In 1949 when the Communist Party succeeded in the Civil War in China the nationalist regime fled to the island then called Formosa. They did not however, forsake their seat on the United Nations Security Council and continue to represent China in that body until 1972. This history is too readily forgotten in the current discussion about the status of Taiwan (as Formosa is now known). The president of Taiwan loudly proclaims the islands independence and calls upon other countries, including Australia, to defend that independence when the Beijing government finally exercises its claim to Taiwan as a legitimate part of the PRC.

Completely forgotten in the current climate by the Taiwanese regime is their own history of claiming to represent China. How convenient it is to disregard their own history when it no longer suits them.

In recent days the government in Beijing has flown ever larger numbers of military aircraft in what Taiwan claims to be its own zone of interest. The big question exercising the minds of both the government in Taiwan and their purported allies is whether these exercises by the mainland presage an invasion.

What is also exercising the minds of the Chinese government is whether or not recent United States moves represent a change in Washington’s official one China policy. The Americans have in recent weeks taken several measures that cast doubt on their “one China” stance. These moves include upgrading the status of the Taiwan representation in Washington and perhaps more alarmingly, increasing by a significant amount the level of military assistance to the
Taiwan regime.

This has also been accompanied by several belligerent remarks by American officials about their determination to “defend” Taiwan’s rights to a separate existence. These moves collectively represent a significant move away from the United States stance of recognising the Chinese government as the legitimate ruler of the Chinese people.

Understandably, this change in the United States rhetoric has been alarming to the government in Beijing. There was a recent telephone discussion between the United States and Chinese presidents, although it is not known what, if any, agreements were reached. The upgrading of Chinese military flights subsequent to that telephone conversation strongly suggests that the Americans have not been willing to acknowledge China’s concerns.

The deteriorating situation in the region has led many commentators to openly speculate on the possibility of the situation deteriorating to the point where there is actual military conflict between the United States and China, and what the outcome of that conflict might be.

If such a conflict remained conventional, i.e. non-nuclear, the consensus appears to be that China would be the winner. They have the advantage of a massive military presence, and the decided advantage of fighting in their own territory. The American psyche is unlikely to accept a conventional military defeat, although to be brutally frank they have had lots of experience in recent years of being on the losing side, with Afghanistan being only the latest example.

The real concern is that of the American mindset. They are acutely aware that they are being outgunned in the economic warfare they have waged against China. China, in terms of parity purchasing power, is now the world’s largest economy, although they persist in referring to themselves only as “number two” in the world.

Perhaps more alarmingly for the Americans, the Chinese are successfully developing an economic trading structure that dwarfs the western efforts. More than 140 countries (3/4 of the total in the world) have signed up to China’s Belt and Road Initiative and that is only one of several such Chinese moves to be the most important of the world’s trading partners.

There was a recent meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation which now has nine permanent members with the recent accession of Iran to full membership. There are several associate member countries, including of particular interest, Saudi Arabia, which is quietly making moves to improve its relationship with Iran.

As recently as this week, the United States government made a request to China to cease its economic relationship with Iran. Unsurprisingly, the Chinese refused. What was interesting about the request however, was that it was even made. As difficult as it may be to accept, that the Americans are so out of touch with the political realities that they would even make such a request is quite astonishing. Much less believing that it had the remotest chance of being accepted.

What it does do is highlight the extent to which the world is changing and not in a matter likely to find favour with the Americans. In this writer’s view that is clearly represented by the recent purported formation of the so-called Quad of nations, including Australia, Japan, India and United States.

Some western writers seek to portray this group as an anti-China alliance, but I look at its membership as strongly suggesting that such a formulation is another example of United States dreaming of an anti-China alliance. In fact, China is the largest trading partner of Australia, India and Japan and it is frankly improbable that any of those three would wish to jeopardise their lucrative trading relationship with the People’s Republic.

India is also a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, having joined in 2017, and despite some border disputes with China, the latter became its largest trading partner in 2020. Economic self-interest is usually an excellent guide to political conduct, and China’s economic importance to all three countries is likely to be a dominant factor in determining actual relationships.

None of the three have expressed any particular views about the status of Taiwan, preferring to regarded it as fundamentally a Chinese internal matter. Certainly, none of them have indicated a willingness to go to war with China over the matter. The Taiwanese foreign minister recently made a plea for Australian support in its conflict with the PRC. Australians listened politely, but they are not so stupid as to risk the relationship with the PRC over Taiwan’s claimed independence.

The Chinese government has expressed the wish that Taiwan returns to the mainland in time for the 2049 Centenary
celebrations of the People’s Republic. China is in my opinion highly unlikely to wait that long, and the military moves of the past week strongly suggest that a denouement is imminent.

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