

The 'Defence' Follies

by GWYNNE DYER

In the early decades of the Cold War, this was the season when NATO defence chiefs would announce their spending plans for the next year, and they would almost always 'discover' some new threat from the Soviet Union to justify the money. In the United States, for example, the intelligence services traditionally found a Soviet armoured brigade hiding in Cuba every February or March.

After a prolonged absence, the tradition is back, though now it's a Chinese threat in the Pacific, not a Russian threat in the Caribbean. Last week Admiral Philip Davidson of the US Navy told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the Chinese are getting ready to invade Taiwan within the next six years.

'I worry that they're accelerating their ambitions to supplant the US and our leadership role in the rules-based international order...by 2050,' said the admiral. 'Taiwan is one of their ambitions before that, and I think the threat is manifest during this decade' in fact, in the next six years.'

War with China by 2027, then. And since the US Navy could not stop a Chinese amphibious invasion of Taiwan by conventional weapons alone 'it's too far from the United States, too close to China, and China has lots of ship-killing missiles' it would necessarily be a nuclear war, or else the United States would just have to abandon its not-quite-ally.

Admiral Davidson didn't go into those awkward details, of course. He was just trying to frighten the senators into giving the Navy more ships. And he couldn't hold a candle to General Lord Richards, former head of the British armed forces, who went to bat at the weekend to argue against cuts to the British army (down 10,000 soldiers to only 72,000).

'I'm thinking Russia and China,' said General Richards. 'I don't necessarily buy that they're about to start World War Three with us, but they still possess large numbers. If all we've got is hi-tech stuff, and they've got half a million troops that can come across the border at you, then hi-tech capabilities aren't going to be much good.'

But what border is that? Russia's western border is almost 2,000 km away, and Britain is an island. The nearest Chinese territory is 3,500 km. away. But then Prime Minister Boris Johnson shut Richards down by explaining that soldiers won't matter so much because the United Kingdom is getting more nuclear weapons.

Johnson is cancelling Britain's pledge to possess no more than 180 nuclear weapons (enough for every city of over a million people in both Russia and China), and raising its declared limit by 40% to 260 warheads. The UK will also 'reserve the right' to use nuclear weapons against unspecified 'emerging technologies' that are not necessarily nuclear, including 'cyber-threats'.

Johnson just doesn't understand that declaring his willingness to use nukes first against a non-nuclear threat 'or sounding like that's what he means' is a profound breach with the doctrine of nuclear deterrence that has kept great-power war at bay for three-quarters of a century. It sounds all right to him.

By the final stage of the Cold War the political and military establishments on both sides had sobered up and were very careful in their choice of words. They didn't make idle threats, they stopped fabricating 'spring surprises', and they did not assume that the other side would know when they were just chest-thumping for domestic political purposes.

That generation, who eventually managed to turn the monstrous Doomsday machine off, is gone now. In their place is a generation of senior politicians and military officers who don't truly fear major war. It hasn't happened within living memory, and they do not really believe it still could. Their counterparts in China and Russia are less vocal, but almost certainly the same.

Compared to those who held their jobs on both sides at the end of the Cold War, they are little boys at play, but it's the same old

game. War between nuclear-armed powers would be insane, but it is not impossible. And they are doing this in the midst of a global pandemic.

Moreover, they are talking like this in the opening phase of a huge climate and environmental crisis that will require a high level of global cooperation to survive. There is a cycle of learning and forgetting again in both military and political affairs, and we are hitting the 'forgetting' phase at just the wrong time.