

How to avoid a war with China

by GWYNNE DYER

'I hope I am wrong. My gut tells me we will fight [with China] in 2025,' declared US Air Force General Mike Minihan last weekend. He didn't mention what his crotch* told him, or if he ever consulted his head on the matter.

'[China's President Xi Jinping] secured his third term and set his war council in October 2022,' Minihan explained. 'Taiwan's presidential elections are in 2024 and will offer Xi a reason. United States' presidential elections are in 2024 and will offer Xi a distracted America. Xi's team, reason, and opportunity are all aligned for 2025.'

Just why China would attack in 2025 if all that stuff is happening in 2024 is left a bit unclear - maybe the Chinese are just chronically slow off the mark - but it's always a mistake to engage too closely with this sort of guff. However, it is definitely getting harder to avoid.

Last October, for example, Admiral Michael M. Gilday, the Chief of Naval Operations, said that the U.S. should prepare to fight China in 2022 or 2023. (Only eleven months left!)

In the previous year Admiral Phil Davidson, then the head of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, predicted that China would invade Taiwan by 2027. A relative optimist, then - but that period is now known in the trade as 'the Davidson window'.

As for the think-tank analysts writing in the foreign policy journals, they are producing articles about the coming war with China at the rate of at least two a week. (I read them so you don't have to.) Some of them also supply blood-curdling predictions of war to the mass media whenever required - and 'if it bleeds, it leads'.

This is fostering a fatalistic belief that a war between China and America is inevitable not only in the United States, but to a lesser extent also in China. It is not inevitable, although it is certainly possible.

War is possible because the great powers are always measuring their potential military power against each other. It doesn't have to be linked to any particular threat or interest: the US military, for example, justify their focus on China simply because it is a 'peer competitor' or a 'pacing challenge'.

It is specifically possible between the United States and China because there is a disputed border, the classic trigger for war. The United States supports Taiwan's choice to remain separate as the democratic will of the great majority of the population. China ignores that, and claims Taiwan on the grounds that it is historically Chinese territory.

This is precisely how Russians persuaded themselves that they have a historic right to Ukraine although the great majority of Ukrainians consistently vote to remain independent. Moreover, the Russians (or rather, Vladimir Putin) acted on that belief and invaded Ukraine. Why wouldn't China (or rather, Xi Jinping) do the same to Taiwan?

One reason might be that Xi is less deluded than the Russian leader. Another is that he already has too much on his plate: a huge but rapidly declining population; an economy that has sunk into stagnation and is unlikely to resurface; the horrible example of how the invasion of Ukraine worked out for the Russians.

But it could be argued, of course, that Xi is badly in need of a way to distract the public from its growing discontents. A rapid and relatively bloodless conquest of Taiwan that 'reunites the Motherland' could buy him years of political credit with the increasingly fractious populace. How can you guard against that?

Not by traditional nuclear deterrence, which deals in threats so terrifying that they are unbelievable until the moment they are

actually fulfilled ? at which point both sides are facing megadeaths. Less dangerous and more persuasive would be the kind of policy that NATO is currently pursuing on Ukraine.

Make sure that Taiwan has enough weapons and well-trained troops to contain an initial sea- and airborne assault by China for at least a few weeks. The fact that Taiwan is an island protected by a substantial sea passage makes this possible.

Strengthen the American fleet and air forces in the western Pacific to make them capable of operating within range of Taiwan, so they can escort supply ships through the inevitable Chinese blockade. But let no American or allied soldier set foot on Taiwan or engage in direct combat with the Chinese.

Gradually improve the quality of the weapons you give Taiwan so China's footholds become increasingly insecure. Wait. Pray if you wish.

We don't know if that will finally work in Ukraine, let alone in Taiwan. But if the Taiwanese can rearm and retrain their forces fast enough, they would stand a decent chance of containing and ultimately repelling an attack ? or, even better, deterring one.

There are no better options.