This page was exported from - Shelburne Free Press
Export date: Fri Oct 30 4:03:16 2026 / +0000 GMT

No war in East Asia

by GWYNNE DYER

Russia has its endless war in Ukraine, Africa has the Sudanese civil war, the United States is on the brink of invading Venezuela, India and Pakistan had a brief (non-nuclear) war in South Asia, and Israel bombed Iran, Qatar, Syria, Lebanon, and the Gaza Strip. Well done, everybody! No, wait a minute ? where's East Asia?

Not a single one of the East Asian countries ? China, Japan, the two Koreas and Taiwan ? has fired a shot in anger all year. Indeed, there has even been a shortfall in the production of bloodcurdling threats in the region.

The worst anybody could come up with was a statement last week in parliament by Japan's new prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, that a Chinese attack on the island of Taiwan could amount to a ?survival-threatening situation.? It might even trigger a military response by the Japanese armed forces. The Chinese reply is just as blunt, and equally ritualistic.

?Should the Japanese side fail to draw lessons from history and use force to intervene in the Taiwan question,? said Chinese defence ministry spokesman Jiang Bin, ?it will suffer a crushing defeat against the steel-willed People's Liberation Army.?

If you're looking for trouble, a further provocation came with the announcement on 15 November that South Korea will begin building nuclear-powered attack submarines in collaboration with the United States. (Which country they will actually be built in is still disputed between Seoul and Washington.)

North Korea is already building similar nuclear-powered subs, and it may well equip them with nuclear weapons. (Pyongyang already has land-based nukes, while South Korea has none.) Nevertheless, there is still little public enthusiasm for nuclear weapons in either Japan or South Korea, and few people lie awake worrying about imminent war in either country.

People do worry about China and Taiwan, although it has been many decades since those two countries fought each other. Indeed, in a sense, they have never really fought: the losing side in the 1945-49 civil war just retreated to the island of Taiwan while continuing to insist that it was the legitimate government of the Republic of China (ROC).

The Communist victors of the civil war renamed the country the People's Republic of China (PRC). They control the entire mainland and claim Taiwan as well, but they have never ruled there. Most citizens of Taiwan are quite happy about that, since Taiwan is a democratic country, but the PRC's rulers insist that it must one day submit to rule from Beijing.

Seventy-six years on, this frozen conflict remains the one wild card in what is otherwise a very stable political status quo in the region.

The only plausible scenario for a second Korean civil war would be a sudden collapse of the North Korean regime, which is most unlikely. Japan is still war-averse and would leave any military action to stop a Chinese invasion of Taiwan to its American ally. And the Taiwanese themselves, outnumbered seventy-to-one by the mainlanders, would never start a war.

That leaves only China as the credible initiator of a war ? and Xi Jinping, China's president-for-life, always insists that the PRC has the right to ?reunite' Taiwan and China by force if other means fail. What has deterred Beijing from doing that for the past 75 years is the high probability that the United States would come to Taiwan's defence.

Since the US established diplomatic relations with the PRC in the 1970s, there has not been a guarantee for Taiwan, just a nod-and-a-wink sort of promise, but Xi Jinping, like all his predecessors, has taken it very seriously. What puts it in some doubt now is the very rapid growth of the Chinese economy (the second biggest in the world) and especially the Chinese armed forces.

This has enabled China to build military forces that might be able to get an invasion force across the 180 kilometres of open ocean separating the mainland and Taiwan if the US doesn't intervene. So many armchair strategists (and some professionals) have started calculating how many aircraft carriers the US Navy would lose if it sent them into the Strait of Taiwan.

They are barking up the wrong tree. Taiwan's land defences need some work, but it is a very big island with few usable beaches, and its submarines and missiles would decimate Chinese sea transports. Meanwhile, the bulk of the US Navy would be a thousand km. offshore in the western Pacific and the South China Sea, blocking all ocean-borne trade to and from China.

No nukes, no conquest of Taiwan, and a dodgy future for the regime in Beijing that rolled the dice. The current regime in Beijing are not fools, so East Asia will probably remain at peace.