

Australians don't want a war with China. It's time to raise voices against it

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For a long time now, Australia's discussion of China has been replete with the language of war: political warfare, hybrid warfare, even the campus as a "battlefield". In the last 10 days, though, the metaphors have given way to something more concrete. Home Affairs boss Mike Pezzullo set the drums beating with his Anzac Day warnings, and Peter Dutton and Jim Molan have kept up the rhythm since. This week has seen reports of an April 2020 speech by Major-General Adam Findlay talking up the "high likelihood" of war with China.

This flurry of war talk has been met with anxiety, but also bemusement. Australia obviously can't pick a fight with China by itself, so what's it all about? Some claim that Scott Morrison is shaping up for a khaki election. It's certainly easy to see the ALP getting wedged on China, given the pride it takes in a "bipartisan compact on national security".

There's also the wider international messaging to consider. Bravado towards Beijing can be a way for Australia to signal to Washington that it is willing to step up and "share the burden" of confronting China. That being the case, today's rhetoric might be an indication that Australia's defence wonks are unhappy with President Biden's positioning on China and want to see a more confrontational stance from him.

Still, the cat is out of the bag now, and there's no point allowing speculation about motives to obscure the basic question here: should Australians countenance war with the People's Republic of China? Even if war isn't immediately on the cards, talk of it is becoming normalised in a dangerous way, and everyone recognises the potential for a mishap in somewhere like the South China Sea to spiral into conflict.

We need to air this question now, because should such an accident come to pass, we may not get much say in how our government responds.

With Australian defence personnel embedded with the US military, a string of "joint facilities" on Australian soil, and a precedent of signing up to American wars without any parliamentary debate, the public needs to fight for its opinion to count on the question of war against China.

Dutton claims that "everyday Australians" support the government in its stand-off with Beijing. But the public does not support following the US into a war with China. The Lowy Institute's 2020 poll showed that only a third of Australians support the idea of joining the US in a war over Taiwan or in the South China Sea.

With a large majority of Australians opposing such a war, it's time for our politicians to stand up and say that they do too. We need to call on them to ensure that the popular will informs policy.

It's not surprising that Australians might look with horror on such a conflict. There's no way for anyone to "win" a war between America and China. A conventional clash could easily end up going nuclear, with the US still reserving its right to first use of these weapons of mass destruction. If China chose to retaliate to such an attack without directly attacking the American mainland, hitting a US ally like Australia would be an option.

The death and devastation it would bring is reason enough to say no to any future war. But as we drift towards one, politicians will dial up their high-minded rhetoric to levels not yet seen and seek to justify their actions with talk of freedom and democracy. Opponents of war will be accused of betraying Taiwan or capitulating to Beijing's expansionism.

We need to puncture these ideological pretensions too. Self-determination for Taiwan, and justice for the Uighurs – these are worthy causes, but not causes that anyone can advance by waging war against China.

America's military presence in Asia serves American interests alone: to pursue the goal enunciated in its 2018 Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific, of maintaining "diplomatic, economic, and military pre-eminence" in the region. If America were to engage in war with China and summon up its allies, it would be for these self-interested ends: to preserve its dominance in Asia, and ensure that it, and not China, profits most from the 21st century global economy.

Australia, for its part, would join for the same motivations that have seen it enter pointless and immoral wars from Vietnam to Afghanistan: to prove Australia's relevance and worth as a US ally, and to help ensure America's lasting military presence in the region.

No one in Australia should contemplate fighting and dying in this cynical game of power politics – not now, or at any point in the future. Before the new Cold War turns hot, today's war talk needs to be met with a forthright rejection, and public pressure mobilised to divert Australia from its collision course with China.

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