

America's Coming War with China: A Collision Course Over Taiwan

Ted Galen Carpenter

Reviewed by Dr Tom Frame

Ambiguity has many advantages. One's intentions are unknown; commitments are never firm, options are always open; escape routes remain available; and, retreating is rarely required. For sixty years, the United States' attitude to Taiwan has been based on ambiguity. But Ted Galen Carpenter, vice-president for defence and foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute based in Washington DC, argues that this approach has become dangerous and must be abandoned if America is to avoid a devastating war with China within the next decade. His alternative is not, however, without its own complications and risks.

After providing a very clear and concise description of the hypothetical 2013 conflict, Carpenter concludes that the Taiwan 'problem' is a legacy of both the Colonial era and the Cold War. Protected by the US military when a Communist China was deemed to be contrary to American interests, the Nationalists persisted with their claim to be the legitimate government of China after 1949 and insisted that Taiwan was the genuine Republic of China. In the ensuing thirty years, Taiwan's economy grew rapidly and its industrial base expanded but Beijing gradually gained the diplomatic upper-hand. The US shifted formal recognition to the mainland in 1979 and the People's Republic was given China's place at the United Nations. Beijing left Taipei in no doubt that a declaration of independent sovereignty would lead to war.

But throughout the 1990s an increasing number of the island's residents came to see themselves as Taiwanese rather than Chinese. They have no interest in reunification. After the introduction of democratic elections, Taiwanese politicians have campaigned strongly on their commitment to independence and used public rallies to denounce the anti-secession laws passed by the National People's Congress. Beijing has responded to these developments with alarm and threats of war. The Communist leadership evidently believes that if it does not settle the Taiwan question in the near future, the prospects for reunification might disappear altogether. Military leaders in the People's Republic apparently believe that an attack on Taiwan for the purpose of bringing the 'renegade province' back into China would be reluctantly accepted by the international community. After all, Beijing regards Taiwan as an 'internal matter'.

Carpenter argues that successive US governments have simply delayed dealing with the Taiwan problem. The Bush Administration has sent conflicting and contradictory messages to both Beijing and Taipei. Carpenter believes the US policy now verges on 'incoherence' and is in a 'state of denial' about the looming catastrophe. Carpenter believes that the Bush Administration probably would defend Taiwan in the event of an attack from the mainland but it would be



alone. Who would win such a conflict? Carpenter claims that Taiwan would *certainly* win if assisted by the US whereas victory would only be *probable* if Taiwan was left to defend itself. But within the next decade, China's military strength will increase and forced reunification of Taiwan will be inevitable notwithstanding the cost to China.

Carpenter argues that the US must avoid being involved because Taiwan is a 'peripheral' not a 'vital' American interest. He says the 'president should state that the US takes no position on the question of Taiwan's independence. It is not our place to support or oppose that outcome'. His solution is to continue selling arms and military technology to the Taiwanese but to withdraw the island's US security guarantee. He believes such a policy would avoid American involvement in a bloody confrontation; force Beijing to open a real dialogue with Taipei instead of 'incessantly badgering Washington to make the Taiwanese behave'; make China realise that an attack on Taiwan would have 'horrendous diplomatic repercussions and economic sanctions; and, oblige the Taiwanese to 'make hard and realistic decisions about their future instead of engaging in largely cost-free political posturing'. Carpenter concedes that such a policy shift would infuriate both Beijing and Taipei but it effectively limits America's 'risk exposure'. He argues that the present policy is destined to be a costly failure and that the US must act now. 'Unfortunately', laments Carpenter, 'time is running out'.

While the ambiguity of US policy might have preserved the quasi-independence of Taiwan for sixty years, the continuing lack of a clear policy leads to the kind of miscalculation and misinterpretation that produced the hypothetical war fought in 2013 between China and the US that Carpenter vividly describes in the opening chapter. It is a frightening prospect because it could so easily happen. Despite not being personally convinced that US policy is so confused or that a 'one China' policy is diplomatically justified or legally defensible, *America's Coming War with China* is recommended reading for anyone interested in what will probably remain the most likely flashpoint for a major East Asian conflict over the next two decades. ♦

Ted Galen Carpenter, *America's Coming War with China: A Collision Course Over Taiwan*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2006, Casebound, 179pp. + notes & index, RRP \$439.95.