

The warning Albanese must deliver to President Xi

The Sydney Morning Herald
Benjamin Herscovitch

By Benjamin Herscovitch
28 October 2023,
914 words,
English,
32

© 2023 Copyright John Fairfax Holdings Limited.

<https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/the-warning-albanese-must-deliver-to-xi-jinping-20231026-p5ef8z.html>

After years of punishing economic coercion and the diplomatic cold shoulder, Australia-China relations are entering a new spring. China's trade restrictions are tumbling, and the two sides are talking at the highest levels.

Fresh from a widely feted trip to Washington, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese will want to emphasise the upside in the Australia-China relationship during his Beijing visit next week. Not least because it will be the first visit by an Australian prime minister in more than seven years and will coincide with the 50th anniversary of Gough Whitlam's first-ever leader-level visit to the People's Republic of China.

Amid all the bonhomie, Albanese should also deliver a pointed message to Chinese President Xi Jinping: an attack on Taiwan would be disastrous for Australia and the world and would risk dealing a body blow to China's economy.

As well as being essential for the preservation of international peace and security, deterring China in the Taiwan Strait is vital for the Australian national interest.

Military conflict in the Taiwan Strait is likely to make Australia's worst strategic nightmare a reality by forcing a stark choice between our trade ties with China and our military alliance with the US. Short of a hardline isolationist in the White House, the US would likely come to Taiwan's aid. President Joe Biden's repeated public pledges to defend Taiwan are testament to that. Given an expanded US military presence at Australian bases and the AUKUS deal to furnish Australia with nuclear-powered submarines, the pressure on Canberra to join a US effort to repel a Chinese invasion would be titanic.

The ANZUS treaty only calls on Washington and Canberra to "act to meet the common danger" when attacked, without specifying precisely how. But that is unlikely to tamp down US expectations of our military involvement. Saying no would mean choosing to sit out a conflict in which the US was up against an adversary stronger than any it has vanquished, including Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany.

Australia would be naive to imagine America would maintain its ANZUS obligations if Canberra declined the request. But a decision to join a US-led counteroffensive against a Chinese effort to take Taiwan would also be disastrous. It would likely bring to a shuddering end the era of Australia's economic intertwinement with China.

With China accounting for nearly 28 per cent of Australia's total export earnings in 2022, the economic aftershocks would be devastating. It would also likely mean shortages of all manner of Chinese-made goods that fill nearly every shop and home in Australia.

Regardless of whether one thinks we should join a US-led campaign, all Australians can agree it would be better to never have to make such an invidious choice. Contrary to periodic speculation, there is no publicly available hard evidence that President Xi is planning an imminent invasion. According to CIA director William Burns, Xi has instructed his military to be "ready by 2027 to invade Taiwan". But being prepared to fight and win isn't the same as deciding to start a war. However, as Russia's invasion of Ukraine makes painfully plain, world leaders are

liable to unexpectedly embrace stratospheric military and economic costs in the name of geopolitical goals. We don't know Xi is planning to do that. But we also can't be sure he isn't. Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines will likely help deter China. With their phenomenal speed, stealth and endurance, these submarines could be used to signal to Xi the added dangers of seeking to seize Taiwan by force. Yet those submarines won't be in the water for years, and Australia won't have command of the full complement of eight boats until the 2050s.

If the goal is to ensure Xi remains chastened in the 2020s and 2030s, AUKUS is an incomplete and likely ineffective answer. Hard though it might be, Australia should start thinking about other tools that might be used to contribute to US-led efforts to deter China. With its globally competitive agricultural sector and vast reserves of iron ore, natural gas, gold, lithium, copper, coal and rare-earth elements, Australia is economically indispensable for China.

Albeit delivered privately and with a suitably tactful diplomatic gloss, Albanese should leave Xi in no doubt that if he decides to pull the trigger on a Taiwan invasion, then China risks losing access to imports that are essential for China's energy, resources and food security. Canberra knows that any successful effort to deter Beijing will start and finish in Washington. But the costs of conflict are likely to be so great that Australia should do more to share the work of deterring China. Considering the repair of the Australia-China relationship is incomplete, this would be a high-stakes warning for Albanese to deliver in Beijing. The risk of leaving Xi undeterred may be even greater.

Any Chinese leader who launches a war on Taiwan would not just endanger millions of lives on both sides of the Strait. They would blow up Australia's efforts to straddle its economic ties with China and alliance with the US. For the sake of the world and all Australians, Albanese should warn President Xi.

Benjamin Herscovitch is research fellow at [The Australian National University](#) and author of *Beijing to Canberra and Back*.

Fairfax Media Management Pty Limited

Document SMHH000020231027ejas0002e