

## OPINION



It is hard to conceive of what war with China would look like. Picture: Getty Images

## Sowing the seeds for war is reckless and depraved domestic politics

MARGARET  
BEAVIS



OVER the last few months, the occasional bit of anti-Chinese sentiment thrown out by backbenchers to distract the media has blossomed into talk of war with China. Toughening of foreign investment laws and cancellation of Victoria's Belt and Road memorandum have been followed by Peter Dutton, Mike Pezzullo and Christopher Pyne talking up the possibility of conflict.

This is not only reckless, but completely against Australia's interests.

The central issue in this debate is not whether or not there will be a war, it is the cynicism with which the possibility has been raised, and used to control and manipulate.

Talking up war with China gives the speaker control of the media narrative. It distracts from inconvenient topics like climate change, sexual assaults and Aboriginal deaths in custody. It shifts the dialogue to defence, where the current government feels it has an advantage.

It has the added "benefits" of increasing the prominence of the Defence portfolio and its minister. It normalises war, potentially reducing criticism of our extremely costly procurement failures. We have not learnt from the purchase of the deeply flawed F-35A Joint Strike Fighter jets. The submarine project has become an open chequebook, going from \$36 billion to \$50 billion to \$80 billion and now \$89 billion. Justifications that the submarines will be in service until 2070 ring very hollow, given advancing drone technology.

Constant talk of war normalises the idea - we come to expect it as a matter of course. A few years ago Australia would have been very well placed to play a constructive diplomatic role in preventing any brewing conflict between our biggest market and our closest ally, but political grandstanding has put paid to that.

It is not for nothing that "Lest We Forget" was the message distilled from World War I.

What would war with China look like? Is war with China "winnable"? It is hard to even conceive of the devastation two super powers could inflict.

How many families would be shattered by war? In Vietnam, as many as 3 million lives were lost, and the ongoing toxicity of Agent Orange has been devastating. Over 500 young Australians died, and a generation faced significantly increased rates of PTSD, alcoholism, suicide and homelessness. In

his book *Dangerous Allies*, Malcolm Fraser wrote that the CIA knew Vietnam was an unwinnable war, even at the time Australia was starting to send troops.

After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, an estimated 1 million Iraqis died. Clean water, sanitation and access to health services were gone. The middle class left. Over 3 million people abandoned their homes. The United Kingdom's Chilcot inquiry found peaceful options were dismissed in the march to war.

We know war destroys economies, with little money for health, education, housing and other key priorities.

Indeed, even in the build-up to conflict, weapons spending comes at the expense of other community needs. Australia's massive ramping up of defence spending now averages over \$1 billion a week every week for the next 10 years, and we are the fourth-biggest weapons importer globally. Defence industry subsidies are justified by "job creation", yet there is clear evidence that the same spend in health, education or renewables would create many more jobs.

For many years, the global community has maintained the delicate diplomatic balance of the "One China" policy, accepting that China sees Taiwan as part of a unified China. China is not threatening Australia. The increasing reports of human rights abuses of the Uighurs and in Hong Kong are unacceptable and appalling. But human rights abuses occur in other parts of the globe, such as Myanmar, West Papua and Gaza, without Australia contemplating war in response.

There are other costs, too. Our ability to export our products has been hit hard, and ironically many of these markets will be filled by US exports. Biden talks of "competition not conflict" with China, and the co-operation of both countries on climate change measures is essential to reducing emissions.

It is very worrying watching the ratcheting up of tensions with China for domestic political benefit. Gareth Evans clearly elucidated recently just how stupid this is. The misuse of the threat of war is appalling in itself - and increases the risk of war.

If we genuinely want to make Australians more secure, we should be spending big on health, education, social housing and fighting climate change.

We urgently need to fund increased diplomatic capacity and put a stop to the reckless warmongering of those with a domestic political agenda.

■ Margaret Beavis is a Melbourne GP and vice-president of the Medical Association for Prevention of War.