



WHAT THE WAR IN UKRAINE MEANS FOR TAIWAN

BY DENNY ROY

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The war in Ukraine has implications for Taiwan, which similarly fears attempted forced annexation by an authoritarian neighbor. There are different interpretations of those implications. Here are mine.

The war in Ukraine does not mean that a war over Taiwan is imminent. There has been [much speculation](#) that Russia's military aggression against Ukraine makes a Chinese invasion of Taiwan more likely because Beijing could take advantage of US attention being diverted to Europe.

This line of thinking has two major flaws. First, the recent deployment of 14,000 additional US troops and six F-35 aircraft to Europe in response to the Russia invasion does not significantly impair the ability of the US military to fight in the western Pacific. The officers of the US Indo-Pacific Command responsible for preparing and executing war plans and recommending courses of action to the White House are focused on developments in the Indo-Pacific, not Europe. The Biden administration's attention to the war in Ukraine did not prevent it from thinking to send a delegation of former US defense officials on a [reassurance visit](#) to Taiwan.

Second, the idea of coordinated invasions of Ukraine and Taiwan assumes Beijing has already made the decision to use military force to compel cross-Strait unification and is waiting for an opportunity to strike. This outlook does not account for Beijing's political

calculus. China-Taiwan relations operate according to their own logic and timetable, independent of what is happening in Europe or even Hong Kong. Attempting a military conquest of Taiwan has always been a last resort that China would consider only when compelled to by Taipei moving unambiguously to a permanent political separation from China.

Xi Jinping's first order of business is to stay in power. His immediate need is to secure a third term as Communist Party General Secretary during the 20th Party Congress in October. Absent a dramatic move by Taiwan toward independence, which President Tsai Ing-wen does not intend to make, Xi does not need to settle the Taiwan issue to get a third term. On the other hand, a war against Taiwan, the United States, and probably Japan would force Chinese elites to think that Xi had led China into disaster. Beijing's recent hostile signaling to Taiwan, in the form of military exercises and warplane fly-bys, are probably less a rehearsal for attack than an attempt by Beijing to halt the trend of closer US relations with the Taipei government.

What the Ukraine war does for Taiwan is to improve Taiwan's own strategic situation marginally.

The Russian invasion forced Beijing to prioritize among Chinese interests. Beijing wants worldwide recognition as a responsible, law-abiding, and constructive international citizen and it hopes to weaken strategic coordination between the United States and Western Europe. But it also wants to preserve its valuable working relationship with Vladimir Putin's Russia.

In China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' [March 1 press briefing](#) (the most recent at the time of this writing), spokesman Wang Wenbin dodged a question of why Beijing refused to call the Russian campaign an "invasion" and backed away from his previous already-vague statement that "one country should not flagrantly undermine others' sovereignty." Instead, he drew moral equivalency between Russia and Ukraine by calling on "all parties to exercise necessary restraint" and implicitly blamed NATO for causing the war by "strengthening or even expanding military

blocs.” Wang’s colleague Hua Chunying has repeatedly [called](#) the United States “the culprit of current tensions surrounding Ukraine.”

In choosing to support diplomatically what is almost universally seen as a villainous act of aggression, China’s international standing is reduced. The ceremonial veneer of moral uprightness that Chinese officials work so hard to maintain is tarnished. Consequently, Beijing’s agenda, including its position that it has the right to annex the de facto state of Taiwan, commands less international respect and engenders more suspicion. In general, a weaker rather than a stronger international position is a disincentive for Chinese leaders to make a decision they know will bring much global opprobrium, at least in the short term.

One of the factors that would support a Chinese decision to go to war against Taiwan would be the expectation that economic reliance on China would deter other important countries from levying serious sanctions against Beijing. Putin likely had a similar expectation with regard to Russia. But contrary to expectations, European governments proved willing and able to support quickly and unitedly a surprisingly tough stance against aggression, despite the potential harm to their economic interests.

Particularly significant was the [disconnection](#) of major Russian banks from the international SWIFT transaction network, a step Europe considered but was ultimately reluctant to implement following Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea. The developed countries now have a template for future similar scenarios, including a cross-Strait war. Chinese elites might have believed that economics always trumps values. No longer.

The course of the war so far is not encouraging to Chinese military planners. Ukraine has demonstrated how a seemingly overmatched military can prove stubbornly formidable when fighting on its home ground and motivated by the objective of saving loved ones and statehood from an invader. This does not invalidate the China’s large quantitative military advantages, but it illustrates that superior numbers do

not automatically guarantee success. The Russians’ problems with logistics and the difficulties they face trying to fight in cities are especially applicable to a would-be invader of Taiwan.

Finally, the war in Ukraine is likely to accelerate changes Taipei must make to improve the island’s chances of fighting off an attempted Chinese invasion. The war should focus minds on at least these three key issues.

First, Taipei must use its limited defense funds to acquire the weapons systems most useful for the all-important job of stopping attacking Chinese ships and aircraft. Second, Taiwanese conscript soldiers require a much more serious training program than they [currently](#) get. Third, Taipei should organize reserve soldiers into a territorial defense force, such as is now acquitting itself well in Ukraine. The prospect of contending with an independent guerrilla army that could fight on even after the apparent defeat of the regular Taiwanese armed forces adds to the disincentives against Beijing choosing war.

The ongoing war should serve as a warning to Beijing that its irredentist claims over Taiwan would not shield China from international condemnation as a war-criminal regime, or from economic retribution if it attacked Taiwan. Nor could it expect the people of Taiwan to accept forced annexation supinely. Ukraine’s heroism reverberates around the world, including in the Taiwan Strait.

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