



UKRAINE: CHINA'S LATEST STRATEGIC BLUNDER

BY RALPH A. COSSA

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Despite its self-proclaimed status as a defender of state sovereignty and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of others, China has found itself unable to criticize its close strategic partner Russia over its “military operation”—Beijing won’t even refer to it as an [invasion](#)—of Ukraine, blaming instead (surprise, surprise) the United States for forcing Moscow to defend itself from the mere prospect of Ukraine possibly one day joining NATO. The best it would do is [abstain](#) at the UN Security Council while calling on “all sides” to exercise restraint.

China’s position has some short-term advantages. As the rest of the world refuses to buy Russian oil, gas, or wheat, China will shamelessly step in to keep the Russian economy from collapse by buying these commodities, no doubt at a reduced price. As Moscow becomes more and more dependent on China’s assistance, it’s real status as the junior partner in the Sino-Russian relationship will be further confirmed and solidified. Russia will join the club of third world countries who have become increasingly indebted to Beijing and thus more willing (if not compelled) to do its bidding.

Putin’s recent speeches have made it abundantly clear that his real motivation in invading Ukraine—which he has called a [fake country](#)—is the rebuilding of the historic Russian empire. Like Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, and Stalin (the not-so-great)

before him, he sees the Ukrainian breadbasket as rightfully belonging to Russia, and he means to take it back. But Chinese leader Xi Jinping would do well to look at the maps of the former empires. Ukraine was not the only area they had in common; so too is the whole of Central Asia, Russia’s so-called “near abroad.” Like Ukraine, there are many Russian-speaking citizens in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics who could one day be called upon to declare independence within the individual post-Cold War republics and call on Mother Russia for help, as the separatists in the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine did to “justify” Putin’s intervention there.

The country with the most to lose in this scenario is China, whose growing influence throughout Central Asia must be seen by Putin as a threat that must be tolerated today but eventually redressed. One can only imagine how much it upsets the Russian leader that the organization through which both Beijing and Moscow extend their influence in Central Asia is named after a city on China—the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—rather than a Russian one, given Moscow’s historic reign over this entire region. The “Great Game” of the 21st Century may still end up pitting Moscow against Beijing in a region historically seen as Moscow’s soft underbelly. China’s silence, if not tacit support for Moscow’s effort to reestablish the western boundaries of Russia’s former empire will eventually come back to haunt Beijing when Putin the Great eventually (and I would argue inevitably) turns his attention southward.

Meanwhile, pundits are spilling a lot of ink speculating on how the Russian invasion of Ukraine will lead to or somehow justify or [make inevitable](#) a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. They overlook the significant differences between the two, including 90 miles of ocean and a “rock solid” US commitment to help Taiwan defend itself in a form and manner yet to be determined. Putin was able to factor out a US/NATO military response in planning his invasion; Xi will need to factor the US (and perhaps its Asian allies) in. While Washington continues to maintain its policy of “strategic ambiguity” as to whether or not it would respond militarily to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, it has become significantly less ambiguous

about its support for Taiwan democracy in the wake of China's heavy-handed pressure tactics toward Taiwan and its blatant violation of the Sino-UK Joint Declaration that was supposed to assure basic freedoms in Hong Kong for 50 years following the 1997 turnover of the former UK colony to the Mainland—two earlier strategic blunders by Xi.

This is not to say that how Washington and the rest of the free world responds to the Ukraine invasion won't be noticed in Beijing. One of the (should be intended) consequences of the concerted effort to inflict a heavy economic cost on Russia for its adventurism should be a strong message to China that it could expect the same if it were ever to invade Taiwan. Beijing also needs to understand that, if the situation is reversed, Russia is unlikely to be able to return the favor and bail China out.

Putin's narrative should also be sobering to Beijing. It began with a group of separatists—do we dare call them “[splittists](#)”—(this time in Donetsk and Luhansk) declaring independence. A major power (in this case, Russian) then recognized these newly independent states and decided to militarily intervene to defend them. Is this the type of precedent Xi Jinping really wants to support?

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