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Ukraine's Significance for Taiwan

ABSTRACT

Russia's brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine is the most significant crisis between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War and has generated attention over its implications for Taiwan. As Russia's invasion intensifies, there has been growing concern that China may be emboldened to seize Taiwan by force. The comparison is understandable. Like Ukraine, Taiwan is a peaceful democracy facing a militarily superior and revisionist authoritarian state unwilling to tolerate its independence.

But beyond these broader parallels, there are significant differences between the security situations of Taiwan and Ukraine, notably around their security relationships with the United States. Taiwan benefits from a strong relationship with the US and an ambiguous security commitment that China believes the US will make good on. Ukraine on the other hand is not a NATO member and does not have a security guarantee from the US leaving it more vulnerable to Russia. Furthermore, the seemingly close relationship between China and Russia and shared revisionist title masks fundamental differences in their visions for the international order. Russia is a declining power whose ambitions outstrip its capabilities, while China is a rising power pursuing global leadership. A move against Taiwan might be seen as a coordinated authoritarian challenge to the international order that could trigger severe economic and diplomatic repercussions. This would threaten Chinese interests and makes an invasion of Taiwan less likely while until the Ukraine crisis persists. The current crisis also offers lessons that can be applied to increase deterrence over a potential Taiwan crisis. First, intelligence has played a critical role in denying the element of surprise, controlling the narrative, and rallying international support for Ukraine. Second, the US and its allies have demonstrated a willingness to enact coordinated economic and political responses that impose very high costs. Allies should prepare a list of agreed sanctions in advance and seek to stockpile or remove China from critical supply chains. Finally, Ukrainian resistance has shown how costly an occupation against a hostile population can be and the effectiveness of cheaper asymmetric and unmanned systems like drones. Ensuring Taiwan has access to these systems and weapons would help alter Beijing's calculations regarding the feasibility of seizing Taiwan. Deterring China from using force against Taiwan will be difficult. These lessons will help convince leaders in Beijing that an invasion of Taiwan could cost them their national rejuvenation and undermine CCP legitimacy at home.

KEYWORDS:

China, Taiwan, Ukraine, Russia

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Introduction

Russia's brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine is the most significant crisis between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War and signals a dangerous shift in the international order. The invasion has also generated attention over its implications for Taiwan. Chinese President Xi Jinping has increased pressure on Taiwan since the election of President Tsai Ing-wen in 2016. Xi believes reunification is inevitable (Kuo 2019) and appears more willing than his predecessors to use force to achieve it. Chinese leaders are undoubtedly watching the situation in Ukraine and the response from the United States and its allies closely. As Russia's invasion intensifies, there has been growing concern that China may be emboldened to seize Taiwan by force (Milken 2022 and Kuo et al 2022).

The comparison is understandable. Like Ukraine, Taiwan is a peaceful democracy facing a militarily superior and revisionist authoritarian state unwilling to tolerate its independence. But beyond these broader parallels, there are significant differences between Taiwan and Ukraine as well as between China and Russia that make this comparison misleading. Taiwan and Ukraine have different security situations, while decisions in Beijing and Moscow are informed by very different capabilities and visions for the international order.

When these differences are taken into consideration, although China is likely considering forceful reunification with Taiwan, the current Ukraine crisis should not be considered as a prelude to an invasion of Taiwan. Furthermore, while the current crisis is still unfolding, there are valuable lessons for how to increase deterrence over Taiwan and that may lead Chinese leaders to reassess their calculations regarding a Taiwan invasion. This paper begins by discussing why China might choose invasion over other options to achieve reunification with Taiwan. Next it will examine differences between the strategic situations of Taiwan and Ukraine focussing on their respective security relationships with the US. It will then discuss the differences between Chinese and Russian revisionism and what they mean for Taiwan. The final section will discuss some of the lessons learned and their implications for Chinese and American leaders.

Why China Might Invade Taiwan

In discussing this topic, it is important to understand why China may choose to invade Taiwan over other means of achieving reunification. Choosing war is typically a last resort to a range of possible actions to coerce or induce a desired result. Prior actions might include a combination of economic or trade incentives/ deterrents, political inducements, cyber attacks, disinformation campaigns, demonstrations of force, or charm offensives. In this regard, Russia resorting to a large-scale invasion of Ukraine is unusual, particularly when compared to its previous military actions in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria that were far more targeted and limited.

In the case of Taiwan, Beijing may feel it is running out of options. When President Xi started his first term in 2013, he enjoyed a positive relationship with Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou. Ma was from the Kuomintang (KMT) party which supports reunification at some point in the future and endorsed the 1992 Consensus which states there is only one China and that both Taiwan and the mainland belong to the same China (Economy 2022, 72). Ma signed an Economic Comprehensive Trade Agreement with China that increased cross straight business relations and in return China supported Taiwan's admission as an observer in select international bodies and stopped its efforts to isolate Taiwan diplomatically (Economy 2022, 72).

The relationship declined rapidly however with the election of Democratic People's Party (DPP) candidate Tsai Ing-Wen in 2016. While she did not advocate for independence, she refused to accept the 1992 Consensus and encouraged policies to diversify trade away from the mainland (Economy 2022, 74). Beijing retaliated by reducing tourism to Taiwan, resuming its efforts to isolate Taiwan diplomatically, and increasing military drills around the island (Economy 2022, 74). However, rather than convincing Taiwan to reverse course, this has largely strengthened resolve among the island's residents. The 2020 Hong Kong National Security Law was also a critical moment which destroyed any faith in a "one country two systems" model for peaceful reintegration. These attitudes were reflected in a 2021 Taiwan New Constitution Foundation poll which found nearly 90 percent of respondents identified as Taiwanese and more than 70 percent of respondents held a negative view of China (Yu-fu and Chin 2021). Additionally, more than 60 percent of respondents also answered they would absolutely or probably go to war to defend Taiwan (Yu-fu and Chin 2021).

These trends and Taiwan's growing international status due to its leading role in semiconductor manufacturing and its successful response to COVID-19 are deeply concerning to China. The failure of the "one country two systems" model in Hong Kong makes peaceful reunification impossible for the foreseeable future and China's failure to induce or coerce greater integration since 2016 leave it with few options other than forceful reunification. This has created a vibrant debate among Chinese officials, some of whom argue in favor of an invasion to prevent Taiwan from becoming independent, while others caution the economic costs would be too high and would threaten China's national rejuvenation (Economy 2022, 76).

Strategic Environments of Taiwan and Ukraine

Among the most significant differences between Taiwan and Ukraine is their respective security situations, notably their security arrangements with the United States. America's security relationship with Ukraine is recent, beginning following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and has been relatively limited. Since 2014, the US has provided more than USD\$5.6 billion in security and non-security assistance to Ukraine (United States Department of State 2022). But beyond this assistance, the US does not have security commitment to defend Ukraine and President Biden has made clear that US troops will not be sent to Ukraine (Wolf 2022).

In contrast, the United States has been deeply involved with Taiwan since 1950 when it prevented a Chinese invasion of the island during the Korean War. Since then, America has played a vital role as Taiwan's leading supplier of arms and in developing the island's economy (Templeman 2022). Much of their current relationship is rooted in the Taiwan Relations Act (1979) which commits the United States to provide Taiwan with the means to defend itself and to maintain the capacity to resist the use of force or coercion by China (American Institute in Taiwan).

While this does not commit Washington to defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion, China has noted America's deepening ties with the island. During the Trump administration, the US Congress passed the Taiwan Travel Act (2017) that allows US officials at all levels to visit and meet with their Taiwanese counterparts (Congress.gov 2018). Later in 2019, Congress approved the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (2019) that commits Washington to support Taiwan in expanding

its diplomatic relationships and to consider supporting countries that have improved their relations with Taiwan (Congress.gov 2020). The Trump administration also expanded arms sales to Taiwan (Economy 2022, 77) and the Biden administration has maintained a close relationship with the island, including inviting its de facto ambassador to Biden's inauguration (Blanchard 2021).

As a result of the deepening ties between Washington and Taipei, Chinese leaders assume that the United States would defend Taiwan (Mastro 2021). This creates a very different calculation in Beijing than in Moscow. While Moscow was certain Washington would not intervene directly in Ukraine, Chinese planners assume a direct confrontation with the United States that makes an invasion of Taiwan far more challenging. As a result, while Taiwan and Ukraine appear similar, their different strategic situations make the comparison misleading.

Chinese vs Russian Revisionism

The deepening relationship between China and Russia is one of the greatest challenges for the United States and its allies today. They are both labelled as revisionist powers seeking to reshape the international order (US Department of Defence 2018) and both aspire to excise the United States and its allies from their desired spheres of influence. The imposition of sanctions following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the precipitous decline in US-China relations during the Trump Presidency have pushed the two countries even closer in recent years. This was put on full display when Presidents Xi and Putin met in February in advance of the opening ceremony for the 2022 Olympic Games. The two signed a major energy contract (Wong and Zhou 2022) and issued a joint statement on February 4 opposing the US alliance system, supporting each others' efforts to remove foreign influence from their near abroads, and declaring a "no limits" friendship (China Aerospace Institute 2022). But this seemingly close relationship and shared revisionist title masks fundamental differences in how Beijing and Moscow seek to reshape the international order that carry important implications for Taiwan.

Russia sees itself as a victim of the post-Cold War order. It feels its geopolitical interests have been ignored through the eastward expansion of NATO and that western powers have threatened its sovereignty by interfering in its domestic politics (Lo 2020). As a result, Putin ultimately desires to overturn the current US-led international order and create a multipolar order in which Russia is respected as an equal peer to the United States and China (Stent 2016).

But these ambitions far exceed Russia's current capabilities. It remains a major nuclear power with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and enjoys an asymmetric military advantage over many of its neighbors. However, despite these advantages, Russia is in a state of overall decline. Widespread corruption has weakened its institutions and its population is projected to decrease by eleven million by 2050 (Jensen and Doran 2018). Its economy is only the eleventh largest in the world (The World Bank accessed 2022) and relies heavily on the export of energy and raw materials. Furthermore, analysts predict its economy may shrink by as much as seven percent this year due to sanctions imposed over its invasion of Ukraine thus far (Partington 2022). Moscow also finds itself diplomatically isolated with few friends and a limited role in global governance.

This reality suggests that time is not on Russia's side. Finding itself incapable of realizing its ambitions peacefully, the Kremlin has become increasingly willing to take risks to undermine the international order.

This has resulted in a strategy of creating chaos and instability through actions such as Russia's military interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria, as well as cyber attacks and disinformation campaigns.

In contrast, China has benefited greatly from the post-Cold War order and its leaders believe that time and momentum are on their side (Lo and Huang 2021). Integration into the global economy over the last thirty years has fueled China's rapid economic growth and it is expected to become the world's largest economy in the near future. It is also a leading manufacturer and a global competitor in emerging technology such as 5G. Its newfound wealth has enabled it to lift millions out of poverty and engage in massive military modernization and expansion. These successes have bolstered the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) but have also made access to natural resources, markets for export, and a stable international system critical to sustaining China's growth (Lo 2020). As a result, unlike Russia, China seeks to reshape the international system from within by influencing existing institutions and creating its own set of international organizations and initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

That is not to suggest that Beijing has avoided using aggressive tactics against its neighbors. China has engaged in increasingly provocative actions such as ramming fishing vessels in the South China Sea (Vu 2020) and attempts to intimidate Taiwan by violating its air defence identification zone (ADIZ). Nor has it shied away from violent confrontations such as the 2020 Galwan Valley clash with India. China also uses a combination of economic incentives and coercion to try and influence the behaviour and policies of other states. However, to date, China's actions are a far cry from the large-scale Russian interventions listed above. Its actions towards Taiwan have largely relied on non-military means such as economic coercion or trying to isolate it diplomatically.

The differences between Chinese and Russian revisionism have produced a very different set of behaviours. China, believing time is on its side, can afford to be more patient and presents a more complex challenge to the international order that includes diplomatic, economic, and military strength. In contrast, Russia has limited capabilities and plays a role as a destabilizing disruptor and spoiler in the international system.

These distinctions also shape how China views Taiwan in the context of the Ukraine crisis. While Russia appears to have accepted its pariah status, China aspires to be a global leader in the international system. Russia's invasion, mere weeks after the Joint Statement between Xi and Putin declaring their "no limits" relationship, has left China in an awkward position internationally. It does not want to be seen as supporting Russian aggression against a sovereign state and has tried to distance itself from the invasion. A move against Taiwan during this crisis would risk being associated with Putin's invasion of Ukraine. This could fuel fears of an authoritarian axis which could result in substantial international repercussions (Mastro 2022).

These concerns expose important political considerations in China regarding an invasion of Taiwan. American assessments indicate the PLA has or is close to acquiring the capability to launch an initial invasion of Taiwan (US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2021). But concerns over the damage to the economy and potential formation of an anti-China coalition in response make Chinese leaders more cautious. Since these repercussions would be more severe if Chinese actions are associated with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China is unlikely to use the current crisis to move on Taiwan.

Lessons and implications

Although the Ukraine crisis is still ongoing, there are important lessons for increasing deterrence that may force China to reassess its calculations over a Taiwan invasion. The Western response to Russia has been surprisingly well coordinated and rapid. But China is a more politically and economically influential actor with diverse means to retaliate at its disposal. This will make countries more reluctant to engage in punishing actions towards it. As a result, developing a response after Beijing has initiated an assault on Taiwan will may take too much time to be effective. To handle China, Washington and its allies need to prepare in advance by building off the lessons from Ukraine.

Intelligence and Controlling the Narrative

Ahead of Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the public had unprecedented access to open source and declassified US intelligence. This included satellite images of Russia's military buildup as well as US intelligence insights into Putin's plans and intentions (Harrington 2022). Using intelligence proactively in this way enabled Washington to control the narrative around Ukraine and mobilize international support against Russia early. This international support translated into the rapid and ongoing delivery of weapons to Ukraine from the US and its allies, enabling Ukraine to impose heavy costs on Russia. Additionally, releasing information on the Kremlin's plans such as false-flag operations has prevented Russia from utilizing operations that rely on surprise and ambiguity (Edel and Lee 2022).

Intelligence could play a similarly important role in the Indo-Pacific. Chinese planners assume the United States would come to Taiwan's defence but hope to achieve a quick victory before Washington has time to respond (Mastro 2021). As Russia's invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated, it is impossible to hide the buildup of military assets. An invasion of Taiwan involving an amphibious landing, would likely require China to assemble forces on an even larger scale than Russia deployed for its invasion of Ukraine. By monitoring Chinese military movements closely, Washington and its allies can ensure they are not surprised by a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. This would give them an opportunity to coordinate a response in advance, reposition assets to the region, and deliver vital assistance to Taiwan such as defensive weapons to make a Chinese invasion more costly. As in the case with Russia, disclosing Chinese intentions publicly would also help mobilize support for a more robust response to Chinese actions which may increase deterrence.

Coordinated Economic Response

One of the most prominent features of the Ukraine crisis has been the punishing sanctions levied against Russia. Prior to the invasion, Putin likely calculated that European dependence on Russian energy would prevent them from implementing meaningful and sustained sanctions against Russia's economy. While there was some initial disagreement, Washington has successfully coordinated an international sanctions regime that has wreaked havoc on Russia economically, financially, and diplomatically. Western sanctions have frozen Russian overseas assets, deprived select Russian banks from accessing SWIFT, and devalued the Ruble. Furthermore, many western businesses have chosen to cut ties with Russia. Major businesses such as McDonald's and Starbucks have chosen to halt their business operations in Russia (Race and Hooker 2022) while BP and Shell stated they would sell off their Russian assets valued at billions of dollars (Davies 2022). As a result, while Russia is slowly making progress in Ukraine, western sanctions are destroying its economy.

The sanctions imposed on Russia illustrate how effective coordinated sanctions can be and their critical role in conflict today. However, coordinating a similar sanctions regime against China will be much more challenging. China is the number one trade partner to many countries and plays a major role in global supply chains. This means sanctions against China would cause greater damage to the global economy than those imposed on Russia. As a result, it will be difficult to convince many EU states and allies, let alone much of the developing world, to sanction China.

But this does not mean the west should not pursue sanctions against China. The CCP's reliance on economic growth for legitimacy means that sanctions will also have a greater impact on their calculations than they do for Putin. China sends nearly sixty percent of its exports to the US and its allies (Mastro 2021) and has substantial overseas investments which would be vulnerable. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) also depends on imports for certain military equipment and materials (Congressional Research Service, June 2021). Sanctions targeting critical technology or energy imports could bring China's economy to a halt. Flight bans on Chinese airlines like the bans imposed by the US, EU, and Canada on Russian owned and operated planes (Schaper 2022) and revoking or limiting visas for Chinese citizens would also slow business and upset Chinese citizens who have grown accustomed travel.

To rally greater support for sanctions, Washington and its allies should prepare and agree to a list of sanctions that could be imposed on China in the event of a Taiwan crisis (Edel and Lee 2022). By identifying which targets will be most damaging in advance, sanctions can be implemented quickly and impactfully even if the US cannot assemble as large a coalition. Working to remove China from critical supply chains would also make American allies more likely to participate in sanctions against China. The CCP undoubtedly expects to suffer economic repercussions from an attempt on Taiwan. Western policymakers should work to convince leaders in Beijing that an invasion would carry heavy economic repercussions, threaten CCP legitimacy, and jeopardize their goal of national rejuvenation.

War is Messy

US analysts believe that the military balance of power in the Taiwan strait is slowly shifting in China's favor, and it is no longer clear that US conventional forces will be sufficient to deter an attack on Taiwan (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, November 2021). The PLA has improved its capabilities across all domains of warfare particularly its missile force. Advances in the PLA's missile capabilities enable them to target many US and allied targets and bases in the region making major assets like carriers vulnerable (Congressional Research Services, June 2022). But the Ukraine crisis has demonstrated that military superiority alone is insufficient. Fierce domestic opposition to Russia's invasion has led to severe casualties. NATO estimates that between 7,000 and 15,000 Russian soldiers have been killed in the in the first four weeks of the invasion (Qena and Anna, March 2022). This is striking compared to the 14,400 soldiers lost during Russia's 10 years of war in Afghanistan (Cancian, March 2022).

These setbacks and high casualties will no doubt give Chinese leaders pause. Unlike the Russian military, the PLA lacks combat experience. It has been untested since the invasion of Vietnam in 1979 and has limited ability to conduct joint operations (Congressional Research Services, June 2021). The Ukraine crisis suggests that strong resistance to an invasion will necessitate a very costly long-term occupation against a hostile population. This would be unappealing for Chinese leaders and will likely cause them to reassess their calculations.

The Ukraine crisis has also demonstrated the effectiveness of newer and cheaper weapons systems. For example, the relatively cheap TB-2 Turkish drones have been highly effective against Russian tanks,

helicopters, and equipment (Axe, March 2022). Similarly, anti-tank and anti-air armaments such as the Javelin anti-armour system have been used to great effect against Russian equipment and vehicles.

The effectiveness of these cheaper armaments may help Taiwan overcome decades of underinvestment in defence (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, November 2021). Emphasizing the delivery of these sorts of systems to Taiwan would help to convince China that an attack would be very costly. However, because China could blockade the island, it is critical that these systems be delivered and stockpiled well before an invasion.

Conclusion

Putin's invasion of Ukraine has led to comparisons between Taiwan and Ukraine which both face militarily superior and revisionist authoritarian states unwilling to tolerate their independence. Recent Chinese actions towards Hong Kong have made a diplomatic solution with Taiwan impossible for the foreseeable future, which, in turn, raises the prospect for a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

Relating Ukraine and Taiwan in this way is understandable but ignores important differences in their respective security and strategic situations as well as the differences between Chinese and Russian ambitions and their respective capabilities to achieve them. While Russia could proceed without fear of direct western military intervention, Chinese planners assume the US will intervene militarily in a Taiwan contingency. Therefore, China is unlikely to attempt an invasion until it believes it can prevail against the US militarily and withstand the economic and diplomatic repercussions. Russia's invasion of Ukraine does little to alter Beijing's military calculus regarding US military strength, but may convince Chinese leaders that the economic and diplomatic repercussions, as well as the degree of local resistance will be more severe than originally anticipated.

While Russia and China are both revisionists, they have distinctly different end goals in mind. Russia is declining and uses chaos and instability to achieve its goals. China, which sees itself as a rising power, seeks to reform the existing institutions from within and aspires to lead global reform. To further its goals, China wishes to avoid actions that imply a coordinated authoritarian axis, which could be diplomatically and economically damaging. Therefore, rather than emboldening China, Russia's invasion of Ukraine makes China less likely to move against Taiwan before the current crisis concludes.

While the current crisis is ongoing, certain lessons can be derived from the western-led response to Russia. First, intelligence has played a critical role in denying the element of surprise, controlling the narrative, and rallying international support for Ukraine. Second, economic repercussions can impose high costs when coordinated effectively. To make this more effective, the US and its allies should prepare a list of agreed sanctions in advance and seek to remove China from critical supply chains. Finally, Ukrainian resistance has demonstrated the costs associated with an occupation against a hostile population and the effectiveness of cheaper asymmetric and unmanned systems like drones. Ensuring Taiwan has access to these weapons would help alter Beijing's calculations regarding the feasibility of seizing Taiwan. These lessons will help to increase deterrence by making clear the costs of an invasion could jeopardize their national rejuvenation and undermine CCP legitimacy.

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