



The Ukraine War Has Lessons for Beijing, Taipei, and Washington

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There has been considerable speculation among global political and policy elites about what Russia's invasion of Ukraine might mean for the Taiwan issue. Initial accounts tended to support the conclusion that Moscow's flagrant violation of international norms against using force to deal with a territorial dispute might encourage the People's Republic of China (PRC) to do the same to resolve the long-festering problem of Taiwan's political status. As the Russian offensive bogged down, and the costs to Moscow in both treasure and blood mounted, the conventional wisdom in Taiwanese and U.S. policy circles shifted. The new "lesson" was that a PRC invasion of Taiwan had become less likely, because Beijing now realized that attempting to conquer the island could be far more difficult and costly than previously anticipated. Both versions contain some elements of truth, but neither one is entirely accurate. Moreover, there are other more subtle, yet extremely important, factors that all parties should take into account.

One important similarity between the Ukraine and Taiwan issues is that the great power involved initially stated its hope that the problem could be resolved peacefully. But both Moscow and Beijing also made it clear that there were "red lines" that could not be crossed. For Russia, the principal red line was that Ukraine could not become a member of NATO or even a military asset of that alliance. NATO and Ukrainian leaders ignored Moscow's repeated warnings. The United States and other NATO countries instead gave Kyiv increasingly sophisticated weapons, trained Ukrainian troops, shared intelligence with the Ukrainian government, and even conducted joint NATO-Ukraine war games. The Kremlin's patience with such provocations finally ran out, and the world is witnessing the awful result.

For the PRC, a key red line is any effort on Taiwan's part to achieve formal independence. Beijing's warnings against Taipei's persistent and sometimes bold separatist actions during Tsai Ing-wen's administration are becoming more emphatic. So, too, are the warnings to "outside powers"—especially the United States and Japan—against encouraging and facilitating such ambitions. Washington, though, has pressed ahead with its support for Taiwan. Throughout the Trump and Biden presidencies, security cooperation between the United States and Taiwan has

increased dramatically. During the Trump years, the bilateral relationship blossomed to the point of nearly re-creating the overt military alliance that existed between Washington and Taipei throughout most of the Cold War. Biden administration officials have continued on that course, emphasizing that the U.S. commitment to Taiwan's security is "rock-solid."

By dismissing Beijing's escalating warnings, the United States may be making the same blunder that it did regarding its provocative relationship with Ukraine. And by relying too much on Washington's support in the event of trouble, Tsai's government may be making the same tragic mistake that Ukraine's government made.

There is little doubt that PRC leaders would prefer to avoid resorting to force to deal with the Taiwan issue. However, Washington needs to understand that Taiwan is a vital interest to China, just as Ukraine was and is a vital interest to Russia. And when vital interests are involved, a great power becomes willing to embrace military options, if that course becomes necessary. U.S. leaders need to take Beijing's warnings about Taiwan much more seriously than they have to this point.

The ongoing Ukraine war also highlights the many dangers to world stability and peace that an armed confrontation over Taiwan would entail. Washington's effort to orchestrate a system of global sanctions against Russia has proven to be just partially effective, as China, India, and other significant economic players have refused to embrace that strategy. Nevertheless, economic turbulence is evident, with turmoil in the global financial and energy markets, and spot shortages and other supply chain disruptions already emerging. A war over Taiwan would likely produce even more far-reaching, destabilizing economic effects.

Other measures that the United States and its NATO allies have adopted in response to Russia's invasion involve truly terrifying risks. By pouring weapons into Ukraine and sharing military intelligence, including targeting information, to bolster Kyiv's military capabilities, the NATO powers flirt with becoming full-fledged belligerents. Moscow already has stated that convoys bringing weaponry into Ukraine constitute legitimate military targets. More ominously, Russian officials and their media allies warn that the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine is not out of the question. The introduction of such weapons into the current conflict would, of course, entail the risk of catastrophic escalation.

The level of risk would be even greater than it is in Ukraine if the United States and its allies in East Asia intervened militarily in an armed confrontation between Beijing and Taipei. The PRC has developed impressive anti-access, area denial (A2, AD) air and naval capabilities over the past decade. Intervening powers would likely suffer serious losses of ships, planes, and personnel. China's nuclear capabilities are quite limited at this time, and the approximately 200 warheads currently deployed are configured for defensive, second-strike capabilities. But Western experts believe that the number of warheads may increase to nearly 1,000 before the end of the decade, with a corresponding increase in effectiveness. A war over Taiwan could well have serious nuclear implications from the outset.

The course of the Ukraine war should provide sobering lessons for both Beijing and Taipei. Russia's offensive has been far more costly and time-consuming than either Vladimir Putin or

top military officials anticipated. That development should induce caution among PRC leaders who might be considering the military option with respect to Taiwan. At the same time, Russia's forces have made steady, albeit slow, progress in grinding down Ukrainian defenses. Russia now controls nearly all of Ukraine's Black Sea coast, and the invaders have secured control of major swaths of territory in eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian leaders and their Western backers who speak of a victory against Russia are engaging in a ruinous delusion.

So, too, are Taiwanese independence militants who believe that Taipei could prevail against a PRC invasion. With more U.S.-supplied weaponry and a tighter focus on air and naval (especially submarine) capabilities, Taiwan can emulate Ukraine and create a nasty "porcupine" strategy that would make a PRC victory extremely costly. However, unless the United States is willing to wage a prolonged, nearly total, war against China to help defend the island, a Taiwanese victory is highly improbable.

Washington needs to learn from its Ukraine experience that encouraging a client state to embrace unrealistic expectations can be tragic for all concerned. The need for greater realism and greater restraint on the part of all parties concerned should be the principal lesson of the Ukraine war.

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