



US aiding Ukraine won't deter China

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What's at stake in Ukraine, exactly, for the West? Just about everything, judging from recent pronouncements. A year deep into Russia's war, US President Joe Biden, while on tour in Europe, claimed 'what literally is at stake is not just Ukraine, it's freedom. The idea that over 100,000 forces would invade another country — after war — since World War Two, nothing like that has happened. Things have changed radically. And we have to — we have to make sure we change them back.'

This is hyperbole. Things 'like it' did happen. Calamitous, armed violations of sovereignty defined the postwar world. China seized Tibet in 1949. The Soviet Union re-invaded Berlin in 1952, Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 (send any quibbles about definitions to the victims). NATO ally Turkey twice invaded Cyprus in 1974 and partitioned it. Indonesia, Washington's client state, invaded and annexed East Timor in 1975. In 1980, Saddam Hussein's Iraq launched a war on Iran, using chemical weapons promiscuously, and then received American assistance. And with Biden's vote, 'over 100,000 forces' invaded Iraq in 2003. Ukraine itself has been invaded and occupied since 2014. One can argue Russia's invasion is the most consequential, one of the most predatory, and falls on a region Westerners should care most about. But that makes it a matter of temperature, not unique substance. Though Russia's invasion warrants punishment, there is not an inviolate 'security order' to return to, neither in Europe nor anywhere else.

This amnesia matters. There is an urge in Washington to treat the war in Ukraine not just as a high-stakes, epic struggle, but as a cosmic one, almost outside time. This is partly the vanity of self-celebration to be found throughout the national security penumbra, of wanting our historical moment to be singular, unprecedented and special. But, crucially, it reflects and reinforces a mythological image of a fragile world structured like a set of psychological dominoes. Supposedly, the hostile revisionist powers of the world watch the struggle keenly, a barometer of Western resolve, calculating whether to pounce on their targets. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and other proponents of supporting Ukraine claim that sending aid, arms and intelligence to the eastern European country will help deter China's aggression in north-east Asia. As well as defending the principle of sovereignty and 'freedom' in general, they say, this signals across hemispheres that armed adventurism will not stand, deterring China from attacking Taiwan. To arm Ukraine, so the logic goes, is to protect Taiwan.

With that framing comes a seductive optimism. If the world is so fatally interwoven, America can win even in the most unlikely region by acting elsewhere, and without fighting. China's economy is ten times Russia's size. It mounts a large naval and nuclear build-up, coerces its neighbours and bids ever more stridently for dominance. And Taiwan, far more than Ukraine, is a technological-economic prize. Yet still, the wager is that by exerting itself with measures short of war somewhere else, Washington can preserve the fabric of world order even in this more forbidding neighbourhood, and without even entering the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The world of 'great power competition' links two major theatres, but in ways that suit the West. To display resolve is to impress a global audience, and avoid painful conversations with allies about the distribution of defence burdens. No wonder the wager is attractive. It promises Americans epochal struggle at lend-lease rates.

Such a vision is dangerous. If 'freedom' is 'literally' on the line, why not fight for it? It is awkward for a superpower and its allies to take such a stance, if they are not prepared to join the fight directly as a belligerent. It couples the rhetoric of maximal war aims with a less-than-maximal desire for limited liability. There are other ways to conceive what the war is about, such as defending a NATO buffer by wearing down a rival. That rationale may be less poetic, but at least it has the merit of proportionality between means and stated ends. That is not how the architects of the west's efforts in Ukraine have chosen to play it. We all, apparently, will only lend consent to the effort if we are told that in Ukraine, we can have it all — measures short of war, and thereby the prevention of major war elsewhere.

The idea that arming Ukraine will deter China from moving on Taiwan is too convenient to accept without an inquest. It offers the promise that China, a determined revisionist power, would be deterred from pursuing one of its most coveted objectives rather easily, by the large but indirect efforts of the West in another fight.

It suggests that the world does not impose harsh tradeoffs. But our world is not a morality play where helping fend off aggressors in one place wards them off elsewhere. It is more tragic. The harsh reality is that Asian and European theatres are connected, but in conflicting, rather than complementary, ways.

Let's take the issue of weapons. While the weapons needed by Taiwan differ in important cases to those needed by Ukraine — and there are other reasons for the backlog in weapons shipments to Taipei — there is still a basic truth that American efforts are being diverted. There are also significant overlaps. Anti-aircraft missiles, or anti-tank missiles or rocket artillery launchers sent to Ukraine can also be used against an invading force of landing craft or helicopters. Generating capability is a more complex matter than simply re-routing ships and equipment, but fundamentally, material resources (in the form of personnel, money, industrial plant or presidential time) devoted to one theatre cannot be allocated to another. The aid programme to Ukraine has also been accompanied by a partial strategic re-pivot to Europe. Washington has shifted thousands of troops, and valuable air, naval, logistics, surveillance and reconnaissance assets back to Europe at the very time China is enhancing the weight of force it can apply in the region it prioritises.

A similar problem besets the question of economic sanctions. To sanction Russia over Ukraine is not simply to set a precedent, such as arresting a criminal to deter others. It is to deplete Western containment capacity. It would be extremely difficult, unthinkably expensive, and politically unsellable to wage intensifying economic warfare on both Russia and China simultaneously. It is not clear just how much soaring inflation and energy price rises Europeans are willing to endure on the promise that it is in their interests. Adding ever-greater sanctions on China may well be too much to ask.

Given this reality, the penalties for being wrong could be steep. Moreover, the concept itself is likely wrong.

Ukraine is not simply a prologue for Taiwan. US strategy does not primarily promise aid to the country in the event of conflict with China. It leaves open the possibility it will intervene to fight a war on its behalf. If Ukraine were such a close proxy for US resolve over Taiwan, and if the stakes are as high as the White House claims, that would be grounds for fighting directly in Ukraine now. Otherwise, measures short of war in Ukraine are not a commentary on Washington's willingness to go to the mat over Taiwan. After all, NATO with its choices, if not its rhetoric, has judged actions against Russia as worthy of some risk and cost, but not its own blood. It is not clear how Beijing is supposed to read its bounded commitment to Ukraine as a signal of its war-willingness to defend Taiwan directly against a larger, richer adversary.

A further problem is the simple difference between land and water. The West can supply and resupply Ukraine across contiguous territory without fighting through the aggressor's defences. It can't do this in Taiwan. Shifting materiel via Nato-assured land routes tells us nothing about the willingness to break a naval blockade with a sealift, by fighting, or both.

If there is a direct analogy between arming Ukraine and arming Taiwan, and an apparent lesson for China, it is to strike hard and fast, seize the Taiwanese islands with overwhelming force, achieve a *fait accompli*, block all routes via sea and air, physically deny an intermediate possibility of arming and supplying Taiwan, and place the burden of further escalation on the US and its allies. Sustained assistance to Ukraine is possible because of space and time. In a collision over Taiwan, China would look to deny America in both.

Rather than maintaining the insistence that measures short of war in Europe will suffice to keep the peace in Asia, after one year of conflict it is more instructive to look at what has in fact happened. Thus far, arming Ukraine has not dissuaded China from attempting to realise its dream of a Sino-centric order, backed by force, a dream that has reunification with Taiwan at its core. It has not halted its large-scale military build-up. It has not moved China to call off its joint exercises with Russia or intrusions into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone — to the contrary. If anything, the Sino-Russia axis, more a non-aggression pact than an alliance, is real and tightening. This is not a China easily awed by Western resolve.

There are even suggestions, apparently supported by American intelligence, that Beijing may arm Russia. More evidence, if any was needed, that our world is often a balancing world, not a bandwagoning one. If so, Beijing recognises it has an interest in shoring up a depleted partner and, wisely or unwisely, bets that the net effect will be to drain the West's resources and will

more than its own. So long as a diminished Russia survives, as a kind of giant North Korea on Europe's doorstep, it can serve China both by becoming a dependent vassal, and a problem that drains American resources.

If one of the largest military assistance efforts in history has not in any perceptible way dampened Beijing's goals; its pursuit of capabilities to achieve those goals; or its increasing attempts to overwhelm Taiwan with a sense of inevitable absorption, there is not much to the 'Ukraine-Taiwan' promise beyond loose 'domino' thinking. That thinking is historically an unreliable bet. Recall Russia's war on Georgia in the summer of 2008: America had affirmed that Georgia was its security partner in the Bucharest NATO summit months before and during the ongoing war in Iraq, a war that was supposed to signal deterrent strength to the world. And that was when America was a unipolar power, when such displays should have been all the more impressive.

This is not to offer a confident view of how best to avoid war over Taiwan. Historically there is more than one pathway to major war, and strong arguments can be made that different postures could incentivise Beijing to attack, whether ramping up, backing off, or maintaining ambiguity.

Any credible account of how a war could start would factor in Beijing's calculation that success needs a temporary military advantage — and it is more likely to make that calculation with American capabilities diverted. Neither is this to repudiate the case for arming Ukraine. To the contrary, the West does have an interest, real but limited, in maintaining support. If we care about NATO and the buffer space around it, a Russia depleted and denied the chance to dominate and impose regime-change in Kyiv is preferable to a Russia that seizes the capital, potentially gets greedier, and imposes a further crisis on NATO's eastern flank, and from a stronger position.

But for the US and its allies to act seriously, and either to deter or respond to an attack on Taiwan, they must take their largest adversary more seriously. Whether in Berlin or Taipei, two under-arming allies, the US should engage in a more intense and uncompromising dialogue about the division of labour and the hard trade-offs between allies and theatres; a dialogue currently impeded by America's heavy lifting. None of this is encouraged by the allegedly comforting notion of 'Arm Ukraine to deter China.' It is not so much a demonstrable, hard-won lesson from history. It is more a faith; a belief without evidence. But, in this case, those who believe it may well not be blessed.

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