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# Does the Ukraine War Mean Anything for Taiwan?

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## Key Points:

- The growing literature drawing parallels between Taiwan and Ukraine compares the pre-war posturing of China with that of Russia before its attack on Ukraine.
- Despite these comparisons and conclusions, there are clear differences between the two cases.
- Russia's pre-war posturing was explicit, while China's show of naval and aerial capabilities has been much more contained in contrast.
- The current international isolation and hostility facing Russia offer valuable insights for China to go down a similar path.
- Differences between the two countries' political thought, military might, and economic conditions also dictate the difference in their approaches.
- China can be expected to exercise all caution in the matter.

The growing literature drawing parallels between Taiwan and Ukraine compares the pre-war posturing of China with that of Russia before the latter's attack on Ukraine. It points to the rise in Chinese activities around Taiwan as a precursor to Beijing's attack. Fears are also fueled by China's vocal support for Russia and a defence of Moscow's approach as a reaction to Western provocation. China and Russia's "no limits" partnership is also being viewed as another sign of Chinese willingness to follow in Russian footsteps. Meanwhile, China's attempts to mediate the Ukrainian crisis are being viewed with similar suspicion. China's 12-point proposal for ending the war in Ukraine is seen as a mere stalling tactic to allow Russia the time to

build back some strength.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these comparisons and conclusions, it must be noted that there are clear differences between the two cases. For one, Russia's pre-war posturing was explicit. Its involvement in Georgia, Syria and Crimea was clear military measures. Various Russian statements on Western provocation, in addition to the several warnings about the impending invasion, were also clear.<sup>2</sup> The problem, in this case, was a lack of understanding of the strategic signalling by its counterparts. While speculators weigh this pre-war posturing against China's reiteration

<sup>1</sup> Al Jazeera, "Russia-China Ties Enter 'New Era' as Xi Meets Putin in Moscow," March 21, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/21/chinas-xi-says-ties-with-russia-entering-new-era>.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Dominguez, "Is Taiwan the next Ukraine? It's More Complicated," *The Japan Times*, February 19, 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/02/19/asia-pacific/ukraine-war-anniversary-taiwan-comparison/>; James Baron, "Taiwan and Ukraine: Parallels, Divergences and Potential Lessons," *Global Asia* 17, no. 2 (June 2022), [https://www.globalasia.org/v17no2/cover/taiwan-and-ukraine-parallels-divergences-and-potential-lessons\\_james-baron](https://www.globalasia.org/v17no2/cover/taiwan-and-ukraine-parallels-divergences-and-potential-lessons_james-baron).

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of the unification of the country and its polemics against the Western nations as a provocation, the two are not the same. China's show of naval and aerial capabilities has been much more contained in contrast.

While the growing fears of an imminent Chinese attack present its various demonstrations and provocation in the South China Sea as evidence, it is clear that these have been more contained reactions instead of a one-sided show of power. China's engagement in direct violent clashes and confrontations has been limited to its immediately neighbouring land borders, in, for example, the case of its confrontation with India.<sup>3</sup> Considering the larger picture, Russia's justification for its aggression was the overexpansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). In any case, the rise of alliances such as Australia, United Kingdom, and United States (AUKUS) partnership and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is being viewed as complementary to the West's approach to Russia.<sup>4</sup> However, the case of China is much different owing to several factors.

And despite the similarity in the Western approach with regard to Ukraine and Taiwan, subtle differences exist. Ukraine is a legally sovereign nation, whereas – despite local aspirations and foreign support– Taiwan legally remains part of the mainland.<sup>5</sup> Hence Western overextension in terms of not only encircling the neighbourhood but also directly engaging with the territory in question – Taiwan – has been much more provocative. Yet the Chinese response has been limited to a counter show of power and diplomatic rebuke. China has also answered by pursuing strategic policy initiatives such as the Global Security Initiative.<sup>6</sup> While these attempts have been viewed as a reluctance or inability to engage with the Western powers directly, they can also be viewed as a preference for risk-averting measures where China prefers a peaceful solution, contrary to the popular opinion in literature and reporting.

## CHINA AND RUSSIA'S DOMESTIC CONDITIONS

<sup>3</sup> Theo Sommer, "China's Relations with Its Neighbors and the West Will Define the next World Order," *The Security Times*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.the-security-times.com/chinas-relations-with-its-neighbors-and-the-west-will-define-the-next-world-order/>.

<sup>4</sup> Amy Hawkins, "'Path of Error and Danger': China Angry and Confused over Aukus Deal," *The Guardian*, March 16, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/16/outrage-confusion-china-reaction-aukus-deal>.

<sup>5</sup> Li Kua-teng, "What Is Taiwan's Legal Status According to International Law, Japan, and the US?" *The News Lens: International Edition*, December 2, 2019, <https://international.thenewslens.com/feature/taiwan-for-sale-2020/128242>.

<sup>6</sup> Aadil Brar, "After Saudi-Iran, China Wants to Displace America. But Won't Be 'Policeman of the World,'" *The Print*, March 15, 2023, <https://theprint.in/opinion/after-saudi-iran-china-wants-to-displace-america-but-wont-be-policeman-of-the-world/1443799/>.

## Political Thought

A comparison of the two states' domestic political landscapes also brings certain differences to attention. In the case of Russia, it is largely believed that Putin is an authoritarian ruler without any critical input from the rest of his government. This has been viewed as the leading cause of the lack of a well-defined strategy in Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> However, in the case of China, the hold of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is perceived to be much more ironclad and far-reaching. Although critics point to Xi's unprecedented third term as President, the CCP still remains much more involved in Chinese affairs as a collective. The recent restructuring within the party also indicates his preference for surrounding himself with loyal counsellors instead of acting in solitude. In this case, then, it is expected that China's stance on Taiwan is more likely to be driven through mutual consultation or, at the very least, collective input.<sup>8</sup>

## Military Might and Economic Conditions

A comparison of the military prowess of Russia and China can also offer some insight. Despite Russia's current standing in the war, at the time of the attack, Russia was much better equipped for military engagement. In the case of China, several sources have warned of the fast-improving Chinese military capabilities. But in terms of traditional capabilities, China is not equipped (or eager) to extend itself beyond Taiwan in a protracted conflict.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, it must be noted here that the two countries have vastly different economic stakes globally. While Russia has been vital as the energy supplier of much of Europe, China is much more integrated multilaterally. While it can cause considerable damage to the global economy, it also stands to lose much in the case of economic isolation or sanctions. Its global economic interdependence is not limited to particular products or services; it has a much more intricate financial and economic involvement.<sup>10</sup>

Here the current international isolation and hostility

<sup>7</sup> James Baron, "Taiwan and Ukraine."

<sup>8</sup> Amy Hawkins and Agence France-Presse, "Xi Jinping to Tighten Communist Party's Grip with Overhaul of China's Government at Key Meeting," *The Guardian*, March 3, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/03/xi-jinping-to-tighten-communist-partys-grip-with-overhaul-of-chinas-government-at-key-meeting>.

<sup>9</sup> Evan A. Feigenbaum and Charles Hooper, "What the Chinese Army Is Learning from Russia's Ukraine War," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 21, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/07/21/what-chinese-army-is-learning-from-russia-s-ukraine-war-pub-87552>.

<sup>10</sup> James Dobbins, Howard J. Shatz and Ali Wyne. "Russia Is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China Is a Peer, Not a Rogue: Different Challenges, Different Responses," *RAND Corporation*, January 28, 2019, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE310.html>; Patricia Cohen and Jack Ewing, "What's at Stake for the Global Economy as Conflict Looms in Ukraine," *The New York Times*, February 21, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/21/business/economy/ukraine-russia-economy.html>.

facing Russia – including the International Criminal Court’s (ICC’s) recent issue of an arrest warrant for President Putin – offer valuable insights for China for going down a similar path.<sup>11</sup> If anything, at the moment, China is looking towards playing a more active role in mitigating the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. It has managed to play a constructive role in the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement.<sup>12</sup> With its continuous stress on resolving global conflicts peacefully, it appears that China is embracing its status and role as the “Middle Kingdom” more proactively.

## THREAT PERCEPTION EMANATING FROM THE WEST

The opinion-making in the Taiwan crisis has also been shaped largely by threat perceptions emanating from the West. After the breakout of the war in Ukraine, alarming reports have been made about an imminent attack on Taiwan. While tensions between Taiwan and the mainland have always ebbed and flowed, the visit of Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan and Chinese retaliation seems to have precipitated the threat perception of Western countries.<sup>13</sup> The outbreak of the war in Ukraine has given these perceptions a newfound legitimacy, and it appears to be just a matter of days before Taiwan meets a similar fate at the hands of a non-democratic government.

Fears on the Western side may also be based on Xi Jinping’s turn to “Xin Xing” from Deng Xiaoping’s earlier “*Tao Guang Yang Hui*”. Where Deng’s philosophy stressed “biding time and waiting”, Xi’s approach has been looking towards a “new era”.<sup>14</sup> Western reactions to this assertive posturing, combined with the more unflinching attitude of Chinese representatives internationally, have been rhetorically labelled “wolf warrior diplomacy”. Beijing has recently called out this approach as a “narrative trap”.<sup>15</sup> Adding to these overall tensions were the (later retracted) statements by US President Joe Biden pledging American support in the

<sup>11</sup> Anders Åslund, “Putin the Pariah: War Crimes Arrest Warrant Deepens Russia’s Isolation,” *Atlantic Council*, March 19, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-the-pariah-war-crimes-arrest-warrant-deepens-russias-isolation/>.

<sup>12</sup> Maria Fantappie and Vali Nasr, “A New Order in the Middle East?” *Foreign Affairs*, March 22, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/iran-saudi-arabia-middle-east-relations>.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Haenle and Nathaniel Sher, “How Pelosi’s Taiwan Visit Has Set a New Status Quo for U.S-China Tensions,” August 17, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/08/17/how-pelosi-s-taiwan-visit-has-set-new-status-quo-for-u.s-china-tensions-pub-87696>.

<sup>14</sup> Pang Zhongying, *From Tao Guang Yang Hui to Xin Xing*, (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, June 2020) Series: Trends in Southeast Asia, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/TRS7\\_20.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/TRS7_20.pdf); Son Daekwon, “Xi Jinping Thought Vs. Deng Xiaoping Theory,” *The Diplomat*, October 25, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/xi-jinping-thought-vs-deng-xiaoping-theory/>.

<sup>15</sup> Tan Dawn Wei, “‘Wolf Warrior Diplomacy’ a Narrative Trap: Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang,” *The Straits Times*, March 7, 2023, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/wolf-warrior-diplomacy-a-narrative-trap-chinese-foreign-minister-qin-gang>.

event of an attack on Taiwan. Yet these statements have been rolled back, and the US maintains its “strategic ambiguity” over Taiwan. The underlying belief in American and Taiwanese thinking is that this will help maintain the delicate balance it has held so far between the three parties.<sup>16</sup>

## TAIWAN’S PERCEPTIONS AND POSITION

According to sources, the Taiwanese public at large is also ambivalent about the US coming to Taiwan’s aid in the event of a military confrontation.<sup>17</sup> Whether or not this scenario actually plays out is something only time will tell. Comparatively, Ukraine acts as a strategic buffer to what is viewed as a “revisionist threat” from Russia in Europe. This underscores its importance in the larger Western vision of a European security structure. Taiwan, on the other hand, remains geographically isolated from Western supporters.<sup>18</sup> Not unlike Ukraine, though, it carries its own economic importance due to its largely irreplaceable semiconductor market and its role in the global supply chain.<sup>19</sup>

Other grounds for comparison between Ukraine and Taiwan include the relative strength of the militaries of the two territories and the differences between the response times of the two in the event of an attack. In the case of Ukraine, it has benefitted from its land capabilities and its ability for defence by over-extending the Russian offensive. However, it is evident in the case of Taiwan that such a feat will not be possible. What’s more, is the consideration of the miscalculation in the Russian offensive about the swiftness of victory. China, on the other hand, is much better informed and has fewer variables to consider in its calculations.<sup>20</sup> If anything, these factors alone can lend predictive power to China’s approach.

## THE JAPANESE POSITION

Apart from the US, only Japan can prove to be a potential bulwark. Historically, Japan has distanced itself from the

<sup>16</sup> Associated Press, “Envoy Says Taiwan Learns from Ukraine War,” *VOA*, January 21, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/envoy-says-taiwan-learns-from-ukraine-war-/6928722.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Damir Marusic, “Taiwan Faces Its Ukraine Moment,” *The Atlantic*, December 3, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/12/taiwan-xi-jinping-china-invasion-us-support/672336/>.

<sup>18</sup> Emily Holland, “Ukraine and Taiwan: Small Powers in the Shadow of Great Power Rivalries,” In *Perspectives on Taiwan: Insights from the 2017 Taiwan-U.S. Policy Program*, (CSIS 2018):3-6, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep22433.4>.

<sup>19</sup> Yoshihiro Sato and Kevin Varley, “Taiwan Is Still Semiconductor Leader as Chip Exports Rise Again,” *Bloomberg*, January 16, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-01-15/taiwan-is-still-semiconductor-leader-as-chip-exports-rise-again>.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Spirtas, “Ukraine’s Dream Could Be Taiwan’s Nightmare,” *War on the Rocks*, October 28, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/10/ukraines-dream-could-be-taiwans-nightmare/>.

Taiwan conflict. Yet, in a recent turn of events, Japan has carved out a much more active role for itself in the security of Taiwan. The latter's security is seen as being closely tied to the former's. The evidence for this also comes from the kind of wording used to describe the Taiwan conflict in Japan's recent National Security Strategy.<sup>21</sup> China's growing presence in the South China Sea and its recent military exercises – viewed as unprovoked by Japan – point to Japan's posturing on the matter.<sup>22</sup> Japan's accusations of the violation of its airspace by China also hint at growing tensions between the two. Its involvement in the QUAD is yet another manifestation of its perception of the Chinese threat in its neighbourhood.<sup>23</sup> This line is also being leveraged by Western countries in order to complete their strategy of encirclement. The rhetoric used by the West and its allies presents an impetus for such alliances, adding to the growing concerns over the conflict in Taiwan.

## CONCLUSION

The burgeoning literature on the comparison of Ukraine and Taiwan, perhaps fueled by the official threat perception of the West and vice versa, points to the inevitability of the invasion of Taiwan. It must be understood, however, that despite such parallels, the two exist in vastly different contexts. They cannot be reduced to a prize in the tug-of-war between the West and an antagonist regional power. While Taiwan and Ukraine themselves demonstrate different conditions, further evidence comes from comparing the military and political structures of China and Russia, which present a starkly diverse picture. Historically, the Chinese government has exhibited more restraint in international conflicts, preferring diplomatic engagement over direct conflict. Recently, it is also carving out a global role for itself as a peacemaker. President Xi's recent interactions with President Putin and the proposal to end hostilities in Ukraine clearly demonstrate the role China is willing to play in the international arena.

The question of Taiwan remains one such area where China has preferred a show of power instead of its actual use. China can be expected to exercise all caution in the matter, despite the rising alarm over the remarks of the Chinese President to not leave the issue as an

outstanding issue for generations.<sup>24</sup> Taiwan is more beneficial to the mainland in its current state of being a major global hub instead of a war-ravaged and depleted ruin. After all, given China's steep progress, unification by peaceful means may even follow as a natural course of events.

<sup>21</sup> Eleanor Shiori Hughes and Riley Walters, "Tokyo Is Very Much Invested in Taiwan's Future," *The Japan Times*, March 9, 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2023/03/09/commentary/japan-commentary/taiwan-japan-relations-2/>.

<sup>22</sup> Radio Free Asia, "Japan Latest Nation to Contest Beijing's South China Sea Claims," *VOA*, January 23, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific-japan-latest-nation-contest-beijings-south-china-sea-claims/6201116.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Reuters, "China's Balloons Give Japan and Taiwan a Reason to Share Intelligence, Says Lawmaker," *Reuters*, February 16, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinas-balloons-give-japan-taiwan-reason-share-intelligence-says-lawmaker-2023-02-16/>.

<sup>24</sup> David Sacks, "What Xi Jinping's Major Speech Means for Taiwan," *Council on Foreign Relations*, July 6, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/what-xi-jinpings-major-speech-means-taiwan>.