

RUSSIA & EURASIA STUDIES CENTRE

What Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Tells Us About Chinese Policy Towards Taiwan

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Executive Summary

Russia and China view the Western response to the military invasion of Ukraine, and to threats of a future invasion of Taiwan, as a gauge of the state of U.S. global power. A weak response, or perception of weakness, could result in further chaos and uncertainty.

Russia and China see Ukraine and Taiwan respectively as parts of their homelands. President Vladimir Putin and other Russian officials routinely define Ukraine as a "Russian land" and Russians and Ukrainians as "one people".¹ State-owned Russian news agency RIA Novosti published somewhat prematurely an article declaring that Russia had overcome "the tragedy of 1991", Russia "restoring its historical fullness, gathering the Russian world, the Russian people together – in its entirety of Great Russians, Belarusians and Little Russians".²

Beijing meanwhile claims Taiwan as its 23rd province, and the Fujianese territories under Taiwanese control as parts of Fujian province. In 2005, China adopted an "Anti-Secession" law intended to prevent Taiwan from becoming an independent state outside China's One China Policy.³ The text asserts that "there is only one China in the world" to which "both the mainland and Taiwan belong", and states that in the event of secession "the state shall employ non-peaceful means... to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity".⁴

For Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping the reclamation of these regions is a matter of their historical legacies. Russian and Chinese revanchism is far deeper than the West had previously assumed, and in February 2022, this led Russia to take the unprecedented step of launching a full military invasion of Ukraine.

Clear signals in the form of previous aggression and a massive build-up of force were underweighted by analysts who played down the imminent threat. There are clear lessons for Taipei, Washington, and London from this failure to predict and prepare. The threat posed by Beijing to Taiwan is comparable to that presented to Ukraine by Moscow, with

clear threats to use force in the event of Taiwan moving away from a one China policy.

The Russian Claim to Ukraine

Vladimir Putin represents a strand of Russian nationalism that views Ukraine as an integral part of the Russian world. Its return, alongside Crimea and Belarus, would cement his place in Russian history.⁵ Crimea was regained in 2014; Belarus, in 2020-21. This leaves Ukraine as the last obstacle to Putin's goals.

On 21 February 2022, Russia recognised the 'independence' of the so-called Donetsk Peoples Republic (DPR) and Luhansk Peoples Republics (LPR). Three days later, Russian troops launched an invasion to reconquer the "Russian land" of Ukraine, transforming Russia's covert involvement in Eastern Ukraine into overt conflict.

This was the logical culmination of territorial claims made against Ukraine throughout the three decades since the disintegration of the USSR in 1991.⁶ Territorial claims against Crimea have been made since January 1992. Putin has also repeatedly claimed southern-eastern Ukrainian lands were wrongly included in Ukraine by Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin when the USSR was created in 1922.

Putin first made overt territorial claims to south-eastern Ukraine at the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest.⁷ Putin described this region of Ukraine as New Russia, a term that had long fallen out of use and associated with the Tsarist Russian Empire. Six years later, Putin revived another Tsarist term for south-eastern Ukraine of Black Sea Lands.⁸

These revanchist statements by Russian leaders constituted direct territorial claims and threats to dismember Ukraine.

These territorial claims are based in part on the view held by Russian nationalists that Ukrainians are one of three branches of the Russian people, which in turn is based on Tsarist Russia's description of the Eastern Slavs as a pan-Russian nation. This belief that Russians and Ukrainians are one people means in turn that they should be united. The place of Ukrainians is within the Russian World and as a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, created by Putin to compete with the EU's Eastern Partnership, rather than as members of the EU or NATO.

This belief is associated with the view held by Russian leader that these nations exist within their exclusive sphere of influence. The Kremlin does not believe Ukrainians, or other countries in Eurasia such as Georgia, should be permitted to join NATO or the EU, viewing the expansion of such organisations as an unacceptable intrusion.

That Ukraine is not united with Russia is viewed as a consequence of its status as a Western puppet state. The Kremlin is adamant Ukraine is part of the Russian World "that accidentally fell under Western influence" but which will be returned to Mother Russia's embrace.⁹

Moscow previously sought to accomplish this return through the Minsk peace process signed in September 2014 and February 2015. Ukraine has resisted implementing these agreements because they would have created a 'Bosnianised Ukraine', with a weak central government and federalised state where two Russian proxy entities would exercise significant power. This in turn would support the Kremlin's secondary objective of Ukrainian 'neutrality', seeking to join neither NATO or the EU, residing wholly within Russia's sphere of influence. The failure of this plan has led to the direct use of military action.

The Chinese Claim to Taiwan

The maintenance of territorial integrity is an overriding obsession for the Chinese state. The existence of Taiwan as a separate entity capable of declaring independence and ending recognition of 'One China' is a matter of deep concern for policymakers.

In Xinjiang and Tibet, China has demonstrated that it is more than comfortable in using military force to achieve its objectives of cultural and national 'unity'. In Taiwan, however, Beijing has taken a more patient approach. Unlike the Russian war in Ukraine, there has been no direct military action undertaken – a consequence of both geography and politics.

It is still true however that Chinese military provocations take place on a regular basis close to Taiwan. China has prepared its security forces for the eventuality of an invasion; should Chinese leaders believe it is justified and the likelihood of US intervention low; building a mock-up of a US aircraft carrier and other vessels in the remote desert area to test military tactics against US forces that could potentially intervene to defend the island.¹⁰

While there is no indication that such an assault is imminent – there has been no build-up of forces comparable to that which preceded Russia's assault against Ukraine – the Chinese state has been very clear that any attempt to change the status of Taiwan could lead to conflict¹¹.

With a more patient approach taken to date, China could well continue to observe Taiwan and permit it to continue as a *de facto* separate and sovereign state, only invading if it declared independence and no longer viewing itself as part of One China. Chinese diplomatic pressure has ensured that only fifteen countries recognise Taiwan, with no NATO or EU members among them.¹² Those states like Lithuania which have attempted to upgrade their relations have been targeted by China with sanctions.

Distinguishing Ukraine from Taiwan

While there are clear parallels in Russian and Chinese attitudes towards Ukraine and Taiwan, the two nations have taken very different approaches towards achieving their desired reunification to date.

These result partly from external constraints. On the American side, the long-established US policy of strategic ambiguity towards Taiwan has no analogy in its relationship with Ukraine. The Taiwan Relations Act instructs the USA to provide Taiwan with defensive capabilities, and to "maintain the capacity" to "resist any resort to force" in an attempt to settle the status of Taiwan.¹³ Successive presidents have declined to clarify whether the United States would in fact elect to use this capacity.

This should be distinguished from the security assurances provided by the USA – alongside the United Kingdom and Russia – in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum.¹⁴ The USA has never committed to defend Ukraine with troops, and clearly stated in the build-up to the current conflict that no such commitment would be made.¹⁵

A Chinese conflict with Taiwan would carry with it a far higher risk of escalation to include the United States than Russia's action against Ukraine.

Beijing's View of Moscow's War

Throughout the Russia-Ukraine crisis, China has provided careful and limited rhetorical support for the Kremlin. A joint statement released at the February 2022 Russian-Chinese meeting in Beijing made no explicit mention of Ukraine, but re-affirmed a One China policy on the matter of Taiwan, supported Moscow's demand for security guarantees, and stated opposition to further enlargement of NATO.¹⁶

Since the start of the conflict proper, however, China has had to strike a balancing act. From 2014 to 2020, China voted against on seven occasions and abstained on two of the nine resolutions voted on by the UN denouncing Crimea's annexation by Russia.¹⁷ China's policy of aligning with Russia against the US and the unipolar world it allegedly leads was – at least until the Russian invasion of Ukraine – more important to Beijing than being consistent in its support for the territorial integrity of states.

In 2022, Beijing has abstained in a UN Security Council vote to denounce the Russian invasion, and stated at a session of the UN General Assembly that "All countries' sovereignty and territorial integrity should be respected", repeating Foreign Minister's Wang Yi's statement that "China firmly advocates respecting and safeguarding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries"^{18 19 20}.

This language has been carefully chosen; China has also rejected descriptions of Russia's actions as an "invasion".²¹ Couching its concerns in terms of territorial integrity repeats its language used in describing concerns over Taiwan. Russia's invasion has "forced China to balance between standing by its Russian strategic partner while maintaining its professed policy of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other countries (and demanding that other states refrain from involving themselves in China's internal affairs)".²²

Those who expected more unequivocal support should recall that China's relationship with Russia is historically complex. As Communist states they briefly went to war in 1969, resulting in the seven-month Sino-Soviet border conflict. Russia has long been wary of the potential for China to encroach on eastern Siberia and the Far East.

Their current close relations are based primarily on their deteriorating relations with the West and rejection of the unipolar global order. Russia and China are strong supporters of the nation-state and oppose the loss of state sovereignty to multi-national institutions and globalisation. This convergence of interests is distinct from a formal alliance, and indeed China is likely to remain disinterested in formalising its relationship into a security treaty with Russia.²³

Their relationship is based more on their anti-Americanism than anything else, and this too is limited; despite internal brutality, China is not a rule breaker of international norms to the same extent as Russia.

Their unequal relationship is based on their unequal national capabilities. Huge economic, financial, travel, and diplomatic sanctions imposed by the Western world in response to the invasion of Ukraine will hasten the economic decline of Russia, diminishing its utility to Beijing. Russia's concerns are regional in nature, with no equivalent of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) global infrastructure development strategy.

China has supported Russia's demands for a revision of the European security architecture because it is in line with Beijing's backing for a transformation of the unipolar to a multipolar world, as is Russia's request for a moratorium on further NATO enlargement. At a joint summit of Putin and Xi in Beijing, China and Russia also condemned AUKUS, the new trilateral security pact bringing together Australia, the UK, and US.

This does not mean that China supports the Kremlin's goal of transforming Ukraine into a

Belarus-2 fully ensconced in the Russian sphere of influence. As one commentator noted: "Beijing is not entirely disposed to a Ukraine that takes an overtly pro-Russian orientation at the expense of closer ties with the West. Rather, it is more likely to be in Beijing's best interests that Ukraine maintains a relatively neutral position between Russia and the West, in no small part due to the geopolitical instability that stems from constant wrangling for Ukraine's geopolitical orientation."²⁴

China would prefer Ukraine adopt a form of real neutrality where it would balance between cooperation with the East and West. Rather than be pulled in both directions. Russia's goal of pressuring Ukraine to become a neutral country no longer seeking NATO and EU membership would undermine Ukrainian sovereignty by converting it *de facto* into a client state.²⁵

Implications for Chinese Policy

While principally matters of national unity, Russia and China also view their respective conflicts to some degree as proxy conflicts with the West, and in particular the US. While Washington had pre-committed to avoiding direct military intervention, the strength of the Western response to the Ukraine crisis in economic and material terms will be seen as a means to perceive the degree of US and Western resolve to come to the aid of its allies.

Russia and China hold a common perception of a declining US power, divided internally, and over-stretched dealing with multiple crises. This perception was heightened by a poor response to the coronavirus pandemic, political and social divisions, and a chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan leading to a rapid takeover by the Taliban.²⁶ This narrative "seems to have taken hold within the Chinese leadership and has become a regular theme of official propaganda."²⁷

The unity and strength of the Western response to Russia's invasion should give Beijing pause. Sanctions have been imposed at an unprecedented level, and military equipment provided at significant scale. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to 27 countries offering military assistance. The EU, for the first time in its history, is also offering to provide military aid to Ukraine that includes the supply of planes to bolster Ukraine's small air force.

This is likely not what either Russia or China expected to happen. China would have to include an assessment of likely Western sanctions and armaments into its strategic calculation of whether it should contemplate a military invasion of Taiwan.

Similarly, the difficulties faced by Russian forces in Ukraine have highlighted the difficulties inherent in attacking well-defended positions. Taiwan's geography, necessitating invasion by sea, puts it in a significantly stronger position than Ukraine. While it may well be the view of the Chinese state that America fears "taking casualties"²⁸, a sufficiently difficult operation would dissuade even the PLA.

Six Ways the West Should Respond to Russian and Chinese Belligerence

If the West had blinked in Ukraine, and Ukrainians had not put up a dogged defence, a case could have been made that Beijing would have been emboldened with regards to Taiwan.

Instead, the West should build on its strong initial response to ensure that its willingness to support its allies is emphasised. Its commitments should be honoured and adhered to without falling for the trap of neglecting security concerns beyond the European theatre.

Britain and America should reinforce their commitment to Ukrainian and Taiwanese sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, continuing to provide defensive weapons in bulk in Ukraine, and offering assistance to the Taiwanese state.

In Europe, NATO should reinforce its presence in the three Baltic states, deterring future aggression, and to unity in provision to Ukraine. While some 27 countries have committed to providing military equipment, the US, Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltics are carrying more than their share of the load. It is important that other countries step up to the plate.

The US should re-affirm security pledges already enshrined in an earlier treaty with Taiwan, and develop a policy of military and economic support for its security.²⁹

While the suspension of the certification of Nord Stream II and implementation of sanctions is welcome, the EU should take a further step by ending the import of all Russian oil and gas. This step has likely been avoided to date because some countries are heavily reliant on Russian energy and require a transition phase. The EU should draw up a transition to a Russian energy free Europe over as short a time frame as possible.

The UK and US should take the lead in expanding existing supplies of military equipment, training, joint military exercises, cooperation in cyber warfare and training in other aspects of hybrid warfare in vulnerable allied nations as a deterrence against Russian and Chinese military aggression.³⁰

For the UK, supporting young democracies such as Ukraine and Taiwan should become a central component of a post-Brexit national identity in a Global Britain foreign policy.³¹ As Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said, "We need to fight for the rule of law, freedom and democracy, and we must take that fight to the where that ideological battle is. Security is no longer solely about military hardware. The battle is now taking place in cyber space, the economy, and in the appalling use of people as collateral."³²

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