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## Why Taiwan Will Not Be Another Ukraine

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Image Source: Facebook page of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ROC (Taiwan)

Description: Minister Wu with representatives of European agencies in Taiwan and civil society in solidarity with Ukraine. Minister Wu (middle), Director of European Economic and Trade Office Gao Zhefu (3rd from left), Representative of Langle from Czech Economic and Cultural Office (3rd from right), Director of Polish Taipei Office (2nd from right), Director of Economic and Cultural Affairs of Slovakia Representative Chu Botawen (1st from right), Dr. Rusha Feng, Hungarian senior researcher of Taiwan Generation Education Foundation (2nd from left), and Ms. Au Shuna, representative of Lithuanian expatriates in Taiwan (1st from left).



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The heightening of tensions in Ukraine and Russia's subsequent (and still ongoing) invasion of the country has spurred a popular and strategic debate on what the event could mean for Taiwan. The US and Japan remain particularly concerned that China will use the precedent set by the Ukraine assault to launch its own military action aimed at forcefully unifying with Taiwan. Although Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen has played down such concerns<sup>1</sup> – and China has also argued that the case of Taiwan is entirely separate from that of Ukraine – she simultaneously put the island on high alert by bolstering military activities (including surveillance and early warning systems around the Taiwan Strait) in response to the crisis.<sup>2</sup> What is the likelihood that Beijing will follow Russia's suit? How does the situation in Taiwan differ from that in Ukraine?

Comparing Ukraine and Taiwan to draw parallels is an attractive endeavour. Especially since both face adversarial and militarily powerful autocratic neighbours that threaten their existence as peace-loving democratic states under a policy of "belligerent irredentism".<sup>3</sup> The fact that Beijing and Moscow share a strategic alignment partnership of great import, driven by mutual derision of the West,<sup>4</sup> only adds credence to such a parity. However, closer analyses of the historical and contemporary comparisons between the Russia-Ukraine and China-Taiwan case studies show several distinct geographical, historical, geo-economic, geopolitical, and strategic differences.

**Firstly**, in terms of geography, while Ukraine shares a land border with Russia, China and Taiwan are separated by the 160 km wide body of the Taiwan Strait, a natural barrier that makes Taiwan less vulnerable. In the absence of a contiguous border, any assault by China would be necessarily air-based or sea-based, against which Taiwan stands well-prepared.<sup>5</sup> While China cannot guarantee that it can bring its troops across the sea to successfully defeat Taiwanese defences, Beijing is unlikely to take direct military action beyond grey zone warfare tactics aimed at intimidation, such as frequent sorties into Taiwanese air defence identification zone.

**Secondly**, in terms of historical connotations, although both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping employ historical justifications and nationalistic narratives in laying claims to Ukraine and Taiwan, respectively, China and Russia stand vastly apart from each other. Most importantly, perhaps, while China claims Taiwan as a historically inalienable part of its territory and therefore, any military action would be measured and ultimately be aimed at unification. Russia's goal is arguably to deter the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) to its border, which it viewed as imminent.

Furthermore, Russia boasts of a considerably experienced armed force that has previously conducted several combat missions in neighbouring former Soviet satellite states, such as Georgia and Ukraine (with the Crimean annexation of 2014), as well as regional hotbeds like Syria. On the

other hand, China has had very little military experience in large-scale combat situations in recent history. Therefore, despite its historical claims to the territory and Xi Jinping's robust desire for unification (even if through a military invasion) to establish "one China", Beijing's capacity and capability to launch a full-scale invasion are limited. Beijing has not hesitated in employing its military power as a tool for coercion within its borders, such as against ethnic minorities of the Xinjiang province and on the periphery, such as in remote frontier regions in the Himalayas via clashes with India and in building military installations in the highly-disputed South China Sea. However, such activities are far from an all-out invasion that Beijing has eschewed and will have to endure should it attack Taiwan.

**Thirdly**, geopolitically and geo-strategically speaking, Taiwan and Ukraine have significantly different policies and strategic postures towards China and Russia, respectively. Ukraine has repeatedly and publicly declared its interest in joining the NATO, despite a wary Moscow seeking assurances that the alliance will not expand further into Eastern Europe to its immediate border. In contrast, Taiwan has been much more cautious to ensure it does not unnecessarily provoke China even as it stands up against Beijing's military adventurism. The US has similarly been careful in its deliberate adherence to a policy of strategic ambiguity as a way to avoid compounding actions and stumbling into an unwanted war, therefore ensuring stability and maintaining the status quo.<sup>6</sup>

Notably, while Ukraine enjoys a greater diplomatic status, Taiwan's statehood remains a matter of debate; it is yet to be recognised by the United Nations. Therefore, while Ukraine can amass its diplomatic partners to mobilise international support, Taipei will be somewhat limited in any such endeavour. Taiwan only shares formal diplomatic relations with 15 states, and these are unlikely to come to its aid militarily. However, this realisation has only served to make Taipei more cautious and employ deft statecraft to integrate itself within the international order through unofficial ties and robust economic relations.

Where the Ukraine and Taiwan cases are similar is their lack of a formal military alliance with NATO and the US, respectively. Nevertheless, unlike Kyiv, Taipei enjoys a clear intention of support from the US, as well as major regional powers like Japan. Putin's decision to invade was a calculated risk: Ukraine is not yet a member of NATO, which instilled confidence that NATO allies would refrain from directly entering the fray and comprising Russia's chances of victory. In fact, Biden's public declaration that the US would not send troops to support Ukraine and limit its support to military weapons<sup>7</sup> likely strengthened Moscow's risk calculus and resolve. In contrast, successive American administrations have indicated support for Taiwan, including under the 'Taiwan Relations Act,'<sup>8</sup> while maintaining their policy of strategic ambiguity. Biden, in particular, has been exceedingly vocal on

the issue and has explicitly and categorically stated that the US would come to Taiwan's aid should China attack.<sup>9</sup> He has also spurred alliance partner Japan to declare support for Taiwan. Because Taiwan's fate is directly tied to that of the disputed Senkaku Islands, Tokyo will view an attack on Taiwan as an existential threat to Japan and thus have a vested interest in coming to Taiwan's aid.

For this reason, China is convinced that despite the absence of a formal military alliance, Taipei-Washington share a consequential security partnership and the US (regardless of the administration in place) will come to Taipei's aid; unlike with Putin's risk assessment, China must hence calculate its Taiwan strategy and contemplate any potential invasion considering the US' readiness to engage. Rather, China would prefer to use its many other strategic options – like imposing economic and financial embargoes, cyber-bullying, enforcing a maritime blockade, or even provoking a regime change – to pressure Taiwan into surrendering without military coercion.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, Russia and China's geopolitical imperatives stand apart as well. While Putin has actively constructed and promoted a strongman, and grandiose image in criticising the West, his goal has not been to offer any real alternative to US leadership or even build a Cold War-like sphere of influence. International condemnation is thus of little concern to Putin. In contrast, China's ambition is to build an international order rooted in its ideology. Much of Beijing's efforts under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), BRICS, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and diplomatic tactics have been accordingly aimed at gaining influence and cultivating the image of a responsible global power capable of replacing the US as the global leader. Xi has invested much in rhetoric like 'win-win' strategies and 'community with a shared future for mankind' ideologies to further his "statesmanlike image" on the global platform.<sup>11</sup> Hence, although unifying Taiwan is a core goal Xi has all but staked his political legitimacy on, the use of armed force for this purpose will be the last resort – if that – as China looks to the bigger picture of building itself as a global leader. The swift and harsh international condemnation of Russia over Ukraine – and failed disinformation efforts to blame the West – will only make China reconsider such a course on Taiwan.

**Lastly**, in geoeconomics terms, unlike Ukraine, Taiwan plays a pivotal role in global trade and supply chains – especially in the semiconductor industry that is vital to any electronic product – which accords it much greater soft power globally. It is the US' ninth-largest trading partner (above India and France), which gives Washington a deeper vested interest in Taiwan compared to Ukraine (ranked at 67).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, as supply chain security and resilience become a critical priority issue for states post-COVID-19, Taiwan's economic importance and integration with the global value chain networks are further emphasised. Unlike Russia-Ukraine, Beijing is also deeply invested in the Taiwanese economy. A potential crisis in the region would thus also severely impact the Chinese economy.

Therefore, although drawing parallels in the two cases suffer from gross pitfalls, the Ukraine crisis will have some spill-over effect. It will, in fact, force China to re-evaluate its Taiwan strategy and take notes on the risks and costs of escalation. Ukraine's strong resistance in the face of Russia will only give China pause as it evaluates the strength of the response from both Taiwan and the US and the international community at large. Taiwan has long faced the possibility of an invasion by China. Since coming into power in 2016, President Tsai has employed shrewd diplomatic advances to expand its limited international space, build unofficial relations with key powers, integrate itself in the global economy and bolster its asymmetric capabilities for defence preparedness. It, therefore, stands strong-willed and prepared to push back against a Chinese invasion.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> "China says Taiwan is 'not Ukraine' as island raises alert level," *Reuters*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-says-must-raise-alertness-over-ukraine-crisis-2022-02-23/>. Accessed March 19, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Scobell and Lucy Stevenson-Yang, "China Is Not Russia. Taiwan Is Not Ukraine..," *United States Institute of Peace*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/03/china-not-russia-taiwan-not-ukraine>. Accessed March 19, 2022.

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<sup>5</sup> Nitin J Ticku, "Taiwan 'Exposes Chinese PLA Blueprint' To Invade The 'Wanderer Island' Without Giving The US Much Time To Respond," *Eurasian Times*, December 20, 2021, <https://eurasiantimes.com/taiwan-exposes-chinese-pla-blueprint-to-invade-the-wanderer-island/>. Accessed March 21, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Clarke and Mathew Sussex, "Why 'Strategic Ambiguity' Trumps 'Strategic Clarity' on Taiwan," *Royal United Services Institute*, November 24, 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/why-strategic-ambiguity-trumps-strategic-clarity-taiwan>. Accessed March 20, 2022

<sup>7</sup> Joseph R. Biden, "Remarks by President Biden on the Assistance the United States is Providing to Ukraine," speech, White House, March 16, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-assistance-the-united-states-is-providing-to-ukraine/>. Accessed March 20, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Jake Sullivan, interview by Richard Haas "A Conversation With Jake Sullivan," *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 17, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-jake-sullivan>. Accessed March 21, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph R. Biden, "Remarks by President Biden in a CNN Town Hall with Anderson Cooper," speech, White House, October 22, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/10/22/remarks-by-president-biden-in-a-cnn-town-hall-with-anderson-cooper-2/>. Accessed March 20, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Harlan Ulman, "Reality Check #10: China will not invade Taiwan," *Atlantic Council*, February 18, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/reality-check/reality-check-10-china-will-not-invade-taiwan/>. Accessed March 20, 2022.

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<sup>11</sup> Scobell and Stevenson-Yang, n. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative, “Taiwan,” <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/china/taiwan>. Accessed March 21, 2022.; Office of the United States Trade Representative, “Ukraine,” <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/europe-middle-east/russia-and-eurasia/ukraine>. Accessed March 21, 2022. On Taiwan’s economic importance, see Stephen Ezell, “The Evolution of Taiwan’s Trade Linkages With the US and Global Economies,” Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, October 25, 2021, <https://itif.org/publications/2021/10/25/evolution-taiwan-trade-linkages-us-and-global-economies>. Accessed March 21, 2022.

