

**FOREIGN AFFAIRS**  
**16-5-22**

## **What Is China Learning From Russia's War in Ukraine?**

**America and Taiwan Need to Grasp—and Influence—Chinese Views of the Conflict**

**By David Sacks**

Beyond Europe, the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine is being felt most keenly 5,000 miles away, on the island of Taiwan. Many Taiwanese worry that they might be the next to suffer an invasion by a more powerful neighbor. Those fears are not unreasonable. While Ukraine and Taiwan differ in many ways, as relatively young democracies living alongside larger authoritarian neighbors with long-standing designs on their territory, the two face strikingly similar strategic predicaments.

Much as Russian President Vladimir Putin has described restoring the “historical unity” between Russia and Ukraine as a kind of spiritual mission, Chinese President Xi Jinping believes that reuniting mainland China with what he views as its lost province of Taiwan will help cement his place in history. Xi speaks of Taiwan in much the same way Putin talks about Ukraine, highlighting blood ties and arguing that China and Taiwan are one family. Whereas Putin has recently challenged the traditional understanding of state sovereignty, in order to suggest that Ukraine does not deserve it, Xi (like his predecessors) denies Taiwan's sovereignty altogether.

These similarities notwithstanding, it would be a mistake to assume that Russia's invasion of Ukraine will in any way hasten China's desire to achieve unification with Taiwan. Fundamentally, Chinese leaders' calculations about whether to use force against Taiwan are political decisions that Moscow's actions will not influence. Moreover, Chinese officials are well aware that attacking Taiwan now would likely fuel Western fears that Beijing and Moscow are forming an authoritarian axis and beginning to act in concert, thereby increasing the likelihood of direct intervention by the United States and its allies.

Nevertheless, Xi and the leadership of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) are closely monitoring events in Ukraine, looking for lessons that might be usefully applied in the event of a conflict with Taiwan. Russia's struggles will in no way shake China's determination to bring Taiwan under its control. From Beijing's perspective, Russia's war in Ukraine is merely a realistic preview of the costs China would likely bear if it resorted to war. Chinese leaders will examine Russia's failures and adapt their operational plans to avoid making similar mistakes.

Taiwan and the United States, therefore, would be well advised to do the same, and to scrutinize each stage of the war in Ukraine from the perspective of a Chinese official. By doing so, they may be able to identify facts or patterns that may already be giving Chinese officials pause as well as capabilities that Taiwan should adopt to buttress deterrence. Although it would be a mistake to assume that Moscow's actions have any direct influence on Beijing's decisions, identifying the kind of evidence that could convince China that Putin's decision to attack Ukraine was a colossal strategic blunder could also help Taiwanese and U.S. strategists deter China from a catastrophic attack on Taiwan.

## A WORLD LESS TRANQUIL

Russia's invasion of Ukraine confirms Chinese leaders' belief that they are entering a more dangerous era and that they must prepare for a greater likelihood of war. In his call with U.S. President Joe Biden after the war began, Xi noted that "the prevailing trend of peace and development is facing serious challenges" and that "the world is neither tranquil nor stable." Xi's words strongly suggest that China will continue to increase its defense spending, which remains focused on developing the capabilities the PLA would need to conquer Taiwan.

As the United States has built a coalition of countries, including many of the world's top economies, to impose severe sanctions on Russia, China has been examining these efforts for evidence of declining U.S. influence. From Beijing's perspective, any cracks in the coalition are heartening news, and it has certainly noted that some close U.S. partners, such as India, have not sanctioned Russia or forcefully condemned its invasion of Ukraine, even after reports emerged of alleged Russian war crimes. China likely assumes that global support for Taiwan will be more muted than support for Ukraine has been, as few countries maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and many lack even robust unofficial relations with the island. Moreover, Russia has successfully leveraged its economic ties with some countries to keep them on the sidelines, which has likely reassured China that its far greater economic might will prevent many countries from supporting Taiwan.

China will also study the sanctions applied to Russia and take steps to decrease its own vulnerability to similar actions. As a first measure, Beijing will accelerate its "dual circulation" strategy—seeking to promote exports while simultaneously encouraging stronger domestic demand—in a bid to increase other countries' economic dependence on China and reduce its dependence on others. This strategy would serve two purposes: insulating China's economy from sanctions and making any sanctions that Western countries apply to Beijing to deter or punish an invasion of Taiwan hurt the West more than China. China will also attempt to produce critical technologies such as semiconductors domestically, reduce its reliance on the U.S. financial system and the dollar, and support an alternative to SWIFT, the dollar-based international payments system. Regardless of how much progress China makes on this front, its leaders are likely confident that U.S. allies would be far more reticent to impose wide-ranging sanctions against China, given its centrality to global supply chains.

Potentially the most important lesson China has learned from war in Ukraine is that the United States will not contemplate direct military intervention against a nuclear-armed opponent. Before Russia invaded Ukraine, the United States took direct military intervention off the table, with Biden warning that "direct confrontation between NATO and Russia is World War III." Chinese analysts and policymakers have likely concluded that Russia's nuclear arsenal deterred the United States from intervening and that nuclear weapons create more room for conventional operations. Chinese strategists likely believe that this validates the country's decision to invest heavily in increasing its nuclear arsenal, which the U.S. Department of Defense recently estimated will reach at least 1,000 warheads within the decade. Moreover, having witnessed Putin's nuclear saber-rattling, China may conclude that it could deter U.S. intervention on Taiwan's behalf by raising its nuclear alert level or conducting nuclear tests at the outset of a conflict.

Russia's military blunders will help the PLA hone its plans and improve its chances of conquering Taiwan. Russia has failed to achieve air superiority over Ukraine; keep its forces

supplied with fuel, food, and munitions; and effectively conduct combined arms operations. The PLA's leadership was likely shocked that Russia's military, with extensive recent operational experience, failed to secure a decisive victory. For the PLA, this vindicates the difficult military reforms it began in 2015, which focused on joint operations and logistics and incorporate lessons learned from watching the United States conduct complex joint operations. At the same time, the PLA fields a significant amount of Russian military equipment and has sought to integrate elements of Russia's military reforms and therefore Russia's struggles could prompt the PLA to question its own readiness to conduct the operations necessary for a fight with Taiwan. This worry is likely compounded by the fact that the PLA assumes the United States would come to Taiwan's defense and the United States has sold Taiwan many of the same weapons Ukraine is using to great effect. In the longer term, the PLA will likely redouble its focus on integrating its land, sea, and air power and improving its joint warfighting capabilities.

President Volodymyr Zelensky's ability to rally the Ukrainian people and international public opinion has shown Chinese leaders the importance of eliminating Taiwan's political and military leadership early in a conflict and breaking the Taiwanese people's determination to resist. In practice, this would, at a minimum, entail attempting to assassinate Taiwanese leaders to demoralize the population, inhibit command and control, and prevent the emergence of a rallying figure. But China would likely pursue even more expansive operations ahead of any assault, including sowing divisions within Taiwanese society, spreading disinformation, and severing Taiwan's communications with the outside world. China has already established essential platforms within Taiwan for spreading pro-China messages through investments in media outlets and recruitment of intelligence assets. It will surely continue to refine this non-kinetic element of warfare.

## **HOW TAIWAN CAN PREPARE**

Since China will be using Russia's war in Ukraine as an opportunity to improve its planning for a Taiwan conflict, it is critical for Taiwan to do the same. There are already encouraging signs. After Ukraine's early successes against Russia, many Taiwanese took to the streets to celebrate, and activists and commentators argued that Ukraine's ability to repel a militarily superior foe had inspired Taiwanese to believe they could do the same. Taiwan's defense minister has established a working group to study Ukraine's tactics and raised the prospect of extending compulsory military service, which now has the support of over three-quarters of those polled. Interest in learning first-aid and disaster response has surged.

But this alone is not enough. Taiwan must urgently accelerate its adoption of an asymmetric defense strategy. It should focus on fielding many of the same capabilities Ukraine is using to significant effect, including portable air defense systems, drones (which Taiwan has already indicated it is prioritizing in the wake of Russia's invasion), and anti-tank missiles. In addition, Taiwan should ramp up anti-ship missile and sea mine production. Its military must decentralize command and control and develop systems to empower smaller military units to analyze and adapt to rapidly evolving circumstances on the ground.

Taiwan must also create a more trained and ready reserve force, establish new territorial defense forces, and more broadly plan for mobilizing its entire society. Ordinary Ukrainians' ability to withstand bombardment and, in many cases, take up arms has showed Taiwanese something of the resilience they would need to demonstrate to withstand a Chinese assault.

Should China attack Taiwan, its objective would be to rule 24 million people indefinitely, and it would be up to the Taiwanese people to make that impossible.

A critical weakness that Taiwan must address is the difficulty of resupplying its population and military during a conflict. Ukraine borders NATO member states, allowing arms and humanitarian supplies into the country even after Russia's invasion, but supplying Taiwan in the event of an invasion, let alone a potential blockade, will be extremely difficult. Supplying even basic goods such as food and medicine will be challenging, as commercial ships and aircraft cannot be expected to risk the lives of their crews to continue delivering goods. Supplying Taiwan's military, especially if the United States were to intervene on Taiwan's behalf, would be infinitely more so.

Since China has noted Ukraine's reliance on resupply by Western countries, even as the war rages, China would likely prioritize cutting off Taiwan as quickly as possible during a conflict. Taiwan should anticipate this and prepare now by stocking reserves of munitions, oil, food, and other critical materials and dispersing these supplies throughout the island. In essence, everything Taiwan will need to fight the PLA for a sustained period while keeping its population fed and healthy enough to put up a resistance must already be on the island when a conflict erupts.

#### **A DETERRENT ROLE FOR THE U.S.**

The United States must also hone its playbook to deter a Chinese assault against Taiwan and respond to Chinese aggression. It cannot rely on the threat of sanctions alone to change Xi's calculus. When the United States publicly warned Putin of the enormous economic consequences he would bear if he invaded Ukraine, he did so anyway. And given China's centrality to the global economy, imposing broad sanctions on the country will be far more difficult.

The United States should coordinate a sanctions package with its allies and partners during peacetime and investigate ways to reduce their economic dependence on China. The biggest weakness of the sanctions imposed on Russia is the carveout for Russian energy, deemed necessary (at least for the first two months of the conflict) given Europe's reliance on Russian oil and gas. The United States should make a concerted effort to develop alternative sources of materials such as rare earth minerals, which the world depends mostly on China to supply.

There is a danger that one of China's takeaways from the conflict in Ukraine is that the United States will be unwilling to intervene militarily on Taiwan's behalf. Thus, the United States needs to introduce a policy of strategic clarity that makes explicit it would directly come to Taiwan's defense. Having a credible military option is essential, which will mean continuing to view Taiwan as the Department of Defense's pacing scenario and resourcing it accordingly. The United States must also work more closely with Taiwan, establishing a robust bilateral training program to bolster Taiwan's self-defense capabilities. It should also help Taiwan develop an asymmetric defense strategy and prioritize weapons deliveries to the island.

The U.S. intelligence community distinguished itself during the Ukraine crisis by revealing Putin's moves before he made them and sharing this intelligence with U.S. allies, which deprived Putin of strategic surprise and helped a coalition coalesce around strong sanctions and military support. The United States should be prepared to gather and preemptively share intelligence about Chinese plans, as well. It must act now to ensure that it has an understanding of early

indicators of PLA preparations for an attack on Taiwan and be ready to share these indicators with its partners to plan a unified response before the war begins.

Given the increasing alignment between Russia and China, the United States cannot rule out that Russia would offer significant assistance to China during a conflict over Taiwan, including arms, energy, food, and intelligence. The United States should also assume Russia would seek to distract it from any fight against China by conducting cyberattacks or seeking to destabilize Europe. In their remarkable February 4 joint statement that established a “no limits” friendship, China and Russia reaffirmed “their strong mutual support for the protection of their core interests,” and Russia agreed that “Taiwan is an inalienable part of China.” China, which has backed Russia throughout the war in Ukraine, will expect to be repaid during a Taiwan conflict.

The steps that Washington and Taipei should take to bolster deterrence must be carried out carefully, so as to avoid inadvertently sparking the conflict they are seeking to prevent. For starters, any stepped up coordination with Taiwan should be done quietly and kept out of the public eye. The United States and Taiwan should focus on how to increase Taiwan’s warfighting capabilities and eschew symbolism. Privately, the United States should emphasize to China that these moves are consistent with the U.S. one-China policy and are a response to the eroding balance of power in the Taiwan Strait that is caused by China’s military build-up. Publicly, the United States should underscore that it does not support Taiwan independence and its overriding interest is in maintaining the status quo in the Taiwan Strait.

The unfolding war in Ukraine offers important lessons for China, Taiwan, and the United States. Whichever side adapts more deftly will do much to determine whether deterrence holds or a conflict that would fundamentally alter the world arrives.

- DAVID SACKS is a Research Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.