

Taiwan and the Software of War: Learning Resilience from Ukraine

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Abstract

Many comparisons have been made, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, between that situation and conditions in the Taiwan Strait. The most important lessons that the people of Ukraine and their heroic resistance can teach to defense planners in Taipei are not about the hardware—the ships, tanks, and other weapons systems—but the software of war: the intangible aspects such as *esprit de corps*, a national narrative, patriotism, and most importantly, the morale that dictate not just how people fight to defend their land, but why. This article offers some suggestions on what lessons Taipei might learn from the current conflict, beginning with how defense planners can expect China to alter its own plans based on new information, examining how important it is to control the narrative reaching the outside world, and finding ways to include all members of society—not just serving military members—in the defense of the nation. The article concludes with some recommendations on this software of war, and what steps Taiwan can

take to begin to address some of the problems besetting its armed forces to create a military that all Taiwanese people can be proud of.

Keywords: *Ukraine, Taiwan, defense, morale, China, Russia*

1. Introduction

A prodigious amount of ink has been spilled by pundits and experts speculating on how the events playing out since the February 24, 2022, invasion of Ukraine by Russia will affect Taiwan. Some see direct parallels, and early on in the Ukraine conflict warned that Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping might launch a simultaneous attack on his democratic neighbour, taking advantage of the world's preoccupation with events in Eastern Europe as cover. This did not take place, as Xi seems to have settled on a “wait and see” approach. Indeed, there has been much to see, and the war—still ongoing at the time of writing—has provided valuable lessons for Beijing, for Washington, and especially for Taipei.

Taiwan's defense suffers not from a hardware problem, but a software problem. More accurately: the hardware problem exists, but it has long received a prodigious amount of attention¹, especially since the beginning of the Ukraine war and the coverage of the implications this has for the Taiwan Strait conflict. Much less attention is being paid to the software problem—the intangibles of warfighting that include such qualitative components as messaging, *esprit de corps*, and most importantly, morale. This paper therefore will examine those software problems, after first looking at how Taiwan can expect Beijing to learn from the same teacher.

2. Lessons for Beijing

It has been said generals always fight the last war. This axiom is a reminder to defense planners to expect more than the current state of knowledge and technique in warfighting—to expect, in essence, the unexpected. In planning for the nation’s defense, therefore, it is incumbent upon Taiwan’s defense planners not just to learn the lessons of defense that Ukraine has to teach, but to anticipate what lessons Beijing is likely to take from Russia. The first section of this paper therefore will focus on what those lessons are, and what the takeaway will be for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) as they plan their long-promised liberation of the island of Taiwan.

Beijing is no stranger to learning the lessons of warfare from others’ experience. The high-tech aspects of the American bombing of Iraq in the Gulf War of 1991, which led to a swift and decisive allied victory, so alarmed Chinese leaders that they launched a modernization effort on the PLA to turn what was then a corrupt, peasant army into a modern fighting force. The events unfolding today have the same potential to offer transformative lessons as they play out in already surprising ways, not just in terms of military tactics, but in multidimensional aspects of social, economic and political life—a doctrine the Chinese call “unrestricted warfare”, first enunciated by Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, who at the time were members of a younger generation of Chinese military officers challenging the *status quo* of that staid and corrupt institution.

There are tempting parallels between the Taiwan and Ukraine situations that have led to the prevalence of such comparisons. For one thing, both countries are threatened by larger, nuclear-armed dictatorships with as much of an emotional as a geopolitical reason to attempt to wipe them off the map. To be sure, taking Taiwan would allow the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to extend its influence well

past the First Island Chain and deep into the Pacific Ocean, just as control over Crimea gave Russia access to Sevastopol and the Black Sea. But at a more visceral level, for Russian President Vladimir Putin, it is anathema to watch Ukraine—whose territory is the ancestral birthplace of the Kievan Rus' (Kyivan Rus') people, the forefathers of today's Russians—inch closer to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Western Europe. Likewise, the continued existence of the Republic of China (ROC), still nominally in exile on Taiwan, is a constant reminder to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that their victory in the Chinese Civil War is less than complete, and the fact that Taiwan is a successful democracy is a constant reminder of the fallaciousness—or mendacity—of the official CCP line that democracy is not compatible with Chinese culture (Rogin, 2022; Jakobson, 2022).

There are differences as well, of course, which must not be ignored. For one thing, Chinese forces would have to cross the treacherous Taiwan Strait to effect the kinetic phase of an invasion, whereas Russian tanks simply had to cross a border. Moreover, Putin could rest reasonably assured that he would not have to face the deployment of troops by the United States, much less the European Union, as they would not have the fortitude to risk conflagrating an attack on a non-NATO member into a third World War. In contrast, Beijing remains unsure of whether a move on Taiwan would elicit a military response from the United States, due largely to the position of strategic ambiguity long employed by Washington for just this reason.

It is for the latter reason that the consensus of opinion among analysts has been that Beijing will seek to overwhelm ROC forces and take Taiwan with the same shock-and-awe rapidity employed so effectively by US forces in taking Baghdad in 2003. If the PLA can occupy the capital of Taiwan within two or three days, the thinking goes, the United States will not have enough time to intervene, and leaders in

Washington would very likely accept such an occupation as a *fait accompli*. There might be sanctions and some strongly worded letters, but America would certainly make no attempt to dislodge a Chinese occupying force from Taiwan. Before long, it would be accepted as the new *status quo*.

Events playing out in Ukraine, however, are calling into question the feasibility of such an objective. Despite all their advantages—including overwhelmingly superior forces such as Main Battle Tanks (MBT), towed artillery, Iskander short-range ballistic missiles, infantry fighting vehicles, and self-propelled howitzers, all having been pre-positioned in the weeks leading up to the attack, ostensibly as a diplomatic pressure tactic—Russian forces have had to fight hard for every inch of territory, and have had to abandon their effort to seize Kyiv, much less been able to occupy all of Ukraine. This raises the question of whether China can afford to spend the weeks, or perhaps months, this suggests it could take to effect an occupation of Taiwan. The world will be watching it happen, as it is in Ukraine, and the United States—which might be tempted to accept a swift *fait accompli*—would be under tremendous international and domestic pressure to intervene. The lesson for Beijing is a simple one: be damned sure the attack succeeds quickly, or else do not make the attempt, and instead focus efforts on other, non-military avenues of forcing unification.

3. The Geopolitics

According to CIA Director Bill Burns, the Ukraine war has been less inspirational to Xi than it has been disconcerting. The Chinese leader, Burns asserts, has been unsettled “by the reputational damage that can come to China by the association with the brutishness of Russia’s aggression against Ukrainians”, as well as by the “economic uncertainty

that's been produced by the war". Uncertainty is anathema to Chinese leaders, who tend to focus on maintaining stability, harmony, and predictability, and when conflict becomes unavoidable, tend to hold off the attack until victory is all but assured. In the words of Sun Tzu, "Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win" (*Financial Times*, 7th May 2022).

With this stipulation in mind, Chinese forces would surely take a different tack than the almost haphazard engagement approved by President Vladimir Putin. Initially little more than a massive troop deployment on Ukraine's borders, which analysts believe was designed to frighten leaders in Kyiv into disabusing themselves from any talk of joining NATO, Putin seems to have decided on the spur of the moment, once it was clear that the intimidation tactic had failed, to follow through on his bluff, tearing up a peace deal in the process and sending the troops across Ukraine borders on a mission they were untrained and ill-equipped to complete. This rashness led to the now infamous truck/supply convoy—40 miles long, according to media reports—stalled on its way to Kyiv, its advance hampered by poor logistical planning.

This is the exact opposite of the aforementioned admonition by Sun Tzu, and hence a mistake that is unlikely to be repeated by Putin's friend, Xi Jinping. History teaches that Chinese military tacticians have a fondness for surprise attacks, and a strong preference for swift, decisive victory with a minimum of risk. Thus, while analysts speculated that Xi might follow on the heels of the Ukraine invasion with one of his own against Taiwan, using the war in Europe for cover and distraction, Xi has been more prudent than that. The lessons of Ukraine may have served to recapitulate the conventional CCP wisdom on an attack on Taiwan, which is that overwhelming force must be deployed swiftly and

decisively, including cyber-attacks, missile barrage, and subversion and assassination missions, in order to decapitate Taipei's leadership and effect an occupation of the island in mere days—long before the Americans could be roused to intervene (Mott and Kim, 2006; Brands, 2022).

Any such shock-and-awe attempt, it should be clarified, would take time to prepare, and would only be possible once all the requisite assets are in place, for which Beijing would surely rely on its tried and tested salami-slicing technique of inching closer and closer to its desired position, each step falling short of a *casus belli* and risking pushback. This is harder to do when the enemy suspects an imminent move, it should be noted, than when the enemy is uncertain of your intentions—or indeed, when the enemy does not yet know that you consider them an enemy. This was the case in the South China Sea, where over a period of years Beijing slowly maneuvered itself into *de facto* control of the entire body of water with small, incremental moves, all the while assuring the international community that it had no intention of island-building or, later, militarizing its built-up islands. Whether Beijing could successfully employ a similar tactic to place its game pieces on the board, readied for a lightning-fast strike on Taiwan, depends only on the international community's credulity.

Whatever form that preliminary stage takes, analysts expect the PLA to employ a three-pronged assault once the operation enters its kinetic stage—the stage at which speed will be required in order to subdue the ROC government before US forces can respond. According to an analysis published in *The Economist*, that three-pronged assault will consist of a missile barrage, an air and naval blockade, a full-scale invasion, or some combination of the three (*The Economist*, 23rd April 2022b).

In one scenario, posited by Jacob Stokes of the Washington think-tank the Centre for a New American Security, the PLA may hold naval drills near Taiwan as a means of moving assets into place before quickly redeploying these vessels into blockade position, encircling Taiwan and putting the island's leader on an under-siege footing. It would take Washington several days at the very least to go through the diplomatic motions and muster the domestic political will to take military action, all the while communist networks of fifth-column operatives, already in place in Taiwan, would perform covert tasks to sow confusion and uncertainty, launching psychological operations and information warfare to confuse foreign observers as to the situation on the ground. Just as Putin attempted to frame his invasion as a liberation of Ukraine from Western-funded neo-Nazi forces that had infiltrated the country and the government, Xi will frame his in a similar light, and will likely be more successful, given the low level of knowledge or interest in Western countries about the geopolitics of Asia, as well as of Beijing's success over the past couple of decades in making its narrative on Taiwan (that it is a renegade province of China) the dominant one (*ibid.*).

In addition to spreading disinformation, members of this fifth column will be busy sabotaging the nation's communications and power infrastructures, and perhaps aiding in the infiltration of PLA special operations units tasked with targeted assassinations of the ROC president and other high-level officials. These techniques would be an effective way of slowing down the international response, during which time Xi would be able to muster and launch the amphibious forces needed for an invasion. Putin used this tactic in Ukraine when he annexed Crimea in 2014, when he abetted a pro-Russia separatist uprising in eastern Ukraine, using Russian-speaking communities as a fifth column to help Russian troops "liberate" a breakaway region they dubbed Novorossiya, or New Russia. It would take little effort and

coordination for Chinese assets embedded in Taiwan to effect some manner of “false flag” event that would trigger the Anti-secession Law, passed in 2005 as legal justification for military action against Taiwan. “It’s one of the scariest scenarios,” said Stokes, who added, “it raises the cost of intervention from the outset.” (*ibid.*; *Defense News*, 23rd August 2011; *Time*, 4th December 2014; *Taipei Times*, 6th May 2022).

While this may sound like the fanciful plot of a Tom Clancy novel, the elements of such a chain of events are hardly far-fetched. For one thing, the PLA routinely holds naval drills very close to Taiwan, the latest and largest (at the time of writing) having begun on 4th August, 2022. In a fit of pique over a visit to Taiwan by US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi—as well as a show of strength for domestic audiences within China—the leaders of the CCP ordered a series of live-fire missile drills around the island nation and placed a number of economic sanctions on Taiwan. As histrionic as Western media reports of the drill were, this represents merely an incremental escalation of China’s behaviour over the past two years, as PLA aircraft have routinely conducted incursions into Taiwan’s air defense identification zone (ADIZ) and sent planes and ships to count coup at the median line of the Taiwan Strait. They do so for a number of reasons, including as a nationalistic show of force, to intimidate the “secessionist” Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government in Taipei, or just as a means of expressing Beijing’s displeasure at some new example of ameliorating Taiwan-US ties. One thing is certain: they have the effect of stretching thin Taipei’s ability to scramble fighters to respond, and they provide valuable intelligence to Chinese military planners on Taiwan’s response times and military communications patterns (Ang U-Jin and Pekka Suorsa, 2021).

As for the presence of a potentially disruptive fifth column on the island, there is ample precedent for such a tactic. In the decade prior to

the 1997 handover of Hong Kong, Beijing's Ministry of State Security subverted the British colony's humanitarian immigration program to plant more than 83,000 PRC agents in Hong Kong under false names and identities. It would be foolhardy to think that the same tactic is not being employed right now in Taiwan, where the number of Chinese immigrants counts in the hundreds of thousands, to say nothing of the large number of well-documented instances of Chinese intelligence operatives recruiting spies in Taiwan, even among its military (Chen, 2004; Eftimiades, 2017).

Indeed, Taiwan is already on the front lines of an information and propaganda war of the type described above, with suspected Chinese cyber-attacks and psychological warfare operations being tested at low levels of infiltration—low, at least, compared to the intensity with which they would be deployed to sow confusion and a “fog of war” in the lead-up to a kinetic attack. On April 20, 2022, the news tickers on a popular Taiwan television news channel ran confusing messages, including “New Taipei City hit by Chinese People's Liberation Army missiles”, “War on the brink of erupting” and “Vessel explodes in Taipei Harbor; facilities and ships destroyed”. While the cause of the error has not been determined, one popular theory is that it was the work of fifth column units acting on orders from, or as sympathisers with, Beijing as a means of disrupting social order and testing methods for creating panic (*Taipei Times*, 6th May 2022).

4. Watching the West's Response

Thanks to Putin's military adventurism in Ukraine, the CCP is now better aware of what to expect by way of response from the United States and its allies, and is busy factoring this new knowledge into its warplanning. Speaking at the McCain Institute Sedona Forum on 30th

April, 2022, US Army General Richard Clarke, head of US Special Operations Command, commented that Xi Jinping now knows the West's playbook, and outlined four ways in which Xi is likely to adjust his plans for annexing Taiwan (Rogin, 2022).

First is the issue of speed. As already mentioned, Russian forces got bogged down and failed to effect a rapid seizure of the political capital, and indeed they seem to have all but given up on that goal. Seeing this, and knowing that China cannot settle for "liberating" pockets of territory on the island of Taiwan the way Putin may have to settle for proxy control over Crimea and the Donetsk and Luhansk regions (just as he carved out Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia in 2008), there will be no victory in Taiwan if that victory is not swift and total. Second is the element of surprise, to deny the international community the time to mount a defense. This is especially important in Taiwan, for whereas the United States and other countries have provided arms, training, and money to aid the fight in Ukraine, they have stopped short of joining in the fight. NATO planners have serious trepidations about directly counterattacking Russian forces for fear of sparking a conflagration into another World War, but no such fear hampers America's military might from being fielded directly against the PLA (Brands, 2022; Rogin, 2022).

The third issue identified by Clarke is that of economic sanctions. Opinions differ on just how effective Western sanctions on Russia have been, but they have definitely had a noticeable effect. Xi is well aware, however, that it would be far more difficult for Western trading nations to cripple China's larger, more sophisticated economy than it has been Russia's. Though China's economy is far more diversified than that of the petrostate Russia, it is still heavily reliant on foreign trade. Xi will be preparing for a sanctions-induced disruption in such trade by expediting efforts, already underway, to boost the importance of domestic demand

to the economy, and other efforts to insulate itself against a sanctions regime. It was reported, for example, that representatives from dozens of banks, including HSBC, were summoned for a meeting with officials from the Chinese finance ministry to discuss what the government could do should such sanctions be imposed. Chinese institutions are not well situated to weather the freezing of their dollar assets or a ban on their use of the SWIFT messaging system, as was done to Russia. Equally important is the issue of food: China has been a net importer of food since the famines induced by the disastrous Great Leap Forward, and has recently been stockpiling food reserves at an unprecedented rate. The US Department of Agriculture predicted that China would account for 69 percent of the world's maize reserves in the first half of crop year 2022, as well as 60 percent of its rice and 51 percent of its wheat reserves. There is a cultural reason for this: in the political belief system operative on the Chinese mainland, any leader who cannot manage to feed the people is seen to have lost the Mandate of Heaven, and will face uprisings, chaos, and possibly even revolution. Xi is desperate to avoid this perception (Rogin, 2022; Brands, 2022; Qian, 2022; Chang, 2022).

The fourth way in which Xi is likely to adjust his plans for annexing Taiwan according to General Clarke is in controlling the information space before and after an attack. Putin's cover story of denazifying Ukraine was designed to appeal to domestic audiences as well as the West, where distaste for fascism remains potent. But this simplistic narrative failed to gain currency in a United States that had spent the previous four years, rightfully or not, using the specter of Russian disinformation as a political boogeyman to be blamed for any and all woes. Compounding Russia's attempts at information control, which included cyber-attacks and shelling aimed at taking down the internet in Ukraine, was the highly publicised move by US billionaire and philanthropist Elon Musk, who, responding to plea for help via Twitter

from Ukraine's Minister of Digital Transformation Mykhailo Fedorov, quickly deployed the Starlink division of his company SpaceX to provide terminals and coverage, allowing the Ukrainian government and people to stay in contact with the outside world. They made the most of that open channel of communication, flooding international news media with heroic tales and images of average Ukrainian people valiantly fighting for their lives against invading Russian barbarians. In terms of the propaganda war, Russia had already lost (*The Washington Post*, 19th March 2022; Rogin, 2022).

In sum, Putin's misadventure in Ukraine—his many strategic and tactical mistakes—has been an education for Xi. According to CIA Director Burns, Beijing is dismayed that Putin has driven Europeans and Americans closer together, in sometimes unexpected ways. For example, shortly after the invasion, both Sweden and Finland launched bids to become full members of NATO, a move that swiftly received enthusiastic approval from the administration of US President Joe Biden. Moreover, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced that Berlin would boost its defense spending to more than 2 percent of GDP, a sum that had been unthinkable in the post-WWII era given the historical trepidation surrounding German rearmament. Germany's former Axis-partner Japan had likewise been flirting with the heretofore unthinkable: fast-tracking efforts to minimize or sidestep Article 9 of its pacifist constitution to allow the deployment of troops abroad in response to an attack on an ally. Proponents of this controversial move have only had their resolve steeled by Russia's aggressive and unprovoked move against its neighbour. A move to forcefully annex Taiwan might well lead to US allies and heretofore nonaligned nations in the Asia Pacific becoming likewise united against China. On the other hand, it is unlikely that China will become a pariah state the way Russia has. For one thing, bad press over the past several years has primed populations in the West

to see Moscow as the enemy; groundwork that is now bearing fruit for those governments. In contrast, China has barely suffered reputationally despite its many misdeeds. If the world accepted, with hardly the suggestion of sanctions, Beijing's policy of incarcerating a religious minority in *de facto* concentration camps, its industrial-level sale of human organs harvested from prisoners, and its abrogation of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration on rights in Hong Kong, then there is little chance the world will bristle at a move against Taiwan. That is, unless Taipei and those sympathetic to its cause can control the narrative (*NPR*, 19th May 2022; Reuters, 27th February 2022; *Financial Times*, 7th May 2022; Stanton, 2022).

5. Lessons for Taiwan

The lessons for Taiwan are rather more complex. By examining how Ukraine has managed to hold off the invading force for so long despite such long odds, planners in Taipei can seek to emulate what works, and adapt it to local conditions. The following are observations and recommendations—some simple, some more difficult to accomplish—that should be considered by defense planners and the ruling elite in Taipei.

Using Ukraine's experience as a guide, Andrew Erickson and Gabriel Collins, writing in *War on the Rocks*, enumerated what they called Eight New Points on the Porcupine; recommendations for how the United States could work with Taiwan to make the island harder for China to swallow. The areas they identified included ballistic missile defense, air defense, sea-denial fires, shore-denial fires, mine warfare, and the resilience of critical infrastructure. Indeed, since the start of the Ukraine war, a prodigious amount has been written on the lessons it holds for Taiwan's planners, so here we will focus on three broad areas:

information warfare, civil defense, and morale. These can be conceived of as the software of defense, which needs just as much if not more updating as the hardware, but gets scant attention (Erickson and Collins, 2022).

6. Propaganda War

What worked best in the international propaganda war raging alongside the shooting war in Eastern Europe has been the stories of the common people, or the lone hero, valiantly pushing back against the Russian advance. Fantastical reporting on the exploits of the “Ghost of Kyiv”, for example, or the tales of grandmothers gifting sunflower seeds (a flower with deep meaning in both Ukraine and Taiwan, it should be noted) to enemy soldiers, “so sunflowers will grow here when you die.” These stories have great resonance in shoring up the nation’s morale and hence willingness to fight, as well as playing extremely well in the global media, and thereby helping to boost foreign support in the face of an unprovoked attack by an authoritarian bully. True or not, similar stories of courage and resistance can help craft the narrative that Taiwan will need if it is to survive such an assault. Fortunately, the politically engaged Taiwanese youth have proven themselves to be very tech savvy, and are far better than Beijing’s clunky state propagandists at crafting messaging that resonates with the outside world.

Second is the imperative to stay and fight. Despite the refugee flight westward to Europe, Ukrainian evacuees are mostly comprised of women and children. Men aged 18 to 60 have been prohibited from leaving the country, to entice them to take up arms and defend their homeland. Although this is a clear human rights violation, it has been reported on favourably, especially since Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy himself opted to remain. He was widely reported to have

refused a US offer to evacuate him to a more secure location with the words “I need ammunition, not a ride.” These are stories that would play just as well in a Taiwan context as they have in Ukraine.

As discussed in the previous section, the most crucial component of controlling the information space is having and maintaining a reliable communications infrastructure. The world would never have heard the Ukrainian tales of heroism had Putin’s gambit to sever electronic communications succeeded. The use of the Starlink constellation of internet satellites, or a system like it, for Taiwan to stay connected during an invasion may be said to have passed its beta test, and would be an effective redundancy, or at least a stopgap measure, to bolster Taiwan’s currently vulnerable internet connectivity, which currently relies heavily on undersea cables that could be severed all too easily in a Chinese attack (*The Wall Street Journal*, 18th April 2022).

There are currently around 14 of these cables, made up of fiber-optic lines bundled together, lying along the seabed and reaching the island at just four locations along Taiwan’s coastline. If the PLA follows Chinese military doctrine, which states that air, sea, and information superiority will have to be achieved before an amphibious assault is even to be attempted, then it is reasonable to expect these four key hubs to be prime targets and would be taken out in the early hours of an attack, depriving Taiwan of 95 percent of its data-and-voice traffic to the outside world. Current satellite capacity represents a tiny fraction of Taiwan’s internet connectivity, and this would surely be prioritized for military and government use. This will not suffice to feed the world with information and images of heroic, average Taiwanese people fighting for their country as the Ukrainians have done. It is therefore urgent that the government purchase and install a network of the specialist terminals needed to receive connections from these satellite networks, to serve as a backup to the vulnerable undersea cables (*ibid.*).

If the global reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is any indication, the outside world will be hungry for such images, and ready to support a besieged population; a free and democratic people under assault by a powerful authoritarian state. Due to the CCP's short-sightedness and its obsession with controlling the narrative, Beijing began denying access to foreign media that covered the crackdown in Hong Kong in an unflattering light, and those media offices have, in many cases, relocated to Taipei, where they will already be ground-zero in any reportage of a PLA assault. Even the hacker group Anonymous has issued China a warning "not try anything stupid against Taiwan", lest the aircraft carrier *Liaoning* suffer the same fate as Russia's flagship Black Sea missile cruiser *Moskva*, sunk by resistance forces. The collective issued the threat in their own inimitable way: by defacing a CCP website with images of the ROC flag, the Anonymous logo, and a shadowy figure wearing a black hoodie and a Guy Fawkes mask, declaring "Taiwan Numbah Wan!" (*Taiwan News*, 6th May 2022).

Arguably, information control will be even more important in a Taiwan scenario, or at least more difficult, given the respective influence wielded by China compared to Russia. China has spent decades cultivating the image of a besieged, underdeveloped country and former victim of the colonial West, and more recently as a viable superpower with the moral authority over Europe and America, whose day as global powerholder has come. Beijing has an extensive network of politicians and journalists in the West over whom it wields considerable influence and who would certainly, in the pattern now only seen among athletes and Hollywood celebrities, come out publically in favour of China. Should the PRC frame its invasion of Taiwan as an attempt to put down a restive, independence-minded territory, this narrative would be more easily embraced in the Western media than Russia's tale of fighting Ukrainian Nazis. Indeed, it has laid the groundwork for this narrative

over the past several years, and—until recent reporting has raised awareness of the parallels between Taiwan and Ukraine—the global media has largely fallen in line behind the false paradigm of the renegade province (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2nd November 2021; Cook, 2022).

7. The Importance of Reservists

One of Ukraine's greatest strengths as evidenced by its resistance to the Russian onslaught has been the resilience and fortitude of its civilian defenders. Unfortunately this may be a cultural characteristic not shared by the polity in Taiwan. This is not to say the Taiwanese will not fight: on the contrary, according to one recent poll, the vast majority of respondents in Taiwan would be willing to take up arms in the event of an attack from China, at 72.5 percent (versus 18.6 percent who would not). Moreover, the survey, conducted by the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, revealed that 62.7 percent would be willing to do so even if the attack were a response to a formal declaration of independence by Taipei (*Newsweek*, 30th December 2021).

No, the will is there. The problem is that there would be no arms to take up. The idea of an armed citizenry is alien in the eyes of Taiwan society—it is only tolerated for the police and gangsters to have guns—and it has been this way for generations. This is not to recommend that Taiwan begin to cultivate a “gun culture” akin to the United States, as this would be a poor fit. But there are precedents where citizens are entrusted with a share of the responsibility for defense of themselves and their homeland. Switzerland and Estonia come immediately to mind, and both would serve as model systems, if not to emulate precisely, then certainly from which to derive inspiration. In Switzerland, for example, the rigorous and demanding mandatory

military training, and the substantial follow-up reserve requirements for all males, is well known as being the backbone of the nation's defense strategy. Moreover, those males are charged with keeping their standard-issue rifle (properly stored and maintained, of course) in the home. As a result, any invader would have to factor in the fact that every military-aged male is potentially armed, trained, and capable of shooting back, whether uniformed or not (Karalekas, 2018).

This should serve as an inspiration for an overhaul of Taiwan's military reserve and civil defence systems. The former is sorely ineffective as it exists now. No-one, neither the men who run it nor those who endure it, take the training seriously. This must change, and Taiwan's leaders are fully aware of it. In March, 2022, Taiwan's defense minister, Chiu Kuo-cheng, proposed extending military conscription for men from the current four months to one year. In a mid-March survey by the Taiwan Public Opinion Foundation, 75.9 percent of respondents supported the idea. One senior legislator from the ruling party has floated the idea of mandating conscription for Taiwanese women, as well. The fact that politicians are having this conversation at all is a good sign, but it is nowhere near enough. Certainly, more meaningful conscription must be reinstated: rather than the current four months of lackluster training; stronger, better trained, and better equipped soldiers must be instructed in weapons, tactics, and guerrilla and urban warfare techniques of the sort they would be expected to employ in the event of a foreign occupation of their cities and villages. In explaining why Imperial Japan never seriously considered an attack on the continental United States, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto famously quipped, "there would be a rifle behind each blade of grass." Taiwan must create the conditions for Chinese military planners to develop the same reservations (Stanton, 2022; *The Atlantic*, 7th May 2022).

8. The Need for a Territorial Army

In order to arm its citizenry, the Ukraine government began passing out tens of thousands of automatic rifles to able-bodied men, allowing ordinary citizens to take part in the defense of their nation, armed with little more than AK-47s and Molotov cocktails. The presence of an armed guerrilla force has not only helped to slow down the Russian advance, it has played an enormous role in the propaganda victory, showing the outside world that the Ukrainian people have not subcontracted out their security to foreign powers, but are themselves willing to fight and die for their freedom. This narrative is an absolute must if Taiwan is to survive a PLA attack.

Under the current exigent circumstances, the preconception that citizens should not have access to firearms must change. More than that, preparations must begin now so that elements are in place for future need. For one thing, stockpiles of weapons and ammunition would have to be stockpiled at various covert, secure locations around the island, ready to be distributed by the proper authorities when the time comes. Moreover, citizen firearms training must be resumed, as it was in the bad old days of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, when high-school students routinely received weapons training. Civilian volunteers should likewise receive rigorous instruction in guerrilla warfare, sniper training, the manufacture and employment of improvised explosive devices, and urban escape-and-evasion techniques. Not only would this help prepare the citizenry, but the ongoing training would serve as a constant reminder to the population that the threat from across the strait is real and imminent, and a matter of life and death (Erickson and Collins, 2022; *The New York Times*, 7th May 2022).

Images on the nightly news of Taiwanese civilians defending their homeland against the PLA; of average people standing up to Chinese tanks; of captured PLA soldiers duct-taped to telephone poles

or humiliated by Taiwanese aunties (all of which is imagery we have seen from Ukraine) would convince Americans that this is a righteous and winnable fight, and would allay the fears of generations of analysts and commentators who have asserted that the Taiwanese lack the fortitude to defend themselves. “The biggest mistake Taiwan has made was to abolish the draft,” commented American political scientist Francis Fukuyama, who added, “America will not fight for a country that is not going to fight for itself” (Stanton, 2022; *CommonWealth Magazine*, 12th January 2022).

In addition to small arms, shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles have made an enormous difference in the battle for Ukraine, and they can do so for Taiwan. Early in the war, it was assumed that the Russian Air Force would quickly establish air superiority, but this has not happened, and in fact Russian pilots have become apprehensive about even entering Ukrainian airspace, opting instead to fire aerial-mounted cruise missiles from their planes while still on the Russian side of the border, according to a senior US defense official. Russia is likewise holding back on deploying its combat helicopters, as they are sitting ducks for Ukraine’s air defenses, including the shoulder-fired missiles like the Stingers supplied by the Americans. Indeed, the only drawback of the Stinger antiaircraft missiles, anti-ship weapons, and the small arms used in urban combat is that the United States is unable to resupply them fast enough—a slowdown that would surely be exacerbated in a Taiwan context, given the logistical problems inherent in resupplying an island state that would presumably be isolated behind a naval blockade. Moreover the system in place for arming Taiwan is one that has focused too heavily on big-ticket, prestige weapons systems, such as the US\$2.2 billion package in 2019 that included 108 M1A2 Abrams tanks. It was reported that US officials criticized that sale privately, pointing out that, by the time tanks are needed to repel a Chinese advance, the island is

already lost. According to Evan Medeiros of Georgetown University, the ROC military is “buying stuff for things that won’t give them much security.” Under battlefield conditions, he argues, many of the high-end weapons that eat up the bulk of Taiwan’s arms acquisition budget will quickly be destroyed or rendered ineffective. Hence the greater need for pre-placement of a large number of small, portable systems (*The New York Times*, 7th May 2022; Shull, 2022; Rogin, 2022; *The Economist*, 23rd April 2022b).

9. Civil Defense and Urban Warfare

All this is to say that Taiwan’s active-duty soldiers, of which there are a reported 187,660 (down from 275,000 in 2011), will not be enough to hold off China’s more than one million troops, equipped with a military budget 20 times that of Taiwan’s. Civil defense units, territorial army divisions, and other manner of irregular fighters will be needed to mount an insurgency against a foreign army bent on occupation and control. And unlike much of Eastern Europe, these concepts are new to Taiwan. It is therefore incumbent upon Taipei to prepare the island’s inhabitants for such an insurgency. Some small, tentative steps have been taken in that direction. The military in April released a Civil Defense Handbook in which citizens can find the locations of bomb shelters, and what to do in the event of air raids and power outages. It was quickly berated for being “out of touch with reality”, however, prompting officials to promise to work on a revised version. Much more substantial work needs to be done. It is for this reason that the ROC government should give serious thought to reinstating the Government Information Office. Considered a holdover of the days when the ROC was ruled by a dictatorship keen to control the information that citizens see from the outside world, the GIO was retooled into a promotional body, with the

task of presenting Taiwan to the world as a destination for investment and tourism. Still, having what essentially amounted to a “ministry of truth” soon came to be seen as anachronistic, and unbecoming of a modern, functioning democracy like Taiwan. For this reason the body was eliminated in 2012, its staff absorbed by the Foreign Ministry and other branches of the civil service. However, with a new mission to fight back against China’s control of the Taiwan Strait narrative internationally, it may be time to resurrect the GIO (*The Wall Street Journal*, 25th October 2021; Erickson and Collins, 2022; *Taiwan News*, 4th May 2022; *The Economist*, 23rd April 2022a).

Since the launch of the Russian invasion, a number of independent, grassroots militia associations and civil defense groups began sprouting up around Taiwan, though without institutional support or funding, these unarmed, largely untrained volunteers stand little chance of being effective in a fight for Taiwan’s survival. What is needed is the creation of a networked civil defense force with more heft. This was the focus of a 15 March, 2022, commentary by Retired ROC Admiral Lee Hsi-Min and security policy expert, Professor Michael A. Hunzeker, who called for the creation of a standing, all-volunteer, Taiwanese territorial defense force. Such a force, they argued, will enhance deterrence by building and signalling national resolve, and might be the difference between Taiwan surviving or succumbing to a PLA assault. To be effective, territorial defense units must receive demanding and realistic training on the very ground they will be defending. Moreover, this will give the people of Taiwan a key role to play in defending their country, with the added benefit of inculcating a shared sense of national identity and pride. For a former flag officer to even make such a recommendation represents a shift away from the traditionally risk-averse thinking that so often hampers positive developments in the ROC armed forces, and is a huge step in the right direction (Lee and Hunzeker, 2022).

The civilian defenders in Ukraine, holding out alone and without direct intervention from NATO or the UN or America, have made such an impact on global news audiences that foreigners from around the world have independently made their way to Kyiv to join in the fight. The struggle against Russia's revanchist expansionism is seen as a righteous call to duty by many in the Western world. So many thousands of volunteers have arrived that the government established an International Legion of Territorial Defense for them to join, and to be recognized for their gallantry in defence of the country. Taiwan might consider setting up a similar system of foreign "military advisors". Indeed; given the current cross-strait threat level and the large number of foreigners already residing on the island—many with foreign military experience— there is no need to wait for hostilities to begin before working out the logistics and organizing such a Taiwanese Foreign Legion.

If a volunteer territorial defense force is going to succeed, it must be armed. There is no two ways about it. As mentioned above, stockpiles of weapons (and, equally vital, ample ammunition) would have to be cached at various locations around the island, to be quickly distributed among trained volunteers. These would have to include assault rifles, preferably assault weapons and sniper rifles that fire 7.62 NATO and 5.56 NATO caliber rounds, as well as shoulder-fired anti-armor weapons with a soft launch arrangement for urban warfare. On the latter, US officials have been pushing Taipei to purchase man-portable air-defense system like the FIM-92 Stinger, as well as Boeing-made Harpoon anti-ship missiles, to prevent the PLA from establishing a beachhead. When used well, these small, inexpensive units pack a punch: the Moskva was taken out of commission by the homegrown Ukrainian equivalent, called the Neptune, which is based on the old Soviet Kh-35 anti-ship cruise missile (*The New York Times*, 7th May 2022; Erickson and Collins,

2022).

Analysts in Washington would seem to agree. Since the Ukraine war began, they see a PLA invasion of Taiwan—once a distant possibility far on the horizon—as an increasingly imminent threat, and that the best way to meet that threat is with a smaller military, armed with the right weapons, and using a strategy of asymmetric warfare focusing on mobility and precision attacks. In the opinion of Sen. Lindsey Graham, who was part of a bipartisan visit to Taiwan during the early days of the Ukraine conflict, Taipei must build itself a civil defense force that will allow the people of Taiwan to defend their homes, adding that the United States could assist in that regard. To that end, Washington has been pressuring Taipei into shifting its focus from purchasing conventional set-piece weapons and more toward the types of armaments that would allow a small military to repel a much larger foe (Rogin, 2022; *The New York Times*, 7th May 2022).

This means rethinking some of the plans for Taiwan's defense, not least of which is the move to an All-Volunteer Force (AVF). While shifting from a conscript to a professional army may make sense for a country like Great Britain, which sits in a region that has benefited from decades of peace, is a member of NATO, and is under very minimal threat of invasion by a conventional army, conditions in Taiwan are not analogous. Rather, they are more akin to conditions in Israel: a small, modern economy in a region where geographically larger neighbours largely want them to cease to exist. Not to put too fine a point on it, but Taiwan cannot afford the luxury of an AVF. The government should expand conscription to all able-bodied men (and seriously consider the same for women), and immediately follow Professor Hunzeker and Admiral Lee's suggestion to create a territorial defence force. Moreover, Taipei must follow the example recently set by Germany and boost its defense budget, now sitting at about 2 percent of GDP. It is a foregone

conclusion that China will eventually make a play to annex Taiwan. When that happens, the ROC military and the Taiwanese people will have to keep the attacker at bay for weeks, maybe even months, until the rest of the democratic world—primarily, let’s be honest, America—can rouse itself to come to the island’s aid. The lesson from Ukraine is clear: the longer the besieged nation has held out, the more aid it has received (*The Economist*, 23rd April 2022a).

10. A New Military Ethic

We have established the importance of holding out against invading forces to give allies time to muster the political will to respond. How was this accomplished in Ukraine? Quite simply, it was the high morale of the Ukrainian forces, leadership, and most crucially, its people. Unfortunately, morale—especially the morale of the armed forces—is something that is sorely lacking in Taiwan. There are a variety of reasons for this, not the least of which is that, for at least the past half century, the ROC military has been regarded by most Minnan-speaking Taiwanese (those whose ancestors moved to the island starting in the 17th century, as opposed to the so-called Mainlanders who arrived from mainland China following the 1949 Kuomintang (KMT, Nationalist Party) defeat at the hands of the communists) as being the “KMT army”. The extent to which this perception persists is very much of interest when determining to what degree the population believes the military shares their culture and their commitment to democracy. Despite vows by ROC President Tsai Ing-wen to address the problem of low morale among the armed forces, very little has been accomplished during her tenure. In late 2021, *The Wall Street Journal* ran a comprehensive piece describing the poor state of morale within the ROC armed forces, citing misconduct, mismanagement, and a culture of paperwork that cut into

combat training. This, combined with a series of espionage scandals involving serving or retired officers caught collaborating with the Red Chinese, contribute to a collective sense of despair on the issue of defense (Karalekas, 2018: 5; *The Wall Street Journal*, 25th October 2021).

The paragraphs that follow propose some suggestions for future areas of military policy that are not solid policy recommendations *per se* so much as they are ideas for programs and projects that would help to usher in a new organizational culture within the ROC armed forces in ways that will help alleviate some of the problems (i.e. media relations, public perception) that beset today's military and that stand in the way of achieving the *esprit de corps*, the fighting spirit, and the high level of morale that has been so crucial to Ukraine's successful resistance against invasion.

10.1. Focus on the Land

The ethic and character of the ROC military is very much focused on the ideals expounded by Dr. Sun Yat-sen and the Three Principles of the People. While these are laudable ethical underpinnings for an organization with its roots in China, they are, as previously mentioned, anachronistic in today's Taiwan, and do not represent the values of modern young people. While there is very little agreement among the nation's ethnic groups and political philosophies, there is one thing that unites Taiwan people of all stripes, be they Hoklo or Hakka, Mainlander or Taiwanese, indigenous person or modern urbanite: the land. It is the land of Taiwan that represents home and hearth, and thus the focus of any cultural shift within the ROC military should be one that focuses on the military's purpose of defending this land. Therefore this topic is mentioned first as it is a motif that must inform all future decisions on projects and policies as the military moves further into the 21st century.

This would alleviate some of the ideological gaps that exist between the traditional military culture and the realities of the people of Taiwan, in that the former is rooted in the Chinese identity, and of the ROC military being *in* Taiwan, but not *of* Taiwan. For decades now, the goal of retaking the mainland has been abandoned, and yet the identity associated with that link has persisted. Instead, a new identity must be adopted, and that identity must focus on the land of Taiwan.

10.2. Conscription

It has already been stated in this article, but it is worth reiterating: Plans to transition the ROC military to an All-Volunteer Force should be abandoned. For the reasons enumerated earlier, the persistent threat of annexation by China makes this an unrealistic—as well as a potentially dangerous—goal. Moreover, there is insufficient budgetary resources to make a military paycheck competitive with what a young graduate can earn in the civilian sector (meaning that manpower goals will never be met), and ending conscription only shifts the military experience away from the majority of society, making the military a much less vital institution in Taiwan—it places the armed forces on the fringes of society, and outside of the everyday experience of Taiwan’s people. The opposite is needed.

In addition to making the country better prepared to defend against an attack, conscription is a socialization mechanism whereby Taiwanese from all walks of life will live, eat, and train together, and learn to work as an effective unit. Soldiers serving their mandated service time will come into contact with peers from all strata of Taiwan society. Taiwan has been called a multicultural society, and properly utilized, conscription would see Hakka, Hoklo, indigenous people, *Benshengren* (本省人) and *Waishengren* (外省人), all training together, helping to form a greater social unity for the nation. These friendships, moreover,

carry over into post-military life, and have a great impact in fostering a more tolerant and unified society. Much has been written on the experience of Singapore: an ethnically diverse city-state where conscription has been credited with contributing to the building of a cohesive nation. This example, more than the American one, is worthy of emulation. At the very least, more research is urged on how the Singapore example might be harnessed in a Taiwan context (Nair, 1995: 93).

10.3. Training

Any effort to define the identity of an institution begins with education and training. The values espoused in military training courses must be those that are in line with the values of Taiwan's society today, not 40 years ago. It must be made clear to the soldiers serving in uniform that they are the primary line of defense protecting not just the country, but the values that they themselves hold to be of importance: democracy, liberty, the freedom to choose one's own path. Continued focus on abstract and anachronistic concepts do little to make the military identity relevant in today's world.

Moreover, in terms of practical training, conscripts must feel that there is value in the work they are doing while in uniform. Training in the aforementioned guerrilla techniques would be a good first step. Given the geopolitical realities in the Taiwan Strait, the only reason to oppose such a project would be the fear that such techniques could be turned against the home government. While this may have been a valid concern during the days of the Chiang regime, when the Taiwanese population was regarded as a potential threat to the ruling elite, this no longer represents reality in today's Taiwan.

The training must be enjoyable, but it must be tasking, both physically and mentally. These concepts are not mutually exclusive:

indeed, the only way to develop a sense of camaraderie among soldiers (which is the first step to developing positive morale) is to provide the opportunity for shared achievement. The reduced level of physical demands on today's recruits come across as treating them like delicate, fragile things, not as warriors. This is not the way to create the opportunity to earn accomplishment, camaraderie, and pride.

10.4. Transparency

It goes without saying that many aspects of military operations are security-sensitive and must be shielded from prying eyes, but incidents such as trainee deaths, which occur all too frequently, must not be covered up as this only compounds the negative perception when they are inevitably discovered. Such transparency must extend to the media, and can help to forge a new, better relationship with the nation's media outlets. For their part, the media too must stop using military scandals as sources for sensationalistic reporting, to focus instead on the facts and the social implication of such events.

One possible route to achieving this could be by expanding the use of embedded journalists in military units. In order to demystify the organization and create a better relationship with the public, it is important that the media and the public see the everyday lives of ordinary soldiers, airmen, and sailors, not just during high-profile drills such as the annual Han Kuang Exercise. An excellent example is the 2010 documentary *Every Singaporean Son*, which follows 15 young men from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds as they endure basic training, and in doing so experience a rite of passage that contributes to cementing their identity as Singaporean. Providing free access to TV crews and filmmakers would go a long way to bringing the ROC military and the public closer together, and reducing the often adversarial nature of military-media interactions.

10.5. Cadets Youth Program

Another project that could be implemented in Taiwan is the institution of a youth league, which in structure would not be too dissimilar from the China Youth Corps, though without that organization's anti-Communist and colonial-era connotations. Rather, Taiwan could adopt a system similar to the one employed in Canada, whose Royal Canadian Sea Cadets, Air Cadets, and Army Cadets offer the opportunity for adolescents from around the country to work with their peers in learning environment-specific military skills and activities that benefit both the participants as well as the military itself.

Army Cadets learn orienteering; living off the land; first-aid; wilderness survival; target shooting; and other soldierly skills, all while still in high school. Most importantly, these groups focus on fun, sportsmanship, and building self-esteem and teamwork, with only a touch of military discipline. Not only would such a program be a boon to recruiting young people into lifelong military careers, but it would be indispensable as a means of fostering a healthier relationship between the military and society. Such an organization would be beneficial to the young people themselves, who are at an age when they seek belonging in a group outside of family, and thus are often attracted to joining gangs, cults, and other dangerous groups. This organization would offer a positive alternative.

10.6. Indigenous Regiments

For countless generations, the indigenous ethnic groups of Taiwan have had to contend with various colonizers who sought to assimilate them and force them to give up their customs, beliefs, and traditional lifestyles in order to adopt the identity of the majority. This represents a lost opportunity for the Taiwan military, which should instead authorize

the formation and training of indigenous regiments that would not only benefit from training in modern military tactics, but employ the traditional skills of their indigenous heritage, such as hunting, tracking, and living off the land. This comes back to the previous notes on refocusing the ethic of the military to one that focuses on the land, and there are arguably no people in Taiwan who know the land better than the nation's indigenous people. While such regiments would greatly benefit the military in general, as those skills are shared and as the public comes to view the military as an organization that respects the diversity of Taiwan's peoples: but it would also benefit the indigenous groups themselves, many of whose traditions and skills are in danger of disappearing for lack of opportunity to pass them on. The creation of indigenous units and regiments would go a long way toward recognizing the value in those traditional skills, and helping the peoples themselves to rebuild their links with their heritage.

It should be noted that such regiments are not unprecedented, with Cherokee and Choctaw battalions in the United States, and such famously fierce units as the Gurkhas making up regiments in the British Army. In Taiwan, indigenous native soldiers led by indigenous officers could be organized according to indigenous groups, or across them. Highly trained and accomplished NCOs of such units could furthermore be tasked to teach skills such as tracking, primitive hunting, wilderness survival, and escape-and-evasion techniques to regular army platoons as well. This would not only serve as a transmission of invaluable skills and knowledge, but it would help foster a greater understanding and respect for the nation's indigenous people among the Han Chinese majority. One of the training objectives of the Taiwan military should be to imbue its soldiers, and especially reservists, with guerrilla fighting skills and tactics, and methods of fighting asymmetrically, should Chinese troops occupy the island. There would be no better teacher of

such skills and such knowledge than the peoples whose ancestors have lived on this land for thousands of years. Moreover: this would go a long way toward dispelling the myth that the military remains the KMT army.

11. Conclusion

The disconnect between the military and society in Taiwan, coupled with the low level of morale in the armed forces, stands as the biggest impediment to a robust defense. And yet it is precisely in these areas that Ukraine has demonstrated its greatest strengths and perhaps the key to its successful resistance. At the time of writing, the invasion of Ukraine has not yet played itself out, and only time will tell how this story will end: will the Ukrainians repel their Russian invaders? Will Russia annex the entire country, or split it in half like East and West Germany after the Second World War? Will it conflagrate into a Third World War or, more likely, be the inciting incident of a Cold War 2.0? Whatever happens, the fighting spirit and courage of the Ukrainian people has been an inspiration to freedom-loving peoples around the world, especially those in Taiwan. It is hoped that the lessons they have to teach will not go unheeded.

Notes

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1. Ian Easton (2019), for example, has written extensively on the nuts and bolts of Beijing's war planning and strategy in its quest to annex Taiwan, while analysts such as Steve Tsang (*Daily Express*, 16th May 2022) and Kerry Brown (2022) have commented on the geopolitical implications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and how this may affect the cross-strait impasse.

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