

## **Lessons from, and Implications of, the Russia-Ukraine War for a Future Taiwan Strait Scenario**

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### **Abstract**

The geopolitical pressure that had built up between Russia and Ukraine in the Donbas region since 2014 finally erupted with Putin's "special military operation" on 24th February 2022. Russia's war against Ukraine not only triggered a tectonic impact on European security but also delivered profound implications for the Indo-Pacific region. Given that both Ukraine and Taiwan are threatened by larger, better-equipped neighbors with as much of an emotional as a geopolitical reason to attempt forceful annexation, security observers believe that the Russia-Ukraine war served as a touchstone for the incoming Chinese Communist Party's ambition upon Taiwan. Those with a pessimistic view of the region's security warned that Xi Jinping was studying the conflict to sharpen his future strategy to wage war upon democratic Taiwan. Still, optimists would suggest that Taiwan could learn from Ukraine's combat of resistance and be better prepared and armed for an approaching conflict. As such, this article aims first to

analyze the strategies used by both Russia and Ukraine and then to investigate how these tactics could be used to illuminate the conflict in East Asia. In the end, this paper hopes to create dialogues by offering some timely academic stimuli of the possible regional responses in the Cross-Strait scenario.

**Keywords:** *Russia-Ukraine war, Taiwan Strait, China, Indo-Pacific security*

## 1. Introduction

On 3rd August 2022, the US House speaker, Nancy Pelosi, along with a US congressional delegation, visited Taiwan (officially known as the Republic of China) to show her democratic solidarity with the Taiwanese people. In her official address at the Presidential Palace in Taiwan, she emphasized the important role of Taiwan in security, economics, and governance in the Indo-Pacific region (MOFA, ROC, 3rd August 2022). Immediately, in the pretext of protesting this congressional visit to Taiwan, China conducted military exercises in six designated areas on the West, North, South, and East sides of Taiwan proper. Some of the military exercises targeted the important Sea Line of Communications and aviation airways and caused temporary diversions of international traffic, both inbound and outbound from Taiwan's airports and harbors. In addition, it was reported that the People's Liberation Army launched 11 ballistic missiles during these military drills (Reuters, 4th August 2022), and 5 of them landed within the proclaimed Exclusive Economic Zone of Japan (*The New York Times*, 4th August 2022). This series of assertive behavior was seen by the hawkish Chinese voice as an act of justice but was viewed by the Taiwanese people and the West as an escalatory and disproportional act,

which was later followed by more cases of airspace intrusions by Unmanned Aerial Vehicles airborne from China's Xiamen, a city in the South East of China, over Taiwan's offshore islands (*CNN*, 17th September 2022). Since then, China has seemed to normalize its military activities around Taiwan, and the growing threat of China toward Taiwan seems to be no less than military aggression (*NIKKEI Asia*, 8th August 2022); in fact, this escalation has been named the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis by security scholars (Twomey, 2022).

## **2. Growing Tensions in the Indo-Pacific Region**

In fact, the Cross-Strait relations have encountered multiple challenges. In particular, since President Tsai Ing-wen was elected as the president in 2016, democratically by the people of Taiwan, the quasi-official dialogues between the Taiwan's Strait Exchange Foundation and China's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits have become ineffective. Not only has China repeatedly announced its intention to "make the use of force a main option and carefully prepare for it" (*The Guardian*, 15th December 2016), but it has also looked for a *fait accompli*, as it is often proclaimed by its state media that "the first battle [with Taiwan] would be the last battle" (*The Japan Times*, 8th October 2020). Subsequently, in 2018, by placing a newly established M503 and W121/122/123 airway around the median line of the Taiwan Strait, China further expanded its aviation activities in-between Taiwan proper and the Taiwan-controlled remote islands and successfully salami-sliced away Taiwan's traditional depth of air defenses (Yau, 2018). In the year before the election of President Tsai Ing-wen, for her second term, in 2020, the historical number of more than 2000 People's Liberation Army (PLA) air intrusions into Taiwan's ADIZ was reported (*Taiwan News*, 3rd January 2021). Later on, US House Speaker Nancy

Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 was followed by multiple PLA military exercises and fire drills to the east of the median line around Taiwan.

Although the immediate cause of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis seems to be the visit of Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan, there are more important fundamental causes of the regional security context. From the structural dynamics of the region, the US has shifted away from its engagement approach toward China and, in 2017, it began to implement a more competitive strategy. The Trump administration started to label China as a “revisionist power” in its National Security Strategy (The White House, 2017), and, in 2018, it first initiated the Sino-US “Trade War” and later, in 2019, it continued by instigating the Sino-US tech competition (Lee, Yen and Yang, 2021; *Insider*, 30th July 2019). In their Indo-Pacific Strategy Report in 2019, the Trump administration also accused the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of “reorder[ing] the region to its advantage by leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce other nations” (U.S. DOD, 2019). By the time of the Biden administration, this competition had been escalated to supply-chain security and semiconductor competition (*NIKKEI Asia*, 16th February 2021; The White House, 2021).

However, this is not to say that the regional security context is solely driven by exogenous factors outside China; endogenously China itself is different. Soon after Xi Jinping came to power within the Chinese Communist Party in 2013, he started to change China's foreign posture from Deng Xiaoping's “keeping a low profile” (韜光養晦 /*taoguang yanghui*) to “striving for achievement” (奮發有為 /*fenfa youwei*) (Yan, 2014). Xi pronounced that China's interactions with the US Obama administration were “a new type of major power relations” in June 2013 (Lampton, 2013), and he proclaimed that “the great

rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” was his Chinese dream (CCP, 2013). Later, in November 2013, he announced the establishment of the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone over the contested territory of the Diaoyu (釣魚) / Senkaku (尖閣) islands with Japan (Lamont, 2014). When the Philippines initiated international arbitral proceedings against China in January 2013 (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016), China also initiated a mass-scale of artificial island building in the South China Sea as its policy response (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2022). During Xi’s reign, there were also multiple military confrontations with India in the Southwest of China in 2017 and 2020 (Gokhale, 2021). Since 2020, Chinese diplomats have been engaging in a very vocal and strident tone of diplomacy, “Wolf Warrior Diplomacy”, and this new style of diplomacy reached a head in 2021 when the Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs in Chinese Communist Party, Yang Jiechi, stated via interpreter very straightforwardly in front of his US counterpart: “let me say here that, in front of the Chinese side, the United States does not have the qualification to say that it wants to speak to China from a position of strength. The US side was not even qualified to say such things even 20 years or 30 years back, because this is not the way to deal with the Chinese people.” (*NIKKEI Asia*, 19th March 2021) In August 2022, China’s ambassador to France, Lu Shaye, even accused the government of Taiwan of having “effectively indoctrinated and intoxicated” the Taiwanese people through “de-sinicization” policies, and stated that these people would need to be “re-educated” as he believed that the island was destined to be taken by China (*South China Morning Post*, 8th August 2022). In the opening address of the 20th National Congress of the CCP, Xi Jinping further stated, “The historical wheels of national reunification and national rejuvenation are rolling forward, and the complete reunification of the motherland must be achieved” (*Taipei*

*Times*, 17th October 2022). When the above rhetoric echoed its extreme hawkish voice on social media, “keep the island, don’t keep the people” (Tiezzi, 2022), it seemed that under Xi Jinping’s leadership, the CPP was working to further consolidate its power and reaffirm its domestic support via inciting its nationalist sentiment in the name of fighting against the “century of humiliation” (Wang, 2020).

### **3. In the Middle of Great Power Politics: Taiwan and Ukraine**

Taiwan is not the only place to be trapped in the middle of the international structure of a great power competition. In fact, in a similar vein to Taiwan and China, Ukraine shared the same cultural roots as Russia, but both of them departed from their choice of political identities after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa, 2016). Russia, under Putin’s rule, has remained an authoritarian regime since 2000, but Ukraine decided to give up its nuclear arsenal in 1994 via the international arrangement of the Budapest Convention (*United Nations Treaty Collection*, 1994). The country later abolished its pro-Putin president, Viktor Yanukovich (Mbah and Wasum, 2022), and moved clearly toward a democratic identity with the European Union’s liberal values after the 2013 Euromaidan incident (Plokhly, 2015). On 24 February 2022, a war erupted in 21st-century Europe, and the Russian military unexpectedly attacked its neighboring country, Ukraine, even though most military observers did not see the possibility of this event coming under their rational predictions. Prior to the conflict, Ukraine served as an important strategic position for Russia to create a security buffer from NATO, but it is also an important economic and energy passage that connects Russia and Europe. However, when Ukraine moved more toward European values at the end of 2013, its sovereign decision was perceived negatively by Russia, which resulted first in its

annexation of Crimea in 2014 and later Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Likewise, the majority of the Taiwanese people share the same cultural heritage as China, but the politically self-governed Taiwan has demonstrated its distinct political identity by possessing the values of a liberal democracy. But China, under the CCP's rule, always views that one of its political legitimacies is tied to the credibility of its policy toward "reunifying" Taiwan and it retains the use of force as an option to engage with Taiwan. Historically, there were three Taiwan Strait Crises prior to Nancy Pelosi's visit (the fourth crisis). The first military conflict, commonly termed the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, which occurred from 1954 to 1955, allowed the PLA to seize the Yijiangshan (一江山) Islands and Dachen (大陳) islands off the Eastern shore of China from Taiwan's direct control but they failed to invade Taiwan proper (Elleman, 2014: 70; Tucker (ed.), 2008: 190). The second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958 started with the PLA's heavy bombardment as an attempt to blockade the islands of the Taiwan controlled Kinmen (金門, also called Quemoy or Jinmen) and Matsu (馬祖, Mazu), but the conflict ended in a stalemate, which resulted in continuous symbolic cross-bombardment on a reduced scale and finally ended along with the result of the Sino-U.S. normalization in 1979 (Cole, 2006: 22-25; Elleman, 2014: 92). The 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, which is referred to as the third Taiwan Strait Crisis (Chi, 2006), occurred when Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui defined the relations between Taiwan and China as "special state-to-state relations" (特殊國與國關係 / *teshu guo yu guo guanxi*) (Bush, 2005: 57), and the PLA conducted multiple amphibious exercises and ballistic missile drills around the Taiwan Strait, two of which targeted offshore areas outside the major cities of Taiwan, Kaohsiung and Keelung.

In addition, Taiwan's role in the Indo-Pacific region is crucial for both China and the US. Politically, Taiwan stands in the adjacent area of the US democratic values and China's authoritarian ideology. China sees Taiwan as an integrated part of its territory, and the US worries that Taiwan could be a new "Fulda Gap" in Asia to the democratic alliance (*Taipei Times*, 21st October 2020). Militarily, for the US, Taiwan is in the important strategic location of the first island chain, but for China, it is also located in the inevitable collision path of China's growing military in the region. Economically, Taiwan's technology capability is prominent in the global ICT supply chain, but the loss of access to Taiwan's technology will mean economic catastrophe for both camps. If the US cannot fulfill its security commitments to Taiwan, the future of Taiwan will also lead to a costly reputation crisis for the US and damage the confidence of its allies in the Indo-Pacific region (Tucker and Glaser, 2011: 32). Given that both Taiwan and Ukraine are stuck in the power play between China/US and Russia/US, the security discourse often makes the analogy, "Ukraine Today, Taiwan Tomorrow" (*Harvard Magazine*, 4th May 2022).

#### **4. Taiwan and Ukraine: A Strategic Comparison**

To better illuminate the possible conduct of a Taiwan Strait scenario from our understanding of the Russia-Ukraine war, it is always better to understand the similarities and differences between the security contexts of Taiwan and Ukraine, including their strategic environment, from the following aspects.

##### ***4.1. Border Features with Opponents***

First, the border features of both countries could help and harm their defenses differently. Ukraine shares a long land border with Russia, and



there are no geographic barriers in its East to obstruct Russia's military mobility and advancement. It was very easy for the already assembled Russian army to invade Ukraine in a couple of hours. On the other case, for Taiwan, most of the outlying islands, such as Kinmen, Matsu, Pratas, Taiping Island (Itu Aba), and the Penghu islands, are far away from Taiwan proper and hard to defend effectively, but Taiwan proper is a defensive island where there are limited locations for triphibious invasions. In addition, the wide availability of Satellite Intelligence nowadays and the geographic challenge of the Taiwan Strait increase the difficulty for the PLA to invade stealthily, quickly or even decisively.

#### ***4.2. Global Interdependence***

Second, the global interdependence of both countries creates different kinds of economic shockwaves in the world. In Ukraine's case, the major exports of its economy are agricultural produce and natural material exports. As such, the Russia-Ukraine war has endangered global food security and the natural resource supply of graphite, titanium, nickel, manganese, magnesium, iron, and steel. However, as an official member of the World Trade Organization, Taiwan's economy is highly connected with the world in the technology sector. Taiwan is also known for its strong technology industry base. Companies like Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) occupy the majority share of the global high-end semiconductor segment, and Hon Hai Precision Industry Co., Ltd. (鴻海精密工業股份有限公司, also known as Foxconn / 富士康) is a major supplier of Apple products. Various brands such as Acer, Asus, D-link, and HTC sell their products around the world. In 2020, it was reported that Ukraine's GDP was about 155.6 US dollars while Taiwan's GDP was about four times that, at 669.25 billion US dollars. A crisis occurring over Taiwan Strait will send another level of shockwaves through the global economy.

### **4.3. Geostrategic Positions**

Third, Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe and its territory is 16 times that of Taiwan. Hence, during its resistance against Russia, Ukraine could adopt a strategy of trading space with time. In addition, it has land borders with EU states such as Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania, with direct connections through highways and railways. Ukraine continues to receive military supplies through land transportation during wartime. Taiwan is protected by the Taiwan Strait as well as being obstructed by its surrounding ocean in terms of its material supplies during wartime. Taiwan imports most of its natural gas from the Middle East, but the PLA's A2/AD capability, and the huge size of the air force and navy are expected to work on blockading Taiwan. While Ukraine's geographical location means that it serves as an important energy conduit to transport Russian energy to Europe (Reuters, 15th February 2013), the adjacent maritime areas around the Taiwan strait serve as important Sea Lines of Communications (SLOC) to Taiwan's neighboring countries, such as Japan, Korea, the Philippines and even China.

### **4.4. Strategic Assumptions of Opponents**

Fourth, due to Russia's previous quick and decisive success in annexing Crimea in 2014, it made the incorrect assumption in early 2022 that its invasion of Ukraine would not meet with significant resistance and it did not invest enough troops in the operation. It was estimated that Russia only assembled a force of 200 thousand people in its first phase of operations, before April 2022 (Gilliam and Van Wie, 2022; Roblin, 2021), which was about the same size as the Ukraine military at the time (Congressional Research Service, 2022). In his famous *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, John Mearsheimer argued that Russia would

certainly oppose NATO's enlargement of its membership as it saw this development as a security threat (Mearsheimer, 2001: 50). But he also pointed out that to secure a quick and decisive victory, any country would need to have a military theater-wide balance of 3:1 force ratio against his adversary (Mearsheimer, 1988). In addition, prior to April 2022, without a clear military objective, Russia initiated multiple fronts of operations from the Northeast, East, and Southeast sides of Ukraine, which intensified the difficulty of its logistics (*Al Jazeera*, 2022). However, China's situation will be different in terms of its Taiwan Strait operations, as it continuously plans for a *fait accompli* before Taiwan can receive any foreign assistance with the continuous improvements to its ballistic missiles and by creating an Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) environment over the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, China's military spending is 25 times that of Taiwan (Lee, 2022), and it is expected that China's military thinking about invading Taiwan will involve its air, surface, and ground military assets coming from multiple military theater commands.

#### **4.5. Considerations of Logistics**

Fifth, probably due to the need for deception, Russia did not mobilize a huge amount of military to support its operation against Ukraine prior to February 2022 (*The Guardian*, 15th February 2022). This decision resulted in a fatal blow to its later encirclement of Kyiv in March and April 2022 (*Financial Times*, 12th March 2022). In addition, Russia relied on the railway system to transport military and materials to the West of its territory, but there was a shortage of available connecting transportation, such as freight trucks, to transport supplies from the terminal stations on the Russian side to the operational units within Ukraine (*U.S. DOD News*, 1st March 2022). The media reported that there was a 40-mile convoy stalled outside Kyiv due to a shortage of

petroleum (*NPR*, 1st March 2022). However, the logistic constraints for China would be different in the Taiwan Strait. Given that China is the world's factory nowadays, its strong production capability and years of efforts in military-civil fusion will enable its industry to effectively support the required materials and resources for its military operation. Hence, China's constraints may be less in terms of war resources but more in terms of securing enough capacity for triphibious landing vehicles to cross the Taiwan Strait. The PLA has been investing its resources in enhancing its strait-crossing landing capability by deploying more dock landing ships, air-cushioned landing craft, Type 071 amphibious transport docks, and Type 075 landing helicopter docks (IISS, 2020). In 2015, China also promulgated the specific regulation "Technical Standards for New Civilian Ships to Implement National Defense Requirements", requiring newly built roll-on-roll-off ships to meet the technical specification for the support of the PLA's expeditionary warfare capabilities, many of them are owned by China's state-owned enterprises, such as COSCO (Tiezzi, 2015). In addition, since 2021, the PLA has occasionally dispatched Z-10 attack helicopters, which can carry combat personnel, to the East side of the median line over the Taiwan strait (*Janes*, 28th October 2021). On 11 September 2022, when Taiwan claimed that it had detected that the PLA's KVD-001 drones had crossed the median line for the first time, the official mouthpiece from the CCP proclaimed that the KVD-001 often accompanied attack helicopters for the purpose of providing communication relays (*Global Times*, 12th September 2022). It seems that China's strategy of using advanced air assault tactics in a future scenario of invading Taiwan proper is no longer just in its imagination (*Insider*, 15th March 2022).

#### ***4.6. Homeland Defense Force***

Sixth, both Ukraine and Taiwan happen to have established a designated organization to mobilize their reservists for homeland defense. On 1st January 2022, the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky officially activated the Territorial Defense Forces to mitigate the Russian military build-up around the border. Ukraine's territorial defense force seems to be focusing more on the practical skills needed on the real battlefield and has a strong connection with the local chain of command and the population (*Foreign Policy*, 7th March 2022). However, Taiwan's newly established all-out defense and mobilization agency, also created on 1 January 2022, chose to make Taiwan reservists an extension of the regular service, and this new organization gives reservists access to equipment and weaponry similar to that which is already used by the active-duty military (*RTI*, 10th October 2022). The new Taiwanese system considers reservists as the operational reserve of the regular force, which will be recalled regularly for training and mobilized when the threat to its national security is assessed to have increased. At the time of writing, the ongoing debate in Taiwan is regarding whether reservists should be trained and tasked exactly like the regular forces and to what extent this could potentially discourage young patriots, who are often less willing to subject themselves to the rigid military formality (Lee and Hunzeker, 2022).

#### ***4.7. Energy Leverage***

Finally, due to the size of its land mass and the abundant energy reserves underneath Siberia, Russia is one of the major exporters in the global energy market, and it is ranked third after Saudi Arabia and the United States as a major crude oil producer (Workman, 2022). Oil and gas once occupied approximately a quarter of Russia's GDP, and this financial

gain contributed to 40–50% (depending on the oil price) of the Russian federal-level budget revenues; in addition, it is 65–70% of its foreign earnings from exports, and this income represents almost a quarter of the overall investment in Russia’s national economy (Hafner and Luciani (eds.), 2022: 652). While Europe is the world’s second-largest energy importer after China, Europe relied strongly on Russia’s oil and gas prior to the Russia-Ukraine War, and Russia has been accused of weaponizing energy to divide and conquer European states (Reuters, 2nd September 2022).

In comparison, China is the top crude oil importer, and more than 80% of China’s energy supply comes from imports of the Middle East countries through the Strait of Malacca (Storey, 2006). This important energy source would need to go through the narrow geographic choke point and the troublesome waters of the South China sea claimed by many claimants, and both of these areas are surrounded by US allies. Under Xi Jinping’s leadership, the CCP’s mitigation strategy is to seize control of important ports, such as from Gwadar to Hambantota, from Chittagong to Kyaukpyu, but the regime has also been building alternative land bridges to access the Indian Ocean. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) endeavored to develop the China-Pakistan, China-Myanmar, and China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridors, and energy pipelines and railways connecting Gwadar in Pakistan and Kyaukpyu in Myanmar have been built or planned (Vaghji, 2022). In addition, to enhance its naval presence in securing this SLOC, it has also been reported since the early 2020s that China is building a naval base in Ream, Cambodia (*NIKKEI Asia*, 28th August 2022).

## 5. Lessons for Taiwan Strait

Now that the comparison of the strategic terrains in Europe and the Indo-Pacific region has been completed, the next step is to investigate how the actual conduct of the Russia-Ukraine war could potentially contribute to our understanding of a Taiwan Strait scenario. Generally speaking, at the time of this writing, the military invasion of Russia upon Ukraine has gone through three important stages. The first stage was from 24th February to 21st April 2022, when Russia attacked Ukraine from the North, East and South toward the unsuccessful encirclement of Kyiv (TASS, 24th February 2022). The second stage was from 22nd April to 28th August 2022, when Russia re-positioned its troops toward the East and South of Ukraine, in particular, around the Donbas region (*The Wall Street Journal*, 20th March 2022). The third event was the Ukraine counterattacks, first in the South around Kherson, and later in the Northeast around Izyum, which started on 29th August 2022 (*Financial Times*, 30th August 2022). As of the time of completing this research in early October 2022, the fighting in Ukraine is in no way like the Blitzkrieg-style operation originally expected by Putin at the beginning of the invasion (*The Japan Times*, 16th September 2022), but more like a stalemate during a war of attrition. These developments have brought the following lessons to Taiwan from four different aspects.

First, in the information battlefield, Russia understands the importance of creating a strategic narrative to project its values and interests to increase its political influence upon the Ukrainian people and shape a discursive environment in its favor (Antoniades, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2010: 3). The eventual goal is to manipulate the Ukrainian people regarding the question of “who Ukrainians are” to reduce their resistance and reshape “what kind of country Ukrainians want” (Reynolds and Watling, 2022). Hence, Putin gave an address in July 2021 with the title “On the Historical Unity of Russians and

Ukrainians”, questioning the sovereignty of Ukraine and arguing that both Russia and Ukraine belong to the same country (Putin, 2021). Russia also accused the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, of a nazified policy to derussify Ukraine (Reuters, 22 February 2022). Likewise, the CCP would be very likely to weaponize history as Russia (Vitvitsky, 2022), as indicated by China’s white paper on Taiwan released after more than 20 years of the previous one. In “The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era”, CCP asserted “External forces have encouraged and instigated provocative actions by the separatist forces; these have intensified cross-strait tension and confrontation and undermined peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region” (Xinhua, 2022). It is no secret that the CCP wants to label any democratically elected administration in Taiwan a foreign proxy to justify its so-called “historical mission” to “national rejuvenation”. In reality, the CCP originates from Marxism-Leninism and a non-Chinese ideology, but its best strategy, paradoxically, is to exploit the social capital of Chinese culture and appeal to its nationalist rhetoric by accusing the government of Taiwan of constantly pressing for “de-sinicization” and promoting “incremental independence” (*ibid.*).

Second, from the perspective of weaponizing international law, Russia first recognized Donetsk and Lugansk as states on 21 February 2022 (TASS, 22nd February 2022), and later, in the name of “humanitarian assistance”, dispatched military into Ukraine (TASS, 24th February 2022). It later staged the so-called referendum in Luhansk, Donetsk, as well as in the part Russian-controlled Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, for them to join Russia (*NPR*, 2022). Russia obviously maneuvered in the grey area of Responsibility to Protect, which was previously exploited by Russia’s military interventions in the independence movements of two autonomous Georgian regions in 2008 (Badescu and Weiss, 2010). However, it is very likely that China would



use a different strategy. China always maintains the rhetoric of non-interference in its so-called “peaceful rise” and “win-win” discourses on international relations (Po and Sims, 2022). It is very like that China wants to exploit the political capital of this narrative to claim that its future war with Taiwan is a “domestic” affair. Nevertheless, this discourse may ignore the fact that Articles 2-6 of the United Nations (UN) Charter recognize the fact that the international community has non-UN Member States. Furthermore, China’s future war over the Taiwan Strait would broadly violate Articles 2-3, which specify that all members shall settle their disputes by peaceful means. A future PLA invasion of Taiwan would also violate the definition of aggression specified in the UN resolution No 3314, “Definition of Aggression, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3314 (XXIX)”. In this resolution, the UN clearly takes the position in its definition of interstate aggression that “‘State’: (a) Is used without prejudice to questions of recognition or to whether a State is a member of the United Nations...” (UN General Assembly, 1974). Hence, China’s use of force upon Taiwan would not be because international law gives the CCP the international legitimacy to do so, but simply because the leadership of the CCP is like Putin, who prioritizes the political ambitions of his authoritarian regimes over the peace and stability of the international community.

Third, in terms of military operations, Russia assembled a huge military in the name of military exercises around the Ukrainian border before the invasion (Roblin, 2021). Given the repeated warning from the US intelligence agency, Ukrainian faced the dilemma of when to mobilize its reservists, as doing so too early would have created panic in its society and doing so too late would have encouraged its enemy (VOA, 23rd February 2022). In addition, Russia made devastating mistakes, including insufficient preparation of its logistics (U.S. DOD News, 1st

March 2022), a lack of encrypted communications (*Foreign Policy*, 22nd March 2022), and inefficient unified battlefield commanders (*The New York Times*, 31st March 2022); furthermore, the lower echelons of the military units tended to passively, instead of actively, respond to the ground situations (*Financial Times*, 10th April 2022). Certainly, China will learn from these military mistakes in the Russia-Ukraine war and has always understood the importance of a quick and decisive invasion of Taiwan (INDSR, ROC, 2018: 56). Given that the closest point of China to Taiwan is about 126 km away from Pingtan, Fuzhou, Taiwan still has sufficient time to call up its reservists before the PLA's full-scale invasion. Hence, the intensified PLA military activities after Nancy Pelosi's trip over the Taiwan Strait signify that China's strategy now intends to further reduce Taiwan's depth of defenses, and this new normal would also allow China to train its military on the actual battlefield with frequent joint military exercises. In addition, China now has its home-grown positioning service, the Beidou-3 (BDS-3) constellations, which were fully deployed in 2020, and there could be 14 to 16 satellites covering Taiwan at any time (Test and Assessment Research Center of China Satellite Navigation Office, 2020). Its Tianlian, Zhongxing, Fenghuo and Tiantong Satellites created secure communication over the Indo-Pacific region. These PLA technical capabilities continue to present a serious threat to the stability of the Taiwan Strait.

Finally, from the perspective of economic warfare, Russia constantly uses energy as its bargaining chip to influence the world (Mohan, 2022), but the West has put Russia under severe economic sanctions, including expelling Russian banks from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), multiple EU sanction packages, and targeting Russia's influential oligarchs (European Union, 3rd June 2022). Although the sanctions did not change

Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine, they did slow down the Russian war engine. For the Indo-Pacific security context, given that China has extremely interdependent economics with the world, and the highest level of self-sufficiency in its weapons system (*South China Morning Post*, 8th October 2022), a future global economic sanction may be more about changing the CCP leadership’s decision-making, as well as slowing down its war engine. Currently, China is highly connected with the global supply chain in terms of manufacturing and energy supplies, and it is the second largest importer in the global energy market. While China’s past economic performance has fueled the important role of the CCP’s political legitimacy, an economic embargo during the Taiwan Strait conflict would aim at the center of gravity of the CCP’s survival.

## 6. Implications

Whether seeing the Sino-US competition as the result of a power transition, where an unsatisfied and *revisionist* China is challenging the US, or Graham Allison’s “Thucydides’ Trap”, where the *status quo* power, the US, is working to sustain its leadership, Taiwan already stands in the middle of this power competition. Yet, the Russia-Ukraine war indicates that a small power, like Ukraine, can still possibly get away from the so-called destiny of “the strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must”, as specified in the Melian Dialogue of Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, once the right formula of defense policy is employed; and such a development brings the following three levels of implications to Taiwan.

Firstly, from the tactical level, Taiwan needs to work to better prepare its military for a potential conflict. Lessons learned from the Russia-Ukraine War would suggest that Taiwan immediately needs to enhance its defenses in areas such as increasing its strategic stockpiles

due to the nature of being an island, enhancing its infrastructure to be more resilient, and maintaining the continuity of its operations during wartime; not just increasing its missile capability but also its capacity to deter a triphibious invasion, and even establishing wartime production capability to replenish its military. The whole objective is to make Taiwan's military, though relatively small compared to the PLA, extremely lethal.

Secondly, from the strategic level, the people of Taiwan need to work toward creating a more resilient society. The conflict between Taiwan and China is just like the conflict between Russia and Ukraine; the center of gravity is about the support of the civilians to its military. China understands that its best strategy is to make Taiwan's civilians believe that a war with China is hopeless, and such a belief would serve as a powerful psychological tool to weaken Taiwan's fighting will and constrain its fighting capability. The already politically divided society in Taiwan should recognize the fact that whether they consider China an external military threat or an internal political foe, Taiwan's autonomy to decide its way of life will rely on the collective will of the Taiwanese society to defend itself. Taiwan may not need to "win a war" with China; but "not losing the war" will still create enough political risk for the CCP, who need to think carefully about whether a potential invasion will do more good or harm in terms of maintaining its political survival.

Finally, this is to say that the international community needs to learn from the CCP's rationale if they want to deter its aggression in the region. The CCP prioritizes its political survival above everything else, and the rationale for the CCP's strategic calculation of a war over the Taiwan Strait is more about the political risk to its regime than the military or economic cost of the war. Before WWII, the European powers mistakenly believed that a policy of appeasement could maintain European peace; they did not understand that Hitler was determined to

initiate a conflict after the negotiations for the Munich Agreement. Before the Korean War, when US Secretary of State Dean Acheson wrongly believed that not announcing having South Korea in America's defense umbrella in the Pacific in 1950 was an act of goodwill, the decision was perceived by North Korea as a great opportunity. Likewise, the systematic challenge presented by the CCP to the world is a means of maintaining its legitimacy in China, and this CCP rationale will naturally lead the country to engage with territorial issues, not only with Taiwan, but also in the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and the Sino-India border in order to fulfill its nationalist rhetoric of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and to shake off "the century of humiliation".

## **7. Conclusion**

To conclude, Russia's war against Ukraine serves as a prism to illuminate the potential conflict coming to the Indo-Pacific region. Since Xi Jinping's full consolidation of power in his historic third term after his removal of the term limit for future Chinese presidents, China, under his leadership, seems to have moved away from an authoritarian regime toward an even more oppressive style of governance. The CCP's tacit legitimacy with people in China is based on its political argument that the CCP is doing an exceptional job of leading the Chinese people back to the global stage both economically and politically. This implicit social contract with its people was once supported by its brilliant GDP growth and economic performance. However, as China's economy has been slowed by COVID-19, and worsened by its quarantine policy, along with the staggering development of the housing market and mounting financial debt amid the global supply chain crisis caused by the Russia-Ukraine War, a new alternative is needed to supplement the CCP's

deficit in terms of its legitimacy and political survival. A growing development suggests that Xi Jinping is appealing more to the ideological tool of nationalist rhetoric and less to the economic tool of the CCP's socialist market economics. Hence, this shift from an economic tool to an ideological tool will naturally create a self-constrained Chinese social universe in the name of the "Chinese dream" that compels the CCP to seek the "historical mission" and "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation", which is seen by others as an expansionist agenda. Hence, without repeating the same mistakes of the Russia-Ukraine War, given that there is no security governance structure in East Asia, it may be time for the world to consider creating new initiatives in order to deter the CCP's unrestrained ambition, and collective efforts from Taiwan and democratic countries are required to change Xi's false perception.

## Note

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