

# Rethinking China's Taiwan Strategy after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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## Abstract

As a third party who witnessed Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the international responses that followed, China's possible strategies on the Taiwan issue have also attracted more attention and discussions. With an analysis focused on global condemning responses and heavy sanctions that Russia has received for its invasion of Ukraine, this paper will argue that China must not repeat the mistakes of Russia when dealing with Taiwan. Instead, China should avoid adopting the military option and try its best to resolve the issue peacefully. It is not just because it is the only rational choice for China on its path to becoming a responsible international stakeholder but also because it is in China's own best national interest.

**Keywords:** China, Taiwan, Russia invasion of Ukraine, political science

## 1. Introduction:

On February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a “special military operation” that officially marked the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Shocking the world, this clash between the two sovereign countries has continued for months, causing widespread humanitarian disasters while displaying no sign of ending anytime soon. Russia claims that the operation is targeted to “De-militarize and De-nazify” the Kyiv regime. At the same time, official narratives of Russia have attempted to justify the action as a passive response to protect Russia's national security due to the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which Ukraine is seeking to join. Putin has repeatedly expressed concerns over NATO's expansion and claimed self-defense for Russia. However, viewing from Ukraine's perspective, Russia's action is undoubtedly an invasion of its sovereignty and a war of aggression. Under Ukraine's hard resistance, Russia has not yet declared victory. With large-scale international condemnations and sanctions on Russia and increasing political and military support to Ukraine, the situation has become more delicate regarding how this war might proceed and who the winner might be in the end.

While the United States and the Western world took a firm stand with Ukraine against

Russia's invasion, China's attitude is more ambiguous. China called for peace in the official narration and stressed that Russia and Ukraine should resolve their conflicts through negotiation. As the world's second-largest economy and a significant player in the international community, other countries have repeatedly urged China to speak up and take a side. Hoping to avoid getting caught in the heat, China never openly condemned Russia. Yet from the civilian standpoint, many Chinese public have demonstrated sympathy and support for the Russian narrative, considering deteriorating relations between China and the West.

As a third party who witnessed Russia's invasion and the international responses that followed, China's possible moves toward Taiwan have also been placed at the center of discussion. In the PRC's narration, Taiwan is a part of its sovereignty that requires reunification. For the governing authority of Taiwan and many others globally, the island is viewed and treated as a politically sovereign area independent of the PRC. Through the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the corresponding international responses, this paper would like to take the Russia-Ukraine war as a reference to discuss the Taiwan issue. The central question this paper asks is—from international responses to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, what lessons can China learn on approaching and resolving the Taiwan issue? With an analysis focused on international condemning responses and heavy sanctions that Russia has received for its invasion of Ukraine, this paper will argue that China must not repeat the mistakes of Russia when dealing with Taiwan. Instead, China should avoid the military option and try to resolve the issue peacefully. It is not just because it is the only rational choice for China on its path to becoming a responsible stakeholder, but also because it is in China's own best interest to do so.

## **2. Putin's "Special Military Operation"**

On the morning of February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, an official announcement from Moscow astonished the world. Under the order of President Putin, Russia launched a "special military operation" that opened a full-scale invasion of its neighboring west country, Ukraine. Three days before the attack, Russia recognized the independence of two breakaway Ukrainian regions (Donetsk and Luhansk) under the control of pro-Russia military forces. Russian troops were quickly dispatched to the two regions after Moscow's recognition. On the following day, the threat of war further escalated as the Russian Council passed a law to authorize the use of military force abroad. Without much time for international reactions and diplomacy, Russia's full-scale invasion broke out on February 24th.

Historically, Russian and Ukraine were both parts of the former Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet, the relationship between Russia and Ukraine had its ups and downs. Scholars believe that the current hostility between the two countries can be mainly traced back to 2014, with the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity and the Crimean crisis (Kuzio, 2017). Besides historical conflicts between the two countries, scholars have also pointed out a more direct cause of Russia's abrupt aggression: the eastward expansion of NATO, which Russia views as a pressing threat to its national security (Batyuk, 2020).

As most wars in history are justified in their starter's narration, Putin also gave a noble cause to his action on Ukraine, despite its undisputable invasive nature. According to Putin,

Russia's special military operation in Ukraine is an act of self-protection aimed at preserving its national security through de-militarizing and de-nazifying Ukraine and keeping NATO away from its doorsteps (Wolfgang, 2022). Yet, no matter how Russia tries to construct the narrative in its favor, there are still no excuses for starting a war. Unlike the relationship between China and Taiwan, both Russia and Ukraine are members of the United Nations. From this perspective, the invasion of one sovereign state towards another sovereign state can hardly be justifiable in any circumstances. On the international level, responses and reactions across the globe also demonstrated strong disapprovals and condemnations, as Russia's aggression severely damaged regional security and posed a dangerous threat to global security.

### *2.1 Global Responses to Russia*

At the moment, it is still unclear how this conflict between Russia and Ukraine might end. Russia has not achieved swift victory as Ukraine responded with solid resistance that was not expected by many at the beginning of the conflict. From the current circumstance, it could be speculated that the development course has grown beyond the original expectations of Putin. Michael Doran, analyst of the Hudson Institute, pointed out that the Russian war machine may not be as strong as the world had thought, while Ukraine's resistance has demonstrated that it is no weak state. The longer Russia is trapped in this war, the more upper hand Ukraine is likely to have, and the worse it might be for Russia. At the same time, the scale of international response to the invasion has also been unprecedented, further hurting Russia's odds of winning.

After the invasion of Ukraine, the United States was the first country to impose escalated sanctions on Russia as a sign of condemnation. According to US President Joe Biden, "Putin chose this war" and must suffer its consequence (The White House, 2022). Up to this point, over 30 countries worldwide have imposed harsh sanctions on Russia, ranging from North America to Asia. Even Switzerland joined international sanctions, disregarding its neutrality. These almost unprecedented international sanctions are targeted to cripple the Russian economy: including freezing its national assets, gold and currency reserves, cutting out Russian banks from the global SWIFT system, banning imports of Russian oil, energy, and investments (University of Michigan, 2022). Some sanctions even targeted Russian citizens and their family members abroad for their ties with Moscow. Furthermore, along with sanctions on Russia, countries and international organizations such as the United States and the European Union have provided military aid to Ukraine as the war continues.

Although no country nor organization joined the war directly, military aids and economic sanctions were already powerful enough to bleed Russia and cripple its economy. In many aspects under today's globalization, the broad range of sanctions and isolation from world markets can cause more damage than any army. By supporting the Ukrainian side, the Western world has also grasped the opportunity to strike and even paralyze Russia heavily. With no allies or support and almost the entire world against it, Russia's aggressive invasion has backfired on itself. Under whole-scale international sanctions and economic decoupling, Russia's economy is going through its worst crisis since Putin came to power (Fortune, 2022).

If the Russian economy collapses, then political turmoil will likely follow.

### 3. Thinking About the Taiwan Issue

With the current development of the Russia-Ukraine war, what are some implications for China to consider? Going back to the research question, from international responses to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, what lessons can China learn on approaching and resolving the Taiwan issue? Although China has repeatedly empathized with its peace-loving nature in the official narratives, domestic voices urging to adopt the military option to take Taiwan have become increasingly popular in recent years (Kastner, 2018). Such opinion trends' potential influence and impact on actual decision-making must not be overlooked. The Taiwan issue has always been a political hot potato for China. On one side, Taiwan's political independence from PRC is caused by historical reasons from the Chinese civil war. The reunification of Taiwan is a political promise that the PRC has been dedicated to accomplishing on its agenda ever since the Maoist era. If achieved, the CCP will have completed a tremendous political victory that can benefit its domestic public image, governing performance, and ruling legitimacy. However, with the current conditions across the Taiwan Strait, it would be irrational to think that the authority and people of Taiwan would willingly give up their de facto sovereignty to the PRC. Furthermore, the Taiwan issue is a complicated yet delicate task that involves multiple players and various geopolitical interests in the Asia Pacific.

For starters, Taiwan is crucial to the interests of the United States in East Asia. Although the United States' One-China policy recognizes PRC as the sole legal government of China, with the Taiwan Relations Act, another close unofficial relationship has continuously remained between the United States and Taiwan. Under such an Act, the United States can carry out bilateral relationships with Taiwan as with any foreign country, nation, state, and government (Kastner & Douglas, 2009). Furthermore, the United States has sustained an unspoken commitment to defend Taiwan from possible military aggression from the PRC. Under such paradox of the One-China policy and the Taiwan Relations Act, the Taiwan issue has evolved into a trilateral relationship of power balancing between three entities—China, Taiwan, and the United States. Therefore, a rare case in international politics is presented as the United States builds a security partnership with Taiwan (which it does not have official diplomatic relations with) to defend against the PRC—a government with which it does have official diplomatic relations with (Bush, 2017).

While the United States has already been deeply involved in Taiwan for decades, Japan also dramatically increased its presence in the Taiwan affair in recent years. On the official level, Japan has a nondiplomatic relationship with Taiwan, where working and collaboration between the two are centered around economic and cultural exchanges (Dreyer, 2019). However, under the intensified US-China competition, Japan has also raised its awareness of the potentiality of military conflicts in the Taiwan Strait. As an ally of the United States and a close neighbor to the island, Japan's deputy prime minister openly stated in 2021 that if China were to Taiwan, Japan would join the United States in defending Taiwan together (Sposato, 2022).

From PRC's perspective, despite all the foreign presence, its greatest fear has always been that Taiwan will declare total independence as a country. When Taiwan was under the KMT, the situation across the Strait was much more at ease than nowadays, when authorities on both sides reached a mutual understanding of the "1992 Consensus" (Chen, 2018). The 1992 Consensus is a political terminology referring to the outcome of a meeting in 1992 between the representatives of Mainland China and Taiwan. For a long time, it served as the foundation of cross-strait cooperation, dialogues, communications, exchanges, and normalized relations between the two (Kastner, 2015). A central concept in the 1992 Consensus is that there is only one China, and Taiwan does not seek independence from China, just that there exist different interpretations of what "China" means. For the Mainland, China is the PRC, while for Taiwan, China means the ROC, with respective interpretations. The 1992 Consensus did work for a while, as the political wisdom and mutual understandings among the two sides have resulted in numerous bilateral agreements and regular dialogues (Saunders & Kastner, 2009). At its highlight in 2015, the relaxed political atmosphere across the Strait even cumulated into a historic meeting between the Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Taiwan leader Ma Ying-jeou, the first time in 66 years of cross-Strait history.

However, under the current leadership of Tsai Ing-wen, the DPP no longer recognizes the 1992 Consensus. Furthermore, the DPP has displayed a trend of political agenda toward de-Sinicization, which means detaching from Chineseness and focusing explicitly on the sovereignty building of Taiwan. Seen by the PRC as severe sabotage of the cross-Strait relationship, Beijing has since cut off all official channels for communication with the Taiwan authority (Jean-Pierre, 2017). It has been pointed out that China's concern is that the DPP is promoting a trend of soft and cultural independence, fostering a robust national identity of non-Chineseness (Bush, 2016).

Besides the current Taiwan authority, China has mainly blamed the United States for depraved relations across the Strait. It is generally believed that the arms sales from the United States provided the governing authority of Taiwan a sense of guaranteed safeness and protection against the PRC. With a shifting world geopolitical landscape, Taiwan has demonstrated a stronger pro-independence tendency in recent years. At the same time, official expressions from China towards the DPP have also become significantly more threatening.

### *3.1 The Dilemma Between Peace and War*

With the current stagnate situation across the Strait, voices calling for militarily resolving the Taiwan issue have increased domestically in China's public discussions. Additionally, under the influence of deteriorating China-US relations, voices calling for taking Taiwan by force have returned with particular popularity. In the early stage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, widespread implications towards reunifying Taiwan by force have widely emerged on the Chinese internet. Such an analogy did not appear out of the blue. On multiple occasions, the PRC leadership has emphasized that it has not renounced the possibility of taking Taiwan by force. Seen by the PRC as an internal issue, President Xi Jinping had openly stated that Taiwan's independence is a "dead-end road" and that China will take all necessary means to stop that from happening (Grossman, 2019). Scholars have indicated that with the

enhancement of PRC's military capability, its leadership may feel more confident to act toward Taiwan when the situation requires (Grossman et al., 2016). Echoing this narrative, the United States also warned of the rising possibility of a military conflict over the Taiwan Strait in the foreseeable time.

However, with the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and international responses to Russia's aggression, China has been pushing back against some comparisons between Ukraine and Taiwan. Indeed, China is not Russia, and Taiwan is not comparable with Ukraine. Yet, examples from Russia's mistakes can still be highly alarming to China's Taiwan strategy. Especially with the rising tendency to use force. Frankly speaking, adopting the military option on Taiwan is a dangerous gamble for the PRC. It can be observed from the Russian example that if China were to use force on Taiwan, then widescale international sanctions are likely to follow. Considering the deep involvement of the United States in Taiwan, using force will also put China and the United States in direct confrontation, which could be extremely dangerous to regional security and the global geopolitical order.

Implied through the Russian example, if China were to attack Taiwan, then the United States and the Western world would most likely seek the opportunity of international sanctions to crush China's economy and even stir up a political turmoil. Therefore, considering its own best interests, China must not repeat the mistakes of Russia. With the rise of China and its ambition to become an international rule-maker, it poses a more significant challenge to the United States's status quo than Russia. While the United States might regard Russia as only a "troublemaker", China's rise presents a real threat to the US-dominated liberal international order. Under the intensified competition between the global powers, it is reasonable to believe that if China attacks Taiwan, the United States will respond with heavier strikes than it did to Russia. China's economy, the second-largest in the world, is much more reliant on the Western market than Russia's. So far, international sanctions and decoupling from the world market have pushed the Russian economy to collapse. Considering China's volume and involvement in the world economy, such consequences are unbearable.

Another critical factor that PRC must take into account is its lack of experience in actual military combat. Unlike Russia, China does not have many military installations beyond its borders, nor has the PLA been fully engaged in massive interventions or warfare since the Vietnam War (Chase, 2015). As long as China cannot guarantee an expedited victory in Taiwan, the rational choice would be to avoid any risky gambling. For every war, there needs to be an exit strategy. Russia's example shows that the longer it is trapped in the war, the more passive it is. The same goes for China. Some Chinese scholars have argued that China should reunite Taiwan swiftly by force so that it could avoid unexpected scenarios and international interference. The problem with such an opinion is that it assumes that Taiwan will not respond with any form of resistance and that Taiwan's governing after reunification by force will be a smooth path. First of all, considering Ukraine's example, there should be no blind optimism that resistance will not be met in Taiwan. Why would it be rational for Taiwan to surrender its sovereignty without fighting? Even if the United States chooses not to engage directly, Japan will most likely get involved for its national security interests. Secondly, up to this point, there has been no clear plan from China's official side on actually

how to govern Taiwan. The closest possibility is a “One country, two systems” formula similar to the one adopted in Hong Kong (Li, 2020). Without mentioning the different historical and political factors between the two places, the implementation of “One country, two systems” in Hong Kong has already proven unsuccessful. That being the case, it is highly doubtful that a similar formula would work smoothly for Taiwan.

Therefore, the only rational choice left for China is to resolve the Taiwan issue peacefully. This paper argues that the PRC leadership should try to avoid using military force on Taiwan. From Russia’s mistake, China should learn that taking Taiwan by force is unwise and irrational, as the action will be read as aggression by the world. The consequence can be severe and international responses will likely cause tremendous damage to the Chinese economy and political stability. On the other hand, as a rising power seeking to take up a more dominating role in the international order, it is also China’s responsibility to be a stakeholder in regional peace and global security. There are still vast common grounds and solid foundations for peace talks between the two sides. Historical collaborations, dialogues, and friendly relationships across the Strait have shown that peaceful diplomacy, patience, and political wisdom can possibly achieve an acceptable solution.

China must also work together with the United States on the Taiwan issue. A healthy and improved China-US relationship can be crucial in resolving the Taiwan issue. While the paradox of the United States in Taiwan has posed challenges for China, from another perspective, it also provided chances for the two to work upon. Despite its ambiguity, the United States’ One-China policy acknowledges China’s position on Taiwan, and more importantly, it does not openly support Taiwan independence. If China and the United States could build on this common ground, progressive steps can be gradually made. It must be remembered that the China-US relationship should not be a zero-sum game. Under today’s global challenges, China should avoid viewing the United States as a total enemy.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the correct resolution to the Taiwan issue requires political wisdom and constructive diplomacy, not hardheaded nationalism and brute force. From the consequences of Russian’s aggressive invasion of Ukraine, China should learn not to repeat similar mistakes. Widespread condemnations and international sanctions toward Russia have shown China what the scenario might look like if it were to take Taiwan by force. Despite China’s position, the adaptation of force on Taiwan will inevitably be interpreted by the Western world as an act of aggression like Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Under such scenario, it can be expected that China would receive similar, if not worse, large-scale international sanctions from the Western world and its allies. Being the world’s second-largest economy and soon to surpass the one of the United States, China would be unable to suffer the severe consequences of decoupling with the international market. Moreover, economic downfall followed by sanctions could result in intense turmoil and instability, which can be destructive to PRC’s ruling legitimacy.

As mentioned earlier, the Taiwan issue is a sophisticated matter with entangled interests of major world powers. So, its correct resolution requires delicacy, wisdom, collaboration, and

proper diplomatic engagements. It should be learned from the Russian mistake that there are no winners in war. Under the changing landscape of today's world, China, as a newly rising power in the international community, must understand and seek to fulfill its responsibilities as a stakeholder of peace and stability.

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