



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Invasions Are Not Contagious

Russia's War in Ukraine Doesn't Presage a Chinese Assault on Taiwan

BY ORIANA SKYLAR MASTRO

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ORIANA SKYLAR MASTRO is a Center Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University and a Senior Nonresident Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

As Russian President Vladimir Putin intensifies his assault on Ukraine, a growing number of U.S. military and foreign policy analysts are voicing concern that China may be emboldened by Russia's example and try to take Taiwan by force. "If Russia can grab chunks of Ukraine or install a puppet regime and withstand economic sanctions, that could embolden nationalists in China to look to Taiwan and think they could do the same," Ian Johnson, a China expert at the Council on Foreign Relations, has argued.

Representative Michael McCaul, Republican of Texas, made a similar argument in an interview last month, as did retired Army General Jack Keane, who said that Chinese President Xi Jinping sees "weakness in the West and how that can advantage him in terms of his national objectives as well."

Xi is certainly watching events in Ukraine, but his calculus for whether to use force against Taiwan is shaped primarily by domestic factors, not foreign ones. As I have argued in *Foreign Affairs*, Chinese leaders are considering “armed reunification” with Taiwan more seriously than at any time in the last 50 years. But Xi will assert Chinese control over the island only if he is confident his military can conduct a successful amphibious invasion and if he believes the timing is right for his own career.

Shifts in the international environment would be important for Taiwan if they changed Xi’s thinking on either count. But the war in Ukraine has not. Xi’s views about U.S. power and resolve and about the likely international response to an invasion of Taiwan probably remain unchanged. If anything, China’s desire not to invite comparisons with Russia at a time when the world is united against Moscow will lengthen its timeline for taking control of Taiwan, not shorten it.

TOO BIG TO SANCTION?

The economic sanctions that the United States, Canada, and many European countries have imposed on Russia give China little reason for pause. To the contrary, these punitive measures simply confirm Beijing’s previous assessments of the possible economic repercussions of using force against Taiwan. Chinese leaders expect the economic costs of an invasion to be heavy but acceptable—partly because of how the international community has responded to Chinese provocations in the past and partly because Beijing’s foreign policy is designed to convince countries to stay out of China’s “internal” affairs, such as the status of Taiwan.

That is not to say the economic measures Washington and its allies have imposed on Russia in recent days are insignificant. The United States and European countries have blocked Russia’s access to most of its foreign

currency reserves, making it impossible for Moscow to intervene to prop up its collapsing currency. They have frozen the assets of senior Russian officials, including Putin himself. And they have moved to exclude big Russian banks from SWIFT, the global financial messaging system.

But the United States and its allies could do more to punish Russia. They could bar all transactions with Russia, whether trade or financial. They could seize all Russian assets within their jurisdictions. Washington could announce secondary sanctions on anyone using U.S. dollars for any transaction with Russia. Most important, the United States could use these and other measures to prevent Russia from exporting oil and gas. Letting Russia continue to export oil and gas would be like letting China sell consumer electronics even after it had taken Taiwan by force.

If the United States and its allies have been cautious in their response to Russia, they are likely to be even more restrained when responding to China—and Beijing knows it. China's ability to retaliate against the West with economic sanctions of its own is much greater than Russia's. Singapore, which announced trade and banking restrictions against Moscow, trades about \$2.5 billion worth of goods with Russia each year—but \$57 billion worth of goods with China. China's leaders likely do not fear U.S.-led economic sanctions in the event of a Taiwan takeover because they probably think that China's own productive capacity, resources, and friendly partners will allow them to survive on their own, especially since China will soon be the world's largest economy. They are probably right. China could absorb the types of sanctions being imposed on Russia. And given China's ability to inflict pain on Western countries, any measures levied against Beijing would likely be softer than those imposed on Moscow.

TAIWAN IS NOT UKRAINE

The Western military response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine will have an even smaller impact than sanctions on China's thinking about Taiwan. True, neither the United States nor NATO has deployed troops to fight on Ukraine's behalf. And U.S. military assistance to Ukraine has been modest: late last month, President Joe Biden instructed the State Department to release up to an additional \$350 million worth of weapons from U.S. stocks to Ukraine.

But Russia would have to invade a NATO ally without provoking a U.S. military response for Chinese leaders to seriously question Washington's commitment to defending Taiwan. Biden has made clear from the beginning of the crisis that his administration will never send troops to Ukraine—a stark contrast with his rhetoric on Taiwan. Just last week, Biden stated unequivocally that the United States would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese attack. As a show of support, he also sent to the island a delegation of former U.S. officials led by Mike Mullen, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In any case, Chinese planners largely assume the United States would intervene militarily on behalf of Taiwan. What some of them question is whether the United States could amass enough forces fast enough to blunt a Chinese assault on the island. Ironically, if the United States had launched a military operation in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Chinese leaders would have had further reason to question Washington's ability to thwart a Chinese assault on Taiwan. The United States does not have the resources to fight the Russians in Europe and prepare adequately for a great-power war in Asia.

Of course, these facts have not prevented China from trying to manipulate the narrative to undermine Taiwan's resolve. Chinese state media has been

flush with stories about how the United States did not come to Ukraine's aid and therefore won't come to Taiwan's either. Like much of what appears on Chinese state media, however, these stories reflect what Chinese leaders want the world to believe—not what they believe themselves.

NOT THE RIGHT TIME

Chinese leaders are without a doubt considering an attack on Taiwan, but now is not the right time. China's military is still honing the capabilities it would need to take and hold the island. And Xi is unlikely to take a dangerous gamble on Taiwan before the next Party Congress in late 2022, when he is widely expected to secure a third term as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. Xi is also working hard to lessen China's technological dependence on the West, thus minimizing the impact on any further decoupling after a possible war. For all these reasons, an assault on Taiwan before 2025 is unlikely.

If anything, the crisis in Ukraine creates an additional incentive for China to wait. Beijing does not want the world to equate the two scenarios. From China's perspective, Ukraine is an independent country engaged in a border dispute with Russia. Taiwan, by contrast, "has always been an inalienable part of China's territory," as China's ambassador to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Deng Xijun, put it late last month. In other words, linking the two issues would undermine China's claim to the island.

China also understands that moving against Taiwan now would solidify fears in the West of an axis of autocrats. The United States may not have the resolve to fight a protracted war to defend Taiwan. But suddenly faced with a need to defend freedom and democracy against an authoritarian alliance, Washington could muster a greater military response and convince its allies

to do the same. Partly for this reason, China has desperately tried to maintain some semblance of neutrality during the Ukrainian crisis.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has certainly changed aspects of the international order. It has rallied European countries against Russia, prompted Germany to increase defense spending, and even convinced historically neutral countries such as Finland, Sweden, and Switzerland to take a stance against Moscow. From China's perspective, however, nothing Russia or its adversaries have done meaningfully alters the calculus on Taiwan.

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