



Ukraine today, Taiwan tomorrow?

An analysis of Taiwan's security situation following the invasion of Ukraine,
and the role the UK should play in defending it

MAY 2022

FOREWORD



When Vladimir Putin invaded a free and democratic neighbouring country, it focused many minds here in the UK on the security of Taiwan, a sovereign democracy that champions modern values in the face of an assertive, autocratic neighbour.

The UK Government deserves praise for the practical and political support it has provided to Ukraine. We have stretched hard to support their defence of their freedoms and independence, and to act as a catalyst for military, humanitarian and retributive action on the world stage. Our troops were training Ukrainian forces for many months before the invasion, the Prime Minister has a strong personal connection with President Zelensky and his visit to Kyiv has been seen as an iconic moment. As a result of these efforts, the UK has made a substantial difference, which Ukraine and President Zelensky have acknowledged.

But what about Taiwan? Are we doing enough to support a sovereign democracy that faces a very similar threat? I do not think so. On the international stage we take a cautionary approach. In our military and logistical collaboration, we hold back from a true spirit of partnership. I know from my experience as a minister during the pandemic that inter-government dialogue between our countries remains in the ice cooler.

This has been going on for a long time. I have long argued that our hesitant engagement with modern Taiwan was not in our national interest. The Ukrainian invasion shows what happens when aggressors think that you are not committed to your friends. The energetic international response to the invasion shows how countries like the UK can make a difference to repelling the aggressor. I believe it is time for an emphatic change in our approach to Taiwan.

We need to start by listening to what Taiwan says it needs right now. In our response, we should step up to our responsibilities to a like-minded sovereign democracy that respects the rule of law and human rights, and champions democratic values in the Asian context.

That is why this paper is so important. It provides a helpful action list of sensible and proportionate recommendations for the UK and Taiwan governments. It makes it clear that our governments should work much closer together, UK diplomatic efforts should be more emphatic, and we should offer proactive support to rebalance the military equation over the Taiwan Strait and deter military adventurism or invasion.

I hope the UK Government will take heed of these and begin work now to build closer ties with Taiwan, work with allies to provide the Taiwanese Government with the tools it needs to defend itself, and make it abundantly clear to the People's Republic of China leadership that any invasion of Taiwan will entail significant and lasting damage in both economic and military terms.

Lord Bethell
April 2022



ABOUT US

The Taiwan Policy Centre is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to boosting political, cultural, and trading relations between the UK and Taiwan.

We aim to increase the knowledge and understanding that policy-makers, the media, and the British public have about Taiwan through a combination of research, educational events, and outreach.

We further aim to highlight the threats and injustices that Taiwan faces at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party and lobby the UK Government to take a stronger and more proactive stand in support of Taiwan on the global stage.

Too often, media coverage and understanding of Taiwan is shaped by the language and claims of the Chinese Communist Party, a governing authority which does not, and never has, governed Taiwan.

The Taiwan Policy Centre aims to correct these misconceptions and ensure that the UK's policies towards Taiwan and media coverage of Taiwanese affairs is rooted in research and law.



Donations

The Taiwan Policy Centre is a not-for-profit organisation that relies on supporter donations to fund our work. We welcome all donations large and small and owing to the sensitive nature of our work, we only publish details of our funding in general terms and have a policy of not naming any donors publicly.

If you would like to make a donation to enable the Taiwan Policy Centre to continue its work, please visit our website at www.taiwanpolicycentre.com/donate

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Cover image: Ukrainian Alina Paniuta, whose family came from the eastern part of the country, speaks at the rally outside Russia's representative office in Taipei Tuesday. CNA photo March 1, 2022 [<https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202203010013>]

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The UK should begin to furnish Taiwan with the asymmetric equipment it needs to defend itself. This includes lightweight or mobile anti-vehicle and aircraft missiles and military drones. Furthermore, Taiwan should begin work now to establish the wherewithal to develop such equipment domestically, ensuring they are not reliant on imported hardware.
2. The Taiwanese Government and military must ensure that there is a full counter-invasion asymmetric military strategy in place and that all relevant personnel receive the appropriate training to deliver it.
3. If it has not already, the UK Government must begin urgent discussions with Taiwan, and allies, to establish a clear strategy to break any blockade that China might seek to place on Taiwan.
4. Taiwan must establish a new Civil Defence Force, run by military veterans and staffed by volunteers. It must ensure that this force is suitably trained and equipped and knows exactly what it must do in the event of an invasion.
5. Taiwan is already boosting the training its reserves receive and that is welcome. But it can and must go further and ensure that reserves receive training on multiple days per month and have knowledge of new asymmetric warfare tactics and equipment.
6. The Taiwanese Government must do more to prevent disinformation from China reaching Taiwanese citizens through both mainstream media and social media. It must also boost the ability of Taiwanese citizens to scrutinise information critically for themselves, rather than accept whatever information is put in front of them.
7. As the UK Government works with its allies to help Ukraine defend itself against Russian aggression, it should remain fully aware that the outcome of this conflict could set a precedent and have consequences for Taiwan, and other disputed regions around the world.
8. The time is right for the UK Government to amend its policy of strategic ambiguity towards Taiwan. It should coordinate with allies to release statements that make it clear that the issue of Taiwan's sovereignty must be settled peacefully and that any attempt to settle it with a blockade or any other military action will be taken as a declaration of war.
9. The UK Government should engage with the authorities of the US, the EU, NATO, and others, as well as Taiwan, to establish a clear strategy for how the international community would respond to an invasion of Taiwan.
10. The UK Government should pass its own Taiwan Relations Act, to put its own policy towards Taiwan on a par with its ally, the US.
11. The UK Government should increase efforts to diversify supply chains to reduce the dependency on China in all key economic areas, in order to ensure that the UK is in a position to employ sanctions without causing undue harm to the British economy.
12. The UK Government should engage now with the authorities of the US, the EU, NATO, and others, to agree on the package of sanctions they would be willing to impose on China in the event of an invasion of Taiwan.
13. The UK Government should increase Ministerial visits to Taiwan and amend FCDO policy to allow Ministers at all levels of Government to visit.
14. The UK Government should immediately permit Ministerial visits to the UK from all levels of the Taiwanese Government.
15. The UK Government must adopt a more robust policy towards Taiwan's inclusion in international bodies and back this policy up with concrete actions together with its allies.
16. The UK Government's leadership in driving the proposal for a D10 group of nations was welcome. The time is right to revisit this idea and deliver a broader alliance of democratic nations which Taiwan should play a full part in.

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to remember a time when war has broken out in one part of the world, yet so much of the ensuing analysis has been on the potential impact it might have upon another.

Ukraine is around 5,000 miles (8,000km) away from Taiwan. It is separated by an entire continent and no fewer than six different time zones. Yet, if you would believe some of the commentary that has been published since the Russian military build-up on the borders of Ukraine first hit the headlines, you might think conflict in Ukraine means a similar war over Taiwan is all but inevitable.

Speaking at the Munich Security Conference on 19th February, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson also alluded to this, commenting that, “If Ukraine is endangered, the shock will echo around the world. And those echoes will be heard in East Asia, will be heard in Taiwan.” ¹

In this paper, the Taiwan Policy Centre will look in more detail at what the war in Ukraine means for Taiwan, how the responses of the Taiwanese Government and the international community will impact Taiwan now and in the future, and the lessons that Taiwan, the UK, and the broader international community can learn from the current crisis to help protect Taiwan.

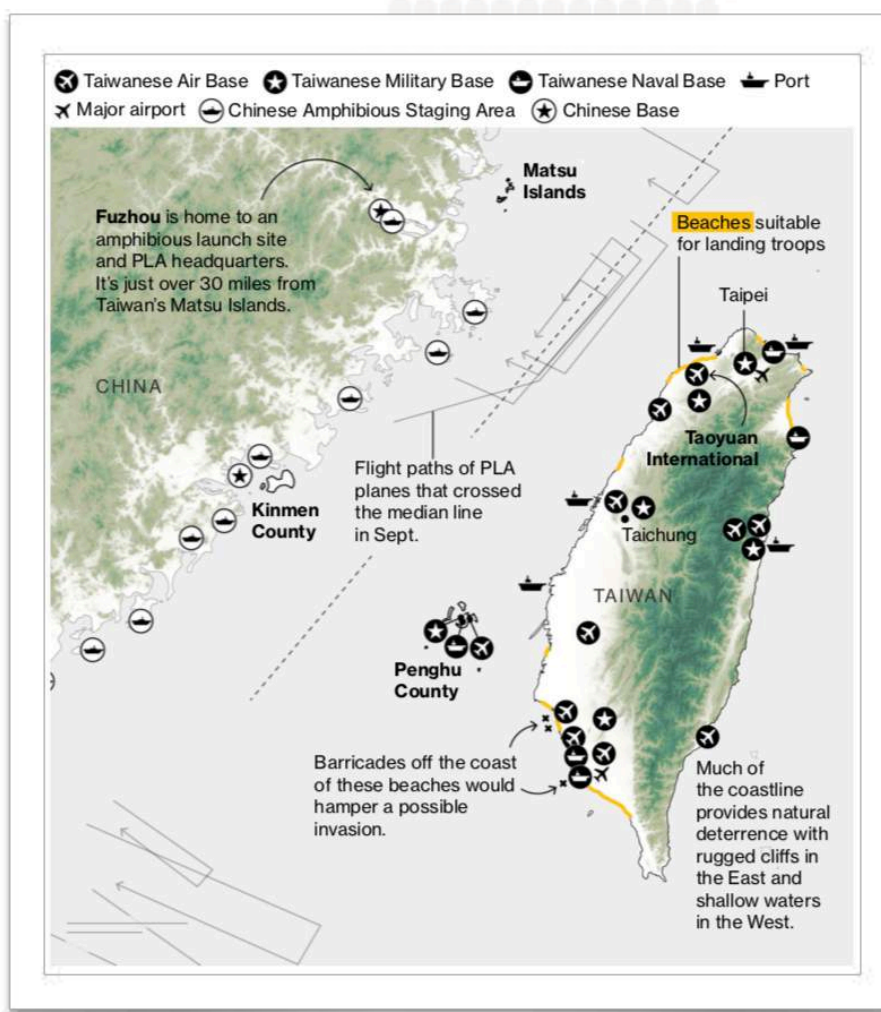


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PART ONE: WHY TAIWAN IS NOT UKRAINE

A number of observers and commentators around the world have suggested that the Russian invasion of Ukraine foreshadows a looming Chinese invasion of Taiwan ². Without minimising how Taiwan has and continues to be threatened by China we find agreement with, Kharis Templeman, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, that reductive and alarmist perspectives constitute “lazy analysis”. ³

It is important to highlight the substantial differences between the security threats and weaknesses of Ukraine and Taiwan, especially given that accuracy on these matters is vital for understanding how and when Taiwan might need outside help, if or when that situation arises. In brief, these include:

Geography

Ukraine’s land border with Russia is 1,426 miles (2,295km) in length. This does not include the borders with Russian controlled Crimea. The border between Ukraine and Belarus is a further 674 miles (1,084km) long.

This gives nations antagonistic to Ukraine a combined land border that is more than 2,800 miles in length, which potentially encircles Ukraine to the north, east, and south, a porous border over which troops and military hardware can easily cross.

There is no such border between Taiwan and China. With the exception of the outlying Taiwanese islands of Kinmen, Matzu, and Penghu, the Taiwan Strait which separates Taiwan from China is 81 miles (130km) wide at its closest point and 140 miles (220km) wide at the furthest.

This makes an invasion of Taiwan by China a very different logistical challenge.

Operational Complexities

In order to invade Taiwan, China would have to move its troops and equipment over this stretch of water either by air or by sea. An invasion of Taiwan would not only be a far greater logistical challenge. The required build-up of troops and transportation would also mean Taiwan had advance warning of an incoming invasion and time to prepare its response. Any prospect of the type of quick and relatively painless invasion Russia hoped for in Ukraine is therefore removed.

Taiwan’s geography also provides some natural defences. There are limited beaches where China could land an invasion force. These beaches are well defended and landing enough troops to mount an invasion would be a treacherous and bloody exercise.

Ukraine is largely made up of flat agricultural plains across which troops can travel with relative ease between one urban centre and the next. In contrast, Taiwan is largely mountainous to the east and a mixture of urban and rural in the west.

This more challenging topography is likely to impact any Chinese invasion in much the same way that Ukraine’s muddy season has bogged down the Russian advance. It likely will serve to draw out any possible invasion for months if not years.

Differing relationships with the West

Despite geographical distance, Taiwan is a developed nation linked technologically, economically, and politically on a much deeper level to the US and Europe than Ukraine, and this relational proximity means that any attack on Taiwan has a number of serious implications for western economies.

Whilst the war in Ukraine appears to be having inflationary effects on EU and NATO economies, Germany and other countries have continued to import oil and gas from Russia and disruption at present seems restricted to prices rather than supply chains.

The conflict has not expanded to neighbouring countries and NATO's refusal to directly engage, whilst nevertheless providing a lot of unofficial support, may have thus far helped to contain the war. If Ukrainian intelligence is to be believed, the country is managing to slow and perhaps reverse the Russian advance.

In a potential Taiwan-China conflict, the absence of the EU and NATO blocks means a very different regional power dynamic. That the EU and NATO are hesitant to militarily confront Russia does not mean that ASEAN or any of its individual members (outside of the US) will not consider steps to intervene in defence of Taiwan.

Both Taiwan and Ukraine are important to the UK, often in ways that people don't readily perceive, and they are important in different ways.

► Location

Taiwan occupies a crucial strategic position in what is known as the 'first island chain'. This is integral to the USA's Indo-Pacific policy as it denies China easy access to the Pacific coastline, and prevents the PRC from exercising undisputed control of key trading routes in the region and leveraging influence on US allies.



In contrast, China's Belt And Road initiative is presented by the PRC partly as a policy response to US-led containment strategies, and partly as a declaration of a map of PRC regional hegemony, a dominance that it claims cannot be achieved without the annexation of Taiwan.

The UK and the EU are currently looking to bolster their trade and political relations in the Indo-Pacific region. Taiwan's strategically important location means any change in its status would directly impact policy and trading objectives in this region too.

For one of the UK's main diplomatic allies in the region, Japan, the prospect of a China-controlled Taiwan also poses a threat to their southern lying islands, including Okinawa, the site of a key US military base. In this scenario,

Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines could be vulnerable to coercion on the seas and in the air by unilateral or multilateral actions by Russia, China, and North Korea.

Maintaining the sovereignty and independence of Taiwan is of fundamental importance to countries across a number of global blocs and alliances in a way that Ukraine isn't.

Europe might accept a Ukraine subordinated by force into the Russian orbit of influence if it meant stability of supply chains and prices, and energy security. It is far less certain ASEAN would weigh up or accommodate China invading Taiwan in the same way. Former Japanese PM Shinzo Abe's comments⁴ about the importance of Taiwan to Japan illustrate how China's strategic calculations for invasions cannot assume the passivity of neighbouring countries.

► Trade

According to the IMF ⁵ Taiwan's economy is the 22nd largest in the world. Ukraine's economy is ranked in 55th place. Taiwan's total GDP is currently four times that of Ukraine.

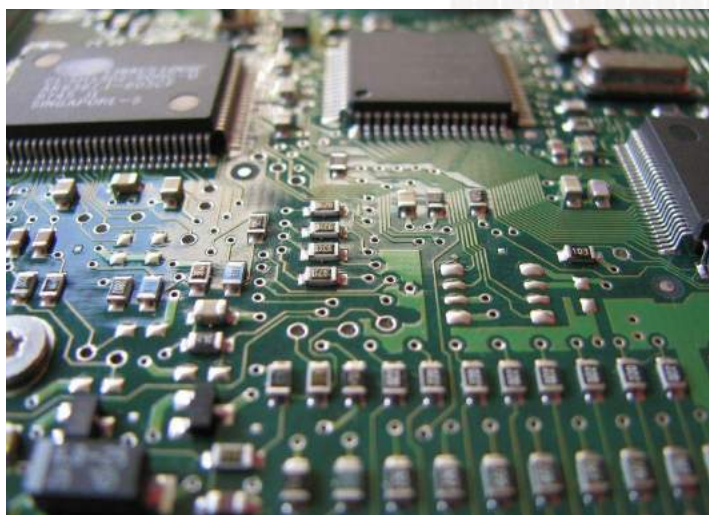
The most recent Office for National Statistics Pink Book data lists total UK exports to Taiwan at £2.9 billion in 2021 while imports were £4.1 billion. In contrast, exports to Ukraine were £618 million with imports at £691 million. ⁶ In 2020, Taiwan was the USA's 10th largest trade partner ⁷, worth around \$90.6 billion in two-way trade. Ukraine was the 67th largest at just \$3.7 billion in 2019, according to USTR data. ⁸

These metrics indicate an invasion of Taiwan would have a far bigger economic impact on the UK and the USA than the invasion of Ukraine has had.

► Semiconductors

At the heart of Taiwan's trading relations with the world is its domination of the global supply of semiconductor chips. The importance of these chips to modern technology and the risks that would be posed to high tech industries in the USA, the UK, and beyond if this industry were to be incorporated into the PRC economy make Taiwan a strategic lynchpin.

As Antoine Bondaz, research fellow at France's Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique has said, "Semiconductors played a key role in making Taiwan visible." ⁹



The Boston Consulting Group has estimated that a one-year disruption in Taiwan's supply of semi-conductors would cost global tech companies around US\$490 billion. It further estimated that rebuilding production capacity after a war would take three years and cost a further US\$350 billion.¹⁰ The Chinese economy is every bit as much reliant on Taiwan's semi-conductors as others around the world are.

To illustrate the perceived importance of the semiconductor industry, the US Army War College's quarterly academic journal recently published a paper recommending

that in the event of an invasion, Taiwan should wipe the industry out entirely rather than let it fall into enemy hands. ¹¹

One of the authors of that paper, Jared McKinney, explained that this was a question of making an invasion of Taiwan a stark choice for China. "Either conquer Taiwan or maintain economic prosperity." ¹² The impact of such a move would have massive ramifications for the Chinese economy as well as long-lasting global implications too. This is why Taiwan's semiconductor industry is also sometimes referred to as its 'silicon shield'.

Ukraine has few if any such critical exports, and although it is a major wheat producer, other nations can fill the gap if necessary. Some observers, such as the Eurasia Group analysts argue that the semiconductor industry alone makes Western military intervention more likely in the case of an invasion of Taiwan. ¹³

► Democracy

Taiwan is a crucial example of a successful and stable representative democracy in a region where most other democracies are less robust and face serious challenges to their legitimacy and authority.

Taiwan was ranked as the second strongest democracy in the Indo-Pacific region and the 8th in the world overall, ahead of the UK, in the recent Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index. ¹⁴ Meanwhile Ukraine was ranked in joint 86th place alongside Mexico.

In Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perception Index Taiwan was placed 28th overall while Ukraine was ranked 117th. ¹⁵

Taiwan's remarkable transition from a country that was under martial law from 1949 until 1991 to one of the world's foremost democracies is crucial in today's war of values and ideals.

As Taiwan's Foreign Minister Joseph Wu recently said, "We understand that defending Taiwan is not just to safeguard our sovereignty and way of life. Our survival is crucial, as we have the responsibility to safeguard democracy for the rest of the world as well." ¹⁶ He is absolutely right.

With the UK and USA increasingly focusing their attention towards the Indo-Pacific region, Taiwan's status as a free and generally liberal democracy has never been more important.

PART TWO: HOW HAS TAIWAN REACTED TO THE INVASION OF UKRAINE?

Government

The Taiwanese Government's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been in line with the way it has handled the majority of major international events under the presidency of Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文); calm, measured and decisive.

On February 23rd, a meeting of the National Security Council took place. Summarising the outcomes of that meeting, Presidential Office spokesperson Xavier Chang said:

"Our government condemns Russia's infringement on Ukraine's sovereignty—infringement which has led to increased tensions on the Russia-Ukraine border, and calls on all parties to continue working peacefully toward a rational resolution to the dispute in order to jointly uphold peace and stability in the region." ¹⁷

The following day, President Tsai issued this statement:



"We strongly condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which violates Ukrainian sovereignty and has eroded peace and stability in the region and around the world. We hope that all sides can promptly resume peaceful dialogue and find a rational solution to this dispute. As a member of the international community, Taiwan is willing to take part in any effort that will benefit the peaceful resolution of this dispute. Taiwan is also joining international economic sanctions against Russia." ¹⁸

Taiwan has backed the US-led sanctions against Russia and is reviewing what it is exporting to Russia, including semiconductors. The Ministry Of Economy has stated that “it was following the Wassenaar Arrangement on export controls for weapons and dual-use goods and technologies, signed in 1996 by 42 countries, to strictly scrutinise products sent to Russia.”¹⁹

Taiwan’s economic response has certainly been noted in Moscow, which included Taiwan on its list of ‘unfriendly countries’ that have sanctioned the country.²⁰

Additionally, the Taiwanese government has now set up a dedicated task force²¹ to monitor events in Ukraine to ensure that the Taiwanese Government response demonstrates unity with Ukraine and her allies, and so lessons that can be learnt from how Ukraine has responded to this crisis.

Military

While President Tsai stressed the differences between Ukraine and Taiwan in her official statement, the Taiwanese military has responded to the crisis too.

President Tsai Ing-wen ordered both the military and national security apparatus to boost its defences, surveillance, and early warning systems. This has been commonly interpreted in Taiwan as a precautionary measure and to boost public confidence rather than a response to any measurable immediate increase in threat from China.

Tsai is also expected to announce a further boost in defence spending in the near future although details about this are unconfirmed at this time.

Taiwan’s Ministry for National Defence has announced that it will carry out live firing exercises using artillery, missiles, and ground troops on a number of Taiwan’s outlying islands including Kinmen, which lies just three miles off the coast of the Chinese city of Xiamen.²²

President Tsai has also ordered the Taiwanese authorities to strengthen the already sophisticated responses to psychological and informational warfare that is expected to hit Taiwan from China in the wake of an invasion.

Countering misinformation and PRC propaganda is a considerable problem for Taiwan in peacetime and there has also been a renewed focus on this in anticipation of an expected uptick in Chinese online activity seeking to capitalise on the Ukraine crisis.

Soft Power

Taiwan’s fast and supportive reaction to the unfolding crisis in Ukraine has also been another soft power success for a government getting adept at this particular form of diplomacy. In being quick and decisive in their condemnation of Russia and support for the shared values of freedom, democracy, and sovereignty, Taiwan has once again emphasised its importance to other democracies around the world as an ally in this region.

It has also underlined the stark difference between Taiwan and China on this matter. At the time of writing, Taiwan had so far donated US\$20 million in humanitarian support to Ukraine. In contrast, China has donated just US\$2.3 million. Far from trying to match Taiwan, China’s stance has been to accuse Taiwan of attempting to exploit the Ukraine war for political gain. As Taiwan’s Foreign Minister Joseph Wu has said in response to these accusations, Taiwan’s donations are “from our heart. It is not political manipulation.”²³

The willingness to engage in sanctions and offer humanitarian support, including sending medical aid to Ukraine and aid for Ukrainian refugees in Poland²⁴ has also seen Taiwan build further goodwill among allies around the world.

John Dennis, the British Representative in Taiwan has openly praised Taiwan's humanitarian support saying "it was good to know what Taiwan was doing for Ukraine" and noting that "now is a very difficult time, and democracies all over the world need to unite."²⁵

The Public

Initially, there was grave concern amongst the Taiwanese people at what the invasion of Ukraine would mean for their country. The phrase "Ukraine today, Taiwan tomorrow" quickly started to trend on social media across the country.



A few hours after the invasion started, the Taipei-based Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation (TPOF)²⁶ published the results of a survey which showed the population as a whole might be far more sanguine about the imminent risk of invasion than social media and the Western press could lead a person to believe.

It found that only 26.6% of Taiwanese people thought it possible that China could attack Taiwan "at any time, especially after the outbreak of a Russia-Ukraine war" and just 7.1% thought it very possible. In contrast, 62.9% said it was not possible and a further 20.2% felt it was not possible at all. When presented with a situation in which China had attacked.

TPOF said its findings were consistent across political cleavages in Taiwan, and also noted that it reflected the assessment made by the Taiwanese Government, indicating the Government enjoys a degree of trust from the public for their response to the crisis in Ukraine and their handling of it. In contrast, public opinion about the likelihood of the United States sending troops to defend Taiwan was pessimistic with 10.5% of those surveyed firmly believing the U.S. would help defend Taiwan during a Chinese invasion; 24% said they somewhat believe it would, 26.5% said they do not fully believe it would, 29.4% said they do not believe at all that it would, and 9.6% had no comment or refused to answer.²⁷

Displays of alliance with Ukraine during the conflict in Ukraine include public buildings across Taiwan being lit in the colours of the Ukrainian flag, including the globally iconic Taipei 101 tower. There have also been a number of protests in Taiwan against the Russian invasion, as has been seen in other capital cities around the world. On 13th March, more than 1,500 people²⁸ took to the streets of Taipei where they were joined by a number of political figures.

A public account which has been opened to take donations from Taiwanese people to support Ukraine had raised NT\$740 million (US\$26.08 million) by 19th March, having been opened for little more than a fortnight.²⁹

PART THREE: HOW HAS CHINA REACTED TO THE INVASION OF UKRAINE REGARDING TAIWAN?

There has been a great deal of analysis about China's knowledge of the invasion of Ukraine and how much support it is offering to President Putin. While this is doubtless important in terms of China's relationship with the international community now and in the future, it is not an issue for this paper. In this section, we will focus on the Chinese Government's reaction to the invasion of Ukraine purely in relation to Taiwan.

Ukraine-Taiwan comparisons

China has rejected comparisons that have been drawn between Taiwan and Ukraine. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has been quoted as differentiating between the two nations on the basis that one was a sovereign country and the other was an "inalienable" part of China.³⁰

Putin's recognition of the independence (from Ukraine) of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics was arguably the kind of endorsement of provincial and ethnic 'separatism' that the leadership in Beijing usually opposes.

Putin asserting that a state has the right to declare portions of another state as now independent states in their own right is not a precedent Beijing will have welcomed, especially given the implications of this for territories it occupies such as Tibet and East Turkestan, and Taiwan that it has declared its intent to.

China has put significant time and effort into, where possible, ring-fencing the issue of Taiwan in all of its relations with other nations, and across all international organisations, at State and civil levels. For Beijing, its stated strict adherence to non-intervention outside of its immediate sphere of influence is a policy that works two ways, both to protect the PRC's crafted image of anti-imperialism and also to ring-fence what it considers to be its core interests.

Sudden geopolitical movements and declarations of the kind Putin made run counter to a long-standing principle of PRC strategy for incrementally building regional hegemony and global influence. That very much includes not only preventing other nations from formally recognising Taiwan or entering into any agreement for mutual defence, but also requesting public declarations of support for its One China Policy. Perhaps the most notable and relevant of these statements came when Putin met with Xi on the fringes of the Winter Olympics in Beijing, their joint statement referred to Taiwan directly for the first time noting that ...

"The Russian side reaffirms its support for the One-China principle, confirms that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China, and opposes any forms of independence of Taiwan."³¹

This statement understandably raises the potential that Russia could provide assistance to China in the wake of an invasion of Taiwan, thus complicating efforts by Taiwan's allies to intervene or penalise China to a degree that would induce their withdrawal.

That meeting and statement came before the Donetsk and Luhansk announcement, and it is noticeable that Chinese moves to support Russia appear to have been mostly rhetorical so far. It is possible this suggests Xi and his Government may be displeased or concerned with the approach Putin has taken, one that has only added to a trend of powerful states undermining or ignoring the sovereignty, borders, and democracy of smaller or neighbouring states.

For China, there is no rhetorical benefit in either Ukraine or the newly declared republics being compared to Taiwan because Russia is clearly the aggressor in this instance and the only country threatening Taiwan or Taiwanese security is China. Thus Beijing is walking a line of respecting Ukrainian rights to sovereignty but also not criticising Russia directly.

Sanctions

China is on record as opposing Western sanctions on Russia and Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying has said, "We believe that sanctions are never the fundamental and effective way to solve problems. China always opposes any illegal unilateral sanctions."³²

This comment drew attention in Taiwan, where it was juxtaposed with arbitrary Chinese bans on the import of a number of products from Taiwan in the last few years, including profitable exports such as pineapples³³, and wax apples.³⁴

Ironically, China has also sanctioned defence firms Lockheed Martin and Raytheon Technologies for selling arms to Taiwan this year.³⁵

China's position on sanctions is hard to reconcile with its actions towards other countries in the region such as Australia³⁶, which saw wine exports to China blocked after calling for an inquiry into the origins of COVID-19, and in Europe Lithuania³⁷, which has endured a full-scale trade blockage from China for having allowed Taiwan to open a representative office under the name 'Taiwanese' and not 'Taipei'.

China will be aware that any invasion of Taiwan will almost certainly result in economic sanctions whether there is a military response from other nations or not. If China has been surprised by the scale and speed of sanctions placed on Russian assets abroad, including those of the Russian Central Bank, it will also note how many of the world's nations are not openly or directly participating in these sanctions.

It will be looking to see if and how Russia can maintain its economy when locked out of the dominant global financial infrastructure. It has also likely calculated that its manufacturing and supply chain integration with the US and EU economies may induce hesitancy on the part of Taiwan's allies to bankrupt China in the event that it invades.

To summarise it is a situation Beijing learns from. We will discuss how effective sanctions might be as a deterrent against an invasion later in this paper.

Motivation

To date, China has taken a position on the war in Ukraine that recognises Ukraine has a right to sovereignty and self-defence but stops short of calling the conflict a war or an invasion, and there has been no condemnation or even direct criticism of Russia or President Putin.



Indeed, on March 19, 2022, Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng stated that "the root cause of Russia's invasion of Ukraine is NATO's breaking its promise not to expand eastward" and that "China has all along opposed unilateral sanctions that have neither basis in international law nor mandate of the Security Council."³⁸ To understand this position, and its implications for the threat Taiwan faces, it is important to take into account the differences between the motivations and long term strategic goals of Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin.

Stability, in both international and domestic political economy is a core priority for the Chinese Communist Party. In 2022, Xi Jinping's first priority will be to remain in power and he will be confidently expecting to secure a third term as Communist Party General Secretary in October. Any challenge from contemporaries in the Politburo to his leadership, which seems unlikely, would face a Xi who enjoys a reformed position within the party and the military.

Where Putin has a track record of violently reasserting Russian control or influence on its western borders and in the former Soviet states, as witnessed in Chechnya, Georgia, and now Ukraine, Xi's strategy has been to slowly transition the PRC's representation of itself to the world from 'peaceful rise' to a global stakeholder that acts as a peace-seeking counterweight to a unipolar financial and military empire led by the US and its allies.

In the last decade, Xi has massively invested in China's military and maritime militia capacity and has used this to project power and pressure on its ASEAN neighbours, particularly in the South China Sea. Examples here include repurposing of atolls into weaponised islands with runways, radar, and anti-aircraft missiles ³⁹, harassment of vessels from other nations within those nations' Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) ⁴⁰, targeting aircraft with lasers ⁴¹, and most recently repeated provocative flights into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ). ⁴²

At the same time, actual clashes with other militaries or vessels have been fairly restrained suggesting that the purpose of these actions are both to lay down unofficial red lines in the hope that they stick, and testing the response times of potential future adversaries. An invasion of Taiwan also represents a step into the unknown and a range of both predictable and unknown risks that would quickly present themselves, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine has seemingly exposed.

This is why we are sceptical about reports, claiming to come from a source inside Russia's FSB intelligence agency, that Xi was allegedly plotting to attempt to take Taiwan ahead of his November re-election but postponed it in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. ⁴³ Not only is there no credible evidence of the required military build-up, but such a move would go against the key mantra of stability at a key moment for him personally.

China lacks the military experience Russia gained following its involvements in Crimea, Georgia, and Syria. It is therefore unknown how China's military will perform in a protracted conflict in Taiwan. The PRC might look at the war in Ukraine and conclude that any attempt to take Taiwan will need to be so fast other nations cannot intervene in time, or so comprehensive that the Taiwanese themselves surrender before help can arrive.

Where Putin seems to have decided on invading Ukraine in January and then doing it in February, it is unlikely that the PRC will wish to signal their intent in this way or act without ensuring core conditions for success are already in place.

It is also not known how Chinese people would react to high numbers of deaths or if a conflict resulted in strikes on Chinese targets, which the Taiwanese military is capable of. Additionally, the prospect of severe economic sanctions, particularly affecting Chinese oligarchs who play a key role in modernising, monetising, and internationalising the Chinese economy, could have severe and immediate implications for the stability of the financial and real estate sectors that prop up the value of the currency. An invasion of Taiwan could put Xi's promise of "national rejuvenation" at risk. Since the Xi and the CCP have rhetorically tied much of their legitimacy and their authority into the future upon annexing Taiwan, to attempt but then fail to take Taiwan, along with what would be humiliating military and economic losses, is not a risk Xi is likely to gamble on given it could ultimately mean the end of his leadership, the CCP, and even the PRC.

These are all risks Xi doesn't need to take. China is still a one-party state and its stated ultimate aim to "reunify" Taiwan with China is the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2049. In that timescale, there is therefore no urgent need to undertake an invasion of Taiwan now.

Chen Ming-tong, head of Taiwan's national security bureau has suggested that China will review Russia's military failures and any attack on Taiwan is likely to now have been delayed by at least four years. "The lesson of Ukraine for Beijing is that it should not easily wage a war," Chen said before adding that it did not expect a war until after the end of President Tsai Ing-wen's term as President ends in 2026 at the earliest. ⁴⁴

A survey of international relations experts conducted by the Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) Project at William & Mary's Global Research Institute agreed with this assessment. Around two-thirds of respondents felt China would not attack Taiwan in the next year and only around 7% thought they would. This remains unchanged despite the situation in Ukraine.

When asked in March, relative to one month ago, if China was more or less likely to use military force against Taiwan or Taiwanese military forces in the next year, only 19% said more likely while 34% said less likely. 46% said the situation remained unchanged. ⁴⁵

That being said, we note Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng's ominous warning that the US is "going against the trend to pursue the Indo-Pacific strategy,...putting together closed and exclusive small circles or groups... is as dangerous as the NATO strategy of eastward expansion in Europe." ⁴⁶

Clear messaging from the PRC like this should be understood as expressions of China's determination to take control of Taiwan at some point in the future. As CIA Director William Burns told a recent Congressional hearing, it would be a mistake to underestimate Xi Jinping's "determination with regard to Taiwan." This is a view shared by Ian Easton, senior director at the Project 2049 Institute and author of *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and American Strategy in Asia*. In his paper evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of Taiwan against a possible invasion Easton concludes:

[... 62 Internal PLA documents examined in this paper] demonstrate that the Chinese party-state continues to prepare for a Taiwan invasion campaign with a remarkable degree of focus and has developed a large and growing set of military and non-military capabilities to this end. If the theories seen in Chinese military textbooks are put to the test, Taiwan's own port infrastructure could become the critical battlefield that decides which side prevails. The Taiwanese government has demonstrated a willingness to address many of its defense challenges. However, some challenges remain only partially addressed. Others have been left completely unaddressed due to their political sensitivity. One of these appears to be port security. ⁴⁷

PART FOUR: LESSONS FOR TAIWAN FROM THE INVASION OF UKRAINE

Whilst Ukraine and Taiwan are very different countries, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine has not precipitated an immediate similar threat to Taiwan from China, this is still an important opportunity for Taiwan to learn lessons from what is happening in Ukraine. We've identified a number of priority areas for Taiwan and sorted these into three broad categories; Military Defence, Civil Defence, and Disinformation & Cognitive Warfare.

Military Defence

Ukraine's resistance to the Russian invasion illustrates methods for how to hold back an invasion from a much larger military power. Jessica Lewis, the US assistant secretary of state for political-military affairs, recently told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that Taiwan needed to procure 'asymmetric systems', of the type that have been "used to great effect in Ukraine." ⁴⁸

Admiral Lee Hsi-min, who served as chief of general staff from 2017 to 2019, concurs. He told the Telegraph, Taiwan should learn from the battlefields of Ukraine and beef up its "asymmetric warfare" strategy. ⁴⁹ Within this category we have identified six key areas for Taiwan to focus on:

- **Air defences** – Taiwan's current air defences are modelled on big US systems (Patriot Missiles). Indeed, just recently the US has agreed a further \$95 million programme to boost Taiwan's Patriot air defence systems. ⁵⁰

Ukraine's successes in preventing Russia from dominating the skies has highlighted the need for smaller, more mobile systems. Portable Stinger missiles have proved highly effective for Ukrainian resistance, both in preventing Russia from landing troops in key strategic locations, and impacting on aerial bombing raids. The Taiwanese Ministry Of Defence has said it plans to more than double its yearly missile

production capacity from 207 a year to 497 annually.⁵¹ This includes the upgraded version of the Hsiung Feng IIE missile, and the longer-range Hsiung Sheng land-attack missile which military experts say is capable of hitting targets further inland in China. While there is some merit in having missiles that can strike targets in China, we argue that the priority must now be lightweight, mobile systems. Taiwan's own domestic productions should refocus on missile systems such as the Stinger too.



Ma Cheng-Kun, director of the Graduate Institute of China Military Affairs Studies at Taiwan's National Defence University, recently told Reuters that Taiwan has been developing weapons like the lightweight and indigenously-developed Kestrel shoulder-launched anti-armour rocket designed for close-in warfare. Such weapons need to now be manufactured at volume.⁵²

As James Forsyth recently wrote in the Spectator, "Ukrainian forces have done remarkably with the weaponry they had at the beginning of the conflict, but imagine how things might have turned out if they had had Star Streak missiles, Switchblade drones and lethal aid from more than 20 countries before the Russians invaded."⁵³

We mustn't make the same mistake with Taiwan. The USA, UK, and its allies should also ensure that Taiwan's stocks of its own FIM-92 Stinger missile systems are dramatically boosted as soon as possible. Taiwan's government should be urging the US authorities to approve sales of these missiles to them at the earliest opportunity.

Taiwan has also announced in the wake of the Ukraine conflict that it will be speeding up its development on military drones. President Tsai said, "Regardless of whether it is for military or civilian use, it is highly necessary for us to speed up our development on drones as it will be an important matter for the next generation."⁵⁴ This is also the right move and cannot begin too soon.

- **Anti-tank capabilities** – Just as the Stinger systems have proved so effective against Russia's aerial attacks, so too have Javelin anti-tank missiles proved crucial on the ground. Again, these systems are lightweight and mobile and have helped Ukraine to not only destroy many Russian tanks and armoured vehicles, but also disrupt supply lines by attacking military lorries and fuel trucks too.

FGM-148 Javelin systems also come from the USA and are another tool that Taiwan needs to ensure it has at its disposal, and we suggest Taiwan's domestic manufacturers need to be producing similar tools as well.

RECOMMENDATION: The UK should begin to furnish Taiwan with the asymmetric equipment it needs to defend itself. This includes lightweight or mobile anti-vehicle and aircraft missiles and military drones. Furthermore, Taiwan should begin work now to establish the wherewithal to develop such equipment domestically, ensuring they are not reliant on imported hardware.

- **Coastal & Port Defences** - Taiwan's coasts are already robustly defended, but this is the right moment to boost these defences still further. Taiwan should invest more in naval sea mines or viable technology that can obstruct an invasion fleet, especially in defence of strategic ports. It should also consider the positioning of short-range missiles along the coast and the optimal configuration of this for delaying and destroying an invasion force. Given the likelihood that such missile positions would be targeted ahead of an invasion, the benefits of situating mobile missile defence systems in key coastal areas is clear.

- **Strategy** - The experiences of Ukraine need to inform Taiwan's strategic approach to a possible Chinese invasion. The case for establishing a deliberate asymmetrical approach is very strong and becoming uncontested amongst military planners and leaders.

The reason for this is well summarised by Admiral Lee Hsi-min. "You cannot compete with them fighter to fighter, ship to ship, tank to tank. You need to think differently in an innovative and asymmetrical way. If you defend everywhere then you lose everywhere. You have to forecast key points, key areas, key moments." ⁵⁵

Taiwan's geographic circumstances, two-thirds of it being mountain ranges with few transport routes across, mean adopting a strategy to hold back an invasion force is in this context both credible, justified, and necessary.

There also needs to be a plan in place for how an ongoing defence of Taiwan will play out, with roles for the military, reservists, and civil defence brigades (about which more below) clearly mapped out. This is an area where we find Taiwan's strategic approach needs to be significantly enhanced at the earliest opportunity.

RECOMMENDATION: The Taiwanese Government and military must ensure that there is a full counter-invasion asymmetric military strategy in place and that all relevant personnel receive the appropriate training to deliver it.

- **Blockade breaking** - It is highly likely that one of the first steps that China will take ahead of an invasion is to blockade Taiwan. Such a move would make the delivery of supplies and military equipment to Taiwan particularly difficult. Taiwan needs to agree a strategy with its allies in advance about how to circumvent such a blockade. The currently most feasible location for an emergency supply corridor into Taiwan is to the north, where Taiwan is in relatively close proximity to outlying Japanese islands and US military bases.

It is vital however that there is an agreement with the USA, Japan, and other allies about the tactics that will be used to keep this corridor open and keep supplies flowing. Other options include establishing a supply route using civilian cargo planes on the assumption that the Chinese will not shoot these down.

Communications will also be key. China is likely to attempt to shut down Taiwan's internet and other key communications infrastructure. In Ukraine, the importance of Starlink in keeping the country online and in communication has been crucial for the country's organisation of internal resistance as well as generating media content for rallying support abroad.

Taiwan should be having discussions about a similar system as well as with the US authorities to ensure they can benefit in a similar way if they need to.

RECOMMENDATION: If it has not already, the UK Government must begin urgent discussions with Taiwan, and allies, to establish a clear strategy to break any blockade that China might seek to place on Taiwan.

- **Outlying islands** – Taiwan's outlying islands are where they are most vulnerable. Those particularly susceptible to Chinese military attack include:
 - **Kinmen** – (also known as Quemoy) a small archipelago of islands situated just 6.2 miles (10km) off the coast of the Chinese city of Xiamen. It is home to around 129,000 people.
 - **Matzu Islands** – an archipelago of 36 islands and islets located just over 10 miles (19km) off the coast of Fujian Province. Around 12,700 people live there.

- **Penghu Islands** – (also known as the Pescadores Islands) an archipelago of more than 90 islands and islets that lies approximately 30 miles (48km) off the coast of Taiwan in the middle of the Taiwan Strait. Just over 100,000 people live there.
- **Pratas Island** - is located around 190 miles (310km) south-east of Hong Kong. It is unpopulated apart from a small Taiwanese military presence.
- **Spratly Islands** – an archipelago in the South China Seas of which Taiwan controls Itu Aba island and the Chung-Chou Reef. They are unpopulated apart from a small Taiwanese military presence.

China's multiple incursions into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zones in recent months are significant as they have occurred primarily to the south and west of the Taiwanese mainland dissecting Taiwan from both the Pratas Island and its territory in the Spratly Islands. This has raised the prospect of China seeking to seize these strategically important territories in an early stage of a military attack on Taiwan. Taiwan's outlying islands close to the Chinese mainland are vital for Taiwan's military preparedness and provide a crucial early warning of any threats from China. They are the 'canary in the coal mine' of a conflict decades in the making.

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Satellite image source: Suomi NPP/VIIRS via NASA

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One common theory is that any invasion of Taiwan is likely to be presaged by China seizing some or all of these outlying islands, possibly in the hope of forcing the Taiwanese government to the negotiating table. Indeed, a quick strike was forecast by an unnamed Chinese official in late April who stated that “China ... may first assault outer islands that are beyond Taiwan's core defenses, such as Kinmen, Matsu, the Dongsha Islands (Pratas Islands), and Taiping Island (Itu Aba Island) ... in order to distract from domestic issues and complete “historical duties”. In parallels with Ukraine, China might “stage an invasion and occupation of the islands, and claim that the people of the “pro-China” islands of Kinmen and Matsu wish to return to the motherland” ... and that “the possibility of China attacking Kinmen and Matsu, the source stressed a “reasonable conclusion” would be that this is “very likely.”⁵⁷

Taiwan needs to have a clear strategy of how it would respond to such a move militarily and diplomatically, as well as domestically, with the possibility of fierce internal debate that could potentially undermine the government's efforts to unite the nation in defence of itself. Crucially, it also needs to ensure this strategy is communicated with allies including the USA and, ideally, has their support.

At the same time, Taiwan should not assume, or rely on, support from outside for at least the first seventy-two hours following the start of an invasion or blockade. Although a blockade could give pro-China elements in Taiwan a reason to argue for suing for peace, it is doubtful China would wish to wait for that position to command majority support amongst Taiwanese and lose a window of opportunity, especially if their operation initially manages to catch Taiwanese allies off guard and unable to quickly intervene.

For China, denial of access entails preventing the US and other allies from breaking a blockade that facilitates the PRC mobilising into Taiwan with less resistance than absent a blockade. Although the US is assumed to be a key player in the defence of Taiwan, domestic political instability, low public support for intervention, and US economic investment in China may undermine the ability of the President to command authority for a fast response to assist Taiwan. This is perhaps reflected in the concerns of the Taiwanese about US capacity or intent to support Taiwan in the initial phases of a conflict.⁵⁸

Civil Defence

Alongside these changes to military policy, one of the key lessons that Taiwan can learn from the experiences of Ukraine is the critical role of national civil defence preparedness. Tan Le-i, secretary-general of the Taiwan Militia Association explained to the Financial Times that, “In our society, everyone expects the government to act, so there is very little bottom-up community organisation, and mobilisation will be very slow.”⁵⁹



There however may be evidence that the first half of this statement is no longer true since the invasion of Ukraine. Kolas Yotaka, a spokeswoman for Taiwan’s presidential office recently said, “The lesson every Taiwanese is learning from what we are seeing in Ukraine is that we have to defend ourselves, no one else will fight for our democracy like we can.”⁶⁰

According to a survey conducted by the Taiwan International Strategic Study Society and the Taiwan International Studies Association at the end of last year, if China launched a military assault on Taiwan, 77.6% of respondents were willing to fight for their country.⁶¹

Despite this, the second half of Tan’s statement remains accurate and this is something we urge Taiwanese authorities to urgently address through a focus on two key areas:

- **A new Taiwan Civil Defence Force** - As the Taiwan Policy Centre CEO David Spencer wrote in an editorial for Taiwan News, the crucial role that the Ukrainian Territorial Defence Forces (TDF) have played in holding back the Russian advance and helping Ukraine’s military make up for its inferior numbers cannot be overstated.⁶²

Manned by ex-military and volunteers, the TDF was formed in 2014 and in a relatively short time developed the capacity for extended military and resistance operations. Although Taiwan has no such civil defence force we argue it could and should move to instituting one as soon as possible.

Taiwan is well placed to get such a Civil Defence Force off the ground fast. The nation has a plentiful supply of former military personnel who would be happy to play a role and Taiwan’s history of mandatory military service should mean that the largest proportion of civilian volunteers will have some experience with weapons, strategy, and active service.

There is already an extensive grassroots political bureaucracy rooted in communities across Taiwan. This is a unique social-institutional strength which could form the bedrock of a formal Civil Defence Force.

- **An enhanced role for reserves** - Alongside a Civil Defence Force, there is also a need for Taiwan’s military Reserves to be better trained with updated skill sets to fit the kind of conflict they will be expected to engage in, whether that is on an open battlefield or guerrilla warfare.

There has been some progress on this with the Ukraine conflict appearing to have given the issue fresh momentum.

For example, late last year Taiwan’s government announced a reform of the training of its reserve forces, including an increased focus on combat and shooting exercises. Under this enhanced programme, which has already begun, reservists get two weeks of training (a year?), rather than the previous five to seven days, and spend more time on combat training and handling weapons.⁶³

We see a need for Reserves to receive training of multiple days per month, including instruction in the use of the new weapons Taiwan will be bolstering its defences with; Stingers, Javelins, and other such equipment. The focus on holding back an invading force remains important. But there should also be more focus on giving reservists a greater understanding of the urban and mountain guerrilla tactics that Taiwan will need to employ to defend a Chinese invasion.

These reserves also need to have leadership skills should the responsibility for leading a Civil Defence Force in the event of an invasion fall on their shoulders.

RECOMMENDATION: Taiwan must establish a new Civil Defence Force, run by military veterans and staffed by volunteers. It must ensure that this force is suitably trained and equipped and knows exactly what it must do in the event of an invasion.

RECOMMENDATION: Taiwan is already boosting the training its reserves receive and that is welcome. But it can and must go further and ensure that reserves receive training on multiple days per month and have knowledge of new asymmetric warfare tactics and equipment.

Disinformation and cognitive warfare

Thus far, media coverage of the invasion of Ukraine will likely have boosted Taiwanese morale, given that outside of Russian and Chinese narratives, evidence indicates Russian forces have been suffering heavy losses, made little progress after their initial incursions, and in some areas even been forced to retreat.

As Lin Chu-yin, a Democratic Progressive Party legislator, told Bloomberg, uncensored footage of this war “sends a signal to China that it won’t be as easy to take Taiwan as it imagines. And it also breaks the myth that one can easily defeat another smaller or militarily weaker country with missiles.” ⁶⁴

Whilst we agree with this argument, which we feel is reinforced by Chinese domestic censorship of the war in Ukraine which suggests a desire by the PRC to both maintain public alignment with the CCP’s policy on Russia and to hide its losses, we also anticipate China may use this war to engage with its United Front allies in Taiwan in a campaign of disinformation to foment pessimism about Taiwan’s future. Should Russia comprehensively defeat Ukraine we can expect a wave of curated content targeting Taiwanese on the inevitability of Taiwan losing a battle against China.

We are already seeing signs of this in China. A report from Taiwan’s Information Operations Research Group (IORG), which seeks to “counter authoritarian expansion with scientific research and grassroots organisation,” has found that tens of millions of social media posts, articles, videos and comments have deluged the Chinese-language internet since Russian troops began massing on the Ukrainian border in November 2021.

Many of these echo Russian propaganda and lots are already slipping into Taiwanese consciousness through social media platforms. ⁶⁵

This is a threat that Taiwan is very familiar with. Beijing has a long history of running disinformation campaigns ⁶⁶ targeting Taiwan – sometimes with the specific goal of swaying public support ⁶⁷ ahead of an election, but sometimes with the more general purpose of sowing political divisions and dissatisfaction. ⁶⁸

As Summer Chen, editor-in-chief of the Taiwan FactCheck Centre (TFC) has explained, Taiwanese media’s rabid thirst for the latest news makes it vulnerable to such misinformation. Journalists working under extreme time pressures will often push ahead with a good story without checking its veracity.



Yu Chih-hao, co-director of the IORG finds that, "... Taiwan needs ... to learn from the Ukrainians how to strengthen their ability to interpret information through daily reading and dialogue, and practise pushing back against disinformation operations. This is very important if we are to strengthen democracy's defences." There are few Taiwanese reporters on the ground in Ukraine which means they are reliant on second-hand sources for the latest news. This reliance leaves them vulnerable to manipulation.

We do note that President Tsai has already instructed the Ministry for National Defence to be prepared for a cognitive warfare onslaught. Foreign Minister Joseph Wu has also indicated his awareness of the threat saying, "[China] are trying to persuade people that Taiwan is doomed and has no friends. They say, 'look, the US abandoned Afghanistan' and 'look, now they won't commit military forces to Ukraine'. So they claim they won't help Taiwan either. We are dealing with this issue, day in and day out, so we have accumulated a lot of experience" ⁶⁹.

The invasion of Ukraine should be a chance for the Taiwanese government to boost public belief that Taiwan is

capable of fighting off an invasion by China and that the international community will support Taiwan to that end. Taiwan's free media environment means this message is already getting through but its vulnerability to disinformation means there is more that Taiwan can do.

The war in Ukraine offers Taiwan the chance to strike an early blow in the information war against China and to undermine the impact of any disinformation that might begin to flow from China as the situation in Ukraine develops. We urge the Taiwanese Government to seize this opportunity.

RECOMMENDATION: The Taiwanese Government must do more to prevent disinformation from China reaching Taiwanese citizens through both mainstream media and social media. It must also boost the ability of Taiwanese citizens to scrutinise information critically for themselves, rather than accept whatever information is put in front of them.

PART FIVE: LESSONS FOR THE UK AND THE WEST ABOUT TAIWAN FROM THE INVASION OF UKRAINE

Putin's invasion of Ukraine has dramatically changed the post-Cold War international order and the ramifications of it may travel far and deep. Ian Easton, Senior Director of the 2049 Institute and author of 'The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defence and American Strategy in Asia', stated in an interview with the Telegraph that the Russian invasion could mark the start of a new era of conflict:

"Putin's invasion of Ukraine has broken the long spell of peace between nations. We now live in a world of state-on-state warfare. What's worse, we now live in a world where a peaceful democracy can be invaded and other nations, including the United States, fail to respond until it is too late to stop the war. Clearly, the assumptions American leaders had about deterrence and war prevention have been falsified. This puts Taiwan in a perilous position." ⁷⁰

We agree that the terrain has substantially shifted, although, for the reasons already laid out in this paper, it remains our view there is a much greater likelihood of the US and other allies intervening in an invasion of Taiwan than there is or was for Ukraine. If Ukraine loses the war and it is seen by the world that the West failed to help Ukraine repel the Russian invasion, there will undoubtedly be negative consequences for Taiwan's security.

It is likely that China will seek to capitalise on this by advancing informational/ideological arguments attacking democratic nations for cynical realpolitik at the expense of the people it has claimed to be helping democratise. China is aware of, and disseminating content aimed at, disaffected populations in the West, drawing successfully on themes of hypocrisy and corruption attractive to both the far-right and anti-American and anti-imperialism on the left. Pro-China elements in Taiwan's domestic political and media scenes are likely to do likewise with messages tailored to fit Taiwanese political cleavages, issues, and fissures in popular opinion. The underlying message aimed at Taiwanese will be "If the USA, NATO, and the EU cannot mount an effective response to an invasion of Ukraine, a European country, what hope they will come to the aid of Taiwan?"

Easton has warned that "if Ukraine falls, Xi Jinping could be encouraged and emboldened. He could order an attack on Taiwan sooner than most have anticipated."⁷¹ It is therefore in the interests of stability in Taiwan for the USA, the UK, and the West to do everything in their power to help Ukraine to defeat the Russian invaders.

To help deter escalation and Chinese adventurism in East Asia, the West has a responsibility to ensure that the worst outcome for Ukraine at the end of the war, be it through a military victory or negotiated settlement, is that it retains its sovereignty, independence, and democracy. Any other outcome likely sets a dark precedent for Taiwan's future security.

RECOMMENDATION: As the UK Government works with its allies to help Ukraine defend itself against Russian aggression, it should remain fully aware that the outcome of this conflict could set a precedent and have consequences for Taiwan, and other disputed regions around the world.

An end to strategic ambiguity over Taiwan

The greatest deterrence to prevent China from invading Taiwan is unquestionably the assumption that war with Taiwan will also mean war with the USA and the West too.

The decision of the USA and NATO to not directly intervene in Ukraine for fear of ending up at war with a rival nuclear power will likely be an encouragement to China.

At the same time, China knows that Taiwan is strategically more important to the US than Ukraine is. China is also aware of the Taiwan Relations Act and its implications for possible US intervention in the event it attacks Taiwan. The legislation commits the US to providing Taiwan with the means to defend itself but it does not specifically require the USA to intervene to defend Taiwan.

Nevertheless, some analysts believe the legislation would be invoked to legitimise a US response.

US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan recently explained that "the Taiwan Relations Act is a unique instrument — we don't have it with other countries; we don't have it with Ukraine — that does talk about American commitments to support Taiwan in various ways."⁷²

One concern is that, up until now, the US has retained a policy of strategic ambiguity towards Taiwan, despite the rapidly diminishing efficacy of that policy position. There has been an institutionalised assumption that the risk of war with the US is enough to deter China.

Western allies, including the UK, have adopted a similar approach. That assumption, and support for the strategic ambiguity policy, now appears to be weakening in direct correlation to reports of increased Chinese CGA and military ‘harassments’ across East Asia.

There is a tangible perception of China engaging in salami-slicing tactics to expand its sphere of influence until it has eventually developed a military-backed capacity to institute Denial Of Access across the entire South and East China seas at will.



This sentiment is reflected in former Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe’s comments on 27th February, shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, that it was time for the USA to abandon its policy of strategic ambiguity and commit to defending Taiwan from invasion from China.⁷³

If, as Easton argues, we now live in an age of State-on-State warfare, and if the US, the UK, and the rest of the democratic world is committed to deterring China from invading Taiwan, now rather than later is the time for these nations to clearly articulate the consequences of such an invasion

We strongly recommend an informal coalition of States, including but not limited to ASEAN and the EU, releasing statements that the issue of Taiwan’s sovereignty must be settled peacefully and that any attempt to settle it with a blockade or any other military action will be taken as a declaration of war, triggering an immediate military and economic retaliation.

These statements should be delivered to relevant Chinese embassies. This method both dispenses with strategic ambiguity but does not directly challenge the One China Policy that many nations have incorporated into their diplomatic relations with China.

There is public support for an end to strategic ambiguity in Taiwan and in the USA. Polling shows nearly 60% of Taiwanese citizens believe the USA would support Taiwan militarily in the event of an invasion and more than half believe the USA could successfully defend Taiwan.⁷⁴

Perhaps more interestingly, polling in the USA suggests that the American public also appears willing to see the island protected with U.S. military assets⁷⁵. Notably, the American public did not support a similar US involvement in Ukraine. When Ely Ratner, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, was asked by the House Armed Services Committee whether the USA’s response to an invasion of Taiwan would be different to that of Ukraine she replied “Yes, Mr. Congressman, I think it would be different,” without going into any further detail.⁷⁶

Given US membership of NATO, an American intervention over Taiwan would likely entail the inclusion and participation of other members of that bloc, including the U.K. It therefore behoves the UK to prepare for this eventuality by clarifying its own policy on Taiwan.

Australia’s Defence Minister Peter Dutton recently told ABC that “We do whatever we can to deter China from acts of aggression in our region... We want peace to prevail in Taiwan as much as we do [want it to prevail] in the Ukraine”.⁷⁷ This kind of statement may have proven utile in the past but is an insufficient response for current geopolitical realities and the directions they appear to be heading.

The UK Government should make clear that it regards defending Taiwan from an invasion as ‘a core responsibility’. Foreign Secretary Liz Truss alluded to this in her Mansion House speech on 27th April.⁷⁸ She now needs to follow up these words with concrete actions.

The UK should have a strategy in place with the US and other allies to quickly respond in the event of an invasion, whether that is by direct military support or a combination of economic sanctions on China and facilitating the breaking of the blockade and supplying Taiwan’s defence and other needs.

For the UK Government to make this substantive shift in policy concrete and enduring the simplest and clearest way would be for Parliament to pass its own Taiwan Relations Act and this should be a legislative foreign policy priority.

RECOMMENDATION: The time is right for the UK Government to amend its policy of strategic ambiguity towards Taiwan. It should coordinate with allies to release statements that make it clear that the issue of Taiwan’s sovereignty must be settled peacefully and that any attempt to settle it with a blockade or any other military action will be taken as a declaration of war.

RECOMMENDATION: The UK Government should engage with the authorities of the US, the EU, NATO, and others, as well as Taiwan, to establish a clear strategy for how the international community would respond to an invasion of Taiwan.

RECOMMENDATION: The UK Government should pass its own Taiwan Relations Act, to put its own policy towards Taiwan on a par with its ally, the US.

Clarity on Sanctions

The main weapon that the West has deployed against Russia following its invasion of Ukraine has been economic sanctions. These sanctions have exceeded measures Russia had prepared for and the extent of them will likely have surprised the Chinese government too. As we have discussed, China has spoken out to criticise the sanctions but it will already be planning how to insulate its own economy from similar measures it will face in the event of an invasion of Taiwan.

Despite this, sanctioning China will not be as straightforward as sanctioning Russia. As Gabe Collins, a fellow at Rice University’s Baker Institute told Bloomberg, “China is systemically important across multiple markets and value chains, whereas aside from oil and gas, Russia basically is not... and ...there remains much uncertainty about how decisive an economic response could be mustered against [China] if it invaded Taiwan.”⁷⁹

It is also questionable how effective similar economic sanctions would be against China. Oriana Skylar Mastro, a fellow at Stanford University and the American Enterprise Institute who researches China’s military told Bloomberg, “This level of economic punishment would be laughable to China... They could easily absorb it, and it would be well worth the benefit of unification with Taiwan.”⁸⁰

If sanctions are to be one of the West’s biggest tools to defend and deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, how can they be made to work? Blocking China from the SWIFT payments system would still have a significant impact on the Chinese economy given its integration into economies providing demand for Chinese products. SWIFT remains the most efficient system for international financial transactions and while China is committed to developing the CIPS payment network, it is not at a stage where it can replace the role of SWIFT in the economy.

Another problem is that now this card has been played against Russia, China will be ready for it. One solution might be demonstrating a willingness to go further and faster. Mastro herself suggests that there needs to be a willingness to “cut off all trade relations indefinitely” alongside a policy of full diplomatic isolation.

In other words, nations who oppose or are helping Taiwan resist an invasion have to be ready to end all trade and diplomatic relations with China as a necessary part of that help. While many countries are attempting the ‘de-sinofication’ of their supply lines, this would be a huge and difficult step for most of the countries who are most likely to come to Taiwan’s defence. It is clear that discussion on what steps Western governments would be willing to take should be happening now.

This might be one area where a degree of strategic ambiguity, or at least quiet diplomacy, still has a role to play.

RECOMMENDATION: The UK Government should increase efforts to diversify supply chains to reduce the dependency on China in all key economic areas, in order to ensure that the UK is in a position to employ sanctions without causing undue harm to the British economy.

RECOMMENDATION: The UK Government should engage now with the authorities of the US, the EU, NATO, and others, to agree on the package of sanctions they would be willing to impose on China in the event of an invasion of Taiwan.

A visible focus on Taiwan

The Ukraine crisis is not going to go away any time soon, even if the war itself is a relatively short one.

One of the biggest risks that the conflict poses to Taiwan is that it could result in the USA, UK, EU, and NATO having a much narrower focus on security priorities in Europe, at the expense of Taiwan.

There is no doubt that the invasion of Ukraine has strengthened the appeal of NATO in the UK and USA, and in Europe where they are now looking at their eastern borders with far more concern than even a few months ago.

Multiple European countries have announced increases in defence spending as a consequence of the invasion and this could have positive ramifications for Taiwan.

If Europe is better equipped to defend itself, it will be less reliant on a US-dominated NATO. This in turn could free up US resources to implement a much more robust Indo-Pacific defence policy.

And as the UK Foreign Affairs Committee heard in their evidence session on Taiwan last November, this would be a desirable division of labour given the US is far better placed to mount a defence of Taiwan than European nations.⁸¹

While the UK should be clear about its willingness to defend Taiwan, it may be that British resources would be more useful being deployed in Europe to free up US resources to support Taiwan.

As Oriana Skylar Mastro and Elbridge Colby logically noted in the Wall Street Journal last month before the Ukraine invasion, “Sending more resources to Europe is the definition of getting distracted... The U.S. should remain committed to NATO’s defence but husband its critical resources for the primary fight in Asia, and Taiwan in particular.”⁸²

Where the UK can play a far more proactive role is in visible engagement with Taiwan, especially on defensive matters. The United States sent a delegation to Taiwan to discuss defence less than a week after the invasion of Ukraine. This was clearly done to send a message to both Taiwan and China. Mike Mullen, a former chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, who was on the delegation said while in Taiwan:

“The United States will continue to oppose any unilateral changes to the status quo and will continue to support a peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues, consistent with the wishes and best interests of the people of Taiwan. I do hope by being here with you, we can reassure you and your people, as well as our allies and partners in the region, that the United States stands firm behind its commitments.”⁸³

There has been no such show of support from the UK. Indeed, UK Ministerial visits and delegations to Taiwan are extremely rare. The Foreign Affairs Committee is scheduled to visit shortly. But there has been no Ministerial visit to Taiwan since Greg Hands MP visited in his capacity as Trade and Investment Minister in 2016.

Senior Ministerial visits to Taiwan are still not permitted by the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office. There has been no defence delegation from the UK visiting Taiwan in recent memory.

The Taiwan Policy Centre believes it is time for this to change and for the UK to follow a number of other countries in being willing to send formal delegations and Ministers to Taiwan, and accept Taiwanese Ministerial visits to the U.K.

RECOMMENDATION: The UK Government should increase Ministerial visits to Taiwan and amend FCDO policy to allow Ministers at all levels of Government to visit.

RECOMMENDATION: The UK Government should immediately permit Ministerial visits to the UK from all levels of the Taiwanese Government.

International Engagement

To date, the UK position on Taiwanese involvement in international organisations has been and remains anodyne at best.

To quote Minister for Asia, Amanda Milling, in the recent House of Commons debate on UK-Taiwan Friendship and Co-operation:

“We are working with partners to support Taiwan’s meaningful participation in international organisations as a member where statehood is not a prerequisite, and as an observer or guest where it is.”⁸⁴

Her words echo her predecessors and all other UK Government ministers who are queried on this point. We regard this response to be woefully insufficient given the importance of Taiwan’s close engagement with the international community both to Taiwan and the wider world.

We do not see a valid reason or excuse for the UK accepting Taiwan remaining outside of and lacking participation in organisations like the World Health Organisation, Interpol, and ICAO.

Furthermore, Taiwan’s 23 million people have no representation on any United Nations body. As long as the UN remains central to global peace and security, this is unacceptable.

The U.N's tepid and bureaucratic response to Russia's invasion of Taiwan has led to calls for alternative blocs and alliances between democratic nations that are more institutionally flexible and united.

Ahead of the UK hosting of the G7 last year in Cornwall, there was much talk of a D10 organisation ⁸⁵ being formed consisting of the world's ten biggest democratic nations. Such an organisation could play a major role in geopolitics and if so Taiwan can and must have a place at the table.



The Taiwanese Government has also expressed an interest in joining the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) ⁸⁶ which is currently made up of the USA, Japan, India, and Australia. There is doubtless merit to this suggestion.

The UK's position on Taiwan's involvement in international organisations has been much too weak as a result of the UK continuing to be shackled to a One China policy that has no basis in international law or history.

It is time to change. If the UK wants to be an influential voice in the world and a key player in the Indo-Pacific region, backing Taiwan and leading allies in bringing Taiwan further into the international community is both a great way to start and a necessary correction after decades of foreign policy at the service of the City rather than building trust and good faith.

RECOMMENDATION: The UK Government must adopt a more robust policy towards Taiwan's inclusion in international bodies and back this policy up with concrete actions together with its allies.

RECOMMENDATION: The UK Government's leadership in driving the proposal for a D10 group of nations was welcome. The time is right to revisit this idea and deliver a broader alliance of democratic nations in which Taiwan should play a full part in.

PART SIX: CONCLUSIONS

Ukraine and Taiwan represent two very different case studies in imperial geopolitics. We find there are substantial contextual differences between Russia's war on Ukraine at this time and The PRC's intention to seize Taiwan by force if necessary.

The invasion of Ukraine heralding a move by China to do likewise this year is a non sequitur. China's 'war of a thousand paper cuts' against Taiwan should instead be seen as having been in progress, in its current form, since at least the Hu leadership.

The threat is as real as Russian tanks on Ukraine's border were, but they manifest in a different way, over a different timescale, and across multiple platforms. In terms of what Taiwan faces from China we find agreement with this description from Stokes, Yang, and Lee:

Taiwan faces an existential threat from the People's Republic of China. For the CCP, an all-out amphibious assault is only one possible course of action. The coercive options available to Beijing are limited only by the extent of imagination and could take forms that have not been anticipated by Taiwanese government leaders, who might struggle to find appropriate responses. Rather than invade, China could instead carry out subversion, blockade, or sabotage operations against Taiwan's telecommunications networks and power grid. To defeat coercion, Taiwanese government leaders must be capable of harnessing the latent power of their nation's military and civil society to find optimal responses to future Chinese actions.⁸⁷

As far as deterring a possible Chinese attack on Taiwan, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) has written in its March 2022 research paper that "European capitals could leverage political, economic and even some limited military means for deterrence ahead of or during a Taiwan contingency if there is the political will to do so" and they conclude that:⁸⁸

"...Europe can no longer avoid the Taiwan issue strategically, politically, economically and even militarily. A different approach to Taiwan is needed as China changes the status quo across the Strait. Several European governments have increased their calls for a peaceful solution to the conflict. Others, most notably Lithuania, have also strengthened their ties with Taiwan, triggering political and economic coercion from Beijing. But it is still not clear what European countries and the EU would be willing and able to bring to the table in the case of a serious escalation across the Taiwan Strait."

This conclusion applies every bit as much to the UK Government as it does to the EU. The UK has, since the 1950s, taken the approach that the issue of Taiwan will quietly resolve itself and generally ignored the question of Taiwan's future. The fact that the UK Government's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, which outlined the so-called Indo-Pacific Tilt agenda, did not contain a single reference to Taiwan at any point, is indicative of this diplomatic and geopolitical myopia.⁸⁹

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this naive approach is no longer sustainable. The UK now needs to establish clear independent policies on Taiwan. These need to be developed in parallel with democratic allies, be Taiwan-centric, not anti-China, and they need to be justified in terms of Taiwanese democracy, economy, and contribution to the world stage, and not oriented around punishing China or sinophobia.

It is time to address the future of Taiwan head on. In this paper, we have made some recommendations as to how we believe this can be delivered. We will be making more such recommendations in the months ahead and pushing the UK Government to recognise and respect Taiwan as an independent polity. Ukraine and Taiwan are very different and the many comparisons we have seen over the past few weeks do not, for the most part, stand up to scrutiny.

The invasion of Ukraine however has shifted the future of Taiwan back into the political spotlight. This is timely and represents a valuable opportunity to reorient UK policy towards a position that reflects the reality of Taiwan's existence rather than continue to serve what might be perceived as diplomatic and political-economy necessities of appeasing the PRC.

Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu said recently,

"Taiwan and Ukraine are on the front line of the conflict between democracy and authoritarianism... This war in Ukraine is very vivid to the rest of the world ... and I think that democracies are uniting to face the situation. Previously some democracies were hesitant in reaching out to Taiwan or showing support for Taiwan. But after the lessons we have learnt in Ukraine, more democracies in the world will understand the importance of Taiwan and will reach out to Taiwan to show support."⁹⁰

The world has observed the horrors of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and it has reaffirmed a shared commitment to help a victim of crude imperialism defend itself, and in the process, defend the values of freedom and democracy that we all hold dear.

In any serious analysis of international tensions in East Asia, Taiwan is widely identified as the most likely next 'front line'. The time to ensure that this doesn't transpire is now. The UK has been at the forefront of the global response to the invasion of Ukraine. It should also now lead efforts to ensure that the statement, Ukraine Today, Taiwan Tomorrow does not come back to haunt us.

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