Chapter 16: China's Role and Strategic Choice in the Ukraine War

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Abstract

For Chinese observers, Russia's war against Ukraine holds special significance in light of China's own revisionist agenda toward the island of Taiwan. Long before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Chinese military strategists drew parallels between Russia's 2014 occupation of Crimea and possible Chinese attempts to gain control of Taiwan. However, the traditionally strong Chinese-Ukrainian relationship is an important and often overlooked factor modifying China's reaction to the war. Against the backdrop of the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership and the Ukrainian-Chinese military-technological partnership, China's public reactions to the war have been ambiguous. This paper outlines how Beijing assessed the Ukraine war until early November 2022 and discusses what lessons the Xi government is likely to draw for its own annexation plans for Taiwan.

Keywords

Russian-Chinese partnership, Taiwan issue, Russian-Chinese relations, Ukrainian-Chinese relations

1 Introduction

For Chinese observers, Russia's war against Ukraine holds special significance in light of China's own revisionist agenda toward the island of Taiwan. Long before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Chinese military strategists had drawn parallels between Russia's 2014 occupation of Crimea and possible Chinese attempts to gain control over

Taiwan.[1] For example, the noted naval strategist Zhang Wenmu of Beihang University in Beijing argued in a December 2014 article that Vladimir Putin's bold move to stage a hybrid takeover of Crimea using "little green men" could be successfully copied by China. After all, if the West were caught wrong-footed again as during the occupation of Crimea in early 2014, China would be able to create facts faster than the United States and NATO could react. Referring to the Chinese notion of "core interests" (*hexin liyi*), for which a nation is willing to use "unlimited means" (*wuxian shouduan*), Zhang essentially argued that the U.S. and the collective West were too geographically distant and also unwilling to sacrifice substantial resources for a "non-core interest", such as Taiwan. China, on the other hand, would be able to use "unlimited means" to impose its preference on the world, just as Russia did in Crimea.[2]

This view ignores some important geostrategic differences between Taiwan and Crimea, such as a very different geography and thus a completely different tactical environment from the perspective of an invading power. It also overlooks the existence of a *de facto* U.S. security guarantee for Taiwan through the *Taiwan Relations Act* (TRA), which gives Taiwan a more favorable position than Ukraine in terms of its alliance status. Nor does an analysis such as Zhang's take into account the important factor of Taiwan's own self-defense capability. Thus, Zhang's analysis reveals a similar mindset to that of many leading Russian commentators, who continue to portray the war against Ukraine as a great power conflict between Russia and the U.S. or NATO, with no active role assigned to Ukraine itself, and thus viewing it only as a pawn.[3]

However, the unexpectedly successful defense of Ukraine against what most observers considered a far superior military power and, in particular, the extreme losses, humiliating defeats, and surprising tactical shortcomings on the Russian side have shown that a mindset that ignores an invaded country's ability to act and its motivation to defend itself can lead to

1 See Saalman, Lora: Little Grey Men: China and the Ukraine Crisis. In: Survival – Global Politics and Strategy, Vol. 58, Issue 6, November 2016, pp. 135–156, p. 135; Goldstein, Lyle J.: "Get Ready: China Could Pull a 'Crimea' in Asia", The National Interest, 11 April 2015.

2 Zhang, Wenmu: 乌克兰事件的世界意义及其对中国的警示 [The global significance of the Ukraine Incident and its warning to China]. In: 国际安全研究 [Journal of International Security Studies], Vol. 4, 28 December 2014.

3 See, for example, TASS: "West uses Ukraine as pawn in geopolitical game against Moscow – Russia's UN envoy", 12 February 2019.

dangerous miscalculations – such as overestimating the military prospects for success and the potential geostrategic advantages of taking a "bold" step to annex the territory of a weaker neighbor.

This chapter outlines what is known so far about China's role before the Ukraine war and its reactions to it up to the time of writing.[4] Furthermore, it discusses what lessons the Xi government might draw from this for its own plans to annex Taiwan.

2 Before the Invasion: Ignored U.S. Warnings and a Sino-Russian Declaration of "Limitless" Friendship

In the months leading up to the invasion, when Russia was already amassing more than 100,000 troops on the Ukrainian border and issuing clear threats (including an ultimatum to NATO in mid-December 2021), the U.S. government – following a video-linked conversation between President Joe Biden and State and Party Leader Xi Jinping – attempted to use intelligence to warn China of Russia's impending invasion plans and urged China to intervene with Russia against it, but without any success. The Chinese side stated that it did not believe in the U.S. intelligence conveyed to it through various channels beginning around mid-November 2021.[5] Worse, China appears to have passed that information directly on to Russia.[6] On February 4, 2022, less than three weeks before the invasion, Xi and Putin stood side by side at the Beijing Winter Olympics and issued a joint statement proclaiming a "limitless" friendship between the two countries. They also concluded a new long-term oil and gas trade agreement, as well as a deal that secures China virtually all of the grain Russia wants to export. This signaled to Russia China's willingness and ability to use its market power to help the Russian Federation resist the effects of economic sanctions that the West might impose in retaliation for a threatened invasion. Moreover, this indicated that China most likely gave Russia at least its tacit approval,

4 This chapter was completed in November 2022 and since only very lightly amended for this translated version.

5 Wong, Edward: "U.S. Officials Repeatedly Urged China to Help Avert War in Ukraine", The New York Times, 25 February 2022.

6 Gertz, Bill: "China shared U.S. intelligence on Ukraine crisis with Russia", The Washington Times, 25 February 2022.

if not full moral support, for military action against Ukraine.[7] All of this ultimately enabled Putin to risk invading Ukraine despite U.S. warnings.

3 After the Beginning of the Invasion: Only Covert Chinese Support for Russia, but Why?

Some observers have argued that China's lack of overt military support for its strategic partner Russia (despite Putin's repeated appeals to send weapons) shows that Russia-China relations are not truly strategic. However, this view overlooks the history of close strategic relations between China and Ukraine, particularly in the period before 2014. For example, Ukrainian military-technological support for China's military modernization since the mid-1990s has been even more important than Russia's – at least in some key areas (such as marine gas turbines, *phased-array* radar technology, but especially aircraft carrier hull technology, carrier-based fighter aircraft, and aircraft carrier pilot training), that are critical to building a world-class navy.[8] It can therefore be argued that without Ukraine's hardware deliveries and technology transfers, as well as the extensive consulting services provided by Ukrainian military technology experts over many years, not a single aircraft carrier in the PLA Navy would be operational today, as the hull of the Varyag (rechristened by China the Liaoning) that Ukraine sold to China in 1998 was the prototype also for China's second, indigenous carrier, the Shandong. Further, China's carrier-based fighter jet, the J-15, is based on a Su-33 that Ukraine had delivered to China in 2001, while other critical naval technologies, such as phased-array radar technology, was transferred from Ukraine to China in the lead-up of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Already during the years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine had transferred naval gas turbine technology to China that today powers all modern Chinese destroyers, including those charged with protecting the carriers.[9] While all these transfers predate the Russian

7 See Ralby, Ian/Soud, David/Ralby, Rohini: "Why the U.S. Needs to Act Fast to Prevent Russia from Weaponizing Food Supply Chains", Politico, 27 February 2022.

8 Kirchberger, Sarah: Russian-Chinese Military-Technological Cooperation and the Ukrainian Factor. In: Kirchberger, Sarah/Sinjen, Svenja/Wörmer, Nils (Eds.): Russia-China Relations. Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals? Springer: Cham 2022, pp. 75–100, pp. 84–88.

9 See Dou, Eva/Wu, Pei Lin: "Ukraine helped build China's modern military, but when war came, Beijing chose Russia", The Washington Post, 9 March 2022; Larson, Caleb:

annexation of Crimea in 2014, upon which Ukraine began to turn towards the West, they have left a significant legacy in the Chinese armed forces.

Moreover, as Andrew Erickson has pointed out, the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and Ukraine, signed personally by Xi Jinping on December 5, 2013, contains extensive security guarantees (building on an earlier bilateral security guarantee that China gave Ukraine on December 4, 1994, following the signing of the Budapest Memorandum and the abandonment of its nuclear weapons).[10] The existence of such binding treaties, one of which was signed by Xi Jinping himself, makes it difficult for China to provide direct military assistance to a nuclear-armed aggressor against its non-nuclear-armed partner state, especially one that has provided China with extensive military-technological assistance in the past and without fail faithfully adhered to its own obligations towards China, including upholding the One-China Policy to a tee. Such an overt abandonment of a strategic partner at a time of existential threat could have damaging effects on many of China's other bilateral relationships with states around the world who have been far less useful to China than Ukraine, and would surely undermine the credibility of its legal commitments towards them. Beijing's rather covert economic, political, and moral support for Russia – in that China did not condemn the invasion, did not call it a war, blamed NATO's eastward expansion or the U.S. rather than Russia, and abstained in the United Nations General Assembly rather than siding with the majority of nations against Russia – all of this should be seen as the maximum of support that China can actually provide in this particular context without significantly damaging its own reputation and global interests.

"Why China's J-15 Fighter Is a Copy of Russia's Su-33 (But It Has a Problem)", The National Interest, 16 April 2020; Poita, Yurii: "Why Ukraine is Reassessing its Defense Cooperation with China", China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE), 6 May 2021.

10 See Erickson, Andrew S.: "2013 PRC-Ukraine Treaty of Friendship & Cooperation/Joint Communiqué: Russian, Ukrainian & Chinese Documents, Context, Timeline", 21 August 2022.

4 The War Becomes a Problem: Shielding from the Consequences of Putin's Strategic Miscalculation

During the first few months of the war, Xi not only had to balance China's commitments to Russia and Ukraine, but also became increasingly aware of the danger of siding with a failed invasion. This carried the risk of appearing incompetent by having committed China to a partnership with an incompetent, even foolish, Russian leader. It also posed additional hazards to China's struggling economy, which was already contending with the effects of Xi's "zero-Covid" policy and faced problems in the real estate and financial markets. Western sanctions, when added to the existing restrictions, could have put the Chinese economy in a perilous position at a time when Xi was seeking to extend his mandate to rule for an unprecedented third term. This is likely why Beijing has carefully avoided to openly violate the Western sanctions regime; why, for example, telecommunications firm Huawei has reduced its exposure to the Russian market; and why China closed its airspace to those aircraft that Russian airlines had refused to return to their rightful owners at the end of their lease.[11] Mindful of Russia's vulnerability to sanctions, China has been taking even more active measures to safeguard its own economy against the threat of potential Western sanctions.

It is possible that Chinese support for Putin's war would have been far more overt and decisive if Putin had not miscalculated so badly and achieved a quick military success. Instead, from Xi's perspective, it became rational and necessary to distance himself from the consequences of a catastrophically bad decision, not least to appease the domestic critics of his "limitless" Sino-Russian cooperation policy. Yet it is unlikely that Xi would find it acceptable to see Russia defeated and humiliated, whether by Ukraine or the West. It is noteworthy that Xi expressed "concerns" about the war in Ukraine to Putin shortly after the *Shanghai Cooperation Organization* (SCO) summit in Samarkand in mid-September 2022, as Putin himself acknowledged.[12] This was interpreted by some in the West, probably somewhat prematurely, as criticism of Russia's brutality against Ukraine. More likely, however, it was criticism of Russia's lack of military

11 Soon, Weilun: "A Chinese telecom giant has suspended Russian operations and furloughed employees as sanctions bite: reports", Business Insider, 13 April 2022; Webster, Joe: "China bans Russian flights", The China Project, 2 June 2022.

12 A notable difference in wording compared to India's Prime Minister Modi, who has directly but tactfully criticized the war.

success. Indeed, shortly after the end of the Samarkand summit, and after the Ukrainian military had made significant gains in eastern and southern Ukraine through a counteroffensive over the summer, Putin ordered a mobilization despite the significant risk of a backlash at home, staged referenda in the occupied territories and "annexed" despite not having actual control over all of them. In addition, he appointed a new Commander-in-Chief known for exceptional brutality in Syria, and had the military fly devastating airstrikes on civilian targets and energy infrastructure throughout Ukraine. Putin undertook all this apparently to quickly turn the tide of the war and force a partial victory, or at least something that could be sold as a success to the domestic public and Russia's allies. Thus, one possible interpretation for the apparent "concerns" Xi expressed to Putin in Samarkand could be that Xi was pressuring Putin to quickly achieve a (partial) success in the war and then end it swiftly so as not to make Xi look bad while he worked on his nomination for a third term as China's supreme leader. Chinese support is crucial for the Kremlin at a time when Russia is suffering economically, and when Putin has turned the country into an international pariah. The harsh military measures Putin took against Ukraine after the SCO meeting in Samarkand may thus have been an attempt to salvage what was left of Xi's goodwill.

Although it is difficult to assess from the outside what the Chinese public knows and thinks about the details of the war in Ukraine, there are indications that the Xi government has not been completely successful, at least among intellectuals, in controlling the narrative in the public information sphere. An interesting example is the case of Chinese vlogger Wang Jixian, a resident of Odesa at the beginning of the war, who began posting videos documenting the attacks and the local reactions that directly contradicted the pro-Russian propaganda narrative spread by the Chinese government at home. This led to him becoming a target of censorship and harsh criticism within China. At the same time, it allowed him to present an alternative view of the war to Chinese viewers.[13] Chinese colleagues have suggested in private communications that the wisdom of Xi's policy over the past decade of aligning himself with Putin is increasingly in question, and criticism of the Russian invasion has increased, despite intense pressure to toe the government line.

13 Yeung, Jessie/Xiong, Yong: "A Chinese vlogger shared videos of war-torn Ukraine. He's been labeled a national traitor", CNN, 18 March 2022.

Xi probably expected Putin to win a quick victory in a short, sharp war. Ideally, this war would have ended quickly, with Ukraine surrendering without too much bloodshed and destruction, and the Zelenskyy government either deposed and arrested by Russia or driven into exile, while a Putin-friendly puppet government would have brought Ukraine firmly back into the Russian orbit. China could then have acted as a benefactor and offered generous reconstruction assistance to its strategic partner, Ukraine, while continuing to pursue its political, economic, as well as military-technological interests in Ukraine. In such a scenario, China would have blamed the outbreak of war solely on the U.S. and NATO. The West's then proven inability to sustain Ukraine militarily would have had the strategic value of demonstrating to the rest of the world that a "declining West" is incapable of shaping the geostrategic playing field even within Europe itself and should be considered inferior to a rising China and Russia. This would have furthered an important goal shared by Xi and Putin: bringing about an end to the U.S.-led rules-based international order.

Against the backdrop of such an expectation, Xi and his close advisers must have been shocked to discover, in the first weeks of fighting, how badly Putin had miscalculated militarily. The removal in mid-June 2022 of Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Le Yucheng, who had been Xi's most important adviser on Russia issues and a key advocate of the "limitless friendship", and had even been considered a potential successor as prime minister until his surprise transfer to a less prestigious post in the broadcasting system, was interpreted by observers as a clear sign of Xi's dissatisfaction with the Russia expertise within the state and party leadership.[14]

Contrary to expectations, Ukraine not only did not surrender, but was able to quickly mobilize broad international support in moral, economic, and even military-technological terms. This was despite the fact that NATO and the U.S. remained true to their previously announced intention not to intervene directly in the conflict. Although some observers view the West's reluctance to fight for Ukraine as a sign of weakness, in practice this has also had the effect of preserving military resources of NATO countries while forcing Russia to deplete its own arsenal and troop strength, thereby weakening it militarily *vis-à-vis* NATO. Moreover, the Western world

14 Nakazawa, Katsuji: "Analysis: Russia hand's demotion signals shift in Xi's strategy", Nikkei Asia, 23 June 2022.

collectively imposed unprecedented sanctions on Russia, and even China was successfully deterred from openly violating those sanctions, while arms and ammunitions deliveries to Ukraine have steeply increased. Thus, far from being exposed as an outdated "paper tiger" by Putin's war, NATO has, on the contrary, been strengthened with another round of enlargement with the accession of formerly non-aligned Finland and Sweden. With this round of accession, the direct NATO border with Russia more than doubles from about 936 km to about 2,275 km – a fact that alone represents a major strategic defeat for Putin.[15]

Apart from the already visible military and economic losses, Russia's image as a major military power and reliable oil and gas supplier in the Western world has been destroyed, while its cultural appeal and other forms of *soft power* have shattered. Also, Russia's remaining ability to coerce Western states via their dependence on Russian energy supplies will soon come to an end. This will inevitably lead to Russia becoming a much weaker player overall on the world stage and extremely dependent on China's (and to some extent India's) economic and political support. This lesson is particularly relevant for Xi's government, as the rise of China as an equal or even superior country to the U.S., envisioned in the "Chinese Dream", would be jeopardized by military adventurism if it resulted in a protracted, unsuccessful war. Xi's advisers have therefore likely been busy investigating how Putin's government could have misjudged its chances of military success so badly, and how similar intelligence failures can be avoided in the event of a war over Taiwan.

6 What Tactical Lessons Could China Learn from the War in Ukraine?

China's military planners will most likely be interested in the following tactical aspects of the invasion of Ukraine in their classified analyses:

– *First,* the problems and failures that the Russian military has experienced in combat, whether related to equipment deficiencies, corruption, doctrinal shortcomings, organizational weaknesses, logistical failures, and also in terms of the overall motivation of the armed forces, in order to identify and address similar weaknesses in the PLA;

15 Gramer, Robbie/Mackinnon, Amy/Lu, Christina: "NATO Countries Begin Ushering Finland and Sweden into the Fold", Foreign Policy, 16 May 2022.

– *Second*, the successful asymmetric tactics employed by the Ukrainian defenders against the superior invading force to ensure that there would be no such surprises if Taiwan employed these or similar tactics;
– *Third,* the impact and mechanics of various international arms transfers to determine how to prevent a similar type of assistance to Taiwan;
– *Fourth,* China's own vulnerabilities to sanctions and blockades, in order to make China's economy more resilient to punitive measures;
– *Fifth,* the impact of Putin's nuclear blackmail on Ukraine and its supporters, and the reactions from the rest of the world, to learn from it.[16]

Since Russia has not yet carried out an actual nuclear strike despite multiple threats, and the West's reaction to such a hypothetical escalation step is therefore not entirely clear, it is difficult to say at the time of printing this article what lessons China will ultimately draw from the analysis of the potential of nuclear escalation threats in the Ukraine war. However, it is reasonable to assume that Western reluctance to defend Ukraine at the beginning of the war was based on fear of nuclear escalation, i.e., Western self-deterrence. This could motivate China to use similar tactics to prevent military assistance to Taiwan. The ballistic missile tests China conducted on August 4, 2022, following Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, in which missiles were fired across the island for the first time and landed very close to Taiwanese territorial waters, underscored the potential for such coercive threats. China's expansion of its nuclear arsenal in recent years and its attempts to build a full nuclear triad should also be seen in this context.[17] However, Putin's nuclear threats against Ukraine have increasingly turned out to be a bluff after initial effectiveness. Even the usually militarily restrained European Union countered the Kremlin's nuclear threats by declaring, via Josep Borrell, that Russia's army would be "annihilated" by the Western powers if a nuclear weapon were launched against Ukraine.[18] In this context, it should be noted that China's nuclear capabilities still lag far behind those of Russia.

16 Yang, Jianli/Yu, Yan: "Conquering Taiwan – What Has Xi Jinping learned from Putin's Invasion of Ukraine?", Providence, 8 July 2022.
17 Kirchberger, Sarah: "Understanding Risk in the Great Competition with China", 2022 Index of U.S. Military Strength, Heritage Foundation, 20 October 2021.
18 Liboreiro, Jorge: "Ukraine war: Russian army will be 'annihilated' if it launches a nuclear attack, warns Josep Borrell", Euronews, 14 October 2022.

7 Conclusions

At this stage, it is difficult to foresee whether China's own planning in terms of a possible timeframe for military action against Taiwan – whether it be a hybrid attack, a blockade, an attempted takeover of offshore islands, missile attacks from the mainland, or a full amphibious invasion – has tended to be pushed back, remained the same, or even been brought forward in time because of the lessons of the Ukraine war. In the hypothetical event of an early Russian victory in Ukraine, which might then have been followed up with further Russian aggression against, say, Moldova or some of the Baltic states, confusion would have reigned in the West and loss of political cohesion could have loomed. Such a situation of weakness might have been taken by Xi as an encouraging signal to launch an action against Taiwan immediately following the Russian aggression, in order to take advantage of the distraction and overwhelm the West's ability to respond. In this sense, Taiwan may have directly benefited from the bravery of Ukraine's defenders in preventing such a dangerous geostrategic scenario.

As of November 2022, the actual evolution of the war in Ukraine can hardly be seen as encouraging an invasion of Taiwan. Moreover, an amphibious military action requiring extensive preparations and large-scale, overt troop movements would be more difficult to camouflage and successfully execute in the changed security climate since February 2022. On the other hand, Xi's advanced age and determination to unify Taiwan with China may put pressure on his military planners to achieve some kind of success during his current third term – especially since the prospects for success after 2030 are likely going to decrease, given unfavorable demographic and economic trends within China.[19] There is thus a risk that deterrence could fail again in the coming years, this time in East Asia. Taiwan should therefore learn as much as it can from the Ukraine war and work quickly to build up its own self-defense capabilities to the point where the chances of success appear too low for China to consider attacking. This would also ensure that the U.S. and its allies would not assume that defending Taiwan would be a lost cause.[20] Further, the existential issue of national defense should no longer be treated as a pawn of partisan interests within Taiwan.

19 See Kirchberger, Understanding Risk in the Great Competition with China, 2021.

20 Hornung, Jeffrey W.: "Ukraine's lessons for Taiwan", War On The Rocks, 17 March 2022; Erickson, Andrew S./Collins, Gabriel: "Eight new points on the porcupine: More Ukrainian lessons for Taiwan", War On The Rocks, 18 April 2022.

On their part, Western states should support U.S. military efforts to deter China with the predominantly economic means at their disposal, and signal their determination to support Taiwan. The mistakes of Russia policy in making European states and especially Germany dependent on Russian energy imports and therefore susceptible to blackmail should not be repeated with respect to China. The U.S. could consider permanently stationing a *tripwire force* on Taiwan and begin joint training and information sharing now, as this would be more difficult to do when a crisis is already underway. How to strengthen Taiwan preemptively without creating a deterrence trap, however, is an open question.[21] This is one of the most important lessons from the Ukraine war, both for China and the West.

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