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Simulating a War without Cost: the Implication of the Russo-Ukrainian War on the Cross-strait Relations in China

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SYNOPSIS

Many experts believe that the unprecedented array of western sanctions against Russia will discourage China from using non-peaceful means. However, it is not the case in the cross-strait relations in China since Taiwan is an existential threat to China, more accurately to Xi Jinping, whose legitimacy is built upon the reunification of the motherland. This commentary argues that the Russo-Ukrainian war facilitates China's use of force to take over Taiwan rather than deters it by revealing the war deterrence strategies by the international community. During the Russo-Ukrainian war, China would realize that the cost of war is lower than expected as it observed the ineffectiveness of the western sanctions. Simultaneously, the benefit of the use of force is increasing as the Russo-Ukrainian war will aggravate the division between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes.

COMMENTARY

The Russo-Ukrainian war is currently a global hot potato. One thing for sure is that the western hemisphere feels extraordinarily threatened by Russia's expansions. Although they are reluctant to engage in direct military confrontations against Russia, many countries and entities have demonstrated their resolve to support Ukraine and punish Russia. Shortly after the invasion, [NATO dispatched weapons, ammunition, and other military hardware to Ukraine's armed forces](#). If not directly, other countries and international organizations also organized to collect resources for [citizen relief and humanitarian efforts](#). At the same time, numerous sanctions and regulations were quickly imposed on Russia. A large coalition of the countries is [negotiating the scope conditions for sanctions on Russian imports and exports](#) as well as [ejecting Russian banks from SWIFT](#). It is not only sovereign nations but also international organizations

that joined the punishment by [suspending or evicting their Russian representatives](#). Moreover, many multinational companies have pulled out, or are [pulling out, their business from Russia](#).

Prevailing Views on the Impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War on China

Many experts and policymakers have pointed out that the general course of the Russo-Ukrainian war ought to convince China [not to use forceful measures in cross-strait relations](#). The speed, scope, and size of the western sanctions are unprecedented; hence, they argue, [China cannot afford to fight alone against the global alliance of democracies](#).



Extraordinary meeting of NATO Ministers of Defence on 16 March 2022 to discuss the Russo-Ukraine war. *The appearance of NATO visual information does not imply or constitute NATO's endorsement.*

However, [Taiwan is not Ukraine](#); Taiwan is not recognized as a sovereign nation by international organizations. China has always made it clear that the cross-strait relationship is not an inter-state conflict, but an internal affair. Therefore, the Russo-Ukrainian war ought to have [little implication for cross-strait relations](#). However, there are few articles with a systematic analysis of China's incentive to use non-peaceful means. Using cost and benefit analysis, this commentary argues that the Russo-Ukrainian War provides an opportunity for China to learn that the cost of the use of force is lower than expected, while the benefit would increase.

Cost: The Effectiveness of Western Sanctions on China

Given the intensity of the sanctions, few doubt [the sincerity of western efforts](#) to pressure Russia. The effectiveness of similar sanctions against China can be evaluated twofold: how cohesive and organized the sanctions are; and how much China is affected by the sanctions. In the above two aspects, China would smile after observing the sanctions imposed on Russia. First, [whether sanctions sufficiently squeeze the target depends on how many countries are willing to join the sanctions](#). Although the US successfully mobilized its allies in the NATO and Pacific regions, there are many leaks from under-developed regions. Particularly, [purchasing](#)

[discounted Russian oil by India](#), a country considered to be close to the West, vividly shows that international collective action is hard to form. China would learn that the US-NATO sphere of influence is weaker than expected.

In terms of economic independence, China is in much better shape than Russia. According to the World Bank, Russia's trade constitutes around 45% of its GDP since 2012, which is almost twice higher than that of the US. [The heavy reliance on oil and gas-related products](#) also makes Russia relatively vulnerable to international sanctions. On the other hand, China has strived to reduce trade dependency and diversify trade partners over the past decade. Specifically framed as the "[dual circulations](#)," China has dedicated itself to bolstering domestic demands and curtailing external influence to rebalance its economy from the export-led model. As a result, China's trade to GDP ratio is decreased from 45% in 2012 to 31% in 2020. Simultaneously, China launched another ambitious project, the "[Belt and Road Initiative](#)," to lower its dependence on advanced economies and strengthen cooperation with less-developed regions, such as Africa and Southeast Asia. By actively exploring new trade partners aside from the western-dominated routes, China could achieve a decrease in its dependence on the western countries. China's trade to GDP ratio was reduced from 5.7% in 2012 to 3.8% in 2020 in the case of the US from 6.4% in 2012 to 4.4% in 2020 in the case of the EU.

Benefit: Xi's Existential Threat and the New Cold War

The benefit of the use of force toward Taiwan depends on how much Taiwan is worth, and how much a peaceful approach is useful to reclaim Taiwan. [The western media tends to underestimate the importance of Taiwan to Xi Jinping](#). It is understandable considering China's historical stance toward Taiwan. Every Chinese leader since Mao Zedong has emphasized the dedication to reclaiming the island. After China opened its market in the late 1970s, China has chosen a slow but confirmed way to realize "[peaceful reunification](#)" by persuading the Taiwanese voluntarily to be a part of the mainland. The reunification had not been the core narrative of the leaders until Xi Jinping connected it with his main hallmark of the "[great rejuvenation of the nation](#)."

Xi Jinping continuously [expresses his intention to put himself on par with Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping](#), the two most-revered leaders throughout the CCP history. However, Xi's achievements are far inferior: one established the country, while the other brought economic prosperity. Through many speeches and resolutions, Xi boasted of his accomplishments—including [eliminating poverty](#), [reaching the "moderately prosperous society,"](#) [eradicating corruption](#), and [reducing inequality](#). Yet, the so-called achievements are neither concrete nor persuasive enough for the Chinese to truly believe that Xi is comparable to Mao and Deng. Without fulfilling an indisputable outcome, it is even questionable for Xi to stay in power indefinitely, as Mao and Deng did in their times. To solve the legitimacy crisis, Xi recast a nationalist card [aiming to restore China's prominence and glory](#) with a very specific goal, the reunification of Taiwan.

In addition to Xi's urgency to enhance his legitimacy through the reunification, the international political landscape is also against the chance of peaceful reunification. First, reunification is [extremely unpopular in Taiwan](#). [An increasing number of the young generation in Taiwan rejects China](#). Moreover, [China lost its trust in the](#)

[authenticity of the “one country and two systems,”](#) the same system adopted to govern Hong Kong. Second, the Russo-Ukrainian war may further accelerate the conflicts between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes and force China into a [new Cold War](#). The imposition of sanctions against Russia, as punishment for its war against Ukraine, might inadvertently teach non-western countries a singular lesson: avoid over-reliance on western economies to minimise their vulnerability to western economies. China may emerge as an alternative economic option to these countries.

Conclusion: What’s Next?

Ever since Xi promoted reunification as a prerequisite of the “great rejuvenation,” which must be [accomplished by the 100th anniversary of the PRC](#) in 2049, the reunification of Taiwan suddenly has a time limit. ~~Now~~, How to achieve the goal now becomes at the center of discussion. Although Xi vows to adhere to [the basic principle of peaceful reunification](#), the possibility of the use of force is increasing. The Russo-Ukrainian war reduced the uncertainty involved in a military operation. If the world becomes more divided after the war, Taiwan would [take advantage of the US-China rivalry](#) that grants it more leverage to reject the China-led reunification. In fact, China has prepared for the inevitable clash between democracies and autocracies over the past decade. By lowering trade dependency and [building an alternative financial system](#), China has sought to make the regime relatively independent from external forces. The current deterrence strategies by the western countries may delay the Chinese invasion by only a few more years. When China reaches a certain level of decoupling from western influence, the world will encounter another miserable moment.

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