

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Taiwan After Ukraine

By Sean King

SYNOPSIS

Pundits warned Russia's Ukraine invasion was a prelude to the People's Republic of China (PRC) moving on Taiwan, with some even suggesting Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping were coordinating strikes. In fact, the two situations are very different. Taiwan should study the ways Ukraine has been holding off Russia and train its citizens in civil defence and offensive counteractions against any future intruders. But what counts most, should a PRC invasion ever come, is US and Japanese support.

COMMENTARY

UKRAINE'S LAND border with Russia, stretching some 2,000 kilometres, was all too easy for Vladimir Putin's troops to cross. Ukraine was also part of the Soviet Union from 1922-1991, so there are Russian military officials alive today who served there and who know its territory. Still, Russian forces have been thwarted in many instances.

By contrast, Taiwan lies 160 kilometres from the Chinese mainland across the often rough Taiwan Strait. Taiwan's inhospitable western coastline could turn any Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) amphibious landing into a kill zone for invaders contrasted with Russia's relative waltz into Ukraine. What's more, the PLA has not fought a war since [1979](#) (briefly against Vietnam) and PLA personnel have never set foot on Taiwan.

Not All Good News

But other differences do not favour Taiwan. Specifically, Beijing sees Taiwan as inalienably Chinese in a way that Moscow does not see Ukraine as Russian. [Even Taipei's own [Republic of China \(ROC\) constitution](#) claims sovereignty over "all China," although, [as of 1991](#), it acknowledges its jurisdiction is limited to Taiwan, some other islands and possessions.]

Hence Beijing's will to absorb Taiwan is greater than any ambition Russia has for Ukraine. And its military power dwarfs whatever Moscow has launched at Ukraine.

Ukraine is also a member of the United Nations (UN) while Taipei [left the UN](#), in 1971, just before it could be kicked out upon the PRC's acceptance into the world body.

While many countries have sanctioned Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, the Russian economy is much smaller than the PRC's which is also far bigger than Taiwan's. Would governments risk incurring Beijing's wrath by punishing it over Taiwan as they have Moscow over Ukraine? Maybe, not.

[And Xi is learning from Putin's Ukraine mistakes](#), fine-tuning whatever eventual plans the PRC may have for Taiwan. Emerging power Beijing will not be rushed into action by fading power Moscow but Taiwan had best beware all the same.

Taiwan and US: Too Important to Fail

Also, unlike in Ukraine, we can expect the United States to come to Taiwan's defence so long as Taipei does not provoke the conflict.

The PRC is America's 21st Century nation-state rival and its gaining Taiwan would allow it to break through the all-important [First Island Chain](#), a string of [archipelagoes](#) which fences in East Asia that runs from Japan, through Taiwan, down to the Philippines and over to Borneo.

The PLA Navy would thereafter enjoy unimpeded access to the increasingly contested Western Pacific, in range of US territories and associated states.

Taiwan is also a [Top Ten US trade partner](#) and home to critical technology. The Economist Intelligence Unit lists Taiwan eighth on its global [Democracy Index](#). In short, Taiwan is too important to fail.

Taiwan and Japan: Would Tokyo Send Troops?

Japanese Self-Defence Forces would almost certainly not deploy to Taiwan in the event of a PRC attack but they could support the US from within Japan where 50,000 American troops are stationed. Japan might also be called upon to take in Taiwanese refugees.

[US President Joe Biden told reporters in Tokyo last month](#) the US would intervene militarily to defend Taiwan in case of a mainland assault (the third time he has said so as president).

Biden's words are not a security guarantee per se, or what has been labelled [strategic clarity](#), as America cannot credibly commit itself to defend an island whose government it does not even formally recognise.

His remarks are seen as a sincere answer to the question posed and are thought to be in line with general American thinking today. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida for his part seemed pleased by what Biden said.

Tokyo sees its own security and territorial integrity tied to Taiwan's not least because Beijing could use Taiwan as a staging ground to seize Japan's Senkaku Islands which Beijing claims on the basis of how it says they [appertain to Taiwan](#). Taipei too claims the islands but rarely pushes the issue, especially not since it signed a [2013 agreement](#) with Tokyo that allows both Taiwanese and Japanese to fish nearby.

[Taiwan is also a former Japanese colony where most people actually like Japan](#). Tokyo appears to relish these generally favourable feelings, and likes to back Taipei whenever it can.

Taiwan and South Korea: Standoffish Seoul

[One might assume South Korea and Taiwan make for an ideal pair](#), as both face threats from nominally communist, nationalist dictatorships that claim them. But relations have been bumpy over the years.

The late Chiang Kai-shek is thought to have tried [meddling in the Korean War](#) for his own purposes and when Seoul abruptly recognised Beijing in 1992, [Taipei retaliated by suspending all Taiwan-South Korea commercial flights by the two sides' carriers](#) until 2004.

Seoul has also long thought it needs Beijing's help on North Korea. And they share a historical antipathy toward Japan from the Second World War and before. Seoul tends to overly focus on Korean peninsular issues and has only recently begun to adopt a wider [Indo-Pacific outlook](#), particularly under newly inaugurated pro-US leader Yoon Suk-yeol.

The last two [US-South Korean presidential summit joint statements](#) notably called for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait while the South Korean public ([especially, its youth](#)) is increasingly sympathetic toward Taiwan and critical of mainland China. But Seoul, even under Yoon, would still look to sit out any Taiwan conflict.

And any effort to redirect any of the 28,500 US troops in South Korea to Taiwan could leave Seoul more vulnerable to an attack from Pyongyang. US treaty ally Australia could help in a Taiwan contingency but it is much further away and hosts far fewer American troops.

Taiwanese should use this time to learn what Ukrainians have done right as they can be sure Beijing is studying where Moscow has gone wrong. But if push comes to shove, it is US hard power – with Japanese support – that matters most. The more indispensable Taiwan can make itself to the outside world in the meantime, the more likely it can survive the unthinkable.

Sean King is a senior vice president at Park Strategies, a New York business advisory firm which has undertaken research and analysis on Taiwan and its neighbourly relations. He is also an Affiliated Scholar at the University of Notre Dame Liu Institute for Asia & Asian Affairs in the US.

T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg