

The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

No. 055/2023 dated 31 July 2023

War in Ukraine and Cross-Straits Relations: Rhetoric, Response, and Reality

Benjamin Ho and Christina Lai

SYNOPSIS

*Parallels have been drawn between the war in Ukraine and cross-straits relations between China and Taiwan, heightening concerns in Taiwan that a Chinese invasion of the island is imminent. As Taiwan heads towards presidential elections in 2024, **BENJAMIN HO** and **CHRISTINA LAI** argue that any new president would find it challenging to maintain the status quo in cross-strait relations while trying to win the approval of a public that increasingly sees itself as Taiwanese, not Chinese.*

COMMENTARY

As the war in Ukraine enters its 18th month without any clear signs of abating, the question of what a “new normal” portends for the international order is worth posing. In Europe, the spectre of war spilling into the rest of the continent has led to the reconfiguration and reassessment of NATO’s capacity and ability to deter Russian aggression. The announcement by Russian president Vladimir Putin that the country has moved tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus was followed by America’s decision to send cluster munitions to Ukraine as a part of a new aid package. All these moves have raised the likelihood of the conflict escalating, which could possibly result in a broader and more devastating regional or even global war.

China – on present evidence – has not shifted its official position substantially with regard to the Ukraine issue. The so-called no-limits partnership expressed by Putin and his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, before the start of the invasion in February 2022 continues to shape official Chinese discourse regarding the bilateral relationship with Russia. At the same time, conversations with Chinese scholars and officials over

the past six months suggest that Beijing is adopting a more calculated – and calibrated – position to the Ukraine conflict as it seeks to maintain the moral high ground in terms of ensuring that it is not seen as condoning Moscow’s belligerent behaviour. This is particularly important for China given that parallels have been drawn between the war in Ukraine and cross-straits relations.

Taiwanese Public Opinion

Indeed, the view from Taipei is that events in the European continent cannot be divorced from the situation in Asia. Russia’s war against Ukraine has led to a sense of urgency in Taiwan. The Taiwanese public are increasingly worried that China might launch a military attack against the island before long. “Today Ukraine, Tomorrow Taiwan” has become a popular point of discussion on social media platforms and in political discourse in Taiwan. Such an analogy has also gained resonance in the United States. For example, Michael McCaul, the House Foreign Affairs Committee chairman, claimed in February this year that “what may be Ukraine today, it’s going to be Taiwan tomorrow.” Admittedly, there are substantive differences between Taiwan and Ukraine in terms of geography, their relations with the West, and their level of economic development. Comparisons are therefore superficial at best as they overlook how the United States has repeatedly provided security commitments to Taiwan over the years, unlike in the case of Ukraine. Nevertheless, such an analogy still holds weight among the general public in Taiwan as Xi speaks about Taiwan in much the same way that Putin thinks about Ukraine, highlighting the shared cultural traditions and the glory of the past empire.

Not surprisingly, the Chinese government has also openly rejected such parallels between Taiwan and Ukraine, pointing out that the analogy is inappropriate and misunderstood. Foreign Minister Wang Yi earlier this year claimed that Taiwan had never been a sovereign state and that China was firmly opposed to Taiwan’s independence. However, China’s information campaign towards Taiwan cannot be easily ignored. Beijing has been trying to persuade the Taiwanese people that Taiwan is doomed to fail should it encounter a military attack. The intended message is that *if the United States and the European Union were unable to organise a collective effort in assisting Ukraine, then Taiwan would probably suffer from a similar helpless situation.*

Over the past year, public concern in [Taiwan](#) has been mounting over the possibility of a conflict with China. The Taiwanese government has actively responded to Beijing’s attempts to spread a sense of defeatism among the Taiwanese people. Taiwanese politicians – mindful of Beijing’s sensitivities – are also careful not to draw *direct* parallels between Ukraine and Taiwan’s relations with China. Even President Tsai Ing-wen, in commenting on the Ukraine conflict, admitted that “the situation in Ukraine is fundamentally different from the one in the Taiwan Strait ... we are working to strengthen our civil defence as well as our ability to counter cognitive warfare.” That said, the war in Ukraine has certainly increased Taiwanese awareness of their own vulnerability amid increased Chinese aggressive behaviour. For instance, a [survey](#) conducted by a Taiwanese think tank showed that there was a significant increase in the willingness of the Taiwanese people to fight for their nation, from 40% to 70% between December 2021 and March 2022. Taiwan’s recent Han-kuang military exercises also suggested that in Taipei’s calculations, it is not so much military

strength as social resilience that would determine the outcome of Taiwan's ability to preserve the current status quo. With a view of preserving the status quo, Taiwan has increased its defence budget as well as engaged in internal debates on what an asymmetric warfare strategy ought to look like to deter Beijing from invading.



While US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Michael McCaul compared the war in Ukraine to the situation in the Taiwan Strait, Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen is careful to distinguish that Ukraine's conflict remains fundamentally different from Taiwan's. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Electing the Next Leader

As the race to be the next Taiwanese president reaches its final stages over the next few months, cross-strait ties will be one major area of focus. Thus far the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) – and its presidential candidate Vice President William Lai – has demonstrated a strong and assertive posture in rebuffing what it sees as Beijing's increased interference in Taiwan's affairs. A survey conducted by the Taiwan Public Opinion Foundation in June 2023 showed that Lai had the support of 24.6% support of the respondents, followed by former Taipei mayor Ko Wen-je from the Taiwan People's Party. Regardless of who wins Taiwan's election in 2024, the Taiwanese leader has to reassure not only Washington but also Beijing of his stance in maintaining the status quo in cross-strait relations. In our view, no Taiwanese leader would push for independence so long as Beijing does not take further steps to undermine Taiwan's sovereignty. At the same time, a new leader would have to continue to build strong relations with the United States as an insurance policy in the event that Beijing decides to unilaterally change the status quo. Given that more and more people in Taiwan (especially younger voters) view themselves as Taiwanese, not Chinese, any Taiwanese leader seeking to win a political mandate would have to operate within a Taiwanese political worldview – one that is circumscribed by a highly liberal ethos – and which is sharply distinguished from that of Beijing's preference. While a cross-strait clash over value systems is not inevitable or imminent, preserving the status quo would become much more challenging and precarious in the coming years.

Benjamin HO is the Coordinator of the China Programme, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). **Christina LAI** is an Associate Research Fellow in the Institute of Political Science, Academia Sinica, in Taipei.