



**Special Feature June 2022**

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**Russia as invader, China as observer:  
What an invasion in Europe means for China in its  
quest to gain Taiwan**

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**Synopsis**

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia will have far reaching consequences for regions extramural to Europe. This article examines the impacts it will have on China's quest to gain Taiwan. Specifically, whether the war that is currently taking place will cause China to re-evaluate its approaches to Taiwan, and especially if kinetic action against Taiwan is deemed necessary by the Chinese government.

The narrative within the article deals with the actions of Russian forces, some historical imperatives that are driving actions; the stance China is taking in this early stage of the conflict; the reactions of the West (and its allies); and what China will be able to learn from the conflict in terms of military- and politico-capabilities. The article is premised upon the understanding that China is and remains, intent on the retrocession of Taiwan and that this will remain constant.

**Keywords: sovereign/sovereignty nation-state, invasion, war/warfare, China, Taiwan, retrocession**

## The invasion of Ukraine and its codicils

As Russian forces penetrate further and further into the 'sovereign'<sup>1</sup> nation-state of Ukraine backed up by their air-, sea- and land-borne assets in what has been deemed by the Kremlin as a '[special military operation](#),' which is referred to colloquially, and is visible by the inscribed 'Z' scrawled on Russian ground vehicles denotes '[Operation Z](#)' (Russian: за победу, English: 'our victory'). Regardless of the terminology used the operation is a deliberate and focused [invasion](#) by a nation-state. The bewilderment of other nation-states having observed the sheer audacity of President Putin's action and the speed of the attacks, there has nonetheless, been a move to stymie Russia's blitzkrieg<sup>2</sup> attacks through the supplying of weaponry and other assets by the West to Ukraine.

There has, however, been no other direct intervention from the West. The supplying of assets by the West appears to be increasing or at the very least is remains a constant and this, combined with the politico-commentary for all intent and purpose shows the West remaining steadfast in its condemnation of the invasion. The intervention of the West aside, it is the stubborn resistance of Ukrainian ground forces; the population in general; and the robust leadership of and by the Ukrainian government that has retarded the positional advances that Russian military had expected to make, and this state-of-affairs too, remains a continuum. Many nations have sanctioned Russia and these actions have come to form a dyad: a definitive unity toward Ukraine by the [West and others with aligned values](#), (such as Japan, South Korea and Singapore); and a complete shock and dismay at Russia sweeping away the entrenched belief and understandings of what sovereignty comprises of and instills within governments and their societies. Broadly speaking, there is a safety component of knowing where borders are located and the respect that is offered in that knowing—this has been in place in Western cum Eurocentric societies since 1648 through the auspices of the Treaty of Westphalia<sup>3</sup> and is the most widely recognized form of governance per sea, and in contemporary times is delivered through the auspices of the United Nations (UN). Notwithstanding the deliberate incursion, what is of interest in this narrative is the attitude that China has taken toward its neighbor embarking upon a military

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<sup>1</sup> 'Sovereignty' and what it precisely constitutes is a contentious and much debated issue. The two simplest terms must suffice, and as such both are linked to what is commonly termed 'statehood.' They are: '*External sovereignty* relates to a state's place in the international order and its capacity to act as an autonomous entity ... *Internal sovereignty* is the notion of a supreme power/authority within the state. Located in the body that makes decisions that are binding on all citizens, groups, and institutions within the state's territorial boundaries.' See: Andrew Heywood. *Key Concepts in Politics*. Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2000, 37. Emphasis in original.

<sup>2</sup> '(1939 – 1945) German equivalent to *Blitz* lightning + *Krieg* war.' See: *Dictionary.com* <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/blitzkrieg>

<sup>3</sup> The Treaty of Westphalia is also referred to as the Peace Treaty of Westphalia, the Settlement of Westphalia, the Peace Settlement of Westphalia, and the Peace Treaties of Westphalia. The Treaty of Westphalia was not borne of a single document as each, to some extent consisted of, and constituted, a 'treaty' of sorts. The most pertinent ones were of Franco-German intercession: the Treaty of Münster, and the Treaty of Osnabrück respectively. See: Leo Gross. 'The Peace Treaty of Westphalia.' *The American Journal of International Law*, 42, 1, January 1948, 20-41. <http://www.jstor.org/view/00029300>

venture, and from this point it is pertinent to ponder what China will 'take' from or be 'offered' by Russia's deliberate incursion into Ukraine.

### **Where China currently 'stands'**

The shock of Russia invading the territory of another through the auspices of a perceived 'ownership'—[irredentism](#)—it is nonetheless noteworthy that China has neither [condemned nor endorsed](#) the actions of Russia. This can be interpreted as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wishing to remain peaceful toward their neighbor and remaining neutral in the international arena. As stipulated, the most obvious reason for its impartiality is because it does not want to antagonize its powerful and somewhat belligerent neighbor which would in turn, produce frictions that would indubitably weaken its own momentum in the numerous power-stakes and preponderance that are in play—the border frictions with India, its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the string-of-pearls naval ambitions and the nine-dash line power projection is to name on some. Hence, it is a broad yet safe argument to make that China, whilst having global determinations is focused on retaining its politico- and military-resilience in the Asia-Pacific—which includes the retrocession of Taiwan—and within this process, it does not allow and will not be distracted by entering a European conflict at any level, which includes commentary. This stance has been used before and a cursory glance at history reveals that China is adopting a well-worn path.

China's non-committal approach to a situation of such gravity is to a certain extent mimicking that of the United States of America (US) after World War One (WWI), (1914 – 1918). Having developed into a stand-alone power after the war was unwilling to enter the European theatre of operations at the beginning of World War Two (WWII), (1939 – 1945) after Nazi Germany invaded Poland. This stance was due to a perception within the US' populace that it had gained nothing from entering WWI. To be certain the US government considered Hitler's aggressions toward Britain and Europe to be a 'European war' and placing this in perspective, the overriding attitude that had developed post-WWI was one of there being '[no good reason to get involved](#)' in another war; and America's interests were '[best served by staying out of \[future\] foreign conflicts](#).'

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Thus, it can be safely argued China is reflecting a similar stance the US did in 1939, albeit with a distinctly different circumstances driving their non-committal. China is therefore, protecting its current status whilst drawing on past performance of a superpower and this signifies it has learned from history. For the time being it is

content to observe what is happening to Russia in its military venture from the sidelines; and the reasons why can now be taken into account.

### **A shambolic invasion: China's learning curve and the lessons Russia offers**

The way in which Russia is (and has) tactically and strategically approached the conquering of Ukraine will indubitably be examined in detail by China in its (future) attempt to gain Taiwan, the point of interest here is and remains what lessons China has been offered. A broad yet accurate assessment of Russia's incursion from a military perspective is to observe it began as an armor-driven spearhead which is ensconced in the twenty-first century model of successful invasion. The model Russia followed is one of '[manoeuvre warfare](#)' which is designed to surprise the enemy through skillful tactics, thereby causing surprise and chaos in enemy ranks. To wit, the [blitzkrieg \(German: "lightning war"\)](#) tactics that Russia employed and which were designed to gain as much of Ukraine as possible and as quickly as possible would completely overwhelm Ukraine's military forces; or if retardation occurred it would have gained enough territory to force the government of Ukraine to sue for peace on terms favorable to the Kremlin. Both could be achieved through a prism of reintroducing stability to the region. The tactical maneuvers by Russian forces however, quickly dissipated into a shambolic, indecisive military incursion which was followed up by clumsy and inept political handling. This indubitably meant Russia's enemies and (some of) those that were neutral have been able to become politically (more) adept and influential. The end result being an overall blunting of Russia's ambitions both politically and militarily. A significant knock-on effect of the coalescing alluded to has given impetus to a Western—particularly the European Union and the US—developing a coordinated and multi-lateral approach to the delivery of munitions and other assets which in turn, has allowed Ukrainian forces to exponentially increase their capabilities. The certainty with which Russia has approached the war and the subsequent hubris displayed—constituting a type of Russian exceptionalism—has meant Russian forces on-ground capabilities have become less-efficient in the face of Ukrainian resistance. Thus, the way in which Russia has approached the war has near-completely unraveled and has not only been staggering in its foolhardiness but has gone against the age-old adage of when going to war, defeat is unintended.<sup>4</sup>

Returning to the point of this narrative however, is to come to terms with Russia's momentous blunders and the salient lessons they are offering China and to be sure, the steadfastness China holds to its aim of claiming Taiwan and that its intent will not change per se, it is timely to consider if the Russia – Ukraine conflict will offer China a different strategy than the threat-of-invasion cum use-of-force mantra that has gone before.

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Blainey. *The Causes Of War*. Melbourne: The MacMillan Company, 1998, 249.

First and foremost, the main lesson for China is targeting the population as opposed to the only the military has culminated in unifying Russia's enemies and this factor must surely be the most salient lesson. This is not what China will want as it begins to move toward taking Taiwan. Giving this factor some clarity is to note China is on a limited timeline as the unification of China must happen by 2049—the hundredth anniversary of the CCP's reign—and as such, the process for China must be one of progress through diplomacy with the threat-of-force always being in the background. The aforementioned aspect of what China will not want to happen, one which has stirred the ire of the West in general and instilled perhaps more importantly has developed a zero-sum-game/zero-end-sum-game<sup>5</sup> (fight-to-the finish) attitude by Ukrainians has involved Russian forces using artillery and airborne assets in such a way as to 'inflict enough pain on enemy civilians to overwhelm their territorial interests'<sup>6</sup>—this is also known as the 'punishment phase'<sup>7</sup> of operations. The use of such tactics, and as shown by the counterattacks of Ukrainian forces has however, caused an opposite reaction and induced a focused determination to fight back. As with the aforementioned historical aspect associated with the US, there is a history to why Russia is attempting to subdue Ukrainians in this way: it is mired in WWII.

To be sure, a large part of the reason Russia has not been able to achieve its goals is because the tactics and strategies are caught up in moribund WWII fighting tactics which comprise of but are not limited to static frontlines from which armor and infantry push out to establish another front line which then degenerates into yet more static or sluggish positional warfare and slog-of-attrition advances which are supported by airpower and missile strikes cum bombardment. The level of shelling—known as 'steel to target,'<sup>8</sup> warfare whilst displaying a return to WWII tactics has not succeeded in Ukraine forces surrendering or being defeated on a large scale, and moreover, it can be safely argued it has only managed to steel the resolve of Ukraine's military and population in general. This factor combined with the advantage of fighting on home soil has further blunted Russian forces (initial) gains. Regardless of how outmoded the strategies are and as has been alluded to, they do offer China evidence of what a united opposition can achieve much and especially if a unified multi-lateral approach is

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<sup>5</sup> According to Cohen a 'zero-sum-game' or 'zero-end-sum-game' is the polarized 'win-lose' environment that is dictated by the extreme of the hostilities and is summed up 'when one state wins the other *must* lose.' See: Benjamin Cohen. 'International Finance.' *Handbook of International Relations*, 441. Emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Pape. *Bombing To Win. Air Power and Coercion in War*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1996, 59.

<sup>7</sup> *Bombing To Win. Air Power and Coercion in War*, 69.

<sup>8</sup> A steel-to-target modus operandi consists of a combination-package or singular unit massive delivery of high-explosive munitions via seaborne, airborne, and/or ground methods on a designated and (relatively) immobile target. See: William Lind.

'Understanding Fourth Generation War.' *Military Review*. 84, July 2007, 12 – 13.

<http://search.epnet.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&an=14796704>

formed early. These are other salient lesson China will absorb in its 'waiting period' which can now be addressed.

### **China and its wait-and-see approach**

To date and by its actions China is adopting a wait-and-see strategy toward Taiwan. What is meant by this is, the focus by which China viewed its retrocession of Taiwan and the use-of-force therein, has without doubt been modified by two components: the reaction of the West (as a unified whole); and the fightback from the Ukrainian military and the civilian populace in general. Whilst this may cause some concern to military strategists in the Chinese military, the way in which China is retaining its politico-status is by exhibiting within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) that it will not be swayed by the opinion of other. China's non-committal approach to the invasion, which is signaled by its [abstaining from a vote in the United Nations Security Council](#) which has sought to gain widespread agreement in the condemnation of the invasion. China's stand is also designed to show it does not need to enter at any level into a conflict in its nascent stage; and from a geo-strategic perspective, a minor European conflict.

Expanding upon the use-of-force as a method of persuasion by powerful actors is to state it would be naive to assume China will be any different than those that have gone before. In the post-WWII era powerful actors have exercised extreme measures to gain whatever level of control they perceive to being necessary to increase their preponderance and/or support allies. This is reflected in the US invasion of Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq; Russia in Chechnya, Georgia, Crimea, Syria, and Ukraine; France in Indochina, Algeria and Mali, Britain in the Falkland Islands/Islas Malvinas, the Malayan conflict/War of the Running Dogs and Iraq; and Saudi Arabia in Yemen. Notwithstanding other actors and their power projection what is of interest here is and remains, will Russia's invasion of Ukraine make China modify its approach to Taiwan?

Numerous Chinese governments have consistently iterated Taiwan belongs to China. Accepting Premier Xi's reign (2013 – ongoing) has been the most fixated and ardent in the – irredentism-driven claims, up to and including conferring that China has the right to use [force against Taiwan](#), should it choose to do so. As this narrative is based upon the premise force will be used and as Taiwan shows no backing down it is timely to address whether Russia's invasion will alter its approach. Whilst admitting the determinations of the West and its allies and the effect they will have on Russia is an unknown quantity at this point in time it is pertinent to state the nascent rage that has been exhibited will be something that China will not want to happen in its quest for Taiwan, especially if the EU and the US are strengthened in the process in the ongoing backlash against the numerous dealings with Russia. Certainly, the inclusion of powerful actors conjoining and threatening force at any level—whether it be direct or

indirect, military or otherwise—is and remains problematic for a main actor in its overall strategy and in its daily tactics, as it has the potential to severely disrupt the normal functioning in its domestic environment. Thus, any depletion in homeland security through issues such as economic deprivation can lead to a continuing and worsening recalcitrance in a population and furthermore, can bring about the questioning of the use of assets; and the ‘worth’ of a conflict—especially if casualties continue to mount. Notwithstanding the rage that is created, if there is a lack of progress for the most powerful actor and if casualties remain consistent, the rumblings of discontent percolate through society and at some points along the way have to be addressed by government—whether communist or otherwise. The proof and somewhat ironic correlation of the aforementioned severely impacting on a government and of it having drastic consequences which have the potential to destabilize Putin’s government if the war starts to falter, is able to be observed in Soviet – Afghanistan War (1979 – 1989). The war continued on a downward trajectory which was unable to be arrested and this state-of-affairs [contributed significantly to the collapse of the Soviet Union](#). The reasons for the Soviets losing consisted of but were not limited to, mounting casualties; inconsistent progress when fighting a war that was becoming increasingly ‘asymmetrical’<sup>9</sup> and of Soviet troops being unable to adapt to said warfare; the unification of Afghan tribespeople with the sole purpose of ejecting the invader; and a powerful actor (in this case the US), contributing to arming the Soviet Union’s enemy: the Taliban. The long-suffering war-of-attrition for Soviet forces were engaged in and the overwhelming discontent it caused, would eventually percolate through Russian society, and would result in a level of discontent which the government of the Soviet Union could no longer suppress. The end result would be the enormous fissures the war created would shatter the union.

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China is acutely aware of what happened to the Soviet Union, and it is safe to argue it will not, in its quest for Taiwan, want any significant contribution by other actors as the retrocession processes are undertaken. Whilst it can be reasonably assured the US will

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<sup>9</sup> Asymmetrical warfare is a complex ‘type’ of warfare; however, its effect can be observed when observing the war that was waged against the French occupation of Algeria. Horne avers, the Armée de Libération Nationale (ALN), fought the French using ‘small, highly trained packets [of guerrilla fighters], taking advantage of electric storms ... Using its increasing fire-power the A.L.N would harass the French Army with repeated painful “pin pricks,” shelling and mortaring units from the relative safety of their Tunisian and Moroccan sanctuaries ... [and] just to keep the pot simmering with an occasional grenade thrown into a café here [in the capital El-Jazair or a main town such as Oman] a burst of machine gun fire on the beach there.’ See: Alistair Horne. *A Savage War of Peace. Algeria 1954-1962*. New York: New York Review Books, 2006, 413.

not enter the frictions if its current [war weariness cum apathetic approach](#) to war in a faraway land persists in the American people throughout the next decade, China is relatively safe in its current strategies of preponderance. Assuming the US remains only as a supplier of assets to Taiwan and does not offer a more focused cum forceful step-in strategy China will be keen not alter the status quo as non-intervention by Taiwan's allies offers China a greater chance of success per se. To be sure, the problematics will be greater for China if the EU exits the current Russia - Ukraine crisis with a stronger and more determined agenda of stamping its authority on regional politico- and military-machinations. The unity alluded to, and the intrusion of the EU into the Asia-Pacific would become an enormous and unwanted issue for China should it push too hard on Taiwan. Based on current responses to Russia, if the EU exercised any level of influence beyond commentary, it would have the effect of deterring China from exercising the amount of force necessary to satisfy its regional ambitions. Any meaningful involvement by the EU would encourage the UN General Assembly (UNGA), to exercise influence which would by implication impact upon China's retrocession requirements.

Furthermore, and beyond the abovementioned, the other major issue for China and one it would definitely not want to happen, if it were to act in the way Russia has, there would be repercussions from the Taiwanese people. Additionally, to this parameter by definition there exists a reality: the Taiwanese people could certainly be emboldened by what has happened in Ukraine. Russia, whilst it may yet win the numerous battles that are being waged in its invasion it has managed in the process, to turn the Ukrainian populace against it and this in turn will tie down its forces in 'asymmetrical warfare'<sup>10</sup> for many years to come.

This is not what China would want as Taiwan too, is a highly-mechanized and – industrialized society and to be sure, China wants Taiwan as intact as it can possibly be; and does not want to become bogged down in a war-of-attrition for the same reasons it failed in the [Soviet – Afghanistan War \(1979 – 1989\)](#) and what must, by the way it is panning out, happen in its current war in the Ukraine. Thus, a repeat of what Russia has generated in Ukraine and the rage and impacts it has produced through the numerous (worldwide) ramifications in the UNGA (albeit with [five countries voting against a withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine and 35 countries abstaining](#)), it is also politico-ground China would not want to become heavily involved in.

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<sup>10</sup> Asymmetrical conflict has within it similar intangible components as limited war. For example, in order to fight a conflict in a largely asymmetrical way some aspects of conventional conflict may need to take place. Asymmetrical war in contemporary times has the traditional aspects of allowing a situation to be developed where 'an adversary, is able to take advantage of its strengths and an opponent's weakness.' This stated, a microcosm of this in contemporary times is that of terrorism which acts '*outside the limits imposed on the use of force*' which is the use of asymmetry in conflict. See: Roger Barnett. *Asymmetrical Warfare. Today's Challenge to US Military Power*. Washington: Brassey's Inc, 2003, 53.

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To be sure, China must comprehend that from the counter-attacks and the intensity of them by Ukrainian forces, if it were to repeat the same strategy and tactics in its occupation of Taiwan the resultant quagmire would indubitably raise a plethora of unwanted domestic politico-issues for the National People’s Congress (NPC)—the ruling elite of the Communist party—and reverberate through Chinese society; and make the NPC appear ineffectual in its strategy. To wit, the NPC it can be safely argued, is acutely aware of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the complexities it caused for and within Russian society, both in its immediate aftermath and the disruption it caused for Russian ‘nationalism,’<sup>11</sup> more generally. Of critical importance to and for the NPC, is to ‘bring along’ the Chinese people in its plans for Taiwan’s retrocession; and for said actions to actively and positively increase Chinese nationalism more broadly. Should China handle the retrocession of Taiwan in a similar way that Russia is attempting to force on to Ukraine, there would without doubt be a backlash from the West and could create a create a similar sense of unity. The single point that is of most relevance is China would not want to create multiple geo- and regional-strategic complications beyond its tactical parameters. The advent of direct force—what is referred to in military parlance as a ‘kinetic action’ or a ‘force-on-force’ collision—if it were to be applied China knows and understands would result in many more casualties than could be tolerated; allow ‘breathing space’ for Taiwan’s military to modify its actions if need be; unify others against China; cause reverberations in Chinese society; and offer greater strength and influence to minor- and middle-power Asia-Pacific actors.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, the CCP will be and remain acutely aware of not repeating the toxic politico-environment the actions that the actions of the Kremlin have created, and nor will it want to produce a debate about to what extent other actors should become involved. The early stages of Russia’s incursion into Ukraine have offered China a scenario and a

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Nationalism,’ as a concept and what it means and achieves for nation-states is much debated. This factor acknowledged it can be explained in a straightforward way and as stated by Kupchan it is part of a ‘national grouping that is defined in civic terms, share a participation in a circumscribed political community, common political values, a sense of belonging to the state in which they reside, and, usually, a common language.’ See: Charles v Kupchan ‘Nationalism Resurgent.’ *Nationalism and Nationalities in the New Europe*. Edited by Charles Kupchan. London: Cornell University Press, 1995, 4.

'template' if you will, of what not to do when entering a conflict, as what it is aiming for in the regional sphere is to use the gaining of Taiwan as a springboard to becoming a regional superpower, with a future view to becoming an international superpower. In doing so, China will observe with considerable interest the trajectory of post-invasion Russia and perhaps more importantly, how the actions will impact upon the normal cum 'everyday person' in the domestic population of Russia. Hence, should Russia's post-invasion economy spiral downwards it can be safely argued, this is what China will be most interested in beyond the success or otherwise, of the invasion. To be sure, the NPC is particularly wary of its population having a decrease in their standard of living being suddenly thrust upon them via irresolute decision-making, and bad policies. To assume there would be no severe repercussions within Chinese society should a war severely retard its economic might is to believe the NPC is all-powerful and immune to iconoclastic change, which it is not. Hence, the NPC is acutely aware of the collapse of the Soviet Union through erratic transitional governing and governance practices, and compounding the issue for China and as alluded to, the NPC is beholden to its much-lauded [eradication of poverty](#) and the subsequent benefits brought to many. At the present time China's population is definitively and purposely on the side of the government and the NPC will do everything possible to keep this state-of-affairs constant. Post-invasion Russia will be a politico-signal to what could happen in China should a decision to take Taiwan be made too hastily; without due diligence; and of ignoring the repercussions of powerful actors.

Within the parameters of the above narrative and presented scenarios the most obvious outcome is and remains, that stipulating when China will attempt to take Taiwan remains somewhat elusive and it is a germane yet necessary point to make, it is dependent upon many factors. What can be stated with a considerable amount of certainty however, is that within the evidence-base, China's actions will not go beyond its [airborne incursions into Taiwan's 'air defence zone'](#); and the ubiquitous retrocession politico-rhetoric for some years to come. The dynamics associated with Russia's determined move to claim Ukraine, albeit without China condemning the invasion will and does present a myriad of problems cum questions for China. The problems will consist of but not limited to how strong will a post-invasion Russia be and will it require a greater or lesser level of China's support; will Russia be able to act as a buffer to any Western incursions into the region should China decide to move on Taiwan; if the war 'goes badly' for Russia how long will it take to recover to a point where China can rely on a renewed and robust Russian military presence in the Asia-Pacific region; if the war 'goes well' or at the very least allows Russia to rebound in the Asia-Pacific region, will the Russian people be wanting yet another war; and to what extent will the war in Ukraine re-focus and cause a rejuvenation of interest by the EU and the US in the Asia-Pacific.

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All of the abovementioned scenarios whilst acknowledging them as predictive will, in some ways surface and have to be dealt with by China. How and when this takes place will inevitably unfold as Russia’s occupation or its ejection thereof by Ukrainian forces, becomes clearer. What is certain at the present time, however, is China is observing the situation closely and moreover, will have a forensic interest in the codicils of the invasion, as its aims and ambitions toward Taiwan remains omnipresent and locked in to the CCP’s 2049 timeline focus--of bringing Taiwan into the fold of the Chinese mainland cum ‘motherland.’ What Russia’s invasion has offered to China is an insight and a window into the future on how irredentist-driven policies are able to be played out through war, and as a method of persuasion. If the war is successful for Russia, China will be emboldened toward using military force on Taiwan, if not, China will be much less forthright and much more elusive in its maneuverings and it is safe to argue, will continue with the strategy of an ongoing threat-of-force intact. It is the contention of this narrative that if the conflict in Ukraine results in Russia being resoundingly defeated it will result in the greater possibility of a blockade of Taiwan being undertaken (as opposed to a frontal attack) in order to gain Taiwan. Notwithstanding the way in which China will attempt to gain Taiwan, whatever rapprochement China embarks upon, the NPC will be most grateful for Russia showing what is successful; or not.

# Addendum

## The Invasion of Ukraine 'One year on': What 'type' of warfare is taking place and are there any ramifications for a future China – Taiwan conflict?

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### Introduction

The invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces (February, 2022) and the war that it has triggered, has passed the one year mark and therefore, it is timely to examine what has been some of the outcomes in the duration of said timeline; what has happened from a military perspective; what 'type' of warfare has taken place; and finally, what effect (if any) the war will have on a the current (and ongoing) China – Taiwan conflict.

First and foremost, there is safe to argue, there is a general consensus within the numerous geo-strategic analytical institutions that the war on the part of Russia—its expectations versus its achievements—has been a spectacular failure. The failure alluded to, whilst having many components, began with the initial deployment of special forces failing to take Hostomel airfield/Antonov Airport from which the intention was to establish a strategic foothold; move in strength toward Kyiv; and take Kyiv. The move however, along with other initial pushes by Russian forces into Ukraine such as the attempt to take Vasylkiv south of Kyiv, would also fail abysmally.

The aforementioned failures for the Russian military would consist of but not be limited to grossly inadequate planning; assumption being treated as fact; inept responses to setbacks; inability to reinforce troops in order to wear down its opposition; and the belief that Russian 'exceptionalism' would be enough to deter any meaningful resistance. The most basic tenets of a battle plan having been so thoroughly ignored, has meant that Russian forces have become involved in attrition-based—often referred to as slog-of-attrition warfare. The inability of the invading Russian forces after passing the 'one year mark' it can be safely argued, was not something that was expected by the Kremlin and from a planning perspective, nor was it envisioned.

Whilst it begs disbelief from a planning strategy to not have a comprehensive back-up plan and hence, a counter-attack plan should things go wrong, it is nonetheless, obvious that that part of the Kremlin's battle plan did not have a codicil of a disproportionate and unexpected backlash by their enemy. Therefore, it is and remains

the case that the unforeseen has happened and Russian forces (and as a result counter-attacking Ukrainian forces), are now immersed in an 'attrition-based' war.

Acknowledging the above has taken place and prior to exploring the greater underpinning issue of a China – Taiwan conflict and whilst it may seem the war that is being engaged in is far in terms of chronologically, geographically, politically and militarily, there is a need to address the 'type' of war that is currently taking place; and extrapolate where China and Russia 'stand'; and extrapolate upon the effect the war will have on any future maneuverings China will take. First however, and before this can be assessed, there is a need to extrapolate on what the term 'attrition-based' actually comprises 'of' and as stipulated a need to establish the way in which the war has panned out 'one year on.'

Attrition-based warfare as a 'type' of warfare; and as a 'viable strategy' Attrition-based warfare is a 'type' of warfare that encompasses the wearing down of enemy forces via the application of continuous assaults, whether they be through ground-, artillery-, sea- or air-borne support assets or a combination of all. Crucially however, when engaging in this type of warfare, the success of it is hinged upon there being a sought after cum notional 'breaking point' that the enemy will 'reach,' whether through personnel, terrain and asset losses, or a combination thereof.

There is a need to extrapolate upon the abovementioned tenet of war, as the strategy has been applied on numerous occasions. In recognising the 'breaking point' alluded to allows for other aspects to be highlighted and this too, exposes issues that underpin why attrition-based warfare is a preferred and therefore, viable tactic. The Battle of the Ardennes/Ardennes Offensive (December 1944 – January 1945) during the last European phase of World War Two is an excellent example of attrition-based warfare in which the German military engaged.

The main purpose of the German forces was to engage directly with Allied forces in order to disrupt their forward momentum and the subsequent push toward Germany; and had as its core purpose to inflict enough casualties on Allied forces so as to moderate and then stall, their advance. The breaking point for Allied forces as such did not manifest as replacements of personnel and assets were able to be maintained by Allied forces. The attrition rate incurred by the Allies was not enough to hinder the Allies advance to any degree greater than having to defend against German counterattacks. Although there would be times when specific advances were able to be stalled by German forces, the attrition incurred would not be enough to completely overthrow Allied momentum.

Whilst the campaign would be the last major offensive for German forces and one in which the German high command considered attrition-based warfare as worthwhile due to it being the only avenue to saving the Fatherland, the underpinning of it as a

strategy was to create a situation in which Hitler could sue for peace on more favourable terms. What actually happened to German forces would slowly evolve into an untenable situation as the attrition-rate that was supposed to be dealt upon the Allies would be reversed and it would be the German military that would be unable to withstand what was being inflicted upon them.

As such, the attrition-rate for German forces, however, would become extremely problematic. German forces were ill-prepared for their own losses and their command structures began to crumble as Allied forces maintained pressure on all aspects of German war-fighting capabilities. German reinforcements would be unable to be deployed in a timely manner as much of Germany's highly centralised industry and transport infrastructure had been destroyed. German forces would face a catastrophic dyad: casualty and asset destruction would continue to mount; and replacement became impossible. Thus, attrition-based warfare and its codicils could not be maintained by Germany even though it was considered the most applicable strategy in saving Germany (and the Reich) per se. Thus, attrition-based warfare is highly dependent on replacement factors, and the steadiness of staying power through consistent attacking and counterattacking.

A further example of attrition-based warfare which would ultimately prove to be unsuccessful was during the last phase of the Vietnam War (1963 - 1975), when the Army of the Republic of Vietnam—the South Vietnamese Army—and some remaining elements of its allies, escalated assaults on the encroaching North Vietnamese Army (NVA) using in particular, artillery and air-assets. The strategy of 'warfare at a distance' was designed to retard the flow of the NVA and its assets reaching far into the south. The preconceived idea was that artillery and air-borne assets could inflict enough casualties on the NVA and this in turn would disallow groupings of their troops to take place; and decisive attacks to be organised. The outcome would be however, any asset destruction and the deaths of personnel that the NVA incurred would ultimately prove to be unsuccessful. The attacks from artillery and air-borne assets would only deprive the NVA's capabilities for a short amount of time as it would be able to replace personnel and assets through well-defined routes to the south of Vietnam (via the Ho Chi Minh Trail) and therefore, the NVA would continue to inflict casualties on ARVN troops and destroy their assets in the process—including those of the Republic of Vietnam Air Force. Returning to the notion of a 'breaking point,' the fighting would continue unabated for many months and in doing so would expose a critical point: the attrition-based warfare engaged in by the ARVN could not reach the desired 'breaking point.' This was in large part due to NVA being able to replace personnel and assets in a timely manner; of only grouping when absolutely necessary and only when a particular en-masse engagement was required; and of their resource-bases in their

home-bases and along the Trail being heavily de-centralised and therefore, unable to be adequately destroyed.

The key elements that can be gained and for the abovementioned type of warfare to be successful comprise of but are not limited to, destroyed assets and the deaths of personnel must be replaced in a timely manner in order for any advances to be capitalised upon; supply lines must be reliable; the associated logistics of said goods must be consistent (and de-centralised); any deficiencies in advances must be 'plugged' through the use of timely counter-attacks; reinforcements must be consistently available; and deployed must not be stretched beyond their capabilities.

With these key components of battle in mind we can now turn to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and in doing so, observe and link China – Russia relations and from this, evolve an understanding of future China – Taiwan relations.

### **China – Russia 'unity': and possible effects**

In conclusion: the inability of Russia to make inroads into taking Ukraine successfully, has produced nothing substantial in terms of China being and remaining, an ally of Russia. The latest rhetoric is based on China – Russia relations being 'rock solid'<sup>12</sup> of their relations being 'mature in character'<sup>13</sup> and of both countries needing to 'work out new steps to ensure the security of both countries.'<sup>14</sup> Further to these factors Chinese President Xi Jinping is preparing to visit the Kremlin in the coming months and this will become an exemplar of the solidarity alluded to. What China has said however, amounts to very little beyond a normative, non-threatening monologue—one which reflects an underlying quasi-agreement that a sovereign nation-state is able to act as it 'sees fit.' Whilst an action, in this case Russia's, may contravene numerous tenets and resolutions of the United Nations, the actions by Russia according to China it can be argued, simply reflects an evolvment of Russia's 'right' to expand its territories through its policies of retrocession. The end point being returning much of what was the Soviet Union back to Russian control. Paradoxically, what China is effectively reinforcing by its lack of meaningful dialogue or commentary is, a powerful nation-state is permitted to usurp what it believes it has the 'right' to claim. After the fact and only then should other nation-states become involved in regional power-stakes. A brief extrapolation of the aforementioned including the reasons 'why,' can now be entered into.

Specifically, the paramount reason that China is indulging in essentially platitudes, is because the National People's Congress—the ruling elite of China—will be expecting a reciprocal level of politico-support and quasi-approval on the part of Russia when its

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<sup>12</sup> 'China's top diplomat says Russia ties 'rock solid.' *Reuters*. 22 Feb, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-ally-tells-top-chinese-diplomat-we-back-beijing-against-west-2023-02-21/>

<sup>13</sup> 'China's top diplomat says Russia ties 'rock solid.'

<sup>14</sup> 'China's top diplomat says Russia ties 'rock solid.'

retrocession of Taiwan enters into its next series of phases. It is the contention of this essay that the first of said phases will be a quasi-annexing of the Taiwan Strait—the body of water between China and Taiwan which both governments claim—and in doing so will exercise a stronger military stance and one of exercising a more direct form of control over Strait; and of severely disrupting Taiwan’s ‘Air Defense Identification Zone.’<sup>15</sup> In turn and as the potential for a kinetic exchange evolves, China will expect Russia to re-state its friendship with China; approve of its retrocession intent/s; and offer to assist in monitoring nautical- and air-traffic within the Strait. This will be seen to have been demanded of Russia by China regardless of whether Russia is successful in its invasion strategy.

This abovementioned pathway has been a deliberate and a focussed part of China’s positioning as it has attempted to be seen as ready to become involved in a positive and meaningful way should the need arise. Furthermore, and what is part of the politico-positioning is not entering into the debate in a reactive way; of being mindful of the ‘rights’ of nation-states; and of not wanting to antagonise Russia. China it can be safely argued and because of the way in which it has approached Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is underpinned by having to keep Russia on-side; and in doing so, be seen as a dependable and loyal ally to the region in general (not only Russia) per se. This is necessary in order to show the West—in particular America and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—that the input of Russia into its territorial ambitions and the deliberate actions therein offers a triad of projection: actions in terms of retrocession have evolved beyond what the West deems to be ‘acceptable’; Russia is not politically isolated because of its actions in Ukraine (read: there is regional loyalty); and sends a direct signal that China is and remains a regional geo-strategic threat to the post-World War Two (Western- and Eurocentric-driven) world order.

Furthermore, it is with considerable certainty an argument can be made that strategists within the Chinese military have been surprised by the actions of Ukraine (as has been the West), at what is now ‘one year on.’ Moreover, it can now be comprehensively understood that Ukraine has embraced an overall strategy of attrition-based warfare as the only form of adequate defence. This factor in and of itself, will be deemed by China to be a ‘wrong signal’ that has been ‘sent’ to Taiwan through the auspices of Russia’s inability to take advantage and maintain territory. The subsequent inertia of Russian forces, the tenacity of Ukrainian forces and the ‘coming together’ of the West in a time of crisis must also have sent shocks through China’s government and military. Whether the same adjuncts would come to the fore as China evolves its claims on Taiwan remains to be seen. Nonetheless, and regardless of the eventual outcome of Russia’s invasion at the moderation or cessation of hostilities, China’s politico- and

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Taiwan – Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ).’ *GlobalSecurity.org*  
<https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/taiwan/adiz.htm>

military demands upon Russia will be immense; and when the next phase in the retrocession of Taiwan commences Russia will have to be 'rock solid' in its support of China, regardless of the scars of its war in Ukraine

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### **About the author**

Strobe Driver completed a doctorate in war studies in 2011 and since then has been writing on the subjects of war, conflict, terrorism and Asia-Pacific security. He is currently completing a book on Asia-Pacific security and the probability of a war taking place in the near future.

## Imprint

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