

Ukraine-Taiwan: To compare or not to compare, that is the question?

Maëlle Lefèvre

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About the author:

Maëlle Lefèvre is currently completing her Master's degree in International Security at the International Business School of SciencesPo Paris (PSIA). She is also a Chinese language graduate from INALCO. She completed a one-year exchange program at National Taiwan University (NTU) in Taipei. She is currently working in Taiwan on a six-month internship. Her research focuses, among other things, are on the Indo-Pacific region, Greater China, and more particularly the relations between China and Taiwan. Maëlle Lefèvre is also the author of *Jiazoku*, a novel published in 2019 by Albin Michel editions, that covers the trafficking of Chinese surrogate mothers in Japan, set up by the Yakuza.

Ukraine/Taiwan *To compare or not to compare, that is the question?*

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On February 24th, 2022, after increasing tensions, attempts of diplomatic talks, hopes of a decrease of tensions, Russia eventually launched the invasion of Ukraine, surprising an important number of countries. Medias (and among them, Taiwanese ones) have been very quick in establishing a comparison between Ukraine and Taiwan, putting emphasis on the fact that Taiwan could be the next one. Tsai Ing-wen, President of Taiwan, reacted with those words: “Taiwan has faced military threats and intimidation from China for a long time. Therefore, we empathize with Ukraine’s situation, and we also support the efforts of all parties to maintain regional security”¹. However, while sharing some similarities, the situations in Ukraine and Taiwan still hold differences that make the risk of a similar invasion of Taiwan less probable in the middle-term (10 years). Therefore, it does not change anything to the discussions of a risk of war in Taiwan’s strait that were already existing before the invasion of Ukraine.

Here below is a list of comparisons between Ukraine and Taiwan in various fields in order to see to what extent Russian move could be the signal of its Chinese equivalent in the short-mid term.

Ukraine-Taiwan: Not the same political and legal status

In 2022, only 15 States (among them the Vatican) recognize Taiwan (ROC, Republic of China) as an official country. But the rest of the world recognizes the PRC (Popular Republic of China) as the sole representative of China, even if, in this regard, some countries’ position is more ambiguous, as the US “acknowledge” (and do not “recognize”) that “all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United State Government does not challenge this position” (US-China Shanghai Communique). Similarly, Japan-China Communique states that “The Government of the People’s Republic of China reiterates that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the territory of the People’s Republic of China. The Government of Japan fully understands and respects this stand of the Government of the People’s Republic of China, and it firmly maintains its stand under Article 8 of the Potsdam Proclamation [which, interestingly, incorporates the Cairo Declaration reference to Formose as one of the territories which has to be returned to the ROC].

On the contrary, since its second independence in 1991, Ukraine is a sovereign state, member of the UN, and a “de jure” state that does not share the complex destiny of Taiwan as a “de facto” state.

¹ « Taiwan president expresses empathy for Ukraine’s situation », February 28, 2022.
<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1546618/taiwan-president-expresses-empathy-for-ukraines-situation>

This difference of status has, of course, been restated by China: Hua Chunying Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said at a press conference that “Taiwan, of course, was not Ukraine. [...] Taiwan has always been an inalienable part of China’s territory. This is an irrefutable and legal fact”². Besides, China has developed its own legal tools to legitimize an armed engagement against Taiwan with the 2005 anti-secession law and the article 8³.

This difference in status is not good news for Taiwan in case of an invasion by China: Indeed, if Russia, despite its official discourse of being threatened by NATO progress to the East and invoking the use of the Art. 51 of the UN Charter (law of self-defence which is an exception to the law of prohibition of use of force in the UN Charter), has no legitimacy in its action in the view of a big part of the international community (the UNSC resolution to condemn Russian actions received 11 votes in favour, 1 vote against (Russia) and 3 abstentions (India, UAE, China)), however the invasion of Taiwan by China would be more complex to condemn in the name of international law. If economic sanctions adopted by the European Union, the US, and other countries such as Canada, Australia, South Korea and Japan were partly based on this violation of international law by Russia, we could wonder to what extent the international community would be vocal and use the same types of sanctions against China in case of an invasion of Taiwan, while many of them agreeing on the “One China principle”.

The US stakes regarding the two crises are completely different

Even though the Ukraine’s invasion by Russia indirectly impacts American interests by getting closer to its European allies, challenging NATO, the international law system, the democratic and rules-based order on which the US have built their leadership, and leading to sanctions that would have a rather limited impact on the US economy and energy supply, American vital interests are not directly threatened by this conflict. If some critics were made against the refusal from the US to send their troops, this decision was fully understandable given the situation. Put simply, the US were not ready to start a war with Russia, which moreover happens to be a nuclear power, for Ukraine (which is not a NATO member with no possible activation of the Article 5).

But it would be a mistake to draw a parallel with China hypothetically invading Taiwan: It is true that the US has been ambiguous regarding their intervention in case of an aggression against Taiwan. **But the potential military intervention of the US for protecting Taiwan would go far beyond defending Taiwan in itself: it would be about defending American interests there** which are much more numerous than in Central Europe.

First of all, the US is a Pacific power (and to a later extent an Indo-Pacific one). With

² « China says Taiwan is ‘not Ukraine’ as island raises alert level », February 23, 2022, *Reuters*.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-says-must-raise-alertness-over-ukraine-crisis-2022-02-23/>

³ This article stipulates that if every possibilities for a pacific « reunification » of Taiwan are exhausted, Chinese State can use « non-pacific means » (非和平方式) to reunify with Taiwan.

its annexing of Hawaii and its war against the Philippines in 1899, the US started to have a direct presence there. They waged war in the region: the Philippine insurgency in 1904, then the Pacific theater of the WW2, the Korean War and eventually the Vietnam war, leading to the intensification and solidification of the US presence in the Asia-Pacific. Resulting from history, the US currently has security agreements with a number of Asian-Pacific countries: Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea and Japan. They have permanent military bases and facilities in Hawaii, Guam, Palau, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Singapore, and Diego Garcia. They also developed various partnerships with other countries: the most famous among them being the QUAD (between Australia, Japan, India and the US) and the recently formed AUKUS (between Australia, the US and the UK).

On February 2022, the new US Indo-Pacific strategy came out, reminding also the pure economic and social stakes for the US all over the region:

- It supports more than 3 million American jobs
- Source of nearly 900 Bn USD FDI in the US
- Drives 2/3 of global economic growth
- A center of gravity for trade with major sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) explaining the importance of FONOPs (Freedom of navigation operations) for the US.

Therefore, The US has made it clear within their Indo-Pacific strategy: “we will focus on every corner of the region, from Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, to South Asia and Oceania, including the Pacific Islands”⁴.

If the US chose not to intervene in favor of Taiwan in the case of a Chinese aggression, this strategy would lose its entire credibility and it would put into question the US’s involvement in the region within its bilateral (especially with Japan and the ROK who would get even more isolated in terms of access to the SLOCs and surrounded by nuclear rival powers – Russia, China, and the DPRK – thus considering more and more the local nuclear deterrence option) and multilateral partnerships. A reconsideration that would nullify the efforts of strategic reorientation towards the East undertaken by the American administrations and more particularly from the strategy of pivot towards the East by Obama. And more generally and more importantly, losing their legitimacy by not defending a democracy in the Asia Pacific (a rare specimen in the region) to which they had repeatedly given reassuring signs of commitment⁵, the US would give

⁴ « Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States », February 2022, The White House.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>

⁵ Among them, the most important ones are the TRA and the 6 Assurances, often quoted in Taiwanese medias. The Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) is an act of the United States Congress passed in 1979 that defines the relationship between the United States and Taiwan after China's recognition. Among other things, it authorizes the sale of arms to Taiwan for defensive purposes. The Six Assurances are six key U.S. foreign policy principles regarding U.S.-Taiwan relations and were adopted to clarify the third PRC-U.S. communique issued in 1982. The latter provided for a gradual reduction in arms sales to Taiwan conditioned on PRC commitments to cross-strait peacemaking. The Six Assurances are part of the semi-formal guidelines used in the conduct of U.S.-Taiwan relations, with their formal content adopted in 2016 by the U.S. House of Representatives in a non-binding resolution. The Six Assurances are 1) The United States has not agreed to set a date for ending arms sales to Taiwan 2) The United States has not agreed to consult with the PRC on arms sales to Taiwan 3) The United States will not mediate between Taipei and

up with their leadership in the region, ceding to China the role of the hegemon in Asia-Pacific. This radical change in the region would just be the beginning of the transfer of power between the US and China on a more global stage.

Taking apart political and military stakes, even Taiwan in itself has a more important economic weight than Ukraine. Ukraine is US's 67th biggest trading partner while Taiwan is America's 9th largest trading partner. Besides, the semiconductors⁶ produced by Taiwan (world's biggest and most advanced high-tech chip foundry; TSMC being with Samsung the only company able to produce the 5-nanometer chips) are valuable and used in everything from consumer cars to military airplanes.

To conclude, given the various stakes that go far beyond a sole country detailed above, it would be a shortcut to compare the absence of American military intervention in Ukraine (like the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan) to a potential American non-intervention for Taiwan. The recent patrol of the missile guided destroyer USS Ralph Johnson in the Taiwan Strait on February 26th while the invasion of Ukraine by Russia is still ongoing was a strong signal in that sense, sending a message to observers fearing that China could take advantage from a potential shifting of the focus of attention of the US to Eastern Europe.

The military aspect of the crises: similarities and differences

No matter what are his thoughts about the invasion which puts him in a rather uncomfortable situation, it is certain that Xi Jinping is watching closely the details and textures of US-EU response (and to a larger extent of the international community), comprising (1) financial sanctions (2) freezing of Russian foreign reserve (3) suspension of Russian institutions from SWIFT (4) Individual sanctions (5) Delivery of military weapons, assets and oil (6) assistance in cyber defence (7) medical and humanitarian assistance (8) exclusion from sportive and cultural events. Other studies would be made by China about the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the conduct of military operations, the response from the Ukrainian government, army and population in order to take lessons.

Some similarities appear between the strategy used by Russia to invade Ukraine and the most probable military type of actions China would take if invading Taiwan:

- Gradual increase of the pressure (the annexing of Crimea, the conflict in the Donbass leading to two separatist enclaves, and the recognition of independence of these two separatist territories in the Donbass by Russia before invading the whole Ukraine can echo to a certain extent to one of the strategy

Beijing 4) The United States has not agreed to revise the TRA 5) The United States has not changed its position on sovereignty over Taiwan 6) The United States will not pressure Taiwan to enter into negotiations with the PRC. In addition to these texts, in the recent years, the US assistance to Taiwan has increased in various fields: sales of weapons, US laws passed by the Congress in favour of Taiwan, joint training between US and Taiwan special forces, Pentagon functionaries who visit annually the island, etc.

⁶ On the other hand and interestingly, Ukraine is the largest producer of neon, a material needed to make the chips in Taiwan.

China could use by first taking the islands in the periphery of Taiwan – Kinmen, Mazu, Penghu, Pratas – using the same “fait accompli” method before attacking the whole island or for a maritime blockade)

- Tactical strikes in order to destroy or seize various military objectives and paralyze the capacity of riposte (air defenses, airfields, troops’ barracks, ammunition warehouses). With the ultimate goal to isolate the decision-making centers and decapitate them.
- Avoiding civilians’ casualties at the same time (for different purposes: it would lead to more resistance from Ukrainian population, a larger condemnation from the international community)
- Associated to disinformation (for both giving legitimacy to the Russian attack and affecting the morale of Ukrainians) and cyber-attacks (within a hybrid warfare context)
- The will to end this conflict quickly (the longer a conflict drags on, the more uncertain the outcome and the higher the threshold for violence) and to avoid a full-scale war (quite closed to the Sun Zi principle of China vis-à-vis Taiwan, with the best option that is “winning a war without fighting” (不戰而勝)).

But there are major differences to highlight. Indeed, for better or worse, Taiwan is an island (furthermore pretty small and with a high density of population, around 36 000 km² with 23 million inhabitants against around 600 000 km² with around 50 million inhabitants for Ukraine) from which the population would not be able to escape in case of a conflict in contrary to Ukrainian population (in less than a week, more than 200 000 Ukrainians are said as having left their country). Therefore, given these different factors, in case of Chinese military strikes on Taiwan, military facilities and the impacts on the civilian population will be deadlier.

Besides, Taiwan Strait is a natural moat. It makes it far from easy to invade (mostly, the Navy, Air and Rocket force of the PLA would be involved, while in Ukraine a big part of the fight is undertaken by the Army on the ground and the Air force, with a limited role of the Russian navy – for now, with the exception of actions taken near Odessa and Mariupol ports). Amphibious landings are among the trickiest operations to fulfill⁷. And even if the invasion is a success, the guerilla warfare that could start on the Taiwanese territory would have different features than in Ukraine with the

⁷ In his book « Demain la Chine : guerre ou paix ? » (Gallimard, 2020), Jean-Pierre Cabestan compiled the various analyses made by American observers and the PLA’s strategy and highlighted the many difficulties of an amphibious invasion (to add to the fact that the PLA has no experience of real fighting since the Vietnam war). Here is an excerpt (chapter 3) : « the PLA will first have to make sure it has control of the skies, which is far from being a given. Then it must be able to reach the Taiwanese coast in eight hours and establish one or more beachheads on the few pages where such an operation could be deployed. It will need to commit sufficient troops to prevail over the Taiwanese military [...] Such an undertaking continues to face major obstacles in terms of coordination, transportation capabilities, and chances of survival in the face of a Taiwanese defense, particularly on land and at sea, that will have been only partially destroyed. » Indeed, « any preparation for an attack will not go unnoticed by Taiwanese intelligence services or American detection means, especially space and underwater. In other words, Taiwan [...] will have between one and two months to prepare. The Taiwanese armed forces will have time to disperse their aircraft and ships, plan alternative airports and bury their command centers. » It has to be added that the navigational conditions in the strait are very uncertain and shallow, making it difficult for submarines to navigate.

advantage that can be brought about by the mountains.

The asymmetry in terms of military capabilities between the threatened countries (Ukraine and Taiwan) and the aggressors (China and Russia, among the biggest defense spenders, and two nuclear powers) is similar. However, the geographic situation of Ukraine and Taiwan is very different and leading to operational specificities that China has to take into account regarding a potential invasion of Taiwan. Actually, the observations lessons China could make about the conflict in Ukraine would be more related to the use of hybrid warfare (cyber, disinformation which are a part of the larger “united front” Chinese strategy) and the resistance of the Ukrainian population and army. Therefore, the current resistance spirit of Ukrainian civilian population, military (both of them preparing for an urban guerilla in sized cities) and the relative failure of the Russian disinformation campaign (such as the presumed escape of Ukrainian president Zelenski to the US which has been contradicted by a video with the President posted on social media) are interesting features for China. It is even more relevant given the increasingly sense of belonging to a distinct Taiwanese society⁸ by Taiwanese people.

From the side of the aggressor: What differences between Russia and China?

The parallel drawn between Ukraine and Taiwan is also linked to the particular geopolitical relationship established between Russia and China and further consolidated within the last decade⁹, especially post 2014, Western powers pushing inevitably Russia into the arms of China. Their complicity was blatant during the 2022 Beijing Olympic games (during which Russia asked probably for the Chinese agreement in order to take further actions in Ukraine), and especially when they published a joint declaration about their common opposition of future NATO expansion. On February 4th, Russia asserted that “Taiwan was an inalienable part of China”. And both countries expressed their concerns regarding AUKUS, Russia being, by the way, considered by some Asian states (India, Japan) as an actor of the Indo-Pacific, at least an Asian actor. These declarations show the nexus between Eastern Europe and the Asia-Pacific, and therefore between the Ukrainian crisis and the Taiwanese one. Similarly, different messages such as the press conference of Hua

⁸ A recent poll from the Taiwan New Constitution Foundation (pan-green) in August 2021 showed that 89.9 percent of respondents identified themselves as Taiwanese, 4.6 percent as Chinese, and 1.8 percent both. Regarding the military engagement, a poll in October 2020 from the Taiwan Center for International Strategic Studies and the Taiwan International Studies Association showed that 77.6 % of respondents were willing to fight in case of a Chinese invasion (interestingly, 66% if it was because of a Taiwan’s declaration of independence), with an important proportion, 51.1 % convinced that the US would send armed forces to assist Taiwan.

⁹ Yet, this relationship should not be considered as a honeymoon for all that : there are still differences of opinion and deep internal quarrels. Even though commercial partnership between Russia and China is tangible : in 2018, bilateral trade overpassed 108 Bn USD, important projects, mainly in the energy sector with gazoduc *Power of Siberia* and infrastructures linked to the BRI are conducted but with 2 main features : China, because of its position and the isolation of Russia, can dictate its conditions which are sometimes unfavorable to Russia (it was the case with *Power of Siberia*) and the projects announced with great fanfare often remain a dead letter (5G, High speed train project between Moscow and Kazan, etc.). Besides, the Chinese influence in Central Asia, and especially Kazakhstan and Kirghizstan do not please Moscow. The other way, the Russian presence in Africa (with an increase of weapons sold to Angola, Nigeria, Sudan and the Central African Republic) are perceived pretty negatively by China and the organization in 2019 in Sochi of the summit « Russia-Africa » did not please Beijing.

Chunying¹⁰ on February 25th or a Hu Xijing video posted for *Global Times*, were insisting on the US responsibility for the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. There are ongoing attempts from Beijing to shift the message from an invasion of Ukraine to a weakness of NATO and the US (unable to deter Russia) and NATO responsibility in this crisis, a rhetoric some ASEAN countries adhere to. Indeed, their messages are not showing a China who is turning its back on Russia, as Beijing showed it by buying more energy and food from its neighbor. Interestingly, Shi Yinhong (a professor of international relations at Renmin University and quite famous for his rather liberal views) said that “this does not mean that China directly supports in any degree of expansionism – this only means that Beijing feels the necessity to maintain and boost strategic partnership with Moscow”¹¹. Indeed, given the great power competition and increasing tensions with the US and the EU China is facing, Russia remains the number one partner that China has to support, an ally who would be crucial with its energy supply and the rest of imports-exports in case of a naval blockade of maritime routes from the US.

Regarding the meaning of invading Ukraine for Russia and Taiwan for China, there are similarities but differences too.

Historically, Ukraine and Taiwan do not share the same fate: In 1991, Ukraine eventually gained its formal independence in opposition to Taiwan who, since 1949 – the escape of Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the KMT, and his mainland supporters to the island after their defeat against the CCP – is considered as a renegade island in the view of the CCP (with even more legitimacy since the PRC entry in the UN in 1971, and the resulting exit of the ROC). If Taiwan started to mean something for China only in the 17th century when parts of the island were integrated into the Qing Empire from 1683 (after Koxinga, a Ming loyalist who has himself taken Taiwan from the Dutch, was defeated), who eventually lost Taiwan in 1895 after the defeat against Japan, Ukraine links with Russia are much older. Elaborating on the history of Ukraine has not its post there but the fact that the first Russian state, Kievan Rus, was established in Kiev 12 centuries ago, is telling in that regard (to be added of course to the USSR period and the current important proportion of ethnic Russian population in the East of Ukraine).

Paradoxically (but maybe not, as the major part of Taiwan’s inhabitants are from Han origin), Taiwan’s identity stake for China is rather more important than Ukraine’s identity for Russia (around 7.5 million ethnic Russians live currently in Ukraine and more especially in the East, Putin called Ukraine “Little Russia” and Kremlin adviser Sergei Markov said that “everybody knows that Ukrainians are Russians. Except for the Galicians”). Xi Jinping has been clear about what Taiwan was representing for

¹⁰ She was saying: « A key question here is what role the US, the culprit of current tensions surrounding Ukraine, has played. If someone keeps pouring oil on the flame while accusing others of not doing their best to put out the fire, such kind of behavior is clearly irresponsible and immoral. When the US drove five waves of NATO expansion eastward all the way to Russia’s doorstep and deployed advanced offensive strategic weapons in breach of its assurance to Russia, did it ever think about the consequence of pushing a big country to the wall ? Our position is that sanctions are never fundamentally effective means to solve problems. We consistently oppose all illegal unilateral sanctions. »

¹¹ Keith Bradsher, Ana Swanson, « Before Ukraine Invasion, Russia and China Cemented Economic Ties », February 26, 2022, *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/26/business/china-russia-ukraine.html>

China. During the XIXth Congress of 2017, the unification (“reunification” in the view of the CCP even if the Communist China never ruled over Taiwan) was defined as a condition of the “rebirth of the Chinese nation”.

A similarity resides in the fact that Ukraine and Taiwan are both respectively buffer zones increasing strategic depth for Russia and China regarding rival powers influence closed to their zones of influence. The invasion of Ukraine (following the annexing of Crimea and the conflict in Donbass) is an answer to NATO¹², while one of the main geostrategic reason behind the invasion of Taiwan would be breaking a critical lock within the 1st islands chain for accessing Pacific¹³, securing its trade, coastline and its positions in the South China Sea, projecting its forces into the Pacific Ocean (with Taiwanese waters on the south and east that are favorable for underwater navigation), challenging the US and their partners, especially Japan, on its eastern flank, and eventually chasing the US from Western Pacific (who would be weakened with US military deployments separated between Northeast and Southeast Asia, in case of Taiwan becoming Chinese).

And if Ukraine’s invasion is a classic nationalistic overbidding that the Kremlin is practicing to compensate for a more pronounced slowdown in growth, playing on the rhetoric of the rebirth of tsarist empire to which China could adhere too (with the humiliation of the Qing Empire by Western powers during Opium wars being frequently used in official speeches and Chinese media), the invasion of Taiwan could similarly be the same answer found by the CCP in case of domestic economic and social difficulties. However, even though Chinese economic growth is currently slowing down, China is the 2nd global economic power, while Russia’s GDP is the equivalent of Spain’s. This disparity of economic weight (and logically leading to differences in terms of interdependencies in global trade) is responsible for different political and diplomatic attitudes.

Indeed, until recently (before the Covid crisis) and especially towards the US, China has taken a rather cautious and pragmatic stance. However, the Russian approach is much more cavalier, in the sense that the Kremlin, which has been living in isolation for the past 8 years, now behaves as if it has little to lose and can therefore act without regard to the opinion of the US. By positioning itself as the new global power, China sees itself as having the task of preserving the global balance and favoring prudence and stability. Indeed, China is much more invested in the current order than Russia is.

¹² The certainty in Moscow that the insurgency and overthrow of the government of Viktor Yanukovich in 2014 would quickly lead to an application for membership of Ukraine in NATO was the primacy cause of the seizure of Crimea, especially since it had been promised to him at the insistence of George W. Bush in 2008. Vladimir Putin was convinced that the new power in Kiev would cancel the 20-year lease that allowed the maintenance of its military base and fleet in Sevastopol. With the seizure of Crimea, he held a mortgage on the future of Ukraine’s international position. He decided to take another one by supporting the Donbass insurgency.

¹³ Indeed, Taiwan is seen by China as a maritime fortress (1) monitoring the passage of Chinese maritime traffic towards the Miyako Strait in the north, and towards the Bashi channel in the south, which allows the US forces to travel to the South China Sea, threatening the PLA installations in the Spratly and Paracel Islands (2) connecting the two China seas, posing commercial and military risks (with Kaohsiung, the main Taiwanese naval base) being equidistant from the Shandong peninsula and the island of Hainan, therefore threatening a large part of the Chinese coast and dividing its naval deployments in two between south and east).

Interestingly, the analysis made by Jean-Pierre Cabestan in his book “China Tomorrow: war or peace” puts emphasis on a China that does not necessarily want war (consistent with the desire to retake Taiwan ideally by non-military means, using grey zone conflicts to put pressure on the population and led to the surrender of the island that would fall into the hand like a ripe fruit – an option less and less probable yet and the PLAN does not actually believe). Besides, analyzing the growing Chinese nationalism that Xi Jinping himself repeatedly tried to calm down, he wrote that “it is as if, like their countries’ diplomats, Chinese experts were taking advantage of the weakness of the US to push the advantage and were adopting more moderate positions as soon as the latter hardened their position and applied punitive measures”.¹⁴ However, Jean-Pierre Cabestan also warned that “the discourse on the fundamentally peaceful character of the Chinese is a smokescreen intended to contain the narrative of the “Chinese threat” and to delegitimize *ex ante* any military action by the opponent. It exaggerates the otherness of the Chinese cultural heritage in order to take advantage of it. In reality, it is just as ideological as the “peace” (*mir*) discourse that the Soviet Union served up *ad nauseam* during the old Cold War”¹⁵.

It has also to be noticed that China, even though refusing to speak about an “invasion of Ukraine”, does not fully support Russia. It did not vote against the UNSC resolution passed on February, 25th. In an official communiqué after a phone call between China and Russia, it was written that Beijing was “supporting Russia and Ukraine to solve their tensions through negotiation, reiterating the constant position of China who respects sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries”. This “territorial integrity” is the point troubling the most Beijing and putting China in an awkward position. and in January 2022, when Russia intervened in Kazakhstan, without China having been consulted or even warned, the support from Beijing came pretty late. And within the same logic, in 2014, China did not recognize the annexing of Crimea by Russia, this principle of territorial integrity echoing in the Taiwan issue (but also the Tibet and Xinjiang one).

Conclusion:

Given that the differences between the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Taiwan Strait conflict outnumber their similarities, as has been described above, it would be a mistake to establish a perfect parallel. However, lessons can indeed be learned from this situation by both Western powers and China.

The Ukraine’s invasion would have numerous implications, being mainly a “wake-up call” for the EU and the US (but not only) that are showing their cohesion more than ever within this crisis, challenging the propaganda of a West in decline. And it could harm China’s interests on the short, middle and even long term (but also Western powers ones as what is bad for China is not necessarily good for the Occident). China is aware of that and is currently trying to adopt a careful stance with Western powers,

¹⁴ Jean-Pierre Cabestan, *Demain la Chine : guerre ou paix*, 2020, Gallimard, 278p.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

especially the EU (Wang Yi exchanged with Josep Borrell to put emphasis on the need of China-EU cooperation):

- This crisis, already a symptom of the weakness of Russia, could fragilize Putin, an ally for Beijing (who may be more and more disturbing for China, however. But the personal relations between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin do not have to be underscored). Besides, in comparison to its predecessors, Xi Jinping has shown a “higher acceptance of risk and friction in foreign policy during his nearly nine years in office”¹⁶. On the other hand, as Russian leaders and oligarchs are currently criticizing the decisions taken by Putin (such as Oleg Deripaska, Evgeny Lebedev, Oleg Tinkov, Roman Abramovich, Mikhail Fridman), it could make Xi Jinping think twice about a risk of discontent within the political elite of China in case of a conflict with Taiwan (but, on the other hand, the influence of Chinese political elite on Beijing decisions is very much limited).
- No matter what (and despite the lack of Chinese involvement and direct linkage with the Ukrainian crisis), because of its relations with Russia and its recent declarations (especially the one of February 4th), China is presented in one block with Russia. It was illustrated by the declaration of Ursula von der Leyen on February, 19th, during the Munich security conference, saying that Russia and China “wanted to replace the existing international rules. They prefer the rule of the strongest to the rule of law, intimidation instead of self-determination, coercion rather than cooperation”. This context would make Chinese moves towards more multilateralism even more difficult and push China into further decoupling with the US and other countries (and the other way around with the EU and the US being even more sensitive regarding trade tariffs, and supply chain related issues highlighted by their dependency on Russian gas and oil), fueling nationalism and further risks of tensions (not necessarily good news for Taiwan).
- This crisis reinforces the transatlantic cohesion between the EU and the US and fuels even more the “Cold War” blocks mentality which is detrimental to China, not having many friends around (and especially in Asia Pacific where its assertive actions in the South China Sea make non-aligned countries within ASEAN more and more worried and led other actors to pick a side like Australia). For instance, ASEAN countries surprisingly released a joint statement concerning the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, Singapore (to adopt sanctions) and Indonesia being the most vocal ones. This EU-US cohesion could go far beyond NATO and get to the Indo-Pacific, especially with the strengthening of an “Europe puissance”.
- It pushes the US, Western and other countries to adopt national strategies more focused on a return on conventional threats emanating from State actors

¹⁶ Kathrin Hille, « Xi pursues policy of ‘pro-Russia neutrality’ despite Ukraine war », *Financial Times*, February 27, 2022. <https://www.ft.com/content/bf930a62-6952-426b-b249-41097094318a?shareType=nongift>

(instead of transnational threats like terrorism, and coming from various VEOs). Therefore, there would be more thoughts about the way to answer to a military but also normative and economic challenge from a State actor, maybe announcing the end of “naivety” already underway regarding some coercive actions from China. The German decision to meet NATO’s 2 percent goal, to deliver weapons to Ukraine, and the future writing of a National Security Strategy and a China strategy are showing that changes are going to occur within EU countries strategy towards China.

Given all these elements, this is also why China’s answer to the Russian war in Ukraine would be crucial in the coming weeks and China’s distancing from Russia could be more beneficial for Beijing than Chinese leaders think. Putin’s behaviour has proven unpredictable. No one could assert that Xi Jinping’s behaviour could be less surprising incomparable backgrounds. Yet, showing how wrong a too strong rapprochement with Russia would be for China is an opportunity not to be missed.

Yet, the Ukrainian crisis is not accelerating any potential invasion of Taiwan by China for the simple reason that Beijing would not take the risk to invade Taiwan if it is not sure to win (as in case of a defeat, it would threaten the legitimacy of the CCP). With one unknown factor being the American intervention, it means that the PLA has to be able to challenge the US forces before taking any action. This situation takes us back to the ongoing debates about when this balance between Chinese and US powers would happen. It varies between pessimistic views (admiral Davidson, admiral Aquilino, Ian Easton to quote some of them, both believing that an invasion could happen in 5-6 years) and rather optimistic ones (Yan Xuetong who does not believe such an attack would occur, Joel Whithnow and Kevin Rudd counting on at least 10 years) about the time left before a Chinese attack.