

The realist underpinnings of China's Taiwan strategy

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August 13 2022

Note: This article appeared in *The Diplomat* on August 13 2022.

China's aggressive response to U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei has prompted criticism, and no small measure of alarm, both within and beyond the region.

It included dispatching People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) jets across the median line separating Taiwan from China, and China's military engaging in a concurrent series of drills in six separating locations on each side of the island – the closest less than 12 nautical miles from Taiwan's shore. The high-risk exercises involved firing munitions around and over the island, some of which allegedly landed in Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone, and temporarily cutting off flights and maritime routes, representing a hostile demonstration of China's capacity to rapidly effect an embargo on the island.

China has now concluded the drills, but its military warned that it would **continue to conduct** 'regular patrols' in the Taiwan Strait.

Notably, China's actions outstripped any seen during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995–96, which also saw exercises and missiles fired near the island and resulted in the disruption of commercial shipping and flights. The upscaled response reflects the severity of current tensions – not to mention the extent to which China has been emboldened by decades of enormous advancements in the capacity of its military.

But there is perhaps another more instructional point of comparison. And that is the vast gulf between the level of bellicose rhetoric seen on this occasion, and the far milder rhetoric emanating from Beijing just four months ago, when Pelosi was first scheduled to travel to Taiwan.

Immediately prior to the August visit, loud and stern warnings were directed at the United States, with six issued over the space of a few days – the most strident being Xi Jinping telling U.S. President Joe Biden that 'those who play with fire will perish by it.'

In contrast, statements were far fewer and tamer in the leadup to the originally scheduled trip in April. For example, a **statement** from the Chinese embassy in the U.S. in April merely stated that Beijing had lodged 'stern representations' and 'urged' the U.S. to 'abide by the one-China principle... and to cancel Speaker Pelosi's plan to visit Taiwan.'

This prompts us to consider an important question: What has brought about such a dramatic change in such a short period of time?

While there is likely more than one answer, one probable reason is what has unfolded in the Russia-Ukraine War – in particular, China's reading of the U.S. and its allies' response to the conflict.

Communication gaps

One issue that might be of concern to China is the extent to which the West has been largely dismissive of Russia's geostrategic concerns.

Russia has often justified its actions in neorealist terms. This is a tradition of international relations that is generally more predominant in parts of the developing world less profoundly impacted by the constructivist revolution of the 1990s, and made skeptical of neoliberalism by their own relatively marginal role in shaping the international norms and institutions that constrain them. Neorealism includes, in particular, buffer state theory.

Russia has often stated fears that neighboring Ukraine – which ousted pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014 – might join NATO, thus depriving Russia of a buffer against this more powerful rival alliance, and empowering the latter, now closer to the gates of Moscow, to isolate Russia and [threaten its security](#). Emboldened by NATO's backing, Putin has claimed, Ukraine or Ukrainian factions might also try to redress long-standing ethnic and territorial grievances in a way that would bring them into conflict with Russia, triggering a mandatory intervention from NATO partners, which could incite a nuclear war.

Unfortunately, these concerns have largely been addressed with extreme skepticism by Western leaders and Western media. Russia's aggression has instead been mainly viewed through the prism of psychology, national identity, and history, manifest in [claims](#) that Putin is delusional and paranoid, and [wants to restore](#) the territorial boundaries – and, by extension, prestige – Moscow achieved at the height of the former USSR.

This returns us to the situation in the Taiwan Strait. China's ambition to 'reclaim' Taiwan is also often understood through the lens of national history and identity, and the psychology of another autocratic leader. What China often describes as its '[sacred](#) task' of 'reunifying' ancestral lands, or, at the least, closing off the [unfinished](#) business of the Chinese Civil War, is often interpreted in the West as an aspiration to restore China's 'greatness' or create an immortal legacy for China's aspiring 'president-for-life' Xi Jinping. Beijing's One China policy, through which China demands that other nations recognize that it is the sole sovereign power of both sides of the Taiwan Strait, is on this basis viewed as face-saving, and a measure of isolating Taiwan so that it can eventually be absorbed at minimal cost.

Looking at the issue through a realist lens, however, tells us another story. Similar to Ukraine's geographical relationship with Russia, Taiwan's proximity and pivotal strategic location in relation to China's maritime trade routes means that as far as Beijing is concerned, if the island is not an ally or a buffer – if Taiwan is able to effectively prosecute an independent foreign policy – it could be a threat. In this sense, the One China policy doesn't only deprive Taiwan of protectors; it helps ensure that an island merely 180 kilometers from China's shores, which overlooks one of the most important maritime trade passages in the world and guards the two direct maritime routes from China to the Pacific – namely, the Bashi Channel and the Miyako Strait – can't effectively form alliances with China's strategic rivals.

Put another way, China's Taiwan policy functions to prevent other powers, principally the United States, from 'using Taiwan to constrain China' – an accusation that has a broader set of meanings, but that nonetheless situates the Taiwan issue in the context of great power competition.

Beijing's calculations on what may trigger war across the Taiwan Strait are predicated not on degrees of provocation but rather upon a hierarchy of concerns. China has indeed shown substantial strategic patience on the matter of the so-called 'reunification' of Taiwan with China. It is much less obvious that it will have strategic patience if it views the United States' alleged salami-slicing of the One China pledge as a leadup to making Taiwan a stand-in or proxy component of the forward presence of a U.S.-led alliance intent on 'containing' China.

It is interesting on this front – though likely coincidental – that prior to the lead up to Pelosi's Taiwan trip, the phrase translated as 'those who play with fire will perish by it' was used in late May by Zhu Fenglian, spokesperson for China's State Council's Taiwan Affairs Office, to [condemn](#) those that 'plan to play the Taiwan card and use Taiwan to constrain China.' The comment was made in response to Biden's later walked-back assertion that the U.S. was committed to defending Taiwan militarily. This was followed shortly after by a

virtual meeting between China and the United States' joint chiefs of staff in July, in which China's General Li Zuocheng passed on to U.S. General Mark Milley China's [demand](#) that Washington 'cease U.S.-Taiwan military collusion.'

More recently, such fears have been communicated more explicitly, albeit it not from the top brass in Beijing. For instance, a recent opinion article in the state mouthpiece China Daily [said](#) that the U.S. has tried to 'incorporate the island into its grand strategy to contain, isolate and weaken China,' and that in contrast to Beijing's hitherto strategic patience on the issue of unification, 'once Taiwan mutates into a national security threat... due to US machinations, Beijing's strategic calculus will drastically change.'

The lessons from the Russia-Ukraine war

If such concerns have heightened in China since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War, it is arguably for good reason. First, if the war is to be regarded as instructional, it might be noted that Russia's aggression has only encouraged neighboring states to rush to the embrace of NATO, and prompted the West to be more committed to Russia's isolation – effectively transforming an aspirational war into something the Russian leadership may see as an existential one.

Second, this response to the Ukraine crises appears to be having some contagion, with Taiwan more aggressively reaching out to allies, and members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States) openly drawing [parallels](#) between Russia's aggression and threats to 'sovereignty' in the Indo-Pacific. This comes after June's NATO summit which – at the behest of Australia and other players in the region – expressed [concern](#) at 'the deepening strategic partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order.'

On the Taiwan side, as with the case with Ukraine, it certainly appears that growing Chinese aggression has pushed Taiwan to seek closer integration with U.S.-led security alliances, symbolized by a [call](#) from Taiwan's Vice President William Lai for the U.S. to consider allowing Taiwan to join the Quad on March 3. Since then, Taiwanese political figures have exploited various international and other platforms to draw attention to parallels between the Ukraine conflict and the existential threats facing Taiwan and emphasize the value Taiwan has to the democratic sphere, including Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen's early June [speech](#) at the Copenhagen Democracy Summit and Legislative Yuan President You Si-kun's [calls](#) for Quad countries to end their strategic ambiguity on Taiwan.

Yet it is important to note that this has been happening in the backdrop of a longer trend, which has gained momentum since late 2020, wherein Washington's alleged salami-slicing of the One China policy became complemented with the 'slice-adding' of Taiwan-U.S. military cooperation. Since October 2020, it has become publicly known that the U.S. military trains Taiwanese forces in [Taiwan](#) and [Guam](#), that the number of U.S. military personnel deployed in Taiwan had [nearly doubled](#), that the U.S. had set up a 'training ground' on the island, and that there had been [cooperation](#) between Taiwan forces and the U.S. National Guard. In October 2021 Tsai [noted](#), 'We have a wide range of cooperation with the U.S. aiming at increasing our defense capability.'

Yet what Beijing is likely to view to be the biggest threat – in terms of the prospect of Taiwan serving as a proxy forward presence of the U.S. alliance – is advancements in interoperability, or the capacity for Taiwanese and U.S. forces to cooperate and conduct joint operations. A tragedy for Russia is that its aggression has helped realize the very thing it feared – Ukraine's greater integration in NATO, seen in Ukraine forces switching from Russian to NATO weapon systems and calibers, receiving training in NATO countries, and (almost certainly) learning to process and use information provided by U.S. surveillance and intelligence agencies. While U.S. and Taiwanese forces are currently very far from achieving integration at the level of full spectrum interoperability, enhancing interoperability is increasingly something that both Taiwan and the U.S. are willing to discuss openly.

A congressional bill forwarded in late September 2021 from the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, for instance, [asked](#) for an assessment of 'the interoperability of current and future defensive asymmetric capabilities of Taiwan with the military capabilities of the United States and its allies and partners,' while a

recent bill amendment [proposal](#) advanced the ‘Enhancement of interoperability and capabilities for joint operations.’ In mid-March this year, a press release from Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense [stated](#) that the island will ‘continue to negotiate with the US to prepare purchasing the latest weapons and equipment... in order to improve military interoperability between Taiwan and the United States.’ The Pentagon’s Defense Security Cooperation Agency in mid-July explicitly [stated](#) that newly announced weapons sales to Taiwan would enhance Taiwan’s military interoperability with the U.S. and its allies. At the same time, Taiwanese forces have begun training in English, and the island aims to become an English-speaking bilingual nation by 2030.

How to avoid catastrophe

In the wake of the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War, it is thus important that the architects and communicators of Western and, in particular, U.S. foreign policy understand and are willing to engage with such concerns. It has generally been the case that the West overstates the prospects of China launching an aspirational war based on the relationship between Taiwan and China in history. It will be far more dangerous if we understate the potential that China would launch what it deems to be a defensive war based on the proximity of the two states’ geography.

Buffer theory may not be common fare in the diplomatic language of Western nations, but policymakers grasp the basic concept well enough when it impact their own interests. When Solomon Islands inked a security pact with China earlier this year, raising the prospect that a Chinese military base could be built within 2,000 kilometers of Australia’s coast, it was [described](#) as a ‘red line’ by Australia’s then-Prime Minister Scott Morrison. The distance between Taiwan and China is less that one-tenth of this.

Taiwan, in my view, should be protected from Chinese aggression. Much is at stake – not just for Taiwanese, but for the security architecture of the Asia-Pacific more generally. But if an unnecessary catastrophe is to be avoided, a fine line needs to be drawn to ensure that active deterrence does not give undue substance to the fear that the West is ‘using Taiwan to constrain China.’ For that to happen, there needs to be a balancing act that negotiates the unabashed application of power politics – or at least the maintenance of the balance of power in the western Pacific – with a recognition of, and attempt to allay, what Beijing might sincerely deem to be ‘legitimate’ security concerns.

If Russia’s enduring Ukraine quagmire has taught us anything, it is that when strategic aspiration gives way to existential fear, grave costs – both economic and more importantly human – may no longer serve as constraining factors.

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