

➤ Russia's War on Ukraine: Implications for China and Indo-Pacific Regional Security

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's response to it—partly in reaction to steps taken by the United States, Europe, and others—have overall negative (if complex) implications for an already poor regional security environment, specifically in China's relations with important neighbors and the United States. There are at least four dimensions to the effects, each of which is more likely to prove substantial, because it builds on preexisting trends.

First, Beijing's responses to the war have revealed, and arguably reinforced, weaknesses in China's diplomacy. China's approach has appeared inept or off-putting or both. Beijing appears not to have appreciated the likelihood of the impending conflict, with Xi Jinping issuing a joint statement with Vladimir Putin proclaiming "limitless cooperation" between their two countries on the eve of an invasion that would make alignment with Russia newly problematic. China reportedly dismissed U.S. warnings of an imminent Russian attack on Ukraine. After the war began, PRC spokespersons scrambled to square China's long-standing commitment to the sacrosanct nature of sovereignty (including Ukraine's) with ongoing support for Russia, while asserting that Taiwan was a completely different case (despite several obvious and troubling analogies). China's ill-fated April Fool's Day virtual summit with the European Union (EU) highlighted what appeared to be a significant misreading of the moment and, likely, something more fundamental. Beijing's explicit call for the EU to adopt a China policy independent of the U.S. and Beijing's

efforts to keep the dialogue focused on what it saw as the positive aspects of the bilateral economic relationship were strikingly out of step with the newly reinvigorated U.S.-EU solidarity over Ukraine, the focus on security and normative issues that the war had triggered, and the amplified concerns about Europe's partly economic-based vulnerability to Russian coercion.

Beijing's attempt to position itself as a neutral broker and potential mediator in the conflict failed as an effort to position, or even present, China as an engaged and effective great power. The hedged offer itself appeared vacuous, devoid of specifics or a plausible path forward. China's hollow offer was fatally undercut by China's evident lack of neutrality, in light of its reaffirmation of solidarity with Russia, its blaming of NATO and the U.S. for instigating the conflict, and its limited or belated calls for restraint on both sides and characterization of the events in Ukraine as a "war" and the atrocities as "deeply disturbing."

China's standing—and frictions—with the U.S. and the many states aligned against Russia were further worsened by at least two other factors. First, China's unwillingness to fully support sanctions threatened to weaken their impact both directly (providing some markets for Russian energy exports, or possible pathways for partial evasion of financial isolation measures) and indirectly (providing political cover for India and other states that did not join the multilateral efforts). Second, China's embrace of—and

providing a substitute for blocked Russian platforms for—Russian propaganda about Ukraine and the war impeded the U.S. and European-led efforts in the information war, particularly by eroding support for Ukraine in the Global South and among right-leaning populist constituencies in increasingly shaky Western liberal democracies.

To Beijing's principal interlocutors in the West and along China's maritime periphery, China's response to the war in Ukraine has been much less—or much worse—than that of a responsible and capable great power. If the Ukraine crisis further, and lastingly, diminishes perceptions of China as a potentially cooperative and valuable partner, then the space for diplomatic solutions is, overall, likely to contract. With diminished confidence in its ability to persuade or to make commitments that will be accepted as credible, China—and its counterparties as well—are more likely to turn to harder-edged tactics. A still more fraught and confrontational relationship between China and the U.S. and more coercive Chinese approaches to states with which it has (often territorial-related) disputes become more probable.

Such developments would extend trends in Beijing's external relations during the last decade and more, including the emergence of “wolf warrior diplomacy,” the heightening of tensions with Taiwan and with rival claimants in the South and East China Seas, the erosion of Beijing's once-notable support for (or at least acceptance of) major status quo international norms and institutions, the escalating international criticism (with pointed rebuffs from China) of China's human rights record (including in Xinjiang and Hong Kong), and a more rivalrous, post-“constructive engagement”

relationship with the United States.

It may be worth noting that things could have been worse. China did not adopt the conceptually coherent but politically provocative position that the Ukraine and Taiwan cases are analogous, with both having the features Vladimir Putin has attributed to Ukraine: a territory populated by members of one's own “people” who have been separately ruled by a democratic regime that erroneously purports to rule a sovereign state that is in fact subject to the sovereignty of the once-ruling authoritarian great power and can legitimately be retaken by force. That Beijing did not explicitly embrace so radical a view that would predictably trigger reactions more strongly contrary to China's interests is relatively small comfort.

Second, the international—and especially the American and European—reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine may—and arguably should—lead to assessments in China, in the U.S., and among China's major economic partners that more significant steps in the direction of economic “decoupling” are more likely or wise. Here, what the impact is or ought to be is relatively murky. The response, especially in Europe and the United States, to Russia's invasion has shown a willingness to bear near-term economic pain in the service of identified important security and political interests. And it shows at least incipient signs of a longer-term Western commitment to reduce the political vulnerability that flows from economic dependence on a potentially, or actually, adversarial authoritarian state.

Observers in China and elsewhere have reason to be skeptical about whether the Ukraine case predicts a parallel set of sanctions toward China in the event of a

conflict over Taiwan, or portends longer-term efforts to reduce economic dependence on China. How much economic pain democracies in the West (or elsewhere) are willing to incur to support Ukraine and constrain Russia remains uncertain and has not yet been high (with European bans on Russian energy exports still notably incomplete). The political will to incur the longer-term costs necessary to reduce dependence on Russia may not endure, especially once the acute phase of the crisis in Ukraine passes. Severe Taiwan-related sanctions against China, or broader and deeper efforts to reduce dependence on China would be far more costly and painful to both sides, rendering any projection from the Ukraine case suspect, especially if Xi's China eschews the blatant aggression and large-scale violence undertaken by Putin's Russia.

Still, such measures are conceivable and less calculated moves could lead to disruptive results. Neither sanctions nor "decoupling" from or by China is an on-off switch. Seemingly low-risk, incremental measures could be followed by unintentional escalation with dire effects. The higher costs (compared to the disruption of economic relations with Russia) of significant sanctions give both sides potentially greater leverage (than in the Russian case) and possible beliefs that such leverage can be used effectively. China's deep, multifaceted, and higher-tech economic integration with the outside world means that China would not have some of the outlets or evasions available to Russia, which largely exports commoditized raw materials with significant markets in the economically less developed states that have been comparatively unwilling to join in

sanctions against Russia. For the suspicious or risk averse in China, the reaction to Ukraine likely serves as at least a "proof of concept" that security and politics can motivate other states to undertake coordinated, self-harming economic measures that Chinese policymakers (according to anecdotal accounts) assumed would not be forthcoming from recently fractious and often economic interest-focused industrial democracies.

Moreover and perhaps more significantly, a broad "pro-decoupling" policy effect from the war in Ukraine would build on existing trends and concerns, including: China's long-standing and recently growing willingness to use economic levers to press other states and officials to toe its line on issues important to Beijing (Taiwan, Tibet, and so on); concerns that Chinese links in global supply chains are dangerously vulnerable to disruptions due to politics, pandemics, or climate change; and increasingly pessimistic foreign assessments of the net costs and benefits of economic engagement with a China that has long faced criticism for violating international economic obligations and norms and that has increasingly embraced a more statist and nationalist economic model under Xi.

Whether economic interdependence reduces the likelihood of war or security crises is highly contested, and the answer is surely context dependent. But to the extent that the general proposition remains persuasive, or even plausible (at least absent stark exploitation of severely asymmetrical interdependence), a Ukraine-reinforced movement toward a significant degree of decoupling with, or by, China is a worrisome development for Indo-Pacific security. Worthy of particular

attention is the prospect that Ukraine-fueled concerns about the political and security risks of economic dependence on, or by, China will strengthen the hands of pro-decoupling advocates in China, the U.S., and potentially elsewhere, who tend also to press for a more broadly confrontational or adversarial policy toward, or by, China.

Third, the more immediately security-related implications of the Ukraine crisis are, in some but not all respects, seemingly more hopeful. The Russian military's lack of success may, and arguably should, make China more hesitant to contemplate using military force to achieve its policy goals, including reunification of Taiwan. China's massive spending on military modernization very likely has yielded a much greater return on investment than has been the case in Russia, where corruption and incompetence appear to be much more serious. But the Russian military experience in Ukraine still should be a cautionary tale that money does not translate reliably or simply into capabilities and that a lack of experience in battle against a capable and motivated opponent may significantly reduce the prospects for success or acceptable costs.

More fundamentally, the initial fate of—and the international response to—the Russian attack on Ukraine would seem to confirm the challenges and consequences for China if Beijing were to wage war on Taiwan. A cross-Strait invasion would be even more difficult than Russia's overreaching attack on Ukraine. Ukraine has been a striking case study in the capacity and will of a people to defend what they see as their sovereignty, democracy, and nation against a much more powerful invader asserting its sovereignty over the targeted territory and

its ethically, linguistically, and culturally kindred population. Ukraine has made the prospects for successful post-conflict occupation or unification in such circumstances appear bleak indeed. The war in Ukraine also has shown that the U.S. and a targeted state's democratic neighbors—which have mutual security pacts among themselves—can rally to the victim's cause, supply significant lethal and non-lethal aid, and provide support through sweeping sanctions.

There is little sign that Beijing has drawn a more problematic lesson from the war in Ukraine. China does not seem to have inferred that the sharp distinction between NATO's position on Russia's invasion of a friendly state that lies outside the Alliance and a possible attack on a NATO member (which would lead to direct military conflict between NATO and Russia) means that China can count on a much lesser U.S. and Allied response to a Chinese attack on Taiwan than to similar actions against U.S. treaty allies Korea, Japan, or the Philippines.

Although potentially calamitous, a full-fledged Chinese military assault on Taiwan has remained a remote possibility. For more likely threats and crises in regional security, the implications of the response to Russia's war in Ukraine are less reassuring. The deterrent effect of the U.S., European, and broader international response to Russia's attack on Ukraine is ambiguous for many potential Chinese actions toward Taiwan and other regional actors as well. China has engaged in escalating grey zone actions, most notably toward Taiwan. And the Ukrainian case seems likely to do little to deter China from such measures. Indeed, Ukraine might teach the lesson that measures short of an all-out war of conquest may be met with

relatively modest responses, akin to those that attended Russia's support for separatist insurgencies in Donbas or its full-fledged annexation of Crimea—moves that would seem to exceed scenarios such as a Chinese seizure of one or more of Taiwan's small, thinly inhabited offshore islands (or Beijing's already-undertaken displacement of rival claimant states' control of disputed formations in the South China Sea). Although the war in Ukraine may have revealed, or drawn, a red line, it also suggests the persistence of the pink fringes in which China (and often Russia) have adeptly operated.

The most salient aspect of China's reaction to the war may be its embrace of the argument—strongly pushed by Russia—that NATO is largely to blame for the war in Ukraine. The view that NATO expansion to Russia's borders and the U.S.'s role in instigating that expansion created a severe threat to Russia's (or Putin's) security parallels long-escalating Chinese accusations that the U.S. is seeking to deepen security alignments with allies and partners—almost all of which are, like NATO members, fellow democracies—to encircle China and counter its rise, or imperil the Party's hold on power. Statements from Beijing that see U.S. and NATO actions as a principal cause of Russia's military action and a justification for it are, in this context, a cause for heightened concern.

While Beijing's rhetoric should not be taken at face value and the analogy to NATO and Russia has its limits, Beijing's framing of the issue and the broader international discourse characterizing the war between Russia and Ukraine in terms of a battle between democracy and autocracy resonates with, and seems likely to reinforce, the increasingly sharp

ideational dimension of the increasingly adversarial U.S.-China relationship. While Cold War parallels are easily made and often overstated, a more ideologically charged and more clash-of-systems tone to U.S.-China relations is likely to increase the risk of crises and conflicts affecting regional security.

Finally, Putin's war on Ukraine raises a deeply troubling, if speculative, concern about China's leadership and its decision-making. The parallels are all too obvious if a bit too facile: a top leader who has increasingly gathered power into his own hands, eroding the restraints of somewhat collective leadership and suspending once institutionally binding limits on his tenure; a growing embrace of ethnonationalism, irredentism toward lost territories and peoples; a deepening rejection of Western values and suspicion of U.S.-led hostile multinational alignments; and reports of the top leader's increasing insulation from expert or heterodox opinion.

To be sure, Xi's China is not Putin's Russia, but given the catastrophe unfolding in Ukraine and its possible wider implications, any steps by Xi and China in the direction of Putinization are a potential danger for regional and broader international security. While the lessons or implications of Ukraine for China and Indo-Pacific security are neither simple nor unmixed, they are troubling, not least because they in many respects align with already existing trends and patterns in China's behavior and its relationships with the U.S. and Indo-Pacific states.