

Ukraine Offers No Easy Lessons on Taiwan

By William H. Overholt

As Russian tanks and troops rolled into Ukraine, speculation about a parallel mainland invasion of Taiwan was predictable. After all, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping met in Beijing on the eve of the Winter Olympics — and the invasion — and issued a strong statement on their shared vision of the world.

But the complexities surrounding Taiwan call for a high degree of caution, writes William H. Overholt. The consequences of disrupting the delicate balance that Beijing, Washington and Taipei have maintained for decades could be disastrous.

WHEN RUSSIA invaded Ukraine, Washington feared a simultaneous Chinese invasion of Taiwan. On sober reflection, China isn't militarily or economically ready. Even more soberly, Xi Jinping is trying to avoid getting stampeded over Taiwan despite another faction labeling him weak. His repression at home has foreclosed non-coercive options; he has raised excessive domestic expectations, and Western gullibility has inflated the resultant rumors. This happens periodically: During the Jiang Zemin era, a columnist in Hong Kong fabricated a story that Jiang had set a deadline for recovering Taiwan and reputable Western columnists repeated it endlessly as fact.

China does want Taiwan "back," badly, but that does not mean it wants an early bloody war that would destroy China's economic miracle. Unlike Vladimir Putin, Chinese leaders are not isolated from multiple sources of advice — reality impinges. Unlike Putin, Chinese leaders are accountable to their Party; they can't launch self-destructive wars and expect to keep their jobs. This doesn't mean that China won't eventually invade. It means that it is now following Sun Tzu's advice to find a way to win without war. Later, when the military and economic balance has changed, the risk rises.

Taiwan's democracy, freedom and prosperity are built on occasionally wobbly stability with the mainland. That stability requires three balances. Chinese leaders must balance the imperative of asserting ownership with the imperative of avoiding catastrophic war. American leaders must balance the imperative of deterring invasion with

the imperative of not provoking that invasion. Taiwan's leaders must defend the island's autonomy without provoking the mainland.

For 43 years, the three leaderships have maintained these balances. But sometimes barely. Beijing risked conflict when then Premier Zhu Rongji overreacted to the US visit of Lee Teng-hui in 1996, firing missiles into the sea near Taiwan. Later, Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian edged toward independence and pulled back only when President George W. Bush made clear that, if Chen provoked a war, he was on his own. Today the US is dangerously tipping the balance. If the US is seen to abrogate the foundational 1979 deal to forgo official diplomatic relations and a formal alliance with Taiwan, any Chinese leader must act decisively or be ejected in favor of someone who will.

Washington, seeing Taiwan under pressure, is sending waves of current and former officials to Taiwan. Experts argue whether this explicitly

breaks the agreement; if Americans can argue about it, Chinese leaders may reasonably interpret these actions as having crossed the line. Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo advocates recognizing Taiwan as independent. That would guarantee war. The US military training mission in Taiwan is way over the line. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, when pressed, says the US respects the One China Policy — as if lip service outweighs actions.

Militarily, respected voices ask, wouldn't deterrence be more effective if we moved from strategic ambiguity to an explicit guarantee? That's logical — if one doesn't know anything about Chinese politics and the history of Sino-American relations. The name for an explicit guarantee is alliance. Rather than deterring war, reconstituting the alliance virtually guarantees war. The guarantee of war becomes absolute if America accepts the logic of Elbridge Colby and others that Taiwan should become the foundation stone of a

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¹ Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (Yale University Press, 2021)

military barrier that bottles China up inside the “first island chain.”¹ Biden’s three-times repeated statements that the US will defend Taiwan, even though walked back by his State Department, jeopardize Taiwan’s future more than any development since 1979.

Does Ukraine make a difference to calculations about Taiwan’s future? Yes. First, it explodes the fallacy, common to Moscow and Beijing, that a shared cultural heritage means conquest would be accepted. Second, it mobilizes Western dread that Xi Jinping might create a similar humanitarian disaster. Third, it cautions Beijing that invasion could become a quagmire even after a successful landing. Fourth, it shows how Taiwan could be defended if its defense were properly organized. Fifth, it has mobilized more of Taiwan public opinion in favor of effective defense.

Is the US ready to go to war with China over Taiwan? Well, maybe we could win, but most war games — run by US military experts — end with a US loss. Even if you side with optimists, how long will the American people support an all-out battle with China 90 miles off China’s coast? If we win the first round, how about the 5th round? Credible optimists’ theories of victory usually require shutting down mainland staging facilities. That’s why China is expanding its nuclear arsenal; Los Angeles should worry.

Advocates of clear commitment emphasize mobilizing allies in support. Which allies? Australia normally stands by America even in the most debatable confrontations, but Canberra is nine hours by plane from Taipei, and a poll by the Lowy Institute in 2021 suggested that 57 percent of Australians preferred neutrality in a US-China war. Japan’s commitment seems solid, although Japanese thought leaders are frightened that Pompeo might become US president in 2024 and provoke a war. Singapore will allow the US to use resources that are currently sta-

tioned there but will prohibit any engagement by the Singapore military.

That’s it. National security leaders of both major parties in South Korea oppose even the use of Korea-based US troops in a Taiwan conflict. India will say, not my problem. Abandoned by the US over Scarborough Shoal, the Philippines under Duterte mostly leaned toward China despite reluctantly renewing a Visiting Forces Agreement in 2021; a Bongbong Marcos government leans more heavily toward China. Indonesia and Thailand would lean slightly in Beijing’s direction. Malaysia, as always, advocates



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non-alignment. Vietnam is strongly pro-US but would refrain from going to war with China. Post-Ukraine Europe is particularly sympathetic to Taiwan, but Europeans have been burned by participating in dubious US expeditions nearer to home. We will get Europe’s sympathy. If Washington is seen as provoking war, key “allies” will openly oppose it.

When speaking about allies, Colby and other hardliners inhabit an alternate universe like the Donald Rumsfeld/Dick Cheney one where Iraqis would cheer the arrival of American troops and create an instant stable democracy.

Moreover, Taiwan is not Ukraine. Taiwan’s defense budgets are inadequate. Conscription is a fatuous four months, compared to 18 months in South Korea and Singapore, with fatuous training and a fatuous reserve system. Taipei’s military strategy is to delay a Chinese landing briefly until the US takes over. The great lesson from Vietnam and Afghanistan is that America cannot defend a government that will not wholeheartedly defend itself.

Geographically, Taiwan is more defensible than Ukraine. In the Second World War, General Douglas MacArthur hopped from Australia up to the Philippines. Aides thought, Taiwan is next. But MacArthur viewed Taiwan as too tough. He leapfrogged to Okinawa.

The unsatisfying but effective strategy to support Taiwan combines that insight with tough love. Sending congressmen and retired officials feels good but just provokes the problem Washington thinks it’s deterring. The mainland’s “aggressive” flights near Taiwan and related actions mostly are responses to specific US provocations. Above all, making a firm military commitment provokes war and validates Taipei’s strategy of leaving the problem to Washington. Instead, insist that Taipei organize to defend itself. Serious military budgets. Serious conscrip-

tion. Organize for a long, Ukraine-style, mountain-by-mountain fight that will make conquest intolerably expensive. Arm Taiwan for that fight, not only for an air-sea battle where the other side is becoming locally superior. Don’t provoke our nightmare into reality. Publicly clarify that we and others will support Taiwan’s democracy but that, as in the George W. Bush era, moves toward independence mean withdrawal of US support.

China’s willingness to allow an autonomous Taiwan to persist depends on continuation of a relationship with Taiwan that does not trigger a populist response threatening the Beijing leadership. Given that precondition, China is somewhat deterred from violence by consideration of what would happen after military reunification. Devastated Taiwan, devastated Chinese economy. China would then face a nuclear Japan, a nuclear South Korea, and a Europe, newly unified by the Ukraine war, firmly united with the US in enmity to China.

Taiwan’s fabulous economic success since 1979 has depended on three parties maintaining delicate balances. Nobody gets everything they want. That is frustrating, especially in an era when ideologues of the right and left swarm to absolutist positions, but the alternative is neither a happy, prosperous, democratic, free, independent Taiwan nor a high-tech, prosperous, loyal Taiwan stably incorporated into the mainland system. It is Mariupol East, possibly along with a devastated Shanghai and Los Angeles.

William H. Overholt is Senior Research Fellow at Harvard’s Kennedy School. The author of multiple books about China, he has held RAND’s Distinguished Chair of Asia Pacific Policy and served as President of Fung Global Institute. He lived in Hong Kong for 18 years and had dealings with China’s top leaders.