

‘Taiwan Flashpoint’ in the Indo-Pacific Region: ‘Russian’ lessons for Xi Jinping?

Catherine Yuk-ping Lo

A ‘Taiwan flashpoint’ has remained one of the most critical issues in international politics and foreign policy. On October 9, 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged that the “historical task of the complete reunification of the motherland must be fulfilled.” Many observers believed that the “complete reunification” would be due by 2049, the year of the ultimate realization of the Chinese Dream, although no authoritative Chinese source has explicitly linked the 2049 goal to reunification with Taiwan. In response to Xi’s affirmation, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen urged allies to support Taiwan, stating “they should remember that if Taiwan were to fall, the consequences would be catastrophic for regional peace and the democratic alliance system.”

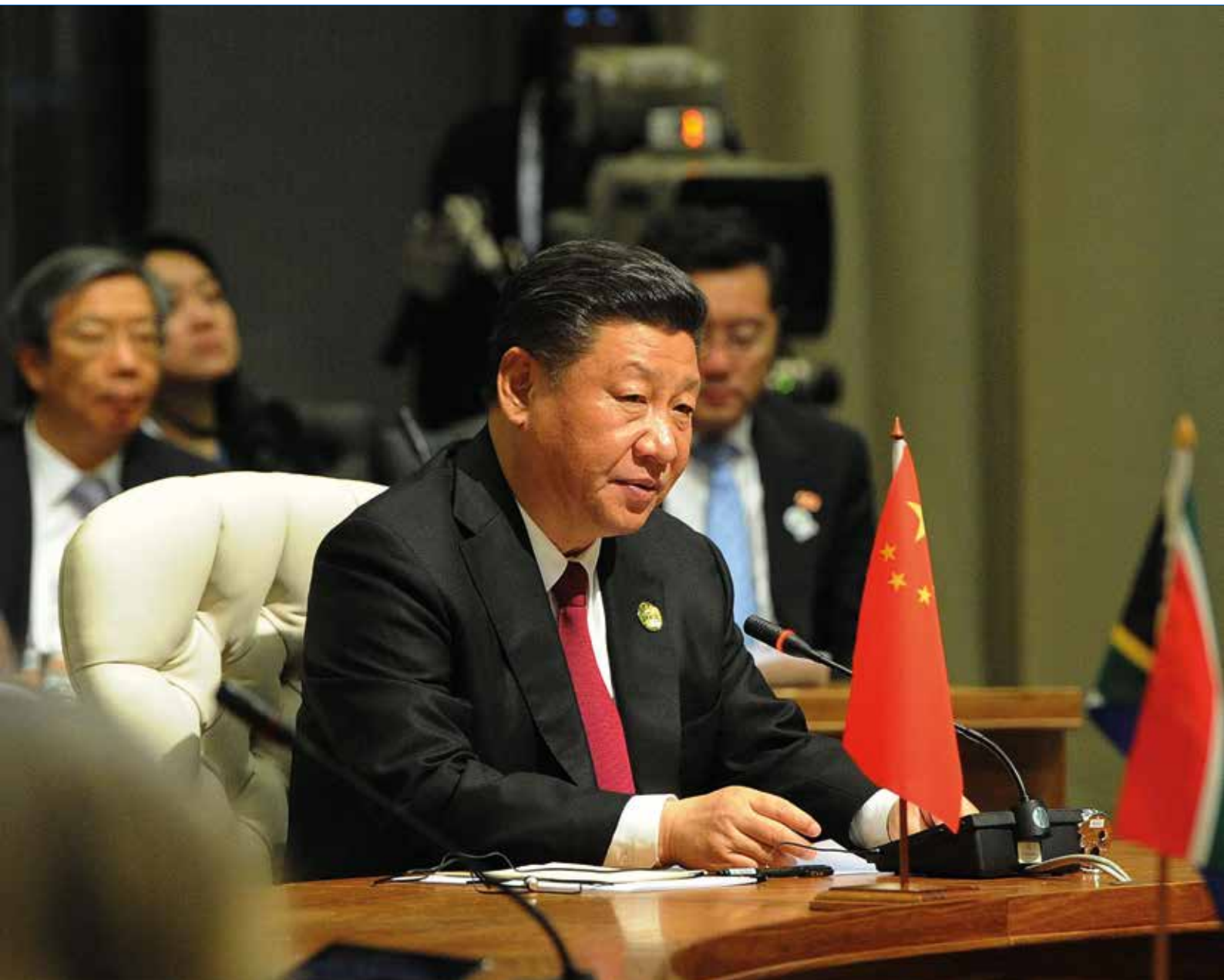
With regard to Russia’s wide-ranging invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a growing number of US military and foreign policy analysts are voicing concern that China may accelerate its long-standing plan to take Taiwan by force at any cost. Is a full-scale Chinese military attack on Taiwan imminent? This article attempts to answer this question by stating that Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine has not advanced the Chinese schedule to reunify Taiwan with the mainland, but that China could be pressured to accomplish the “unfinished business” sooner than the “2049 deadline” in order to sustain its regime legitimacy in light of the deteriorating Sino-US relations and surging Taiwanese support for *de jure* independence, and that the ongoing Russian military invasion of Ukraine has showcased that conventional warfare is the less optimal strategy for China to use to bring Taiwan back to the fold.

CHINA-TAIWAN WAR IS INEVITABLE BUT NOT IMMINENT

Xi has staked his legitimacy on the Chinese Dream, which is his vision for great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The national rejuvenation is to be realized via the attainment of “Two Centenary Goals”: the economic targets of China becoming a “moderately prosperous (*xiaokang*) society ... by around 2021, and the modernization target of China becom-

ing a completely developed country by around 2049.” To realize the Dream, Xi in 2013 announced the flagship Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), a collection of massive infrastructure development and investment projects, seeking to connect Asia with Africa and Europe via land and maritime networks with the goal of improving regional integration, increasing trade and stimulating economic growth. Additionally, the second centenary goal is also about national sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the country. Observers widely believe that 2049 would be the deadline for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to take back Taiwan, peacefully or otherwise.

Many scholars and commentators for years have anticipated that China would invade Taiwan ahead of 2049. In 2021, the US Indo-Pacific Combatant Commander Admiral Philip Davidson warned that China might seek to achieve its reunification with Taiwan “in the next six years.”¹ The so-called “Davidson Window,” referring to the Chinese window of opportunity to seize Taiwan, asserts that once the 2022 Beijing games end, China will be able to pursue political and military ambitions once again, much as its Russian counterpart did following the 2014 Sochi games when Russia invaded and occupied part of Georgia. Instead of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, a



Taiwan flashpoint has remained one of the most critical issues in international politics and foreign policy. On the 9th of October 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged that the “historical task of the complete reunification of the motherland must be fulfilled.” Pictured is the Chinese President in 2018 (Flickr / GovernmentZA / CC BY-ND 2.0)

full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine commenced four days after the end of the Winter Olympic Games in Beijing. As Putin intensifies his assault on Ukraine, a growing number of military and foreign policy analysts in the US and its allies are voicing concern that China may accelerate its plan to take Taiwan by force. Around the same day that Putin announced a military intervention in Ukraine, nine Chinese military jets entered Taiwan’s self-declared air defense identification zone (ADIZ). Just a month before the Russian military invasion of Ukraine, China launched the largest incursion since October 2021, sending 39 warplanes, one bomber, two electronic warfare planes near Taiwan’s self-declared ADIZ. It is generally believed that the Chinese moves validate the “Davidson Window” prediction (i.e., China will invade Taiwan in between 2022 and 2028). A full-fledged military invasion in 2022 is nevertheless highly unlikely.

Sending warplanes to fly near Taiwan can be seen as an example of a Chinese tactic known as “grey zone warfare,” which involves coercive activities that do not reach the threshold of conventional military warfare, but enable the perpetrator to avoid risks associated with military build-up. Chinese warplanes had made occasional incursions prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but the incursions have become a near-daily occurrence since late 2021. The incursions allow the Chinese authorities to test the limits of the American commitment to defend Taiwan, and to undermine confidence in Taiwan’s own defense.

More importantly, Xi has been preoccupied with securing his third term as general secretary of the CCP. Although Xi smoothly removed the two-term limit on the Presidency in 2018, he still needs party approval to win a third term when

the Party Congress meets in October 2022. Ever since he became CCP General Secretary in 2012, he has set in motion the purge within the Party in the name of an anti-corruption campaign. One of the most striking incidents occurred in 2014, when ex-security chief Zhou Yongkang became the most senior Chinese official to be arrested and expelled from the CCP for corruption. In addition, in 2020 Xi initiated a new round of purges, a “rectification campaign” against the police and public security establishment to ensure its absolute loyalty. Xi is widely expected to secure a third term as CCP General Secretary, so it is highly unlikely that he will take a dangerous gamble on Taiwan before the next Party Congress in the fall of 2022.

A military invasion in 2024 is probable given the deteriorating Sino-US relations and rising Taiwanese support for *de jure* independence, but China would not militarily invade Taiwan unless the latter declares independence.

To a certain degree, US compliance with the One China Policy and its opposition to Taiwanese independence stated in the Three Communiqués and Six Assurances² contribute to the mainland’s confidence and patience to pursue a policy of peaceful reunification with Taiwan. The notable progress in US-Taiwan relations since President Donald Trump took office has nevertheless made Beijing worry that Washington could wittingly turn the cross-strait issue into a geopolitical card, while the China-US strategic rivalry grows increasingly intense. China once hoped that the more confrontational Sino-US relations ushered in by the Trump administration would change course in the Biden-Harris administration. The current US administration, however, has followed a hawkish and aggressive approach to China. One of the indications is that Biden invited Taiwan’s *de facto* ambassador to Washington to his inauguration. It was the first time a Taiwanese leader had been invited to the marquee presidential event. Moreover, there are signs that the US is no longer upholding the long-standing “strategic ambiguity” to Taiwan enshrined in the US Taiwan Relations Act (TRA).³ The US commitment was confirmed at a CNN town hall event when CNN anchor Anderson Cooper asked Biden whether the US would come to Taiwan’s defense if China attacked. Although the White House later insisted that Biden’s remarks did not signify a change in the US’s Taiwan policy, the president’s response was generally understood to reflect the instinctive US reaction that it ought to protect Taiwan in a military confrontation with China. Following the Biden remarks, in an interview with CNN on October 28, Tsai acknowledged that US forces were in Taiwan training with the Taiwanese military. Adding up all these incidents indicates that Taiwan would be a proxy in potential Sino-US military confrontations.

The clock is ticking for Chinese reunification with Taiwan. Previous CCP leaders have been content to maintain the status

quo and bide their time concerning the Taiwan issue. The calculation has been that Taiwanese reunification with the mainland should be a consequence of the national rejuvenation rather than a cause of the rejuvenation. This meant that having a thriving and modernized economy would influence the Taiwanese people to embrace the mainland under the One Country Two Systems (1C2S) doctrine, a model that was put into practice in Hong Kong and Macau after the 1997 and 1999 handovers, respectively. In a 2019 poll released by Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), 79% of the Taiwanese public, however, expressed disapproval of the 1C2S proposal.^{iv} It appears that the idea of peaceful reunification is slipping away from China, and thus Xi’s hope of peacefully fulfilling the Chinese Dream.

One way for China to turn the tide is to stop Taiwan from electing another anti-unification political leader in the next presidential election in January 2024. Beijing may hence choose to escalate its military provocations and even engage in all-out military conflict to sway the Taiwanese electorate towards unification. Having said that, it is widely believed that the Taiwanese remain pragmatic about Taiwan’s sovereignty. In other words, the DPP-led Taiwanese government would still prefer to defend the status quo, which means it operates separately from China, rather than pushing for a formal declaration of independence from the mainland which could trigger a full-fledged military response from China. To avoid provoking the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific region, China would not militarily invade Taiwan unless the latter declares independence.

THE SURVIVAL OF THE CCP IS KEY

Would China invade Taiwan even though the latter does not declare independence? It is believed that domestic factors primarily shape Xi’s calculus regarding whether to use force against Taiwan. Steve Tsang, Director of SOAS China Institute, proposes a “Party-state realism” framework through which CCP foreign policy decision-making can be understood. This framework says that the core interests in Chinese foreign policy are state security (i.e., survival of the CCP), followed by national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and then the development of a stable economy.⁵ The priority implies that the CCP values uniting China and Taiwan more than having a stable economy.

One domestic factor that could lead to Taiwan’s invasion is if the CCP needed to strengthen its state legitimacy during an economic decline. It is believed that in the absence of political legitimacy and with fading ideological legitimacy, performative legitimacy serves as the main pillar that justifies the legitimate rule of the CCP. However, the performative pillar has been eroded since 2012 because the Chinese economy has reached the limits of its quantitative growth, which had been driven by investment and exports over the past 30 years.⁶



The idea is that having a thriving and modernized economy would influence the Taiwanese people to embrace the mainland under the One Country Two Systems (IC2S), a model that has been put in practice in Hong Kong and Macau after the 1997 and 1999 handover, respectively. Pictured is a PRC sign in Mawei reading: "Achieve peaceful reunification under one country, two systems" (photo: Wikimedia Commons)

As the Chinese economy has experienced a slowdown and will continue to face headwinds going into the foreseeable future, the CCP leaders have altered the idea of performative legitimacy from economic performance to pandemic management. For the past two years, the Chinese “zero-Covid” strategy has been viewed by Western observers as a draconian but effective way to maintain low infection rates considering the massive population size of the country. The strategy’s apparent success has been a source of pride for the Chinese people, and the country’s leadership has claimed that China’s mobilization response to Covid-19 demonstrates the government’s superior governance capability as a form of performative legitimacy. The costs of city-wide lockdowns nonetheless are truly expensive, especially in China’s coastal economic hubs. It is estimated that that imposing a full-scale lockdown in a major city like Shanghai would reduce national real (inflation-adjusted) GDP by 4%.⁷ At the time of writing, 373 million people in 45 Chinese cities are under some form of lockdown due to a surge in Omicron cases across China, accounting for 40% of the country’s economy.⁸

Even if the zero-tolerance Covid policy proves to be successful in terms of pandemic mitigation, the economy of China will suffer from the effects of a “long covid.” The CCP might then have to safeguard its legitimacy by shifting its reliance from performative to nationalist legitimacy. Given the existential importance that the CCP leadership and the Chinese people have placed on the Taiwan issue over decades, any nationalist movement within China will involve calls for taking the island by force. Thus, if nationalism becomes the key legitimacy pillar for the CCP, the leadership could be pressured to invade Taiwan to meet the demands of the Chinese public.

SAY GOODBYE TO CONVENTIONAL WARFARE

If China uses force against Taiwan, what are the chances of China succeeding? Many scholars and commentators have tried to answer this sixty-four-thousand-dollar question. Some argue that China will lack the amphibious transport capacity necessary to conduct a cross-strait invasion successfully for at least the next five years. Others believe that it is just a matter of time before China acquires the required



The so-called “Davidson Window,” referring to the Chinese window of opportunity to seize Taiwan, asserts that once the 2022 Beijing games ends, China will be able to pursue political and military ambitions once again. Pictured is the closing ceremony (photo: Andrew Makedonski / Shutterstock.com)

military might. At least based on the current estimation, China’s military capacity has been described as the “fastest modernizing military force” globally. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) already has the largest army in the world (i.e., 1 million members of its armed forces in comparison to Taiwan’s 163,000 active service members), while China’s nuclear arsenal is generally ranked third in the world.⁹ That Xi has moved the PLA’s modernization timeline from 2035 to 2027 is another indication demonstrating the Chinese capability to invade Taiwan sooner.¹⁰

One key lesson China has learned from the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war is that conventional warfare is the less optimal strategy. Intelligence experts had initially anticipated that Russia would take Kyiv within days of its attack on Ukraine, but the Ukrainian military “smart tactical use” of its anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons, such as the Javelin and Stinger systems provided by the US and NATO, has deterred Russian ground troops from advancing to Kyiv, forcing Russia’s military to “focus on its top goal of liberating the Don-

bas region.” Despite the fact that the situations of Ukraine and Taiwan are incompatible in many ways, Taiwan would adopt a similar asymmetric tactic, or so-called “porcupine strategy,” to resist the military invasion of the PLA. To launch a full-fledged airborne or amphibious attack across the Taiwan strait, China would need to be confident that either (1) the PLA could swiftly take Taiwan before a US military response; or (2) that the West would let Taiwan go without military intervention. The first scenario is implausible given the US intelligence capabilities and the vast logistics involved in seizing Taiwan, while the second option is likewise doubtful given the unambiguous US commitment to defend Taiwan in case of Chinese invasion, together with the strategic importance of the island to the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific region.¹¹

THE DECADENT DECLINE OF THE WEST? NOT QUITE YET

China’s 2049 plan was seemingly promising until the outbreak of war in Ukraine. The U.S had alienated its European allies with Trump’s “America First” policy. The European Un-



ion has been chaotic with the departure of Britain and refugee crises. China, in stark contrast, has been strengthening its economic ties with countries around the globe. An ineffectual response by the West toward the Russian invasion in the Crimean War in 2014 re-confirmed the existing belief of Beijing and Moscow that the US and its allies are weakening and divided. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine nevertheless has rallied European countries against Russia, prompted Germany to increase its defense spending, and even convinced historically neutral countries to take a tougher stance against Moscow. Popular notions that liberal democracy is decadent and in decline thus merit some re-assessments. The West is in decline; however, the rate of decline is not as fast as Beijing and Moscow would like to see. A strong, determined, and united America and its allies would make Taiwan's reunification with the mainland even more uncertain in the coming decades, provided that the commitment of the alliances of democracies remains.

Catherine Yuk-ping Lo, who was born and raised in Hong Kong, is Assistant Professor at Maastricht University. She specializes in international relations and health security.

Would you like to react?

Mail the editor: redactie@atlcom.nl.

1. Suliman, A. (2021). "China could invade Taiwan in the next 6 years, assume global leadership role, U.S. admiral warns. *Nbcnews*", March 10, 2022. Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-could-invade-taiwan-next-6-years-assume-global-leadership-n1260386>
2. The Six Assurances states that the US would not (1) set a date for termination of arms sales, (2) amend the TRA, (3) consult with China regarding U.S. arms sales, (4) mediate between Taiwan and China, (5) alter its position that Taiwan's future be decided peacefully between the parties, or pressure Taiwan to negotiate, or (6) recognize Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan.
3. The TRA ended official recognition of Taiwan, formally recognized mainland China, and relegated Taiwan into a non-profit corporation, "The American Institute in Taiwan" (AIT). The TRA permitted the U.S. to continue all cultural and commercial exchanges with Taiwan, including defensive weapons "in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain sufficient self-defense capabilities." TRA language formally forbade any invasion or threats against Taiwan by "other than peaceful means" as "a threat to the peace and security of the western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States." It also allowed the U.S. to export "arms of defensive character to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion."
4. Mainland Affairs Council, Republic of China (Taiwan). (2019). Mainland Affairs Council. https://www.mac.gov.tw/en/News_Content.aspx?n=A921DFB2651FF92F&sms=37838322A6DA5E79&s=9F00FAD137241F9
5. Tsang, S. (2020). "Party-State realism: A framework for understanding China's approach to foreign policy". *Journal of Contemporary China* 29(122), 304–318.
6. Lo, C. Y. P. (2022). The coronavirus as the 'final straw' of the CCP's performative legitimacy? In *Public health in Asia during the COVID-19 pandemic: Global Health Governance, migrant labour, and International Health Crises* (pp. 217–230). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
7. Qian, N. (2022). "What is China's COVID Endgame?", *Project Syndicate*, April 13, 2022. Available at: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-unsustainable-zero-covid-policy-by-nancy-qian-1-2022-04>
8. Stevenson, A. (2022). China's economy pays a price as lockdowns restrict nearly a third of its population. *The New York Times*, April 14, 2022. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/14/business/china-lockdowns-economy.html>
9. Tierney Jr., J. J. (2022). "Taiwan: A dangerous flashpoint." *The Institute of World Politics*, January 27, 2022. Available at: <https://www.iwp.edu/articles/2022/01/27/taiwan-a-dangerous-flashpoint/>
10. Erickson, A. S., Collins, G. B. (2021). "U.S.-China competition enters the decade of maximum danger." *Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy*, December 2021. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/18/china-danger-military-missile-taiwan/>
11. Taiwan is part of the first island chain. Whoever controls the area inside the first island chain controls shipping and supply lines to China. In the event of conflict, the US would aim to deny China this control while defending the first island chain nations and dominating domains outside the chain.