



# What does the Ukraine crisis mean for Taiwan?

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For *The Straits Times*

With more than 100,000 Russian troops massed on Ukraine's borders, NATO rushing arms to Kyiv, and the United States and other G-7 countries ominously but vaguely warning of "massive consequences" if Russia should invade, war clouds seem gathering over Europe.

The commentariat has speculated that a Russian invasion of Ukraine could lead to China taking advantage of US preoccupation in Europe to attack Taiwan.

On Thursday, the Chinese and Russian foreign ministers, perhaps intentionally, fanned such speculations when a statement issued after their meeting in Beijing said that they had "coordinated" positions on Ukraine among other regional issues.

There is a superficial plausibility to the scenario.

In 2012, then US President Barack Obama drew a "red line" over the use of chemical weapons in Syria. But when he failed to enforce it the following year when Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad clearly crossed it, the credibility of American power was shaken and American adversaries emboldened. The more so because Mr Obama in effect outsourced a response in Syria to Russia.

But I do not think what the US does or does not do in Ukraine will have more than a very marginal effect on Beijing's calculations on Taiwan.

Syria a decade ago and Ukraine in 2022 are very different situations.

I do not claim to be able to read President Vladimir Putin's mind. But we should not take it for granted that the Russian leader intends to launch a full-scale

invasion of Ukraine.

Mr Putin has denied that this is his intention. That is what he would say in any case. But President Joe Biden has also said that he isn't sure if Mr Putin intends an invasion.

Even Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky has criticised Western handling of the crisis and accused its leaders of inciting "panic" with repeated warnings of invasion.

#### WHAT PUTIN HAS ACHIEVED

More to the point, why should Mr Putin risk a full-scale invasion? Consider what he has already achieved.

Russia's annexation of Crimea is a fait accompli. Much of Eastern Ukraine – about a third of the country's population – is effectively out of Kyiv's control.

As Mr Zelensky's criticisms indicate, Kyiv already has to be acutely sensitive to Moscow's interests.

Of course, the Russian demand that Ukraine be barred from joining Nato and Western troops pulled back from Eastern Europe will not be met.

I doubt Moscow really expected the West to agree. Mr Putin knows better than anyone else that no sovereign country will ever give another country a veto over its security and defence policies.

But by forcing Nato off-balance and making it scurry around, Mr Putin has shaken up the West and demonstrated once again that Russia's interests in its "near abroad" cannot be ignored with impunity.

Giddy with hubris in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the West had steadily expanded Nato to Russia's borders.

In 2013, the European Union fecklessly encouraged Ukraine to move closer to the West without anticipating a Russian response being able to deter a response.

The Ukraine crisis is the consequence of those mistakes. Mr Putin is teaching the West a lesson.

Russia has crucial security and other interests in Ukraine which lie at the heart of Russian culture

and identity. Any Russian government would find a Western alliance on its borders threatening.

#### WHAT ARE WESTERN INTERESTS IN UKRAINE ANYWAY?

Despite professions of unity, differences of opinion among Nato members have once again been exposed, with Germany – Europe's most important economy – clearly reluctant to take a hard line.

Mr Putin has demonstrated that Nato cannot force him to pull back his troops from Ukraine's borders until he is ready to do so.

Mr Biden may have mis-spoken when he said Nato members had differences over how to respond to a "minor incursion" in Ukraine, but old Joe spoke only the truth.

Mr Putin cannot reverse Nato's eastward expansion. But the tenuousness of Nato's extended deterrence has been exposed.

If Nato cannot even influence Russian troop movements, is Nato really going to consider an attack on the likes of Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro or even the Baltic states an attack on all members and risk war with a nuclear-armed Russia?

And why should Moscow launch a conventional across-the-border invasion? Mr Putin's generals practically invented the concept of "grey zone operations" in Ukraine.

Even if Russia does invade, unlike in Syria a decade ago, no one expects the US to use force as a response and the US has not threatened to use force. It has only threatened more sanctions.

In fact, I would go so far as to say that no one really expects any effective response. Sanctions are more a sop to Western amour propre rather than intended to change Russian behaviour.

Previous sanctions did not deter the present crisis and there is little reason to expect that more sanctions will be effective. China is an enormous back door for Russia to evade sanctions.

#### THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TAIWAN AND UKRAINE

Beijing surely understands the obvious: US interests in Taiwan and Ukraine are not symmetrical. Taiwan is vastly more important to the US and to the world economy than Ukraine.

Taiwan is a prosperous and advanced industrial economy – the eighth largest in Asia – a crucial and technologically advanced node in the global semi-conductor

supply-chain. It is ranked 29th in the world in terms of per capita GDP by the International Monetary Fund.

Ukraine's gross domestic product per capita is ranked 135 in the world by the IMF, the lowest in Europe. While some sectors of its economy are advanced, its economic prospects are shadowed by rampant corruption and it is ranked 117 out of 180 countries in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index.

The US has no treaty obligation to defend either Ukraine or Taiwan and maintains a policy of "strategic ambiguity" with regard to the latter.

But given the political mood towards China in the US, it is highly improbable that the US will not respond robustly and kinetically to a Chinese attack on Taiwan. It would be political suicide for any American president to stand idly by.

Moreover, if the US fails to defend Taiwan, the entire American alliance system in East Asia, as well as looser partnerships such as the Quad, will be badly – and probably fatally – undermined.

American allies and partners will question the value of American commitments and working with the US. The entire security architecture that underpins East Asian stability and prosperity will begin to unravel.

A US-China conflict over Taiwan will certainly draw in Japan. Tokyo cannot stay aloof without irredeemably damaging its alliance with the US.

If Japan is involved, so also will Australia and South Korea be drawn in as they too cannot distance themselves from the conflict without damaging their alliances with the US beyond repair.

Therefore, if it attacks Taiwan, China will probably find all of US allies in East Asia, and possibly India too, arrayed against it in one way or another.

China badly misjudged the US mood and was caught by surprise by the trade war and the bipartisan determination to compete with and confront China. I don't think Beijing will risk another miscalculation.

For China, an attack on Taiwan must succeed. Any other outcome will threaten the stability of Communist Party of China rule whose claim to legitimacy rests on its ability to defend China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

#### THE TAIWAN GAMBLE

War is always a gamble. War over Taiwan is at present betting on long odds.

The People's Liberation Army has become a formidable modern military force. But it has no experience of modern warfare and none of amphibious operations which will be needed to capture Taiwan.

Amphibious operations are among the most difficult of all military operations to carry out. Capturing Taiwan would require an operation at least on the scale and complexity of the Inchon landings in 1950 during the Korean War.

War over Taiwan will certainly

disrupt the world economy. At a time when China is facing a future of slower growth and stability is foremost in the minds of Mr Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders, I doubt that regardless of what happens in Ukraine, they will roll the dice over Taiwan.

For that matter, war over Ukraine will also disrupt the world economy. While China may feel a certain satisfaction at the spectacle of the US and Europe discommodated over Ukraine, I do not think they would view the prospect of conflict in Europe with equanimity.

We will never know for sure what Mr Xi and Mr Putin discussed when they met during the Winter Olympics. But I doubt Mr Xi urged Mr Putin to invade. Their joint statement does not contain the word "Ukraine".

Talk of "coordination", Chinese expressions of support for Russia's security concerns, and the speculation over Taiwan, is perhaps better understood as psychological operations to unsettle the US and its allies.

In October or November this year, the Chinese Communist Party will hold its 20th Congress at which Mr Xi will seek to extend his term beyond the customary 10 years.

Mr Xi is feared. He has destroyed or sidelined all obvious rivals and will probably get what he wants. But the anti-corruption campaign cannot have won him many friends among the cadres.

His foreign policy, particularly the relationship with the US, has drawn cautious and muted internal criticism.

In 2008, at the time of the Beijing Summer Olympics, China's international reputation was never higher. Today, multiple international polls show that there is nary a country without concerns about some aspect or another of Chinese behaviour.

No country will ever shun China. But in June last year, Xinhua reported that Mr Xi himself had ordered his officials to create "a credible, lovable and respectable image of China" and to expand its circle of friends.

This does not suggest that Mr Xi himself considers China's diplomacy a stellar success. All the more reason not to gamble over Taiwan at this time.

I do not know how the crisis over Ukraine will play out.

It is possible that when Mr Putin judges the West has been sufficiently shaken and stirred, he will simply declare that the exercises that his troops were engaged in are over and order them back to the barracks, leaving Nato on tenterhooks to wonder when the next exercises will be held and if they will only be exercises.

China will never forswear the use of force to "reunify" Taiwan. I do not say war will never occur. But whatever happens in Ukraine, unless Taiwan goes crazy and unilaterally declares independence, war over Taiwan is not imminent.

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Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen inspecting navy troops during the inauguration ceremony of domestically produced mine-laying ships at a navy base in Kaohsiung, southern Taiwan, on Jan 14. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE