

STEVE CHAN

## Precedent, Path Dependency, and Reasoning by Analogy

*The Strategic Implications of the Ukraine War for Sino–American Relations and Relations across the Taiwan Strait*

### ABSTRACT

This essay addresses the strategic implications of the Russo–Ukrainian War as it pertains to relations between China and the US, especially with respect to how this conflict may inform prospective developments across the Taiwan Strait. I pursue this question under three topics: the influence of precedents, path dependency, and reasoning by analogy. The war in Ukraine has interrupted Washington’s intention to pivot to Asia to focus on containment of a rising China, and it has also caused Moscow and Beijing to align more closely. Finally, it may have made the direct military intervention of the US in a possible future crisis involving Taiwan less likely.

**KEYWORDS:** Russo-Ukrainian war, precedents, path dependency, reasoning by analogy, relations across the Taiwan Strait

This essay explores the strategic implications of the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, focusing on lessons one may draw to inform an understanding of the evolving relationship between the US and China. A constant point of contention in this relationship is the status of Taiwan. The situation in Ukraine naturally evokes a parallel in some people’s thinking about future relations across the Taiwan Strait. What can we learn from the actions and

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*Asian Survey*, Vol. 62, Number 5-6, pp. 945–968. ISSN 0004-4687, electronic ISSN 1533-838X. © 2022 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2022.1789165>.

inaction of those involved in the Ukrainian situation for possible developments in Sino–American relations and the perennial flashpoint of contention over Taiwan’s unresolved status? I discuss these implications in terms of three concepts: precedents, path dependency, and reasoning by analogy. I should say at the outset that these concepts are not mutually exclusive, so the implications being drawn from one of them may be the same as those drawn from another. Before discussing these concepts, I turn to a brief discussion of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine as well as a brief account of recent Sino–American relations.

### A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF RUSSO–UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

As I write these words, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has already lasted for nearly four months. This action is generally described in the US as an “unprovoked” attack, and hailed as a shining example of heroic and effective Ukrainian resistance. Many commentators have also pointed to Moscow’s inability to prevail in a seemingly lopsided contest, and the strong and unified response by Western countries in rallying to the assistance of Kyiv and punishing Moscow with crippling sanctions. Russia’s early efforts to encircle and capture large Ukrainian cities, especially Kyiv, stalled, with Moscow losing about one-third of its invading force, according to the British Ministry of Defense (*Sky News* 2022). More recently, however, it has had more success in seizing territories in the Donbas region. Although Ukrainian forces have slowed down, and in some places stopped and reversed, Russia’s military advances, many of Ukraine’s cities lie in ruins, and much of its population has been displaced. As the war drags on, Russia’s military advantage over Ukraine has become more evident. There are now voices suggesting that Ukraine will eventually have to make territorial concessions to end the war. In the meantime, over a quarter of Ukraine’s population has been displaced. Millions have emigrated to neighboring European countries, principally Poland.

Western media have prominently featured many stories about the suffering of Ukraine’s people. There has been an outpouring of sympathy and support for Ukraine in the rest of the world. Only a handful of countries have supported Russia’s explanation of its military invasion, with a large majority in the United Nations voting to condemn Moscow’s action. The US, the European Union, and countries such as Japan, Australia, and Canada

initiated serious economic sanctions to punish Russia, including freezing its assets abroad and locking its banks out of international financial transactions relying on the SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications) system. There was even a boycott on importing Russian oil and, less effectively, natural gas, though it carried a heavy cost for the sanctioning countries, especially those in Europe that depend heavily on such energy imports.

However, the Western concern with Ukraine's plight did not extend to outright military intervention on its behalf. Despite sending massive amounts of military equipment and weapons, the Biden administration had signaled publicly even before Russia's invasion that it would not send US military personnel to Ukraine to assist its defense. Moreover, as the crisis unfolded, it also denied Kyiv's request to impose a no-fly zone over its airspace. Washington also turned down a proposal to allow Poland to turn over the MIG fighters in its possession to help Ukraine defend its airspace (and for Poland to exchange these MIGs for US jet fighters). The US and other NATO members have largely limited their military assistance to providing weapons to help ground troops repel Russian tanks and helicopters.

Ukraine has also been subject to counterblockade by the Russian navy. It has not been able to export grain, a key source of foreign revenue. Its economy has suffered an estimated 45% contraction, while Russia's has declined by 11.2% (Zakaria 2022). As the conflict has evolved into a war of attrition, Kyiv's reliance on NATO assistance will become more acute. The two belligerent countries' respective "burn rates"—that is, how fast they use up their personnel, materiel, and even patience—will determine how long they can stay in the fight. Kyiv may come under increasing pressure to negotiate a settlement with Moscow, involving some form of exchanging territory for peace. Reconstructing its economy and reconstituting its society in the war's aftermath will be huge challenges. And even after peace is restored, it will still face the unenviable geographic reality of having to live with a large and menacing neighbor.

#### ONGOING SINO-AMERICAN RELATIONS

Regarding Chinese actions and inaction, Beijing's public presentation of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has generally mirrored Moscow's explanation for the invasion, claiming that it stemmed from Russia's reaction to constant

Western pressure, especially NATO's expansion to and encroachment on areas adjacent to Russia. Yet Beijing has been reluctant to side completely with Moscow's position. It has consistently and publicly professed its support for the principle of sovereignty for all states. Moscow's recognition of the two breakaway republics in eastern Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk, is concerning to Beijing because of the obvious parallel to Taiwan. For Beijing to show support for Russia on this issue would undermine its own position on Taiwan. Specifically, the secession of eastern Ukraine—and, earlier, of Crimea from Ukraine—could provide fodder for those supporting Taiwan's independence, and Russia's recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk could provide a legal precedent for the US to do the same for Taiwan.

This said, the Russo-Ukrainian war came at a propitious time for Beijing. Before this episode, Washington had been clearly "pivoting" to Asia, with a focus on rallying China's neighbors to oppose Beijing. US officials have been transparent in designating China as the US's main competitor, or even adversary, in international relations. Many have professed that policies intended to engage China and transform it into a more cooperative and congenial "responsible stakeholder" have failed, and that it is time to take a tougher stance against Beijing (see e.g. Campbell and Rapp-Hooper 2020). Significantly, even though sharp partisan divisions usually characterize politics in Washington, Republicans and Democrats generally agree on this policy of confronting China. The Russo-Ukrainian conflict has, at least for now, weakened the push in Washington to single out China as the US's chief opponent in a global struggle for influence, and disrupted the Biden administration's attempt to shift attention and resources from Europe and the Middle East to East Asia in a campaign to contain Beijing's influence.

Before this war, Washington had increased its political and military support for Taipei, a position implying greater support for an independent Taiwan, at the same time that it claimed to oppose any unilateral attempt to alter the status quo across the Taiwan Strait. On October 21, 2021, when asked whether Washington would come to Taiwan's defense if it were attacked by China, president Joe Biden said, "Yes, we have a commitment to do that." The White House, however, quickly walked back Biden's statement, indicating that there has not been any change in the US policy of "strategic ambiguity," which declines to commit Washington to any future course of action (Widakuswara 2021). On at least two other public occasions, when asked whether the US would intervene if Taiwan were attacked, Biden

said yes, and again the White House tried to walk it back, insisting that there has been no change in US policy toward Taiwan. Nevertheless, few people believe that these were mere slips of the tongue. Biden's statements were preceded by similar indications from former US officials. For example, during his visit to Taiwan, former US secretary of state Mike Pompeo publicly called on the US to extend diplomatic recognition to Taiwan as a sovereign country (Blanchard 2022). These words obviously caused grave concern in Beijing.

In this context, the timing of the Russo–Ukrainian war might have given Beijing some “breathing space” to escape Washington’s “strategic headlight,” at least for now. The 9/11 event (and the subsequent “war on terror” waged by the US, including invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan), the global recession caused by the housing bubble in the US in 2008–09, and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019–21 have also helped distract or divert US attention from the challenges of a rising China. Without these intervening events, Beijing would have faced a more concerted US effort to contain and confront it earlier, when it was in a substantially weaker position to resist US pressure. Although the war in Ukraine did not reduce US animosity toward China, it has had the effect of reminding Washington that cooperation from Beijing is still desirable, perhaps even necessary, on various important matters, including imposing effective economic sanctions on Russia and discouraging any military assistance to it from China (such as by providing Moscow drones for military deployment).

On March 18, 2022, Joe Biden and Xi Jinping had a phone conversation lasting almost two hours. Public statements from the US side indicated that Beijing has been warned that “severe consequences” will follow if China gives economic and military assistance to Russia. Although the readouts of the conversation from both sides contained few specifics, it is not hard to imagine that Beijing would ask for reciprocity regarding this demand from Washington to refrain from assisting Moscow in the war in Ukraine. And the most obvious target for such reciprocity would be US assistance to Taiwan. Nor does it take much imagination to see that a weakened or defeated Russia would enable the US to refocus its attention and resources to contain and confront China. In other words, a protracted struggle in Ukraine would be to Beijing’s advantage, enabling it to divert US pressure from itself and increasing Russia’s dependence on its support.

Before turning to the next section, I should clarify that the propositions I advance are just that: propositions. They are subject to the judgment of

history. My prognosis may be too optimistic, or too pessimistic. For example, some colleagues may question my view that the Ukraine war is likely to reduce US pressure on China, to lower the probability of US intervention in the Taiwan Strait, and to draw Russia and China closer together. Other colleagues may have different opinions on these and other matters. Space limitations do not allow me to explain and fully document my reasons, or to enumerate and counter possible objections.

### THE RELEVANCE OF THE RUSSO–UKRAINIAN WAR AS A PRECEDENT

Precedents create examples for people to follow or imitate. They can inform subsequent decisions. Therefore, precedents can be helpful as a harbinger for future developments. With respect to this paper's topic, an obvious example would be that Russia's invasion of Ukraine, whether it turns out eventually to be successful or unsuccessful, may influence officials' decisions in other situations that may involve a resort to arms. For instance, Beijing would naturally try to draw lessons from Russia's experience in the conflict in Ukraine. Already, military analysts in China have stressed the importance of unmanned drones in future conflicts. As another example, it would be natural for these analysts to ask what specifically the US reluctance to intervene directly in the Russo–Ukrainian war portends for a prospective conflict between China and Taiwan. Washington and its European allies have clearly drawn a line between direct military assistance to members of the NATO alliance and those outside it to justify their decision not to send combat troops to Ukraine to assist Kyiv or, as already mentioned, even to impose a no-fly zone over Ukraine. In addition to refusing to supply Ukraine with MIG fighters from the arsenals of some NATO members, like Poland, US media have reported that Washington has declined to provide Kyiv with rockets that can reach Russian territory. Are these decisions likely to be repeated in a possible future situation pertaining to Taiwan (as opposed to, say, South Korea and Japan), given that this island does not have a formal defense treaty with the US?

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is of course not the only such incident in recent years. For instance, it fought a war against Georgia in 2008. Similarly, in the past 40 years the US has invaded Grenada, Panama, Afghanistan, and Iraq. It has also attacked other countries, primarily with airstrikes, as in

episodes involving Libya, Serbia, Somalia, and Syria, as well as covert actions such as mining Nicaragua's harbors. Although some people have celebrated the end of the Cold War in the expectation of a new era of peace and stability (e.g., Fukuyama 1993), wars and military interventions have increased in recent years. The US decision to wage a preventive war against Iraq is especially noteworthy because it shows that when a great power decides to use military force, even when it acts without authorization from the United Nations, it is difficult for other countries to restrain it. Moreover, the public rationale given by Washington for this action, namely that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and that he had ties with the terrorist organization al-Qaeda, turned out to be false and was instead just an excuse to wage war. The explanation given by Moscow for invading Ukraine, namely that Kyiv was ruled by a fascist regime persecuting Russian-speaking residents, is also unpersuasive. The larger point of this discussion is that Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine augurs and points to a more permissive international environment in which great powers are increasingly inclined to take matters into their own hands, including the direct resort to armed force. Ironically, compared to the days of the Cold War, when mutual nuclear deterrence cautioned against such action, the incidence of wars and military interventions by major powers has been on the rise in recent years.

There is another important, though perhaps less immediately obvious, precedent in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I am referring to the idea that major powers do not easily tolerate regimes that feature an opposing ideology or political system in their sphere of influence. Washington's policies toward various South American and Caribbean countries, including Grenada, Nicaragua, Cuba, and most recently Venezuela, point to this tendency. Moscow's displeasure with Georgia, the Baltic states, and former members of the Warsaw Pact also points to this pattern. Its recent invasion of Ukraine is another reminder that perceived encroachments on another major power's immediate periphery can be a dangerous cause for war. From Beijing's perspective, continued US support for Taiwan is also highly provocative—just as Moscow had made quite clear that NATO's expansion to include Ukraine would pose an existential threat to it and that it would not tolerate NATO dominating Ukraine's government and politics (Mearsheimer 2014, 2022a, 2022b; Sarotte 2017). In short, Russia's invasion of Ukraine provides another precedent and warning that major powers are not inclined to accept the influence of a hostile power in their immediate neighborhood. If war is to

be avoided, major powers should refrain from infringing on one another's traditional turf. One hardly needs to be reminded that China fought the US in Korea to avoid having a hostile regime on its doorstep. Just imagine what Trump or Biden would do if Mexico were to join an alliance hostile to the US. The one time the world has come closest to a nuclear war was in 1962, when the Kremlin introduced missiles to Cuba after the US tried to overthrow Fidel Castro in the Bay of Pigs invasion.

As mentioned briefly already, Moscow's formal recognition of the two breakaway republics in eastern Ukraine introduces another precedent. There have obviously been other occasions when secession movements have escalated to become major issues of international contention, such as when Bangladesh seceded from (West) Pakistan to become an independent state and when the former Yugoslav federation disintegrated and was subsequently reconstituted as several independent entities. Although it contradicts popular Western narratives of the Korean War and the Vietnam War, if one accepts the proposition that the Vietnamese or the Korean people belong to a single nation, and are therefore entitled to unification under a single state, these conflicts can also be seen as attempts by one side to secede and by the other side to prevent that secession. Indeed, the entire legal justification for the US to intervene in these conflicts was based on the argument that the temporary demarcation line separating the northern and southern contestants in these civil wars constituted an international border and therefore the crossing of this border by northerners was tantamount to an act of international aggression. From that point of view, these conflicts were not instances of civil war but international conflicts between sovereign states.

The larger point of this discussion, of course, concerns the legitimate rules and norms for addressing secessionist movements. The US itself fought a civil war over the right of the Confederacy to secede from the Union. African states have overwhelmingly accepted the borders drawn by colonial powers, even though they often contradict natural demarcations suggested by geography and ethnic ties. As the US has stated, Moscow's recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk contravenes international law and violates Ukraine's sovereignty. The obvious retort from Beijing is, how then can Washington justify its support for Taiwan's *de facto* independence, an island which in Beijing's eyes is trying to secede from China? Only 14 countries recognize Taiwan as a state, and most of them are small states that can hardly be seen on a global map. The overwhelming majority of states in today's world recognizes Beijing



as representing China—the entirety of China, with Taiwan being an integral part. In short, Moscow’s recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk and Washington’s condemnation of this action provide a precedent that could box in the US, politically and legally, in its relations with Taiwan.

Still another example of precedent is the US’s charge that Russia committed war crimes in Ukraine. The US, Russia, and China have all declined to join the International Criminal Court (ICC). US allegations of Russia’s war crimes suffer from a credibility problem because the Trump administration imposed sanctions on prosecutors working for the ICC to discourage them from looking into alleged war crimes by Americans in Afghanistan. It froze their financial assets and banned their families from entering the US. It even threatened to punish anyone who cooperated with the ICC investigators (Human Rights Watch 2020a, 2020b). The Biden administration has rescinded these policies, but secretary of state Antony Blinken has said that the US continues to “disagree strongly” with the ICC’s investigations in Afghanistan and Palestine, and Biden himself has said that the US would “vigorously protect current and former United States personnel” from any attempts of the ICC to exercise jurisdiction over them (as quoted in *Deutsche Welle* 2021).

Collectively, the precedents mentioned in this section erode the rule of law in international relations and undermine confidence in international order. They also augur a more turbulent world in the years ahead as states flagrantly violate the basic norms and principles of international order, and as they engage in conduct that creates a permissive environment for starting war and undertaking military interventions (Kegley and Raymond 1994). The incidence of such interventions by the US has increased significantly in recent years (Toft 2017).

#### THE EFFECTS OF PATH DEPENDENCY RESULTING FROM THE RUSSO–UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

The idea of path dependency is that what people do, or fail to do, today can affect their available choices in the future. What happens today can create new opportunities down the road, or it can limit and even close off future options. In the current context, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine means that it will be a long time before it can restore relations with the West. It will take extensive effort by Moscow to recover the trust that has been lost due to this

invasion. At the same time, the invasion itself indicates that Moscow has also lost trust in Western countries and given up hope on their intentions; otherwise it would not have resorted to this invasion in the first place.

As another example, now that European countries have banned energy imports from Russia and turned to alternative sources such as nuclear power, it is hard to imagine that energy supplies from Russia will be restored quickly, regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine. There are a variety of reasons for this expectation, including concerns on the part of both sellers and buyers in energy transactions that they may yet be subject to further attempts at economic coercion in the future and the large sunk investments necessary to establish alternative sources of energy (such as nuclear power plants) that, once undertaken, would be too expensive to reverse or abandon.

As a final example of path dependency, NATO not so long ago called out China as a threat to it (Goldstein 2022). This being the case, it is now more difficult to solicit Beijing's cooperation to oppose Russia's invasion. Elementary logic from traditional realist reasoning suggests that Beijing has an interest in preventing Russia from suffering a total defeat, lest China be left alone to fend off a hostile West, which can then turn to China as its primary target.

Popular media in the West promote the view that strong, unified economic sanctions can inflict and have already inflicted enormous costs on Russia's economy. But this is a double-edged sword. After having suffered this devastating setback, would one expect Russia to continue its prewar reliance on trade and investment with the West? If Western sanctions result in a more economically autonomous Russia, the West will have fewer strings to pull or levers to press in a future situation calling for economic coercion. In other words, successful economic sanctions have a self-defeating effect in the sense that one can expect the target of these sanctions to diversify its trade and investment away from the sanctioning countries to prevent similar economic coercion in the future. The next time the West confronts Russia, for example, Russian oligarchs will have fewer mansions, yachts, and bank accounts in the West where their assets can be seized. The same line of reasoning explains in part why it has been so difficult for the US to coerce North Korea economically. Pyongyang has few economic assets and links abroad, so there is little Washington can threaten to take away. Parenthetically, the confiscation of properties from alleged Russian oligarchs with clear legal titles to them also raises important questions about legal due process, as it could have unexpected repercussions for other people considering owning assets in foreign

countries. For example, should US corporations investing and operating in a foreign country be more concerned that their host governments might seize or “nationalize” their properties with impunity?

Like other actions taken by governments engaging in international interactions, economic sanctions send a signal to others beyond their immediate target. There are onlookers who will also draw conclusions from these episodes. Having seen Western countries’ sanctions against Russia, Beijing will naturally seek to protect itself from a similar fate. One would expect Chinese officials to diversify their commercial and investment decisions away from the West, especially the US, to avoid the vulnerabilities experienced by Moscow. But because China is far more embedded in the global economy than Russia is, the costs of Western sanctions would be also more severe for the sanctioning countries. After all, economic sanctions are acts of self-denial; that is, they are public signals of a willingness to accept the costs of lost trade and investment to demonstrate the sanctioning country’s resolve to resist the target of its sanction. They are also often undertaken in the expectation that the costs will do more damage to the sanctioned than to the sanctioners. Note, however, that such costs are usually distributed unevenly. European countries have more extensive economic relations with Russia than the US does, and thus must bear a heavier burden for sanctioning Moscow. This uneven distribution of costs can be a source of disagreement.

Formal alliances may help alleviate the effects of this uneven burden. Remember that there is no NATO, a multilateral alliance, in Asia. The alliance system erected by the US in Asia has been based on separate bilateral agreements between pairs of countries. There are several plausible reasons for the hub-and-spokes design of this system. Leading explanations include Washington’s fear of becoming “entrapped” by its Asian allies in an unwanted conflict, historical legacies of antagonism among US allies in Asia, and lack of a common regional identity (even racism) in Asia compared to Western Europe (Cha 1999; Hemmer and Katzenstein 2003; Izumikawa 2020). The absence of a multilateral alliance in Asia to confront China means that it would be more difficult for Washington to organize and hold together a coalition against Beijing. For Asian countries, sanctioning China in a future conflict over, say, Taiwan’s status would be far costlier than the economic deprivation being borne by the West in the Ukraine situation. China is a much more important economic partner for its Asian neighbors than Russia is for the European countries.

Given China's pivotal role in global investment and financial networks (including loaning large sums of money to the US) and cross-border production chains, there will be far greater worldwide reverberations should China become the target of a similarly wide range of sanction policies. Many countries will suffer more serious collateral damage in such a scenario, including formal and informal US allies in East Asia, such as Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, for whom China has become their primary commercial partner. Sanctions against China could have serious economic repercussions in the sanctioning countries, possibly even bringing about a global recession.

The larger point of this discussion on path dependency is that economic sanctions related to the conflict in Ukraine could set in motion attempts by various governments to decouple from the global economy, exacerbating the process of deglobalization that started during the Trump administration and perhaps even earlier. An obvious example would be for Moscow, Beijing, Tehran, and other similar countries to lessen their dependency on the dollar and their reliance on US-dominated international financial institutions for international transactions. Thus the economic consequences of the war in Ukraine may extend far beyond that country's borders. There are already media reports that many poor countries face the prospect of widespread hunger because grain produced in Ukraine cannot be exported due to wartime conditions.

### REASONING BY ANALOGY

People often make judgments based on their recollection of analogous situations in the past. In other words, they draw lessons from their experience and try to apply them to the current situation (Khong 1992). Naturally, the analogies being applied to guide policymaking can sometimes be inappropriate, and thus mislead rather than inform officials in their decision-making. For instance, the recollection of the Munich conference just before the outbreak of World War II and the supposed lesson to be drawn from it, counseling against appeasement, have been used to justify US intervention in Korea and Vietnam. In the context of this paper's topic, it would be natural to expect Chinese officials and planners to watch the situation in Ukraine closely in their preparations for various contingencies involving Taiwan. The most salient parallel between these two situations concerns the question of possible direct US military intervention.

The war in Ukraine appears to have had an impact on public opinion in Taiwan. On the question of whether they would support a decision to declare formal independence, two factors are pivotal in the minds of Taiwan's people. One pertains to the respondent's belief about whether China would take military action in this event, and the other reflects their view on the prospect of US direct military action to help Taiwan defend itself. A March 2022 survey by Taiwan's Institute for National Defense and Security Research, an affiliate of the Ministry of Defense, showed a significant drop in the number of respondents holding the belief that the US would or could come to Taiwan's defense if China were to attack. Of those surveyed, 14% thought that the US would do so, and 26% believed it to be a possibility. These two response categories add up to 40% of respondents. In contrast, in a survey by the same institute in September 2021 (before the war in Ukraine), 57% said there "would be" or "could be" US military intervention to help Taiwan. Thus we are seeing a drop of 17 percentage points in a short time. The institute attributes this shift to the war between Russia and Ukraine (Central News Agency 2022).

Is Ukraine a sovereign country that should be free to make autonomous foreign policy, including the pursuit of NATO membership? Should the breakaway region in eastern Ukraine be entitled to seek independence without following Ukraine's constitutional procedures? China also sees Taiwan as a breakaway province seeking to secede. Taiwan's status touches on China's claim of sovereignty, and thus in Beijing's eyes Washington's support for this island's *de facto*, if not *de jure*, independence violates China's sovereignty. As Fearon (1995) has argued, disputes over intangible and symbolic issues such as sovereignty are more difficult to resolve because they pertain to indivisible goods, making compromises harder to locate than in disputes over tangible resources, such as money or territory. Fearon suggests that intangible or symbolic issues involving values and identities are inherently less "divisible." Of course, they also impinge more strongly on human emotions. Thus we see protracted stalemates in disputes over the status of the Falkland/Malvinas Islands, and sacred places like Jerusalem (Goddard 2006).

As already noted, the US and its NATO allies have limited their support for Ukraine to the provision of armaments to Kyiv and the implementation of sanctions against Moscow. These countries have refrained from intervening directly in the conflict by sending in their troops to fight the Russians or even using their aircraft to impose a no-fly zone. These decisions speak loudly

when compared to other recent Western actions involving Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Serbia, Somalia, and Syria, where they have applied more direct force. In some situations, such as Afghanistan and Iraq (not to mention earlier conflicts in Vietnam and Korea), they undertook large-scale invasions and resorted to outright occupation of another country. The West's military actions have been far more restrained in the current Ukraine war, for the obvious reason that Russia is a much more formidable adversary than the other countries just mentioned. Note, however, that the West and the US have also avoided attacking Iran and North Korea directly, presumably because these latter countries also have credible retaliation capabilities.

Beijing is likely to feel cautiously optimistic that, given the Western reluctance to undertake direct military intervention to assist Ukraine, there would be similar avoidance in a situation involving Taiwan. Mearsheimer (2022a) has predicted that despite its economic vulnerabilities and military shortcomings, Russia will ultimately prevail in Ukraine, achieving its primary objective of keeping the latter country outside the orbit of Western influence. This prediction rests on his belief that the Russians are more resolved in this undertaking than the opposition they face from the West. Moscow has a larger stake in the outcome of the contest. The European countries and especially the US are farther away, and therefore the fate of Ukraine is of less importance and concern to them. Analogous reasoning would lead Chinese officials to believe that in a contest over Taiwan, they are likely to prevail. Indeed, as alluded to earlier, in any bargaining between Washington and China over Beijing's assistance to Russia in the war in Ukraine, an obvious *quid pro quo* would be US assistance to Taiwan. Thus, this war opens a window of opportunity for Beijing to demand reciprocity from Washington, and Taiwan could be the loser in these prospective transactions.

Western media have reported widely that Russia's attack on Ukraine has stalled—at least in the early days of this conflict. (It appears that in more recent days, Russia has been more successful in the fighting in the Donbas region.) Since we do not know the strategy and objective that Moscow's military planners have intended to deploy and pursue in this conflict, we cannot be sure whether the Russians have been successful in their mission. (Although Western media have widely reported that Russia's original plan to seize Kyiv quickly has been frustrated, that it has suffered serious casualties, and that it has even come under intense counterattack by the Ukrainians.) One plausible interpretation of Russia's strategy and objective is that Moscow

intends to lay siege to Ukraine's cities and use bombardment to intimidate the residents and force them to flee the country. Given the backlash of public opinion in many European countries against refugees from recent war-torn countries such as Iraq, Libya, and Syria, a large exodus of Ukrainians could roil the governments and politics of neighboring countries, many of which are not equipped or prepared to shelter all these refugees. In other words, Moscow might have intended to "weaponize" refugees, even if it was wrong in expecting that the flood of Ukrainian refugees would create pressure on the neighboring countries to demand that Kyiv settle this conflict on Moscow's terms. (Refugees from Ukraine have clearly had a much warmer reception from Western countries than did the refugees from Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia, and Syria.) A depopulated Ukraine would be easier for Moscow to coerce and control.

Beijing may conclude from Russia's experience in Ukraine that in planning for a future contingency involving Taiwan, economic denial, especially using a naval blockade to interdict the island's overseas commerce and supply of raw materials, would be a far more attractive option than mounting a direct, amphibious assault in the fashion of the Normandy invasion in World War II. The latter kind of operation imposes huge demands on the attacking country's ability to organize its logistics, and China would have to establish command of both air and sea to protect its troops while in transit across the Taiwan Strait. A blockade would likely be both less provocative and more effective. Given the island's heavy dependency on overseas trade and supply of vital raw materials, Taiwan's economy is highly vulnerable to any disruption caused by such a blockade. Even rumors of such a blockade might cause panic among its people.

In 1987, Iran was trying to block Kuwait's energy exports via the Persian Gulf. The US responded by reflagging Kuwait's tankers, thus justifying US naval protection for these vessels. Ukraine's seaborne exports via the port of Odessa have been stopped by Russia's naval blockade. But the US and its NATO partners have not thus far taken action to break this blockade. Naturally, this inaction will be noticed by Chinese military analysts, who will try to infer from this situation whether the US and its allies in East Asia would also eschew such action in a contingency involving Taiwan, to avoid direct confrontation with China. Such inference will naturally reflect these analysts' judgment of the relative importance of Ukraine and Taiwan in Western countries' geostrategic agendas. It seems that at least for the

European members of NATO Ukraine looms larger than Taiwan, whereas the reverse is likely to be the case for Japan and Australia.

Another key question pertains to the exit option for Taiwan's people. Evacuation would be a serious challenge, given the simple fact that they live on an island, with no highways or train routes to neighboring countries. This represents a potential for internal panic that could work to Beijing's advantage. Indeed, it suggests that Beijing might not have to resort to an armed invasion to achieve its purposes. Bombardment by long-range missiles and airstrikes could put pressure on Taipei to settle the dispute on Beijing's terms while limiting military casualties for the People's Liberation Army. This strategy might also reduce the pressure for the US to intervene directly, because that kind of intervention would necessitate attacking missile sites and airfields inside China.

There are two other parallels between the ongoing situation in Ukraine and possible future scenarios in East Asia. As remarked already, the US and its NATO allies have imposed severe sanctions on Russia. The Europeans, however, have much greater commercial relations with Russia than the US, so they will bear more costs from the economic fallout of these sanctions. And thus some of these allies have not joined the US call to boycott imports of natural gas from Russia. In East Asia there is an analogous situation, whereby many of China's neighbors have deeper and more extensive trade relations with it than the US does. Were the US to call for economic sanctions against China in a future conflict scenario, it would suffer less economic damage than US allies like Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, and even Japan, in part because the US has a larger domestic market than other countries, and its trade portfolio is more diversified. In other words, the costs of sanctioning China, just like those of sanctioning Russia, are bound to be uneven and much less consequential for the US than for its allies and partners. Extrapolating from the European reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it seems less likely that Asian countries would react just as forcefully to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. But note also that there is one significant factor distinguishing these two cases: whereas Ukraine is a sovereign country recognized by the international community, Taiwan is not. In fact, the overwhelming majority of states—including the US—do not recognize Taiwan as a sovereign country. Effectively, they agree with the principle that Taiwan is a part of China. This distinction is important, even though popular US media typically overlook it. Therefore, again, Beijing can expect the political and



economic repercussions to be less severe, should it undertake military action against Taiwan.

The other possible parallel between the current situation in Ukraine and a possible future situation involving Taiwan is that, as noted earlier, NATO and the US have refrained from direct military intervention in Ukraine. They have decided not to introduce ground troops to Ukraine or even to impose a no-fly zone there. Reasoning by analogy, outright military intervention by the US and its allies in a plausible future scenario involving Taiwan seems less likely given Ukraine's experience. Ukraine's situation will also remind leaders in South Korea and Japan that they need to be thinking seriously about their policy in a contingency involving Taiwan—specifically, whether in such a contingency they would allow US military bases and personnel in their country to be used against China, thereby involving their country in a military conflict with China. Judging from the Ukrainian precedent, one may speculate that Seoul and Tokyo would be reluctant to take such a risk, especially since China is economically and militarily stronger than Russia. Thus far, both Ukraine and Russia have scrupulously observed international borders to avoid their conflict spilling over into neighboring countries. However, Moscow has hinted that it might consider striking sites outside Ukraine where Western weapons meant for Kyiv are located.

## CONCLUSION

Recall that the current Ukrainian crisis started with NATO's policy to expand eastward and its member states' promotion of and assistance to color revolutions in Russia's near abroad, most notably the so-called Maidan Square uprising that overthrew the government of Ukraine's pro-Moscow president, Victor Yanukovich, and drove him to exile in Russia. Few current accounts of the war in Ukraine trace its origin to these Western policies, which the Kremlin sees as an existential threat (Mearsheimer 2014, 2022a). One likely consequence of the current crisis in Ukraine is that the West will become more cautious in the future in its efforts to engineer regime change in areas immediately adjacent to Russia and, by extension, China. We have already seen that despite their verbal protests, Western countries have not taken serious tangible actions to overthrow the military regime in Myanmar.

The war in Ukraine appears to have evolved into a war by proxy, whereby the West provides aid to the Ukrainians to fight the Russians without directly

involving its own personnel in combat. This situation is reminiscent of Western, especially US, support for the Afghan fighters, the mujahideen, in resisting the USSR's invasion of their country in 1979–89. One may also recall the Chinese and Russian assistance given to North Vietnam during the Vietnam War, providing Hanoi economic and especially military aid to fight the US. Similarly, Moscow assumed this role without directly involving its own combat personnel (at least not publicly or in large numbers) when the Chinese and Americans fought in Korea. In all these cases, the foreign patrons of the weaker side in a war sought to protect their junior partner while refraining from involving themselves directly in military combat. This policy has had the effect of preventing an ally or partner's defeat at the hands of a stronger adversary, while at the same time exhausting the latter by causing it to be bogged down in a long war, draining its resources. It also tends to produce a more protracted conflict, resulting in a military stalemate.

Joe Biden has called Vladimir Putin a “butcher” and a “war criminal,” and has said that “for God’s sake, this man cannot remain in power” (Collinson 2022). US officials later tried to walk back the latter remark. Some people see these words as a gaffe, but others dismiss this idea and take Biden’s words seriously as an effort to disclose and communicate US intentions. Either way, these harsh words give the impression that the US is trying to promote regime change in Moscow, and they lend credibility to the Kremlin’s charge that the US and its allies have been engaging in this effort in Ukraine. They also make it less likely that Biden and Putin could meet personally to resolve the situation in Ukraine diplomatically. As a result, any such initiative is more likely to come from Turkey, France, Germany, or China as a potential broker or mediator to end the war.

Another consequence of the current crisis in Ukraine is to push Russia and China closer together (Goldstein 2022), and to create a more polarized pattern of global alignment. We have already seen this development in US efforts to promote and strengthen the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), a coalition in the Indo-Pacific region consisting of Australia, India, Japan, and the US itself. But the prevailing situation in the Indo-Pacific differs from that in Europe in important ways. The major English-speaking countries, that is the US, Australia, Canada, and Britain, appear to present a cohesive bloc, whereas other countries, even those that are quite critical of Russia’s conduct, have been more reluctant to pursue a hard-line policy to sanction Moscow. Then there are the countries such as China,

Brazil, India, Israel, Mexico, and even Saudi Arabia that have declined to join the sanction campaign. Thus, compared to the bipolarized structure during the Cold War, today's political alignment patterns are more variegated. In addition, there is evidence pointing to discordance among NATO members (such as on the question of importing natural gas from Russia, or of admitting Finland and Sweden as new members of the alliance), and this shows that US influence over some of its traditional allies (such as Israel, Turkey, and those in the Western Hemisphere) has in fact waned. One indication is that (as of late June 2022) Russia's energy exports have remained at prewar levels, even though NATO members have boycotted them. Another indication is that although the G7 countries have excluded Moscow from their ranks, Russia continues to be a member of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). Vladimir Putin participated in this group's virtual summit meeting, held in Beijing in late June 2022.

Moreover, another important difference distinguishes today's world from the one that prevailed during the Cold War. Countries in today's world are far more interconnected economically, and China is clearly far more embedded in the global economy than in those earlier days of its economic isolation. Extensive economic ties are likely to dampen the dynamics of security rivalry and political competition, which have been intensifying, even though (as remarked earlier) the process of globalization may suffer further reversal in the coming days—a process that was already visible before the war in Ukraine. One other effect of the war in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia is a likely acceleration of the de-dollarization of international finance, and a corollary process of increasing use by countries of digital currency and blockchain payments to avoid total dependency on the SWIFT system dominated by the US and its allies.

Incipient evidence already points to such an effort by Moscow. It has demanded that those that buy Russian energy pay in rubles and from accounts with Russian banks. This policy has helped stem further serious loss in value for the ruble, for now. At the same time, members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries have increased their production output, but not by nearly as much as what Washington has demanded. They are concerned that a major hike in production would depress the price of their exports, especially when US energy companies are also ramping up their production. Moreover, in view of prior US actions to sanction other countries, oil in the ground appears much safer than oil

revenues in US bank accounts. The rising price of gasoline in the US has in turn added to inflationary pressure and thus to the Biden administration's concerns about the Democrats' electoral chances in November 2022. This situation has caused the administration to release stockpiles from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. Naturally, the US government will need to replenish the reserve in the future, and oil prices may be higher or lower than now. In late June 2022, Biden asked Congress to suspend the federal tax on gasoline to reduce the price at the pump. But that would likely increase consumer demand, which would push up prices, defeating the purpose of the suspension, at least to some extent. These remarks suggest complex chains of interactions in the wake of US sanctions, and their wide-ranging implications, including for Washington's ties with other concerned countries and the impact on its own domestic economy and partisan politics.

Inflationary pressure has risen in the US, reaching a height not seen for about four decades. Although during his election campaign Biden criticized Donald Trump's decision to impose tariffs on Chinese goods, citing harmful effects on the US economy, he has not rescinded them. With rising inflation, however, there is rumor that he may consider removing or reducing these tariffs. To the extent that the war in Ukraine has compounded shortages and abetted inflation due to disruptions of global supply chains and the COVID-19 pandemic, we see another example of the ramifications of this war.

As winter 2022 approaches and demand for heating oil rises, it will be interesting to see whether Europe's collective effort to boycott Russia's energy exports continues. There have already been widespread complaints about the price of gasoline in the US, and Washington has approached other oil-producing countries, even Venezuela, to encourage them to increase their production of fossil fuel. While Washington has publicly professed that it is for Kyiv to decide how to fight and end this conflict, we do not know whether Kyiv may come under pressure to settle its conflict with Moscow as the war of attribution takes an increasing toll or if the danger of further conflict escalation increases. Fatigue is likely to set in among Ukraine's Western allies at some point.

The other likely impact of the current Ukrainian crisis on Sino–American relations is that Washington will shift more resources (including military troops and equipment) to NATO countries bordering Russia and Ukraine, meaning that it will have fewer resources to deploy in China's neighborhood. The US will now also have to divide its policy attention—it will not be able

to focus its efforts entirely on its strategic rivalry with China. As remarked earlier, this development will give Beijing more breathing space and more possibilities for policy maneuvers. The longer the war in Ukraine lasts, the longer Beijing is likely to benefit from it, in part because Washington will be less able to intensify pressure on it, and in part because Moscow will more likely need its assistance.

A further implication of the situation in Ukraine is that it will give Beijing more leverage in talks with Washington regarding US assistance to and support of Taiwan as a *quid pro quo* for any concessions it makes regarding its support for Moscow in the war in Ukraine. Finally, and as already implied, the war in Ukraine is a dramatic example of the boomerang effect of imperial overreach. John Mearsheimer has argued that the West and especially the US bear some responsibility for this war, which, contrary to popular depiction in the US, was not entirely unprovoked (McFaul, Sestanovich, and Mearsheimer 2014; Mearsheimer 2014, 2022a, 2022b). To the extent that this war contributes to cautioning the US and its allies to reconsider their push to expand alliances and deploy their military assets in areas immediately adjacent to Russia and China, it may produce a peace dividend. Like the earlier war in Korea, this is a reminder that such an agenda can provoke a reaction from countries that see themselves as targets of encirclement and intimidation. Sweden and Finland have recently asked to join NATO as its newest members. How their application for membership is managed will have considerable political and military consequences because it is unlikely that Moscow will view it with equanimity. Turkey has withdrawn its initial objection to these countries' admission to an enlarged NATO, but there may still be other complications in the future.

If Moscow's invasion of Ukraine was at least partly motivated by Kyiv's prospective membership in NATO, the latest developments pertaining to Sweden and Finland clearly show that the decision has backfired. But one may still ask whether Moscow's policy originated from security concerns or from a desire to recover from its sense of humiliation and loss of dignity in the aftermath of the disintegration and demise of the Soviet Union (Krickovic and Zhang 2020; Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 2019). Of course, the answer may well be both. The crux of the matter is whether Russia's invasion represents an offensive or a defensive campaign. Does it stem from a revisionist impulse or from a motivation to preserve or restore the status quo? Naturally, people's views on this matter are influenced by their reference

point or the benchmark they use. The overwhelming view in the US and the West is that the war in Ukraine is an instance of Russian aggression and revisionism. But this view does not give equal consideration to how the US has reacted to perceived encroachments by the USSR or Russia in the Western Hemisphere, such as in episodes involving Cuba, Nicaragua, Grenada, and Venezuela. It also does not consider whether Western and US efforts to promote regime change abroad, such as in Iraq, Libya, Serbia, and Syria, might represent in the eyes of others a precedent and an effort to alter the status quo and to promote a revisionist agenda. Looking back in history, when states respect other states' territorial integrity, abide by their treaty commitments, refrain from arbitrary use of force, and accommodate other great powers' traditional spheres of influence, international relations have tended to be more peaceful and stable (Kegley and Raymand 1994).

One final remark, albeit not directly pertinent to Sino–American relations or cross–Taiwan Strait relations. Readers may recall that Ukraine gave up its nuclear arsenal after the demise of the Soviet Union and after receiving guarantees from major powers for its security and sovereignty. One may be drawn to ask whether North Korea might feel even more skeptical about giving up its nuclear weapons after the Ukraine war.

*Published online: October 10, 2022*

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