

‘Nobody likes a bully: What Taiwan can Learn from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine’

Amidst the horrific humanitarian catastrophe that has resulted from Russian President Vladimir Putin’s war of aggression against Ukraine since February 2022, a silver lining of sorts has emerged – namely, the rejuvenated resilience of the post-1945 world order based on democracy, international civil society, and a condemnation of wars of aggression as an instrument of policy. It should be recalled that the period prior to February 2022 had seen increasing commentaries that warned of the looming death of the post-1945 rules-based order.¹ In light of the US debacle in Afghanistan in 2021 and the wider backdrop of growing authoritarianism and populist politics in various parts of the world, such an assessment was not surprising at the start of 2022. Moreover, given the parallels between Ukraine and Taiwan – both democratic polities whose populaces have rejected the authoritarian leaderships of their neighbouring ethnic brethren – the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) – multiple commentaries emerged in the days following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, arguing that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was watching these events closely to assess US resolve to defend Taiwan.²

Insofar as the CCP’s ambition to absorb Taiwan is concerned, the forthcoming decade and a half present Beijing with risk and opportunity at the same time. China is faced with the prospect of a looming demographic decline that would undercut its ability to leverage its population size for the purposes of military manpower and economic boycotts against countries willing to oppose Beijing.³ At the same time, however, given China’s rapidly modernizing air-naval capabilities, it is conceivable that the CCP may believe that the period from the mid-2020s until the late 2030s marks a closing window of opportunity to execute a successful invasion of Taiwan,⁴ in time to mark the centenary of the founding of the PRC in 2049.⁵

¹ Zack Beauchamp, ‘The war on terror and the long death of liberal interventionism’, *Vox*, 8 September 2021, <https://www.vox.com/22639548/911-anniversary-war-on-terror-liberal-interventionism>.

² Michael Schuman, ‘Is Taiwan Next?’, *The Atlantic*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/02/vladimir-putin-ukraine-taiwan/622907/>.

³ Helen Davidson, ‘China’s population growth rate falls to 61-year low’, *Guardian*, 17 January 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/17/chinas-birthrate-falls-to-61-year-low-despite-moves-to-stave-off-demographic-crisis>.

⁴ Ibride Colby, ‘The Fight for Taiwan Could Come Soon’, *Wall Street Journal*, 27 October 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-fight-for-taiwan-could-come-soon-china-navy-defense-11635349097>.

⁵ Hal Brands, ‘China Is a Declining Power—and That’s the Problem’, *Foreign Policy*, 24 September 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/24/china-great-power-united-states/>.

Yet, in direct counterpoint to such pessimistic ‘worst-case’ possible outcomes for Taiwan that might arise as part of the wider, global geostrategic implications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a silver lining has emerged from this episode, not only in the form of the tenacity of Ukraine’s efforts to defend itself, but also in the international community’s near-unanimity in condemning Russia’s aggression.

The leaders and people of Ukraine have demonstrated a blend of courage, tenacity, and skill in the defence of their homeland and their democratic aspirations that have inspired the world. Foremost is the manner in which Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has led by example – instead of accepting a US offer to evacuate him and his family from Kyiv to the safety of western Ukraine, Zelensky’s pithy reply – ‘the fight is here; I need ammunition, not a ride’ – underscored the Ukrainian leader’s willingness⁶ to share in the hardships faced by his people, even in the face of direct Russian threats on his life. Combined with a multitude of speeches that have invoked historical anecdotes of courage and resistance against the forces of aggression, Zelensky’s boldness in the face of Russia’s invasion has turned the one-time television comedian into the new champion of the democratic world.⁷ Furthermore, Ukrainians from all walks of life – from members of the armed forces to ordinary civilians⁸ – have demonstrated courage, defiance and resilience against the Russian invaders, thence earning the respect of the international community.⁹

In line with the widely-held observation that ‘no one likes a bully’, the pluck of the Ukrainian David’s defense against an unprovoked war of aggression by the Russian Goliath has struck a chord with the international community, which has been virtually unanimous in diplomatically condemning Russia and in cooperating with the US imposition of harsh economic sanctions on Moscow;¹⁰ the few holdouts to oppose sanctions, notable for their

⁶ Sharon Braithwaite, “Zelensky refuses US offer to evacuate, saying ‘I need ammunition, not a ride’”, *CNN*, 26 February 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/26/europe/ukraine-zelensky-evacuation-intl/index.html>.

⁷ Isabella Kwai, ‘Walls, Dreams and Genocide: Zelensky’s Speeches Invoke History to Rally Support’, *New York Times*, 21 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/21/world/europe/zelensky-speeches-ukraine-russia.html>.

⁸ Yuval Noah Harari, ‘Why Vladimir Putin has already lost this war’, *Guardian*, 28 February 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/28/vladimir-putin-war-russia-ukraine>.

⁹ “Defiant Ukrainian troops tell Russians: ‘Go home while you’re still alive’”, *BBC*, 24 March 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60860548>.

¹⁰ ‘FACT SHEET: United States and Allies and Partners Impose Additional Costs on Russia’, Website of the United States of America White House, 24 March 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/24/fact-sheet-united-states-and-allies-and-partners-impose-additional-costs-on-russia/>.

own pariah status, underscore the extent of the international isolation that Putin has brought for Russia.¹¹ China, far more dependent on the outside world for its export-oriented economy than Russia, would do well to contemplate the ongoing economic devastation being inflicted on Russia as a result of these international sanctions, should Chinese President Xi Jinping or his successors consider an invasion of Taiwan.¹² Equally noteworthy is the extent to which the international community has rallied in support of Ukraine's war effort, whether in the form of the delivery of armaments¹³ and humanitarian aid¹⁴ to Ukraine, to an estimated 20,000 (and counting) persons who have volunteered to join the International Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine to resist Russia's aggression.¹⁵

The international community's demonstration of solidarity against Russia's aggression underscores the potential trump card that Taiwan could use to hedge against an invasion by the mainland. Like Ukraine, Taiwan has parted ways from its much larger neighbor in embracing democracy. In spite of its isolation, Taiwan has developed a unique form of soft power that has enabled it to maintain ties with the international community.¹⁶ As J. Michael Cole has noted, 'where Taiwan has been forced to close its embassy, follow-up bilateral negotiations have led to the opening of reciprocal representative offices that will continue to process visas, foster exchanges and promote trade.'¹⁷

In spite of China's efforts to impose its interpretation of the 'One China Policy' and thus isolate Taiwan, the latter has developed an unorthodox, yet effective, strategy of unofficial diplomatic engagement with the international community. Taiwan's status as an ethnic-Chinese populated democracy underscores that democracy and a Confucian mindset

¹¹ Michael Wasiura, 'Nowhere to retreat: Vladimir Putin is trapped in Ukraine', Institute of Modern Russia, 22 March 2022, <https://www.imrussia.org/en/opinions/3440-nowhere-to-retreat-vladimir-putin-is-trapped-in-ukraine>.

¹² 'Putin's War on Ukraine Shows Xi the Dangers of Attacking Taiwan', *Bloomberg*, 8 March 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2022-03-07/what-china-s-xi-is-learning-about-taiwan-from-putin-s-war-in-ukraine>.

¹³ Joseph Gedeon, 'The weapons and military aid the world is giving Ukraine', *Politico*, 22 March 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/03/22/ukraine-weapons-military-aid-00019104>.

¹⁴ David Ainsworth, 'Funding tracker: Who's sending aid to Ukraine?', *Devex*, last updated 21 March 2022, <https://www.devex.com/news/funding-tracker-who-s-sending-aid-to-ukraine-102887>.

¹⁵ Andy Blatchford, 'Band of others: Ukraine's legions of foreign soldiers are on the frontline', *Politico*, 24 March 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/03/24/ukraine-legion-foreign-soldiers-00020233>.

¹⁶ Chris Horton, 'Taiwan rides soft power wave as democracies sour on China', *Nikkei Asia*, 20 October 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Taiwan-rides-soft-power-wave-as-democracies-sour-on-China>.

¹⁷ Cole, 'The World is Not Abandoning Taiwan', *Taiwan Sentinel*, 30 June 2017, <https://sentinel.tw/world-not-abandoning-taiwan/>.

are not incompatible.¹⁸ Rather, Taiwan has continued to undertake efforts to maintain unofficial ties – including commercial ties and inter-governmental meetings – with multiple international partners over the years. This has included Taiwan’s numerous contacts with members of the G-20,¹⁹ as well as Taiwan’s ‘New Southbound Policy’, underway since Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen’s first term in office, in seeking to foster Taiwan’s ties with countries in Oceania, and South and Southeast Asia.²⁰ Likewise, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwan has defied attempts by China to exploit its influence at the World Health Organisation²¹ and the International Civil Aviation Organization²² against Taiwan. The latter has not only emerged as one of the globe’s leading success stories in the fight against the pandemic²³ (in contrast to the mainland’s continuing COVID outbreaks),²⁴ but has also gone out of its way to provide Personal Protective Equipment and other medical aid to countries badly impacted by the pandemic.²⁵

Combined with Beijing’s increasing attempts to bully not only Taiwan, but also other countries that have shown support for the latter,²⁶ the international community has shown an increasing willingness to support Taiwan. This has included growing levels of EU participation in US-led Freedom of Navigation operations in the western Pacific²⁷ (which, although not specifically aimed at deterring a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, is a barely-veiled

¹⁸ Raffaele Cazzola Hofmannis, ‘Soft Power as an Instrument for the Taiwanese Foreign Policy to Develop’, Institute for National Policy Research, 17 December 2019, <http://inpr.org.tw/m/405-1728-1586.c112.php?Lang=en>.

¹⁹ Patrick Wintour, ‘Global activists gather at Rome G20 to demand tougher action on China’, *Guardian*, 29 October 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/29/global-activists-gather-at-rome-g20-to-demand-tougher-action-on-china>.

²⁰ Scott Kennedy, ‘The New Southbound Policy: Deepening Taiwan’s Regional Integration’, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 19 January 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-southbound-policy>.

²¹ Cole, ‘Taiwan must be allowed to join the World Health Organization’, *Nikkei Asia*, 12 May 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Taiwan-must-be-allowed-to-join-the-World-Health-Organization>.

²² André Laliberté, ‘Time to end the exclusion of Taiwan from the International Civil Aviation Organization’, Center for International Policy Studies, 3 March 2020, <https://www.cips-cepi.ca/2020/03/03/time-to-end-the-exclusion-of-taiwan-from-the-international-civil-aviation-organization/>.

²³ Er-Win Tan, ‘South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan Take on Coronavirus’, *Medium*, 13 July 2021, <https://medium.com/digital-asia-ii/south-korea-singapore-and-taiwan-take-on-coronavirus-7650a40bcde>.

²⁴ Simone McCarthy, ‘China doesn’t have a Covid exit plan. Two years in, people are fed up and angry’, *CNN*, 25 March 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/25/china/china-covid-frustration-exit-plan-intl-hnk-mic/index.html>.

²⁵ Lawrence Chung, ‘Taiwan offers masks and medical aid to foreign countries, angering Beijing’, *South China Morning Post*, 5 April 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3078448/taiwan-looks-play-leading-international-role-battle-against>.

²⁶ Stuart Lau, ‘Beijing warns G20 nations they’ll ‘pay a price’ for backing Taiwan’, *Politico*, 30 October 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-foreign-minister-wang-yi-g20-summit-taiwan/>.

²⁷ Giulio Pugliese, ‘Europe’s Naval Engagement in the South China Sea’, *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, 12 June 2021, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/europes-naval-engagement-south-china-sea>.

symbolic warning against Chinese aggression against the island), as well as calls by the EU to increase its scope for economic and security cooperation with Taiwan.²⁸ Likewise, in October 2021, following an increase in Chinese aerial incursions against Taiwan, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg incorporated discussion of China's power into NATO's Strategic Concept, for the first time in the transatlantic alliance's history.²⁹ This has been further echoed by expressions of solidarity by individual EU states towards Taiwan. Visiting Taipei in September 2020, Czech Senate President Milos Vystreil declared in Chinese that 'I am Taiwanese'; likewise, in 2021, Lithuania approved Taipei's bid to open the Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania, a move notable for inclusion of the name 'Taiwan'.³⁰

Such circumstances underscore the significance of the present moment for Taiwan. On the one hand, the tenacity of the people of Ukraine in defending their homeland and their democracy, and the wider expressions of solidarity from the international community, reflects what can be accomplished by like-minded nations in demonstrating their commitment to international norms. On the other hand, given Taiwan's lack of diplomatic recognition and China's playbook of attempts to isolate Taiwan through the exercise of Beijing's brand of soft power and social media influencers³¹, Taiwan faces the long-term risk of being sidelined from the consciousness of the international community. Should such a development occur, it is conceivable that a Chinese takeover of the island – whether through armed invasion or subversion – may fail to register in the collective consciousness of global civil society.

Such circumstances underscore the need for Taiwan to consolidate its soft power and promote its standing amidst the public consciousness of the international community. Such measures could include increasing the networks of sister-cities between Taiwan's cities and the international community,³² tapping into the contributions of social media influencers

²⁸ 'EU-Taiwan relations: MEPs push for stronger partnership', European Parliament, 21 October 2021, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20211014IPR14926/eu-taiwan-relations-meps-push-for-stronger-partnership>.

²⁹ Tan, 'Jens Stoltenberg on the Rise of China: Is NATO Pivoting to the Indo-Pacific?', *Politics Today*, 26 October 2021, <https://politicstoday.org/jens-stoltenberg-on-the-rise-of-china-is-nato-pivoting-to-the-indo-pacific/>.

³⁰ China condemns opening of Taiwan office in Lithuania as 'egregious act', *Guardian*, 19 November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/19/china-condemns-opening-of-taiwan-office-in-lithuania-as-egregious-act>.

³¹ Keoni Everington, 'China propagandist Nathan Rich's criminal record revealed', *Taiwan News*, 1 June 2020, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3941420>.

³² William Yet, 'Taipei hosts event to support Ukraine in wake of Russian invasion', *Focus Taiwan*, 3 March 2022, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202203030024>.

willing to support Taiwan,³³ and pressing ahead with measures that underscore the solidarity of the international community against authoritarian-instigated wars of aggression.³⁴ Moreover, given the extent to which hybrid warfare (utilizing cyberwarfare as well as diaspora-based influence operations) have become a part of the toolbox of statecraft by both China and Russia, countries in central and Eastern Europe have stepped up their levels of planning for such contingent scenarios.³⁵ Taiwan should step up policy-related research collaboration with other countries that face comparable threats of hybrid warfare, in order to engage in a process of mutual learning of policy measures to enhance their mutual security interests.

Such measures, taken in conjunction with continued US efforts to modernize Taiwan's armed forces, can function as a symbolic warning to the mainland of the collective opposition by the international community that Beijing will face, in the event that the CCP attempts an invasion of the island. In light of how the combined impact of severe international sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and substantial military aid being delivered to Ukraine have blunted Putin's war of aggression, it is to be hoped that a comparable strategy of high-visibility expressions of solidarity will dissuade Xi Jinping and his successors from attempting any similar maneuver against Taiwan. Moreover, in light of the track record that China and Russia have demonstrated in undertaking economic boycotts against countries that have dared to defy them, a stronger show of unity and solidarity within the international community will underscore their strength and economic supply chain resilience, whilst further enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of economic sanctions against violations of longstanding international norms against wars of aggression.

³³ Ethan Paul, 'US-China friction turns into YouTube fame (and laughs) for online influencers', *South China Morning Post*, 29 October 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3107497/us-china-friction-turns-youtube-fame-and-laughs-online>.

³⁴ "'Lithuania mania' sweeps Taiwan as China spat sizzles", *France 24*, 9 March 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220309-lithuania-mania-sweeps-taiwan-as-china-spat-sizzles>.

³⁵ 'Baltics and Taiwan discuss countering hybrid threats', *Public Broadcasting of Latvia*, 20 January, 2022, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/features/video/baltics-and-taiwan-discuss-countering-hybrid-threats.a438671/>.