Taiwan Is Not Ukraine

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Ukraine and Taiwan: Understanding Sino-Russian Expansionist Strategies Beyond their Relationship

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Introduction

The black bear, endemic to Taiwan, is often illustrated as punching Winnie the Pooh, a cartoon character used as a pejorative analogy for President Xi Jinping, as depicted in Figure 1 (Plummer, 2023). Tenacious in their symbolism, the battle of the bears echoes the political resolve of the Taiwanese against their perceived oppressor. For the Taiwanese, an overt

military conflict with China is seen as inevitable as academies prepare the next generation for war (Kuma Academy, 2025).

The media often draws parallels between their situation with Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. It is thought that the ensuing economic sanctions and diplomatic backlash the Kremlin received post-February 2022 imposed a revision of the Politburo's One China policy towards Taiwan. The Politburo, the supreme decision-making body of the CCP, and its One China policy assert that Taiwan de jure belongs to mainland China. Both China and Russia are autocratic regimes laying claim to a democracy they share a history and language with and that is economically reliant upon them. Yet, as this essay will argue, these similarities are often too quickly and easily drawn. The similar circumstances faced by Ukraine and Taiwan are just that; the similarities do not hold in terms of the mechanics of the Chinese and Russian expansionary powers and the international status and influence of these two nations on the world stage.

Effectively, this essay aims to refute the too-easily drawn-out parallels between Russia and China. This essay will therefore start by reviewing the comparisons between Russia with Ukraine and China with Taiwan, providing an overview of the arguments' literature employs to liken Ukraine to Taiwan. A second part will examine the quality of the Sino-Russian relationship as well as the differences in their foreign policy. Finally, a third part will discuss what such conceptions can indicate for the Taiwan contingency.

I. China is to Taiwan What Russia is to Ukraine

On December 12th, 2024, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte stated that members must ready themselves for war in the off-chance Russia comes victorious over Ukraine, allowing a possible opening for Chinese expansion toward Taiwan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China, 2024). Rutte posits that in a status quo where Russia is the winner, annexation of claimed territories could become normalised and international sanctions would be put on the back burner. In a time of turbulent international order, certain states, including China and Russia, were cited as threats to global peace and security. The media has rushed to draw parallels between the great powers. With assumedly undeniable similarities in their expansionist ambitions, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is perceived as a possible future for Taiwan that must be avoided.

Taiwan and Ukraine share many similarities. They are both democracies that neighbour significant autocratic regimes – regimes that lay claim to their national territories. They share a history and linguistic and ethnic ties with their neighbour, depend economically on them, as well as rely on the US and Western allies for national security (Köckritz, 2023).

The Russo-Ukrainian war has several implications for Taiwan (Khrestin, 2023). Russia's invasion of Ukraine poses a concern for great power competition and escalating conflict in Europe and Asia, especially as the war of attrition is taking longer than planned. This rushed invasion of Ukraine was initially motivated by the weakening of Russian security and dignity;

yet, Ukraine's continued resistance is contributing to this weakening ever still (Simes, 2024). Taiwanese leaders have been quick to express their support for Ukrainian citizens after the invasion, drawing parallels with their situation with China (Khrestin, 2023). Taiwan has since increased military spending and reinstated the one-year mandatory military service in 2022. The US has similarly renewed its multi-billion USD commitment to Taiwan through weapons sales and national defence contributions (Khrestin, 2023). The Taiwan contingency now permeates global policy, with the US namely split between supporting Ukraine and Taiwan should China replicate and learn from the Kremlin.

In response, much of Taiwanese policy oriented towards the Taiwan contingency echoes si vis pacem, para bellum ("if you want peace, be prepared for war"). In August 2022, the People's Republic of China issued a white paper on its Taiwan policy, pointing to the inevitability of conflict if Taiwan continues to pursue its anti-China stance. US intelligence has corroborated this by stating that President Xi intends to prepare the People's Liberation Army for conflict by 2027 (Yen, 2023). Some claim this is where Taiwan and Ukraine fundamentally differ: while Ukraine is a widely recognised country in the West, it had no explicit military strategy funneled by concerns of intervention. Taiwan's partial support from the biggest military in the world and its domestic politics, schooling, and society dedicated to si vis pacem, para bellum, implicate a level of preparedness and support that is not comparable to pre-invasion Ukraine. The US has been much more vocal concerning Taiwan compared to Ukraine, with US national security policy authority Elbridge Colby asserting that "Taiwan's fall will be a disaster for American interests" (para. 2) in a Senate confirmation meeting in March 2025 (Lai, 2025).

Russia and China's relationship lies within four shared pillars: the US as common opposition in their geopolitical strategies (the Asia-Pacific for China, and Europe for Russia), authoritarian political systems, and economic capacities that rely on each other (Russian resources and Chinese manufacturing) (Rumer, 2024). The parallels shared between Russia and Ukraine, and China and Taiwan, are distinct and presumably undeniable, yet the similarities as presented are limited in their predictive powers.

Ukraine and Taiwan are respectively economically dependent on Russia and China, great powers that both lay claim to their territory. They share history and culture, and with Russia and China so intrinsically politically linked, it creates a comparative narrative that is easy to follow. Yet, differences in the mechanisms of the two powers' expansionist ambitions and the responding policies from Ukraine and Taiwan limit the conclusions drawn by the Russia-China parallel.

II. Comparing Sino-Russian Expansion Strategies

Common Conception: Russia and China as Fused Foreign Policy

Taiwan and Ukraine are so easily compared due to the often too-easily drawn parallels in Chinese and Russian expansionism. It is thought that

China is focused on the Indo-Pacific, Russia on Eastern Europe, and that US national security is threatened by the Sino-Russian convergence being downplayed (Campbell, 2025).

In June of 2013, at the International Economic Forum, President Putin declared a pivot to the Asia-Pacific. While the announcement was eclipsed by the seizure of Crimea in 2014 and the intervention in the Syrian Civil War in 2015, it marked the beginning of a Russian shift away from the Transatlantic and towards Eurasia (Campbell, 2025). This was largely realised to gain an ally, a strategic alignment with the PRC in order to dismantle US hegemony. In a 2017 statement, Putin claimed the "main struggle, which is now underway, is that for global leadership, and we are not going to contest China on this" (Campbell, 2025, para. 4).

Though they may have similar goals, Sino-Russian politics are better characterised through friendship rather than an alliance (Roshchin, 2025). They most identifiably coordinate to support each other without the demands of an alliance. Russia is also often thought to be China's subordinate, but in reality, they both have agency in the global arena and vocalise differing opinions, with different definitions of global governance and similar interests in multipolarity. They also act independently and pursue self-interest rather than coordinated action. They balance diplomatic coordination without hesitating to reproach each other. In February 2025, following President Trump's call to Putin on negotiating a ceasefire with Ukraine, Putin followed up by calling with President Xi, outlining the negotiation terms (Roshchin, 2025). Their comparable foreign policies are thus not identical and fall short when being used to illustrate the similarities between Ukraine and Taiwan, diverging significantly.

Where Sino-Russian Foreign Policies Diverge

China has not intervened as Russia has in other countries and while both are assertive militarily, they are not to the same degree. President Putin has cultivated the image of a strongman whereas President Xi has invested in his image as a statesperson, emphasising common, shared good.

In terms of action, Russia favours revisionism, allowing, for example, military escalation in the Middle East and post-Soviet sphere (Pisciotta, 2023). The Kremlin chooses to openly criticise NATO and continually threatens military force. Until February 2022, Russia had been successful in exerting minimal military effort for a greater reward. In this sense, Russia tends to make cost-benefit calculations that favour military action (Pisciotta, 2023). This includes the "success" of the Crimea annexation despite some sanction costs. Russia is thus risk-acceptant, with its military interventions having territorial claims, the desire to strengthen its regional presence, and an economy that cannot support prolonged conflict.

While China has a somewhat equally powerful military, it is more risk averse. Unlike Russia, the PRC has preferred a global approach, employing economic and diplomatic measures (Pisciotta, 2023). Being the world's second-largest economy, it has the financial and economic backing to

challenge American hegemony. By implementing a 'good neighbourhood' policy in the South China Sea and adopting the Westphalian view of non-intervention, it is largely committed to joint development through trading and investing. The Politburo also tends towards international stability and peace by challenging status quo powers through economic means rather than outright war. Its economic growth and maritime capabilities in the Asia-Pacific have, for example, aimed for a gradual removal of American regional presence.

This marked difference between the states' foreign strategy further widens Ukraine-Taiwan comparisons. By examining the policy strategies of the countries that lay claim to them and elucidating their disparities, it brings attention to the greater picture instead of simply focusing on the characteristic similarities between both Ukraine and Taiwan. If Russia and China have different ideas on how they want to incorporate adjacent territories then it would be misguided to expect a similar result to Ukraine for Taiwan.

III. Limits to the Russia-China Parallel Concerning Taiwan

The discussion on parallels drawn between China and Russia can also be extended back to incorporate the topic of Taiwan. Indeed, while Russia had a limited base of supporting states previously to Ukraine, China's allies are plenty. The economic and reputational consequences Russia faced would be comparatively less of an international burden for China in the Taiwan contingency. Over the past decade, China has deepened its ties with developing states in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, subsequently securing allies to back its unification policy (Taylor Fravel, 2023). Presumably, they would not support the coalition against Beijing in the instance of an invasion of Taiwan, whereas Russia's cultivation of allies in regions like Eastern and Central Europe have equivocated in their relations with Russia post Ukrainian invasion. China's multiplicity of allies and international standing would transcend the reputational costs led on by the Taiwan contingency, costs that Russia had to bear post-Ukraine.

This also does not account for the vast difference in capacities between both states, with Beijing's higher military spending, greater economic power, and, relatively speaking, normalized long-term presence in the South China Sea region. The PRC also has a more supportive base of citizens, with most believing Taiwan is an inalienable part of China and that they have a legitimate right to it. Meanwhile, Russian citizens are less faithful to a Russia's Ukraine. In this way, not only does China have a stronger and wider base of allies internationally that do not recognise Taiwan, but it also sees more support for its expansionist policies internally.

[Figure 2]

Furthermore, Russia unspokenly targeted the West through Ukraine, writing out an implicit message. Much less could be said for a potential Chinese attack on Taiwan. As it stands, Taiwan consists of a vital American limb in the Indo-Pacific and threatening it openly would lead to an

anything but implicit message against NATO. Indeed, President Trump incited NATO countries to invest more in response to Ukraine, to move towards reinforcing European defence (Adler, 2024). However, Washington has gone further in its promise to Taiwan, offering direct military support and funds, and soliciting the help of NATO members in a potential campaign against Beijing (Lee, 2024). While Russia had few consequences post Crimea and largely economic backlash following Ukraine, the Taiwan contingency demands a greater military response from NATO. However, what the Taiwan contingency demands in response from NATO is different from what could realistically happen. China is stronger militarily than Russia, currently, and is a contender for global hegemony. While the US has been continually supportive of Taiwan, its support has always been contingent on maintaining formal diplomatic relations with Beijing. Even further, while the US might be willing to intervene in Taiwan, the same cannot be said for the rest of NATO countries. NATO intervention in case of a Chinese intervention is an American dream for many and is often interpreted as a simple ideal meant to reinforce American presence and legitimacy in the Asia-Pacific.

Lastly, but perhaps most crucially, raw military power is not how China envisages conquering Taiwan in the first place. There is still a pervasive belief amongst advocates of the parallel that China will lead a military intervention in Taiwan like Russia in Ukraine. However as mentioned, military action is a policy Russia favours compared to China's proclivity for economic expansion. More realistically, China has and is still working towards a "peaceful reunification" with Taiwan (Taylor Fravel, 2023). Policy experts have indeed been divided over this subject and their points of debate are twofold: whether China (a) plans to use force (b) in the near future. Chinese plans for reunification are for now purely political and manifest themselves in the continued isolation of Taiwan from international fora and multilateral institutions, the coercing of a unilateral economic dependence on China, and the restricted state recognition of Taiwan globally (Taylor Fravel, 2023). Much attention is allocated towards a blatantly military Taiwan contingency, yet Chinese expansionism in Taiwan has perhaps already started. Xi has demonstrated a penchant for grey-zone statecraft in the South China Sea, which can be reasonably extended to Taiwan. If these methods were not already in motion, Ukraine's invasion would have reinforced deterrence from Taiwan and perhaps encouraged China to pursue alternative methods of statecraft. If anything, Taiwan will not implicate a military conflict, but a grey zone war of attrition, encompassing cyberspace, economic dependence, and diplomatic isolation. In this instance, Chinese expansion would manifest through the gradual isolation of Taiwan on the global scene.

Further, if China continues to pursue grey-zone tactics with Taiwan and foregoes an outright military agenda, Western sanctioning, reaction, and defence would also be delayed. The NATO agenda concerning the Taiwan contingency projects a Chinese military intervention in Taiwan (Lee, 2024).

US intelligence did not anticipate Putin's invasion of Ukraine and a similar outcome could be expected for One China (Yen, 2023). The Politburo's vision of a peaceful reunification with Taiwan is often overlooked, yet it corroborates China's current grey-zone activities in the South China Sea and its efforts so far to push Taiwan away from international fora and foreign recognition. Overall, regardless of potential military capabilities and allies comparisons between Ukraine and Taiwan, it is highly unlikely Beijing opts for a military intervention in Taiwan. This qualitative difference makes a likening of Taiwan to Ukraine an oversimplification that is misleading for the greater public.

This discussion nonetheless reflects the concerns over China's growing power in the East as China concentrates, for now, on weakening US support of Taiwan in such a way that would allow for a peaceful unification with Taiwan. As Beijing has disclosed it favours grey-zone tactics, so might continue its imposed dependency of Taiwan on China (Köckritz, 2023). In any case, the unprecedented resistance and the international coalition of support for Ukraine and lasting economic sanctions might dissuade Beijing from invading Taiwan so immediately if it were to be a military intervention.

Conclusion

Russia's claims to power in Ukraine has posited several, yet limited, considerations for China's aim towards Taiwan. Due to the similarities of their expansionist ambitions, Ukraine is thought to excavate a precedent for Chinese unification policy. Yet limits emerge from this parallel and manifest themselves in the nature and quantity of the powers' allies, their economic and political capacities, and the statecraft methods chosen by their expansionist policy. President Xi's readiness to maintain a strong global economic status for China also reduces the likelihood of a military intervention in Taiwan, instead favouring a gradual and informal war of attrition.

Most literature emphasises an ultimatum, the inevitability of war, but as demonstrated, this is not necessarily inexorable. Further work on this subject is essential, reflecting on President Trump's significant pro-NATO position and rapprochement with President Putin, and analysing China's penchant for grey zone tactics. While Russia pursues its destructive war of attrition on Ukraine, academic and media focus needs to move away from the black box of the Russia-China parallel and excavate Chinese expansionist ambitions without this oversimplification.

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Figure 2: 2 graphs

Graph 1. Who do you consider yourself to be first and foremost?

% chose the option "Citizen of Ukraine"

The Kyiv International Institute of Sociology conducted long-term surveys on Ukrainian public opinion. After 2022, around 80% of Ukrainians consider themselves as "citizens of Ukraine", as opposed to other options, including "citizen of Russia" and "citizen of the world"

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