

The Ukraine-Taiwan Dilemma:

Part 1



Occasional Paper 2

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The Ukraine-Taiwan Dilemma:

How to counter a two-front grey zone threat

Part 1

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Having recently read George Friedman's analysis on why there will not be a war between Ukraine and Russia or between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC), [The Unlikelihood of a War with China and Russia](#),¹ has made me reflect on some of the writings I've done on this topic in SAGE International's 2020 report on the power dynamics of the Indo-Pacific² as well as within my LinkedIn network on both these issues.

Firstly, I cannot stress enough that war is the last resort of both the ignorant and the brash. Few ever win such contests since the unintended consequences of war is to alter the very fabric of strategic reality usually to the detriment of *all* combatants.

Politics drives war and if a state were to choose this option, it is usually a sign of desperation, reflecting the ephemeral hold politicians have over their people and a failure of competent statecraft.

For autocratic states, usually but not always run by men, war is a sign of masculinity and/or national strength which plays well to domestic constituents in these states. We see this in the bravado of the likes of Putin, Xi and Erdogan, the patriarchal figures of their respective countries – defenders of the faith and of their nationalities. But of course, whether autocratic or democratic – this political Ying and Yang of the international community will always remain. Humankind cannot live in the light without the darkness being manifest somewhere. And war is the deepest expression of humankind's desire to own, destroy, dominate or seek vengeance for past wrongs. Knowing this, let us revisit the main points that Friedman makes about the 'unlikelihood of war' between Russia and the Ukraine.

Post-Soviet Russia in a Nutshell

It is true that Russia is a pale shadow of the former Soviet Union. Strategically, the collapse of the Soviet Union robbed the core Soviet state of Russia of the country's strategic depth. This collapse came in two phases. The collapse of the USSR's Eastern European cordon sanitaire represented by the Warsaw Pact (1989), which reopened the eastern part of the European peninsula to the prospect of Western European encroachment, playing to traditional Russian fears. Then there was the collapse of the USSR itself (1992). Parts of the

¹ Friedman G., [The Unlikelihood of a War with China and Russia, Geopolitical Futures](#), April 14, 2021

² Bruni J, Olney D.O., Jain P.C., Ludwig J.Z. & Tyrrell P.J., [The strategic implications of changing dynamics and regional partnerships on major power competition in the Indo-Pacific](#), Ovato Press, Melb., Vic., 2020

once mighty Soviet state now were independent republics, leaving Russia even more strategically vulnerable.

But the loss of Ukraine (1991) was Russia's deepest wound of all.

For much of Russian history, Russians considered Ukrainians cultural kin and Ukrainian territory a natural expression of Russian territory.³ Coupled to this, the rapid expansion of NATO into the Eastern European space during the 1990s when the Russian economy collapsed, and the Russian state was at its weakest point in decades likely helped propel the nationalist Vladimir Putin into office after the disastrous post-Soviet Yeltsin years.

Putin promised to return Russia to a position of international power. In many ways, using the recovered Russian economy, buttressed by the financial power of his favoured oligarchs, the suppression of the free press and utilisation of Russia's vast reserves of hydrocarbons, Putin managed to achieve the impossible. Russia may not have been 'first among equals', but during the 2000s, the country recovered enough to be considered a significant factor in international relations. Putin's clever use of limited Russian military power managed to suppress Chechen independence⁴ and shore up Armenia during the 1990s⁵, while in the 2000s going on the offensive to recover some 'lost territories' in the Caucasus against the Republic of Georgia.⁶ Putin was always careful not to act rashly and overstep in areas where the West would respond in force. He operated in areas deemed of a lower order significance to the West. His boldest move to date was the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and the continued support of pro-Russian elements within the eastern Ukrainian territories of Donetsk and Luhansk, more popularly known as the Donbas.

It is worth remembering here that Ukraine, while referred to as a unified country by the popular media is anything but.

The country is ethnically divided between some 77.8 percent who identify as Ukrainians with some 17 percent identifying themselves as Russian.⁷ The country is also culturally divided between a multitude of branches of Orthodox Christianity. Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, is located in the western part of the country and since its separation from Russia has aligned itself to the West, which, as many in eastern Ukraine contend, has left them voiceless within a predominantly Western orientated political hierarchy drawing its strength from neighbouring, virulently anti-Russian Poland.⁸

Having unpacked the strategic quagmire in this part of eastern Europe, let's return to Friedman's contention that a major war will not occur between Russia and Ukraine in spite of some 100,000 Russian soldiers having been mobilised to the border of the Donbas.

³ Kappeler A., *Ukraine and Russia: Legacies of the imperial past and competing memories*, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol.5, Issue 2., July 2014, pp. 107-115.

⁴ First Chechen War 1994-96, Second Chechen War 1999-2009

⁵ First Nagorno Karabakh War 1988-94

⁶ In 2008, giving rise to pro-Russian republics Abkhazia and South Ossetia

⁷ Predominantly residing in Donetsk and Luhansk. The remainder of the population is classified as 'other' minorities

⁸ Poland acceded to NATO in 1999

Friedman argues that Russia is unlikely to stage an invasion of Ukraine because of the size of the territory involved. Also, that there is the very real prospect that NATO has been arming and training Ukrainian forces with advanced weapons. What he doesn't say in his article is that military actions outside of an invasion are impossible. He narrowly defines the scope of any Russian military action as a conventional military invasion of the entire country, perhaps as a prelude to the country's re-annexation into Russia. This would be a step too far. There is the very real likelihood of Polish & Hungarian volunteers entering the fray to defend Ukraine from Russian assault and the possibility of this dragging NATO into war with Russia. Consequently, the risks presented by of a full-scale invasion and occupation of all of Ukraine by Russia might trigger a NATO response. Therefore, I believe we can safely rule this sort of Russian military action out.



Figure 1. Map of Ukraine & the contested space of the Donbas. Image: Shutterstock

Russia is not strong enough to take on the combined forces of NATO. Doing so would risk its defeat and possibly cause the Russian president internal risks to his hold on power.

Putin will only consider action against Ukraine that stands a chance of winning. Such action has to be politically saleable within the Kremlin and popular among the Russian oligarchs and people. A war to 'liberate' Russians and Russian speakers from the yoke of Kiev would be short and stands a very high chance of success. Ironically, Kiev would benefit from the removal of its eastern Russian minority since they would always be restive, difficult to rule and largely pro-Russian. Kiev would certainly hate the territorial adjustment to Russia's favour, but just as Friedman declared about Ukraine being a large territory, Russia is far

larger. Hypothetically, having conceded the Donbas to Russia or Russian influence, in another possible twist of irony Kiev might well be given the chance to join NATO as compensation for its territorial loss.

A Ukrainian-Russian war *is* a possibility and Russian military action *short of the invasion and occupation of Ukraine proper* can occur, whether under current conditions or into the future and should therefore not be ruled out.

The Taiwan Problem

Much has been made of the growing strength of the navy of the People's Republic of China. That the number of hulls being produced out of Chinese shipyards is eclipsing those of the US Navy. This is true. Beijing is playing for a displacement strategy, building vast numbers of vessels in order to make it increasingly difficult for the US and allied navies to safely conduct Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) through the contested waters of the East and South China Seas as well as the Strait of Taiwan.⁹ Should PLAN naval traffic in these waters become too numerous, the likelihood of a collision or accidental discharge of weapons becomes exceedingly high.

As CCP cadres know of the open reluctance of the US and its allies of pushing it too hard,¹⁰ especially if the outcome could lead to a major Sino-American war, all the CCP has to do is to continue this course of action until a tipping point is reached and Washington makes the calculation that conducting FONOPS in waters close to the Chinese mainland is too dangerous. This would give the Chinese a chance of victory without fighting. An ideal based on the thinking of ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu (544 BC-496 BC).

But this displacement strategy does not mean that the PLAN cannot conduct offensive operations in areas where American commitment is ambiguous such as against the western Philippines, the Japanese Senkaku islands or the Taiwanese islands close to the Chinese mainland.

However, one has to think carefully whether the idea that US statements to defend the western Philippines, the Senkakus or all Taiwanese islands are real and that depends on the will of America's Commander-in-Chief, the US President. If the president deems action against China too provocative or too risky, no matter how strong US forces are technologically or how well organised against their Chinese counterparts, the president is unlikely to take action. US grand strategy doesn't just depend on American capabilities, it also depends on convincing adversaries that if push came to shove, the US would take a strong stand, including the decision to act militarily in defence of the status quo. This is the power of US deterrence. Should a US president not act in the interest of preserving the status quo, this might concede ground to an adversary determined to achieve a territorial objective.

⁹ Bruni J., *The China-US Fight for Naval Supremacy*, Policy Paper (17), TRENDS Research and Advisory, Abu Dhabi, UAE, November 2020, p.29.

¹⁰ [China is betting that the West is in irreversible decline](#), The Economist, April 3, 2021

The PLAN has very limited offensive maritime capabilities, but what they have is optimised for small-scale, high impact actions designed to test American political resolve. For instance, would the Chinese seizure of Taiwanese held Kinmen, Wuciou or Matsu islands¹¹ spark American military retaliation? Would it even spark Taiwanese military retaliation? Were the Chinese to capture these outposts of Taiwan in-force, would Washington mount a campaign to recapture them on behalf of Taiwan? Would such small islands be worth putting US and allied warships and naval personnel at risk by sailing so close to Chinese rocket forces and PLAAF fighters? Logic would dictate that no Western government would fight the PRC over such small prizes and that should this happen Washington would pressure Taipei to stand down and accept the fait accompli. One could see a similar trajectory for Chinese action against part or all of the Senkakus, or part or all of Palawan island in the Western Philippines.

What the PLAN and the PLAAF is also primed for is to launch an air and naval blockade of Taiwan as recent exercises and provocations have clearly demonstrated.¹²



Figure 2. Taiwan Strait. Image: Shutterstock

It is not in the interest of the CCP to destroy Taiwan and its unique and profitable industrial base or wipe out its highly skilled population. A Normandy-style invasion of Taiwan, a difficult proposition even under the best circumstances considering the sea-state in the

¹¹ Simon S., [We Must be on Guard as China Seeks Strategic Advantage](#), Macdonald-Laurier Institute (MLI), Ottawa, Canada, March 26, 2020

¹² See: Lu Li-shih, [China's Military Exercises Near Taiwan: The Lowdown on an Uptick](#), The Diplomat, October 20, 2020; [China flies nuclear-capable bombers, fighter jets over Taiwanese waters](#), ABC, January 23, 2021; 25 [Chinese warplanes enter Taiwan defence zone](#), WIION, YouTube, April 14, 2021

Taiwan Strait and Taiwanese defences is the least likely scenario in the short-to-medium term. Also, an air or missile attack on Taiwan would devastate the country with the CCP having to foot the bill to rebuild the island's industries, its cities, not to mention carry the burden of having to pacify a hostile and resentful population. Besides, the CCP would only have one chance to subdue the island militarily and if it fails, the fate of the Chinese senior leadership would be imperilled as would the CCP's hold over the mainland.

Another major issue that receives very little press time is that the armed forces of China are not national armed forces they are the armed forces of the CCP, a political organisation. And while this political organisation is some 90 million strong,¹³ the interest of the party is to bend China to the will of CCP dictates.

The CCP is not a traditional totalitarian party, it uses totalitarian means to suppress dissent while accepting that capitalism, mostly for party members, is a far more productive means of social and economic order than Maoist communism.

Chinese military technology has not been tested in state-on-state combat since 1988,¹⁴ though some Western observers and media influencers contend that Chinese military technology is on par with that of the US, and in some measures, more advanced, less sanguine observers suggest that Chinese military technology is mostly of Russian origin or domestic knockoffs of stolen Western IP¹⁵ and therefore is of inferior quality.

Whatever the truth of this matter, the primary objective of the PLA is the survival of the CCP. Its secondary objective is to recover Taiwan. Whatever alarmist story comes out of the media in regard to the CCP's aims to recover Taiwan, and today there are many, this will always be the CCP's *secondary* consideration – a prestige assignment to show Chinese strength to the world. China is a vast country with an ethnically and religiously diverse population of 1.3 billion people. The CCP's key objective is to manage the expectations of this massive population. But historically when previous Chinese governing structures failed to meet popular expectations, they fell, sending the country into spasms of civil war on scales that have no Western equivalent. Furthermore, when assessing the strength and capability of the PLA one of the most salient indicators is command. Totalitarian states demand the loyalty of their armed forces. Consequently, no totalitarian state allows its officer corps to exercise flexibility and adaptability at the operational or tactical level in case a popular officer arises through the ranks to threaten the party. This sort of political structure is therefore both paranoid and fragile.

While a Chinese air and naval blockade is not a war against the island-state, it would be a war-like action, well within the means of current PLA forces to achieve that would cause maximum problems for both Washington and Taipei.

How could this scenario be countered?

¹³ According to *Statista*, the CCP is [91.2 million](#) strong, representing some 6.6 percent of the Chinese population

¹⁴ Bruni, Trends, op.cit., 2020, p.35.

¹⁵ See: Gertz B., *Deceiving the Sky: Inside Communist China's Drive for Global Supremacy*, Encounter Books, 2019

PLAN and PLAAF assets with clear rules of engagement such as not to shoot until fired upon would clearly complicate a Western response since breaking through a Chinese air and naval blockade would likely require an American-led kinetic attack. Clearly that could escalate any such situation into a direct Sino-American War. As both the Chinese and American economies are so heavily interlinked, such a war could bring down both countries and therefore could not be in Washington's or Beijing's interest.

Donbas Revisited

Having established that Russia invading all of Ukraine is highly unlikely, the idea of it 'liberating' the Russian speaking population of the Donbas from Kiev's rule is *very possible*. But what would Putin get from announcing Russia's intentions so openly? Was this a mistake? And does such a move give Kiev enough time to mount an adequate defence?

Internally, Putin's polling is not tracking well.¹⁶ The Russian opposition, while still unlikely to replace Putin anytime soon is growing in popularity. Putin's longevity in office as well as his economic mismanagement (not helped by international sanctions) seems to be having a negative effect on the Russian people. And while Russia is not a Western-style democracy, it is also not a totalitarian state. For want of a better description it is a 'liberal' autocracy. It has a partially free press and has not outlawed opposition parties. But the Russian state under Putin regularly harasses journalists, and sometimes kills them if they express openly anti-government opinion.

Furthermore, while opposition parties are allowed to exist, they are there at the mercy of Putin.

In Russian elections, Putin is the only candidate allowed to win.

In 2014, facing general public apathy, Putin engineered what became known as one of his most audacious and clever moves by seizing the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine through what is now known as 'hybrid warfare.' Exploiting the domestic chaos within Ukraine during and in the aftermath of its 2014 Euromaidan revolution, Kiev was in no position to put up a coherent front. Largely conducted in secret, and by means difficult to counter because of its covert nature, Putin used a combination of information warfare, the use of unmarked Russian soldiers and local sympathizers to capture Crimea. It was through guile, not force that Putin scored his tactical victory. The West, as well as Ukraine itself, not knowing how to counter this form of covert military action allowed it to stand. The reason? While Putin made a play for Crimea and seemed prepared to fight for this territory, the Ukrainians were unable to take on Russian forces in direct combat and in truth, for NATO and the Americans in particular, a war with Russia over Ukrainian territory just didn't seem worth it. In November 2014 unmarked Russian forces entered the Donbas and what was called a frozen conflict between Kiev and Moscow over eastern Ukraine began. Putin was careful not to

¹⁶ Dobrokhotov R., [Putin's rating is collapsing as anger grows in Russia](#), Al-Jazeera, June 17, 2020; Kolensikov A., [Are Russians finally sick of Putin?](#) Carnegie Moscow Centre, April 7, 2020

overextend Russian forces since plans were afoot to support the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. International sanctions were slapped on Russia as a consequence of its capture of Crimea. And as money was in short supply, a long-drawn out period of low intensity combat ensued in the Donbas.

However, since Russian forces prevented the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, securing Moscow's long-held eastern Mediterranean base in the Syrian port of Tartus, and since Putin's popularity has taken a significant hit since Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war, it seems a greater victory is needed to keep Putin relevant to the Russian people. A victory that's less kept out of the state media and something that the Russian people can galvanise around. With some 100,000 Russian soldiers on the edge of the Donbas, the Western media have talked-up the prospect of a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. While Friedman is right to contend this is unlikely, rolling these forces into the Donbas and declaring Donetsk and Luhansk Russian oblasts might give Putin the public display of might the Russian people can care about in a way a successful military intervention in a foreign country like Syria can't match. Considering that Ukraine is not a NATO member and the state of politics in Kiev is not aligned with that of Western Europe values, an open Western defence of Ukrainian territorial integrity might not seem worth a direct engagement with the Russians. Should Putin go in this direction, it might be a relatively cheap and easy win for him. Were Kiev to balk at weak Western support and mobilise for a full-scale war with Russia, this would be a war Ukraine could not win.

Outlier to Broader Conflict

Unlike the Taiwan scenario which stands little chance of escalation even were Xi to contemplate limited military action against the island-state, a different dynamic persists in the Donbas, no thanks to another autocrat, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan who has pledged his support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Erdogan has deployed a limited number of Turkish military drones to Ukraine, the same drones that allowed Azerbaijan to win its recent war with Armenia over the contested Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁷ What makes Turkey's active support of Ukraine important is that the country is a NATO member and so therefore is covered under Article 5. In spite of having gone politically 'rogue' on its NATO allies by buying Russian military equipment, Turkey is still a NATO state. Therefore, what would happen were a Turkish drone, or supporting Turkish military personnel targeted by Russia in a major Donbas operation is unclear. Technically, NATO would be obliged to assist the Turkish dictator in his strategic gambit in Ukraine. The illiberal Catholic NATO governments of Hungary¹⁸ and Poland¹⁹ might also call to support Ukraine were Russian forces to cross the border into Donbas. It is unlikely that NATO HQ in Brussels would agree with such calls. Disagreements within NATO about what to do, highly visible through media reporting, would sow further dissent and perhaps even confusion in the organisation.

¹⁷ Tastekin F., [Will Turkish drones help Ukraine reclaim territory?](#) Al-Monitor, December 11, 2020

¹⁸ Serhan Y., [EU watches as Hungary kills democracy](#), The Atlantic, April 3, 2020

¹⁹ Wigura K & Kuisz J., [In Poland we've become spectators at the dismantling of democracy](#), The Guardian, August 17, 2020

Conclusion

Having established that while the invasions of Ukraine and Taiwan are not on the cards, other military action can certainly be contemplated by Putin and Xi either as coordinated or unilateral limited offenses. Ideally both would be playing for low-cost, high impact operations whereby the Western media would carry the message of their inevitable cleverness in outmanoeuvring hapless Western governments. This would continue to feed into the declining West/US narrative that Putin and Xi play to their own domestic audiences and to those countries not aligned to either Washington or Brussels.

So, getting back to whether Friedman's contention is correct. I would say he is, but with a strong caveat.

Contemporary Russia and China are limited in what they can achieve against Western interests. By a sober assessment of their military capabilities and postures, which are largely a result of real-world economics and what these countries can afford to get away with, they can act decisively in areas contiguous to their heavily defended borders. The Western media, largely ignorant of its own role in exaggerating the nature of international crises, is Russia's and China's ace-in-the-hole. Any tactical win they get at the expense of Western interests will be telegraphed as another example of the corrupt, effete nature of Western capitalism and way of life. Repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth. It was NAZI Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels' greatest observation about political life. And it is as true today as it was during World War II. Using the military instrument cleverly, knowing one's own limits and knowing the limits of one's opponent is not just politics by other means, it is politics pure and simple.
