

From Taiwan to Ukraine

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Geopolitical realignment and anticolonial solidarity in a time of war

WAR: A FAMILIAR COLONIAL NARRATIVE

While Ukraine and the geopolitics of Eastern Europe were far away from Taiwanese consciousness prior to Russia's invasion, the war has since galvanized a vibrant discussion on imperial rivalries between US-Russia-China, and war preparedness in Taiwan. Right after the attacks on February 24th, 2022, Taiwan was trending on Twitter as all eyes were on how China and the US would react to the geopolitical conflict over Ukraine. The questions were whether China would align with Russia against all Western criticisms and how the US would adjust its military and diplomatic strategies in the Asia Pacific as the conflict developed in Europe. In this sense, the war feels intimately connected to the fate of Taiwan despite the distinct histories of Taiwan and Ukraine and the different geopolitical dynamics around them. The slogan "Ukraine today, Taiwan tomorrow" has been adopted by both the pro-unification and pro-independence camps to express the urgency of war. It is taken from a previous slogan, "Hong Kong today, Taiwan tomorrow."

Putin's justification for his war in Ukraine is eerily familiar for the Taiwanese. He legitimated his "special military operation" with chauvinistic ideology that fundamentally rejects Ukrainian sovereignty and subjecthood, viewing it as inferior to a normative Russian identity. The invasion makes almost no sense militarily or economically. The only justification comes from Putin's imperialist nostalgic narrative and colonial arrogance. In the same way, Beijing has made the case for its annexation plan for Taiwan by asserting that people from the two countries share similar linguistic and cultural roots. The ethnic and cultural dominance of Han Chauvinism sharply resembles Putin's ethnonationalist narrative; like Ukraine, Taiwan must be seized and returned to the Chinese motherland to complete China's "territorial integrity."

The international discourse about Ukraine, which primarily treats it as a pawn between two global superpowers without national history, culture, and struggle, is also similar to that about Taiwan. Its particularity is elided in a taken-for-granted international relations analysis. Of course, inter-imperial competition is critical for understanding the challenges facing both countries, but a strict geopolitical realist understanding ignores the national interests and agency of both. Such a reductive analysis has political consequences; it guides superpowers' policies in ways that often force marginalized and less powerful states to make concessions to this or that imperialist or agree to some settlement negotiated between them. In this sense, we must understand that the lessons Ukraine provides for Taiwan are not only about military preparation or security strategy but about the problems of *coloniality* in geopolitics and political theory.

RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

Not surprisingly, a part of the Western left reproduces such coloniality. Thus, for many, the initial response to Russia's invasion was to shift focus from it and from Ukraine's resistance back to the West itself. They focused on "NATO expansion" as an understandable and legitimate security

concern in a fashion that seemed to justify Putin's invasion of Ukraine, strangely mimicking the official position of Putin's administration on the war. Eastern European activists have critiqued this one-sided interpretation as "[US-plaining](#)" and pushed the Western left to confront its lack of analysis of non-Western imperialism, and specifically Russian imperialism.

China was initially put in an awkward position by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. On the one hand, China wants geopolitical stability and access to Western markets, but on the other, wants to preserve its alliance with Russia, shares its aspiration to change the balance of geopolitical power in the world, and has a common aim of imposing its rule over countries it views as part of its national state or empire. Russian claims that Ukraine is not a legitimate, independent nation-state, which parallels China's claims that Taiwan is not a country but an integral part of the Chinese nation-state since time immemorial.

Whatever its initial hesitations, China eventually doubled down on backing the Russian narrative, especially domestically where Putin's talking points have been repeated verbatim. Thus, China frames the invasion of Ukraine as a justified response to Western aggression and plays up the presence of far-right groups such as the Azov Battalion in Ukraine. Any initial tensions between China and Russia were quickly covered over. While this pro-Russian discourse circulates only in marginal and sectarian circles of the Anglophone left's media, it has occupied a significant space in the [Mandarin media circuits](#), especially in Chinese state-sponsored media.

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Interestingly enough, apologists for the Chinese empire in Sinophone discourse have sometimes taken their cues from Western leftists who sought to redirect blame exclusively back to the West, often citing arguments drawn from western leftist apologists for Russia. These apologists and their Western leftist accomplices frame the West as the only actor to criticize and Russia's actions as a legitimate response to NATO aggression. Whether they do so out of ignorance or out of a sense of guilt about Western imperialism, the result is to absolve non-Western imperialisms, in this case Russia, of its agency and culpability for the horrors it has wrought in Ukraine.

GEOPOLITICAL REALIGNMENTS IN TIME OF WAR

Russia's war on Ukraine is sobering for both China and Taiwan. Beijing now must recognize that the West - the US and Europe - is willing to implement economic sanctions on a massive scale and deliver military aid, even from staunchly anti-war countries like Germany. Taipei has to come to grips with that fact that neither the West's sanctions nor arms deterred Russia's aggression. Both realize that the war will have an enormous impact on their antagonism, defense policy, and economic relations. For Taiwan, specifically, its defense strategy will be to increase military spending and preparations to resist invasion in the hope of making Beijing think that a cross-strait war would be too costly even to consider.

While China has maintained its alliance with Russia and reproduced its talking points domestically, it thus far has taken a cautious approach in international relations. It has perhaps realized that it cannot afford to fully side with Russia and risk isolation from international markets by getting dragged into an economic and diplomatic conflict with the West over the war. China has publicly pledged only a relatively small sum of [1.57 million USD](#) in humanitarian aid to Ukraine. It has condemned the US for assisting Ukraine with weapons, contending that those would only result in an escalation of the war. But it has done little to oppose the US and NATO.

China has been actively reaching out to European countries to consolidate its alignments since it not only needs Europe as a market but also as a source of technology and innovation. It can ill afford for the war to disrupt these economic ties. Up until now, Europe and China's relationship has been an opportunistic one that was focused on trade and economy. Beijing wants to preserve these.

However, the EU-China summit on April 1st, 2022, may have been the beginning of a change in their relationship. The European leaders refused to back down on [multinational, coordinated statements against Chinese human rights abuses](#). Despite China's efforts to narrow the focus of the meeting on trade and economic concerns, EU representatives persisted in raising objections to China's policies in Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

While China and Europe at large are still economically interdependent, the situation is beginning to change amidst this conflict. Since COVID-19, Taiwan has built closer diplomatic ties with several Eastern European countries, especially Lithuania. China responded by imposing a trade boycott of Lithuania. Its determination to punish countries for establishing relations with Taiwan could begin to compromise its relationship with other states in the EU and the EU as a whole.

The complex multilateral relations between China, the EU, the US, and Russia cannot be explained in the binaristic geopolitical outlook of a "new Cold War" either economically or politically. The war on Ukraine has demonstrated that the world we live in is not only mediated by the superpower competition between the US and China, but there are many other actors involved. Ukraine, despite being largely ignored until the last decade by the West because of its lack of economic and political power, has shown how its unwavering resistance is capable of redrawing the geopolitical alignments and changing the dynamics of post-Cold War world history.

Unlike the predictions of the neoliberal economists or geopolitical realists, market liberalization and the ever more interconnected world economy have neither prevented another war from breaking out in Europe, nor transformed China's authoritarian state. The multiple collisions between global superpowers from both the West and non-West in ongoing geopolitical contestations are evidence that the questions of imperialist aggression and coloniality are far from resolved by the end of the Cold War.

Further, the war in Ukraine has highlighted the critical position of the former Soviet states such as the Baltic countries, who are much more assertive in their stance on both Russia and China. Compared to the Western European states, especially Germany and Italy who are heavily reliant on importing Russia's natural gas, these post-Soviet and postcolonial states seem to be more willing to take sides against imperialist aggression.

THE WAR'S IMPACTS ON ASIA AND SUPPLY CHAINS

With its abrupt and violent invasion, Russia's disregard for international laws and economic ties with Europe may also cause the West to reconsider its relations with China. Recognizing that economic engagement may not nudge China away from regional aggression, Western countries may adopt a more confrontational stance toward China, increasing the likelihood of the outbreak of an inter-regional conflict. Although some have argued that economic interdependence in global supply chains—effectively a version of the post-Soviet Fukuyamaian "end of history" argument—would prevent conflict between the US and China, that may not turn out to be the case.

Despite the postcolonial parallels between Ukraine and Taiwan, in regard to political economy, it is important to distinguish between the positions of the two countries in the world and their relationship with various major powers. The US has a stronger historical relationship with Taiwan than it has with Ukraine. Taiwan is also a significantly larger economy and is much more central to

the world economy. It is vital to global semiconductor supply chains, producing [half of the world's made-to-order chips](#) and [92% of the global market for advanced chips, by some estimates](#).

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Taiwan also has a different relationship with its regional imperialist overlord, China, than Ukraine has with Russia. For example, Taiwanese semiconductors are reportedly essential parts of the missiles that China has pointed at the island. Consequently, China’s reliance on Taiwan for semiconductor manufacturing has been a greater economic deterrent to a Chinese invasion. Given the deep integration of the Chinese and Taiwanese economies, the economic impact of a Chinese invasion on China would be enormous.

Nevertheless, economic interdependence is no guarantee against war, as Ukraine demonstrates. Most of the [world’s supply of neon, which is needed for semiconductor manufacturing, and 40 percent of krypton, is sourced from Ukraine](#). Ukraine is also a vital breadbasket for Europe and is one of the world’s major exporters of grains. Thus, Ukraine’s role as producer of grain and raw materials for high tech manufacturing, something that directly impacts Russia, was not a deterrent to a Russian invasion. We can expect such political conflicts and even wars, despite the integration of the world economy.

Following the invasion of Ukraine, global geopolitical alignments will be drawn into sharper relief than in recent history. It will strengthen ties between eastern European countries already worried about the geopolitical threat of Russia and NATO. It will trigger similar dynamics in Asia. The Taiwanese government has already aligned itself with the US and European states against Russia. [Former prime minister Shinzo Abe of Japan](#) has suggested that Tokyo adopt a stronger stance in defense of Taiwan to prevent it from suffering a fate similar to Ukraine.

Geopolitical tensions between the US and China will likely intensify after the invasion of Ukraine—potentially drawing Taiwan into the conflict. From the standpoint of Taiwan, the [call for more cooperation between US and China](#) is unlikely to be heeded as cross-strait relations have only become more conflictual. China is doubling down on its annexation discourse and attacking Taiwan’s attempt to establish more diplomatic relationships throughout the world.

SOLIDARITY AS DETERRENCE STRATEGY

From a progressive standpoint, Taiwan would benefit from having more balanced geopolitical relations in the Asia Pacific region and not relying so much on the US’s support. Nevertheless, Ukraine’s living example has shown that Taiwan cannot risk negotiating with the authoritarian regime which views it as a subordinate in its empire. In the meantime, a better strategy for Taiwan’s diplomacy is building more multilateral alliances—official and unofficial—with other partners such as the Central and Eastern European countries beyond the US to break away from its international isolation.

As a small country with limited international access, Taiwan cannot play in the same game as superpower nations. It cannot compete with China’s much larger military budget and security apparatuses. However, the broad-based grassroots mobilization from civil society as well as the government of Ukraine has shown that international solidarity can be deployed as a deterrence strategy. The primary objective of Taiwan is to deter war with China not through appeasement, as that approach would only turn into Beijing’s greater political and economic dominance, and its erasure of civil liberty in the country.

Instead, a better strategy is to increase awareness of the stakes of geopolitical relations domestically, and accumulate our allies internationally. In light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Ministry of National Defense in Taiwan, for the first time in decades, issued a [civil defense booklet](#) to the Taiwanese public due to the pressure from grassroots organizations. Despite its flaws and the incompleteness of the current version of the booklet, the most concerning part of war discourse in Taiwan is not how we talk about it, but the fact that no one talks about it due to the historical and affective link to the white terror of its past. As a young democracy that has fought to leave its authoritarian past, Ukraine's lessons for Taiwan are not only about war preparedness or mobilization but also the critical task of realizing its own identity and anticolonial sovereignty.

Beyond its domestic focus on security, Taiwan has also served as a critical site that facilitates intra-regional grassroots movements against China's imperialist aggression. Since the mid-2010s, Asia has seen a wave of people's movements, which have sought to take a stance against regional authoritarianism. This ranges from Hong Kong to Myanmar and Thailand, with the "Milk Tea Alliance" having proven a popular framework for situating these movements alongside each other.

These struggles were primarily against each country's domestic authoritarianism. Hong Kong is an exception to this pattern as it was directly contending with the deterioration of its political freedoms caused by the Chinese government, which rules over it. What will be essential but challenging is trying to bring these movements together across borders to prevent regional conflict, especially when they may not be able to deter actions from states that are not their own.

Nevertheless, this question of transnational solidarity seems pressing at a time in which regional conflict seems increasingly likely and could drag the region, and possibly the world, into more wars. Building such solidarity has been very difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has largely restricted the organic, interpersonal exchanges among activists across borders. But the war on Ukraine has shown the importance of solidarity in the virtual space, a space that has been critical to counter Russian propaganda and apologist discourses.

We must do all we can to build such common organizing across borders. As antiwar activist Shiyam Galyon [argues in light of the current conflict](#), "Not liking war is not the same as being antiwar. Where war involves a style of conflict engagement that is rooted in domination, subjugation, and armament, being antiwar involves a style of conflict engagement that is rooted in cooperation, collaboration, and disarmament."

For activists in Asia, many of whom are in postcolonial societies, war is far from a distant memory. The close confrontations with authoritarian states have led us to find solidarity in our continuous pursuit of democracy, sovereignty, and decoloniality. Only by facilitating grassroots movements and transnational interdependence can we find alternative ways of belonging and engagement that reject the escalating inter-imperial rivalries.

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