

Ukraine Crisis Brings Relief and Stability to Taiwan Situation



by Conrad Black

Whether Vladimir Putin holds his position or not, and that must now be considered somewhat problematical, events in Ukraine and elsewhere should help cool things somewhat over Taiwan.

The Chinese have an even more political and, from all accounts, an even more self-indulgently corrupt army than the Russians, and they haven't fought a serious war since the agreement of the ceasefire in Korea in May 1953—and as we've seen in Ukraine, 70 years without testing your deployment, morale, weapons, and command structure may invite extremely

unpleasant surprises if you suddenly unleash war upon a well-armed, NATO-trained, and highly motivated opponent.

If Putin does hang on as Russian leader, he will surely come under very heavy pressure to wind this war down—to salvage something from the Donbas and the Black Sea coast and maintain Crimea but, beyond that, to resign himself on behalf of Russia to Ukraine becoming for the first time an independent country with unquestioned international status. The question mark that has hovered over Russian acceptance of the defection of all of the other former republics of the Soviet Union from the control of the Kremlin will have been resolved as far as Ukraine is concerned, particularly in the West. Putin or any successor regime may salvage out of this fiasco enough of a minor accretion to Russian territory from eastern Ukraine to permit a jaunty masquerade of partial success, followed at once by a reanimation of cordial relations between the West and Russia.

The greatest dangers in this war for the West were that snuffing out Ukrainian independence would confirm the widespread view that the Western Alliance was effectively defunct, the West was soft, the United States was a paper tiger, and freedom had no serious defenders. Equally important was the danger that, in such a result, and especially if China were enabled to play a significant role in assisting Russia to victory, it would solidify the relationship between those two countries. To the extent that China and Russia became a single strategic entity, and more particularly to the extent that China got its hands on the vast untapped resources of Asian Russia, China would instantly become a far more dangerous and formidable strategic adversary than it already is.

In addition, any such Russian experience in Ukraine would almost certainly have been the encouragement that it has seemed to be anyway to China to accelerate what had been the timetable for getting to grips with the Taiwan question.

President Richard Nixon agreed with Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai on his first visit to China in 1972, on Mao's assurance, that China wouldn't focus on the Taiwan question for 100 years and that it should be allowed simply to sleep under the agreed formula that the United States accepted the principle of a single China embracing both the People's Republic and Taiwan, but that the People's Republic accepted that there would be no attempt to reunify China by force.

As only half of the anticipated century has elapsed, every rational argument is to take whatever measures are available without embarrassment or apparent weakness to relaunch, at the midpoint in the century, a policy of quiescence on the issue. It's entirely possible that in a further 50 years, Taiwan will be entirely capable of deterring an attack upon itself. It's even possible that in that time, the People's Republic might become a much less belligerent government than it has been.

Some combination of events, including the Ukraine war, the American debacle in Afghanistan, and the heightened Chinese Communist Party (CCP) agitation about the status of Taiwan, has created considerable concern in the last six months that the CCP might be tempted to dispense with Mao's indicated timetable and move on Taiwan imminently. This seems now to be settling down, but fortuitously there have been some useful developments.

Taiwan has shown itself to be resolute and impossible to intimidate, and instead of a lot of loose speculation, considerable focus was given to the fact that to invade Taiwan, China would have to move at least half a million men across 150 miles of open water under the entire deterrent and defensive apparatus of Taiwan.

The theory that China could simply reduce Taiwan to impotent supplication by an air campaign is nonsense in itself, but particularly so, since even this most hesitant, incoherent, and at times pusillanimous U.S. administration has

unequivocally stated in the last Defense Authorization Act that in the event of a People's Republic attack upon Taiwan, the United States would militarily assist directly in repulsing that attack. I couldn't be accused of distributing compliments over-frequently and too effusively to the Biden administration, but I think it should be commended for managing to make this point without it apparently inflaming the atmosphere of Chinese-U.S. relations.

It now seems likely that as long as provocations continue to be deescalated, normalcy will be restored, but it will be a matter of record that the United States will join directly in responding to any such Chinese attempt to invade Taiwan.

Ukrainian warriors have caused an apparent substantial rundown in reserves of American ammunition and other ordnance, and there has been a good deal of attention to the fact that American capabilities at hypersonic missiles have fallen behind those of China and Russia, that the extensive American military bases on Guam are inadequately protected from possible Chinese air attack, and that the giant Nimitz class aircraft carriers have an inadequate defense against sophisticated missile attack. Any period of de-escalation should be quietly used by the United States to make good on all of these deficiencies.

In addition to all these factors, China would presumably take on board what the morale of well-armed free people defending their homeland can do, and suggestions that, in their more unguarded moments, Chinese semi-official spokespeople have made that it would be a simple matter for China to snuff out Taiwanese independence should be discreetly reconsidered.

The spectacle of crowds cheering the mutineers as they marched on Moscow, and of the defectors taking over the city of Rostov (a million people) and the regional military headquarters without firing a shot, must be sobering for any country contemplating aggression. Long-serving Soviet foreign minister

Andrei Gromyko famously called Egypt “a paper camel;” Russia looks more and more like a paper bear.

If events in Ukraine and in Moscow take their most likely course, it must be said that it will be a success to the account of the Biden administration, the first significant such success it has had in foreign policy.

It’s unlikely that this will in itself be too influential on the 2024 U.S. election; American voters demonstrated after the first Gulf War how short their memory of such things is. But it can’t fail to be a benevolent event for the West, when the United States puts what’s shaping up as a very satisfactory result in Ukraine on the international board—it largely erases Afghanistan from memory, much as the 1962 missile crisis erased recollections of the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

At this point, the entire Ukraine issue, including whatever connection it has to Taiwan, is shaping up very satisfactorily for the West.

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