



# Putin's Ukraine invasion and its Indo-Pacific impact: what it means for Taiwan and China

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### Putin's Ukraine Invasion and the response of the West

On February 24 2022, Russia started to invade Ukraine. Some thought that it would end up with a new frozen conflict in the Donbas region that had been under Russian influence since the war to annex of Crimea in 2014. It was not the case. The Ukraine war turned into a full-scale invasion, driving million of refugees to flee and inviting many brave ordinary Ukrainians to hold guns and stand up.

President Putin made a fatal mistake. He might end up with a nightmare of stalemate, or even lose the war. This is no longer a war for Russia, but for himself and his power in Kremlin. He unexpectedly galvanized the whole West against him. The Western judgement of his atrocities is a black and white matter. His invasion is a flamboyant violation of international law and the United Nations Charter.

He has inscribed his name together with Hitler and Saddam.

NATO is still fearful of escalating the Ukrainian war into a nuclear World War III, and restrains itself from setting a non-fly zone that President Zelensky badly needs. President Putin has hinted that he might use tactical nuclear weapons. Western intelligence officials have warned about Russian use of chemical and biological weapons. Time is running against President Putin. At least, he will not hesitate to brutalise the war, attacking more civilians to break the determination of the Ukrainians to fight. The Western economic sanctions are effective, but not enough to stop the war immediately. In this moment, one thing is certain. The credibility of the West is at stake. The West cannot lose this war.

### Ukraine war and Taiwan contingency

The Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, must be embarrassed now. He accepted President Putin in Beijing just before the invasion and televised worldwide the message that the two revisionist nations were together. But now, Beijing seems unready to share the crime and the shame of Russia in Ukraine. The Chinese leaders are carefully watching how united the West is against Russian adventurism.

The Prime Minister of Japan, Fumio Kishida, is following faithfully the sanction course set by the West. He knows well that it is not only European security but the stability of the whole liberal international order itself is at stake. The spurring of Western unity is encouraging. It is more so for Japan. The Ukraine war has put a vital question directly to many Japanese policy makers: if China invades Taiwan, could the whole West be united in resistance of the PLA, like in this Ukraine war?

A Taiwan contingency is different from the Ukraine war. Ukraine always wanted to join NATO, but NATO did not grant membership. It promised to do so in the future, but not for the moment. Its members shut the door in front of the nose of the rabbit and told him not to provoke the neighbour bear. NATO did the same thing to Georgia. The result was the war in 2010 in which Georgia lost South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The West was angry for sometime but essentially forgot and moved on. The conflict was buried in the graveyard of freedom, called 'Russian frozen conflicts'.

In 2014, when then pro-Russia Ukrainian President Yanukovich fled from Kyiv after strong pro-Western demonstrations, President Putin annexed Crimea by force and put Donbas region under his influence. Again, the West showed its anger, put sanctions upon Russia, but soon went back to business as usual with Russia. The message that President Putin drew from these

experiences was that the West was weak and in disarray, and did not have guts to face Russia militarily. Russia was convinced that Mother Russia can retain its sphere of influence by force, outside the defence responsibility of NATO.

Taiwan is very different. The island had been in the sphere of influence of the United States for more than 75 years. Japan is a direct player here. The Japan-US Alliance treaty has the similar Article 5 of common defense obligation as the NATO treaty. In addition, it has an important article on regional security, Article 6. This stipulates that US forces can use US bases in Japan for the stability of the Far East. The article means that US forces defend South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines, using the US bases in Japan. This was drafted reflecting the strategic situation in Asia around the 1950s: the Korean War and consecutive Taiwan strait crises. Sino-US and Sino-Japan rapprochement in 1970s erased the fear of a Taiwan contingency for some time. But neither Japan nor the United States ever accepted the Chinese assertion that Beijing can forcibly annex Taiwan against Taiwanese free will.

The Chinese assertion of history that Taiwan has always been a part of China is fake news, as is Putin's assertion

## Can a Taiwan contingency happen?

The idea of a Taiwan conflict or contingency could be dismissed as something of a laughing matter in 1990s. When the leader Li Denghui democratized Taiwan, China feared a new national identity would be born there. The PLA launched many missiles in the vicinity of the island to scare the Taiwanese off. Two US navy aircraft carriers rushed to the Western Pacific. China backed off immediately, with rage against the humiliation.

Now, however, China is three quarters of the United States in terms of economic size. Its military budget is five times bigger than the Japanese defence budget, that is more than 30 percent of the US defence budget. It is huge, for the US military budget is almost half of global defence spending. China's is still increasing, with double digit growth every year, and that is not including a massive R&D budget. The PLA is now without a peer in the region, except the US forces. In size it is becoming a monster, like the Imperial Japanese Army in 1930s.

Xi Jinping will not risk an adventure at this juncture. He is concentrating his political energy to extend his leadership into the third term from 2022 to 2027, and beyond. Around 2030, when he should be thinking of his trophy for his leadership, that must be a comparable one with Mao Zedong, China must be far bigger than today and the PLA far stronger. He might then be tempted to invade Taiwan.

that Ukraine has been core to Mother Russia. Taiwan was a Dutch-ruled island like Indonesia. It became a territory of China only in the late 17th century. Taiwan was annexed by Japan in 1895 after the Sino-Japanese war and quickly Japanised and industrialised. After the defeat of Imperial Japan in 1945, Kuomintang leader Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) fled from the continent to the island. Since then, Taiwan has always been in the sphere of influence of the US.

The island of Taiwan has a population of about 23 million. The surface is as big as Kyushu island of Japan. Taiwan's people achieved spectacular economic growth in 1980s. Taiwan got fully democratized under the leader Li Denghui (Lee Teng-hui) in the 1990s. And the Taiwanese today have a robust identity as a free nation, clearly distinct from communist China. China once tried to absorb Taiwan economically at the turn of the new century, and then leader Ma Yingjiu (Ma Ying-jeou) tilted toward the continent. But in 2014 the students born after Taiwan democratisation rushed into the parliament in protest, and pulled back the foreign policy of Taiwan to distance it from China. The incident is known today as the 'Sunflower Revolution'. Taiwan is now the symbol of freedom in Asia as the West Berlin was in 1950s Europe.

Dictators have an extraordinary psychology that ordinary people cannot imagine. Putin is the proof. Dictatorship decays over time. All the wise men will be ousted. Young "yes-men" surrounds the dictator, trying to please the ailing ruler. Suffering from the solitude and suspicion of treason and new leadership challenge, fearing the ailing brain and physical strength, worried about his own future, and more and more detached from the reality, the dictator could make a mistake. As Talleyrand said, a mistake could be worse than a crime. Xi Jinping could make the same fatal mistake.

Xi Jinping is from the Red Guard generation of Mao's cultural revolution. From 1966 through 1976 when Mao died, there was no education in China. The generation's world view is extremely narrow. They are still living in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The world is a jungle. The strong survives and the weak is destroyed. This Social Darwinism, dead long ago in the West, is still very much vividly ingrained in their psychology. They do not understand liberal ideals. As they see it, the Westerners carved out China, during the Qing dynasty, like pieces of a cake, because China was weak. Now China is strong. Why can China not expand its territory and its sphere of influence in Asia, at least in the Western Pacific? It was a Chinese sphere of influence, not an American one, only two hundred years ago. This is how they feel.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is now suffering from the lack of legitimacy of power. In reality, Chinese traditional political thought is close to ideas of the European Enlightenment. Menzi said two thousand and three hundred years ago: love is the basis of the good governance; the people's voice is heaven's voice; people are more precious than a king; a good king is given the grace of heaven to rule the world and a bad king can be decapitated. The Chinese leaders know that they are bad kings; rotten red aristocrats enjoy huge wealth; the social gap widens; the whole society is aging rapidly; ethnic minorities who are awoken assert self-determination and resist the oppression and forced assimilation with the Han majority. But the Chinese leaders are determined to stick to power. They saw the miserable collapse of the Soviet Empire in the Eastern Europe around 1990. They are fully determined to make their communist regime survive. That is the only existential purpose of CCP today.

They started to rewrite history. The legitimacy of the

## The cause to defend Taiwan

Can the West be united to defend Taiwan? Unlike in the Ukrainian case, the United States, Japan and Australia could be involved immediately in the contingency.

What is the cause of defending Taiwan? This is not only about Taiwan. This is the war to know whether the emerging liberal order in Asia will survive or not. Many Asians support the liberal international order. Human dignity is absolutely equal across nations and cultures. People are born to be free. Freedom means to do what one believes right and to contribute to others. People can cooperate to live better, for humans share the same very basic emotion. It is called love in Christianity, compassion by Buddhist, ren (love) by Confucians and brotherhood by Muslims. This is why Asians can accept freedom, democracy and the rule of law as universal values.

Asians came through a very different path to come here. When the Westerners were busy establishing democracies inside their nations and warring against each other for the mastery of world politics, the Asians were colonised, racially discriminated against, and today's universal values were applied to them in a very limited manner. Their human dignity and sovereignty were denied cruelly.

But after World War II, they became independent. Gandhi led India to independence with his belief of love and non-violence. Other leaders of Asia took guns to fight back against the returning colonial rulers like in Vietnam and Indonesia. It was only the United States which swore that its colony, the Philippines, should become independent. The British, the French and the Dutch came back with guns in their hands. Many of the newly independent nations turned their back to the West. They chose dictatorship, communist, populist or even military junta, to pursue rapid development, and to be strong and prosperous.

But after half a century's experiment of dictatorship, in the 1980s they started to join the club of democracy one by one. The Philippines was the first new democracy in

communist dictatorship is based upon the glorious history of founding a strong and prosperous communist China by the party. The Western invaders and the Japanese were kicked out by communist war heroes. China even kicked out the American invaders from North Korea. The Kuomintang was driven to Taiwan. And China is now the number two economy on earth. Under the state's electronic hyper surveillance system with strictly controlled information, nationalism is used to govern. A wise Chinese intellectual has said: nationalism is a tiger, once on its back, one can never get off it. And this is exactly the situation for the CCP today.

In this political context, a Taiwan invasion and annexation must be a national goal for CCP. It cannot be otherwise. Xi Jinping declares that annexation of Taiwan is a historic mission of China. It is no longer a matter of "to do or not to do." It is the matter of "when and how."

Asia in 1986. South Korea followed in 1987. In the 1990s, coastal ASEAN nations and Taiwan followed. They are still shaky democracies with many frailties inside, but their people are proud of their democratic progress.

Asians also understand that the West changed drastically, much for the better, after World War II. Reverend King's civil right movement pulled down racial discrimination as an institution in the United States. The Europeans followed. Freedom and democracy were no longer local white Christian values, but universal values. The leadership of the United States is no longer only for the West itself but for the world. Now nations elsewhere are following the West by becoming equal partners of the liberal international order.

They are watching Western leadership in Ukraine, after a mixed record over many years. NATO intervened in Yugoslavia and Libya. Syrian use of chemical weapons did not invite US attacks. Hong Kong, so close to China, lost completely its freedom. Georgia was lost. But now the West is standing up for Ukraine. What will happen if China invades Taiwan? This is the question that the Asians are asking.

China is far bigger and stronger than Russia. China is a number one trade partner for many nations globally. It has nuclear weapons too. It would be impossible to isolate China as the West did Russia. Exclusion of Russia from the SWIFT system and freezing bank account for foreign reserves is choking the Russian economy. Russia provides 40 percent of natural gas for Europe. But still, it is a small economy in comparison with the United States, EU and Japan. Its economy is about the size of South Korea's. The shock of economic sanctions against Russia is big but bearable. Could we do the same when China invades Taiwan?

The answer to the question should be "this is not about money". If Taiwan is lost without the help of the West, the whole of Asia will be lost to the CCP. And the credibility of Western values will erode instantly.

## The grand strategy of the West to defend the liberal order in Asia

The West needs a grand strategy to defend the emerging liberal order in Asia and to deter China from reckless adventurism. Ex-Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe launched the strategic concept of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). It spread worldwide rapidly. Now in the United States, in Europe and in Asia, many governments talk about their own Indo-Pacific strategies. There are two points in this strategic concept.

The first is the importance of incorporating India in the strategic framework. The Indian economy has already been half the size of Japan's. It will soon be the number three economy globally. Its population will soon surpass that of China. And their average age, 29 years old, is ten years younger than the Chinese. The centre of prosperity is moving from Eastern Asia to Western Asia. As a strategic counter-weight vis-a-vis China, India will be the only candidate.

The United States and Japan should not forget that when they kissed Mao's cheek to face the Soviet Union, they pushed away a born democracy, India, towards Russia. India never forgets Mao's invasion in their early times. Mao is one of the cruelest dictators of the last century. A Beijing-Washington-Tokyo axis together with Pakistan pushed India, not willingly, towards Russia. This strategic picture should be redrawn. India is the creation of Gandhi and Nehru. It is a born democracy. India should be called upon to join the club of free nations club as a main pillar.

The second point is that the realignment of democracies is necessary. The liberal international order must be expanded successfully into an Asia that will count 60 percent of the human race and 60 percent of world economy in this century. The West cannot be marginalised. On the contrary, it must be expanded. New Asian democracies, and those who share the strategic interests to sustain the liberal order at least, should be realigned to form a strategic and global partnership. Despite the propaganda we hear from Xi and Putin, the liberal order is wining and spreading in the long term. This is the mainstream of the world history. This is the message of FOIP.

There should be leading nations in FOIP. These are the QUAD: the United States, Japan, Australia and India. The cooperation of the four is moving forward, to the surprise of China. The British after Brexit are joining the United States and Australia in Asia, forming AUKUS. This is a great contribution to Asian stability. In the region, Indonesia, the Philippines (an ally of the United States), Vietnam and other ASEAN nations should be invited to the club of favouring a liberal international order. They usually do not want to be involved in the big ones' quarrels. But now they understand the watershed moment is near. They will need to stand up with Quad, otherwise, they would be compelled by China to become its tributaries.

The most important partner to the Quad is Europe. Europe shares the same universal values. Europe has the same agenda, including human rights, a rule-based international community, and countering climate change. China can catch up with the United States in terms of economic size in the not-distant future, just as it did with Japan. And China's military capabilities could be dominant in the Asian theatre. But China can never surpass the comprehensive might; - political, economic and military - as well as the power of the narrative of values of the West.

If Europe can join the collective voice and power of building the liberal international order in Asia, it will still be possible to prevent China from reckless adventurism. A Free and Open Indo-Pacific is not an exclusive concept. It is rather an inclusive concept. One day when China throws away Marxist-Leninist statecraft, and goes back to its original Confucian values, it will find the door of FOIP wide open.

This will be possible only in a long distant future. But it will come one day. Industrialisation awakens the people. And mature citizens cannot live like sheep, shutting eyes to the rotten dictatorship and shutting mouths for criticism. China's rise is not forever. China's population has started to shrink, and its national power will peak out around 2050. Until then, Western unity has to be strengthened and maintained through a long competition of ideas, values, economy and military power.

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