

Taiwan Is Not Ukraine: Stop Linking Their Fates Together - War on the Rocks

warontherocks.com · by Kharis Templeman · January 27, 2022

Russia's military buildup around Ukraine has triggered the most serious crisis in relations between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War. Over 100,000 Russian troops are deployed near the border with Ukraine, poised to launch a major military assault at a moment's notice. While these developments appear only to affect European security,

American [commentators have been quick to](#) draw [parallels to Taiwan](#). The similarities seem obvious. Like Ukraine, Taiwan faces an existential threat from one of Eurasia's great autocratic powers, and it is also a Western-oriented democracy that the United States has [an interest in keeping free from coercion](#). Both Ukraine and Taiwan are [being framed](#) as [critical test cases](#) of America's [willingness to uphold global norms](#) against the use of military force to seize territory. Some observers have even gone so far as to argue that their fates will be linked: a failure to respond to military action against Ukraine would weaken American credibility and invite an attack on Taiwan by the People's Republic of China.

Put simply, this is lazy analysis. In the current geopolitical moment, the differences between Ukraine and Taiwan are far more important than their similarities — and linking together the security threats that the two countries face can make both situations worse. The United States should not continue to divert limited resources away from the Indo-Pacific, where the military balance is shifting in China's favor over the next decade, to a region that is both less crucial to American interests and where the balance of power is more advantageous to Washington. U.S. prioritization, not reputation, is what really matters for Taiwan's security.

Taiwan Is a Different Kind of Partner

To see why this comparison obscures more than it clarifies, first consider the history of U.S. involvement with each country. American security support for Ukraine is [recent](#), [limited](#), and [subsumed under broader concerns](#) about Russia's challenge to the post-Cold War European security order.

In Taiwan, however, American interests run deep. Taiwan exists today as [a *de facto* independent state](#) only [because the Truman administration intervened in June 1950](#) to prevent a Chinese invasion across the Taiwan Strait. Ever since, the United States has been the island's primary security partner and source of military aid, training, and arms sales. The United States also helped Taiwan transform from a poor military dictatorship into a prosperous liberal democracy: aid in the early 1950s [constituted 10 percent of Taiwan's gross national product](#), and U.S. advisers played an important role in promoting land reform and economic stabilization. Later, the United States granted Taiwanese exporters [preferential access to American markets](#), [helping to set Taiwan's economy](#) on a rapid upward trajectory that has now brought its per-capita gross domestic product [level with Germany's](#), adjusted for purchasing power.

This long history of engagement means that America's global reputation and influence have far more at stake in the event of a Chinese attack on Taiwan than a Russian one on Ukraine.

China Is Not Russia

Next, consider the adversaries. Russia's interests, strategies, and tactics on the world stage [are all fundamentally different](#) from China's. As a declining power ruled by a single strongman since 2000, Russia under Vladimir Putin [has had a weak hand to play](#). Putin's aggressive foreign policy actions have been [motivated primarily by the need to bolster his domestic standing](#), not to

enhance Russian security. While he has sought to undermine existing institutions and encourage divisions within the European Union and NATO, he has mostly failed to prevent the reorientation of much of Eastern Europe away from Russia and toward the West. That we are talking about Russian threats to Kyiv, rather than Warsaw, Prague, or Budapest, is ample proof of that.

By contrast, China is a rising power, and its leaders [have reason to believe](#) that [time is on their side](#). The Chinese economy is already the largest in the Indo-Pacific and the second largest in the world, and it has benefited immensely over the last three decades from the existing global economic and security architecture. In a stark departure from Russian behavior, China's moves to revise the international order have mostly involved [working through existing global institutions](#) and [creating supplemental ones that it can control](#) — that is, [building up](#) rather than tearing down.

These divergent trajectories have led to fundamentally different strategies to advance their interests in the two cases. Russia has *already* seized and annexed Ukrainian territory in a blatant violation of international law and norms, and it has supported proxy forces fighting a conflict in eastern Ukraine that [has cost over 14,000 lives](#), taking [an enormous toll](#) on its global reputation and national interests.

China has not done anything remotely similar to Taiwan, and the threat it poses is [as much economic and diplomatic as it is military](#). For instance, the People's Liberation Army could quickly seize the vulnerable offshore islands of Kinmen and Matsu — the former only 30 kilometers from downtown Xiamen — if it wanted to destabilize the region and try to force concessions from Taiwan or the United States, but these territories remain under Taiwanese jurisdiction. Likewise, the Chinese military's [regular, high-profile exercises](#) near Taiwan's airspace are intended primarily to [send signals to](#)

[leaders in Taiwan and the United States](#), not seize and maintain territory or foreshadow an invasion. So far, they have also not resulted in any loss of life or direct conflict.

Instead, China's strategy is most notable for its reliance on non-military means to gradually shift the cross-Strait *status quo*. Even when faced with a Taiwan leader it does not like or trust, Beijing's Taiwan policy [has emphasized "soft" economic inducements as much as "hard" diplomatic and military pressure](#) to increase influence over Taiwan. This strategy has also included a relentless, multifaceted propaganda campaign, aimed as much at the United States as the people of Taiwan. This campaign seeks to [emphasize the Chinese Communist Party's preferred narrative](#): that Taiwan is sacred Chinese territory, that China will pay any price to achieve cross-Strait unification, and that a declining United States should back away from its commitments there, because Taiwan will always mean more to the Chinese people than to Americans.

That is a very different kind of message than Russia's: It is more patient, more sophisticated, and harder to counter, and American policymakers risk playing right into it by overextending U.S. commitments in other global hotspots.

America Has Different Interests in Taiwan

The range and depth of American interests in Taiwan also dwarf those in Ukraine. Taiwan is an economic powerhouse that punches well above its weight in global commerce, and its economy is closely intertwined with the rest of East Asia and North America. In 2020, it was America's 9th-largest trading partner, with [\\$106 billion in two-way trade in goods and services](#). ([Ukraine was 67th](#), with [\\$3.9 billion](#)). It is also the home of the world's most strategically important company, TSMC, which has built a daunting lead in semiconductor technology and [now accounts for more than half of global foundry revenues](#).

In addition, Taiwan sits in [a strategically crucial location](#) astride busy sea routes in the first island chain, with U.S. treaty allies directly to its north (Japan) and south (Philippines). Were the People's Liberation Army able to occupy the island, it would undermine America's ability to defend both, and shatter the credibility of its commitments to other allies and partners in the face of China's growing hard power.

Taiwan's continued existence as a [prosperous liberal democracy](#) also offers a compelling alternative to autocratic China: It demonstrates that democracy and free-market capitalism are suitable for a Chinese-speaking society. Taiwan's people share norms and values with the West, not the Chinese Communist Party, and it is a shining success story for U.S. efforts to promote prosperity and freedom in the world. Ukraine could well be that someday, but if it does it will probably be through closer economic integration with the European Union, not its tenuous ties to the United States. For all these reasons, were Taiwan to come under control of Beijing, American interests would be impacted far more severely than in a Russian attack on Ukraine.

America Doesn't Need to Fight Russia in Ukraine to Save Taiwan from China

The most dubious claim to come out of the comparison between Ukraine and Taiwan is about [the need to uphold American credibility](#). Many of [the same critics](#) who asserted that Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan would [encourage Chinese adventurism](#) are now advocating for [intervention in Ukraine](#) for [the very same reason](#). But that argument [rests on a false premise](#): that the credibility of U.S. commitments in the Taiwan Strait depends on what it does half a world away, against a different adversary, presenting a different kind of threat, to a different coalition of U.S. partners and allies.

In reality, it is American [prioritization, rather than reputation](#), that matters most for Taiwan's security. [Diverting resources and attention away from the](#)

[Indo-Pacific](#) to meet a lesser threat will not help reassure allies and partners in the region where the United States will face its [greatest security challenges over the next decade](#).

It is therefore reassuring that Biden administration officials appear to recognize the differences. As National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan [noted in a recent interview](#), the U.S. commitments to Taiwan are rooted in the “One China” policy, the Taiwan Relations Act, the three communiques. And the Taiwan Relations Act is a unique instrument — we don’t have it with other countries; we don’t have it with Ukraine — that does talk about American commitments to support Taiwan in various ways.

The Biden administration’s recent steps to respond to Chinese pressure — from [arms sales](#) to [bilateral trade discussions](#) to [the invitation of Taiwan’s representative](#) to Biden’s inauguration — ultimately attract much more attention in both Beijing and Taipei than how Washington responds to the crisis in Ukraine.

It would help both Taiwan and Ukraine if more of America’s foreign policy commentators would also notice the difference, and stop linking their fates together.

Khari Templeman is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, where he manages the [Project on Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific Region](#). A leading expert on Taiwan politics, he is a member of the [U.S.-Taiwan Next Generation Working Group](#) and was previously a [National Asia Research Program](#) fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research.