



Taiwan's Fate May Be Decided In Ukraine

June 4, 2021 **Herman Pirchner, Jr., Alexander B. Gray** *The Hill*

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Russian President Vladimir Putin recently surged nearly 100,000 troops, along with significant numbers of aircraft and equipment, to his country's common border with Ukraine. His message was clear: the continued existence of a vibrant, democratic, and independent Ukraine will always be threatened by Moscow's whims. With barely disguised Russian proxies occupying significant portions of Eastern Ukraine, as well as the Crimean Peninsula, it is a message to be taken seriously.

Having just returned from Kyiv and the line of contact between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists, we can state emphatically that the government and people of Ukraine will not be intimidated by Mr. Putin's strongarm tactics. The attitude of Ukrainians at all levels of society is increasingly supportive of further integration with Western institutions, from the European Union to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Indeed, Mr. Putin's bullying appears to have had the opposite of its intended effect.

Yet it is not simply Ukrainian resolve that the Russian thugocracy is testing. One of the central tenets of the post-World War II international system is the rejection of military force as a solution to territorial disputes. Over the past dozen years, the West has repeatedly acquiesced to attempted changes in the world's map by unlawful military means, issuing largely empty statements or inadequate sanctions that signaled a tacit acceptance of such tactics.

In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia and occupied the disputed regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; 13 years later, they remain under Moscow's dominion.

In 2010, China began its campaign of land reclamation in the South China Sea, establishing facts on the ground in a series of territorial disputes with its neighbors that have gained Beijing significant military advantages.

In 2014, Russia occupied the Crimean Peninsula and portions of eastern Ukraine, fomenting an ongoing proxy war that has killed over 10,000 souls and displaced over 2 million Ukrainians, and still shows no sign of abating.

In 2015, Russia intervened in Syria on behalf of dictator Bashar al Assad, and has since strengthened its military presence on the Mediterranean and abetted the slaughter of countless civilians in pursuit of Moscow's perceived regional interests.

In 2020, Chinese soldiers attacked an Indian Army patrol in the Himalayas along a disputed border, bludgeoning 20 Indian soldiers to death and throwing their bodies into a crevasse.

That the West reacted weakly, or not at all, to these provocations has not been lost on the world's authoritarians. They have understood the resulting message well: force is paramount, and a preponderance of it will help to ensure one's political objectives. Mr. Putin's recent behavior toward Ukraine is simply another chapter in this saga.

Nowhere is this lesson being watched more closely than in Beijing, which has dialed up its aggressive posture toward Taiwan since the Biden administration took office. With new records for air incursions over Taiwanese territory set almost daily, and Chinese officials competing to issue the most warlike pronouncements about the "renegade province," the atmosphere across the Taiwan Strait is the most tense in decades.

Chinese President Xi Jinping's commitment to "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and the realization of the "China Dream" appears to rest on his ability to resolve the question of Taiwan, on Beijing's terms, in the coming decade. It is increasingly clear that Taiwan will never peaceably accede to a political accommodation with Beijing, having seen Chinese authoritarianism at work in Hong Kong and Tibet. Mr. Xi's only route to realize his goals is a forcible unification with Taiwan.

As the world watches the Taiwan Strait with trepidation, the clearest predictor of future events is the West's consistent non-response to similar aggression. Mr. Xi is well-aware of the success his fellow authoritarian in Moscow has had in altering the geopolitics of his region at gunpoint. As he considers the likelihood of American intervention in a potential Taiwan conflict, Mr. Xi has ample evidence arguing against a forceful Western response.

The United States, and its allies and partners, have an opportunity in Ukraine to demonstrate their commitment to the existing international order, and thereby to deter potential aggressors long before military force is required. In Ukraine, the United States can act quickly to extend Major Non-NATO Ally status to the country, and to significantly expand the scope of its security assistance, including by providing counter-drone technologies, more sophisticated personal protective gear to frontline troops, and carrying out enhanced freedom of navigation operations in the Black Sea alongside our NATO partners.

Such signals will send a clear message not only to Moscow, but to Beijing, Tehran and Pyongyang as well. Weakness remains provocative, while strength deters. The coming decade is not necessarily destined to be one of continued military aggression and adventurism by our authoritarian competitors. But preventing it from being so requires Washington to work proactively, before it is too late for deterrence.

Herman Pirchner, Jr. is President of the American Foreign Policy Council, where Alexander B. Gray is a Senior Fellow. Mr. Gray served as Deputy Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff of the White House National Security Council, 2019-21.