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CHINESE MILITARY ACTIVITY AROUND TAIWAN: LESSONS FROM THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

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Since the founding of the modern PRC, Taiwan and its return to Beijing's control have remained one of the key issues for resolution in foreign and domestic discourses, although domestic politics will remain less public and multifaceted due to ideological reasons.

The Russian full-scale invasion in 2022 only intensified the discussion of a possible conflict in the Taiwan Strait and the conditions under which it might occur. Additionally, in 2022, notably with the visit of Nancy Pelosi, a significant increase in Chinese military activity around Taiwan began. Starting from June to July 2022, the crossings of the Median Line, which had previously been recorded only as periods of special tension, became a systemic phenomenon around Taiwan from 2022 onwards. One of the consequences of such presence was the pressure on Taiwan's leadership [1]. Such activities can be compared to Russia's military exercises around Ukraine at the beginning and end of 2021, which can be considered partially successful in the case of Ukraine with Russia, but in the case of relations between the PRC and Taiwan, there are many more complexities and peculiarities that the PRC must take into account in the event of a military conflict.

One of the key features is the close relationship with the United States, namely the existence of the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, which, although it does not explicitly state that the United States is a security guarantor for Taiwan, nevertheless indicates the possibility of the United States responding in the event of a security threat to Taiwan, which leaves significant room for diplomatic maneuvering.

Taiwan as a vulnerable target

Taiwan is an island that presents opportunities for conducting military operations, both positive and negative, for the island's inhabitants. First of all, we are talking about limited resources, which apply to many aspects, including food, energy resources, materials, and vulnerable sea routes that

can be restricted or completely blocked on the eve of or during a conflict. This also applies to air traffic with Taiwan. Of course, such a blockade can be partial or complete, depending on the choice of the PRC leadership. It may involve completely blocking all traffic, conducting inspections of ships heading to or from Taiwan, or blocking the main shipping and air routes [3]. China regularly conducts high-intensity military exercises in the waters around Taiwan, simulating similar operations. Together with a vulnerable and centralized system of electricity supply that can be sabotaged or severely damaged, this creates additional challenges in maintaining social order while facing potential conflict.

On the other hand, Taiwan is an island, which can significantly complicate the conduct of military operations directly on the coast of Taiwan. For this, the PRC will require a substantial number of ships to transport military personnel, equipment, and necessary supplies. Even the number of landing sites exceeds a dozen, which simplifies the tasks for island defense, primarily because most of these sites are located in the northern part of Taiwan and on its western coast. In addition, some of these sites are occupied by industrial zones, which will only complicate the task for the PLA. To avoid such problems, the PRC is rethinking the first weeks of the war in Ukraine, primarily to avoid the mistakes it made in the first weeks after the invasion, taking into account the fact that Taiwan is an island. Secondly, such an operation is extremely complex and does not guarantee complete success in a short time and with low losses, both factors that are key for the PRC leadership. Thirdly, the mountainous landscape of the main island only complicates the task of conducting military operations there. Also, the seabed relief in the Taiwan Strait is extremely complex, which in turn only increases the risks during a possible conflict. Together with the rough seas and complex bottom relief, as well as adverse weather conditions in the Taiwan Strait for most of the year, this leaves a rather limited window of opportunity for conducting a full-scale operation to gain complete control of the island.

Practicing various scenarios, both at sea and in the air, is a crucial component of preparing Chinese troops for a potential conflict. Taiwan's Ministry of Defense regularly reports on such exercises and observations of Chinese military aircraft. However, such exercises, which are routinely conducted by the Chinese military, and the activity and volume of which are increasing many times, also have other tasks, namely:

- Creating an atmosphere of constant psychological pressure on the military and political leadership of Taiwan;
- Exhausting limited human and material resources compared to China;
- Conducting open intelligence activities on the reaction of both the Taiwanese military and coast guard, and the political leadership;

- Demonstration actions for the Taiwanese political leadership;
- Studying the reaction of the international community, primarily the United States;
- Conducting information and political operations.

Thus, it can be concluded that Chinese military activity around Taiwan bears signs of comprehensive preparation for a possible conflict. However, a military conflict must also have a specific political basis, primarily for its greater legitimization within the world community. According to the annual report of the US Department of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving The People’s Republic Of China 2023 Annual Report To Congress”, the US sees several main factors that may influence the military solution to the “Taiwan issue”, namely:

- Official declaration of independence by Taiwan;
- Uncertain steps towards Taiwan’s declaration of independence;
- Internal unrest within Taiwan;
- Taiwan’s acquisition of nuclear weapons;
- Uncertain delays in resuming dialogue between Taiwan and China on unification;
- Foreign military interference in Taiwan's internal affairs [5].

Analyzing the current situation, we can conclude that a declaration of independence, uncertain steps towards Taiwan declaring independence, obtaining nuclear weapons, or foreign military intervention in Taiwan's internal affairs are improbable options considering the current status and situation. The most relevant are seen as internal unrest within Taiwan and uncertain delays in the resumption of dialogue between Taiwan and China on unification.

If we draw parallels with Ukraine, it becomes clear that the Russian aggression in 2014 and 2022 took place against the backdrop of complex political crises. In 2014, these were the events on the Maidan; in 2022, the loss of trust in the incumbent president and criticism from the opposition against the backdrop of a possible full-scale invasion. Thus, the use of political pressure on the leadership of Taiwan and the PLA’s military exercises is one of the means of destabilizing the political situation on the island and around it to determine the best option and timeframe for a possible military operation that can resolve the political situation.

As mentioned above, Taiwan is almost 100 % dependent on imports, including energy [3]. Therefore, the issue of interrupting the supply of energy resources to the island is one of the most critical for Taiwan. No less important is the problem of food and medicine. In fact, if the supply of essential products is disrupted, the island can expect a destabilization of the political situation, including protests by parties that advocate closer

relations with mainland China, as well as accusations against the president and the Democratic Party.

Chinese military activity around Taiwan and in the western Pacific Ocean suggests possible preparations by China for similar actions. In addition, critical for Taiwan is the possibility of communication with the outside world, which is provided by submarine cables that are sensitive to damage. A massive interruption of wires, which could lead to a complete communication breakdown, may also trigger public unrest and serve as a signal for the rapid escalation of conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

Together with the possible “decapitation” of the military and political leadership of Taiwan, it can cause serious problems in the system of control and repeat the situation of Ukraine in 2014 after the Revolution of Dignity, when key national institutions were literally disabled and couldn’t respond to the Russian invasion of Crimea and further annexation.

Of course, while observing the Russian invasion of Taiwan, China learns tons of information related to the usage of unmanned weapon systems and the possible usage of them during the war in Ukraine to make its own unmanned weapon systems as effective as possible, and at the same time, protect PLA troops from unmanned weapon systems of the opponent. Thus, China reconsiders the use of aviation and the role of precision weapons [2; 4].

Conclusion

The comparison between Chinese military pressures on Taiwan and Russia’s pre-invasion maneuvers against Ukraine highlights both instructive parallels and critical divergences. In each case, large-scale exercises and demonstrated force projection served to test political resolve, probe defensive reactions, and impose psychological strain on the target leadership. However, Taiwan’s island geography, more robust alliance with the United States under the Taiwan Relations Act, and highly developed civilian-military resilience differ markedly from Ukraine’s 2021–22 context, where land borders and weaker deterrence ties facilitated rapid Russian advances.

Beijing’s increasingly routine crossings of the Taiwan Strait’s median line, combined with simulated blockades of sea and air routes, illustrate a multipronged strategy to exploit Taiwan’s import dependencies and central-grid vulnerabilities. Yet, the logistical complexity of amphibious assault against mountainous terrain and the narrow windows for favorable weather underscore that a swift “fait accompli” is far from assured. Beijing’s adaptation of lessons learned from Ukraine – such as the risks of over-reliance on precision strikes and the evolving role of unmanned systems – demonstrates a learning curve but also presupposes the PLA’s mastery of maritime landing operations at an unprecedented scale.

For Taipei, deterrence hinges on maintaining credible asymmetric defenses, ensuring redundancy in energy, food, and communications networks, and deepening interoperability with U.S. forces. Washington's calibrated signaling – balancing diplomatic ambiguity with operational readiness – remains crucial to dissuading Beijing from miscalculating the costs of a possible war. Ultimately, while the specter of Ukraine underscores the potency of high-intensity coercion, Taiwan's unique strategic environment and defense partnerships may prove a decisive bulwark, provided Taipei and its allies sustain political cohesion and military preparedness.

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