



Two embattled countries face similar threats with similar difficulties

From Kyiv to Taipei is 5,000 miles (8,000km). Yet geopolitically, Ukraine and Taiwan are closely linked, writes Edward Lucas. Their biggest shared problem is legitimacy. Russia does not regard Ukraine as a proper country. Vladimir Putin dismissed it as a mere collection of territories in 2008. His cod-historical essay, published in 2021, argued for "historical unity" between Russia and Ukraine, based on a wilful misreading of the history of Kyivan Rus.

Similarly, as seen from Beijing, Taiwan is a rebel province, unfinished business from the civil war that ended on the mainland in 1949. Talk of independence for the self-governing island arouses fury. For their part, the Taiwanese authorities still maintain the decades-old fiction that their formal name is the "Republic of China." But they have long dropped talk of "bandits in temporary control of the mainland," which I remember from my teenage years listening to the splenetic shortwave broadcasts of "Voice of Free China".

A second similarity is that the regimes in Beijing and Moscow have created just the problem they were trying to avoid. After independence in 1991, Ukrainians were (put mildly) unfocussed on the threat from the north. Russia forged close economic, cultural, and other ties with its big southern neighbor. Ukraine was stuck in a bureaucratized post-Soviet limbo, too corrupt and ill-run to be a candidate for European integration. Hawks like me worried about this, but outsiders could not care more about Ukrainian national security than the Ukrainians themselves.

This changed not because of Western pressure, but because of Russian meddling and bullying, starting with the electoral fraud that stole the presidential election of November 2004 for the Russian-backed candidate Viktor Yanukovich. It culminated in the Kremlin-backed insurrection in the Donbass and the seizure of Crimea in 2014. Now Ukrainians are fervently anti-Russian

and pro-Western.

The mainland Chinese approach to Taiwan also combined subversion, rhetorical onslaughts, and military pressure. Coupled with the dismal fate of Hong Kong's promised "One Country, Two Systems," it nixed hopes that Taiwan's democracy, rule of law, and economic system would survive any kind of political integration with the mainland.

The United States used to treat both dossiers as difficult but not urgent. Ambiguous guarantees and expressions of support sufficed. What mattered were big-power relations, where American diplomatic heft all but guaranteed a satisfactory outcome.

No longer. Russia and China are the problems burning holes on desks in Washington, DC. The roads to escalation and disaster lead through Ukraine and Taiwan. They have moved from the geopolitical margins to center-stage.

These dilemmas are the price of past mistakes. If Western decision-makers had taken a more robust and consistent attitude in past years, Ukraine and Taiwan would both be in far better positions. Signal weakness for long enough, and adversaries take note.

The failures are local too. Taiwan obediently focussed on trade and cultural diplomacy. Now it needs to learn political warfare, fast. After years of military neglect, it is scrambling to restore a semblance of deterrence. Ukrainians rue the clueless, self-indulgent decades that followed independence. Russia's gains in 2014 and 2022 were the product chiefly of Ukrainian ill-preparedness.

But the real source of danger is not failure but success. By 2021 Ukraine, albeit belatedly, was proving that a large Slavic ex-Soviet country could offer its people dignity, liberty, and justice. Taiwan's prosperity, freedom, and honesty about its totalitarian past are a standing reproach to the mainland's history of lies and mass murder. For both the Moscow and Beijing regimes, successful counter-examples to their bombastic, messianic rulebook are intolerable.

If the West wants to win the big fight for our own survival, this is where we start.

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