

## **A three pillar strategy to prevent war in East Asia**

**China, U.S. and Taiwan need to learn from the war in Ukraine**

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Since Russia's unprovoked war with Ukraine began on Feb. 24, the three protagonists in the dispute over the status of Taiwan -- China, the U.S. and Taiwan itself -- have been trying to draw useful lessons that may be applied to a future military conflict.

For Chinese leaders, Putin's tactics and his struggle to defeat Ukrainian forces may have convinced them of the power of nuclear deterrence and the importance of economic security.

With NATO's caution in aiding Ukraine being seen as a product of its fear of a nuclear war with Russia, Beijing may decide that building a large nuclear arsenal and raising the stakes to catastrophic levels would help deter the U.S. from intervening militarily in a Taiwan scenario.

Beijing will also have noted that economically, Putin's efforts to sanction-proof the Russian economy were woefully inadequate. For example, he had left \$300 billion, nearly half of Russia's foreign exchange reserves in Western banks on the eve of the war, allowing the funds to be frozen once his army's tanks rolled into Ukraine.

If Beijing applies these lessons, then the probability of a war to conquer Taiwan would be lower in the short to medium term because it will take many years for China to build a large enough nuclear arsenal to achieve mutually assured destruction capability with the U.S.

Avoiding the economic mistakes that Putin has made would also take time, requiring China to transform its globalized economy into a war economy. But once China gains both objectives, a war over Taiwan would then become both more likely and too horrendous to imagine.

For leaders in Taipei and Washington, Ukraine's success in deploying mobile anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles has most likely reinforced the view that Taiwan should invest in similar capabilities instead of costly advanced jet fighters.

The Pentagon may also view Putin's war on Ukraine as a failure of Western deterrence, leading them to conclude that, in retrospect, greater military support for Ukraine before the war might have made Putin think twice before pulling the trigger. And economically, the case for decoupling from China has become even more compelling because maintaining the status quo will only help to strengthen the Chinese economy and its military.

While these lessons may seem reasonable in a narrow sense, they are not the right ones to draw from the Ukraine war.

What the conflagration in Ukraine has taught us is that the world would be better served by learning how to prevent war in the first place rather than focusing on how to fight and win a future war across the Taiwan Strait. Such a conflict will inflict immense destruction on Taiwan and China's wealthy coastal areas and could even escalate to a nuclear war between the U.S. and China.

A comprehensive strategy to prevent war in East Asia must rest on three pillars: military deterrence, diplomatic engagement and crisis management.

Maintaining effective military deterrence is essential in preventing war in the Taiwan Strait. America's deployment of more advanced weapons and capable forces in East Asia and the quasi-military alliance of the Quad comprising the U.S., Japan, Australia and India will be central to this effort. Taiwan's expanded investment in its defense capabilities will be helpful on the margins, but military deterrence alone is unlikely to be decisive as China will react with its own military buildup.

That is why diplomatic or political engagement will be as critical as deterrence. Since the U.S.-China rapprochement half a century ago, peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait has been underpinned by both America's military superiority and a basic understanding over the status of Taiwan. But today, this political understanding has all but collapsed.

China blames Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party, which rejects the so-called 1992 Consensus reached between Taipei and Beijing three decades ago that acknowledges that there is only one China but that the two sides disagree on what "one China" means.

In the eyes of the U.S., China is changing the status quo through coercion and by abandoning its commitment to peaceful reunification. China has never renounced the use of force. At the same time, China believes that the U.S. has not only gutted its "One China policy" but has effectively settled on a course of preventing China from ever achieving reunification with Taiwan.

While it is unlikely that the three protagonists can reach a new political understanding in an environment of enmity and distrust, they still need to intensify diplomatic efforts to know what each other's bottom line is and find a new modus vivendi.

As the U.S., China and Taiwan beef up their military capabilities, the risks of accidental conflict will unavoidably grow. It is imperative that they develop effective crisis management mechanisms.

The Pentagon has been trying to engage the People's Liberation Army for years to develop such mechanisms with only modest success. As Beijing has a strong interest in preventing an accidental conflict from spiraling out of control, the PLA should be far more cooperative with the U.S. military in managing a future crisis.

If the key lesson for China, Taiwan and the U.S. from the war in Ukraine so far is that a war in the Taiwan Strait is now more likely, then they should unlearn that as soon as possible. What they must do instead is develop an alternative strategy to prevent war.