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UKRAINE AND TAIWAN: STRUCTURAL SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN OPPOSING BIGGER NEIGHBOURS

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Abstract. The Russo-Ukrainian war destroyed the existing security system and led to concerns about a similar potential hot spot – Taiwan. The research paper is an analysis of how Ukraine and Taiwan oppose their bigger neighbours, who claim them as their own territory. The article explores the similarities and differences between these two asymmetric conflicts. Attention was also paid to the policy of «strategic ambiguity» employed by each side. The potential reactions of the parties involved in the Russo-Ukrainian war to a possible war in the Taiwan Strait are researched. Findings indicate that successfully maintaining Ukraine's sovereignty and imposing a high cost on the Russian Federation for launching a full-scale invasion serve as a deterrent for the People's Republic of China against taking similar actions regarding Taiwan. The study utilizes theoretical and empirical methods, in particular, generalization, analyses, system approach, comparative and observation.

Key words: Taiwan, China, Russo-Ukrainian war, asymmetric war, strategic ambiguity, one-China policy.

Introduction. Despite the regular military training of the People's Liberation Army in the Taiwan Strait and violations of the air defence identification zone of Taiwan, there was little talk about official Beijing being ready to take over the island by force. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 drew attention to the possible similar action of the People's Republic of China against Taiwan. While Ukraine is already in a fight against Russian forces, Taiwan is working on preventing a full-scale war and trying to maintain the status quo. Beijing and Taipei are learning the lessons from the asymmetric Russo-Ukrainian war.

Purpose of the article. To analyze the structural similarities and differences between the Russo-Ukrainian war and the Taiwan-China conflict. The aim of the research paper is achieved through the following tasks:

- 1) determining the historical context of the issues;
- 2) characterizing the relations between Ukraine and Taiwan;
- 3) defining the similarities and differences in terms of political status, economic factors, and geographical location;
- 4) revealing how the strategy of «political ambiguity» is employed by the parties enrolled in the issues.

Materials and methods. The study uses the comparative method, allowing for the identification of similarities and differences in the political and economic situations in both Ukraine and Taiwan. The method of analysis is employed to examine the historical context of the issues addressed. Generalization helped aggregate data from different sources to identify common trends and patterns. The systems approach is used to organize the obtained data and form a holistic view of the political and economic aspects of the conflicts.

The «Taiwan issue» also known as the «Taiwan problem» has been widely researched in the scientific literature. It became more popular after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This serves as an important factor that has an impact on cross-strait relations. Given that the Russo-Ukrainian war continues and more parties are becoming involved in it, the analysis of these two asymmetric conflicts is of high relevance.

The paper uses the study of P. Gries and T. Wang in which they research the policy of «dual deterrence» often referred to as «strategic ambiguity» (Gries and Wang, 2020). Luke P. Bellocchi in his research also analyzes the «strategic ambiguity» in contrast to the «strategic clarity». He aligns them both with the gray zone (Bellocchi, 2023: 27). D. Lin researches cross-strait relations from the position of the «one China» framework and defines the conflict as a «one China» dispute (Lin, 2022: 1095). P. K Davis points out the consequences of the Russo-Ukrainian war for Northeast Asia, in particular the economic but mainly nuclear (Davis, 2023: 114). D. von Hippel also evaluates the possibility of using a nuclear weapon by Russia in the war against Ukraine (Von Hippel, 2023). A. Hrubinko and I. Fedoriv analyze the Russia-Ukraine and China-Taiwan conflicts as asymmetric by nature (Hrubinko and Fedoriv, 2023: 24). J. Feryna and L. Kutěj compare the Ukrainian and Taiwanese cases and define the lessons Beijing could learn from the war in Ukraine (Feryna and Kutěj, 2023). T. Fravel also pays attention to the potential lessons China could learn from Ukraine (Fravel, 2023). W. Norris researches the similarities and differences between the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the possible Taiwan scenario (Norris, 2023). I. Habro and O. Shevchuk analyze the positions and actions of the PRC regarding the Russo-Ukrainian war (Habro and Shevchuk, 2023).

Results and discussion.

Historical context. During most of the Chinese Civil War (1927–1949) between the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) Taiwan was under Japanese control (1895–1945). It was returned to China after the Second World War. The Kuomintang leader Chiang Kai-shek and his forces having been defeated in the war against the Chinese Communists led by Mao Zedong, moved to the island of Taiwan in 1949. As a result, the same year the Communists established the People’s Republic of China (PRC) with the capital in Beijing and the Nationalists continued to exercise power as the government of the Republic of China (ROC) but on a limited part of the country they controlled with the de-facto capital in Taipei. Since that time the Communists have been claiming Taiwan (and some small islands) to be part of one China and aiming to reunite, by force if needed.

Ukraine became an independent state in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union which marked the end of the bipolar system in international relations. Russian Federation annexed the Crimean Peninsula and occupied parts of eastern Luhansk and Donetsk regions in 2014. It launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Chinese and Russian leaders question the independence of Taiwan and Ukraine accordingly. Xi and Putin signed a «no limits» partnership – days before the Kremlin started the so-called «special military operation». As noted by I. Habro and O. Shevchuk, «the diplomatic rhetoric of the PRC can be defined as «neutral» to a certain extent» (Habro and Shevchuk, 2023: 10). The People’s Republic of China officially does not support and at the same time does not condemn Russia’s war against Ukraine. However, in June 2024, the U.S. Ambassador to the People’s Republic of China Nicholas Burns said, that China «is not neutral, but has effectively sided with Russia in this war» (The Diplomat, 2024).

Relations between Ukraine and Taiwan. Ukraine does not have diplomatic ties with the Republic of China and does not recognize its independence. There is neither a representative office of Taipei in Kyiv nor a Ukrainian representative office on the island. Ukraine has diplomatic relations with the PRC and adheres to the «One China» policy.

Ukraine is unlikely to switch diplomatic ties from the People’s Republic of China to Taiwan. Kyiv sees Beijing as a global player in the international arena and one who has an impact on the Russian Federation. Ukraine is seeking to involve the PRC in finding a peaceful solution to the Russo-Ukrainian war. The visit by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Dmytro Kuleba, at the end of July 2024 – the first in eight years of such a level – signals Beijing’s interest in playing the role of peacemaker. In its press release, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China stated that «Ukraine supports China’s position on the Taiwan issue and will continue to adhere to the one-China principle» (Forbes, 2024).

Both Taiwan and Ukraine have **similarities and differences**. The biggest similarity is the geopolitical situation – each opposing a neighbour who is much bigger in the territory and military power and is also a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. This serves as an example of the «asymmetric conflict relations» (Hrubinko and Fedoriv, 2023: 24).

Another thing that Taiwan and Ukraine have in common is that the PRC and Russia, respectively, claim the territory of their neighbour as their own, either in full or in part. W. Norris notes that «Russia and China both view their respective target states as renegade satellites» (Norris, 2023: 141). According to its constitution, Beijing considers Taiwan part of the People’s Republic of China, viewing it as the 23rd province that is separated from the mainland. The Russian Federation «incorporated» the occupied territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia into its constitution on October 5, 2022. Similar actions were taken concerning the Crimean Peninsula on March 18, 2014. The difference is that Moscow included the regions in its constitution after occupying and establishing control of them. Initially, it didn’t have the Ukrainian territories in its fundamental law when becoming a separate state in 1991. While the PRC despite including Taiwan and its islands in the constitution since its establishment in 1949 has never controlled these territories. This is the argument used by supporters of Taiwan’s independence.

Kyiv and Taipei receive military and financial aid from Washington which plays an important role in the capabilities to defend themselves. Since the Russian invasion in 2022, the US Congress has passed five bills for the general amount of \$175 billion in aid to support Ukraine. This is the biggest US spending for a European country since the European Recovery Program (also referred to as the Marshall Plan) after World War II (Masters and Merrow, 2024). The \$8.1 billion aid for the Indo-Pacific region including Taiwan as a part of a general \$96 billion bill (in particular for Ukraine) passed in April 2024 is an important signal to the PRC and Russia (Scott, 2024).

The important **difference** between Ukraine and Taiwan is their **political status**. The first is a recognized state, in particular by the Russian Federation. The same cannot be applied to Taiwan, which has diplomatic ties only with 11 states and with the Holy See (as of July 2024). For reference, this number was 23 in 2016. Beijing puts pressure on countries that recognize Taiwan.

2 days after presidential and parliamentary elections were held in the Republic of China on January 15, 2024, the Republic of Nauru switched diplomatic ties from Taipei to Beijing. Therefore, the list of countries with which the ROC has diplomatic relations includes Belize, the Republic of Guatemala, the Republic of Haiti, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Republic of Palau, the Republic of Paraguay, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, the Federation of Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Tuvalu, the Kingdom of Eswatini, and the Holy See (Ukrinform, 2024). T. Fravel regarding the advanced industrialized democracies notes, that the PRC will try «to reduce potential support they might provide as part of a coalition which might form during an invasion of Taiwan» (Fravel, 2023: 20).

Taiwan is a self-governing island with attributes typical of a state. It has a permanent population, defined territory, government, and the ability to engage in relations with other states. Thus, it meets the criteria for a state as outlined in the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States.

Although most countries have diplomatic ties with mainland China and de jure do not recognize Taiwan’s sovereignty, adhering to the «One China» principle or policy, Beijing does not govern the island de facto. Both the PRC and the ROC claimed territories from one another. This is known as the Two-China Dilemma. The situation is different for Ukraine and Russia, as there is no concept of «two Ukraines» or «two Russias». Kyiv does not claim any territory of its neighbouring country, unlike Moscow.

The other difference is that the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the People’s Republic of China have never recognized each other as independent states, unlike Ukraine and Russia. Taiwan is not a member of the United Nations. It lost its seat in the organization in 1971 when the General Assembly decided «to restore all its rights to the People’s Republic of China» (UN, 1971).

The spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China Wang Wenbin stated that «Taiwan is an inalienable part of the Chinese territory. This makes it fundamentally different from a sovereign country like Ukraine» (FMPRC, 2022).

There are differences in terms of **economics** as well. Taiwan is ranked among the top 20 global economies by gross domestic product (U.S. Department of State, 2023). A crucial factor driving global concern for the defence of Taiwan is the world's dependence on semiconductors. More than 60 percent of all semiconductors and over 90 percent of the most advanced chips are manufactured in Taiwan (Sacks and Huang, 2024). In 2021, the nominal gross domestic product (GDP) of Taiwan was \$773.04 billion compared to Ukraine's \$199.8 billion, which was the highest in its history. In 2023, the values were \$756.59 billion and \$177.2 billion, respectively (IMF).

Geographical location. Taiwan is an island with several other smaller islands. The distance from mainland China to Taiwan is at least 128 km which makes it more difficult to invade (Gatopoulos, 2022). Ukraine, in contrast, is a mainland state with a Crimean Peninsula. The country shares a common border with the Russian Federation and Belarus, the territory of which was used to attack Ukraine in February 2022.

Strategic ambiguity. The USA in its relations with Taiwan and the PRC follows a policy of «strategic ambiguity». The concept of it is to leave the parties in a state of ambiguity about the measures that the US will take in response to the PRC's attempts to reunify with Taiwan by force. Beijing was warned against initiating an unprovoked attack on Taiwan but was assured that the U.S. would not support Taiwan's move toward formal independence. Similarly, Taiwan was reassured that the U.S. would come to its defence as long as it did not provoke Beijing by declaring official independence. While neither side in the Taiwan Strait fully achieved their goals, they received assurances that the worst-case scenarios would be avoided (Gries and Wang, 2020: 51).

This approach of dual deterrence was adopted by the United States when both the PRC and ROC were trying to control the opposite side and restore «one China» under their own rule. Its roots date back to 1954 when the USA and ROC concluded the mutual defence agreement, which was a part of the American policy of communism deterrence. The document did not clearly define the territories to which it extended and in general, had ambiguous formulation which reserved Washington opportunities for maneuvering in case of escalation of the conflict by Beijing.

Although such uncertainty and the absence of a «red lines» declaration have contributed to maintaining the peace in the Strait for decades, it might be risky. The PRC may consider the lack of clarity on the «Taiwan issue» as a sign of weakness. This increases the chances of a military scenario.

The policy of «strategic ambiguity» has some elements of clarity. For reference, through 2022–2024 US President Joseph Biden says that «we have a commitment» to defend Taiwan if China attacks (White House; Chen, 2024). But at the same time, he doesn't specify the form of the defence and the ambiguity persists. Besides that, the President uses «we have a commitment», which «might imply there is an allied capacity (rather than just a US capacity) to resist force against Taiwan» (Bellocchi, 2023: 16). This indicates the move to the policy of «collective strategic ambiguity».

Mainland China also maintains uncertainty regarding «Taiwan's independence». Neither Beijing nor Taipei clearly defines this terminology, allowing for different interpretations depending on the political context. The PRC has its own interpretation of Resolution 2758, which led to the transfer of United Nations membership from the Republic of China to the People's Republic of China in 1971. Beijing views the document as a legal basis for the «one China» principle but both sides cannot agree within this frame. D. Lin states that a rapprochement between the PRC and ROC «merely suspends their confrontation to buy time and prospects for reconciliation» (Lin, 2022: 9).

The goals of the two sides of the Taiwan Strait in resuming negotiations are different. Taipei aims to maintain the status quo, while Beijing is likely to use these talks to increase Taiwan's dependence, particularly through economic integration.

Such an attempt was made during the presidency of Ma Ying-jeou (Kuomintang party) in 2014 with the Cross-Strait Agreement on Trade in Services, signed by the proxy organizations Straits Exchange Foundation (ROC) and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (PRC) (Yan-chih, 2013). This resulted in protests and the «Sunflower» (March – April 2014) student movement in Taiwan, which led to the non-ratification of the agreement by the ROC government. Support for the Kuomintang's policies among voters decreased, and the party lost the presidential elections three times in a row in 2016, 2020, and 2024.

The protests in Taiwan coincided with the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation (February – March 2014), and later the beginning of the Russian occupation of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine (March 2014 – ongoing).

The West's policy towards Ukraine also has some elements of ambiguity. But it is rather uncertainty than dual deterrence. There is a lack of political consensus among the 32 members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization about inviting Ukraine to join the alliance. There are no specific time-frames, and officials say that the country will only be able to join the military organization after the Russo-Ukrainian war is over. However, the definition of «war is over» may vary. It could mean the restoration of control over the entire territory of Ukraine within its 1991 borders, or it could simply refer to the end of military actions. The challenge lies in defining when the war is over. It is unlikely that any agreement will be reached to officially declare the end of the war, primarily because the Kremlin refers to it as a «special military operation».

The other example of strategic ambiguity regarding Ukraine is the statement French President Emmanuel Macron made in May 2024 about not ruling out sending troops to Ukraine. He said that because of «facing someone who is ruling nothing out» (The Economist, 2024). In this context, the French President was referring to Russia, which also employs a policy of «strategic ambiguity». Vladimir Putin has not ruled out the use of nuclear weapons but has not specified the circumstances under which they might be used or the type of weapon that could be involved. As noted by D. von Hippel, «Russia's nuclear signaling during the Ukraine conflict has been effective in large part because of Russia's vast nuclear arsenal» (Von Hippel, 2023: 90).

Parties involved. The Russo-Ukrainian war cannot be considered a solely European problem, as it also involves, albeit indirectly, players from other parts of the world. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran) supply Russia with direct military aid. The PRC exports to Russia dual-use items that are utilized in the military industry. The war also involves the United States, which is the largest donor of financial and military aid to Ukraine, as well as Canada, Japan, Turkey, and other non-European countries that provide support. The consequences of the war are also tangible for poorer countries, as grain prices have risen due to the decrease in exports from Ukraine.

The Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute for National Defense and Security Research in Taiwan Yurii Poita believes that one of the biggest deterrents for the PRC will be Ukraine's achievement of serious military victories on the battlefield. PRC will then understand that the West is strong and that it is impossible to seize a piece of territory and claim it as its own (Zahidfront, 2023). According to A. Hrubinko and I. Fedoriv, «the victory of Ukraine and the active participation and policy of the United States will be factors that can reduce the likelihood of a China-Taiwan conflict» (Hrubinko and Fedoriv, 2023: 28).

It is important to recognize that the «Taiwan issue» extends beyond being just an Asian problem, as it affects not just military but also economic interests globally. Taiwan produces chips that are used worldwide; any disruption in the supply chain could significantly impact global GDP. The war in the region will have a negative impact not only on the PRC's economy but the whole world due to the effect on the global shipping routes in the South China Sea. The consequences might be worse than those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. China's deep integration into the global economy

means that the cost of launching a full-scale invasion would be very high for it. The economic sanctions implied by the world could be «devastating to China» (Davis, 2023: 114). Given the economic interdependence of the EU and PRC, «any sanctions would be a double-edged sword for Europe's economy» (Bellocchi 2023: 41). J. Feryna and L. Kutěj state that China «will try to harm other economies dependent on China that could try to sanction China» (Feryna and Kutěj, 2023: 33).

Countries that support Russia in its war against Ukraine may also support the PRC if it intervenes in Taiwan. Similarly, countries that support Ukraine are likely to support Taiwan.

If the USA gets directly involved in the Taiwan Strait war, they will count on the support of the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea). The direct participation of the ROK military forces in the war is unlikely to be expected in Washington. The US has approximately 28,5 troops based in the Republic of Korea. It may want Seoul to provide at least the logistics and technical support to this army personnel and to use their forces to deter North Korea, with the help of the US if needed. In this case, the US should be able to use its Korean-based forces to defend Taiwan (Cancian, Cancian and Heginbotham, 2023: 61).

Okinawa (Japan) serves as the nearest US Air Force base and will likely be used as a part of the supply chain. Thus, it may be considered as a military target by the PRC. The important point is that Beijing claims the Senkaku Islands controlled by Tokyo as its own territory and a part of Taiwan province. It may try to capture them during the Taiwan Strait crisis (CFR, 2023: 66).

The Philippines will be also affected by the instability in the region. The country is interested in the security cooperation with the US as relations with China deteriorate. Beijing wants to control the entire South China Sea including the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of the Philippines. This led to the conflict around the Second Thomas Shoal in the Spratly Islands. Since 2023 Beijing has been preventing Manila from accessing this submerged reef, located in the Philippine EEZ. In 2012, the Philippine authorities officially named a part of the South China Sea, which is considered part of their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), as the West Philippine Sea (Official Gazette, 2012).

The Philippines' proximity to Taiwan complicates Manila's policy of neutrality. The security situation in the region partly depends on the ability of these neighbours to build relationships with one another and with the United States, which, according to agreements reached in February 2023, has restored its military presence in the Philippines.

Conclusions. Taiwan and Ukraine face challenges to their sovereignty and security in complex geopolitical conditions. Although their international statuses are different, they both seek to strengthen their independence and democratic development. Taiwan is focused on maintaining the status quo and developing defence capabilities to prevent a full-scale invasion, while Ukraine is focused on defending its territorial integrity in a war launched by the Russian Federation. The experience of opposing the bigger neighbour can be valuable for studying and analyzing the processes of democratic development.

In this paper, the author determined the historical context of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the Taiwan-China conflict. It can be seen from the retrospective analyses that although the roots are different, the approach Russia and China adopt and the rhetoric they use are similar. The article defined the structural similarities and differences between Ukraine and Taiwan.

The study also characterized the relations between Ukraine and Taiwan and concluded that Ukraine is unlikely to switch diplomatic ties from the People's Republic of China to the Republic of China (Taiwan).

The author notes that the strategy of «political ambiguity» is employed not only by the United States regarding the «Taiwan issue» but also by the PRC and Russia. Such a lack of clarity leaves the opportunity to act differently depending on the situation.

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