

The Taiwan question: when will Xi make his move?

by Michael Smith

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The Russia-Ukraine crisis has experts alarmed at the scale of China's ambitions to control Taiwan, writes Michael Smith in Tokyo.

[The Russia-Ukraine crisis](#) has raised the spectre of another potentially catastrophic conflict closer to Australian soil.

China, which shares Russia's interests in weakening the United States' position as a dominant world power, will be watching events in Europe closely. Opinions vary about whether a successful Ukraine invasion by Vladimir Putin would embolden and accelerate Beijing's ambitions to reunify self-governed Taiwan with mainland China.

[But either way, it raises many questions about the unresolved issue of Taiwan's sovereignty, which will shape geopolitics in Australia's backyard for decades to come.](#)

Hugh White, Australian National University emeritus professor of strategic studies, says the US response to Putin's ambitions in Europe will shape Chinese President Xi Jinping's next move on Taiwan.

"What Putin is doing in the Ukraine is, in its way, the direct analogue of what Xi is doing over Taiwan – just as Putin is using Ukraine as the test of whether or not the United States is actually willing to fight to sustain its vision of itself as a dominant power globally," White tells *The Australian Financial Review*.

He argues that if Ukraine exposes US President Joe Biden's lack of appetite for full-scale military conflict, Xi will be emboldened to move on Taiwan if he is confident enough that Washington will not respond.

"I think there's a serious danger that Xi will convince himself that America won't fight over Taiwan. The more confident Xi is that the Americans understand they can't win the war, the more likely he is to take the risk," he says.

White's predictions about Taiwan include worst-case scenarios, including nuclear war. He controversially believes Australia should not support the US militarily if it decides to defend Taiwan, because it is a war the West cannot win.

[The Australian Foreign Affairs journal this week publishes a timely series of essays on Taiwan](#) under the banner, *The Taiwan Choice: Showdown in Asia*. As tensions over Ukraine escalate, the federal election is now being fought on security issues and the China threat.

[Defence Minister Peter Dutton has warned that a Chinese conquest of Taiwan would be the first domino to fall in a campaign by Beijing to dominate the Indo-Pacific region](#). It is a foregone conclusion that Australia would be required to fight alongside the US in the event of a conflict.

Grey zone tactics

Not everyone agrees with White's thesis. [Linda Jakobson, founding director and deputy chairman of China Matters](#), who also writes in Australian Foreign Affairs, argues that China will use grey-zone tactics of bullying rather than bullets to take Taiwan.

Like White, she believes the language coming from the Morrison government about the likelihood of war is unhelpful. But she also says it is important to properly understand the context of the Ukraine situation to predict how things might play out in the Taiwan Strait. While Biden has indicated he will not send troops into Ukraine, he would not say the same thing about Taiwan.

"There is one huge difference [from Ukraine]. While it is clear to the world the United States is not going to go to war over Ukraine, no American president is going to publicly rule out using military force [to go that far] during a crisis over Taiwan," she tells the *Financial Review*.

"Taiwan means so much more to the United States, unfortunately, than the Ukraine does. The US does not want to see a unified mainland and Taiwan. Keeping the PLA [China's People's Liberation Army] off Taiwan is in the US strategic interests."

White and Jakobson agree on some things – including that a war over Taiwan is not inevitable – but they represent two divergent views on a complex situation.

Diplomatic coercion

Part of the problem of making predictions about how the world's two most powerful countries might react to a situation is that both sides are playing a game of diplomatic coercion, something Putin has excelled at over Ukraine.

Jakobson, who lived in China for many years, says the key unknown is that no one can tell where Taiwan sits in Xi's list of priorities.

"Xi Jinping really wants as his legacy to be the person who is given credit for the great reunification of the motherland.

"He really wants it, but the key question is we don't know how much of a priority this is compared to the other hugely ambitious priorities that he has laid forward, such as raising the living standards of the Chinese people," she says.

White thinks the Taiwan issue will come to a head "sooner rather than later" as China and the US are tested over their willingness to use force. He does not give a time frame for this but notes that "Xi is a man in a hurry, and very powerful men are dangerous".

The risk is how the US might respond if Xi calculates on a move that would allow China to become the dominant power in east Asia and the western Pacific. Because the US can no longer match China's maritime capability in the region, it may have little option but to use the threat of nuclear weapons against China, which is also a nuclear power.

"Xi is likely to judge that Biden will be too prudent to start a war that he can't win by conventional forces and that he can't win by using nuclear blackmail," White says.

"Biden is old enough and sufficiently steeped in the realities of nuclear warfare to understand that even beginning to think about the escalation of nuclear war raises the danger of attack on US cities, which I don't think he would be willing to contemplate."

Australia loses either way, he says. If the US does not defend Taiwan, the credibility of its position in east Asia is destroyed and alliances with Japan and South Korea are weakened. If it does defend Taiwan and the issue escalates into a nuclear exchange, the outcome is catastrophic for everyone.

"Australia needs to adapt to the fact that, with Taiwan having been made the test on which of those two powers is going to be the dominant power in east Asia, it is very likely that China is going to win it. We are going to have to learn to live in an Asia dominated by China," he says.

Hong Kong lessons

Under Jakobson's scenario for Taiwan, there is no full-scale war. Xi will bide his time and force Taipei to the negotiating table through a combination of economic coercion, cyber bullying and other means that would put it on the path to reunification without mass bloodshed. Xi already has a history of

achieving this with Hong Kong, where national security laws have quashed any resistance to Beijing without having to deploy the PLA.

Jakobson's essay in *Australian Foreign Affairs* notes Taiwan's economic vulnerability, given it is heavily dependent on exports to China. In 2020, almost 44 per cent of its exports went to China, a 14 per cent increase on the previous year. This value equates to 8 per cent of Australia's GDP.

While there is no appetite among the Taiwanese people at the moment to live under the increasingly authoritarian rule of the Chinese Communist Party, Jakobson says the possibility of governments in Beijing and Taipei striking a deal in future is not impossible. One unification model would be for each country to retain its system of government and secure international safeguards for the demilitarisation of Taiwan.

"The end goal here for Xi Jinping is not war; the end goal is to get Taiwan to negotiate. Negotiations could take the next 20 years, but then Xi Jinping will have succeeded in bringing about reunification because those crucial talks would have begun," she says.

This could happen through a protracted and intensive campaign by Beijing using "all means short of war" to create enough instability that it would force Taiwan to the negotiating table. It is also often overlooked that Taiwan has its own conditions for political talks with Beijing, including China abandoning its threat of force.

The measures at Xi's disposal could range from economic pressure or a partial embargo, cyber attacks, disinformation operations and covert actions of political interference and subversion, to assassination and the limited use of military force. Those actions on their own would not be enough to trigger a military response from the US.

Jakobson says Xi has his hands full finding an off-ramp for COVID-19 and ensuring the economy keeps growing, which means he is unlikely to move on Taiwan this year. He is expected to be appointed to a third five-year term as president by the Party Congress this year.

Inflection point

She says the next inflection point will be [Taiwan's presidential election in 2024](#), and that political pressure on Xi to make progress towards his "reunification" goal would intensify after that. That pressure would be greatest if the next Taiwanese president were an openly pro-independence leader. Another factor is who becomes the next US president.

White is not so confident that Taiwan's future will be resolved without bloodshed as things come to a head between China and the US.

"Then both will face a disastrous choice between humiliation and war. In such situations, leaders in the past have often chosen war. This is how wars happen, despite neither side wanting or intending them."