

The Implications of the Ukraine Crisis to Taiwan

Chen-Shen J. Yen

Based on the Chinese “Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches” that runs a cycle of 60 years, 2014 marks the 2nd cycle of the First Sino-Japanese War that took place in 1894. With recent tensions in the East China Sea and the visit of Yasukuni Shrine by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the tension has been running high in early 2014 between China and Japan, leading to the speculation that military conflicts might take place again on the 120th anniversary of the First Sino-Japanese War.

2014 is also the centennial of the First World War, a war that is supposed to end all wars. We do not believe that history is destined to repeat itself. However, if conflicts in early 2014 are signs to an uneasy year ahead, we are looking at the prospect of geopolitical maneuvering that have not been witnessed for quite a while.

After Ukraine’s parliament ousted the embattled president, Viktor Yanukovich, in late February, the Russian parliament granted its leader, Vladimir Putin, broad authority to use force in Ukraine as a response to the upheavals in that country. The authorization appears to have emboldened Putin, who feels that he has a free hand in Crimea and has conducted military exercise along the Russo-Ukrainian border and intervened in the peninsula without hesitation.

The U.S. and its Western allies expressed their condemnation and insisted that they do not recognize the legality of the Russian actions as well as the subsequent Crimean referendum for independence. Russia on the other hand considered the new Ukrainian government as illegitimate because Yanukovich had been ousted by unconstitutional

means. Putin even called such a transfer of power a coup. As Russian-speaking Crimea citizens felt detached from the new central government, its decision to hold a referendum to decide the political future of the peninsula appeared justified.

Even though the U.S. has mobilized its fleet and entered the Black Sea as a counterbalance force, and President Barack Obama announced possible sanction measures, Putin seemed to be undeterred. However, a repeat of war or conflicts between two powers like the one that took place a century ago appears unlikely. But the scenario reminds people of what happened to Georgia in 2008 when Russians went into its former republic to support the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

During the Georgian crisis, two American policy specialists with previous government



A member of a pro-Russian self-defense force takes down a Ukrainian Navy flag, left, as another raises the Russian flag at Ukrainian Navy headquarters in Crimea, March, 2014. (Source: voa.gov)

* To prevent confusion and for reading convenience, in this article, the “Republic of China” is indicated as “Taiwan,” while “China” means “Mainland China.”

experiences wrote an article entitled “Georgia’s Lesson for Taiwan” that had important implications for Washington, D.C. Basically the arguments from Jeffrey Bader, former senior director for East Asian affairs on the National Security Council (NSC) and Douglas Paal, former director for American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), derived from watching helplessly as Russia intervened in Georgia, a state of the former Soviet Union, almost at will. They offered six lessons of the Russia-Georgia crisis for Taiwan and for U.S. policy toward Taiwan.

First, the Americans should be careful about security commitments. If the U.S. and the European allies did not intend to commit the full force of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) power to Georgia’s defense, do not try to bring this state into NATO. To provide a security commitment and then not back it up would send a message to the world that the U.S. is not serious about its commitments.

Second, smaller countries should not provoke the bear (Russia) or the dragon (China) and expect the eagle (U.S.) to fly to the rescue. Georgia’s former president, Mikheil Saakashvili, and Taiwan’s then president, Chen Shui-bian, both made similar provocative approach, and the U.S. was wise to withdraw support for Chen’s erratic behavior.

Third, the need for the U.S. to have a constructive relationship with major powers is an essential component of security for these smaller vulnerable states. They pointed out that Taiwan benefited from positive relations between the U.S. and China, and Washington should not hold a disdainful attitude toward Russian security interests.

Fourth, geography matters. The authors reminded the smaller nations near large powers that they should not forget who their neighbors are. Fifth, Mr. Bader and Mr. Paal pled that if the U.S. does not plan to carry a big stick, it is wise to speak softly. In the Georgia case, the Russians saw the U.S. warnings as a bluff. Would the U.S. allies consider the American commitment to them prove as empty?

Finally, American credibility is global. The two former government officials insisted that there are no purely local crises, and American commitments

remain critical for a stable international system. Americans need to be clear about their commitments to ensure the credibility of the U.S. in international affairs.

Mr. Bader’s two colleagues in the Brookings Institution, Richard Bush and Kenneth Lieberthal, wrote a piece “From Georgia to Taiwan” for the *Asian Wall Street Journal* that partly concurred with the views of the former. They basically argued that even though Taiwan and Georgia have similar dynamics, but the outcomes for the two are quite different. Messrs. Bush and Lieberthal accused President Bush for misleading President Saakashvili to his confrontation with Russia. He did the same thing when he told a CNN reporter in April 2001 that he was prepared to “do whatever it takes” to defend Taiwan against China. This gave Mr. Chen a carte blanche for his provocative approach, and Washington’s restraining moves finally helped to stabilize the volatile cross-Strait situation. They also believe in and praise the conciliatory approach taken by Ma Ying-jeou toward China. Their conclusion of the comparison is illustrative of the lessons to be learned:

American commitments should be carefully shaped around sober analysis of American capabilities and interest and the competing goals and interests of other major players, and articulated on that basis. Otherwise, the U.S. will create trouble for its friends, its major power relationships, its credibility, and its capacity to manage other critical international issues in the future.

In 2008, Georgia’s defiance of Russia was compared to Taiwan’s provocation against China when the island just emerged from the politics of confrontation by President Chen Shui-bian and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The author’s warning for Taiwan’s optimism that the U.S. would come to the island’s assistance if conflicts broke out across the Strait was well founded. The return of the Kuomintang (KMT) or the Nationalist Party to power and the subsequent conciliatory gestures taken by President Ma Ying-jeou should alleviate American worry that a trouble-making Taiwan

would prompt a military confrontation between the two superpowers.

Instead of feeling optimistic of the cross-Strait relations with Ma at the helm, there appeared few articles arguing that the U.S. should abandon or ditch Taiwan. These “abandonment” works start with Charles Glaser’s article in the prestigious *Foreign Affairs* in the spring of 2011, followed by an op-ed piece of a former National Security Fellow at the Harvard University in the *New York Time* later that year. The former argued for the abandonment of Taiwan to avoid confrontation or possible war with China; the latter advocated the ditching of Taiwan to save the U.S. economy. Some noted specialists refuted such arguments either before these pieces first appeared or responded right after.

Most recently John Mearsheimer, Professor of International Relations from the University of Chicago, published an article on *National Interests* in March 2014 that caused great concerns in Taiwan. In the piece entitled “Say Goodbye to Taiwan,” this theorist best known for his advocating of “Offensive Realism,” argued that the U.S. should view the reunification of Taiwan with Mainland China as inevitable and prepare for this foregone conclusion. Even though his piece was immediately refuted in the same journal just three days later, the events unfolding in Ukraine and Crimea again connected Taiwan to the power politics of the regional hegemony.

If we looked at how the U.S. handled some of the geopolitical issues in the former Soviet Union or even former Yugoslavia, the lack of consistent stance is troubling. For example, the U.S. supported the independence referendum in Kosovo, an autonomous region of Serbia, and overlooked the fact that it was different from the separation of the republics like Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Montenegro from former Yugoslavia. The U.S. and its European allies gave formal recognition to Kosovo while Serbia, Russia and China refused to do so.

Then came the Georgia crisis in which two autonomous regions of South Ossetia and

Abkhazia broke away from Georgia and gained de facto independence with the help from Russia. Washington’s lack of punitive actions against Moscow left the impression that the U.S. might be able to impose its will on a smaller state like Serbia but simply could not exert any leverage against a greater power like Russia.

Such a lesson was not learned by pro-European Ukrainians. By ousting a pro-Russian president for the name of “democracy” or “anti-corruption,” they have actually caused grave concerns that this former republic of Soviet Union is being used by the West to contain Russia. Instead of moving into the European Union and NATO, Ukraine has lost its strategic asset of Crimea.

Another lesson we learned from the Ukraine/ Crimea crisis is that the U.S. should not condemn other powers to claim their core interests of sphere of influence while maintaining the existence and validity of a dated Monroe Doctrine itself. At the end, Washington simply could not stop Moscow’s gains in the last two crises involving its former republics.

Crimea underwent a referendum requiring to be annexed by Russia. While President Obama and his European allies claimed that this was an illegal move, Putin insisted that the process was in accordance with international law, including Article 11 of the *UN Charter* regarding the principle of self-determination. There was no surprise to Russia’s



Taiwan must learn from the Ukraine crisis and maintain its competitiveness. (Source: rocmp.org)

recognition of the Crimean independence that was approved with more than 96% of the ballot cast and the subsequent annexation. While the U.S. and EU proposed sanctions against Russia, some regions in the eastern part of Ukraine meditate the same path taken by Crimea.

Ukraine's loss of Crimea is not likely to be reversed. The country should concentrate on retaining the eastern part of the country and preventing more secessions and the collapse of territorial integrity. Putin has asserted Russia's sphere of influence in some of the former Soviet republics considered of vital strategic importance to Moscow. The West should contemplate on consolidating the centripetal trend of the existing members of European Union and NATO rather than trying futilely for eastern expansion that would clash with Russia security interests.

If all the U.S. could do in the Ukraine crisis is to “speak loudly but carry a soft stick” and watch Crimea taken by a Russia that is determined to restore its glorious past, what is the lesson to be learned for Taiwan? The challenge of American hegemony by a rising China is at least as serious as that of Russia. Some will argue the threat posed by Beijing is probably greater. If such analogy is applicable to Taiwan, what are the lessons we can learn from this? Let's first look at the similarities of the two.

Despite the similarities between Taiwan and Ukraine, there are also many differences, giving Taiwanese confidence that Ukraine crisis will not be played out here.

First, both Ukraine and Taiwan are economically engaged with a powerful neighbor friendly in trade relations but hostile in political interactions. Both countries are caught between two great powers, European Union and Russia for Ukraine, and the U.S. and China for Taiwan.

Second, both Ukraine and Taiwan are not security allies of the U.S. Kiev aspires to join NATO and Taiwan is excited to be included in the neighboring area of U.S.-Japanese alliance. Both have proclivity towards the West but are not part of the Western camp yet.

Third, Ukraine depends on Russia for its market and the energy supply. China has long replaced the U.S. as Taiwan's biggest export market. Such dependence means any sanction raised by the powerful neighbor is likely to cause huge damage to the economy of the smaller counterpart.

But there are also many differences, giving Taiwanese confidence that the Ukraine crisis will not be played out here. First, the existing of the Taiwan Strait makes it very difficult for the People's Liberation Army to have a quick and effective occupation of the island.

Second, even though there are few people in Taiwan who consider themselves exclusively Chinese and support unification with the mainland, there is very little likelihood that a referendum for unification will be introduced any time soon. Instead, most people on the island support status quo and prefer not to make a decision of cross-Strait political relations now.

Third, Taiwan did experience a scare during the DPP rule when President Chen Shui-bian tried to provoke Beijing to earn some political capital at home. While the U.S. did encourage Kiev to break away from Moscow, its attitude switched from commitment to Taiwan's security in the early years of Bush administration to a restraining force on Chen's move towards independence later. In other words, while supportive of Taiwan because of shared values of freedom and democracy, market economy and respect for basic human rights, the U.S. does not want to see Taipei consider Washington's positive view of Taiwan a carte blanche for defying China.

Finally, while Ukraine is still torn between choosing EU or Russia, Taiwan has been able to maintain a delicate balance between China and the U.S. since President Ma Ying-jeou came to power in 2008. The KMT government has been able to



achieve political reconciliation and diplomatic truce with the mainland while remains as an important ideological partner of the U.S. In other words, Ma's conciliatory approach toward Beijing and trouble-free attitude in the eyes of Washington have succeeded in reducing tension across the Taiwan Strait.

As to the lessons we learn from the Ukraine crisis, three can be drawn easily. First, big powers usually do not go to war against each other. They may have military confrontation with the smaller countries or even proxies, but no direct conflict is likely to happen. In other words, the U.S. is not likely to fight a war with China on behalf of Taiwan.

Second, if Ukraine falls in Russia's sphere of influence, Taiwan is definitely China's core interests. Geography is fixed. Ukraine made the mistake of trying to leave that sphere of influence. Taiwan should learn the lesson by restraining the separatist sentiment in order to maintain the status quo, which is in the best interests of Taiwanese people.

Finally, Russians in Ukraine reminiscing the good old days of the Soviet Union are likely to support Russia's annexation of Crimea. This is also the fault of the Ukraine government for failing to create an economy and polity that is more attractive

than Russia. Taiwanese will opt for status quo as long as our economy grows at a respective pace and people maintain a better standard of living than the counterparts in the mainland. Maintaining our competitiveness would make it unlikely for the U.S. to abandon Taiwan.

Chen-Shen J. Yen is a Research Fellow at the Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University

1. Jeffrey Bader and Douglas Paal, "Georgia's Lessons for Taiwan," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, September 3, 2009, [http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2008/09/Taiwan-bader or carneigeendowment.org/2008/09/02/Georgia-s-lessons -for-taiwan/25wj](http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2008/09/Taiwan-bader%20or%20carneigeendowment.org/2008/09/02/Georgia-s-lessons-for-taiwan/25wj).
2. Richard C. Bush III and Kenneth G. Lieberthal, "From Georgia to Taiwan," *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, September 16, 2009, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2008/09/16-taiwan-bush>.
3. Charles Glaser, "Will China's Rise Lead to War? Why Realism Does Not Mean Pessimism," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (March-April 2011): 80-91.
4. Paul V. Kane, "To Save Our Economy, Ditch Taiwan," *New York Times*, November 10, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/11/opinion/to-save-our-economy-ditch-taiwan.html?_r=0.
5. Shelley Rigger, *Why Taiwan Matters: Small Island, Global Powerhouse* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011); Nancy Bernkopf Tucker and Bonnie Glaser, "Should the United States Abandon Taiwan?" *Washington Quarterly*, Volume 34, Number 4 (Fall 2011): 23-37.
6. John J. Mearsheimer, "Say Goodbye to Taiwan," *The National Interest*, February 25, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/article/say-goodbye-taiwan-9931?page=show>.
7. Iskander Rehman, "Why Taiwan Matters," *The National Interest*, February 28, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/why-taiwan-matters-9971>.