

What Russia's Hybrid Warfare in Ukraine Reveals for Taiwan

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1. News Highlights

On February 21, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared Ukraine an inseparable part of Russia and signed an order recognizing the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic. Putin also called on the Ukraine authorities to cease hostile acts against the two "countries", or else they would have to assume all responsibility for any subsequent bloody conflict.¹ The Russian army then moved into the eastern region of Ukraine under the guise of "peacekeeping," which the US deemed to be equivalent of an invasion. Russia then announced the establishment of

diplomatic relations with the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic. For now, there is still no light at the end of the tunnel regarding the escalation of the conflict.

The crisis in Ukraine, which has been heating up again since October 2021, can be traced back to the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014. The Russian Federation annexed Crimea without a fight and caused the declaration of independence of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic in the eastern region of Ukraine, resulting in the division of the country. However, the war did not end there as Russia still continued to wage hybrid warfare against Ukraine. Since

1. "Обращение Президента Российской Федерации," Президент России, 21 февраля 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>; Ilya Tsukanov, "Russia Recognises Donbass Republics' Independence," *Sputnik International*, February 21, 2022, <https://sputniknews.com/20220221/russia-recognises-donbass-republics-independence-1093241178.html>.

the Chinese PLA is deeply influenced by Russian military thought,² and there is a possible chain effect to China-Taiwan relations in the similarities from the Russia-Ukraine situation, it is necessary to look into Russia's hybrid warfare in Ukraine in preparation of a similar situation in cross-Strait relations.

2. Security Implications

Russia's hybrid warfare against Ukraine has been a long-running operation. It was in the making long before the 2014 Crimean Crisis and the Donbas War, and it has continued to wage hybrid warfare since then. The following is a list of important points that can be compared to the situation of cross-Strait relations.

2-1. Grey zone tactics

Russia's hybrid warfare against Ukraine is most widely known for its operation of unidentified covert armed personnel in green uniforms, dubbed "little green men", to carry out "strategic

deception" to annex Crimea through deceptive drills, delivery of "humanitarian supplies", and other cover-up operations. Russia has also used this grey zone tactic in eastern Ukraine while consistently denying outside accusations; Russia even used civilian security companies to cover up its military intervention. On February 21, 2022, Russia sent troops into the pro-Russian region of eastern Ukraine under the guise of "peace-keeping" to camouflage its military operations.

At this stage, China's military aircraft incursions into Taiwan airspace are most similar to such actions by Russia. The moves not only can exert pressure on Taiwan but also spy on Taiwan's air defense capability; these make up China's "battlefield management" in that while conducting "strategic deception" it can, if required, be immediately transformed into a military invasion. On February 5, 2022, there was another incident in which a Y-12 civilian transport plane approached Taiwan's ADIZ in Dongyin Island, indicating that China's means of grey zone

2. For more than a decade, Russian and Chinese military exercises have been conducted in the Russian language using common codes from the Russian command system, a tacit understanding has developed between the two sides; and a large number of PLA officers also studied in Russia to adopt the latter's traditions, strategies, and tactics of the Russian forces.

tactics are not limited to military aircraft.

2-2. Information warfare

Today, many people consider hybrid warfare a description of the unconventional and conventional warfare waged by Russia against Ukraine; in fact, the term was first used in the US and was seen by Russia as a way to promote a “color revolution” in the former Soviet Union countries to contain Russia. However, the widespread outbreak of color revolutions has exposed that, although Russia is relatively powerful in terms of politics, economics, and military in the former Soviet Union territory, its political system is far less attractive or appealing to others. Portrayed as an aggressor by the West during the Caucasus War with Georgia in 2008, Russia reorganized its state propaganda machine and established Russian state-owned news agency Sputnik International during the Ukraine crisis in 2014 to launch a strong anti-Kyiv, anti-Western information warfare. Sputnik International not only spreads disinformation to vilify the Ukrainian authorities, accuses the West of manipulating the relationship between Russia and Ukraine, but also stresses that Russia is being persecuted by NATO’s

eastward expansion to win the approval and support of the Ukrainian people and the rest of the world — this tone has continued to this day. Moreover, Russia is good at creating and disseminating indistinguishable information to confuse the world. For example, during the Crimean crisis in 2014, Russia said that it was invited by exiled former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to send troops to protect Ukraine; in May 2021, Russian troops participating in an exercise near the border with Ukraine left their heavy equipment behind and returned to their base to create the illusion of being unaggressive; and Putin openly stated that he did not want war when some of the troops participating in the exercise returned to their barracks. However, it’s just another deception and the same aggression happens again.

China’s information warfare against Taiwan also bears similarities. After Xi Jinping took office, he continued to promote the “grand external propaganda” to enhance the positive international image of the CCP and China; and he continues the “one-China” principle and opposition to Taiwan independence while promoting reunification. In terms of tactics, in addition to the continuous defamation of

current Taiwanese authorities, the CCP also focuses on attracting groups such as small or medium-sized enterprises, people of central and southern Taiwan, working classes, and younger generations; and it also uses Taiwanese media as its propaganda agents to disguise its psychological infiltration. In addition to the common “united front” propaganda, China also attempts to disturb the morale of Taiwanese people through disinformation. For example, in November 2020, a disinformation stating that a Taiwanese F-16 fighter jet had landed at China’s Xiamen Airport appeared on the Internet immediately after the plane went missing during a training mission.

2-3. Division through “united front”

After the annexation of Crimea and the division of Ukraine, Russia has continued its “united front” strategy to further divide Ukraine. One of the tricks is issuing Russian passports to Ukrainian citizens. The threshold for foreigners to become Russian citizens is quite high, as they must not only master the Russian language but also give up their original nationality; however Russia has lowered the bar for Ukrainian people.

The move is considered to strengthen the separatist forces in Ukraine so that Russia can intervene with force in the future. On February 21, 2022, Russian troops were sent to the eastern states of Ukraine to “protect the local Russians.” Since Russia has always committed to the protection of Russians abroad, including Russian citizens, ethnic Russians, Russian speakers, and Orthodox Christians, the pro-Russian tendency in eastern Ukraine has become the basis for Russia’s “united front” to divide Ukraine.

China has its own version of the strategy for Taiwan but is fine-tuned to meet the actual situation: the “31 Taiwanese Beneficiary Articles” issued in February 2018 provide citizen privileges to Taiwanese in China, while the “26 Actions” in November 2019 being a further enhanced version. Moreover, China has recently planned a new wave of offensive to divide the Taiwanese society by mobilizing well-known Taiwanese people who have moved their careers to China to declare their naturalization in China and give up their Taiwanese status and health insurance.

2-4. Fostering proxies

The fostering of proxies is one of

Russia's major hybrid warfare tactics, with the famous example of Vladimir Yanukovich, the ex-President of Ukraine, who left his country behind during the Crimea crisis in 2014. Russia's purpose of supporting proxies is to expand its influence over Ukraine and, if necessary, to become its own fifth column working from inside. On January 20, 2022, the US Department of State announced sanctions against four current and former Ukrainian officials, accusing them of spreading disinformation at the behest of Russia to destabilize the country.

Similarly, China also takes advantage of the openness of Taiwan's democratic society to foster pro-China forces. In response, Taiwan amended the "National Security Law" in June 2019 to plug up loopholes in other laws, stipulating that the people of Taiwan are not allowed to develop organizations for China; and enacted the "Anti-Infiltration Law" in January 2020 to prevent the infiltration and interference of foreign adversaries. However, given the invisible and hard-to-prove nature of hybrid warfare and the fact that Taiwan is a democratic society governed by the rule of law, it is a tough challenge to block all foreign infiltrations.

2-5. Cyber warfare

Before and after the 2014 Ukraine crisis, Russian cyberattacks on Ukrainian public sector continued unabated, which is believed to be associated with Russian hackers and intelligence services; and the popularity of Russian media and social software in the pro-Russian eastern and southern regions of Ukraine has also inevitably contributed to the Russian hybrid warfare offensive. Media coverage can conduct cognitive warfare on the audience, while the widespread use of Russian social software by the Ukrainian people contributes to the enrichment of the Russian database, which in turn facilitates big data analysis of user perceptions and preferences and assists in cognitive warfare against Ukraine. To address this, the Ukrainian authorities banned the transmission of Russian media and public access to such social network sites in May 2017 to defend against Russian cyber warfare.

Similar things happen between Taiwan and China. Due to exchanges and the need to live and work in China, Taiwanese people use a considerable amount of Chinese computer, communication, and consumer

electronics and websites, making Taiwan, like Ukraine, a testing ground for the opponent's cyber warfare. In January 2019, Taiwan announced the principle of banning Chinese computer, communication, and consumer electronics, WeChat service, and Chinese websites such as Baidu in the public sector. At the end of 2021, the public sector is banned from all Chinese computer, communication, and consumer electronics.

The Chinese has been launching countless cyberattacks against Taiwan. They are not only targeting the public sector but also academics or private citizens they are associated with, to steal secrets. The PLA has set up the Strategic Support Force after the military reform, but the real situation is largely unknown due to its secrecy; but the discovered Base 311 in Fuzhou, Fujian Province, is believed to aim at cyber attacking Taiwan. Although Taiwan has also established the Information, Communications and Electronic Force, with a democratic nature, in contrast to China's closed and censoring environment, the restriction and imbalance in the cyberspace environment are Taiwan's disadvantage in defense and countermeasure in cyber warfare.

3. Trend Observation

From the comparison and analysis above, we can see that Russia's hybrid warfare in Ukraine has inspired China to a certain level, and it is possible that China will refine the Russian hybrid warfare model and apply it to Taiwan. The following discussion offer several possible inferences for Taiwan to have an in-depth view and prepare for possible scenarios.

3-1. China's grey zone tactics toward Taiwan will be more diversified and expanded

Hybrid warfare is an operation of undeclared war, and the grey zone tactic is one of its core techniques that makes the victim country lower its guard or even be caught off guard. In China's current grey zone tactics, the most threatening one is sending military aircraft to approach or circumnavigate Taiwan since the moves can be converted into invasion operations at any time. The recent approach of the Y-12 transport aircraft to Taiwan's Dongyin Island proves that China has begun to experiment with a variety of grey zone tactics against Taiwan using non-military aircraft or vessels in attempts to make Taiwan less wary, just as the people of Kyiv were accustomed to the

pressure from Russian forces. Since the PLA's amphibious landing capability is still immature, it's yet to have either the confidence to defeat the US in naval or air combats in the Taiwan Strait, or to conquer the Taiwan island; however, the outlying islands are shrouded in the shadow of China's grey zone tactics, and the risk of being attacked is likely to rise due to China's internal instability and desire to shift focus from any domestic troubles.

3-2. Hybrid warfare will be trend of future conflicts

Russia's hybrid warfare against Ukraine is not only to prevent the latter from joining NATO but also to expect it to rejoin Russia someday; this is the reason why Russia oppresses Ukraine but patronizes it at the same time. China and Russia are very similar in terms of such objectives. Observed from the long history of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, hybrid warfare is actually Russia's response to the similar warfare ("color revolution") launched by the West against it, and then evolved into Russia's own counterpart of the strategy. Facing the Russian version of hybrid warfare tactics, Western countries are also trying to create proper

countermeasures. Take the recent crisis in Ukraine as an example, the US revelation of Russia's possible attack timing on Ukraine may not only be a means to disturb Russia but also a way to counteract it, which means using "disinformation" to counter the grey zone tactics. At a time when China is constantly using grey zone tactics against Taiwan as hybrid warfare could become prevalent in future conflicts, Taiwan can also think about how to resist China in the same way.

3-3. China's "naturalization campaign" may divide Taiwan's unity, but not effective for military intervention

Currently, Taiwan does not allow its citizens to obtain Chinese ID cards or Chinese passports, and violators will be subject to revocation of their Taiwan household registration, ID cards, and passports. Therefore, even if China were to issue Chinese ID cards or passports directly to Taiwanese citizens, that would not become a viable excuse for China to interfere in the internal affairs or even initiate military intervention toward other countries like what Russia did; but China will continue to divide Taiwan's social solidarity by offering economic incentives

in the form of citizen privileges. According to Taiwan's National Immigration Agency, the number of Chinese residents in Taiwan is about 21,000 as of December 2021,³ and there are about 345,000 spouses from China as of June 2019.⁴ The two types of immigrants take only a very small percentage of the total Taiwanese population, and they are hardly comparable to the number of ethnic Russians in Ukraine. Since Chinese residents and spouses must give up their original nationality before naturalization in Taiwan, it's clear that China cannot follow the Russian model of issuing passports while allowing dual citizenship for Ukrainians and use it as an excuse to "protect Russians abroad".

3-4. China keeps seeking proxies and expanding cyber warfare, Taiwan needs to find countermeasures

China's establishment of proxies in other countries is seen by the National

Endowment for Democracy and some countries as a demonstration of "sharp power" similar to Russia's hybrid warfare tactics. Alerted to the threat posed by China in this area, Taiwan has amended the National Security Law and enacted the Anti-Infiltration Law; but since the legal proceedings would take considerable time, the laws might not be immediately effective in the prevention of such threats. Although Taiwan intended to amend the laws again in 2021, it was immediately criticized by Taiwan's pro-China media. This is a major difficulty Taiwan must overcome as a democratic country when resisting infiltration by foreign authoritarian forces, and it also provides a chance for China to keep seeking and cultivating its proxies in Taiwan. In this regard, in addition to enacting relevant laws and regulations to prevent this, Taiwan also needs to cultivate the awareness and correct understanding of all the people in order to effectively curb

3. In 2021, 7,422 people came to Taiwan from mainland China and 13,810 from Hong Kong and Macao for residence and emigration. For details, see "Statistics of the number of People from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Macao, and Nationals Without Household Registration Entering Taiwan for Residence and Emigration," *National Immigration Agency, Ministry of the Interior, Republic of China (Taiwan)*, December 3, 2021. <https://www.immigration.gov.tw/media/74903/大陸地區人民-港澳居民-無戶籍國民來臺居留-定居人數統計表11012.xls>.

4. "National Information Report (No. 152)," *National Statistics, R.O.C (Taiwan)*, August 14, 2019. <https://www.stat.gov.tw/public/Data/9814162455MKFO31MR.pdf>.

China's tactics of cultivating proxies.

Russia's hybrid warfare strategy shows that cyberattacks are not only a precursor to conventional military operations but also an adjunct to major attacks. There is no doubt that Taiwan will face the same threat in the future. Taiwan is already adopting information security measures similar to that which is practiced in Ukraine, aiming at preventing Chinese cyberwarfare targeted at the public sector, however, this only applies to the public sector so far. To further apply to the general public, it will require not only a perfect timing, but also raised awareness in information security.

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