

The Unlikelihood of War With China and Russia

by George Friedman - April 14, 2021

Much has been made of China's seemingly unending potential to invade Taiwan – nearly as much as Russia's buildup near Ukraine, which many believe is little more than a pretext for a future war. Lurking behind this is the age-old fear that Russia and China will team up to undermine the United States, say, by launching simultaneous attacks. This isn't inconceivable, but neither is it likely.

Let's begin with China. An invasion of Taiwan would obviously be an amphibious operation. One of the principles of war is the value of surprise. Surprise is particularly important in an amphibious assault. At Normandy, for example, the U.S. and Britain mounted a massive disinformation campaign to convince the Germans they were not going to land where they did. If defenses are concentrated on the point of disembarkment, the attack could be a slaughter. Even if China had a superior force, the force multiplier of correct deployment and preparation could devastate its soldiers.

There's also the issue of distance. Some 100 miles (160 kilometers) of water lay between China and Taiwan. Assuming a direct line of attack, the attack force will be at sea for about five hours. Apart from alerting defenders to planned positions, the force would be subject to air and missile attacks and more dangerous submarine attacks. The probability of the Chinese reaching the landing zones without enduring heavy losses is high. Even if U.S. space-based reconnaissance were completely neutralized – and I doubt it would be – submarines could provide targeting information to U.S. missiles distributed globally.

If Chinese troops successfully land, and if Taiwanese troops are forced to cede ground, supply and reinforcement will pose an enormous problem for the Chinese. At this point, the landing point would be known, and the routes needed to resupply Chinese infantry mapped. Resupply and reinforcement by aircraft would not be enough. So even if the initial landing took the beach, the resupply problem would cripple Chinese operations.

There is also a political problem. A Chinese invasion of Taiwan would trigger warning signals among U.S. allies in the area, some of which, such as Japan, could prove dangerous. Of course, a stunning and low-cost victory by China might force them to reconsider their alliances, but a drawn-out conflict or an outright defeat would convince U.S. allies of Chinese intentions, and they would prepare accordingly. China must win fast if it is to use the attack as a lever to intimidate the region.

This is the ultimate problem for China. In any war you can lose. A victory would turn China into a genuine, not notional, superpower. A defeat would shatter that dream. In addition, the U.S. might choose to counter an invasion with simultaneous actions in chokeholds critical to China, such as the Strait of Malacca, or at Chinese ports. The Chinese could not control the U.S. response, which might include (or theoretically substitute for a Taiwan strategy) seeking to paralyze China's maritime trade. This coupled with hostile economic actions by Europe would make anything but a stunningly rapid victory, potentially crippling.

China has not had fleet action since 1895 and initiating their unbloodied navy with an amphibious operation against the U.S. Navy could result in defeat or victory. China is aware of this, which is why they forfeited surprise. They do not intend to invade Taiwan. Alternative islands are somewhat (only somewhat) less risky. The Chinese have created a sense of impending war. An attacker might try instead to downplay war.

Which brings us to Russia. As I have written, Russia is in the process of trying to recreate the strategic depth that it had for centuries and lost when the Soviet Union collapsed. So far, it has reached a dominant position in Belarus and managed to emerge from the war in Nagorno-Karabakh with a sound political position as well as peacekeepers deployed. This means, respectively, that it has strengthened its position on the western path over the North European Plain, and that the entry point in the Caucasus has been shored up with soft, political moves.

There is a third line of attack into Russia, via the Carpathians or, more precisely, Ukraine. Of all the buffers Russia lost in 1990-91, none is more critical to Russia than Ukraine. The Russians have attempted soft maneuvers designed to change or shift the alignment of the Ukrainian government, but they have consistently failed, both for passing reasons and because Ukraine has a memory of Soviet brutality. Moreover, Kyiv has been bolstered by Western support. This support is cautious in the extreme so as not to provoke Russian fears of an attack, but it is there as a potential reality.

The massing of Russian troops along the border of Ukraine has to be read in this sense. Are the Russians preparing a military operation to retake Ukraine? The problem with such an operation is the vast size of Ukraine. Assuming no resistance at all, which is not likely, it would take weeks for Russia to fully occupy Ukraine, and during those weeks it would have to assume that Western weapons and supplies, and perhaps troops, would pour in. An extended campaign by Russia would do more than prove costly; it would leave other Russian interests short of defenders. The status of Belarus might be challenged, as well as the Russian position in the Caucasus. The emergence of Russia against the borders of a range of NATO members, from the Baltics to Slovakia, Hungary,

Romania and Bulgaria, would likely revitalize NATO, driving much of Europe from its strategic complacency and toward panic.

There is no question that Ukraine is critical for Russia, and a revitalized NATO might be a small price to pay for it, but Russia faces the same problem as China: It could lose. Russia has a vast army, but as with the Soviets, only parts of it are effective. And as with the Soviets, Russia's ability to support a massive armored force logistically is unknown. A rapid seizure of the area south of the Pripet Marshes might not strain Russia's forces, but should the U.S. and NATO rapidly arm Ukrainian forces with anti-tank and anti-air weapons, and support them logistically, a quick win could become a long battle. This would particularly prove true if U.S. aircraft, optimized for anti-armor warfare, were thrown into the battle. Turkey, seeing an opening, might test Russian forces in the Caucasus, and Poland could move in on Belarus.

None of this is certain, but Russian planners must be taking these possibilities seriously. Optimists rarely win wars, and Russia has learned not to be optimistic. It could find itself bogged down in Ukraine, hammered with advanced weapons and facing attacks on its flanks. In other words, it could lose. What's more, starting a war in Ukraine would mean sacrificing economic possibilities in Europe.

Now, a war is possible. Russia has used military exercises as cover for war before, namely, with Georgia. But Georgia is small and Russia didn't take all of it. Ukraine is startlingly big, and I suspect its forces will have training on U.S. weapons that have not been distributed out of concern for Russian fears – but they could be rapidly distributed in the event of war.

There is, then, the possibility of coordination between Russia and China. On the surface this is reasonable. In practice it would have little effect. A war with China would be a naval war. A war with Russia would be a ground war. There would be no contest for troops between regions, only for supplies, and only if both wars were extensive, which is doubtful. The two at war with the U.S. at the center would not achieve a dilution of forces, nor could Russia or China support the other. Russia cannot supply meaningful naval support, and China cannot sustain meaningful ground forces at that distance. An alliance to launch a war together would of course panic the U.S., but the U.S. has been good at using panic to mobilize the public.

So in my view the likelihood of war, let alone a coordinated war, is low. Neither China nor Russia is so desperate as to risk defeat or a long, bleeding war. And each is acting as if it is not serious about war; instead, they are advertising the threat. Of course, all things are possible, but this seems farfetched.

Author: George Friedman

[Read more from this author on geopoliticalfutures.com](https://geopoliticalfutures.com)