

Defending Taiwan: Lessons From the Russia-Ukraine War



Commentary

The current, expanded phase of the Russian-Ukrainian war is entering its eighth week. The invasion has triggered far-ranging changes to international relations.

Among them are the emerging remilitarization of Germany, a renewed sense of purpose within NATO, the potential expansion of the organization to include Sweden and Finland, and a rethinking of Europe's energy procurement policy.

It has also triggered a profound reevaluation of how the United States and its allies should respond to both Beijing's threats to invade [Taiwan](#)

(the Republic of [China](#)) or an actual invasion of the island nation.

What lessons does the Ukrainian war offer for how the United States and its allies should support Taiwan?

A potential conflict between China and Taiwan would be very different from the current war between Russia and Ukraine. An invasion of Taiwan would have a significant naval component both to provide transport and cover for amphibious landings and to isolate the island and forestall resupply.

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Moreover, Beijing would rely on a combination of land-based missiles, airpower, and sea power to create an area-denial zone around Taiwan, making it very dangerous for the U.S. and allied naval forces to operate around the island.

Airpower would obviously play a role, especially since any invasion would likely include an airborne component. The People's Liberation Army [Air Force](#) (PLAAF) is more than five times [larger](#) than the Taiwanese Air Force—4,630 combat aircraft versus 814. It could inflict considerable damage on the island. So, too, could the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF).

Ultimately, however, this will be a naval contest. The ability of China's People's Liberation Army [Navy](#) (PLAN) to successfully deliver an invading army will primarily determine the outcome of the conflict.



Soldiers stand onboard a Taiwan Navy minelayer in Keelung, Taiwan, on Jan. 7, 2022. Taiwan is bracing for more Chinese military patrols this year after the People's Liberation Army incursions more than doubled in 2021, fueling concern about a clash between the region's big powers. (I-Hwa Cheng/Bloomberg via Getty Images)

The Taiwanese navy has around 100 ships. Most of these ships consist of frigates and fast-attack missile boats. Taiwan also has four submarines, only three of which are operational. These are older diesel-electric boats. Two of the submarines are ex-U.S. Navy boats, USS Cutlass and USS Tusk, and are mostly used for training. The other two submarines, the Chien Lung class, are based on an older Dutch design.

The largest ships in the Taiwanese navy are four Kee Lung-class destroyers. These are formerly U.S. Navy Kidd-class guided-missile destroyers that were decommissioned some 30 years ago.

Taiwan has a total of 67 ships tasked primarily with coastal defense and anti-submarine warfare. This fleet consists of frigates (22), corvettes (14), and fast-attack missile craft (31). These are of more modern construction.

The Cheng Kung-class frigates (10) are based on the U.S. Navy's Oliver Hazard Perry-class design. The six Kang Ding-class frigates are based on the French-built La Fayette class. These frigates have a reduced radar cross-section and were originally nicknamed "stealth frigates." The remaining six Chi Yang-class frigates are based on the older American Knox-class frigate.

The Corvettes consist of 12 Ching Chiang-class and two Tuo Chiang class ships. These are small, fast patrol ships of between 500 and 600 tons each. The Ching Chiang-class boats are primarily tasked with anti-submarine warfare duties. The two Tuo Chiang-class catamarans are designed to attack large-deck PLAN warships, like China's two aircraft carriers, or PLAN Type 071 and 075 amphibious warships, as well as the civilian merchant ships that would be carrying PLA troops and their equipment.

Finally, the Taiwanese Navy has 31 Kuang Hua Vi-class fast-attack missile crafts. These are relatively new ships. They, too, are primarily tasked with coastal defense but could also be used to attack and sink the ships of an invasion fleet.



A Taiwan destroyer launches a surface-to-air missile during exercises meant to simulate an attack by communist China, near the east coast of Taiwan, on Sept. 26, 2013. (Sam Yeh/AFP/Getty Images)

In the event of a Chinese amphibious invasion, Taiwan would primarily rely on a combination of land-based and ship-based missiles to keep the Chinese navy at bay. While these ships and missiles could do significant damage to an invading or blockading force, they probably lack the ability, given their numbers, to decisively cripple it.

The Taiwanese navy requires more anti-ship weapons from ships, shore, and aircraft to repel a PLAN invasion. Without acquiring these weapons systems, any such defensive operation would require the intervention of U.S. and allied naval forces.

Moreover, keeping sea lanes to Taiwan open in order to resupply such weapons in an environment where the PLAN would have overwhelming naval superiority, plus the advantage of the proximity of mainland air

bases and a significant land-based missile arsenal, would be difficult.

Unlike the situation with Ukraine, where billions of dollars of military aid were able to flow into the country after the conflict started, in the event of an invasion of Taiwan, pre-supply would be critical. Responding after the fact might simply not be an option, especially given Beijing's stated desire to conduct a "[short, sharp war](#)."

Initially, much of the military aid provided to Ukrainian forces were termed defensive. The difference between defensive and offensive weapons is a subtle one. A Javelin anti-tank missile is considered a defensive weapon. To the Russian soldier sitting in the tank that it is targeting, it probably looks very offensive.

In reality, the distinction is not so much between defensive and offensive weapons as it is between short-range and long-range weapons. Initially, the Biden administration was unwilling to supply Ukraine with long-range weapons for fear that Ukrainian forces would escalate the conflict by attacking military targets inside Russia or attacking Russian population centers in retaliation for Russian attacks on Ukrainian cities and civilians.

This policy was particularly problematic for Ukraine because it allowed Russian navy ships in the Black Sea to shell coastal areas with relative impunity. For example, Kyiv's request for longer-range anti-ship missiles was initially turned down by the Biden White House.

Nonetheless, Ukrainian forces have been able to inflict significant damage on Russian naval forces in the Black Sea. Most recently, Ukraine's [Neptune](#) anti-ship cruise missile was used with devastating effectiveness to significantly damage and ultimately sink the Moskva, a

Slava-class missile cruiser and the flagship of Russia's Black Sea fleet.

The Neptune is an anti-ship cruise missile with a range of approximately 180 miles. It's based on the Zvezda Kh-35 anti-ship missile. This is a Soviet-era design that was improved by the Luch design bureau in Ukraine to give it a longer range and better targeting electronics. The missile went into production in 2019. It's not known how many of the cruise missiles Ukraine produced.

Taipei is in a similar situation. It needs weapons capable of engaging an enemy invasion fleet well before it approaches the island. Taiwan's [anti-ship arsenal](#) consists primarily of domestically designed and produced Hsiung Feng II (HF-II) and Hsiung Feng III (HF-III) missiles. These are medium-range subsonic (HF-II) and supersonic (HF-III) missiles that can be used to attack both land and naval targets. Variants allow their launch from land-based mobile platforms, ships, or planes.

The [Hsiung Feng](#) missiles have an operating range of 100 to 250 miles, depending on the variant. It carries an armor-piercing warhead capable of delivering a roughly 500-pound charge. It can easily sink ships displacing 5,000 tons or less and severely damage ships with larger displacements. This weapon system poses a [lethal threat](#) to any PLA invasion force.

Taipei has not disclosed how many of the Hsiung Feng missiles it has produced. Its current capacity is around [200 missiles](#) a year. However, according to one intelligence analyst, Taiwan would ultimately need thousands of those missiles if it intended to mount a credible missile threat to an invading PLAN fleet.

In September 2021, Taiwan's Cabinet approved a plan to mass-produce

a new, improved, longer-range variant of the [Hsiung Feng III](#) missile with the aim of doubling the island's Hsiung Feng missile yearly production to 500 by 2026. The longer-range missiles would be deployed on the Keelung-class destroyers and on land-based mobile launchers.



Sailors salute the island's flag on the deck of the Panshih supply ship at the Tsoying naval base in the southern city of Kaohsiung, Taiwan, on Jan. 31, 2018. (Mandy Cheng/AFP/Getty Images)

In addition, the Trump administration had announced in 2020 that it would provide Taiwan with [100 land-based anti-ship missile systems](#) consisting of 400 RGM-84L-4 Harpoon II missiles, four RTM-84-L-4 Harpoon II training missiles, 100 launch vehicles, and 25 radar trucks for \$2.37 billion.

Taiwan had requested the newest Harpoon variant, the RGM-84Q-4 Harpoon Block II+ ER missile, but Washington would only supply the older variant. The newer variant has a longer range, more lethal

warhead, and the ability to receive in-flight targeting updates.

The sale represents a significant increase in Taiwan's anti-ship missile capability. The program, however, is not expected to begin [rolling out](#) till 2025 and won't be fully operational until 2028.

Taiwan currently has approximately [300 Harpoon missiles](#) previously sold by the United States. These missiles are designed to be launched from Taiwan's current fleet of F-16s, as well as selected naval craft.

Naval analysts estimate that to pose a credible threat to an invasion force, Taiwan needs the capability to destroy roughly [half of an attacking fleet](#). At the moment, it's unlikely Taiwan has that capability. The addition of the [American Harpoon](#) anti-ship missile is a significant addition to Taiwan's arsenal but won't have much impact in the short term. Moreover, given its subsonic speed and shorter range, the RGM-84L-4 Harpoon is inferior to Taiwan's domestically produced HF-III missile.

We will never know whether a more expansive and timely military assistance program to Kyiv might have deferred the Russian invasion of Ukraine. What is clear is that in the case of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, the supply of military assistance after the fact will be much more difficult and may well prove to be impossible. In a war, Taiwan's military will likely have to fight with whatever it has on hand.

Beijing probably lacks the ability to mount an overwhelming amphibious invasion of Taiwan currently, but its capability is growing rapidly. The PLAN's continued rapid development makes an invasion of Taiwan a realistic option in the next two to three years.

Taiwan, the United States, and its allies have less than a two-year

window in which to ensure that Taipei has sufficient military capability to discourage a Chinese invasion or successfully defeat it once launched.

The United States has followed a policy of “strategic ambiguity” with respect to its willingness to intervene in the event Beijing launches an invasion of Taiwan. It has neither confirmed nor denied that it would respond militarily. The best way for Washington to ensure it doesn’t get dragged into a shooting war with China is to build up Taiwan’s ability to successfully defeat an invasion without the military intervention of the United States and its allies.

To deter or defeat an invasion, Taiwan needs to significantly expand its anti-ship missile arsenal and modernize and expand its air and naval forces, especially its submarine fleet. Two years may seem like a long time, but in the world of weapons procurement, it’s an instant. In the meantime, Taiwan’s future hangs in the balance.

Views expressed in this article are the opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.



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