Parameters Winter 2022 Demi Issue

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In Focus

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Henry D. Sokolski

Putin Chooses between a Series of Bad Options
Jeffrey D. McCausland

SRAD Director’s Corner

Preserving Taiwan as Strategic Imperative
George Shatzer
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Welcome to the Winter demi-issue of *Parameters*. Released approximately one month before the full issue of the journal, the demi-issue addresses unfolding current events and issues critical to our readership, generates interest in the forthcoming full issue by previewing upcoming content, and tackles the big questions being asked today in the fields of military strategy and defense policy. This Winter 2022–23 demi-issue consists of two *In Focus* commentaries and the *SRAD Director’s Corner*.

As Dr. Echevarria’s temporary replacement as he enjoys his much-deserved sabbatical, at my first meeting to understand my new duties I found that because of a paper shortage, we have had to reduce the weight of the paper in our print edition and deal with months delay in distribution. For those aspiring authors out there seeking to produce an article for this journal, I would encourage analysis of the American economy and industrial base. What has happened so the shutdown of one baby formula factory causes a national crisis, and our military assistance to Ukraine has caused significant strains in our own ammunition stocks? Those of us in the military have learned that “just in time” logistics often is not; it appears we have let economic efficiency override effectiveness. So I encourage future submissions looking at such issues.

In our first *In Focus* essay, “Present Danger: Nuclear Power Plants in War,” Henry D. Sokolski argues that following Russia’s seizure of Ukraine’s nuclear plant at Zaporizhzhya, the United States must adjust its military planning and policies to cope with hostile military forces’ targeting, seizing, and garrisoning of armed forces at large operating nuclear plants. Additionally, US leadership must clarify the policies regarding possible US targeting of such plants.

In our second *In Focus* essay, “Putin Chooses between a Series of Bad Options,” Jeffrey D. McCausland analyzes Russian President Vladimir Putin’s decision to escalate the war in Ukraine. Building on this analysis, he offers insights into how Putin might further escalate the war using conventional and unconventional instruments of power, including food, energy, and nuclear weapons. He then presents strategies for the West and the world to prevent or oppose possible future escalations.

Finally, in the fourth installment of the *SRAD Director’s Corner*, George Shatzer focuses on the relationship between Taiwan and China. He reviews *The Trouble with Taiwan: History, the United States and a Rising China*
by Kerry Brown and Kalley Wu Tzu-hui and *Taiwan Straits Standoff: 70 Years of PRC–Taiwan Cross-Strait Tensions* by Bruce A. Elleman. Shatzer shows how these books might help readers better understand the contentious and violent history of cross-strait relations between Taiwan and China so they can deal with the problem today and in the future. The books also provide insights for strategists attempting to plan for security in the region. ~CCC
ABSTRACT: After Russia’s unprecedented seizure of Ukraine’s nuclear plant at Zaporizhzhya, the United States needs to adjust its military planning and policies to cope with hostile military forces’ targeting, seizure, and garrisoning of armed forces at large operating nuclear plants and clarify its policies regarding possible US targeting of such plants. This article is the first to analyze these concerns. It compares Russia’s assaults with previous strikes against research reactors and nonoperating nuclear plants in the Middle East and clarifies what new military measures and policies will be needed to cope with military operations against large, operating nuclear plants. US Army and Pentagon officials, as well as military and civilian staff, will discover ways to mitigate and reduce future military harm to civilians in war zones and understand the operational implications of military assaults on and seizures of civilian nuclear facilities.

Keywords: Zaporizhzhya, nuclear reactors, Law of War Manual, Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan, radiation

Zaporizhzhya’s nuclear plant, as of this writing, has been placed on cold shutdown. The plant and its military vulnerabilities, however, have generated some of the world’s most sensational headlines.¹ Earlier this summer, online reports featured photographs of the plant’s damaged transformer, a system critical to assuring a steady supply of electricity to the plant’s all-important reactor coolant and safety systems. Throughout August and September, news organizations detailed how the plant’s external main power lines—built to keep electricity flowing to its reactors—had been cut. Some days, some of the plant’s six reactors were operating. Other days, none were. Repeatedly, the viability of the plant’s emergency diesel fuel electrical generators was “Topic A.”

Each of these stories raised the specter of a military-induced Fukushima: strikes against the plant or the power lines feeding into it that could cut off the electricity needed to run the reactors’ coolant pumps and safety equipment followed by nuclear fuel failures and a massive radiological release over Ukraine and its neighbors. Add to this firsthand accounts of Russian torture, the murder of “disloyal” Ukrainian

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reactor staff, and an emergency International Atomic Energy Agency visit, and you have everything needed for a Netflix docudrama.

What you would not have, however, and what is still lacking, is a Pentagon assessment of what all this means militarily.

Close friends have offered hints. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida called for stationing security forces at each of Japan’s nuclear plants, and his administration also suggested the possibility of deploying dedicated missile defense systems (as Belarus has done at its nuclear plant since 2019). Seoul crafted military exercises this year with US forces that included explosives detonating at one or more of South Korea’s civilian reactor sites. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky accused Russia of turning Zaporizhzhya into a prepositioned, slow-burning, radiation-dispersing "nuclear weapon." Meanwhile, Tobias M. Ellwood, the British House of Common’s Select Committee on Defense chairman, insisted that if Russia intentionally struck Zaporizhzhya and spread harmful radioactivity to Poland or Romania, it would trigger NATO’s Article 5. Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine did more than talk. All three countries prepared to distribute iodine pills to their citizens (to reduce the thyroid cancers radiation might induce if Zaporizhzhya leaked radiation).

The following map shows what might happen as a result of a nuclear accident at the Zaporizhzhya nuclear power plant. It shows the spread of simulated contamination levels after a hypothetical core meltdown at Zaporizhzhya 1.
Figure 1. Simulation of contamination spread after a hypothetical core meltdown at Zaporizhzhya 1, using weather information from the third week of March 2021, and simulated contamination levels after a hypothetical core meltdown at Zaporizhzhya 1, using weather information from the fourth week of March 2021.

(Map by Pete McPhail)
What has the Pentagon made of this? So far, not much. The Department of Defense’s spokesperson merely observed the danger and “irresponsibility” of Russian military assaults on the Zaporizhzhya plant.7 But that is it. One might have expected him to reference assessments the Department might have made following any of the more than 13 military assaults Iran, Iraq, Israel, the United Kingdom, or the United States mounted against reactors in Iran, Iraq, Israel, and Syria. Perhaps no such assessments were undertaken by the Department. If there were, it would help clarify how the Zaporizhzhya attacks differ from those made in the Middle East and what those differences portend.

The short answer to the latter question is plenty.

First, none of the Middle Eastern attacks were directed against operating powered reactors.8 Not so with Zaporizhzhya. Before the war, the plant produced more nuclear power than any other European plant. With Russia’s assault on Zaporizhzhya, the drama of a possible massive radiological release is real; with the previous strikes in the Middle East, it was not.

Second, unlike the attacks on Zaporizhzhya, none of the raids against Middle Eastern reactors were mounted with long-range precision drones or missiles. All of them were executed either with attack bombers or inaccurate Scuds. The Middle Eastern strikes, moreover, were aimed to destroy the entire nuclear plant, not particular subsystems. Again, not so with Zaporizhzhya. At different times and separately, the Zaporizhzhya plant’s on-site transformer was hit, its four inbound power transmission lines felled, and its spent fuel storage area struck. Each of these separate strikes ratcheted up fears similar to what one might experience climbing a nuclear escalatory ladder (think: Herman Kahn, version 2.0). In contrast, past Middle Eastern reactor attacks were binary—either total hits or relatively harmless misses.

Third, none of the attacked plants in the Middle East were ever seized and operated by the attacking party. Not so with Zaporizhzhya. The Russians not only seized Zaporizhzhya and assumed its operation, but they also used it as a missile and artillery launch site and allowed (or inflicted) damage to the structure to manipulate how much electricity Ukrainians might get. Russia also threatened to redirect the plant’s electrical production toward Russia and

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Russian-held territory to the east and south. Come winter, Russia may literally be able to freeze out local Ukrainian opposition.

Fourth, none of the Middle Eastern plants were near major urban areas. Before the war, Zaporizhzhya and the surrounding area had nearly 1.7 million residents. Many hundreds of thousands still live there. Given the risk of radiological release, Zelensky asked them to evacuate. The movement of so many residents at once, however, could easily complicate local military operations for the Ukrainians and the Russians. More importantly, the radioactivity the plant might release could go in several directions. If the winds were to blow west (which they most often do), then Russia would suffer; east, Ukraine and Romania (a NATO member); north, Poland and possibly other NATO member states; and south, Türkiye (another NATO member). A North Korean summertime attack on South Korean reactors would release more radioactivity over Japan than South Korea. In the winter, the reverse would occur. None of these considerations were factors in previous Middle East raids.

Finally, and related, none of the targeted Middle Eastern reactors were located in or adjacent to states the United States was treaty-bound to defend. Washington has no treaty security guarantees for any state in the Middle East—not even Israel. It does, however, have them for NATO in Europe, Japan, and South Korea. Most NATO members operate large reactors. So do Japan and South Korea. Taiwan also operates nuclear power plants. Chinese, Russian, and North Korean authorities (as well as former officials) have suggested they might strike these facilities. Seoul, Tokyo, Moldova, Romania, and Taipei are all now considering defensive measures.

What, then, if anything, should the Pentagon do? Three things come to mind.

Assess the military, deterrence, and security alliance implications of waging war where nuclear plants operate, including in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. All of these theaters host American military bases. If reactors in the region are hit, how vulnerable might US troops be to possible radiation releases? What active or passive defense measures would be useful for them to take? What should US troops do if a state whose security the United States guarantees calls for assistance after one of its reactors has been hit or if its citizens are irradiated after a strike is made against a neighbor’s nuclear plant? What assistance, if any, should the Pentagon be prepared to offer to replace emergency electricity that might be lost after such attacks? In either war or

peacetime, should the Pentagon offer air and missile defenses, intelligence, or first responder assistance to help protect friendly nations’ nuclear plants? What forms might this assistance take? What counteroffensive actions might be considered proportionate to strikes made against allied nuclear plants?

The Pentagon’s replies may differ for different countries. Its general conclusions, however, should be dialed into any future Nuclear Posture Review and be a part of the Pentagon’s defense guidance. Bureaucratically, accomplishing this may be difficult. Currently, there is no office responsible for conducting such analysis. The regional commands may feel uncomfortable assuming this task unless told to do so. The Pentagon’s Office of Nuclear Deterrence Policy in Open Supervised Defense Protocol, the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Acquisition (Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological), and the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy are all plausible places to tangle with these matters; yet, so far, none has taken charge. Another possible contributor would be the secretary of the Army, whom the secretary of defense just made the lead proponent for a newly minted Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan. Congress could instruct any of these organizations or individuals to take the lead in producing the needed nuclear plant analysis. Congress should make this assignment quickly and ensure the analysis is updated routinely.

Separately, the Pentagon should take a more active role in reviewing US nuclear export license applications with an eye to how vulnerable such plants might be to military assaults. The Pentagon already serves as the lead in identifying the location of potential future war zones. The Pentagon also manages a military reactor program and says it wants to deploy these reactors overseas. As such, it is already on the hook to clarify how safe these plants might be and where they would be safest to deploy. Armed with this information, the Pentagon should be tapped for any assessment of the vulnerabilities of reactors private US firms may want to export (and, coincidentally, that American military forces may be asked to defend). This requirement is hardly a new ask. It is already required by the Nuclear Nonproliferation Act of 1978, which

expects the Department of Defense to comment on the national security implications of US civilian nuclear exports.14

The Defense Department should also clarify and strengthen current guidance on targeting nuclear plants in war. All the world’s nations except India, Iran, Israel, Pakistan, Türkiye, and the United States have ratified the 1977 Protocol I to the Geneva Convention. Chapter III of the protocol strongly discourages targeting nuclear electrical generating plants.15 Russia withdrew from the protocol in 2019. Washington signed it in 1977, indicating an intention to ratify it—which it never did. In the 1980s, the Reagan administration opposed ratification because of concerns about what constituted liberation movements under the protocol.16 Some may also now believe the United States should do nothing to restrict its freedom of action to strike nuclear electricity-generating plants. Even the protocol allows for targeting such plants in extremely rare cases. Military justifications for such strikes are few and far between: military forces will hardly want to operate in, or liberate, regions near a plant if it has irradiated the region after being hit.

Washington wants to condemn Moscow for its strikes against the plant at Zaporizhzhya. What makes this awkward is the Pentagon’s 2016 Law of War Manual, which ultimately allows US military commanders to target nuclear power plants if they think doing so is “important.”17 Given the outsized political, diplomatic, and military downsides of producing a major radiological release, it would be helpful if the Pentagon could make the presumption against attacking nuclear plants at least as clear as the protocol makes it. One might want to clarify further that nuclear electricity-generating stations should include related nuclear facilities, such as reprocessing plants, spent fuel storage sites, etc.

Another issue worth resolving is what US policy should be regarding attacks against large research reactors (something the Law of War Manual does not mention). This clarification could be accomplished by asking the Pentagon to wire brush its Law of War Manual. It would also make sense for Congress to elevate any military decision to target such plants to the commander in chief. Currently, this action is required for the release of nuclear

weapons for use. It would also make sense for any targeting of nuclear plants in war zones. After what has unfolded at Zaporizhzhya, civilian nuclear plants must be viewed as prepositioned nuclear weapons that, if hit, could potentially disperse strategically disruptive amounts of radiation over thousands of square miles—making the decision to attack them more than a theater or tactical matter.

Henry D. Sokolski

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Putin Chooses between a Series of Bad Options

Jeffrey D. McCausland
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ABSTRACT: Now that Vladimir Putin has chosen a path of escalation in his unnecessary war of aggression against Ukraine, it is imperative Western policymakers know the consequences and how he might escalate further. This article examines recent events on the battlefield; the implications of the announced annexation of territory, mobilization of forces, and threats to employ “all means” to defend Russian territory; the domestic ramifications and Russian thinking on “hybrid warfare”; and the possible weaponization of food and energy as Putin determines future escalatory steps. It will assist American and European leaders in determining policies to deal with the ongoing crisis at this moment and prepare for an uncertain future.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine war, Putin, escalation, hybrid warfare, nuclear weapons

Vladimir Putin had a very bad September.¹ The Ukrainian counteroffensive in the northeast of the country has been a staggering success, and it continues. Kyiv liberated more territory in two weeks than Russia seized in the previous five months.² Remarks by Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during their meetings with Putin in Uzbekistan were clearly unsupportive of Russia’s aggression.³

The strategy Putin had for this war of aggression is now in tatters. It was based on two false assumptions. First, he assumed his army would quickly defeat the Ukrainians, topple Volodymyr Zelensky’s administration, and occupy a sizable portion of the country. He grossly underestimated the Ukrainians’ ability to resist and overestimated his own forces. The vaunted Russian Army has suffered from poor morale, abysmal leadership, and an inability to provide the necessary logistical support for Putin’s invading force. Second, Putin believed the West would not be able to mount a unified response. He thought the West’s reaction would be similar to that of 2014 when he annexed Crimea and fomented a quasi-civil war using proxy forces in southeastern Ukraine. But Washington and its NATO allies have

shown surprising unity in their support for Kyiv, and with the addition of Finland and Sweden the alliance may be stronger now than it was at the onset of this conflict.

Putin had two options in the aftermath of his most recent military and diplomatic reversals. He could have cranked up his propaganda machine and declared his “special military operation” a remarkable success. He could have argued Russia had “denazified” large portions of Ukraine, reduced the threat Kyiv posed, and sent a clear message to the West. He could have accompanied this with the announcement of a cease-fire and a call for negotiations. This might have paused the war and offered him a chance to use the upcoming winter to reorganize his forces. His second option was escalation. With a speech to the Russian people on September 21, 2022, he chose the latter. It is critical to consider what this means and how he might escalate further.

Putin escalated the war in three ways. First, he announced a partial mobilization. The Kremlin claimed this mobilization would consist of 300,000 reservists or those with previous military experience. As the first Russian armed forces mobilization since World War II, it underscores the Russian Army’s desperate need for manpower—especially now: the Pentagon estimates the Kremlin has suffered around 80,000 casualties since this war began. This desperate gamble is, in part, a response to right-wing hardliners in the Russian media who have been openly critical after a string of recent defeats. But Putin risks greater social unrest and opposition to the war at home with the decision to escalate. Unrest and opposition are now occurring in many cities across Russia. A reported minimum of 1,300 people have been arrested following demonstrations, and thousands of young Russian men have fled the country. Up to this point, most Russians have been apathetic about the war, as Putin sought to insulate the population from its ill effects: while the Ukrainian

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counteroffensive was gaining momentum, Putin was dedicating a Ferris wheel in Moscow and urging the Russian people to enjoy themselves.\textsuperscript{11}

The mobilization will test the loyalty of those born after the demise of the Soviet Union and those less fond of the Russian strongman. It will have little significant immediate effect on the battlefield, could backfire, and will likely fail. It will take weeks, if not months, to identify, organize, train (or retrain), equip, and deploy these new troops.\textsuperscript{12} With the impending arrival of winter, these new forces are unlikely to appear in significant numbers until spring. There have also been reports that the Russian Army stripped troops from its training base as the military situation deteriorated, and this will further slow the training and deployment of new troops. Russia has lost thousands of tanks, armored vehicles, trucks, and aircraft.\textsuperscript{13} Consequently, it may be difficult to equip new units with modern weaponry.

Even from the onset, the Kremlin may intend for this “partial mobilization” to far exceed the stated goal of 300,000 and has also included many Russian men who have no prior military experience. The mobilization is also disproportionately aimed at minority groups, rural areas, and territories in the Far East rather than large cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg. This disparity has already resulted in unrest in these areas.\textsuperscript{14} Several experts have now suggested more Russians have fled the country since the mobilization announcement than have fought in Ukraine, and some of Putin’s strongest supporters have been less than enthusiastic. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov has said recruitment will not be extended to Chechnya since it has already exceeded its targets for recruitment.\textsuperscript{15}

The mobilization announcement included increased penalties for Russian soldiers who surrender or desert. It also involuntarily extends the contracts of soldiers currently serving in Ukraine.\textsuperscript{16} There were widespread reports of Russian soldiers fleeing the advance of Ukrainian forces around Kharkiv and

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\item 16. Youssef and Gershkovich, “80,000 Russian Troops Hurt.”
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abandoning massive amounts of equipment.\textsuperscript{17} Some soldiers even stripped off their uniforms and attempted to escape in civilian clothes.\textsuperscript{18} Consequently, it is hard to believe Russia can succeed—with troops with already sagging morale and poor leadership, training, and equipment—by forcing more young Russians to fight in a war they do not support.

Second, Putin described this conflict as primarily between Russia and the West. He falsely claimed Western leaders threatened the very existence of the “Motherland.” Consequently, Putin warned he would “use all the means at [Russia’s] disposal to protect Russia and [its] people,” adding “[t]his is not a bluff.”\textsuperscript{19} This obvious threat to employ nuclear weapons comes at an ironic moment: the 60th anniversary of the Cuban missile crisis, the last time the United States was involved in a crisis that threatened global nuclear catastrophe.

Putin’s decision to escalate is a blatant attempt to intimidate NATO, Ukraine, and Washington. But it also represents Putin’s effort to reshape the narrative. In this case, he appeals to Russian nationalism. He falsely described Russia’s very existence as imperiled by outside forces and called upon the nation to respond as their ancestors did against the Napoleonic invasion of 1812 or the Germans’ attack in World War II.

Third, he supported the annexation of four partially occupied Ukrainian provinces via sham referendums.\textsuperscript{20} In their aftermath, Putin signed an annexation decree and delivered a fiery speech assailing the United States for “satanism.”\textsuperscript{21} He further argued the West was an “enemy” of Russia that sought to destroy the nation.\textsuperscript{22} The forcible seizure of these territories is the largest land grab in Europe since World War II. It makes a mockery of international law, and few nations, if any, are likely to accept Russian sovereignty over these provinces. Furthermore, it makes the possibility of negotiations even more

\textsuperscript{22} “[Signing of Agreements on the Admission of the DPR, LPR, Zaporozhye and Kherson Regions to Russia],” Kremlin (website), September 30, 2022, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465.
remote as Putin described this move as “irreversible.”23 In the same speech he called on the Zelensky administration to accept the permanent transfer of these territories, accept a cease-fire, and enter into talks. In response the Kyiv government insisted negotiations will be impossible as long as Putin remains in power.24

Putin’s speech also will heighten his attempt at nuclear extortion. Moscow can now claim these areas are Russian territory and use any attacks against them as a rationale to threaten the use of nuclear weapons in its defense. Still, it remains to be seen if Putin is willing to do so. Only a day after Putin’s speech, Ukrainian forces captured the strategic city of Lyman in the Donbas region and part of the territory that Moscow now claims is Russian territory.25 It is reported many Russian soldiers fled the city in disorder while thousands may have been captured. This major setback for Putin could be followed in the coming weeks by further setbacks, including the possible loss of Kherson in southern Ukraine.

Since Putin has chosen a path of escalation, what might he do in the future? He has further escalatory options. He can threaten nuclear catastrophe with missile and artillery strikes to disable or damage a Ukrainian nuclear power plant and create a Chernobyl–like disaster. Recently, a missile struck less than 1,000 feet from the South Ukraine Nuclear Power Plant.26 External power to the Zaporizhzhya Nuclear Power Plant—the largest in Europe—has been shut off several times, forcing the staff to use emergency power to cool the reactors. The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency has described the Zaporizhzhya situation as “untenable” and “playing with fire.”27 This is a classic example of “hybrid warfare,” the fusion of conventional and unconventional instruments of power and tools of subversion. Moscow has employed hybrid warfare in the past—with the invasion of Crimea in 2014, interference in Western elections or the Brexit vote, the assassination of Putin’s opponents, and the dissemination of misinformation. Putin can threaten nuclear facilities at times of his choosing, which provides him the intimidating effect of nuclear

24. Mykhailo Podolyak (@Podolyak_M), “Negotiations are possible, but with the new president of Russia,” Twitter (website), October 1, 2022, 7:00 a.m., https://twitter.com/ConanOBrien/status/590940792967016448.
weapons without potential international blowback. Such threats are actually criminal, as they endanger the staff and innocent civilians in Ukraine and beyond. Finally, they also divert media attention away from reports on war crimes, Russian failures on the battlefield, and other setbacks.

Putin could also further employ his energy weapon. He has already ended the export of natural gas to Europe and could seek to do more damage.\(^{28}\) The recent attacks on the Nord Stream pipeline are likely an example.\(^{29}\) European and NATO leaders have described them as “sabotage,” but so far there has been no formal allegation that Moscow perpetrated them.\(^{30}\) Still, these attacks are consistent with the Russian hybrid warfare thinking previously mentioned. Such attacks would require the Russian Navy to possess sophisticated capabilities such as divers or undersea drones. The attacks occurred in international waters and, consequently, could not be construed as attacks on a NATO member’s territory that might elicit an Article 5 response.

The attacks are also clouded in plausible deniability. As a result, the Kremlin has described any accusation against Russia as “stupid and absurd” and blamed the United States.\(^{31}\) The attacks are also an implicit threat against the new Baltic Pipeline connecting Poland and Norway, which opened at the same time the attacks occurred.\(^{32}\) Finally, the attacks clearly underscore the ongoing uncertainty around European energy supplies as winter approaches. Putin obviously hopes skyrocketing energy costs coupled with the arrival of winter energy demands will result in social unrest in Europe. Social unrest might force European leaders to reduce their support for Ukraine and put pressure on Kyiv to accept negotiations on Putin’s terms.

Putin’s expanded attacks on the Ukrainian civilian energy infrastructure and the closure of nuclear power plants already belong to this effort. His attacks have reduced the availability of energy to Ukraine and will likely result in more Ukrainian refugees as winter arrives. Putin’s action renews pressure on NATO

countries, discourages them from maintaining their existing nuclear facilities, and forces them to consider sharing limited supplies with Kyiv.

Moscow could use the “food weapon” and once again halt the export of Ukrainian grain from its Black Sea ports. In July 2022, an agreement signed by Russia, Türkiye, Ukraine, and the United Nations allowed for the export of millions of tons of Ukrainian and Russian grain and fertilizer. Ukraine and Russia provide roughly 30 percent of the world’s grain, and the failure to deliver these commodities to global markets may well result in famine in many parts of the world. Some have claimed Russia is waging a campaign of “theft and destruction” of Ukrainian agriculture reminiscent of the famines caused by Joseph Stalin in the 1930s.

Finally, Putin could escalate militarily through further force mobilizations, strikes on NATO locations important to the flow of military assistance to Ukraine, or expanded cyberattacks. The use of nuclear weapons, as Putin threatened, could also be an option. Graham T. Allison, author of the celebrated book on the Cuban missile crisis *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Little, Brown, 1971), observed that the possibility of Russian nuclear use clearly increases if Russia perceives a growing existential threat to itself or its rule. Allison recounted that in 1962 President John F. Kennedy believed the possible use of nuclear weapons became a “more plausible scenario if a leader is forced to choose between catastrophic humiliation and a roll of the dice that might yield success.” Should Putin decide to use nuclear weapons, the system used would likely be a tactical nuclear weapon, of which Russia is believed to have 2,000. Tactical nuclear weapons are designed with a nuclear yield below 100 kilotons and delivered by short-range aircraft, artillery, or missiles.

While the West cannot ignore the possibility of expanded military threats, the probability of Putin using nuclear weapons appears low at this moment.

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for several reasons. First, Russian military doctrine calls for the use of such weapons primarily to create conditions on the battlefield that can then be rapidly exploited by conventional forces. But Moscow no longer has readily available forces to exploit opportunities any such employment might offer. Russia has failed to demonstrate the ability to conduct large-scale offensive operations effectively for the past seven months in a nonnuclear environment. It is hard to imagine how reinforcing Russian forces, in their state of degradation, with poorly trained conscripts could possibly allow for successful operations in a nuclear environment demanding a much more sophisticated level of training, equipment, and command and control.

Second, Putin would become even more of an international pariah. The tepid support he now receives from China, India, and other countries in the Global South would likely evaporate. Third, he would have to consider the response by the West. This could include the imposition of a no-fly zone over Ukraine, expanded military assistance, and even the direct involvement of Western ground forces. Washington has already sent private warnings about the grave consequences to follow should Moscow cross the nuclear threshold.

Fourth, the employment of such weapons in eastern Ukraine would result in a radiation pattern that would threaten areas occupied by Putin’s forces or existing Russian territory.

Putin’s threats of escalation have not had the immediate effect he hoped for, and Western countries have announced their continued support for Ukraine. But there is no denying the world faces extreme danger at the moment. It is critical the West adopt policies to deter or respond to potential future escalation by Moscow. These policies must include several important considerations. Washington and its European allies’ greatest strength against Russian aggression has been their unity of policy and effort in response to that aggression. Unity must continue, but it may grow more complicated in the aftermath of recent elections in Italy and Sweden, which seem likely to result in the far right’s return to power. It may also become increasingly difficult

to find alliance agreement on future policy with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán or Turkish President Recep Erdoğan as the war continues.

Military support for Ukraine must continue and expand. As the war has continued, NATO has created a sophisticated coordinating effort designed to meet changing requirements and avoid the duplication of efforts to ensure the delivery of equipment from donor nations to Kyiv. The level of military assistance to Ukraine has been enormous. As of the end of September, the Biden-Harris administration has provided nearly $17 billion in weapons, ammunition, and equipment. Washington will need to increase its industrial capacity dramatically to produce artillery rounds, rockets, anti-tank weapons, and air defense needed to support Ukraine, refurbish wartime stocks, and prepare for future conflicts.

There is also a growing need to expand logistical and training assistance to Ukraine, which should include contractor support in the future. These efforts must be forward deployed to repair and maintain sophisticated military equipment for its rapid return to the battlefield. The West will also need to continue its economic and financial assistance to Ukraine to buttress its economy and deal with even larger requirements for humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and NATO frontline states.

Ukraine can attribute its success in its recent counteroffensive to the acquisition of more sophisticated military hardware, such as the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, and to the integration of real-time intelligence from Washington and NATO, the latter of which has dramatically improved targeting, with devastating effects. Washington and NATO must maintain and improve the provision of real-time intelligence, as it is essential to Ukraine’s future military success on the battlefield.

Finally, the West’s diplomatic and information efforts should be expanded. Putin’s recent escalation of the war was roundly condemned by the vast majority of nations at the recent UN General Assembly meeting in New York.

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York. Evidence of war crimes should be vigorously pursued and the results of the investigations widely disseminated. Washington and its allies must seek to further isolate Moscow diplomatically and convince countries in the Global South to participate in economic sanctions.

The information tool of so-called soft power is also crucially important. Every effort should be made to use the Internet and traditional means, such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, to inform the people of Russia and Belarus of the lies Moscow continues to propagate about the conflict, war crimes, sham referendums, the flight of Russian youths, etc.

Fred C. Iklé observed in his book *Every War Must End* (Columbia University Press, 1971) that wars end when one side changes its objectives—by choice or by force. Putin’s objectives have changed multiple times. He initially sought to capture Kyiv and topple the Zelensky administration. He then pursued the capture of Odesa and the occupation of Ukraine’s Black Sea coastline. Putin has now settled on an attempt to annex the Donbas in southeastern Ukraine and portions of the coast. All his efforts have failed, and his September 21, 2022, speech is a clear admission of failure. His continued description of his aggression as a “special military operation” is absurd in the aftermath of more than half a year of war and thousands of dead young Russian soldiers.

Still, Putin believes the overlapping goals of the United States, NATO, and Ukraine are not necessarily coincident. Kyiv cannot accomplish its goal of driving Russian forces from its territory—including Crimea—if its Western allies are willing to accept a negotiated settlement that allows a return to the status quo ante. Consequently, Putin still believes he can win, so to speak, and his success will be defined by the shattering of the long-term unity of the West. He is convinced, at this moment at least, that his willpower is superior to Western determination to resist.

Time will tell whether he is correct.

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Preserving Taiwan as Strategic Imperative

George Shatzer

Review of

The Trouble with Taiwan: History, the United States and a Rising China
By Kerry Brown and Kalley Wu Tzu-hui

Taiwan Straits Standoff: 70 Years of PRC–Taiwan Cross-Strait Tensions
By Bruce A. Elleman

Keywords: China, Taiwan, Cross-Strait tensions, Taiwan Strait, PRC

Despite the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine and Russian President Vladimir Putin’s repeated threats to employ nuclear weapons, the gravest threat to global security remains the potential for war over Taiwan. Were the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to attempt to forcibly overthrow the government of Taiwan and seize the island nation, the resulting US-led military operation to defend Taiwan could spark a much wider international war. The world’s two largest economic powers with arguably the most powerful nuclear-armed militaries engaging in open war would be a catastrophic first in human history. Both the United States and the PRC would suffer huge military casualties and lose significant portions of combat power, rendering both nations vulnerable to other threats. The homelands for both countries would be subject to nuclear attacks, which would kill and wound many thousands of civilians and lay waste to vast areas. Security commitments and allegiances would likely draw nations in Asia, especially Japan, North and South Korea, the Philippines, Russia, and Singapore, into the conflict. The United States, the PRC, and most of the world would suffer economically as US-PRC trade and the regional maritime shipping that drives much of the global economy slams to a halt. Some would argue US-PRC economic ties alone would prevent war. It is worth remembering wars large and small have jumped the firebreak of economic entanglement many times in history.

Especially worrying today is the threat of conflict over Taiwan seems to be growing and drawing nearer. In what some have called the “Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis,” the visit to Taiwan earlier this year by the US Speaker of the House of
Representatives sparked an angry response from the PRC. Beijing employed its People’s Liberation Army (PLA) aggressively against the main island of Taiwan with unprecedented scale. The deployment of PLA air and maritime forces and the firing of missiles around Taiwan was a significant expansion over what the PRC did during the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, a response to concern that Taiwan’s first democratic presidential elections could lead to a referendum on independence for the island. Both in terms of the scale and extent, the PLA demonstrated a much expanded capacity to isolate Taiwan by force.

Additionally, the overt US military response this time was substantially more muted. In December 1995 and March 1996, the United States sent two Naval carrier groups (the USS Nimitz and Independence, respectively) near Taiwan. This strong US response is widely seen today as a large part of the impetus behind the PRC’s rapid acceleration of efforts to build a large, modern military. In 2022, the United States seems content to continue only with what it calls “routine” transits of the Taiwan Strait with smaller US Navy warships. While the lack of a clear military response might be a wise step to de-escalate tensions today, the effect on PRC thinking and actions in the future is potentially unfavorable for the United States and Taiwan should Beijing perceive the United States as unwilling to defend the island. Indeed, as reported by the government of Taiwan, the PRC has increasingly sent its maritime and air forces across the median line of the Taiwan Strait to challenge Taiwan’s military and shift the norm for where the PLA can operate in proximity to Taiwan.

Understanding the contentious and violent history of cross-strait relations between the PRC and Taiwan is important to dealing with the problem today and in the future. Bruce A. Elleman’s *Taiwan Straits Standoff* is vital reading to this end. This short book was published in 2021 prior to the strait crisis of 2022, and provides the right depth of background to today’s issues. Throughout the historical narratives describing the previous three strait crises, the consistency across time in policy perspectives, strategic factors, and military operations is remarkable. Several of these are worth special mention because they are suggestive of potential problems and strategies the United States and Taiwan must understand today.

First, Elleman reminds us of the critical role Taiwan can play to influence PRC behavior elsewhere. He mentions how US military operations in the Taiwan Strait helped bring the PRC to the negotiating table for armistice talks in Korea in 1953. Further, once the armistice was signed, the PRC immediately began pulling forces from Korea to reinforce its posture across from Taiwan (30). The connection
between deep-seated PRC security concerns on or near its borders (especially with India, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan) must be accounted for and leveraged as pressure points to shape Beijing’s decision making and actions. Similarly, we must be mindful that the PRC could use the same stratagem of generating a military crisis in one location to draw in US forces and reduce its ability to respond elsewhere.

Second, the PRC harbors a misconception that aggressive action against Taiwan will somehow cause the United States to split from Taiwan. Elleman notes this was the PRC’s expectation when it attacked the Taiwan-held offshore island Quemoy in 1954–55 during the first strait crisis (55). The PRC routinely seems to misperceive a US reluctance to fight a war with it as a sign of fundamental weakness in the US-Taiwan relationship or in US resolve to support Taiwan. Yet, in each instance of PRC aggression against Taiwan, the United States has taken concrete measures to reaffirm and even strengthen its relations with the island nation. Recognizing this blind spot in Beijing’s thinking is important when working through the potentials for escalation and off-ramps in the next crisis. Perhaps the United States can defuse an emerging crisis and moderate PRC behavior by clearly communicating that escalation is a dead end and will only strengthen US-Taiwan ties.

Additionally, history points to other possibilities for PRC military attacks against Taiwan that do not always receive much attention today. In 1958, the PRC ended its shelling of Quemoy after 44 days and the wounding or killing of nearly 3,000 soldiers and 500 civilians. But occasional artillery fire would take place for the next 20 years—the longest sustained artillery campaign in history (105). While it is well known that the PRC has planned firepower strike operations against Taiwan, less appreciated perhaps is the PRC’s will to sustain these operations (even if at low volumes) for years and even decades. Given the PRC’s present-day rocket and missile capabilities and inventories, we must account for the real possibility of a sustained fires campaign against the main island of Taiwan that would generate far more casualties and destruction today.

Conventional strikes against Taiwan suggest the issue of nuclear weapons. Elleman dedicates an entire chapter to the history of US threats to use nuclear weapons in the context of a Taiwan Strait conflict and briefly tracks the evolution of US nuclear use policy given the advent of PRC nuclear weapons, the dissolution of the PRC-USSR alliance, and Taiwan ending its nuclear weapons program. The specter of nuclear war between two global powers hangs heavily over any Taiwan conflict. Nonetheless, US strategists must thoroughly investigate all the potentials of the nuclear factor. On the surface, it might seem the PRC enjoys a strong first-mover advantage in conducting military operations against Taiwan because the United States would not want to risk a response escalating the situation to a nuclear war. Yet, the PRC faces the same dilemma should the United States
choose either to deter with forward-postured forces or counterattack to defend Taiwan. The US second-strike capability is something Beijing cannot ignore and carries serious deterrent weight.

Another historical Taiwan conflict dynamic Elleman illuminates is the complexity of the PRC-USSR relationship and past US efforts to undermine that relationship. In simple terms, the United States sought to push the USSR and the PRC closer together so they could then be split apart (125). He argues the United States let the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) dominate China so the PRC would become dependent on the USSR for support. This closer, dependent relationship exacerbated the animosities and tensions between them and made it easier to fracture the relationship. A key mechanism in fracturing the relationship was the threat of a Taiwan conflict potentially escalating into a broader conflict in which the USSR would be vulnerable to a US attack. As the PRC pressed forward aggressively during the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis, the USSR fears of a wider conflict helped drive it to withdraw support from the PRC and ultimately collapsed the relationship (131–34). With a much closer PRC-Russian relationship developing today, strategists must consider what tensions exist in PRC relations that might be vulnerable in the context of a Taiwan conflict. These weak points may offer pressure points that deter or constrain military action.

Finally, the book reminds us that for much of cross-strait history the PRC has judged war with the United States over Taiwan “pointless,” since they believed they could ultimately gain control of the island through propaganda and other subversive means (147). If winning without fighting is still a core tenet of Chinese military thinking, then the United States must seek to encourage this idea and leverage its deterrent value. The most troubling trend in the military balance across the strait may not be the growth of PRC military power but rather the growth of nationalism and impatience in the CCP such that they decide it is worth fighting to seize Taiwan.

In *The Trouble with Taiwan*, Kerry Brown and Kalley Wu Tzu-hui delve deeper into PRC perceptions and attitudes toward Taiwan. The book centers on questions of identity and the powerful effects this has on thinking and actions, especially those of the PRC. This welcome find provides fresh perspectives and ideas on the cross-strait problem from British and Taiwan points of view. Distressingly, the authors identify multiple factors that seem to suggest future conflict is becoming more likely.

They first provide a very clear explanation of the importance of Taiwan to the PRC. Taiwan’s symbolic value
is bound up with the PRC's notions of its historical legitimacy and the very idea of the Chinese nation they claim ownership of. For Beijing, compromising on the status of Taiwan would mean forfeiting its claimed historical and cultural right to controlling it and would thus call into question its right to every other territorial and maritime claim, such as the South China Sea, Tibet, and Xinjiang (55–56). The CCP has based its legitimacy in the restoration of the Chinese nation. Ceding any of these claims would mean the literal breaking up of this Chinese nation—an action irreconcilable with the CCP's stated purpose. As US President Abraham Lincoln asserted in his first inaugural address in 1861, no government proper ever permits its own termination.

Additionally, the authors argue nationalism is on the march in the PRC and, for President Xi Jinping and the CCP, it is now a “core source of legitimacy” (111). Along with this shift is a burgeoning sense of urgency in resolving the Taiwan problem. While the PRC has for decades been clear it views Taiwan as one of its provinces, the authors convincingly illustrate how the PRC under Xi has been much more assertive in enforcing this claim internationally as well as at home (112). Further, Brown and Tzu-hui argue the pervasive nationalist messaging and quashing of dissenting views have created an insular and dangerous orthodoxy on Taiwan such that the CCP decisionmakers have outdated views. The authors suggest Xi's inner circle of advisers—much like with Putin and his misguided war on Ukraine—is out of touch and dares not challenge convention or present new ideas anyway (117).

Finally, the authors contend the real reason today the PRC wants control of Taiwan owes to status and face. As the PRC has grown wealthier and more powerful, its view of its status has increased. With its growth in power the PRC now has more means at its disposal today to compel “reunification” with Taiwan than at any other time in its history. These trends elevate the desire and urgency of taking control of Taiwan (220). Also, harkening back to historical notions of China as a “civilizational force” and “mother culture,” today the PRC has the strong Confucian sense of being an elder sibling to Taiwan and deserving of its respect (221). This dynamic means Taiwan cannot be sovereign in the eyes of the PRC and hence there is no room to consider any sort of relationship that would afford Taiwan equality. The PRC expects to have senior status (222). As the authors summarize: “That Taiwan has become so tied up with the PRC’s own identity and definition of its self [sic], and feelings about itself, creates an almost intractable problem. To be fully China, to have the status it wants, to rank as a great global power, the PRC needs Taiwan to be part of it” (223).

Despite this bleak assessment, the authors offer some hopeful ideas. They suggest Taiwan's democracy is its best defense against PRC aggression (68). Like many other observers of Taiwan society, the authors note that increasingly
the people of Taiwan, especially younger generations, view themselves as being uniquely Taiwanese and not Chinese. While this dynamic would seem to make the possibility of a peaceful reconciliation with the mainland more remote, it does have two potentially useful effects. First, democracy holds with it the possibility that the people could choose to reunify with the PRC. This permits Taiwan to say it is not ruling out that possibility (98). Second, the unique Taiwanese identity suggests to the PRC that Taiwan has a strong will to resist. This identity raises the stakes and potential threat to the CCP’s legitimacy should it fail to subdue Taiwan. No matter how confident the PRC becomes in its military power, it will have to account for the real possibility that Taiwan will resist with all means, even without US intervention.

Returning to the worst-case scenario of a US–PRC war described earlier, this presumes the United States would defend Taiwan. A great many questions have been raised concerning the likelihood of the United States risking war with the PRC over an island the size of Maryland. While the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 does not require the United States to defend Taiwan, it is nonetheless a strong statement of US commitment to supporting Taiwan militarily and in other ways. Additionally, the Taiwan Policy Act of 2022 greatly expands US security assistance over the next four years. Most compelling have been seemingly resolute statements by President Joe Biden, twice last year and twice again this year, that the United States would defend Taiwan in the event of a PRC attack to seize the island.

These recent assurances of US commitment seem to be shifting the long-standing US policy of “strategic ambiguity” on the question of US military intervention in a Taiwan conflict. In decades past, when the United States enjoyed clear military superiority over the PLA, maintaining strategic ambiguity was a sensible approach to checking the PRC’s aggressive ambitions towards Taiwan while also not encouraging Taiwan to declare independence. As the military balance across the strait no longer seems to favor the United States (or Taiwan), the utility of strategic ambiguity has arguably worn thin. Critics charge that dropping strategic ambiguity is dangerous because it hardens US and PRC positions and ripens the potential for war. This is a valid but manageable concern so long as the United States can maintain a credible capability to deny the PRC achieving its objective by force. This deterrence mission very much remains viable so long as the United States makes the necessary investments in posture, will, relationships, and capabilities in the region and beyond.

Yet, the valid question remains: are such massive investments worth it? Or, put another way, is Taiwan worth it? The clear answer is yes. Economically, Taiwan and the United States enjoy robust trade relations, particularly in goods, services, and agriculture. In the past few years, US foreign direct investment in Taiwan has
doubled to over $31 billion, especially due to the vital semiconductor industry as Taiwan is the world’s top producer of computer chips. Further, Taiwan sits astride some of the world’s busiest maritime shipping lanes. Nearly 90 percent of the largest container ships transit through the Taiwan Strait ever year as they connect East Asia with the Middle East and Europe.

Taiwan’s geographic location also matters deeply from a military perspective. It is noted frequently that Taiwan is the central link in the island chain that sits just offshore of mainland China and effectively bounds Beijing’s ability to project the PLA eastward. This island chain runs from the Russian-controlled Kuril Islands (claimed in part by Japan) in the north through the Japanese archipelago, the Ryukyu Islands and Taiwan, and the northwestern Philippine islands and ends with Borneo in the South China Sea. Less often elaborated is the military maritime advantage the PRC would gain if it controlled Taiwan. The PRC would be able to expand significantly the reach of its maritime surveillance and submarine warfare capabilities. This would leave US naval forces far more vulnerable even at great distances east of Taiwan as the PRC could significantly upgrade its long-range fires capabilities. This, in turn, would greatly complicate US naval operations and war planning generally and leave the United States with fewer practical contingency response options in the region. Also, PLA Navy and Air Force operations out of Taiwan would present a much greater direct, flanking threat to Japan and the Philippines, especially, and would open a direct attack route to Guam.

The most serious interest the United States has in preserving Taiwan is political. The United States had a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan for nearly 25 years (from 1955–79). Although the United States switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC in 1979, it replaced that treaty with a set of laws mandating the sale of defensive arms to Taiwan and enshrining a range of other business and cultural ties with the island. Were the United States to choose not to defend Taiwan with military force, the clear signal to allies and partners in the region would be that the United States is unwilling to defend anyone from the PRC military threat. Additionally, the United States would be standing by as the PRC snuffed out a democratic government and locked its nearly 24 million people in an industrial-sized police state. The democratic experiment in Taiwan and US leadership in the region would end (to say nothing of the damage done to US leadership worldwide). In essence, the United States would be permitting the PRC to control the region. This would immeasurably hurt the region and the United States—immediately and in the long run. It is hard to imagine the expense and suffering that would have to be borne to reverse this situation and recover US position and influence.

Preventing this outcome requires careful study of the PRC and the development of a firm understanding of its thinking. What does the PRC fear more: loss of
legitimacy from not “liberating” and “reunifying” Taiwan with mainland China or loss of legitimacy from losing a war with the United States over Taiwan? This is the critical question framing PRC decision making. If the CCP increasingly perceives that its so-called China Dream of national rejuvenation is threatened by failing to absorb Taiwan and that the United States is unwilling or unable to defend Taiwan, then Beijing might choose to use force to seize the island. This is the question and problem the United States must commit to solving.

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