

VICTORY IN UKRAINE = INDO-PACIFIC POSSIBILITIES

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Before Russian tanks crossed into Ukraine, Putin suggested that the invasion was not merely inevitable but righteous. Russia would annex Ukraine to correct a historic wrong and Ukrainians would be grateful, according to Putin.

Nearly two years into this war, we have proof of Putin's folly but we have something more - a lesson that myth making does not lead to easy conquest.

This is something China cannot help but notice.

Victory by Ukraine over Russia would sooth global tensions that have been stirred by the aggression but the Indo-Pacific region could see a bigger payoff if China reconsiders its ambitions for Taiwan.

For now, the Pacific is tense. As Russia faces a stalemate in Ukraine, Putin seems eager to show China that it can help on the seas.

Notably, Russia and China are increasing the number of joint military operations around Taiwan. In May, two Russian frigates began several weeks patrolling the east coast of the imperiled island. Meanwhile, China and Russia are also conducting operations at sea that can only be understood as provocations against Japan.

Over two days in late July, ten Chinese and Russian naval vessels passed through La Pérouse Strait (Soya Strait) between the Japanese territories of Hokkaido and Sakhalin and entered the Sea of Okhotsk from the Sea of Japan. There, the vessels conducted joint training exercises, including shooting, in the Sea of Japan. Chinese and Russian vessels include missile destroyers, frigates and supply ships.

In one light, we can see Russia's moves for what they are: a feeble flex of might to prove to the Chinese that the country provides some worth.

These moves are not so consequential in themselves, but in a region that is so tense and where escalations are measured by inches, the joint maneuvers can be dangerous. It is not difficult to imagine how one errant missile launched from a joint Russian and Chinese naval exercise could cause a crisis.

Despite these provocations, political support for Ukraine in the Pacific is strong.

In March, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida made a blitz visit to Kyiv to hold talks with President Zelenskyy ahead of a G7 meeting in Hiroshima. President Zelenskyy made a surprise appearance at that May meeting.

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While diplomatic triumphs rarely lead to an increase in the political standing of Japanese prime ministers, Prime Minister Kishida's moves attracted the attention of the Japanese public and contributed to an increase in his approval rating.

The Japanese people strongly opposed Russia's invasion of Ukraine because they understand the need to maintain the existing international order. Never before has Japan signaled as strongly as it does now that the world order is directly linked to its own security.

Allowing Russia to annex Ukraine by force would lower the hurdle to the unilateral unification of

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Taiwan by Chinese military. For Japan, any Chinese military assertive action in Taiwan would require a response.

Russia's naked aggression in Ukraine was a reminder to peaceful nations that it is wise to prepare for dangers that might seem remote. Russia had no qualms about attacking Ukraine and nearly two years of costly defeats have not forced Putin to relent.

Russian forces are flailing and the costs of the war are mounting. Russia has not quieted Ukrainian fighters and the terrain Russia occupies is restive. There is no corner of Ukraine where Russian soldiers are welcome or where they can sleep in peace.

Meanwhile, the war has sparked a destabilizing refugee crisis, upheaval in regional trade and political uncertainty in Moscow. None of these outcomes is desirable for leaders in China. The costly lessons from the Ukraine invasion have been observed. We hope they will be heeded in the Indo-Pacific.

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