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Asia Pacific

The Taiwan Strait Crisis: Geopolitical Conflicts and the Right of the Taiwanese to Self-Determination

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At the beginning of August , the tension rose by a (big) notch after Nancy Pelosi's whirlwind visit to Taipei, the capital of Taiwan, and Beijing's "over-reaction". Even though the invasion of the Island was never on the agenda at that point, the dynamics of militarization of the Asia-Pacific region are accelerating and the conflict between China and the United States is sharpening. However, geopolitical concerns should not overshadow the right of the Taiwanese to self-determination. A month later, let's try to take stock of the situation.

President of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi is, in the Washington order of protocol, the third person in the state, after President Joe Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris. Her stopover in Taiwan, on 2 and 3 August, as part of an Asian tour, therefore had significant political weight and it was to be expected that Beijing would react.

This visit was not, it seems, unanimously approved of in the ruling circles of the United States, the general staff deeming it inappropriate and Joe Biden choosing to show some distance [1] – which may have encouraged Xi Jinping to raise his voice by ordering, among other things, military exercises of a scale and aggressiveness a good notch higher than on previous occasions; in fact, far greater than most observers had anticipated. Indeed, as Taiwanese journalist Brian Hioe notes, missiles were fired over Taipei, the People's Army Naval Air Forces penetrated further into the Taiwanese Air Defense Identification Zone and its maritime space. .

More significantly, Tokyo and Seoul were directly implicated. Missiles hit Japan's Exclusive Economic Maritime Zone, which the Japanese Ministry of Defence denounced as a deliberate act [2]. The Chinese Navy also maneuvered not far from the disputed islands of the Senkaku/Diaoyutai archipelago. [3] It did the same off the South Korean peninsula, in the Yellow Sea and in the Gulf of Bohai.

According to Brian Hioe, by attacking these two countries, which are very much integrated into the US military system in the region (witness in particular the importance of the US bases on the island of Okinawa), Beijing was carrying out preventive action in order to give a warning to other Asia-Pacific states willing to help Taiwan. This warning could prove premature and encourage them to stick together in the face of Chinese threats, in the opinion of the journalist Brian Hioe. [4]

On the one hand, the current crisis is more actively involved than the previous ones in a dynamic of strategic conflict between China and the United States; on the other hand, the "Taiwanese question" finds itself more than in the past at the heart of the geopolitical reconfigurations that involve all the powers of the region, including India and Japan. [5] This process of recomposition has begun, but it is far from complete. Questions of power are in fact not homogeneous throughout Asia. Although India responds "present" to the anti-Chinese front called for by Washington, it refuses to do the same towards Russia, with which it maintains deep and historic relations of cooperation. [6] Japan-South Korea cooperation is under tension, particularly given a colonial past whose memory was revived by the previous Prime Minister, the late Abe Shinzo, and an accumulation of successive treaties, as evidenced by the Japanese journalist Karen Yamanaka for North-East Asia – namely Japan, South Korea and the USA. [7]

The fourth crisis in the Taiwan Strait has nevertheless remained, for the time being, carefully calibrated. The invasion of the island was, at that point, never on the agenda. There was no mobilization of resources and troops on a scale comparable to that which preceded the invasion of Ukraine. The Taiwanese continued their daily activities as if nothing had happened [8] Beijing quickly let it be known that its major naval air manoeuvres would end after five days.

However, although "calibrated", the exercises in early August are part of a rise in geopolitical conflicts between the United States and China, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. They probably signify that the stakes have been raised and that the era of a regional balance maintained under tension thanks to "ambiguity" has come to an end.

Towards the end of the status quo ante based on "strategic ambiguity"?

Taiwan is de facto an independent state, but it has never declared itself as such, Washington carefully avoiding explaining how far its support could go in the event of an open conflict. Since diplomatic relations were re-established with the People's Republic in 1979, the United States has "acknowledged" that for Beijing, Taiwan is a Chinese province, but has not endorsed this position. [9]. The diplomatic texts leave room for various interpretations (which China are we talking about?) [10], the Chinese and English versions may differ.

For its part, in recent years, the CCP has constantly reiterated its interpretation of the "One China" policy (which has led to Taiwan being excluded from UN international institutions [11]) and maintained its territorial claims, regularly conducting routine military exercises in the Strait, but without engaging in a showdown.

For many analysts, this policy of ambiguity retains all of its "virtues". It allows the United States to give Taiwan the means to defend itself, without saying whether US naval air forces would be committed further in the event of a conflict. In their eyes, today, overtaken by the recent events that followed the arrival of Nancy Pelosi, the hardening of the Xi Jinping regime and the discussion in Washington of the law entitled Taiwan Policy Act, the conditions for its reimplementation should for the good of all be brought together again by the governments concerned [12]. The proposal is common sense, but without wishing to prejudge the future, it would involve a real reversal of the dynamics that are underway.

Eric Chan, a senior specialist working for the United States Air Force and non-resident fellow at the Global Taiwan Institute. [13], for its part, seeks to situate the fourth Strait crisis historically. It is necessary to take with a large pinch of salt the cries of alarm regularly launched in the USA on the coming global military superiority of China, which opportunely serve the interests of the Pentagon (hungry to obtain budgetary increases) and of the military-industrial complex; but that is not Chan's point. He goes back over the succession of events since 1989 and the massive repression of popular movements in China, which have built up the CCP's feeling of vulnerability in the face of Washington: the Gulf War (1991), the third crisis in the Taiwan Strait (1996), the "accidental" bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade (1999), the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan (2014, see below) and the change of orientation gradually implemented by Xi Jinping after his accession to power (end of 2012): militarization of the South China Sea (2015), crushing in Hong Kong of the mobilizations against the law of extradition of local residents to mainland China (2019-2020) – all without paying a price on the international level, to conclude:

I believe “strategic ambiguity” is increasingly moribund for multiple reasons. First and foremost: Xi Jinping is not satisfied with PRC strategic patience, which was part of the context for U.S. strategic ambiguity. Second, Xi does not believe the U.S. is adhering to strategic ambiguity; rather, for him, it is strategic ambiguity in name only. Third, as the PRC has become more hawkish across the DIME [diplomatic, informational, military, and economic] spectrum against both Taiwan and the U.S., the U.S. government as a whole – and particularly Congress – has become significantly more sympathetic towards Taiwan. Fourth, U.S. strategic ambiguity is also meant to deter Taiwan from formally seeking independence. This is no longer relevant as the PLA is now fully capable of that deterrence.

As Xi will almost certainly continue his coercion and legal warfare campaign against Taiwan, the pressure against strategic ambiguity will continue to grow in the U.S., as evidenced by proposals like the Taiwan Policy Act.

We have thus entered a "grey zone" between war and peace, where Beijing relies on maintaining a constant military threat, rather than on diplomatic agreements, to dissuade Taipei from declaring independence. This is currently taking the form of a latent drone warfare, first with civilian drones, then military. On September 1, for the first time, Taiwan shot down a Chinese drone near Lion Island, a Taiwanese defence outpost not far from Xiamen on the Chinese mainland. A few days later, a military drone, accompanied by eight aircraft, entered Taiwan's air defense identification zone, without crossing into Taiwanese airspace.

Taipei's Ministry of Defense warned in late August that Taiwanese forces would retaliate if Chinese aircraft or ships crossed the 12 nautical mile limits. Their readiness for conflict is probably uneven. The military budget is steadily increasing (by 12.9 percent next year, for a total of \$415.1 billion). The Biden administration has just announced a \$1.1 billion arms sale to Taiwan (Harpoon air-to-sea missiles, Sidewinder air-to-air missiles, logistical support for the surveillance radar program, etc.). At the same time, Washington and Taipei have decided to enter into formal trade negotiations, with the aim in particular of guaranteeing the resilience of supply chains, especially for semiconductors. These commitments are obviously denounced by Beijing.

However, disagreements are emerging between senior military officials and President Tsai regarding the island's strategic preparation. The latter must resolve a difficult equation: to show firmness without worrying the population or bearing the responsibility for a possible escalation, while the country needs a large influx of labour to support the development of its economy and must reassure immigration applicants.

The relevance of the anti-war struggle

It is useless to try to find out who began to upset the previous "equilibrium in ambiguity". Xi Jinping himself contributed to this, when he proclaimed loud and clear that under his presidency (therefore in the near future), the island would be reconquered, by force if necessary. The Taiwanese are today hostage to a geopolitical conflict that is beyond them. The recent Strait crisis is not the cause of the rise in geopolitical tensions between the United States and China, but rather its consequence. In this global context, the Taiwanese issue certainly retains a specific importance due to its location in the heart of an ultra-militarized South China Sea and its economic weight, like its technological success, which is out of all proportion to its size (23 million inhabitants).

From provocation to provocation, from sanction to sanction, an infernal spiral of militarization and a new arms race are engaged. Washington is sustainably strengthening its military presence off Taiwan. The Japanese government is aiming to complete its rearmament (including nuclear) and is actively participating in major naval air exercises with the United States, which is strengthening its cooperation with Australia. China participates in Siberia in major military manoeuvres with Russia. Each power considers the actions taken by its adversary as aggressive and its own as defensive.

For its part, the Indian government has denounced the "militarization of the Taiwan Strait" by Beijing. An unresolved conflict over the delimitation of borders in the Himalayas opposes for a long time India and China, where military tension is recurrent. They are also engaged in a struggle for regional influence which is crystallized particularly in Sri Lanka. However, this would be the first time that New Delhi has intervened in these terms with regard specifically to the Taiwan Strait [\[14\]](#).

Not so long ago – in 2014 in particular, when Xi Jinping was already in power – Beijing and Washington had a complex relationship of competition and collaboration [\[15\]](#). Seeking to predict the future is proving to be particularly uncertain today, but it is hard to see how we could return to such a geopolitical configuration now!

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While Xi Jinping has made the reconquest of Taiwan a real marker of his presidency, in the United States, the bulk of the political class is united on this issue. Nevertheless, it seems difficult to predict how the crisis of regime that the United States is going through may affect Washington's policy in the South China Sea.

Taipei has become a very popular place to visit among elected American politicians, especially members of the Republican Party (which supported Democrat Nancy Pelosi's initiative). These trips can take a frankly strange turn, like that of Senator Marsha Blackburn, an avid follower of Donald Trump. She spoke of Taiwan as an independent country during a meeting with President Tsai Ing-wen (who steers clear of such remarks), a veritable diplomatic blunder, and she also went to the Memorial Hall of Chiang Kai-shek, while the host country's ruling party, the Democratic Progressive Party, considers (with good reason!) that he imposed a particularly repressive regime of dictatorship on the island [16]

Few Taiwanese today say they want a formal declaration of independence under the present circumstances. Could the US far right be trying to strengthen the "ultra" camp? That would be playing with fire.

The conflict between what has become the second world power (China) and the established power (the United States) has entered a new phase. The question that we are posed today is not to "choose sides" in the face of such a confrontation. Its consequences will be disastrous for humanity, giving in its turn (after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia) a powerful boost to the climate crisis.

The reinforcement (where it exists) and the reconstitution (where this is not the case) of a large unified anti-militarist movement is more than ever on the agenda, with in particular in perspective the demilitarization and denuclearization of conflict zones, starting with the South China Sea. [17]

In North-East Asia (in Japan and South Korea), South-East Asia and South Asia (jointly involving Pakistanis and Indians) such movements exist. Mobilizations against global warming should, when this has not yet been done, actively integrate the anti-war dimension, the latter thus regaining in return a truly international dimension.

The necessary solidarity with the Taiwanese

Finally, and this is not the least important question, the geopolitical stakes must not make us forget solidarity towards the Taiwanese.

The complex history of the island is quite distinct from that of mainland China [18]. The Chinese Communist Party, at the time of Mao Zedong, recognized its independence for a long time, before this question became a key issue in its fight against the Kuomintang (KMT) (Kuomintang) of Chiang Kai-shek. [19]

In the past, the island was only very briefly and unequally integrated by a Chinese imperial dynasty – moreover, an ancient suzerainty (real or legendary) never, by itself, justifies a present territorial claim. The uninhabited reefs and islets of the China Sea were used by all the fishermen of the region and the "discovery" of a Chinese coin of venerable age (perhaps conveniently buried there by nationalist historians who unearthed it) does not change anything, does not in any way justify Beijing's "taking possession" of this entire maritime zone.

Taiwan is not a "rock" (an unfortunate expression of Noam Chomsky during a recent interview, in contradiction to comments he had previously made [20]), but a country. What matters is the *current* feeling of the people who do not see themselves as part of Xi Jinping's China. Not only do opinion polls point this out [21], but contemporary history

confirms it:

When Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang retreated to the island with arms and baggage, it imposed its dictatorship on the local population. When China made its bourgeois counter-revolution, the CCP and the KMT, yesterday sworn enemies, became two complicit totalitarian parties – complicit in the oppression and exploitation of the island population. In 2014, the signing of a Sino-Taiwanese free trade agreement sparked a student-led revolt known as the Sunflower Movement (or 318 Movement), with the occupation for 24 days of the Legislative Yuan (Parliament) and a demonstration of support by half a million people. A process of democratization was then initiated in depth, despite the repression, which finally led to the establishment of a bourgeois democratic regime more democratic than those in force in many Western countries.

Xi Jinping initially hoped to regain ascendancy in Taiwan by using KMT networks, raising the prospect of major economic gains and proposing a "one country, two systems" solution like the one that had been established in Hong Kong after the retrocession of the former British colony (1997): formally integrated into the People's Republic, Taiwan would certainly lose its sovereignty in certain important areas (foreign and military policy, etc.), but would preserve its political and legal regime, its civil Liberties. A promise that lost all power of conviction when Xi himself tore up these agreements to engage in a policy of forced "normalization" which resulted in the establishment of dictatorial control by Beijing over the "special administrative zone" (the official name of the Hong Kong territory). [22]

Unable to convince the population of the island by using carrots and a few sticks, Xi Jinping is now resorting to crude military threats. He recognizes himself, in doing so, that the Taiwanese really have no appetite for his regime!

* *What is now footnote 10 has been added for clarification 9 septembre 2022, 17:50.*

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[1] *Politico*, 1 August 2022 "[Pelosi heads to Taiwan despite warnings from Xi and Biden](#)".

[2] Kosuke Takahashi, *The Diplomat*, 5 August 2022, "[China's Live-Fire Drills Near Taiwan Send Ballistic Missiles Into Japan's EEZ](#)".

[3] Senkaku is the Japanese name of this archipelago, Diaoyutai the Chinese name.

[4] Brian Hioe, *New Bloom*, 21 August 2022, "[How Should Taiwan Find A Path Out of Regional Escalation?](#)".

[5] Karen Yamanaka, 18 August 2022, "[Taiwan Strait Crisis: for the right to peace and security in East Asia](#)".

[6] Anuradha Chenoy, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 13 May 2022, "[Why India Won't Take Sides](#)".

[7] Karen Yamanaka, 5 July 2022, "[Military Alliances Aiming for Another "NATO" in East Asia](#)".

[8] Brian Hioe, *The Guardian*, 3 August 2022, "[China and the US are facing off – and in Taiwan we are caught between them](#)".

[9] Jessica Drun, Centre for Advanced China Research, 28 December 2017, "[One China, Multiple Interpretations](#)".

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[10] The full sentence is here: The US “*acknowledges* (my emphasis) that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United States Government does not challenge that position. It reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves.”

Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XVII, China, 1969–1972 - Office of the Historian:
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d203>

The US has opposed Taiwan independence (which would mean officially replace the ROC with something like “Republic of Taiwan”), but it has also opposed any unilateral changes from the PRC. The US also has been consistently vague in the question of “which China Taiwan belongs to, PRC or ROC?” The US’s recognition of PRC in 1979 has not changed this either.

[11] Which means in particular that Taiwan is not represented, for example, in the World Health Organization (WHO), whereas its experience in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic was invaluable and public health issues should not be held hostage to power struggles.

[12] John Feffer, *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 10 August 2022, [“Taiwan and the Virtues of Ambiguity”](#).

[13] Mercy Kuo, *The Diplomat*, 5 August 2022, [“US-China-Taiwan Tensions: New Status Quo? Insights from Eric Chan”](#).

[14] Helen Davidson, *The Guardian*, 29 August 2022, [“India accuses China of ‘militarisation of the Taiwan Strait’ as row over navy vessel grows”](#).

[15] See Pierre Rousset, 8 December 2014, ESSF, [“La Chine, deuxième puissance mondiale”](#).

[16] Brian Hioe, *New Bloom*, 30 August 2022, [“Marsha Blackburn Raises Eyebrows with Chiang Kai-Shek Tweets During Taiwan Visit”](#).

[17] Karen Yamanaka, 18 August 2022, [“Taiwan Strait Crisis: for the right to peace and security in East Asia”](#).

[18] Brian Hioe, *The Guardian*, 18 August 2022, [“Don’t believe China’s convenient historical tales. Taiwan belongs to the Taiwanese”](#).

[19] Gerrit Van Der Wees, *The Diplomat*, 3 May 2022, [“When the CCP Thought Taiwan Should Be Independent”](#).

[20] Brian Hioe, *New Bloom*, 8 August 2022, [“Jacobin features Noam Chomsky and Vijay Prashad labeling Taiwan a “Rock”, again ignores Taiwanese voices”](#).

[21] According to recent polls, 80 per cent of the population prefers to maintain the status quo of de facto independence in one form or another, while only 1.3 per cent are in favour of immediate unification with China. Brian Hioe, *The Guardian*, 18 August 2022, [“Don’t believe China’s convenient historical tales. Taiwan belongs to the Taiwanese”](#).

[22] Frank Ching, *Courrier international*, 28 September 2019, [“Contestation. Les Taïwanais compatissent avec Hong Kong”](#).