

Resumen:

La interdependencia no ha promovido la democratización en China (RPC), no ha modulado su revisionismo, ni ha reducido las posibilidades de conflictos en su entorno. En oposición a lo generalmente esperado, el aumento de las interrelaciones con la China Popular ha propiciado una era de no paz.

La interdependencia del mundo con la RPC permite ampliar el campo de batalla hasta expandirlo tanto como para no ser necesarias las batallas decisivas. La futura supremacía no necesariamente se dilucidará en una batalla aeronaval en el mar del sur de China o en el estrecho de Taiwán. No obstante, pensar que la guerra se puede evitar es considerar la guerra como una posibilidad.

Las tensiones acumuladas aumentan el riesgo de que Pekín pueda intentar bloquear o invadir Taiwán en un futuro próximo. La sensación de urgencia se percibe tanto a uno como a otro lado del estrecho de Taiwán, generando una corriente peligrosa de apremiante desconfianza.

La dinámica de competencia entre las grandes potencias es volátil y ambigua. Los actores internacionales disponen de muy pocas certezas. Precisamente, su escasez aumenta su valor, aunque nuestra relación con las certezas sea incómoda.

Los acontecimientos de los últimos 12 meses y su evolución pueden ser interpretados por el Partido Comunista Chino como un intento de revisión de la doctrina de una sola China. La declaración de independencia de Taiwán o la concesión de garantías de defensa estadounidenses implican la guerra con China continental. La certeza es absoluta. La interdependencia como mecanismo para evitar la guerra ha fracasado en Ucrania. El periodo entre los años 2024 y 2027 descubrirá si fracasa o no en Taiwán.

Palabras clave:

Taiwán, Ucrania, interdependencia, desacople de la globalización, geoeconomía, Taiwan Policy Act, Nancy Pelosi, competencia estratégica gestionada, certeza de guerra.

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The barriers between national security and business have dissolved.

For decades, Edward Luttwak has been a politically incorrect strategic thinker. Many of his considerations, reflections and proposals were ahead of their time, initially uncomfortable, destabilising and controversial. In 1990, Luttwak circulated the concept of geoeconomics in a famous essay.¹ It is worth highlighting some old ideas from this article, which are interesting for better understanding the power play between today's major powers.

The first idea is that commercial methods are displacing military methods, but without changing the logic of the conflict that remains. It remains because each power continues to seek to gain relative advantage over the others, albeit by means other than force. So what we can expect is that wars will persist even if they take the form of economic rivalry. The second idea is that society itself influences the government to adopt strategies that are more or less geoeconomically oriented. The relationship between business and state, on the one hand, and citizen and state, on the other, is fundamental to defining the geoeconomic performance potential of an international actor. Consequently, more open and liberal societies will find it more difficult to impose a power policy underpinned by economic dominance because it would affect business and market freedom, damaging free trade.

The third idea is that the state's geoeconomic activity will become a focal point of political debate and partisan controversy. This will provoke ideological and intellectual tensions within democratic societies, pitting elites and citizens against each other over the relationship between security and the economy.

Remarkably, in 1990, Luttwak anticipated issues that the United States and the European Union have been facing for 15 years but especially now, with the war in Ukraine and the gradual increase in tension in Taiwan.

The problem for liberal democracies is that they are not designed to exercise comprehensive, long-term planned management of their economy for the purpose of achieving a position of global power. Free societies do not accept subordinating the national economy to national strategic objectives, except during a more or less brief state of emergency. However, China and Russia can do so with greater ease and more leeway.

¹ LUTTWAK, Edward (1990) 'From geopolitics to geoeconomics: Logic of conflict, grammar of commerce.' *The National Interest*, summer (20) 1990.

The rise of China and changes in the distribution of global power it has brought about confirm Luttwak's considerations. Political, diplomatic and economic power can and will be used as a preferred strategic mode of geopolitical change. Geoeconomics inspires Chinese geostrategy, which uses all the levers of national power, so far avoiding open warfare, to subvert the system of global governance where states compete from within and thus facilitate the achievement of the fundamental objectives of its national interest. Geoeconomics renews political warfare between major geopolitical competitors, becoming a constant practice in the space of mutual interrelation, where any link can be used as a weapon and where fields of interdependence are contested spaces in a nuanced grey zone. It has been evident since the 2008 crisis that the formula of geoeconomic defiance is adopted by revisionist powers against the dominant power, the United States and its allies.

With the 2008 financial crisis, from which China emerged stronger, thinking should have begun to shift to realising that the good times were over and there was no more room for complacency. The 2008 crisis discredited confidence in the deregulated market system and has progressively weakened confidence in the more liberal optimistic proposals. China began to believe the conviction that its time had come and the inevitable would eventually happen, it was just a matter of a few decades.

The country has been draining the West of industrial, scientific and technical capabilities, co-opting much of the competitive advantages of its companies. China's production structure has absorbed most of the West's basic and more advanced industry, and has managed to direct its incentives to displace them. Having consolidated this process, it has begun to aim higher in order to gain an advantage in the leading technological sectors of the fourth industrial revolution.

Thinking the unthinkable is mostly uncomfortable exercise. Thinking the unthinkable means making decisions at a high cost. Thinking the unthinkable is to question the permanence of 'Business as usual'.

When praising foolishness, Erasmus of Rotterdam warns us that there is nothing more inopportune than an ill-timed truth. Normally, when an election period gets underway in democratic systems, the inconvenient truth needs dressing up. Permanent scrutiny makes it difficult, even in ordinary political times, to look beyond the everyday, and so thinking the unthinkable is indecent until the unthinkable becomes an incontestable reality that imposes a certain punishment and sense of urgency.

Recognising the new situation in 2008 meant thinking the unthinkable, globalisation had gone too far. The People's Republic of China had been riding the trends of globalisation according to its own self-regulated patterns. Containing China's advance towards world leading power status would mean containing globalisation and thus disengaging not only from China but from a process of global interdependence. Trying to stop China was trying to stop the pace of the world.

The cost of accepting the challenge was too high for the establishment, many powerful companies and citizens in the West. Letting time pass was not conducive to the evolution of the Western powers' position of power, nor to the evolution of their productive fabric, scientific and technological developments and, even less so, to the welfare of the majority of their workers. However, recognising the trends imposed an ideological, political and economic shift that would be resisted by many because of the immediate detrimental effects, possibly unable to understand the future benefits. The United States, the West in general, needs a direct and devastating attack like Pearl Harbor or 9/11 to mobilise its response, which then tends to be disproportionate and ill-timed.

Since the 2008 crisis, the global system has been locked in continuous trade disputes. The United States was constantly complaining about Chinese barriers and was not alone in criticising the Asian giant's malpractices. The World Trade Organisation was not doing what was necessary to discipline the Chinese model of competition. Even President Obama, a staunch advocate of the benefits of global free trade, was forced to progressively impose protectionist measures. There was also an urgent need for an exit strategy in the Middle East.

The 2017 US national security strategy was the first document to clearly identify the gravity of the situation for the future of the United States as a great power.² 'The United States will respond to the growing political, economic and military competition we face in the world'.³ Suddenly, the unthinkable changed category.

China and Russia were challenging the power, influence and interest of the United States by eroding its security and prosperity. Patterns that had brought so much profit to major US and European companies had to be changed. President Trump's trade war was the

² <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

³ 'The United States will respond to the growing political, economic, and military competitions we face around the world. China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity'.

beginning of a new understanding of the situation. The decoupling of globalisation had begun.

The COVID-19 coronavirus has highlighted the West's vulnerability to over-reliance on Chinese industrial production. We have seen it and suffered for a long time. The mask crisis during the first phase of the pandemic is hard to forget. The world's largest and sometimes only supplier of the active ingredients of some vital medicines is China. About 80 per cent of pharmaceutical products sold in the United States are produced in China. Not only is China the world's dominant supplier of pharmaceuticals, it is also the world's largest supplier of medical devices such as ventilators.⁴

Centralising the global medicine supply chain in any one country makes it vulnerable to disruption, whether by error or design. China could use this dependence as a weapon. If it were to close the door to drug exports, hospitals and clinics in the West would be out of business within weeks.

Gary Cohn, President Trump's chief economic affairs adviser, opposed the trade war against China from the start, arguing that a trade department study found that 97 per cent of antibiotics used in the US came from that country. "If you're the Chinese and you want to really just destroy us, just stop sending us antibiotics".⁵

China has become the largest source of imports for all core economic regions. More importantly, however, for many of these imports, China is the dominant producer. The factory of the world is China and whatever it may decide is immediately transferred and multiplied to the more advanced economies with which it competes for technological dominance.

Supply security and defending production are new and essential components for the redesign of a balanced economic structure that guarantees national and regional autonomy in the face of possible threats caused by the interruption of supplies or excessive dependence on a single country.

Competition between major powers is reshaping business strategy. Companies are seeking more security, aiming to make their operations more robust to external shocks and moving production closer to home. With the advent of COVID-19, many have realised that the barriers between national security and business have dissolved.

⁴ <http://theconversation.com/the-silent-threat-of-the-coronavirus-americas-dependence-on-chinese-pharmaceuticals-130670>

⁵ WOODWARD, Bob (2018) *Fear: Trump in the White House*. Simon & Schuster, New York.

‘Weaponisation of interdependence’

In his book *The Age of Unpeace: How Connectivity Causes Conflict*, Mark Leonard states that the unexpected has arrived.⁶ The flows of globalisation, long interpreted as effective mechanisms for strengthening peaceful relations, the expansion of free markets and democratic development in illiberal or totalitarian countries, have become a serious danger to stability, rule-based order and the expansion of spaces of peace and freedom. Interdependence has not fostered democratisation in China, nor has it modulated its revisionism or reduced the potential for conflict in its neighbourhood. Contrary to what is generally expected, increased interrelations with the PRC have led to an era of non-peace, where the line between war and peace is increasingly blurred. ‘Rather than eliminating tensions[...], connectivity offers new means of competing and engaging in conflict’.⁷

The new battlefields of war without war will be the most solidly interconnected areas of the world where there is no accepted ruling power. This idea is also supported by Mark Galeotti in his new book *The Weaponisation of Everything: A Field Guide to the New Way of War*.⁸

The world's interdependence with the PRC has allowed the Chinese Communist Party to expand the battlefield so far that decisive battles by large armies and navies are no longer necessary. Future supremacy will not be decided in a naval air battle in the South China Sea or in the Taiwan Strait. Through its political war, the PRC aims to make scientific and technological development, and control of production and supply chains, the centre of gravity of the great power struggle by exploiting the vulnerabilities of the system. The Chinese model could be identified as ‘weaponisation of interdependence’.

Efforts to decouple the US economy from the People's Republic of China have achieved some results in a short time. The first and most important is to question the model of globalisation. However, the US trade balance with the PRC in 2021 still accumulated a deficit of \$355 billion. The trade war against China has reduced the trade deficit by just

⁶ LEONARD, Mark (2021) *The Age of Unpeace: How Connectivity Causes Conflict*. Bantam Press, London.

⁷ LEONARD, Mark (2021) ‘The Connectivity War’. Project Syndicate. Available at: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/connectivity-conflicts-weaponization-of-migration-by-mark-leonard-2021-12/spanish>

⁸ GALEOTTI, Mark (2022) *The Weaponisation of Everything: A Field Guide to the New Way of War*. Yale University Press, London.

over 15%⁹ and Chinese dollar reserves have fallen by 18%.¹⁰ Decoupling the economies of the major powers is a trend, but its pace of progress cannot be dizzying because it would lead to shortages and the paralysis of companies would spread to the entire productive system.

The necessary controlled disengagement suggests that the weight of the geoeconomic and geotechnological components will be influential enough to allow a progressive reconfiguration of the current geopolitical model without the need for military confrontation.

Surprisingly, this has not been the case in Europe. The interdependence, especially energy interdependence, of Russia and the EU has not been enough to prevent war in Ukraine. The conviction that shared economic interests are sufficient to prevent a war of aggression has gone into crisis. The European Union has not hesitated in the face of Russian aggression. It has preserved the unity of the European partners in view of a difficult test, with serious effects on the economy. The infrequent unanimity has been maintained even when it was easy to anticipate the crisis in the energy and production model of European countries, especially those most dependent on Russian gas and oil. The United States can easily cope with sanctions on Russia. US trade and financial relations with Russia are irrelevant compared to those with China. Cutting off Russian gas supplies to Europe will sink the German economy, cause stagflation across the EU and weaken the euro's position against the dollar. Meanwhile, the US economy will be virtually unaffected and may even improve its trade balance with other countries as a result of the higher dollar. Without the need for military confrontation, sanctions on China on the same scale as those imposed on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine would provoke a global economic seismic shock that would drag the US into an unprecedented crisis.

⁹The US Census Bureau fixed the trade deficit with China increased by \$355.3bn the largest since the record \$418.2bn in 2018. The 2020 gap had been a 10-year low of \$310.3 billion. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com.mx/economia-exportaciones-de-eu-a-china-caen-en-diciembre-y-provocan-45000-mdd-de-deficit/>

¹⁰ China's portfolio of US government debt fell in May to \$980.8 billion, according to May data from the Treasury Department. In 2017, at the start of the trade war, the volume of dollars in Chinese hands was close to \$1.2 billion. Available at: <https://www.epe.es/es/mercados/20220729/deuda-eeuu-pierde-atractivo-china-14183821>

The effects of the Ukrainian war on Taiwan

There is no doubt that the war in Ukraine will affect perceptions of the People's Republic of China, especially in relation to its security and national rejuvenation project. Developments in the conflict in Ukraine will force the People's Republic of China to review its strategy in the South China Sea and especially in Taiwan. Meanwhile, strengthened relations between Moscow and Beijing may crystallise a worst-case scenario for the United States, a geostrategic alliance of the two great Eurasian powers.

In June 2022, Admiral John Aquilino, commander of the US Pacific Command, speaking at the think tank 'Foundation for Defense of Democracies', stated that the most worrying factor in the war in Ukraine is that the People's Republic of China and Russia have a policy of friendship without limits, which could place the world in an extremely dangerous moment.¹¹

A few days earlier, President Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, argued that an insufficient US response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine would send a message to other potential aggressors, including China, inviting them to do the same.¹²

Many commentaries and analyses have linked the war in Ukraine to a possible invasion of Taiwan. There is no reason to believe that there could be a relationship. In this context, Robert Gates, former US Secretary of Defence, noted that the likelihood of a full-scale Chinese invasion of Taiwan is very low, but warned that developments in the war in Ukraine could favour a more aggressive Chinese policy against Taiwan, which would encourage non-military actions aimed at increasing Beijing's influence over Taipei.¹³

In any case, even if Robert Gates' comment is sufficiently well-founded, the truth is that Chinese dynamics are not easy to predict and even less so at this point in time. Should the renewed party politburo and central committee emerging from the October 2022 congress come to the realisation that its strategy of progressive rise and influence is no longer adequate to achieve, by fait accompli, positions favourable to its vital interests, especially with regard to the South China Sea and Taiwan, there will undoubtedly be changes of direction.

¹¹ <https://adnamerica.com/ucrania/eeuu-dice-que-el-apoyo-sin-limites-de-china-rusia-amenaza-la-humanidad>

¹² https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3181999/us-security-adviser-says-hard-line-russia-needed-dissuade?utm_source=copy_link&utm_medium=share_widget&utm_campaign=3181999&module=inline&pgtype=article

¹³ <https://www.scottishdailyexpress.co.uk/news/world-news/russian-invasion-ukraine-prompts-concerns-27308679>

The war in Ukraine may lead the Central Military Committee to conclude that the invasion of Taiwan needs to move quickly, bringing all its military power into play from the outset. The aim would be to impose the occupation as a *fait accompli* in a matter of days. However, the complexity of the military operation and prior deployments could not go unnoticed. It would be foolish to contemplate the possibility of strategically surprising the United States and its allies with an amphibious operation of the magnitude necessary to occupy Taiwan.

However, it would not be impossible to surprise by using more limited and less ambitious military operations aimed at isolating Taiwan or occupying one of its islands in the South China Sea. We need not envisage a scenario of a complete blockade. A quarantine managed within a grey-zone 'Legal Warfare'¹⁴ effort to demonstrate a *de facto* exercise of sovereignty would be enough to gradually stifle the island's economy. The invasion of the important Taiwanese island of Taiping, the only one of the Spratley Islands where water has been discovered, or the Taiwanese archipelagos of the Matsu and Kirmen, located a few kilometres from the mainland, would be immediate and without any possible reaction without inducing an escalation.

Urgency as a problem.

Xi Jinping is not willing to postpone Taiwan's integration indefinitely. The previous political process involved renewing the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China every 10 years, a situation that allowed the historic mission of reunification to be passed on to the next leader. Changes introduced allowing for the unlimited renewal of mandates increase the danger. Xi Jinping will inevitably be tempted to identify his leadership with the historic destiny of a unified China.¹⁵

Meanwhile, a sense of urgency is emerging in the United States regarding the decisions and actions needed to prevent an assault on Taiwan. Retired US Admiral Philip Davidson, commander of the Pacific command until last year, has on several occasions set out his prognoses, which have become increasingly gloomy over time.

In 2021, appearing before the Senate, Admiral Davidson set a date after which the CCP's armed forces would have the capability to invade Taiwan. He pinpointed that he believed

¹⁴ War of laws.

¹⁵ The 21st National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party will be held in 2027, where Xi Jinping could revalidate his fourth term in office at the age of 72. Waiting until 2032 to achieve unification would mean forcing Xi Jinping to renew for a sixth term and reach the expected level of strength to be able to carry out the threat of invasion with sufficient guarantees of success at almost 80 years of age.

the threat would manifest itself during this decade, in fact he was more specific in stating that from 2027 the PLA would be in a position to launch the occupation. His statements were picked up by the press around the world.¹⁶ The date is no coincidence.

A new milestone was set at the CCP's annual plenary session in October 2020. August 2027 marks the centenary of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Chinese Communists seem to take anniversaries very seriously, so much so that they relate them to their achievements. The CCP said it wants to reach the centenary commemoration of its armed forces by fully modernising its military capabilities to meet future national defence needs. Xi Jinping underlined that achieving the goal of modernisation, on the day of the centenary celebration of the founding of the party's armed forces, is a relevant decision made by the CCP's Central Committee and the Central Military Commission, stressing that it is a task related to China's overall security and development.¹⁷ This decision brings forward the timetable set by the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2017 by eight years.

A little over a year later, Davidson himself rectified that "this is the decade of concern, particularly the period between now and 2027. I make that assessment because of the staggering improvements in Chinese military capabilities and capacities, the political timeline for Xi Jinping and the long-range economic challenges in China's future".¹⁸ The danger seems to anticipate even the expected completion of China's full military build-up.

The evident sense of urgency in the United States is clearly reflected in the views of some analysts. On 14 September 2022, *Foreign Affairs* magazine published an article entitled 'Time is running out to defend Taiwan: Why the Pentagon should focus on short-term deterrence'. One of its co-authors is Michèle Flournoy, the most senior woman in the history of the defence department.¹⁹ Of course the article is written by very well-informed people because they anticipate some of the details of President Biden's National Security Strategy (NSS). The anticipated content of the NSS highlights the urgent need for an

¹⁶ "I think the threat is manifest during this decade, in fact in the next six years." Available at: <https://news.usni.org/2021/03/09/davidson-china-could-try-to-take-control-of-taiwan-in-next-six-years> <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20210311/6299523/ee-uu-preve-invasion-china-taiwan-seis-anos.html> <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2021/03/10/6048b814fc6c83f06f8b45ba.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1230155.shtml>

¹⁸ <https://www.ft.com/content/0850eb67-1700-47c0-9dbf-3395b4e905fd>

¹⁹ Michèle Flournoy was Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (USDP) under President Barack Obama. The USDP is the chief of staff and principal adviser to the secretary and deputy secretary of defence. This office is appointed by the president with the advice and consent of the Senate.

accelerated strengthening of deterrence vis-à-vis China.²⁰ The authors also highlight a possible invasion of Taiwan within the next five years, identifying a window of opportunity for China between 2024 and 2027.

It is precisely in 2024 that the next presidential election will be held in the United States, where the polarisation of the United States could be a decisive source of weakness if Donald Trump were to run as a candidate. Xi may decide to occupy Taiwan because he understands that non-military efforts at reunification have run their course or because he believes the chances of success will diminish if he waits for US military capabilities to be fully deployed over the next decade.²¹

The danger of democratic stridency.

Competition between the major powers feeds a continuous stream of surprising and worrying news. US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's scheduled visit to Taiwan sparked a debate in the United States over its timing. Despite having majority support in the House, with the backing of both Democratic and Republican representatives, the White House did not hesitate to express its displeasure. Former President Trump's Republican circle was particularly critical of the decision. President Biden even stated that the defence department felt that the trip to Taiwan was "not a good idea at this time".²²

The trip by the second in line for the presidential succession to Formosa was compromising. No such high-profile US political representative has visited Taiwan in the last quarter of a century. Moreover, since the 'Tiananmen massacre' in 1991, Nancy Pelosi has been particularly belligerent about human rights violations in the People's Republic of China. Mainland China did not expect any polite words from an activist House

²⁰ "The good news is that the Biden administration's new National Defence Strategy, transmitted to Congress in March and to be released in unclassified form in the coming months, reflects the need to move with greater speed and agility to strengthen deterrence in both the near and long term. The strategy reinforces the focus on a more aggressive China as the United States' primary threat and emphasizes a new framework of "integrated deterrence", drawing on all instruments of national power as well as the contributions of U.S. allies and partners to deter future conflicts that are likely to be fought across multiple regions and domains".

²¹ https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/time-running-out-defend-taiwan?utm_medium=newsletters&utm_source=fatoday&utm_campaign=Time%20Is%20Running%20Out%20to%20Defend%20Taiwan&utm_content=20220914&utm_term=FA%20Today%20-%20112017

²² 'President Joe Biden saying the Department of Defense believes such a trip "is not a good idea at this time".' Available at:

<https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-62401777>

speaker, who for 30 years has never missed an opportunity to raise her voice in denouncing communist repression in China.²³

The People's Republic of China had warned that there would be a strong response if Pelosi travels to the island, which Beijing considers an inalienable part of China's territory. In response to a journalist, Zhao Lijian, deputy director of the information department of China's foreign ministry, told a press conference that: "If the United States challenges China's red line, it will be met with resolute countermeasures. The US side must bear all consequences."²⁴

The planned video conference between Biden and Xi in late July was threatened with suspension by the Chinese side. The meeting finally took place. Xi insisted on recalling that 'the historical ins and outs of the Taiwan question are crystal clear, both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to one and the same China'. Once again, mainland China is repeating a message without possible interpretation, the political pillar of China's relations with the rest of the world and, of course, with the United States, with whom it has three joint communiqués on the issue. China opposes not only Taiwan's independence but also any outside interference in what it considers a rogue province. Xi did not miss the opportunity to once again lecture, 'those who play with fire will perish by it'.²⁵

US defence analysts anticipated a strong reaction from the Chinese Communist Party as a result of the visit, which could lead to the establishment of a no-fly zone over Taiwan and other escalatory military measures to increase tensions. The visit at the beginning of August was certainly not timely.

The 20th national congress of the Chinese Communist Party is just around the corner in the autumn. Against this backdrop, where the Taiwan issue will inevitably come up, US foreign policy towards China is strident and in no case a whimsical mistake. It is the result of democratic principles that establish the separation of powers and periodic elections. Open political debate does not facilitate the planned synchronisation of messages that are fully consistent with a long-term strategy.

²³ "The decisiveness with which the Chinese authorities decided to put an end to the Tiananmen protest earned them almost global condemnation, including that of a Congresswoman from the state of California, Nancy Pelosi, who had travelled to Beijing as part of a congressional committee. Pelosi and three colleagues unfurled a small banner that read: "To those who died for democracy in China".' Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-62401777>

²⁴ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/xwfw/lxjzdh/202207/t20220731_10730922.html

²⁵ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/zxxx/202207/t20220729_10729618.html



A few days after Ms Pelosi's return, the People's Liberation Army began the largest military exercises in its history in the South China Sea around Taiwan. The deployment, fire drills and areas of operations point to a rehearsal of a possible sea and air blockade of the island. Taiwan's defence ministry interpreted it in this sense. PLA naval air exercises imposed sea and airspace closures in six areas around Taiwan, which were declared target practice areas. Some of them are only a few kilometres from the island of Formosa.²⁶

For the first time, the PLA has launched missiles over Taiwanese airspace. Five missiles fell in Japan's exclusive economic zone, prompting the Japanese government to

²⁶ One of the areas off-limits to military exercises was only 20 kilometres from the coast of Kaohsiung, the main city in the south of the island. Available at: https://www.roc-taiwan.org/es_es/post/30282.html

complain. Meanwhile, Taiwan's military defence forces remained on high alert and exercised in response to an attack.

In the first half of 2022, President Biden stated three times that the US would intervene militarily if China tries to take Taiwan by force. The president's statements call into question the deliberate ambiguity that Washington has traditionally maintained on the issue. On all three occasions, the White House was quick to reinterpret the president's words, concluding that in no case does it imply a change in US policy. Inevitably, the words are out there. Three times is neither a coincidence nor a mistake by a long-serving president, even more so when it requires the intervention of his cabinet to re-edit the message. Biden hit back in September 2022 by bluntly stating on CBS's *60 Minutes* that the US would support Taiwan militarily if China attempted an invasion.

To finalise the new US position on Taiwan, the Senate passed a bill called 'The Taiwan Policy Act' on 15 September 2022. The content of the proposals is a decisive first step, redirecting the traditional US position of strategic uncertainty in Taiwan by strengthening mutual relations.

The content of the Taiwan Policy Act represents a change in language and terms, to which Chinese diplomacy attaches so much importance.²⁷ In the security field, in addition to increasing military aid and funding, the secretary of defence is ordered to review and report on war plans to defend Taiwan from aggression by the People's Liberation Army.²⁸ It also asks the administration for a programme of economic sanctions in the event of escalation around Taiwan, whether as a result of a blockade or an occupation of territories under its sovereignty.²⁹

Approval of the US Senate bill could be interpreted by People's China as a revision of the one-China doctrine. In this case, the Chinese Communist Party would understand that

²⁷ Establishes de facto diplomatic treatment for Taiwan equivalent to other foreign governments. Directs the Secretary of State to negotiate the renaming of the "Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office" to the "Taiwan Representative Office" and adjust all references accordingly. Requires Senate confirmation for the Director of the American Institute in Taiwan's (Taipei office) and bestows the title "Representative" for such office".

[https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SBS%20Taiwan%20Policy%20Act%20FINAL%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SBS%20Taiwan%20Policy%20Act%20FINAL%20(1).pdf)

²⁸ Directs the Secretary of Defense to review and report war plans to defend Taiwan from People Liberation Army (PLA) aggression including an assessment of: (1) Taiwan's current and near-term capabilities to deter such aggression; (2) a strategy of denial to defend Taiwan, (3) comprehensive assessments of risks to the United States; (4) the near-term likelihood of such aggression; and (5) a list of necessary military capabilities for Taiwan that enable a strategy of denial.

[https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SBS%20Taiwan%20Policy%20Act%20FINAL%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SBS%20Taiwan%20Policy%20Act%20FINAL%20(1).pdf)

²⁹In response to the People's Republic of China's (PRC) escalating hostile actions in or against Taiwan, the President shall impose and report on sanctions on Government of the PRC officials including Chinese Community Party leadership, on at least three major PRC financial institutions, on PRC economics sectors.

[https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SBS%20Taiwan%20Policy%20Act%20FINAL%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SBS%20Taiwan%20Policy%20Act%20FINAL%20(1).pdf)

the status quo established between the two great powers in 1979 with the passage of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), which was signed into law by US President Jimmy Carter, has been changed. The consequence would be a military intervention by the People's Republic of China in the Taiwan Strait.

The Brussels summit declaration and the approval of NATO's new strategic concept in Madrid do not facilitate détente. The UK is adding fuel to the fire. British Prime Minister, Liz Truss, newly arrived at 10 Downing Street, dismissed the need to choose between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security as a false dilemma, arguing for a global expansion of NATO to help defend the region's democracies, including Taiwan.³⁰

Without eliminating the known effects of US democratic stridency, the messages and actions undoubtedly have to do with increased concern associated with the perceived risk by Taipei, Tokyo, Seoul, other allies and Washington itself that Beijing may attempt to invade Taiwan in the near future. We may be living a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Against this backdrop, Kevin Rudd, former prime minister and foreign minister of Australia, has published a book entitled *The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China*, where he argues for the necessity and possibility of avoiding military confrontation.³¹

There is therefore more than a possibility of open war between China and the United States. To avoid it, according to Rudd, we must interact, knowing that there is an antagonistic worldview, an incompatible ideological and political foundation, an abysmal cultural distance, and complex historical grievances embedded in China's memory. Disaster can only be avoided if both sides are able to understand their mutual obligation to refrain from imposing a situation that would force the other side to betray its vital interests. The formula is a 'managed strategic competition' relationship.³²

³⁰The U.K. rejects "the false choice between Euro-Atlantic security and Indo-Pacific security". "I mean that NATO must have a global outlook, ready to tackle global threats." "We need to pre-empt threats in the Indo-Pacific, working with allies like Japan and Australia to ensure that the Pacific is protected. We must ensure that democracies like Taiwan are able to defend themselves". Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/liz-truss-nato-taiwan-protect/>

³¹ RUDD, Kevin (2022) *The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China*. PublicAffairs, New York.

³² 'Managed strategic competition'. Kevin Rudd studied history and Asian languages at the Australian National University (ANU) and learned Mandarin Chinese. After several stays in Taiwan, he began a diplomatic career, rising to the post of first secretary at the embassy in Beijing.

Conclusion

The dynamics of competition between the great powers, in a scenario of rapid and accelerating change, are volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. International actors have very few certainties that allow them to anticipate possible futures. The scarcity of certainties increases the value of the few that are available, and they need to be identified in order to build the best possible future.

Our relationship with certainty is often uncomfortable. It is precisely the certainties that often reveal the limits of today's actions and set the pace of change in international relations. Only a possible future can be a desirable future. A future is of course not possible if its price is unacceptable or we cannot finance it.

In Eastern Europe, the certainty that Russia would not accept Ukraine for NATO membership cannot be disputed. Joining NATO does not happen overnight and requires a potentially lengthy adaptation process for all applicants. The further Ukraine moves forward in the integration process, the more pressing the pressure would be from Russian leaders to consider the option of open war. There is no point in debating who the aggressor is, we all know that. Perhaps what needs to be discussed is what has or has not been done to avoid war and to what extent ignoring the continuous warning signs has been a serious mistake.

In the Western Pacific, the certainty that Taiwan's declaration of independence or an extension of the US Taiwan Relations Act to provide defence guarantees will mean war with mainland China is absolute.

Open war between great powers is possible if the few certainties available are not considered. The immense pain and destruction that would result from a direct military confrontation between great powers can be avoided. However, the major powers are obliged to recognise and accept the constraints imposed by the limits of their competitors. Opposing parties can accept outcomes less than their preferred outcome, but pretending to coexist by forcing another major power to give up its vital interests is not possible.

A peace that is unbearable for a great power will sooner or later end in a costly and tragic war. *Qui totum vult totum perdit*³³ How can we not fall on our knees before the altar of this certainty?

³³ He who wants everything loses everything.

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