

What consequences to be expected from conflict between China and the United States over Taiwan?

by Hugues Eudeline

Resumé

Ett av Kinas viktigaste mål är att återinförliva Taiwan. Samtidigt har president Biden klart lovat att försvara Taiwan vid ett kinesiskt angrepp. Enligt amerikanska bedömare ökar nu risken för ett anfall. Detta skulle kunna ske genom en invasion stödd av starka flygstriidskrafter. Men operationsområdet skulle vara mycket större och innefatta såväl Arktis som Indiska Oceanen. Kinas främsta allierade skulle vara Ryssland och Nordkorea. Mot detta skulle USA kunna samla en stor koalition av såväl asiatiska som europeiska stater bl a Japan, Korea såväl som Storbritannien och Frankrike. Resultatet skulle bli ett storkrig som omfattar hela det norra halvklotet. Risken för användning av kärnvapen skulle vare överhängande.

IN HIS OPENING speech at the 20th Chinese Communist Party Congress on October 16, 2022, President Xi Jinping spoke about Taiwan several times. He said of Taiwan, "We will never promise to renounce the use of force and we reserve the option of taking all measures necessary¹." The political objective, i.e. the highest level of war², is thus clearly reaffirmed as it has always been since 1949. A month earlier, during a television broadcast on September 18, 2022, President Joe Biden, when asked to clarify if he meant that unlike in Ukraine, U.S. forces—American men and women—would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion, Biden replied: "Yes."

A large-scale operation could be imminent. If China were to attack Taiwan before the war in Ukraine ended under such conditions that the resulting peace would be long-lasting, the likelihood of the conflict spreading

to the whole Northern Hemisphere would be real. It would then oppose the triple union of nuclear autocracies (China, Russia, North Korea) to the alliance of democracies under the aegis of the United States of America in NATO and with its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific.

China is keen to regain the position of the world's leading economic power that it held in 1820 and which it feels it has lost through "a century of humiliation" imposed by Japan and the great European powers of the time, including Russia. As a mainland power, it was systematically defeated when it faced their naval forces, particularly during the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-5, after which Taiwan became a Japanese province until 1945. Since then, Taiwan has always remained under the control of the Republic of China (ROC), which moved there when Mao Zedong took power on the main-

land and created the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Lacking a navy, he was then unable to pursue his advantage and take a number of islands, including the main one, Formosa—more commonly known as Taiwan—on which the defeated Kuomintang troops under Marshal Chiang Kai-shek took refuge.

On January 5, 1950, U.S. President Harry Truman had the following statement "The United States Government has always stood for good faith in international relations. Traditional United States policy toward China, as exemplified in the open-door policy, called for international respect for the territorial integrity of China. This principle was recently reaffirmed in the United Nations General Assembly Resolution of December 8, 1949, which, in part, calls on all states to refrain from (a) seeking to acquire spheres of influence or to create controlled foreign regimes within the territory of China; (b) seeking to obtain special rights or privileges within the territory of China."

He changed his policy on June 27, 1950, due to the attack on South Korea, and the United States signed the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty (SAMDT) with the ROC on March 3, 1951, which would be abrogated after the People's Republic of China replaced the Republic of China at the United Nations.

Informal relations have been maintained with Taiwan since January 1, 1979, when the Carter administration established diplomatic relations with the PRC and severed diplomatic ties with the autonomous ROC, over which the PRC claims sovereignty. The Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979 provides a legal basis for this unofficial bilateral relationship. The TRA does not require the United States to defend Taiwan, but states that U.S. policy is to maintain the ability to do so,³ creating strategic ambiguity about

U.S. actions in the event of a PRC attack on Taiwan.

This continuity explains U.S. support during the Taiwan Strait crises of 1955, 1958, and 1995/6, as well as the 2022 crisis following the visit of then-U.S. House Speaker Pelosi.

As of today, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has become the world's second-largest economy and may become the largest. Its navy is on the heels of that of the United States of America in terms of displacement and exceeds it in terms of the number of units. Its military forces, concentrated along its coastlines, outnumber those of Taiwan and outnumber U.S. forces in the Pacific theater due to their global dispersion.

Because of the growing opposition of the island's population to (re) unification⁴ with the PRC, the question is not whether a conflict will occur, but rather when, how, where, and who would participate? The answer to the United States will depend on the administration that governs it at that time and on the alliance and partnership treaties it enters into in the Indo-Pacific theater and, more broadly, in NATO and with the European Union.

When?

It is the People's Republic of China that will have the initiative to trigger a conflict, as Taiwan has renounced for decades its desire to regain power on the mainland. While the deadline for this has been clearly defined by Xi Jinping, recent reports suggest that it may happen soon, if not imminently.

Unlike Western-style democracies, which are subject to short terms of office, the Chinese have the ability to set their plans in the long term, both historically and in the future. President Xi Jinping has announced that he wants to achieve the "Chinese dream" in 2049, which implies that the Taiwanese

problem must first be resolved. The furthest deadline is thus set. In order not to be constrained by the vagaries of domestic politics, Xi granted himself full powers for an unlimited period at the 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. Born in 1953, his age allows him to hope to accomplish a good part of his program before his death. In particular, he could complete by 2035 the expansion and modernization of the armed forces—mainly the maritime forces (navy, coast guard and maritime militia), which are essential for crossing the Taiwan Strait.

China could then be the world's leading military power and outperform the United States both numerically and technologically, which could then decide not to confront a stronger country. Under these conditions, without American military support, and in view of the overwhelming difference in capabilities, the attachment of Taiwan to the PRC could take place without a fight. This solution is certainly the one Xi would prefer, but it would be without counting on the industrial, research, organizational, development and innovation capabilities that the United States has always demonstrated in all the major wars it has had to wage in the 20th century. It has also always been able to form ad hoc alliances that have proven to be effective.

The timing of operations will determine the readiness of both Chinese and opposing forces. Statements from the relevant authorities keep bringing that time closer.

- On March 9, 2021, Admiral Philip Davidson, commander of the Indo-Pacific theater, in a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, noted the massive buildup of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the region and its increasing production rate. He estimated that China could attempt to annex Taiwan

"within this decade, in fact, within the next six years," or by 2027.

- Taiwan published the "ROC National Defense Report 2021" on November 23, 2021. It noted in its foreword that "the PRC's military preparations, realistic combat training and exercises, intimidation and actions targeted at Taiwan are expected to be intensified, posing a grave threat to the security in the Taiwan Strait." On December 27, 2022, the President of Taiwan announced the extension of mandatory conscript training from four months to one year. It will be effective in 2024.
- On October 19, 2022, Admiral Mike Gilday, the U.S. Navy's chief of naval operations, stated that Beijing could invade Taiwan as early as 2023. He clarified that his assessment was based not just on Chinese President Xi Jinping's speeches, but on "how the Chinese behave and what they do." The comments came days after U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Beijing was preparing for reunification with the island "on a much faster timeline."
- More recently, on January 27, 2023, Air Force General Mike Minihan, commander of the U.S. Air Mobility Command, instructed his officers to prepare for a war with China within two years, i.e. by 2025. laid out his premise in terms of geopolitical logic, as tensions between China and Taiwan continue to mount. "[Chinese President] Xi [Jinping] secured his third term and set his war council in October 2022, Taiwan's presidential elections are in 2024 and will offer Xi a reason. United States' presidential elections are in 2024 and will offer Xi a distracted America

An aggravating factor, other than military, is likely to intervene in the decision-making

process. China is facing domestic political problems that are generating social instability that could lead to criticism of the regime. The government's "zero covid" strategy to control the pandemic led to the prolonged closure of borders and strict containment of the population. The resulting health dictatorship was very unpopular as television images from the World Cup soccer tournament showed hundreds of thousands of unmasked fans in Qatar's stadiums. GDP growth of only 3% in 2022 is far below what was expected in normal times. According to the IMF, it should be 5.2% in 2023, which remains low for the needs of the PRC. In addition, there is a real estate crisis and a very high unemployment rate among young graduates. On December 7, 2022, the government, under pressure from the street, was forced to abruptly lift the restrictive traffic measures, while the population was not sufficiently vaccinated. The number of deaths that resulted is deliberately hidden.

Memories of the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989 are still vivid in the minds of the communist leadership, and the risk of a nationalistic push forward should the situation deteriorate further could lead to a precipitous attack on Taiwan, whatever the cost.

How? Initial attack and response

China continues to develop its weaponry at an unprecedented rate. However, equipment and weapons alone are not enough to prepare its armed forces. It needs trained men to man its warships and maintain its weapons systems. It is doubtful that it will be able to do this when its navy, for one, has never seen high intensity combat and does not have a sufficient pool of well-trained sailors capable of arming task force capable

warships and fighting in all types of combat (anti-aircraft, anti-submarine, mine warfare, amphibious...). The PLAN only began sailing away from the Chinese coast in 2008, since when it has maintained a group of two frigates and a supply tanker in the Indian Ocean to fight piracy and above all to learn to last away from its bases. It trains regularly with Russia, but very little with other navies. Its combat effectiveness is doubtful and can only improve with time.

Attacking Taiwan at short notice is therefore particularly risky, and failure is not an acceptable option for Xi Jinping. Only a war with limited objectives can be won under these conditions. It would be a matter of avoiding U.S. intervention while taking territorial pledges in the form of islands not covered by an agreement. These are the island of Taiping in the Spratlys and those close to the mainland, Quemoy, Wuchiu and Matsu, which could not be conquered during the first three Taiwan Strait crises, in 1955, 1958 and 1996. Such an operation would have the advantage of not having to cross the Taiwan Strait under anti-ship missile fire and the invisible threat of defensive minefields with which the Republic of China's forces are amply equipped. Shallow, 65 nautical miles wide, or four times the size of the Strait of Pas de Calais, it is the island's main natural protection.

Taiwan's response would probably also be limited to avoid any escalation, but could be particularly damaging. It would carefully avoid PRC territory and thus the mainland. Long-range missile strikes could render unusable the nine PLAN-occupied infilled artificial islands in the Spratly Archipelago whose ownership is disputed, particularly Fiery Cross reef, Subi reef and Mischief shoal. These three naval airbases have runways of more than 3,000 meters in length. The aircraft that use them help protect China's stra-

tegic bastion in the South China Sea, where their nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) patrol, and can operate without refueling over all the straits of the first chain of islands that provide access to China's maritime approaches and are vital to its economy. Making these naval air bases unusable would pose an existential threat to China by weakening its deterrence as well as its maritime supplies.

Another possibility would be a maritime blockade of Taiwan. This is an act of war that would not leave the United States idle and could quickly escalate into a war with unlimited political objectives. Taiwan's response initially may be identical to the previous one, which would allow U.S. naval forces to conduct a blockade of China without having to strike Chinese military bases themselves.

A large-scale operation would require the prior destruction by Chinese missiles of Taiwan's ports, air bases and land force concentrations. Amphibious operations would be conducted by taking advantage of the very large number of units of all tonnages available to the navy (360 ships), coast guard (250) and maritime militia (> 400), and would conduct swarm attacks to saturate Taiwan's anti-ship defenses. A surprise effect would be possible by having the ships sail independently, drowned in the intense maritime traffic and without AIS (Automatic Identification System), until they make coordinated groupings near the landing beaches and sail together towards them. Since 1974, militia ships have been experienced in this type of tactic, which allowed them to take some of the Paracels Islands in Vietnam and many of the Spratlys shoals and reefs in the Philippines.

The large ships specialized in power projection (aircraft carriers) and force projection (amphibious Assault ships...) accom-

panied by container ships and ro-ro ships fitted out for the occasion would intervene on the eastern coast of the island, which is more rugged and therefore less exposed to the risk of mines. Their airborne resources – which would join those coming from the mainland – would allow troops to be airlifted to the heights overlooking the few places on the coast where the landing craft could be landed. The latter would land the marines trained for this type of operation. The Marine force should gradually increase from 8,000 to 100,000 men. They were 40,000 in 2021.

China would gain air control by simultaneously destroying Taiwan's runways with long-range missiles. It would be supported by the PLAAF's (air force) overwhelming numerical superiority. Close air support aircraft could then focus on detecting and destroying camouflaged land-sea missile batteries as they were deployed.

Where? The theater of operations

The theater of operations is primarily maritime, since it involves seas bounded by a chain of islands and sea lines of communication (SLOCs) essential to maritime trade. The 21st century Maritime Silk Roads initiative launched by Xi Jinping in 2013 is designed to boost the PRC's economy by developing a network of ports controlled by Chinese companies with dual logistics activities (civilian and military). In 2018, a white paper was published defining China's Arctic policy and in particular its desire to add a northern branch to the BRI, the "Polar Silk Road" to take advantage of global warming. The sea route to Germany is 30% shorter than the usual one through the Indian Ocean. This Northeast Route runs along the northern coast of Russia, which is gradually being

opened up. Eventually, Russia will no longer need to continue to fight as it has done for centuries without success to gain access to the warm seas; the warm seas will come to it. And it intends to take advantage of this by controlling its exploitation.

The alliance with China praised by President Putin in 2022 would therefore only be an alliance of circumstances. It would not last, confronted in the long term with the divergent interests of the two countries both on the sea in the Arctic and on land with the desire of China to recover its land conquered by Russia during the "century of humiliation" and which it needs for its population ten times more numerous.

The main theater of maritime operations thus includes:

- The Indian Ocean with the three main straits that give access to it and near which China has bases or military support facilities (Bab el Mandeb and Djibouti; Ormuz and Gwadar; Malacca and Pyu Kyu);
- The Pacific (including the seas within the first island chain);
- The Arctic Ocean.

With China's commercial and fishing interests spanning all seas, it is taking economic and operational control of certain overseas merchant ports that are critical to the smooth operation of its maritime activities. They constitute what is sometimes called the "string of pearls" and are also logistical support facilities for its navy. With few of its combat fleets operating far from its maritime approaches and the Indo-Pacific, the rest of the world ocean is a secondary theater of operations. It would regain importance if Russia were involved, as it has bases in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean (Tartus and Hmeimin in Syria) and the Red Sea (Port Sudan) in particular.

Who? Possible alliances on both sides

China has two main allies, Russia and North Korea. All three are nuclear powers and autocracies. Together they constitute a colossal continental block and the territorial continuity of their coasts, leaving aside South Korea—a true geostrategic island—runs almost continuously from the South China Sea to the Barents Sea.

Taiwan, which is not represented at the UN and is recognized by very few states, has no formal allies. A U.S. law, the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, however, provides a legal basis for this unofficial bilateral relationship. The TRA does not require the U.S. to defend Taiwan, but states that U.S. policy is to maintain the ability to do so, creating strategic ambiguity about U.S. actions in the event of a PRC attack on Taiwan. Unlike the PRC or Korea, the ROC has very good relations with its former colonizer, Japan, which it is grateful to for modernizing it. The Japanese island of Yonaguni is only 60 NM away from Taiwan.

The United States has established alliances with five Pacific Rim countries: Thailand, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, and the Philippines. It has established partnerships with India, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Singapore and Mongolia.

Due to the growing importance of maritime flows through the China Seas, more and more countries and institutions are establishing strategies for the Indo-Pacific region. They are economic or military, or both. The following list is not exhaustive, but it highlights the growing awareness of the geopolitical importance of the region.

Before 2020, in the EU, only France had developed an Indo-Pacific strategy, based primarily on the fact that it considers itself

a resident power in the region. Germany and the Netherlands followed in September and November 2020. Together, the three member states launched a debate at the EU level with the aim of adopting a European position on the Indo-Pacific. Despite some notable differences in the three approaches, they agree on the economic and strategic importance of the region for Europe and share fundamental interests and objectives.

- November 13, 2020: In the Indo-Pacific, an "inclusive" French strategy. It promotes a balanced position between Washington and Beijing.
- September 15, 2021: The United States, the United Kingdom and Australia forge an AUKUS military alliance to counter China. They seek to bring India into the alliance.
- September 16, 2021: The European Union's Indo-Pacific strategy to counter the trilateral AUKUS pact. Coincidentally, it was only a few hours after the announcement of the AUKUS alliance between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States that the European Union presented its strategy in Brussels to position itself and strengthen ties with the countries bordering the Indian and Pacific Oceans.
- January 10, 2022: Germany strengthens its commitment to the Indo-Pacific region. Since the September elections, two important announcements have been made regarding Germany's future activity in the region. In November, the head of the German Navy, Vice Admiral Kay-Achim Schönbach, said he would send ships to the Indo-Pacific region every two years in an effort to increase cooperation with Japan, Australia and the United States, and to advocate for peace, freedom of navigation and the maintenance of rules-based international order in the South China Sea.
- In January 2022, Japan and Australia entered into a bilateral "Reciprocal Access Agreement" (JA-RAA), a defense and security pact that allows reciprocal access between the Australian Defense Forces and the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. This strategic partnership between Japan and Australia is part of their underlying common goal of securing their shared strategic interests aligned in the Indo-Pacific through an assertive foreign policy to counter China's military assertiveness, identified by both countries as the uncertainty facing Japan and Australia in the Indo-Pacific...
- February 24, 2022: France's new Indo-Pacific strategy is identical to the first one but modifies relations with Australia. "Australia's decision in September 2021, without prior consultation or warning, to break off the partnership of trust with France that included the Future Submarine Program (FSP), has led to a re evaluation of the past strategic partnership the two countries. France will pursue bilateral cooperation with Australia on a case by case basis, according to its national interests and those of regional partners. France intends to maintain close relations with the United States, an ally and major player in the Indo Pacific, and to strengthen coordination, including on issues raised by the announcement of the AUKUS agreement."
- May 23, 2022: U.S. President Joe Biden announces in Tokyo, the launch of a new Asia-Pacific economic partnership with 13 initial participating countries, including the United States and Japan. The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework

(IPEF) is not a free-trade agreement, but provides for greater integration among its member countries in four key areas: the digital economy, supply chains, green energy and anti-corruption. The IPEF initially comprises 13 countries: the United States, Japan, India and Australia—the four states that make up the “Quad” diplomatic format, as well as Brunei, South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

- 27 November 2022: Canada launches its Indo-Pacific strategy: It includes specific strategic objective Promote peace, resilience and security
 - Enhanced Defense Presence and Contribution.
 - Strengthened Public Safety and Security.
 - Security Partnerships and Capacity-Building.
 - Cybersecurity and Digital Technology Diplomacy.
- January 11, 2023: The United Kingdom and Japan sign the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA). It is a landmark defense agreement detailing an “unwavering commitment” to the security of the Indo-Pacific region as the two partner nations seek to address Chinese threats in the region. The Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) means London and Tokyo are able to “plan and conduct more complex and larger-scale military exercises and deployments” focused on the Indo-Pacific region, according to the British government, while accelerating defense and security cooperation.

Other specific agreements link certain Pacific states to each other (see Appendix).

A U.S. response scenario with its Allies and Partners

In the event of unlimited war, but without the use of nuclear weapons, China’s maritime approaches in the China and Yellow Seas would be entirely under threat from Chinese armed forces practicing an AD/A2 (Anti-Access/Area Denial) strategy. With all PLA bases located there (with the notable exception of Djibouti), the entire Chinese navy would be in the immediate vicinity of its arsenals and support facilities, while the allied forces would be far from theirs, in particular the U.S. Navy, which—and this is an aggravating factor—lacks tankers. However, the latter would have bases in Guam, Japan (Yokosuka, etc.) and the Philippines (if they could be made operational in time.)

Access by allied forces to the Chinese maritime approaches located west of the first island chain would be very risky, if not impossible. Only nuclear attack submarines could enter the South China Sea to monitor the activities of the SSBNs present in the “bastion.” The East China and Yellow Seas are too shallow—and therefore subject to the mine threat—to conduct prolonged underwater operations.

On the other hand, in order to isolate China’s maritime approaches, Chinese forces could be prevented from leaving these seas by blocking the straits of the first line of islands. This would be done initially by minefields and preemptively entrenched forces on land (including the new U.S. Marine Littoral Regiments) in coordination with the new Marine Corps being formed in the Japanese Army. They would be equipped with anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles, as well as drones, which have been proven effective in the Black Sea.

Allied nuclear submarines patrolling the deep waters of the Pacific would form the second line of defense.

The closure of the straits would be completed by a third, more distant layer, composed of large surface ships armed with cruise and anti-aircraft area missiles.

Aircraft carriers would support Taiwan at a stand-off range from the Chinese air force, although they would still be under threat from hypersonic anti-ship missiles (DF-17, DF-26...) whose effectiveness has not been demonstrated. Aircraft from bases in CONUS, Hawaii, Japan—if it has joined the United States—would also intervene. It should be noted that the chances of survival of land bases to long-range missile strikes, perfectly positioned, would probably be less than that of aircraft carriers in permanent movement if the Chinese observation satellites are blinded.

The blockade of China could then be completed by the selective closure of the Strait of Hormuz to ships carrying oil bound for China. This could be a favorable moment to control Iran, an objective ally of China and a declared adversary of the United States. Oil and gas pipelines through Myanmar would be blocked by taking control of the sea terminals of the Kyauk Pyu pipelines in Myanmar. Finally, Taiwanese long-range missile strikes would cut off the land-based tubes bringing gas from Russia overland.

This would make China's energy blockade virtually watertight. The country has insufficient reserves and domestic production in the medium term.

Its industry, unable to import raw materials and export manufactured goods, would not function, generating social instability that even the strong nationalism of the population might not be enough to calm.

The outline of this scenario is obviously drawn in broad strokes. Its only ambition

is to determine the extension that the conflict could take. It could be developed in stages. The sole mining of the straits with short-lived mines such as those used by the Americans to mine the port of Haiphong by plane during the Vietnam War, in full view of the North Vietnamese, was perfectly effective, traffic having been interrupted for the desired time, the fields being refreshed as necessary.

Conclusion

A conflict between the PRC and the ROC could not be limited to operations localized to the Taiwan Strait and the islands that make up the latter. Through the interplay of alliances and interests, it would drag the world's major economic and maritime powers into the turmoil.

On June 29, 2022, NATO unveiled its new Strategic Concept. The event is important because the document replaces one published in 2010, before the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. It is especially important because, for the first time, it takes into account the Chinese threat and that South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand participated in this summit as countries concerned about Beijing's aims in the Pacific.

This comes in response to Vladimir Putin's statement on February 4, 2022 from Beijing that "the new relationship between China and Russia is superior to the political and military alliances of the Cold War era. Since the agreement was not disclosed, it is impossible to judge the extent of their rapprochement.

Since China does not share a border with any of the NATO countries, it is necessary to leave behind an overly 'earthly' logic and to replace it with a geostrategic analysis on a global scale in order to take the measure of the threat that it represents.

In the space of 45 years, the PRC has become a leading maritime power. Its commercial, fishing and war fleets now crisscross the entire world ocean, and it is acquiring control of more and more ports on all continents. It is through the sea that the Chinese economy has been able to develop. It is thanks to the freedom of navigation that it receives the supplies of raw materials and energy that its industries need and that the flows of finished products that its factories manufacture leave. And it is also to protect this world trade and, more generally, its interests and its citizens overseas that the PRC is building a formidable naval power that is growing at a rate unknown in the world until now.

However, it is clear that the capabilities of such a fleet, composed of power projection vessels (aircraft carriers, aircraft carriers and cruise missile cruisers) and force projection vessels (amphibious assault ships, landing ships, etc.), far exceed the support needs of its merchant navy and its expatriates. It is to this strategic competition, which concerns the PRC in particular, that NATO intends to respond by noting⁵: 'The People's Republic of China's (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values. The PRC employs a broad range of political, economic and military tools to increase its global footprint and project power, while remaining opaque about its strategy, intentions and military build-up. The PRC's malicious hybrid and cyber operations and its confrontational rhetoric and disinformation target Allies and harm Alliance security. The PRC seeks to control key technological and industrial sectors, critical infrastructure, and strategic materials and supply chains. It uses its economic leverage to create strategic dependencies and enhance its influence. It strives to subvert the rules-based interna-

tional order, including in the space, cyber and maritime domains.'

Now that President Xi Jinping has cemented his place as head of the Chinese Communist Party and state and granted himself powers at least equal to those of Mao Zedong, he is ignoring the maxim of his wise predecessor Deng Xiaoping, the father of China's economic recovery: 'Hide your strength, bide your time.' Confident of his military might, he is now threatening both economically and militarily, forcing the world to fear him and arm itself.

Its alliance with Russia, which is waging a war of aggression in Ukraine, is worrying.

These two great emerging powers, very different but complementary, form a colossal continental bloc. Both are permanent members of the UN Security Council and are also nuclear powers.

Leaning against each other on their common land border, they face the same adversary, the United States of America, as well as its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific and the North Atlantic, which tend to merge under the aegis of the former. Both are allied with North Korea, another nuclear power led by a megalomaniacal and threatening autocrat who seems impervious to the concept of nuclear deterrence.

If China were to attack Taiwan before the war in Ukraine had ended in such a way that the resulting peace would be lasting, the likelihood of the conflict spreading to the Northern Hemisphere would be real. It would then pit the triple union of nuclear autocracies (China, Russia, North Korea) against the alliance of democracies around the United States of America in NATO and its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific.

The same would be true after an unsatisfactory peace process for Russia, which could see a new window of opportunity to resume the fight against the West.

Iran might choose to also jump on the bandwagon.

This could then be an opportunity for the United States and its Israeli ally to strike at Iran's nuclear industry. As a major supplier of hydrocarbons to China and weapons to Russia, it would be a matter of preventing its access to nuclear weapons before this threatening theocracy acquires them and makes the world even more unstable.

The threat of the use of nuclear weapons would be real and could lead to a rise to extremes.

The author is Captain (retd) in the French navy and holds a Ph d. He is a corresponding member of the Royal Swedish Naval Academy.

Appendix

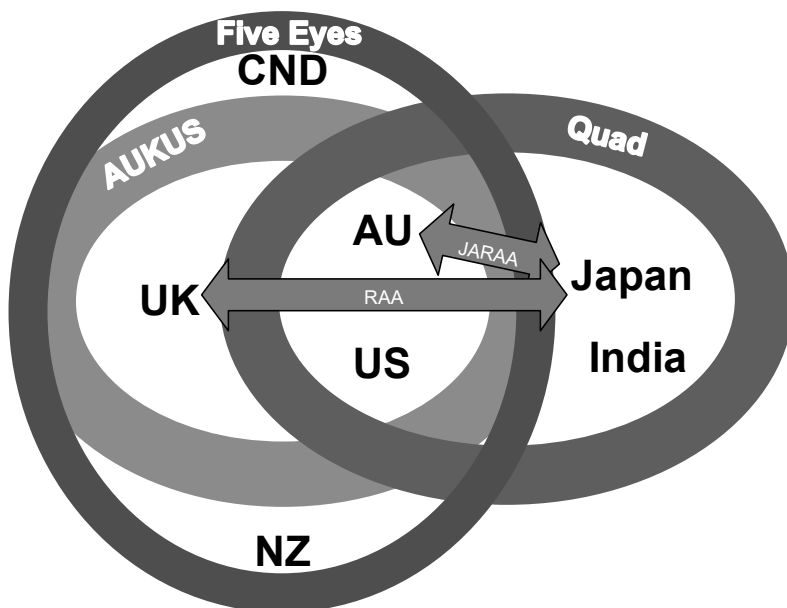


Fig. Some Indo-Pacific Alliances.

Notes

1. A law called "Anti-secession" was even promulgated about Taiwan by the president at the time, Hu Jintao, on March 14, 2005. It is still in force.
2. Strategists recognize four levels of war. The highest level is the political level; it is that of the choices by which the political objectives to be achieved are fixed. This level is above the strategic level, which determines the means (military or other) that will be used to achieve these goals. Operations (or the operative level) constitute the highest level of force management, while tactics is the lowest.
3. TRA "Declares that in furtherance of the principle of maintaining peace and stability in the Western Pacific area, the United States shall make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capacity as determined by the President and the Congress."
4. The Republic of China rejects the term "reunification" on the grounds that Taiwan has never belonged to the PRC. It prefers the term "unification".
5. *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*.