



# NOUVEAUX REGARDS SUR L'ASIE

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A fresh perspective on Asia and the diversity of its issues and cultures,  
combining the views of experts and high-level players.

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## TABLE OF CONTENT

- p.4 **Interview Nouveaux  
Regards**  
Mohan Kumar,  
former Indian ambassador to France
- p.7 **Interview Nouveaux  
Regards**  
Vice-Admiral Hiroshi Egawa,  
Commander of the Japanese  
Maritime Command and Staff  
College
- p.10 **Japan caught between  
Taiwan and China**  
Yo-Jung CHEN,  
former French diplomat

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## EDITORIAL

by **Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet**

Director of Publication, French Diplomat

**T**he Year of the Snake for Asians begins on January 29, 2025 (the first day of the winter solstice), following on from the Year of the Dragon, which was rather eventful in terms of armed conflicts of all kinds. Let's hope that this snake will prove less aggressive than its larger reptilian cousin, which has lived up to its reputation: explosive and violent.

Shortly before the snake's arrival, President Donald Trump will officially take office in the White House on January 20, succeeding Joe Biden.

At the start of this year, we can only speculate as to what the Asian policy of the 47th President of the United States of America, elected for a second and final term ending in 2029, will be. [1]

The Biden administration had largely focused on strengthening ties between the United States and its Asian partners, as a counterweight to China's growing influence in the region. A shift in priorities on the part of the new Trump administration could force America's Asian allies to adjust to a more transactional foreign policy led by the new host of the White House.

In the period of instability expected for the rest of the world as well as for America after Donald Trump entered the White House, Francis Fukuyama predicted: "If I was an Asia ally, I would be very worried indeed,"



adding: "If anyone in Asia thinks the US is going to be able to do more to support allies like Japan at a time like this, they are crazy."

It seems that Asian countries are, in fact, well aware of this.

Japan, for its part, has already anticipated this potential shift in direction by deciding to increase its defense budget to 2% by 2027, based on its analysis of the strategic situation in its regional environment (Chinese, Russian, and North Korean threats), as recalled by former Prime Minister Kishida: "Today's Ukraine could be tomorrow's East Asia." However, while Tokyo has committed to increasing its defense spending in response to regional security threats, the weakening yen has undermined these efforts and prompted the U.S. Treasury Department to keep Japan on a watchlist for potential currency manipulation.

As the largest foreign buyer of Treasury bonds, Japan would normally be rewarded for helping finance the massive U.S. debt. However, some members of Trump's team view these incoming capital flows as a driver of U.S. trade deficits and have floated the idea of taxing them. What may attract Trump's attention the most is that Japan's trade surplus with the United States remains stubbornly high.

Trump's combative rhetoric and transactional approach to diplomacy are expected to test the U.S.-centric foreign policy of South Korean President Yoon (whose parliament voted on December 14, 2024 to remove him from office, following his controversial attempt to introduce martial law. Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, who was serving as interim leader while awaiting the final decision of the Constitutional Court, was also impeached.).

Like other Asian countries in a similar position, it is highly likely that Trump will call for the renegotiation of a cost-sharing agreement signed in October 2024 between the United States and South Korea. In addition to demanding more money, other requirements from the new Trump administration could include increased South Korean investments in the United States, particularly in strategic sectors such as semiconductors and AI, as well as a faster adoption of export controls and other measures of economic security against China. This pressure to align itself more closely with US policy, against a backdrop of potential threats from Washington to

withdraw partially or totally from the peninsula, could well call into question Seoul's traditional diplomatic strategy of remaining on good terms with both the USA and China, as is pretty much the case for all Asian countries wishing to continue trading with their large neighbor while obtaining military protection from the USA against Beijing's hegemonic thrusts.

Thus, the fear of weakened American commitment could fuel existing domestic debates about the advisability of launching a local nuclear weapons program to deter the North Korean threat independently of the United States. If Trump insists on resuming diplomatic negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea ("I would invite Kim Jong-Un to a baseball game"), Seoul risks being entirely sidelined in the talks, given its currently strained relations with Pyongyang.

Trump's transactional diplomatic style could equally drive a new wedge between Seoul and Tokyo—just as it might persuade their close neighbors to pursue even closer relations to guard against American uncertainty—even though the weak political leadership in Japan under newly elected Prime Minister Ishiba could complicate decisive progress in Japan-South Korea relations.

India, on the other hand, seems less concerned about Trump's election. At least that is what Foreign Minister Jaishankar appears to suggest when he says of the relationship between Delhi and Washington: "Like any relationship there were issues. But overall...in those four years, did our relationship deepen? Did it grow? Absolutely."

Few countries appear as pleased with Trump's victory as India—Narendra Modi and Donald Trump share a personal and ideological affinity—and Trump will inherit, following Biden's presidency, a U.S.-India bilateral relationship that has never been stronger. However, if trade between India and the United States has grown significantly in its trade relationship with India over recent years, yet India continues to maintain a substantial trade surplus with its newfound "friend" America. Beyond this, New Delhi's historically protectionist approach to trade and its domestic economy is viewed as problematic by some of Trump's key advisors, including former U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer.

As a result, like Europe, India could well face

the risk of tariffs in sectors such as pharmaceuticals or others in which it excels.

Trump has already criticized India for its use of tariffs and trade restrictions against American companies.

With China, it is highly likely that the Trump administration will adopt an even tougher stance than its predecessor, which itself had continued this trajectory.

As before, Chinese strategists appear to be expecting even more inflammatory rhetoric and potentially crippling tariffs from Trump (note: Trump has already announced a 10% tariff increase as soon as he enters the White House). However, some believe his isolationist foreign policy could create a vacuum that Beijing will seize to further expand its global influence.

Nonetheless, it is likely that Chinese leaders—who share a similar transactional philosophy with Trump—will strive to maintain the appearance of a cordial personal relationship with the new U.S. administration while continuing to intensify their efforts to project China's power and strength beyond its borders, particularly toward the island it claims as its own. The young democracy of Taiwan already knows it will face the same tariffs as its Asian neighbors—a development that Beijing may welcome. Trump, not yet president, has already made his position clear to the near ally of the United States: "I know the people very well, respect them greatly. They did take about 10% of our chip business. I think Taiwan should pay us for defense. You know, we're no different than an insurance company. Taiwan doesn't give us anything." Therefore, like others, it will have to dig into its pockets to increase its chances of

continuing to benefit from the American umbrella.

Trump's current China policy, focusing on imposing high tariffs—up to 60%, according to the Trump Agenda 47—on Chinese imports, might also be leveraged as a threat (which would, incidentally, work against the interests of Americans, who would have to pay more for foreign imports) to reach a trade agreement with Beijing.

This could involve making some concessions to the Chinese capital on semiconductor technology or even the Taiwan issue. Taiwan might well bear the brunt of such a maneuver, though it would go against the Republican consensus, which supports Taiwan's cause and advocates for stronger deterrence against China by doubling down on economic security measures.

Finally, it cannot be ruled out that the two near-allied great powers, China and Russia, might seek, in such a context of unpredictability, to test the strength of alliances and commitments made by Washington with Indo-Pacific nations.

[1] According to the 22nd Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: "No person shall be elected to the office of the President more than twice." If Donald Trump were to dream of a third term extending to 2008—one year after the end of the extraordinary third term (2022–2027) permitted by a constitutional amendment for his greatest adversary, Chairman Xi Jinping—he would require a constitutional amendment. Such an amendment would need to be passed by a two-thirds majority in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, as well as by three-quarters of the legislatures of the 50 U.S. states, which seems virtually impossible under the current democratic system in the United States.



## Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

*A career diplomat after devoting himself to Sinology in France, Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet has, among other things, served as Consul General of France in Guangzhou (2007–2011) and Beijing (2014–2018), as well as in Mumbai/Bombay from 2011 to 2014. He was head of Asia at the Centre d'Analyse, de Prospective et de Stratégie (CAPS) attached to the cabinet of the Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs (2018–2021).*



## Interview Nouveaux Regards

# Mohan Kumar, former Indian ambassador to France

Interview by Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

**Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet: The delineation of the borders separating the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China remains a thorny issue between the two countries. China, in particular, contests the demarcation. It has occupied Aksai Chin since its war of aggression against India in 1962. It claims the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh as part of its territory, which it names "Nan Xizang (South Tibet)" on its new geographical map and assigns Chinese names to the cities of this state to better assert its belonging to the PRC. Serious skirmishes between the military forces of the two countries occurred in June 2017 at the Doklam Pass and then from 2020 to 2022 in the Galwan River Valley, causing the deaths of 20 soldiers on the Indian side and more than 40 on the Chinese side. In light of the war of aggression led by Russia under President Putin against Ukraine, claiming the eastern oblasts and the Crimean Peninsula, is there a fear on the Indian side that China might follow the example of its Russian partner?**

Mohan Kumar: There is really no fear from a rational perspective that China would commit the kind of aggression against India that Russia has committed against Ukraine. Even though there is a significant power gap between China and India, I think China has little to gain by invading India.

China is facing real challenges regarding Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea. In this sense, India does not represent the most significant security challenge for China. This does not mean that China will not pursue a policy of encirclement by cultivating neighbors like Pakistan and Nepal or that it will not continue to nibble away at Indian territory. But my view is that China realizes it made a mistake in Ladakh in 2020, and this explains why it has accepted the current rapprochement with India. Trump and his Unpredictability may also have been a factor. Therefore, I expect the thawing of Sino-Indian relations to continue, slowly but surely.

**How does India position itself in relation to its two neighbors since they concluded an informal agreement in 2022 to coordinate their diplomatic and economic actions and build a de facto alliance (according to Vladimir Putin: "not allies, but better than allies") that "does not exclude any domain of cooperation" against the United States? Particularly in relation to Moscow, knowing that Delhi is highly dependent on it, notably for its supplies of gas, oil, and armaments?**

The Sino-Russian relationship is a real concern for India. It may be the first time these two countries are on the verge of forming an alliance, which significantly reduces India's strategic autonomy. India does not have the power to completely change or counter this situation, but it will do everything it can to cultivate its relations with Russia and prevent it from becoming entirely a junior partner to China.

Russia is a proud country, and one cannot expect it to be satisfied with the current situation, but it is powerless against the West and thus dependent on China. However, China is also not entirely pleased with the involvement of North Korean soldiers alongside the Russians, creating a complex dynamic.

**How would you define the policy led by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi on domestic and foreign fronts? Domestically, Mr. Modi seems to draw inspiration from the Chinese development model, which has been quite successful over the past thirty years (though less so now as Xi Jinping prioritizes the state sector over the private sector. India is on a path to catch up with the Chinese economy, with a GDP that today remains far behind China's but is growing rapidly. India's population has surpassed that of China, which is experiencing demographic decline due to its (now-abandoned) one-child policy. While China's population is aging, India's remains predominantly young. With increasing foreign investment, could India catch up to China or**



**assert itself more and more as its competitor?**

Domestically, Modi has certainly tried to strengthen his control over the BJP. However, Western media have displayed biases by speaking of a "democratic backslide," etc. Most Indians disagree with this analysis. Moreover, the recent elections, which did not grant Modi a complete majority, are proof that Indian democracy is alive and capable of pushback.

Compared to China, I honestly believe that India has a lot of catching up to do. India's GDP is \$4 trillion, while China's stands at \$18 trillion, making the comparison stark. I believe that India will follow its own development trajectory, which may not necessarily mimic that of China. This will be the "India Way", as described by Foreign Secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar in his book "The India way - Strategies for an uncertain world".

The Chinese face two nightmare scenarios: (a) First, they fear the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) could meet the same fate as the Soviet Communist Party under Gorbachev.

(b) Second, if India succeeds as a democracy, ordinary Chinese citizens might ask, "If India can succeed as a democracy, why can't China?" This could pose a significant challenge to the CCP.

**The "world's largest democracy" has faced criticism from Western democracies for an alleged "authoritarian drift" under Modi, who has been accused by some media and academics of promoting "Hindutva" (Hindu identity/Indianness) targeting India's Muslim population. Are these criticisms justified in your view? What is your opinion of the policies pursued by the Prime Minister, who is aiming to secure a third term but losing his majority in the Lok Sabha (lower house)?**

The criticisms addressed by the West against Modi and his "Hindutva" are frankly exaggerated and unfounded, and I would personally reject them outright. Yes, Modi is a strong leader, but India likes strong leaders, as Indira Gandhi was before him. The West doesn't understand this. As with all democratic leaders, many people in India like his policies and others don't. That's democracy.

**Since the partition in 1947 between India and Pakistan, relations between the two countries have had their ups and downs, and mostly downs due to the deadly confrontations that**

**took place in the decades that followed. How would you describe the current state of relations between Delhi and Islamabad today? And what is the future of relations between two nuclear-armed countries? Does the fact that the Taliban has taken control of Afghanistan and now governs the country after the hasty withdrawal of U.S. troops constitute a concern for your country? Is the risk of terrorist attacks against your country greater? How does India plan to manage this new situation in its immediate neighborhood?**

India's relations with Pakistan are at an all-time low. This government will not re-engage with Pakistan until it completely ends terrorism as an instrument of its policy. There are currently some changes in Pakistan, so a rapprochement between our two countries might occur in the future. But it is difficult to predict how long this will take.

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan has not played in Pakistan's favor as it had hoped. India, on the other hand, is making subtle openings toward the Taliban. Afghanistan is too important a neighbor for India to completely ignore.

I think Delhi believes that the terrorist threat against India remains, but has probably decreased. This may also be due to the fact that the current Modi government is considered strong and will not stay silent, as past Indian governments sometimes did in 2008, after Pakistan carried out deadly terrorist attacks against Mumbai.

**France supports India's entry into the United Nations Security Council. What, in your opinion, are the obstacles preventing this entry? Don't you think it would be useful in the current situation where the international context is being disrupted by Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the crisis in the Middle East, which could further deteriorate with the involvement of North Korea and Iran in particular? Does India challenge the international order as Russia and China do? How does it position itself with regard to the 'global south,' a very heterogeneous group of countries that China and Russia seem to want to form a bloc against Western democracies, with the United States at the forefront?**

France may be sincere when it says that India should become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. But other countries only talk about it in passing, and India is aware of this.

That said, China is probably the country



most resolutely opposed to India joining the Security Council as a permanent member.

From Beijing's point of view, such membership would tarnish China's luster as the only Asian country on the Security Council.

In an uncertain world, made even more unpredictable with Trump's re-election to the presidency, the Franco-Indian relationship is of great importance and

could be a factor in global stability.

The end of the war in Ukraine is important for India, because we want the EU and France to play their rightful role in creating a truly multipolar world.



**Mohan Kumar**

*Ambassador Mohan Kumar spent 36 years with the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, and held various diplomatic posts in Geneva, Paris, Colombo, Belgrade and Rabat. He was India's chief negotiator at the GATT and then at the WTO in Geneva. He was India's ambassador to France based in Paris from 2015 to 2017. Since his retirement, he has been Dean/Professor of O.P. Jindal Global University in Sonapat, India. The address of his web page [\[link\]](#).*



## Interview Nouveaux Regards

# Vice-Admiral Hiroshi Egawa, Commander of the Japanese Maritime Command and Staff College

Interview by Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

On November 6, 2024, Vice-Admiral (VADM) Hiroshi Egawa, Commandant of the Japanese Maritime Command and Staff College, was received at the French National Assembly by Deputy Olivier Becht, with the support and in the presence of the France Japan Foundation. Following an introduction by Mr. Becht, the vice-admiral spoke on the theme of "The future of global naval collaborations: strengthening the partnership for peace and stability".

Good morning, and thank you for that kind introduction, Mr. Deputy, and for your warm welcome.

I am Vice-Admiral Egawa, President of the Command and Staff College of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces. I am honored to have had this opportunity to speak in a separate meeting with Mr. Olivier Becht, as well as with all of you involved in Franco-Japanese relations.

I learned that the France Japan Foundation was created this year, and that its inaugural event was held in July at the French Embassy in Tokyo. I find it remarkable that this Foundation is working to promote exchanges between France and Japan, providing a platform for those involved in Franco-Japanese relations to exchange ideas and strengthen lasting ties between our two countries.

Modern relations between Japan and France began with the Treaty of Friendship and Commerce signed in 1858. At the time, the Tokugawa Shogunate was aware that Japan was lagging behind Western civilization, and maritime defense was a national priority.

The Shogunate sought French support to build a navy, and France generously agreed. In 1865, French naval engineer François Léonce Vernet came to Japan.

The result was Japan's first naval base, with facilities for shipbuilding, was built in Yokosuka. The first dock, built by Vernet over 150 years ago, is still in operation today, testifying to the high quality of French technology and Vernet's exceptional

leadership. To honor its achievements, Yokosuka and Brest have been twinned since 1970.

Today, I'd like to talk to you about the security environment surrounding Japan, its initiatives to strengthen its defense capabilities and regional security, and the defense cooperation between Japan and France.

The free, open and stable international order is today threatened by serious challenges against a backdrop of historic shifts in the balance of power and intensifying geopolitical competition.

Up until now, advanced democratic nations, including Japan and France, have dedicated themselves to defending universal values such as freedom, democracy, respect for fundamental rights and the rule of law.

They have played a leading role in building an international society based on coexistence and co-prosperity.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine reminded us once again that globalization and interdependence alone are not enough to guarantee world peace.

Over the last twenty years, certain countries have shown that they do not share these universal values, have extended their influence through military and non-military means, attempting to unilaterally alter the status quo and challenge the international order.

We have learned the difficulty of predicting



precisely when a country or an authoritarian leader might consider directly threatening another country, and carrying out their threat.

Furthermore, we cannot ignore non-state actors. For example, the situation in the Red Sea, a crucial maritime communication route, is threatened by regional actors.

The UN is not fully able to perform its functions, particularly due to Russia, which blatantly violates international law, even though it is a permanent member of the Security Council. I would now like to focus on the Indo-Pacific region, particularly on the security situation surrounding Japan. The Indo-Pacific region is the heart of global economic dynamism and is home to more than half of the world's population, producing 60% of global GDP.

The dynamism at the intersection of the Pacific and Indian Oceans serves as an engine of growth for the global economy. However, several actors possessing large military forces, including nuclear weapons, do not share universal values.

Allow me to address three notable cases: China, North Korea, and Russia.

**China:** Under national objectives such as the “renaissance of the great Chinese nation,” China is rapidly and extensively developing its military capabilities, including nuclear and ballistic ones, with no transparency. It is also intensifying its attempts to unilaterally alter the status quo by force in the East and South China Seas, as well as in airspaces. China does not rule out the use of military force for the “unification” of Taiwan with its mainland, which could lead to a situation as grave as the Russian aggression in Ukraine, particularly in East Asia.

**North Korea:** It has repeatedly launched ballistic missiles to improve its capabilities, including intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that could reach American territory. North Korea seeks to rapidly enhance its nuclear capabilities in both quantity and quality, thus posing a serious imminent threat for Japan's security.

**Russia:** It does not hesitate to use military force to achieve its strategic objectives. Furthermore, it is strengthening its strategic coordination with China and North Korea, as evidenced by its joint military exercises near Japan.

These challenges place Japan's security environment at the most complex and

serious level since World War II, as indicated by our latest National Security Strategy that has been published. Japan's National Security Strategy describes the Japanese archipelago as a front line to protect the international order based on rules and universal values.

In 2023, the Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) carried out 700 interception missions, 70% of which targeted Chinese military aircraft, and 30% targeted Russian and North Korean aircraft. The Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF), meanwhile, is constantly at sea to patrol, defend territorial waters, and protect the population from North Korean ballistic missile launches. Furthermore, China's growing influence in other regions of the world remains a concern, particularly due to its exploitation of the economic dependence of certain countries, which Beijing uses to apply pressure on them.

In response to this evolving security situation, Japan revised its National Security Strategy in 2022 and adopted a new **National Defense Strategy** in parallel.

The Japanese government plans to:

- Double its defense budget to reach 2% of GDP by 2027.
- Strengthen its multi-domain operational capabilities.
- Develop long-range counterstrike capabilities, autonomous systems, ballistic missile defense capabilities, as well as its intelligence and command infrastructure.

Diplomatically, Japan is actively working to create a stable security environment and is prosperous, notably by deepening cooperation with its allies and countries that share the same values, such as France.

Japan places particular importance on the Indo-Pacific region, which is the engine of the global economy. The preservation of order and stable development in this region has significant repercussions, not only for the countries along the coast but also for their partners in Europe and beyond.

In this context, **maritime power** plays a central role. The Indo-Pacific region, made up of islands and vast maritime expanses, requires rigorous maritime surveillance and protection. France, as an Indo-Pacific nation,





has two-thirds of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in this region and is home to about two million citizens there.

Given the complex security environment, the increased presence of friendly European nations in the Indo-Pacific, such as France, sends an important message to maintain freedom and order of navigation at sea. I would like to express my deep gratitude for France's active commitment in the Indo-Pacific region and for the bilateral exercises that strengthen military cooperation between our two countries.

Japan, alone, cannot meet all the challenges. While its main ally, the United States, plays a key role, but their attention is divided between Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific. It is therefore essential to deepen partnerships with countries like France in order to ensure long-term sustainable maritime security.

France's presence in the Indo-Pacific also sends an encouraging message to small island nations and coastal countries facing increasing security pressures from China.

### **Finally, a few words about research and development (R&D) in defense.**

During my visit to the Euronaval exhibition, I noticed the differences between defense equipment cooperation with the United States and with France. French systems are open and unique, unlike the "black boxes" from the U.S. that complicate repairs and slow down operations.

I see many opportunities for collaboration between Japan and Europe, particularly with France, to accelerate technological and security cooperation. I will share these impressions in Tokyo and will work to strengthen bilateral cooperation in this area.

**Thank you very much.**



**Hiroshi Egawa**

*Vice-Admiral Hiroshi Egawa, born in Nagasaki in 1990, graduated from the National Defense Medical College before joining the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces (JMSDF). Among his key roles, he commanded the escort ship Mineyuki, served as Defense Attaché to the USA and led the 5<sup>e</sup> Escort Flotilla.*

*Since 2022, he has chaired the JMSDF Command and Staff College, focusing on strategic education and leadership. He has strengthened maritime security, particularly in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden, and promotes international cooperation through dialogue and transparency.*



## Analyze

# Japan caught between Taiwan and China

By Chen Yo-Jung

While the world's attention is focused on the conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine, another crisis is brewing in East Asia that could erupt at any moment with global repercussions, and the potential to lead to open war between the world's first and second powers in the short, medium or long term.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) indeed aims to annex ("unify" according to its Chinese lexicon, "reunify" in its Western translation) by force, if necessary, the Republic of China in Taiwan, which Beijing considers part of the PRC and the territory it controls and governs. The United States and its allies could oppose such an attempt at annexation by force through military means when they call on Beijing and Taipei to find a solution to their dispute through peaceful means (e.g., negotiations).

The possibility that communist China will act is likely but not absolutely certain, at least in the short term, being subject to the behavior of the key actors, primarily the USA and the PRC.

As far as it is concerned, the PRC has continually proclaimed since its founding in 1949 its determination to "unify" (and not "reunify") Taiwan with the "land of the ancestors" ("zuguo" meaning China). While "Chairman" Xi Jinping has made the annexation of Taiwan an absolute and necessary condition for achieving the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" since his rise to power in 2012, it is clear that there is hesitation within the Chinese government and/or the People's Liberation Army to take action due to the scale of the stakes they should rationally consider: a highly probable military intervention by the United States, which cannot afford to "abandon" their de facto Taiwanese ally, risking discrediting themselves in the region in the event of non-intervention; negative consequences for the Chinese economy and its international image with strong sanctions as a consequence in the event of an unprovoked attack from the opposing side; the current capacity of the People's Liberation Army to wage a large-scale war (it has not fought a war since its

unsuccessful invasion of Vietnam in 1979) against the United States and their regional allies (Japan, Australia, the Philippines, South Korea, Thailand, Taiwan, and possibly certain NATO members), the potential concern (cf. the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989) about avoiding a bloodbath among "Chinese compatriots," etc.

On the other hand, Beijing today seems to be questioning the situation of the relative status quo (continuation of negotiations with Taipei, which are currently halted due to Beijing's stance) that prevailed across "the two sides of the strait." Over recent years and up to today, Beijing has been increasing its aerial and maritime incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ (Air Defense Identification Zone); launching missiles in Taiwanese waters (and in Japan's EEZ); staging military blockades (encirclements) of the island; arresting and sentencing Taiwanese entrepreneurs on the mainland, accusing them of "independentist" thoughts, etc.

The vast majority of the population of Taiwan's young democracy (with its first direct presidential and legislative elections by universal suffrage in 1996) supports maintaining the status quo and opposes any "unification" with the PRC, which they view as simple "annexation" that would result in the suppression of their fundamental freedoms and a hard-won rule of law, as has been the case for Hong Kong after its brutal takeover by Beijing. At the same time, Taiwan exports nearly 40% of its goods to the Chinese market (including Hong Kong), but there is also a steady decline in both its exports and investments on the mainland.

If the United States, like all other countries that do not maintain diplomatic relations with the Republic of China in Taiwan, adheres to the



"one China" principle and "does not support Taiwan's independence," principles that Beijing steadfastly holds, Washington (and also Tokyo, by the way) merely "takes note" (acknowledge) but does not accept the position of the PRC that Taiwan would be an integral part of Chinese territory, considering that Taiwan's legal status under international law remains "undetermined" to this day. The U.S. capital is also legally bound by the "Taiwan Relations Act" (TRA) passed by Congress in 1979 to "treat the governing authorities of Taiwan as it treats all foreign countries, nations, states, governments, or other similar entities."

And while the U.S. capital does not explicitly guarantee military intervention in the case of an attack or (unprovoked) invasion of Taiwan by the PRC, Washington is required to "maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any use of force or other coercive means that could endanger the security, society, or economic system of the Taiwanese people." The TRA also stipulates that the United States "will consider any effort to determine Taiwan's future by means other than peaceful, including boycotts or embargoes, as a threat to peace and security in the Western Pacific region and a grave concern for the United States." For the U.S. administration, the TRA takes precedence over the Three Joint Communiqués signed with Beijing, as well as the "six assurances" given to Taiwan under the Reagan administration, particularly in terms of arms supplies.

The U.S. "strategic ambiguity" regarding the defense of Taiwan has been effectively lifted at least four times by President Joe Biden, who publicly confirmed that the United States would intervene militarily against China if the latter were to attack Taiwan.

With Donald Trump's return to the White House, Taiwan's future could darken. During the U.S. presidential campaign, the Republican candidate, who is not one to mince words, had already declared himself opposed to America risking war with China to defend "a small island that hasn't even paid the bill for its protection." From there to Beijing interpreting the Republican president's statements as a green light to take action against Taiwan? That being said, the elected president had also declared that he would punish China with tariffs that could rise to 200% if Beijing attempted to invade Taiwan... enough to make the Chinese capital think twice.

While the vast majority of European countries feel sympathy for Taiwanese democracy (a disturbing example for its Chinese neighbor),

they are, due to realpolitik, forced to cater to the mood of the essential trade partner that is China and thus subscribe to the "one China" principle themselves – which, by the way, commits them to nothing, as the restoration of diplomatic relations with the island is hardly conceivable.

However, this ambivalence has not prevented European countries from demonstrating their tacit support for Taiwan by repeatedly sending, in collaboration with the U.S. Navy, their warships through the highly sensitive Taiwan Strait (the French Navy in 4/2023 and 10/2024, the German Navy in 9/2024, the U.S. Navy and Canadian Navy in 10/2024, not to mention the New Zealand and Australian navies and, more recently, the Japanese Navy), right under Beijing's nose and to its great displeasure, as it considers the strait to be an internal sea of China.

The subtlety of the Western response was taken to its peak in the specific case of the French frigate *Prairial*, which crossed the strait in question in April 2023. Its timing was well calculated: not only did it occur in the middle of one of China's encirclement and intimidation exercises around Taiwan, but also the day after President Macron's state visit to China. Upon his return, he surprised America and its allies by claiming the EU's decision-making autonomy on the Taiwan issue "without following Washington or Beijing."

A close neighbor of Taiwan, Japan is economically very tied to China but sentimentally very close to Taiwan for historical reasons (the island was colonized by the Japanese Empire from 1895 to 1945 and remains very pro-Japanese to this day). Tokyo also has a vital interest in ensuring that its supply route for energy resources from the Middle East, which passes off the coast of Taiwan, is not cut off in case China takes action (attempted invasion or blockade) against the island. Compared to other countries, Tokyo is limited in its choice of actions due to its "pacifist" Constitution, which prohibits it from waging war (except in cases of self-defense). With its considerable economic and commercial interests in China, Japan also cannot deviate from the "one China" principle, at the risk of angering its powerful neighbor, while calling on Beijing to avoid making waves in the Taiwan Strait.

#### The question of Taiwan's belonging from a historical perspective

Since its victory in 1949 over the nationalist (KMT) regime of Chiang Kai-shek, who



retreated with the rest of his troops to Taiwan awaiting revenge, Communist China has always made the "unification" (tongyi) of Taiwan a national cause.

The main argument on which Beijing relies is to assert that Taiwan has always been an integral and inseparable part of China. However, in terms of history, nothing is less certain.

According to the archives, far from being an integral and inseparable part of China, Taiwan has always been considered by successive Chinese dynasties as a "wild land outside the sphere (Chinese) of civilization" (化外之地) and therefore outside its territory.

Populated by aborigines of Austronesian origin and Chinese migrants mainly from the Fujian province facing Taiwan (including the author's ancestors), the island was "discovered" in 1542 by the Portuguese, who named it "Ilha Formosa" (beautiful island). At the time, it served as a base for pirates and did not appear on Chinese imperial maps. When the Regent (Taiko) Toyotomi Hideyoshi's Japan attempted in 1593 to make Taiwan a vassal, his emissary found no one to whom to deliver his request...

Formosa later became the object of the desires of European merchant sailors. Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and even briefly French (attempts to land by Admiral Courbet's fleet were repelled in 1884 and 1885) came in succession to establish themselves on this territory.

In 1624, in an act reflecting China's total disinterest in this "wild land," the Ming dynasty (Han ethnicity) (1368-1644), concerned with keeping Europeans away from its shores, offered the Dutch the opportunity to permanently take possession of Taiwan.

With China's blessing, the Dutch were only too happy to rule the large island, which they transformed into an important stop on the trade route linking Southeast Asia to Japan. During the 38 years of their rule, the Dutch fought against the Spanish, who contested their dominance of the island. It was only in 1642 that the Dutch succeeded in driving out the Spanish, becoming the sole rulers of Taiwan, which the last truly Chinese Han dynasty still refused to show any interest in.

In 1662, the Dutch were in turn expelled to

Batavia (Indonesia) by the powerful Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga) clan, a pirate and general loyal to the defunct Ming dynasty and opposed to the new Manchu Qing dynasty (1644-1911). Taiwan was then partially administered for two decades by the small "kingdom" of Tongying, governed by the Zheng family in the southwest part of the island.

It was only in 1683 that the Qing dynasty succeeded in overcoming the Zheng resistance. However, it hesitated for a long time before deciding to include this land, considered "wild," in its national territory. Taiwan was subsequently converted into a region under the Fujian province, governed by a local administration (prefecture). The birth of the island's very first "Chinese" administration.

In 1871, when Japan protested against the massacre of 54 Japanese shipwreck survivors by Taiwanese aborigines, Qing China's response was that it was not responsible for this incident committed by the inhabitants of a wild land (化外之地) outside its jurisdiction national (化外之民)... In 1894, defeated by Japan, the Qing dynasty agreed to cede Taiwan to the Japanese empire, ending two centuries of effective administration of the island-province by the Manchu empire.

In 1945, after 50 years of occupation, Japan, defeated in war, "renounced" all its rights over Taiwan and its dependencies (the Pescadores) without specifying in the Treaty of Taipei signed on April 28, 1952, with the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek's regime exiled in Taiwan, nor in the 1952 Treaty of Peace of San Francisco, to which authorities the island and its dependencies were transferred: to the Republic of China of Chiang in Taiwan or to the People's Republic of China of Mao? Therefore, for international jurists, Taiwan's status remains "undetermined." Furthermore, at that time, most Western democracies still recognized Chiang's regime in Taiwan as the sole legitimate representative of China.

From this arises the thorny issue of the "two Chinas," which remains unresolved to this day. One, the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国), which considers Taiwan to be its own, the other, which claims to be "independent" (de facto) and "sovereign" in relation to the mainland (but does not dare to officially declare itself "independent"), under the current and provisional name of the "Republic of China (Taiwan)" 中華民國 (台灣).



## Taiwan Today

From 1949 to 1987, the first decades of Chiang Kai-shek's dictatorial regime in Taiwan were marked by bloody repression of the local population. Governed with an iron fist, the population had no freedom of expression. Opposition political parties were banned, and their representatives were arrested and deported to a penitentiary on the Green Island (Lü dao) in the southeast of Taiwan. Many local intellectuals were simply executed.

It was only in 1987 that Taiwan, through a "peaceful revolution," gradually freed itself from the Chiang clan's dictatorship to become a democracy that has since matured through political alternations. The young democracy was ranked 10th in The Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) 2023 Democracy Index, ahead of Japan (16th), France (23rd), and the United States (29th) and China (178th). The nature of its regime, a rule-of-law state guaranteeing fundamental freedoms, is now its best asset in the face of the growing threat from the authoritarian Chinese regime. The Taiwanese population, by and large, believes that it has nothing to gain from coming under the control of a one-party, communist dictatorship (this is written into its constitution), hostile to freedom of expression.

Taiwan also has another asset: the production of advanced semiconductors. The island is the world's leading supplier of this high technology. The potential destruction of this industry following a Chinese invasion would have catastrophic consequences for global industries (automotive, aerospace, home appliances, defense, etc.). One only needs to recall the panic caused in 2021 by the sinking of a cargo ship that blocked the Suez Canal for more than a week, depriving European industries of their supply of Taiwanese chips...

Everyone has an interest in ensuring that this true industrial gem does not fall into the hands of a China known for its industrial blackmail for political purposes.

## Japan and the Growing Tension around Taiwan

The stakes are enormous for Japan, which faces a high risk of becoming the first collateral victim of a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

The Japanese population, Taiwan-friendly and accustomed to lasting peace since the end of World War II, generally remains optimistic about the growing tension between its immediate neighbors and holds the vague impression that everything will eventually be sorted out thanks to its American ally.

However, the political class, which maintains close ties with Taipei (Mr. Ishiba visited just a few days before his election as head of the Japanese government last October), is aware and deeply concerned about the inevitability that Japan will be involved in a war in the Taiwan Strait initiated by the People's Republic of China (PRC).

China has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to form a naval blockade around the island. Such a blockade would cut off the supply route of raw materials from the Middle East and Africa, suffocating the Japanese economy and potentially forcing Tokyo to submit to Beijing's demands.

In the case of a Chinese military aggression, there is a strong risk that Japanese national territory would become a battlefield even before the first missiles hit Taiwan.

In the fairly likely scenario of American intervention to defend Taiwan, this would necessarily come from the numerous U.S. military bases in Japan, where the 7th Fleet and more than 50,000 American soldiers are stationed, with all weapons combined. Therefore, it is not hard to imagine that before launching its assault troops across the 130-180 km (from the narrowest to the widest) strait separating the mainland from Taiwan, where they would be in a vulnerable position facing American and Taiwanese air or ballistic attacks, the Chinese command would have every interest in attempting to preemptively annihilate the nearby American defense system located in Japan. This could result in a rain of Chinese missiles over the entire Japanese territory, causing incalculable losses and forcing not only American forces but also Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to retaliate, plunging the "pacifist" Japan into a bloody war with China.

In the face of these apocalyptic scenarios, Japan overall seems to display an almost surreal nonchalance.

Analyses are attempting to warn, for example, about the absence of a national emergency plan that would include, among





other things, the evacuation of the population from vulnerable areas near Taiwan or American bases. The potential evacuation of thousands of Japanese companies in China and the many Japanese nationals residing in China and Taiwan is also a concern.

Overall, Japan seems to live with the hope that China, despite its formidable military superiority, would be reasonable enough not to cross the threshold of a war that promises to be catastrophic for all parties involved, including the aggressor. It is clear that the Chinese economy (already struggling), with the sanctions imposed by the international community, would not come out unscathed from an attempted invasion of Taiwan.

That being said, Japan's Self-Defense Forces are beginning to move their military assets to the southern islands near Taiwan in preparation for potential escalations, similar to those that occurred during a recent Chinese intimidation exercise encircling Taiwan, where five Chinese missiles fell in Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone (which Beijing does not recognize due to its claims over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands). A hypothetical aggression is now expected to come less from the north (Russia) than from the south (China).



**Yo-Jung CHEN**

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# FONDATION FRANCE-ASIE

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