

Webinar Report



‘Bridges over troubled water’

Security Situations in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea after the Hong Kong National Security Law

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Abstract

On 28 October 2020, the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS) hosted an international expert discussion and webinar on the topic of maritime security in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea after the Hong Kong National Security Law. The adherence to the principle of freedom of navigation and to international law in these areas is increasingly seen as under threat due to an intense militarization of sea lanes. Two separate panels of speakers discussed the security situation in the region, of which the first analysed the security dilemma in the Taiwan Strait, while the second focused on the perils in the South China Sea.

Panel I: Security Dilemmas in the Taiwan Strait

The event kicked off with welcoming remarks from Mr Xavier Nuttin, Senior Associate at the European Institute of Asian Studies (EIAS), and moderator of the first panel titled “Security dilemmas in the Taiwan Strait”. Mr Nuttin set out the current situation in the area and underlined how the balance of power is changing in favour of Beijing. The increasing capabilities of the Chinese military, in particular its naval and precision guided-missile ones, have called into question whether Taiwan could long withstand any serious military offensive. Taipei, in turn, is strengthening its defences, with the purchasing of the latest model of F-16 jets from the United States in August 2020. However, the US is not the only ally Taiwan can count on. According to the Stockholm International Peace Security Research Institute (SIPRI), Taiwan has received arms from dozens of countries since 1950, including EU Member States. Mr Nuttin made note of the EU’s absent military presence in the region and how it is not yet perceived as a credible security actor in East Asia.

The floor was then handed to the first speaker, Dr Ivan Štefanec, Member of the European Parliament. He delivered a comprehensive summary of the current situation in the Strait and detailed the three unique key events that have marked the escalation of violence in the Taiwan Strait. Among these events, the strong Chinese reaction and Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s threatening words to the EU following the visit of the Czech Senate’s Delegation to Taiwan gave a strong signal. “This unusual diplomatic language” is unprecedented in the history of EU-China relations and triggered a sharp reaction from both the Czech Republic and the EU. Dr Štefanec identified Taiwan, China and the US as the key players in the region and explained in depth the motivations and claims of these powers. He argued that it is China’s will to reunite with Taiwan before 2049. Yet, the possibility for a peaceful reunification to take place seems to be losing ground nowadays. In fact, only 3% of the Taiwanese population seems to agree with such a plan and anti-Chinese feelings are growing steadily. He identified three possible scenarios that China can undertake to achieve its goal. The first one is the use of soft power, exerted on Taiwan’s political and economic elites through bribery and political influence. The second one is partial annexation of Taiwan’s remote disputed areas in the South China Sea, such as the Matsu or Kinmen Islands, playing on loopholes in the international law. Finally, the worst-case scenario for Taiwan is represented by a full-scale invasion.

Dr Štefanec then addressed the US and EU involvement in the Taiwan Strait, arguing that these powers’ will is to maintain the status quo, while improving regional and local cooperation in the area. He stressed the importance for the EU “to call for freedom of navigation, to clearly state that Chinese violation will not pass unnoticed but will be followed

by sanctions, and to work for the future recognition of the Republic of Taiwan”. Now seems also the right time to discuss an EU-Taiwan bilateral investment agreement and economic cooperation in digital and green technology, while continuing to support the work of civil society and international organizations in the Taiwan Strait.

The second speaker was Ketty W. Chen, Vice President of the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy. Dr Chen addressed the successful Taiwanese democratic development. Despite witnessing a stepping up of Chinese influence in domestic politics, as reported by the Information Operation Research Group, government and civil societies have been able to deal with Chinese disinformation campaigns on social media and television. The issue of Chinese interference in Taiwan’s politics, however, is still a source of concern. Moreover, China has been preventing Taiwan from participating in international fora. This assertive behaviour has only strengthened Taiwanese support for democracy and freedom in recent years. According to a survey by the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, 80% of the Taiwanese population believes democracy to be the best domestic system, while 63% has an optimistic perception of the democratic future of the island. Since President Xi stated last year that the only way Taiwan can be reunited with China is through the “One Country, Two Systems” framework, an increase in the younger generations’ attention and participation to the political landscape has been registered. Again, if asked whether they would be willing to fight for their country, 80% of young people answered yes, a 10% increase compared to 2019.

Dr Chen also stressed the role played by Taiwan in the fight against Covid19, underlining how cooperation between democratic institutions and civil societies has brought successful results. Taiwan has been one of the main producers of face masks, having donated more than 51 million of them to 80 countries around the world. To conclude, Dr Chen expressed Taiwan’s willingness to take up an active part in the international community and articulated her hope for more statements in Taiwan’s support by European countries, such as the one issued by Forum 200’s International Coalition for Democratic Renewal.

Dr Duchatel, Director of the Asia Programme at the Institut Montaigne, expressed his agreement with many arguments of the first two speakers but sought to provide an analytical presentation of the actual risk of Chinese military coercion against Taiwan. From his experience in the field, he holds the perception that Taiwan’s energies were all directed at preventing a full-scale invasion in the Strait, considering the undertaking of more limited military actions too risky and counterproductive for China. Despite this general feeling, he listed three counter arguments as proof of possible limited coercion activities in the near future. First, he argued that China is already conducting such activities. According to the Taiwanese Defense Ministry, Taiwan’s air force has scrambled more than 1,700 times in

2020, as a consequence of the serious increase of incidents in the area. Chinese air force allegedly crossed the median lining 75 times this year. Tactically, these operations are not only meant to build China's military advantage over Taiwan, but also to avert the International Community to further engage with the Republic of China. Secondly, the PRC's pathway in the Taiwan Strait is the same one followed in the South China Sea, gradually changing the status quo by extending its administrative control. In this regard, Dr Duchatel highlighted the importance of monitoring the People Liberation Army's (PLA) air operations in the South-West corner of Taiwan since they could be understood as tactical approaches to a territorial conflict. Finally, there are no alternatives to military pressure for China in conducting its Taiwan policy. Referring to Beijing's lack of interest in cooperating with Taiwan to further any economic and political integration, this is considered the most powerful motivation according to Dr Duchatel.

Dr Duchatel also mentioned the important role the US and the EU can play in the area, especially through influencing the costs and benefits of Beijing's military coercion. He argued that nowadays the international community does not refer to Taiwan only in terms of binary choices between unification and independence, conflict and peace, democracy and authoritarianism. Since 2019, Taiwan has been looked at from a different perspective, thanks to the incredibly successful management of the Covid-19 pandemic and its positioning at the frontline of technology and communication supply chains. This has brought Taiwan to the EU policy discussion table, with the aim to establish a more comprehensive form of cooperation.

The first panel concluded with a question and answer session which enquired whether regional powers, such as Japan and South Korea, provide clear support to Taiwan and whether the EU should engage more in supporting Taiwan's democracy through strong statements and the application of economic sanctions. Responding to this question, Dr Štefanec explained how the European Parliament is actively influencing the European Commission in taking a more pro-Taiwan position. Recently, the European People's Party issued its EU-China relations policy paper, questioning the Taiwan sovereignty issue. The European Commission, in its turn, is working out more duties and sanctions in response to China's violation of human rights and environmental standards. Dr Duchatel added that the EU should see its engagement with Taiwan as a way to contribute to the regional balance. He argued that we should combat the narrative according to which anything involving Taiwan is off the table simply because it would provoke a reaction from China.

Panel II: The South China Sea's Perils

The second panel discussed the current security situation in the South China Sea (SCS), providing valuable inputs that enhanced the audience's understanding of the overall situation in the region. The session was chaired by Mr Serge Stroobanst, EIAS Senior Associate. Speakers included Mrs Anna Fotyga, Member of the European Parliament; H.E. Dr Ming-Yen Tsai, Taipei Representative to the EU and Belgium; Mr Bill Hayton, Associate Fellow at Chatham House; and Dr Eva Pejsova, Senior Japan Fellow at VUB.

To begin with, Mrs Fotyga highlighted that the European Parliament has been raising the issue of the South China Sea for several years. Despite recognising China's increasingly aggressive posture in the region, particularly its willingness to influence international political opinion and elites, Mrs Fotyga claimed that a direct military invasion is highly improbable. Beijing still follows the path of Deng Xiaoping's famous dictum 'Hide your strength', as it tries to gain power in its sphere of influence step by step. Mrs Fotyga also mentioned that Europeans should not allow the Middle Kingdom to impose its ways on other countries. For that matter, the EU is increasingly engaging with like-minded partners in Asia to counterbalance Beijing's ambitions, while informal groupings of parliamentarians have been set up to closely follow the country's activities, such as the Hong Kong Watch Group.

Dr Tsai affirmed that China's strategic actions were responsible for the worsening of the security situation in both the Taiwan strait and the SCS. By flexing its muscles over the region while the international community is preoccupied with fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese leadership is more capable of challenging its neighbours. The government has been particularly engaging in military, political, and hybrid warfare activities to control the SCS. These operations include, notably, the building and promotion of artificial islands, radars, and aircrafts to ensure its military control, an increase of grey zone activities, and economic seducement through financial support to third countries. Against this grim background, Dr Tsai encouraged the European Union to speak up about the ongoing developments in the SCS.

Next, Mr Bill Hayton paid attention to China's so-called 'historic rights' regarding the U-shaped nine-dash line that is used to claim its maritime territories. Highlighting the undefined character of the origins, shape, and meaning behind the line, he put into question the actual legitimacy for Beijing to assert its sovereignty over the area. In particular, Mr Hayton pointed out three main regions rich in fisheries, gas, and oil reserves, which remain disputed between China and its neighbours: the Reed Bank in the Philippines, the Vanguard Bank in Vietnam, and the Luconia Breakers in Malaysia. He also emphasised some recent

victories on the Chinese side vis-à-vis its regional counterparts. First, there was the case of the Vietnamese government cancelling a major oil project in its waters which should have been conducted by Spanish and Russian oil companies, in the wake of China's pressure. Second, the successful push operated by Beijing in Filipino waters was discussed, where it will conduct a joint venture for oil exploration with companies based in Manilla and Singapore. In addition, he underlined the fact that the country is now able to hide its nuclear submarines in the South China Sea's waters, providing a viable submarine deterrence base in the region, while US military presence has seen an increase.

Eventually, given the fact that China's military expansion in its neighbouring waters has been ongoing for the last 15 years, Dr Pejsova wondered what would represent the next 'red line' for the international community. Moreover, she noticed two major encouraging trends in recent years. First, the conflict has become more internationalised. As such, external powers which were previously neutral are increasingly voicing their objections, including the EU and the US. For that matter, Brussels is currently working towards a common position on an 'Indo-Pacific strategy', underlining its willingness to counterbalance China's influence in Asia. Second, the international community can rely on an official court ruling delivered by the Permanent Court of Arbitration that provides a legal basis for tackling Chinese claims in the South China Sea. Although no country has substantially acted upon it yet, the international ruling still matters. In particular, Dr Pejsova noted that a growing coordination was visible at the UN level and that China was paying attention to these objections voiced by other nations. She also pointed out that tensions with China will continue on many fronts. What is necessary on the EU side, however, is to stay united and coordinated while staying active through diplomatic and military means. A possible solution would consist in increasingly bringing the issue of the SCS to the UN level, particularly in view of environmental degradation and resource conservation concerns. Last but not least, Dr Pejsova concluded by arguing that the EU, and more broadly the international community, could learn at least one thing from China: to act boldly and holistically, thereby creating a type of 'fait accompli', much like China has already been pursuing in the South China Sea.

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