



THE IMPLICATIONS OF SINO-AMERICAN RELATIONS ON THE WORLD ORDER – THE TAIWAN STRAIT ISSUE –

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This article aims to highlight, in a realist perspective, the importance of Sino-US relations and the diplomatic steps taken by the main global actors in the context of the military actions in Ukraine. In order to provide an authentic portrayal of the characteristics of the international security environment and, in particular, of the Asia-Pacific region, with a focus on the Taiwan issue, I have taken an overview of the situation in the region, with reference to recent history and the current context, while showing the implications of Sino-American relations over security and the role of the AUKUS and QUAD alliances in the politico-military sphere.

The current crisis on the international arena, triggered by the individual or joint actions of certain state actors, has political, economic and military aspects with serious repercussions for the whole community and affects global security to a degree that brings the military component to the fore. This “atrophy” is being addressed by a number of events taking place at different points around the globe, namely the war in Ukraine, the Asia-Pacific region and the Taiwan Strait, where the interests of major state actors are involved and are finding it difficult to reach a consensus.

Keywords: security crisis; Sino-US relations; Asia-Pacific region; Taiwan Strait issue; war in Ukraine;



INTRODUCTION

Motto: “The art of war is of vital importance to the State. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin”.

Sun Tzu

The changes in the current security environment are determined by the confluence of the interests of major state actors, who are in constant competition for control of a particular area, political, economic or military, at the international level. The historical framework presents us with a result of the factual and ideological contrasts of states, starting from the first project of international relations, namely the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which founded the current context of international relations, thus portraying the current state of affairs at global level and reflecting the positions of large and small state actors and their interdependence in relation to the magnitude of the security factor.

In terms of the evolution of economic, political and military factors at the level of states, it is increasingly difficult to anticipate changes in the security environment and to take measures to combat the threats that may arise in these evolving processes. Power poles are tending to shift, and the global centre of gravity in economic, political and military terms is changing its position, drawing the attention of the main players and the main world organisations, particularly in Asia.

Asia has been a point of great interest for Westerners since ancient times, as evidenced by military expeditions for economic and expansionist purposes to the far reaches of East Asia, one of the most exciting areas and with great industrial potential being the territory of China and the areas contained by neighbouring states. In this respect, things do not seem to have changed very much in the view of the Western countries; still, of utmost interest in terms of international relations, as well as geopolitical and geostrategic factors, remain the actions of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and its influence at regional and global level.

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CHANGES IN THE ACTUAL COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENT CAUSED BY THE TENSE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE US AND THE PRC

A short retrospective of China's history, beginning with Britain's intention to colonise this vast territory in 1637 (Luard, 2019, p. 16), when it first appeared on the Chinese coast for commercial purposes, shows us the fundamentalist ideological way in which the great Chinese empire conducted its policy towards outsiders. Throughout this time, China showed patience and tenacity in its strategic planning to face Britain's colonising attempts on the one hand, and to face Japan's military might on the other, and then to free itself permanently from its domination with the end of World War II.

Relations between the PRC and the United States have been subdued by the tactful actions of the Chinese people, who wanted to develop politically, economically and militarily after the Communist Party's seizure of power and the relentless attempts of the West to limit the development of the Communist state as much as possible.

The beginning of the Cold War marks a turning point in Sino-US relations, which have never been "warm" but, on the contrary, have been dominated by disagreements that escalated to the use of armed force, especially during the wars in East and Southeast Asia, where the two states were involved with military attributes.

There have been no direct implications for mainland European organisations as a result of tensions between the PRC and Taiwan, but they are felt in certain sectors, such as the economy and industry. The European Union's attempts to maintain good economic relations with the PRC have been given concrete form by practical actions taken by France, which wanted a constant import of products from the Asian state in order to increase the economic level, which has suffered from the COVID-19 pandemic and tensions in Eastern Europe, following the entry of Crimea into Russian administration and the military exercises conducted by Russia on the border with Ukraine after 2014.

The US membership of the North Atlantic Alliance, complemented by its interest in European states and the objectives set at European level, could not but generate tensions and repercussions for this area once China became involved in domestic and foreign policy. If the Cold War period did not generate critical moments for European states through the actions of the United States of America on the Taiwan Strait

and on countries in China's sphere of interest, the period following the break-up of the Soviet bloc, in addition to the rapid development of the phenomenon of globalisation, began to exert an increasing impact on Europe. This impact was reflected both in the accessible labour force coming from China and in the economic and industrial level, the main factor being the flooding of the market with remunerative, low-quality products, which were becoming a first choice for most buyers, compared to higher quality, more expensive products from Western countries.

The present shows us increasingly tense Sino-American relations, which is also reflected in the National Security Strategy of the United States of America (National Security Strategy, 2022, p. 23), determined by the race of the two countries to take the lead in the economic, industrial, military and political domains. This competitive state of affairs has given rise to tug-of-war between the US and the PRC, driven by global technological developments as well as important political and military changes that have occurred at distinct points around the globe, including the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine.

The new intergovernmental mechanisms, namely AUKUS (Australia-United Kingdom-United States) and QUAD (The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), which have been formed at global level, are a result of Sino-American relations, thus confirming once again the global importance of the two actors. For a clearer perspective on these alliances, I will take a look at their role in the global politico-military sphere.

QUAD took the form of an Asia-Pacific fulcrum, consisting of four countries: the US, Japan, Australia and India (Panda, Gunasekara-Rockwell, 2022, p. 1). Having emerged relatively recently, in 2007, this form of cooperation, initiated by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (Rossiter, Cannon, 2023, p. 3), was given the status in the international sphere as a response to the growing economic and military power of the PRC, with the diplomatic arrangement being referred to as "Asian NATO".

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from the very fact that, as a diplomatic dialogue, QUAD did not have strong levers for eventual military development among its members. Even after the “resuscitation” of the QUAD alliance in 2017 (Panda, 2022, p. 34) under the Trump administration, its objectives have been to create an economic balance in the Asia-Pacific through political and diplomatic channels. The emergence of what is now known as QUAD plus is a legacy left by the Trump administration, continued by the Biden presidency, which maintains the same vision of how to counter China’s expansionist initiatives in the economic-military sphere, but which has focused primarily on defending against COVID-19 and is expected to continue to take reinforcing measures with regard to maintaining economic and military security in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

AUKUS is focused primarily on developing Australia’s military domain and, by extension, maintaining a balance in the Asia-Pacific security environment by responding to potential threats that may arise as technology continues to evolve. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation has little involvement in the region, the only member states directly involved being France and the US, but in a manner independent of the Alliance. Of course, the interests of the two alliances (NATO and AUKUS) are similar, as they want stability in regional security, because indirectly, the outbreak of a military conflict here would also have repercussions for the members, if not militarily, then economically.

Changes in recent years, manifested in response to attempts by the world’s major state actors to maintain supremacy in a particular area, have had consequences for smaller states, leading to challenges at home and abroad, and also to a military arms race in response to the changing security environment.

RECENT HISTORY AND THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF THE TAIWAN STRAIT

The Taiwan Strait has been one of the most controversial points on the globe since the end of the Second World War and has involved the Republic of China (Taiwan, with its capital in Taipei), the People’s Republic of China and the United States of America. The nature of the adversarial relations between China and Taiwan was generated by the PRC’s non-recognition of Taiwan as an autonomous and independent territory, as the latter and the US would have wished. In order to clarify

Taiwan’s political position at the international level, I find it useful to mention that in 1971 the PRC was recognised as China’s sole legitimate representative in the United Nations, which resulted in Taiwan’s exclusion from the organisation and loss of statehood (UN Assembly, 1971). This was preceded by events in 1949, when the two parties fighting for power, the Nationalist Party of China and the Communist Party of China, separated, with the former retreating to Formosa (present-day Taiwan), representing China internationally, including at the UN until then.

Disagreements between the two political parties culminated in three major crises (Kissinger, 2011, p. 116) in the Strait, the first two of which can be traced temporally to 1954-1955 and 1958 respectively, with a third crisis occurring in the Taiwan Strait in 1995. The actor involved in managing these crises was the USA, which, driven by geostrategic and geopolitical interests, intervened with armed forces in the area, ultimately succeeding in bringing the two sides to a common denominator. Although the peak of tensions materialised in the three major crises, there was never a definite period of peace and stability between China and Taiwan. Political and diplomatic divergences were constant throughout the period following the separation of the two parties, the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party. The role of the US has been instrumental in keeping relations between China and Taiwan on the edge of instability, promoting the idea of a future where the latter will gain independence.

One of the states that fuelled tensions both in the Taiwan Strait and in the spectrum of Sino-US relations was the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which never wanted a bilateral development of ties between China and the United States, but rather tried to gain as much influence over the Asian state as possible and, why not, turn it into a Soviet “satellite”, already having common political characteristics under Marxist ideologies.

The end of the Cold War and the entry into the third millennium, complemented by technological developments and their impact on all areas, have brought major changes to the security environment. Massive fluctuations at the military level have prompted politicians to adopt a different strategy for managing inter-state relations, where the geopolitical and geostrategic spheres can no longer be neglected. This perspective gives the impression that the space given by the seas



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and oceans shared with the continental-land areas is already too small for the intentions and interests of the major state actors and even insufficient for the accumulation of military forces currently present at global level. The three areas that used to delimit the space where conventional battles were fought, namely land, air and sea, have been supplemented by two others, space and cyber. The latter two domains complement the three basic domains mentioned (Cucinschi, 2023), but we believe that they are rather beginning to gain independence from the three spheres and massively influence the way in which combat is currently conducted, even though all five are interdependent in the perspective of creating the environment where a state should be able to conduct armed combat, thus rendering the multi-domain conceptual-practical framework.

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The free will generates situations that are difficult to anticipate and then equally difficult to control, causing difficulties depending on the magnitude of the factor of risk. Such a situation has been experienced by the entire population of the globe in the period 2020-2022 under the pandemic manifestation of the COVID-19 virus. On the one hand, this example showed us the state of global cooperation between countries and governmental and non-governmental organisations and, on the other hand, it showed us a barrier that is difficult to overcome between the same countries which, before and after this phenomenon, showed hostility in their mutual relations.



Sino-US relations are influenced in particular by the current status quo of the territory defined by the Taiwan Strait and Taiwan Island. President Xi Jinping's coming to the helm of the Chinese Communist Party has facilitated new perspectives on Taiwan in Sino-Taiwanese relations, as he increasingly desires territorial unification, repeatedly referring to the historical factor.

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The actions of the Soviet Union up to the time of its collapse, and of the Russian Federation afterwards, led to significant fluctuations in US-China relations and, at the same time, in relations between European states and China, as the Russian Federation was a particularly important state actor at regional and international level. Russia's assistance to the PRC during the Cold War was of real interest to the PRC, not only in terms of mutual benefits, but also in terms of its development in a number of areas, not least the military – including the development of nuclear capabilities.

After the end of the Cold War period and the break-up of the Soviet bloc, bilateral Sino-Russian relations began to cool down, with the Russian Federation focusing more on domestic issues. However, as the new millennium entered, China and Russia began to reconsolidate their relations, with mutual benefits translated to the economic level, thus generating a response to the growing global economic influence of the European Union and the United States. The affront created by China and Russia also came as a result of the impact that the fall of the communist bloc had on the world order and the extent to which the democratic-liberal trend promoted by the US and the Western Europeans gained ground. The world order was tilting towards the visionary democracy of the Western states, and the states resulting from the break-up of the Soviet bloc, which still wanted a political regime based on communist foundations, together with the People's Republic of China, had to join forces to avoid coming under the influence of the democratic political current.

We consider it necessary to refer to the year 2021, more precisely to the 15th of September, when a new organisation, namely AUKUS (Implementation of the AUKUS Partnership, 2022), was launched in the existing global inter-state competition. As I said, the new alliance was aimed at reorganising the poles of power in the Pacific Ocean and limiting the hegemony exercised by China. This development in the security environment, all the more so as it was reinforced by the fact



that the US was behind the alliance, led to contradictory responses from China regarding the completion of the AUKUS pact. The PRC issued several criticisms and complaints, including the fact that security in the Asia-Pacific will be increasingly difficult to maintain as an arms race will begin between states in the region, the main consideration being rendered by the fact that the PRC will no longer have the same control over them (Wende, 2022, p. 50).

The recent period, defined by the years 2020-2021, shows that China's intentions are to further consolidate capabilities among its armed forces, and according to a US report (The Department of Defense, 2021, p. 5), Beijing has set 2027 as the deadline for completing the modernisation process that China's military is currently undergoing (Wei, 2022, p. 12).

Since 2016, when Tsai Ing-wen from the Democratic Progressive Party took over the leadership of the province (Clark, 2017, p. 4), China has been increasingly vocal in its desire to annex Taiwan to its territory, repeatedly exposing historical issues, and in order to demonstrate its supremacy in the area, the PRC has begun to carry out large-scale military exercises with the aim of intimidation, going beyond Taiwan's territorial boundary. These military exercises conducted by the China Eastern Theater Command (Wood, 2016, p. 1) were aimed at demonstrating armed supremacy in the region and providing a response to the political and diplomatic changes generated by Taiwan, Japan and the US in the Pacific region. Taiwan's 2020 presidential election was yet another reason for the PRC to step up its military exercises around Taiwan, a context also provided by the fact that diplomatic ties between the two sides have stalled since 2016. Nor has the pandemic situation seemed to stop China from conducting large-scale military exercises, and not only against Taiwan but also against Japan, highlighting the issue of the Sunkaku Islands, which are under Japanese administration but which the PRC wants, also appealing to the historical factor. The United States disagreed with China's actions in entering Japanese-administered territorial waters, stating that Japan administers that territory (Ibid., p. 100).

The tensions between China and the United States have increased with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, especially since China is a strategic partner for Russia and an opening market for the Federation's natural resources, as well as a powerful economic agent that can indirectly support Russian troops in the conflict west of its borders.

The issue arose when China exhibited a neutral stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but also the fact that it did not impose any economic restrictions on the Russian Federation, as many other states around the world did. An interesting point of view is made by Monish Tourangbam in an article in which he refers to Sino-American relations and China's actions in the Indo-Pacific and, by implication, the Taiwan Strait (Tourangbam, 2023, p. 1), with the implications of the withdrawal of US and allied troops from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, relatively shortly before the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, being outlined. These actions may be the result of a lengthy US analysis of the international security environment and global interstate diplomatic and political relations. With the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, the US and its NATO allies have been given more freedom of action both to support Ukraine in the Russian-initiated war and in the event of a conflict in the Asia-Pacific region that might be triggered by China.

August 2022 marked a critical moment for Sino-US and Sino-Taiwanese relations with the visit of US Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan. China has been vehement in its statements against this act initiated by the United States, warning during the discussion between Xi Jinping and Joe Biden that this event will not escape the notice of the People's Republic of China and that *"those who play with fire will get burned"* (Toh, Yang, Lee, 2022). So this visit did not benefit Taiwan in its relationship with China, but in the end the government in Taipei was in a position to choose the *"lesser of two evils"*, and the gains from the US spokesman's visit mattered more for US-Taiwanese relations than the island's relations with China, which were not, in any case, sufficiently calm ones to be worth losing this opportunity. China's intentions to take over Taiwan had not ceased before Nanci Pelosi's visit, and even more so, they would not have taken a different turn had the Taipei stopover not taken place. This event highlighted, finally, two important issues: the first is the fact that the Taiwanese government continues to hold its position towards China at a constant level, without an openness to dialogue in a productive way for the bilateral relationship, and the second is the uncompromising position of the US, on the one hand, in relation to the foreign policy of the Chinese Communist Party and, on the other, to China's military capabilities, which have not yet had sufficient impact to pose a real threat to the United States.





The trio that has militarily dominated the world from the end of the Cold War to the present day, consisting of the United States, Russia and the People's Republic of China, has in recent years stepped up its efforts to gain supremacy in a particular area (military, economic, political, etc.), with implications at both military and economic level, thus resulting in an increased dynamic in changing the world order already established in recent times.

INTERNATIONAL DYNAMICS IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF THE TAIWAN STRAIT

The European Union is confronting a series of challenges in international relations that are only leading to an increased pace of role-shifting among its members before the pandemic challenge caused by the COVID-19 virus and even more so before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Many of these changes in the European continent were influenced by the world's major economic and military powers, through the interests they had and continue to pursue in various areas. The trio that has militarily dominated the world from the end of the Cold War to the present day, consisting of the United States, Russia and the People's Republic of China, has in recent years stepped up its efforts to gain supremacy in a particular area (military, economic, political, etc.), with implications at both military and economic level, thus resulting in an increased dynamic in changing the world order already established in recent times.

East-West relations can very well be translated as a crisis driven by political, economic and military considerations, with important global repercussions (Tian, 2023, p. 217). Until the outbreak of the War in Ukraine, these tensions were spilling over into consequences on two "battle fronts", firstly at the economic level, between the US and China, and secondly at the military level, in different areas around the globe, including the Taiwan Strait, through the display of military capabilities by each other. Also in this context, we find two sides with relations established also on political-ideological grounds, the western formation being composed of the US and the EU, and the eastern formation of China and Russia.

The outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, through the involvement of the military instrument, once again puts the East and the West in the position of exposing their military and diplomatic qualities, having, at this moment, practically two dimensions of the conflict: one determined by the economic-commercial factor and the other determined by the military factor.

Under the spectrum of this situation, both the EU and NATO are in a position to put into a realistic and practical framework the inter-state links between its members and, implicitly, the quality of these relations, on the base of which the two organisations operate. Thus, at NATO level, we see changes in the way some states act, depending

on their interests, and as an example, we can see states such as Hungary, which has distanced itself, to some extent, from the policies imposed by NATO regarding the War in Ukraine (National Assembly of Hungary, 2022), Poland, which has embarked on an arms race at a much faster pace than other states in the region (O'Donnell, 2022), or Germany, which seems to have taken a step back from the foreign policy pursued before Chancellor Olaf Scholz came to power.

All these political and diplomatic changes taking place in Europe have consequences for all the states and organisations in the Asia-Pacific region, and in terms of international relations and economic ties, we can attribute the role of negotiator – practically self-assumed – to France, which wants to increasingly impose its point of view on the old continent and also on the interests of the EU. Considerations such as Brexit or political changes in Germany have given it this option, which it seems unwilling to share with other countries, and, moreover, it seems to be pursuing a foreign policy with clear intentions of moving away from American influence.

With regard to the situation mentioned above, there are two major events that determined the French state to pursue interests that are not exactly in line with those of the US, one of them being Australia's choice to purchase nuclear-powered submarines delivered by the US and the UK (which resulted in the AUKUS pact), at the detriment of conventional submarines to be purchased by the Australians, following earlier discussion with France, Australia being a virtual 'victim' of the vices of economic interests that transcend the intrastate sphere. The second event involving the French state was President Emmanuel Macron's official visit to China in April 2023, which resulted in a three-day meeting (Hale, 2023) with Chinese President Xi Jinping. The situation that generated questions about France's position in the "new world order" was, on the one hand, the statements made by its president upon his return to Europe, including that "being allies does not mean we are also vassals (with reference to the relationship between Europe and the US)" (Tisdall), and, on the other hand, the assumption of speaking for the entire European community, being, in practice, a self-assigned role beyond the verbal agreements of all EU members, portraying a vision of Emmanuel Macron that assumes European individualism in the international sphere and the establishment of a superpower status for the Union. The role performed by the French





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delegation was also probably focused on intrastate interests and with reference to the establishment of strong economic relations with the People's Republic of China, also targeting the French extension (French Polynesia), located in the Pacific Ocean, in China's sphere of economic influence.

In the same context, generated by France and the French President's visit, is the attitude towards China's policy on Taiwan, implying that it is not a European issue. This attitude, demonstrated by a state which is increasingly present on the international relations scene and which seems to be at odds with the interests shown by the United States and the United Kingdom, may have a brutal impact on diplomatic relations conducted at world level.

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The international community's call for the unresolved security problems of today continues to be met with an uncertain response, given the multitude of technological changes taking place and the efforts of states to keep up with them in order to create a solid and secure framework.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has aimed to provide a realistic picture of the rapid developments in international relations, highlighting the most important issues currently facing the world, and the Asia-Pacific region in particular. Thus, by presenting aspects regarding the most important state actors from the beginning of the Cold War to the present day, we can easily see the framework where the protagonists have been the three superpowers – the United States, Russia and China, which have configured the "world order" according to the interests pursued, using the tools of influence in their specific spheres and domains.

The present offers us a similar picture, in which the three states are present and exert, through political, economic and military means, the same influence, but supplemented by the emergence of new presences, in the form of the European Union or states such as Turkey, which want a place alongside these major actors.

With regard to the Taiwan Strait, limiting ourselves to China and the United States of America, we can conclude by saying that, at this stage, no consensus has been reached, with antagonistic attempts and reactions on the part of both military superpowers, both politically and militarily, on a field where Taiwan is practically the epicentre of the problem.

The European Union, even though it has suffered a huge loss with Britain's withdrawal, has an increasingly vocal and consistent presence internationally by promoting its main "voice", namely France. The EU's views on the world stage highlight aspects that interfere with those of the US and the UK, in some cases even seeming to contradict them, but under the desire for international recognition as a player worth considering.

The global security environment now more than ever needs the diplomatic prowess of states, which in our view is the most important means of stabilising a potential crisis at some point. However, when the diplomatic instrument is depleted, the crisis falls under political and military means, which can ultimately create the conditions for armed conflict.

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