Are we heading towards a new cold war, and if yes, will the European Union have to pick a side?

The war with China won't occur

On the 15th of May 2020 on the channel *Fox News* Republican senator Martha McSally declared, after a report from the FBI disclosed new actions of Chinese cyber espionage: "We are entering a Cold War with China"; a statement enthusiastically supported by several other authorized members of the Republican Party and former advisors to Donald Trump. As a response to this statement, on the 24th May 2020, the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi issued a warning to the world that China and the United States are "on the brink of a new Cold War." "Cold War"; these words that are on everyone's lips. They refer to a past believed to be over; that of a fight between two blocs by any means possible, except direct military confrontation.

In reality China has worried the United States for more than ten years. It has been eight years since Barack Obama pivoted American foreign policy towards Asia and four years, since the election of Donald Trump, that tensions have been building. So much so that for many political commentators the question no longer seems to be whether we have entered a new Cold War or not, but rather how the one we are in will develop: Is this an inescapable path, which will push the two countries towards all out war, or is there still time to return to the *status quo* before the US elections of November 2020?

This question has been the subject of many reflections, books and conferences for several years and yet it seems that with every day that passes there is a new article published on the subject. The work to reference on the subject is that American political scientist Graham Alison: "Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?" Published in 2017[6]. Based on the principle that "it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable." Graham Alison led an applied history project at Harvard which revealed that over the past five centuries, the confrontation between an ascending power and a reigning power has occurred sixteen times and has ended in war twelve. Given this, the idea that "the United States and China are heading straight for war"[7] is not a huge leap to make, though nevertheless it is one Graham Alison refuses to take, positing that an open war between China and the US is not inevitable. It is simply a question, he tells us, of recognizing the structural trends which guide the relationship of these two great powers, and which cause a "tectonic" stress that the two capitals must control to avoid a simple spark off the coast of Taiwan, between the two Koreas, or on the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands, triggering an armed conflict.

Let us note, moreover, that this fear of armed conflict did not begin with the arrival of Donald Trump to power. The fictional novel entitled: "The Ghost Fleet"[8], published in 2015, and which would have greatly inspired the American military, tells the story of a future war in which China, assisted by Russia, would launch an offensive against the United States, leading to the occupation of the Hawaiian Islands. It is interesting to note that the 'offensive' was made possible by the fact that the electronic chips sold by China to the United States, which are present in all American weapons systems, in particular in drones and missiles, would allow the military Chinese to gain the upper hand. Any connection between this novel and American concerns about the Chinese firm Huawei would undoubtedly be purely fortuitous…

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[6] Graham Allison – Destined for war – Can America and China escape Thucyde's trap? – First Mariner Books New York 2017

[7] Title of an interview of Graham Allison by Figaro Magazine, 3rd May 2019

[8] P. W. Singer and August Cole – Ghost fleet – Houghton Mifflin Harcourt – US – June 2015

In reality, this developing "cold war" is very different from its predecessor. Firstly, because China does not wish to claim ideological domination and is not an expansionist power. In any case, this is what the former Singaporean Ambassador to the United Nations, Kishore Mahbubani, claims in a well-argued work entitled: "Has China Won?"[9], a title that resonates as an answer to the question posed by Graham Allison. Moreover, despite its economic and technological strength, China does not currently have a military tool that gives it global reach. Above all else, it does not constitute a cultural model that could be exported past Asia, and does not claim to be so. Its soft power is weak, at least in Europe, where it is seen as a "partner, a competitor, but also a systemic rival."[10] Finally, because the economic and financial ties forged between the US and China and between Europe and China are of such great magnitude that a conflict, even limited to its commercial dimension, would lead to "mutually assured economic destruction".

Certainly, a military incident can quickly occur as passions on both sides have been heightened since Donald Trump came to power. However, even if such an event did ever occur, it is unlikely it would descend into open war. The reason is simple: China's rulers, as staunch followers of Sun Tzu, will not deviate from the strategy of winning without fighting. They will avoid a military confrontation at all costs and will seek, through long-term policy, to isolate the United States. This would continue what Donald Trump has been doing so well so far on his own. If there were to be a war, it is therefore reasonable to assume it would remain "cold." The problem is that nations behave as irrationally as the men and women who lead them. This makes predictions in matters of international relations a difficult and therefore interesting art.

Does the Union have to choose a side, and if yes, who?

It is evident that, from the point of view of the European Union, there is no symmetry between its relationships with, on the one hand, the United States and, on the other hand, China. History, culture, language, economy, technology and above all else, the political system, bring Europeans infinitely closer to the Americans than to the Chinese. Especially since, through the European lens, China is a counter-model in terms of human rights and public freedoms and maintains a policy that is difficult to accept both within its borders vis-à-vis Muslim minorities (Uyghurs), and outside, in places such as Tibet. The recent events in Hong Kong have not improved China's image in Europe.

China's behaviour in international trade must also be taken into account. Its government has, in fact, imposed restrictions on access to its market which, in the long run, prove unbearable for European companies. It is, for example, an obligation to partner with Chinese firms who benefit from forced technology transfers, and then become fierce competitors of European companies. Finally, China's bad reputation in Europe comes also from a great number of instances of industrial espionage. Given all this, it follows that China has a significant handicap vis-à-vis the United States, in winning the hearts of Europeans. China has succeeded in its economic and military take off, but she has failed to be admired, let alone loved, at least by the West.

However, one must admit that on the other hand, the behaviour of Donald Trump's America towards the European Union has been, quite frankly, hostile. Instead of uniting to form a common front, the President hinted that he would deal with the European Union before he had 'finished' with China[11].

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[9] Kishore Mahbubani – Has China won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy – Public Affairs New York, April 2020

[10] European Commission and HR/VP contribution to the European Council – EU-China – A strategic outlook – 12th March 2019

[11] Comments made to the CNBC channel on January 21st, 2020, in relation to the Davos Economic Forum – "Europe has been very, very tough to deal with. They've taken advantage of our country, the European Union, for many, many years… I wanted to wait till I finished China. I didn't want to go with China and Europe at the

In this context, the Union has no choice other than that of a balanced policy based on its own interests, maintaining its values without lecturing other nations. What could the formative principles of such a policy be?

Firstly, we must abandon the idea at the heart of the so-called American "engagement" with China, that this country could be made to evolve towards democracy by the sole virtue of openness. China is a power that has 1.5bn people and its history is notably different to ours. In this story, democracy is neither a value nor a model. With regards to the history of the Soviet Union's transition to democracy which turned into the virtual disappearance of Russia, China would tend to frame democracy as a counter-model. If, therefore, there should ever be radical changes in the governance of China, these changes will be the result of internal developments rather than external pressures. Following a pattern proven many times throughout history, increases in external pressure only serve as a pretext to harden domestic politics.

The second idea is that the policy of the Union must be driven by its own interest. That doesn't mean it has to give up its values, but rather that it can only promote them if it uses its power wisely. There is little point in lecturing China or imposing sanctions on it. Did the sanctions imposed on Russia allow Crimea to return to Ukraine or end the war in Donbass? Did it change the regime in North Korea or Iran? Moreover, does the European Union show itself to be vigilant on the issue of human rights? Did it take action against Saudi Arabia after the heinous murder of Jamal Khashoggi? Will it take sanctions similar to those it has taken on Russia if the government of Benjamin Netanyahu annexed part of the West Bank? With the current state of its power, the only possible position for the European Union vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes which infringe human rights is that stated in the "global strategy" of 2016, that of "pragmatism with principles". As Sven Biscop[12] aptly explains, this means cooperating with China whenever it is in our best interests, as long as we do not become complicit in human rights abuses, which must be our absolute limit. This cooperation must take place whilst maintaining a critical dialogue, which is not limited to incantations, lessons, or sanctions. Authoritarian regimes are also notably sensitive about their image.

The European Union has leverage over China, if only in terms of trade and technology. It has the means and the right to demand – within the World Trade Organization – that China changes its behaviour in regards to public procurement, respect for intellectual property and protection of investments. The case of fifth generation mobile networks and the possibility of using the infrastructure of the Chinese firm Huwaei provides a good example. From this point of view, the European Union must not allow itself to be pushing around by the United States, which did not wait until the election of Donald Trump to eavesdrop on the mobile phone calls of European leaders. Another important area of cooperation between the European Union and China but be climate, where the two powers need to align. Moreover, in the development of African countries, the interests of China and those of European Union should also converge. It is well understood to be in the Unions interests for Africa to develop as much as possible, if only to secure the most fragile populations in place and reduce, if not avoid, new waves of migration. From this perspective, consultation with China would be more advantageous for everyone than the current, knives drawn, competition. Finally, the European Union and China has every interest in the defence of multilateralism, all the more necessary following the withdrawal of the United States from important international organizations such as the World Health Organization. Yet the Union must make sure it isn't "naïve" and should not put up with the entryism often practiced by China.

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same time. Now China's done, and I met with the new head of the European Commission, who's terrific… But I said, look, if we don't get something, I'm going to have to take action, and the action will be a very high tariff's on their cars and other things that come into our country."

[12] Sven Biscop: European Strategy in the 21st century – new future for old power – Routledge 2019

Finally, the third idea which should guide the European Union's policy towards China is, put simply, to remain united. The European member states are facing China, but also Russia and the United States, the same situation as the Gallic tribes were in facing Julius Caesar. Given the requirement of a unanimous vote on foreign policy, any of these three powers need only have control over one member states to block any policy. It is an immense fragility that we will have to dispense with one day, and the sooner the better. The European Union therefore has no interest in getting caught up in the Sino-US quarrel. No matter how close we are to the United States, the end of the Cold War demonstrated that their interests and ours no longer automatically align. The Union too must act in accordance with its own interests. Yet it is not enough to say that we will go our own way. We still have to describe this path, and give it substance, which in the current state of European governance is our greatest challenge.

Will the Union be able to do this or is it doomed to disappear into the strategic vacuum?