

HIROYUKI AKITA

Commentator of *Nikkei*, Japan

Thomas Gomart, Director of Ifri

Let me start with Mr. Akita. Mr. Akita, the floor is yours. I have asked all the panelists to take six or seven minutes before we have some discussion and turn to the audience.

Hiroyuki Akita

Thank you very much for having me here today. I am sorry I could not join you at the conference. I got excited and checked all the information about Abu Dhabi, including the food, the culture and the conference agenda and I hope I can visit in the future.

I just want to make three brief points: on the changing nature of the US-China rivalry; the prospects for that rivalry; and what we should do to win this competition.

First, on the changing nature of the US-China rivalry, before the pandemic I think this was more or less about competition on high-tech and geopolitics, especially on maritime domain. However, through this pandemic we now have a very important new element in this rivalry, it is a fierce competition over the political system. In short, competition between a Communist Party's political system versus the US democratic system. Now, the US generally believes that the Communist Party regime is partly responsible for the Covid situation in the US and other countries. The US believes that if the Communist Party allowed press freedom, freedom of expression, this situation could have been avoided and the outbreak contained in Wuhan at an earlier stage. The US perceives this pandemic situation was caused partly by the nature of China's political system. On the other hand, China believes that the US situation is largely due to the mishandling of Covid by former President Trump. Moreover, Beijing is now expanding the narrative that the Communist Party system is superior to the US democratic system and the Covid situations in two countries are proving it. So it seems to me that this rivalry has gone beyond high-tech and maritime security, and now it includes the competition over the political system.

Second, what are the prospects for this rivalry? I am afraid to say this, but I think Western countries are in a less favorable position than Beijing now. If we look at the economic front, China signed a mega FTA agreement with 15 Asian countries last year, called RCEP. China is also now trying to apply for participation in the TPP and we cannot underestimate its willingness to join. The US on the other hand, does not have any alternative economic strategy and it may not be willing to come back to the TPP. This is the situation in the economic competition. On the military front we have to admit that China is in a more favorable position as of today. The Chinese military now deploys around five times more submarines, aircraft and warships than the US military deploys in the Indo-Pacific. According to the



predictions of US military, the military balance of power will shift even more to China's favor in the coming years. Therefore, my second point is that we are not in a favorable position now vis-à-vis China.

That leads to my last point. What should we do to win this competition? Obviously, we really need to have a better common Indo-Pacific strategy to pushback. Each individual country or the EU now have their own strategies, but we need a common strategy. But, it is very difficult to achieve, because each Asian countries' attitudes to China differ a lot. For example, Japan and Australia are willing to accept high levels of risk to counter China because we are a treaty and allies of the US and are under US security umbrella. On the other hand, ASEAN countries are relatively small and largely rely on China economically, and so they cannot afford to resent Beijing. Accommodating all these Asian countries and proceeding with the common Indo-Pacific strategy is very difficult. But, I do not think it is impossible.

My conclusion is that if we were a painter, maybe we should follow the approach of the pointillist, Georges Seurat, rather than a portrait painter approach. That is, we place dots on the important spots on the canvas with a likeminded country and accumulate those dots with the aim to evolve towards an ambiguous Indo-Pacific strategy. Those dots include high-tech, supply chains, or consequential digital rulemaking. This approach, rather than working like a portrait painter, could draw a common strategic picture that can be accepted by everybody. Thank you very much.

Thomas Gomart

Thank you very much, Mr. Akita, for your points on the changing nature of the rivalry between the US and China and the prospects. You argue that China is in a better position and that is certainly a good way to start the discussion with Renaud, who may have a different point of view.