

## RENAUD GIRARD

Senior reporter and war correspondent at *Le Figaro*

First, I would like to thank our listeners who had the courage to come and hear to this session – timely as it is with regard to the signing of the treaty between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States – on Asia, China and the Sino-American rivalry.

My entire thesis, in fact, is that China made a serious strategic mistake in showing its hand too early. In strategy, “time is of the essence”. And here, I think that China showed itself too soon.

What was the strategy after the Maoist episode, marked first and foremost by confrontation with the West, with France in Indochina, with America in Vietnam, with, due to an external factor, the Soviet Union – a reconciliation right at the end of the reign of Mao Zedong?

Mao Zedong’s replacement, Deng Xiaoping, pursued a strategy of accommodation, not only with Western powers, in particular America, but also with Asian powers, such as Japan. China benefited greatly from Japanese technology for its economic development, and historical problems with Japan went unmentioned. As for the Senkaku Islands, they were already shelved at the first historic meeting between Prime Minister Tanaka and Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai.

China hence garnered its huge economic power via a very simple model: “We are a peaceful power; we enjoy good relations with everyone.” There was even a reconciliation with the Soviet Union. From Gorbachev’s trip to Beijing in 1989, you will recall the words: “We are poor, help us. We are a large country.”

All of the West, and even all of Asia, were fascinated by China’s progress. Fascinated by the sumptuous Olympic Games that it organised, if I recall correctly, in 2008. So the whole of the West, all of the world’s major powers, helped China to develop, with China pretending to be an underdeveloped country in need of help. And it used this paradigm right to the end, until the moment it was told: “That is enough. You are not an underdeveloped country and we can no longer consider you as such.”

It worked. But in political terms, China showed its hand too early. That is, it consolidated its economic power to such an extent that it became somewhat arrogant. In fact, when it comes to strategy, arrogance and power are unhappy bedfellows.

How did China show its hand? It did so for issues that were not essential to it, which were not of any real strategic importance. There were the islands in the East China Sea, in a kind of confrontation, initially with Japan. And at the same time, a confrontation with the South-East Asian countries, as it wanted to seize the South China Sea by installing aerodromes on reefs that had been *terrae nullius* up to that point under international law; i.e. uninhabited islands that did not belong to anyone.

But China seized all this sea, which is larger than the Mediterranean. Today – and this is the theory of the “nine-dash line” – it considers that it owns the whole South China Sea, which stretches along the Vietnamese coastline, to Malaysia, up to Brunei, and then up into the Philippines. It has seized all these reefs. From the beginning, this went down somewhat badly with the Vietnamese.

Next, while speaking to Mr. Obama during a trip to the United States, Mr. Xi Jinping promised *urbi et orbi* – to the people and to the world – that he would never militarise the islands in the Paracel and the Spratly archipelagos; but never mind. He did not keep his promise – this happens to China – as today these islands are equipped with missiles and strategic bombers. And this adventurism, for non-essential reasons that are perhaps important for China, gave rise to a sudden, significant wave of fear in Asia.

Asia was somewhat willing to ask the Americans, who did not necessarily want to stay, to leave their bases. As was the case, for instance, in the Philippines. And now the dynamic completely changed direction, with all the Asian countries asking more from America: “Please, stay.” Even Vietnam. We recall Hillary Clinton’s visit to Vietnam during the Obama administration, which removed Vietnam from the list of countries to which America could not provide arms. Today, America can freely sell arms to Vietnam, whereas this is clearly not the case for China. The same has likewise been true for Europe since the Tian An Men Square incident in 1989.

In fact, by showing its hand too early, by asserting its power, China missed the chance to establish its dominance in Asia. Strategically, I think that China does not want to conquer the world. China does not want Thomas Gomar or Renaud Girard to live like the Chinese. We can keep on living in our little French museum, which suits them very well.

On the other hand, I do think China wants to achieve dominance in Asia. This is very clear. And above all – this was what a Chinese vice-minister told me over dinner in 2009 – China considers that America has no part to play in Asia. That it is not at home in Asia. That America has no interest beyond, I would say, the Bay of Bengal to the island of Hawaii. That this area is very distant – which is true, geographically speaking – from America; and that it has no role to play there.

In fact, by showing its hand too early – being too “assertive”, as they say in English, with its power – China has made a strategic mistake. It has scared all the countries that until then were extremely willing to cooperate with it, including Japan economically. It has made all these countries tense and fearful.

There are countries that are less dependent on their trade with China. Japan, for instance, is not very dependent. Only 4 or 5% of Japanese GNP, I believe, involves exports and imports with China. On the other hand, you have countries like Korea that are much more dependent, with the trouble being that China acted extremely brutally towards Korea after the Koreans equipped themselves with the American THAAD ballistic missile defence system.

My conclusion here is that this constitutes a new example of Chinese arrogance. And I repeat: arrogance and power is a very bad mix. The more powerful you are, the humbler you have to be in international relations. If not, you are no longer making progress. China is clearly very



powerful and will automatically become the world's leading economic power. But it has not been able to retain its humility, and has shown itself to be arrogant.

The latest form of this incredible arrogance relates to Covid-19, which, in my opinion, clearly stems from an industrial accident in Wuhan during experiments on the transfer of coronaviruses in bats to humans. When China rejected an international investigation into the origin of the virus – this when it was already an international pandemic – and when it punished Australia, which had quite naturally requested an investigation, it lost Australia. We saw this with AUKUS.

Australia was quite close to China, with a high volume of trade. Now, it is really a strategic rival. So China showed its hand too early. Arrogance in international relations sits very badly with power.

Thank you.

**Thomas Gomart, Director of Ifri**

Thank you very much, Renaud, I think that is a very good point of discussion with the presentation made by Mr. Akita.