

## JEAN-PIERRE CABESTAN

Senior Researcher Emeritus at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) attached to the French Research Institute on East Asia (IFRAE) of the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilisations, Professor Emeritus at Hong Kong Baptist University

**Douglas Paal, Distinguished Fellow at the Asia Program Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, former Senior Director of Asian Affairs and Special Assistant to the President in the US National Security Council**

Is China going to be everybody's leading trade partner forever? Is the disposition of forces the way you have described it; or has it been changing? Is the debt policy of China undergoing various changes, as we heard this morning in other panels? I would like to come back to some of that, but now Jean-Pierre.

### **Jean-Pierre Cabestan**

Thank you. As a Frenchman based in Asia for many years, my view may be a bit biased because I am more sensitive to the rise of China through its growing assertiveness in the region. If I were based in Paris, or elsewhere in Europe, of course, the Ukraine war; the Middle East; and Africa are much more pressing issues than what is going on in the Far East – what we used to call the Far East in Europe – which is the Indo-Pacific region.

The short answer to your question, Doug, is that I think the US has been, and will remain, more successful in the global north and the global south in aligning its allies and partners with it on China and the growing tensions in East Asia.

John mentioned – and I basically agree with him – that NATO is a big factor of bringing together the Europeans and the Americans and the Canadians on issues like China. The fact that China now is one of the issues discussed in NATO meetings is an important move in the direction of a better transatlantic coordination on East Asia and China. That is the trend which I think we cannot ignore.

Another trend which has taken place for some years – even before these recent tensions in the Taiwan Strait – is the fact that the European Union itself has moved away from a kind of naïve and full engagement with China to a much more balanced China policy. We know the three pillars of this policy now – one is economic cooperation; the other one is economic competition; and the third one, which is something which shocked the Chinese when it appeared in 2019, is the idea that China and we are systemic rivals. What does it mean? It means that we do not share the same political values; we do not see the international order the same way; we do not abide by international law in the same manner, and in particular, for

instance, as far as human rights or the law of the sea are concerned, and many other aspects of international law.

I think here, in other words, China's growing power has brought together more than before Europeans and Americans on China. That does not mean there are no differences – there are quite a number of sources of friction, which we mentioned earlier today, like the trade war; and how much shall we put sanctions on China, for example for human rights infringements, like the questions of Xinjiang or Hong Kong.

On the Xinjiang issue, two years ago, for the first time the Europeans with the Americans, the British and the Canadians decided to impose sanctions on some Xinjiang officials – from the European point of view; and the European Union point of view, that was unprecedented.

Those are changes which tend to bridge the gap between the Europeans and the Americans on China.

Now, if we look at East Asia, I think that South-East Asia is in a very delicate position. South-East Asia cannot publicly and openly criticize China, but the countries of this region are very happy to have and keep the US around – all the way from the Vietnamese, of course, who have been in a difficult position for 1 000 years with the Chinese; but also with a country like Singapore, which is very happy to have the Americans come in and use the Changi naval base.

In addition, you have countries in East Asia like Japan – and we can talk about them – and South Korea, which are also US allies. These US allies in the Pacific region remain a factor for alignment with the US position regarding China.

Now, the burning issue – we may come back to it later – is the Taiwan issue. What has triggered the growing tensions in the Taiwan Strait has been, not only Beijing's clear assertiveness, but also its more obvious haste to unify Taiwan with China. That has been, to me, a major destabilizing factor in the region because most of the countries in the region are attached to the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. In contrast, since 2013, Xi Jinping has embarked on a new strategy, based on the idea that the Chinese communist leadership cannot leave this question unsolved and transmitted from one generation to another.

Therefore, China's policy towards Taiwan has been to use much more coercion against Taiwan in order to try to convince Taiwan to unify with China.

However, the problem is this policy has badly backfired and, actually, rallied a number of countries which were not that close to the US to support the status quo in the Taiwan Strait.

We may come back later to the comparison between Ukraine and Taiwan. I would just say a word about the Global South because, in the last 10 years, I have worked a lot on China/Africa relations. I have done field works in a number of African countries and, clearly, the Africans do not want to choose between the US and China.

However, one thing I will remind everyone that according to Afrobarometer surveys both China and the US are popular in Africa. In terms of favorable views, they are more or less at the same level – 60% of the Africans are favorable of China; but then also 58% of the Africans



have a favorable view of the US, a much more positive view than their view of the former colonial powers.

Clearly, they do not want to choose. Even today, I think most countries in the south, they think they can get away with this new so-called Cold War between the US and China and remain neutral – and still benefit from cooperating with both sides.

The problem with Africa is the fact that the US is much less present in Africa; and that the American diplomacy has deserted Africa. That has been, I think, a big weak point of the Americans in that continent. That has actually opened a boulevard to China which China has used to becoming much more active from a diplomatic point of view, a military point of view, and of course an economic point of view, with the BRI, the Belt and Road Initiative.

That is where we are now.

### **Douglas Paal**

Thank you very much, Jean-Pierre. As a parent of diplomats who are self-professed Africanists, I recognize your last remark very clearly.