



Europe Can Play a Role in a Conflict Over Taiwan. Will It?

Antoine Bondaz, Bruno Tertrais | Tuesday, March 23, 2021

In early February, France revealed that one of its nuclear-powered attack submarines had completed a mission in the South China Sea. The rare announcement, two years after the passage of the frigate *Vendemiaire* through the Taiwan Strait, was a clear signal of a growing French, but also European, interest in the sensitive region.



The French Navy ship Vendemiaire during a port call in Manila, Philippines, March 12, 2018 (AP photo by Bullit Marquez).

European awareness of its strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific is a slow train coming. Even for France and the U.K.—which, as permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and nuclear powers with a tradition of power projection, have long been interested in East Asia—there has been a quantum leap in recent years in their appetite for involvement in the region.

France has spearheaded the recent upsurge in interest, driven by its numerous overseas territories in the Pacific that are home to almost 2 million French citizens and comprise 80 percent of its maritime exclusive economic zones. Paris has signed significant weapons contracts with India and Australia, and is party to bilateral, trilateral as well as multilateral security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. In 2008, the Defense and Security White Paper for the first time acknowledged the importance of the region for Europe in general (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/2266/frances-strategic-posture-a-widening-focus>), and France in particular. Since then, the French Defense Ministry has regularly published an Asia-Pacific strategy document, which became an Indo-Pacific security strategy in 2019.

In the aftermath of Brexit, the U.K. is also sending strong signals of a renewed interest in the region. In its Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy

(https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/969402/The_Integrated_Review_of_Security__Defence__Development_and_Foreign_Policy) issued on March 16, London announced it would maintain a permanent naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. Bilateral security cooperation with Japan, in particular, is booming, with the two sides recently agreeing to a Maritime Security Arrangement. A deployment of a carrier strike group to patrol in regional waters and drill with the Japanese self-defense forces is set to take place in the coming weeks.

Both the U.K. and France have recently engaged in freedom of navigation operations in the region, in particular in the South China Sea, though they are keen to not be seen as being enlisted by Washington into any China containment strategy. With Germany and the Netherlands having now published their own Indo-Pacific strategy documents, the trend is clearly amplifying. The EU is also expected to set out in the coming weeks a common vision for its future Indo-Pacific engagement that will focus on supply chain diversification and technology, but also security and defense cooperation.

Yet, there is still a huge discrepancy between the demonstrated European interest in the Indo-Pacific and Europe's readiness to think about what its role would be in crisis scenarios, including conflict contingencies, especially in the Taiwan Strait. There is an urgent need to address this deficit if Europe is to not only defend its interests, but also participate in preventing conflict from happening.

This is all the more troubling given that tensions in the Taiwan Strait are growing. Since the election of President Tsai Ing-wen in 2016, Chinese pressure on the island, whether military, diplomatic or economic, has steadily increased. In January 2021 alone, more than 80 Chinese military aircraft entered Taiwan's air defense identification zone, or ADIZ, compared to 41 in November and 32 in December 2020. Meanwhile, Taiwan is attracting more attention from a world that increasingly sees it as an example and even a model, whether in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, sustaining its growth model, promoting democratic values or investing in emerging technologies.

To be clear, conflict scenarios in the Taiwan Strait are not limited to the widespread caricature in Europe of a massive Chinese invasion of Taiwan. They could involve a range of actions on the part of Beijing, including the takeover of the Dongsha Islands (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29494/a-small-island-chain-could-be-the-next-flashpoint-in-taiwan-china-relations>), the violation of Taiwanese airspace or even the organization of a maritime blockade around the island. Despite this, most Europeans have yet to fully realize that a unilateral change of the status quo by force would have far-reaching consequences not limited to the Taiwan Strait, and that Europe could not stay idle without incurring serious costs.

To begin with, far from remaining local and limited to China and Taiwan, any conflict would be much more global in scale. It would involve at least the United States and potentially Japan, as well as other U.S. treaty allies in the region—all countries that are essential economic and security partners for Europe. And while the NATO Treaty does not cover the Indo-Pacific region, European solidarity would be tested if China were to threaten the U.S. mainland.

To be a credible actor in the Indo-Pacific, Europe must prepare for a conflict contingency involving Taiwan, as this is its best hope of helping to prevent one from occurring.

A conflict would also endanger the lives of the more than 15,000 European citizens residing in Taiwan; cause huge disruptions in global value chains, including sectors—like superconductors—in which Europe has an overwhelming reliance on Taiwan; and threaten European foreign direct investment on the island, which combined represents the largest FDI in Taiwan. Any aggressive or opportunistic actions by China, even short of an all-out invasion, would embolden authoritarian regimes to act similarly, including on Europe's periphery, to say nothing of European overseas territories in the Indo-Pacific that could be affected in the event of escalation. And a failure by Europe to respond would call into question the principle of solidarity among democratic nations.

In the event of such a contingency, Europe would be neither without a role, nor without leverage to defend its interests. European countries could support friends and allies politically, including at the Security Council, as well as militarily by sharing intelligence and “back-filling” the U.S. military presence if needed, for instance in the Middle East and possibly through NATO. European countries and the EU could also impose political and economic costs on China, including by imposing sanctions on Chinese entities, setting up a partial embargo on any dual-use technologies, putting an end to major cooperation projects with Beijing and applying pressure on China within international organizations to impose reputational costs.

Of course, Europe would then face the risk of a Chinese backlash, whether directly or indirectly. But China's threats in such a scenario would be more bark than bite, as Beijing would not be able to wage a major war and isolate itself politically and economically from the entire world at the same time. In addition, the brutal deterioration of relations between China and its main trading partners, including the United States and Japan, that one can assume in such a contingency would give Europe inordinate weight and unprecedented leverage over Beijing. Should Beijing go so far as to threaten European territory that is vulnerable to Chinese missiles—a scenario evoked by some Chinese experts—then the independent British and French nuclear deterrent would enter into play.

Yet, as European policymakers prepare for responding to and intervening in such conflict scenarios, they must understand that they have an even bigger role to play in preventing them from happening in the first place

(<https://www.frstrategie.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/notes/2021/202105.pdf>). This requires moving confidently from being passive observers to active stakeholders in the region. In close coordination with partners in the Indo-Pacific, European governments and the EU should adopt a visible and credible strategy to deter China by convincing it that any unilateral change in the status quo by force would be not just too risky, but above all too costly.

Such a strategy could be based on several short-term, consensus-based and multilevel initiatives.

First, Europe should strengthen its declaratory diplomacy and better signal its interests and resolve to China. There are many reasons to criticize Europe's current strategy of systematically rendering Taiwan “invisible,” (<https://www.echo-wall.eu/knowledge-gaps/searching-bolder-china-policy>) both at the EU and national level, in order to avoid potentially “offending” China.

But among its flaws, it also makes Europe's position on the wide range of Taiwan contingencies unclear and increases the risk of misperceptions on both sides. Europeans should take every opportunity to clearly and publicly state that they are strongly opposed to any unilateral change of the status quo by force and would not stand by in the event of a conflict.

Second, Europeans must resist both China's diplomatic pressure and its desire to impose its narrative. While the Chinese Embassy in France recently pressured French parliamentarians to "refrain from any form of official contact with the Taiwanese authorities," parliamentary exchanges must not only continue, they should be expanded to include joint parliamentary delegations of the European Parliament and national parliaments, including the U.K. This would send a message of unity and firmness, while also raising awareness among European constituencies of Taiwan-related issues. In addition, it should be hammered home that Europe's "one China" policy differs from the People Republic of China's "one China" principle, and that Europeans have never acknowledged Taiwan as part of the PRC.

Finally, Europeans should begin preparing contingency plans for conflict scenarios now, given the slowness of crisis-response discussion and decision-making processes at the European level. This coordination effort should include Europe's partners in the Indo-Pacific, as well as civil society groups in Europe and Taiwan to facilitate and multiply interactions between them. The role of think tanks in this context is crucial to creating spaces for discussion and exchange, including with Taiwanese officials.

Europe has belatedly begun to realize the Indo-Pacific's centrality to its global role. But to be a credible actor there, it must prepare for a conflict contingency involving Taiwan, as this is its best hope of helping to prevent one from occurring.

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