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# East Asia: Key Security and Political Challenges<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

East Asia, part of the world's largest and most populous continent, is taking on an increasingly important role in global political, economic and security matters. While regional economic integration has flourished over the past two decades, cooperation in the security domain remains very modest, which is – considering the regional flashpoints, such as the Taiwan Strait, North Korea, the East and the South China Sea – a matter of great concern. Even though China's rise has accelerated the processes of regionalism and the formation of new integrations, East Asian countries remain increasingly anxious about Chinese strategic intentions and ambitions. The article argues that the absence of trust in the face of increasing military spending, is creating a security dilemma, which is very difficult to resolve due to the region's geostrategic importance. Without a US presence, the region would be unstable, and likewise, the strained relations between the US and China endanger regional stability, too. While the Chinese government opposes the US's presence in the region and makes no secret of its ambitions to create a new multilateral security architecture, more and more countries seem to side with the American definition of China as a revisionist power, challenging the existing world order.

**Keywords:** East Asia, security cooperation, USA, PR China, South China Sea, Taiwan, world order

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1 The article partially summarizes and connects to the research published in Razprave FF (Istenič 2016).

## **Povzetek - Vzhodna Azija: ključni varnostno-politični izzivi**

Vzhodna Azija leži na največji in najbolj obljudeni celini sveta, ki prevzema vse pomembnejšo vlogo v globalnih političnih, gospodarskih in varnostnih zadevah. Medtem ko je gospodarsko povezovanje v regiji v zadnjih dveh desetletjih na vrhuncu, sodelovanje na varnostnem področju še vedno močno zaostaja, kar je ob perečih regionalnih kriznih žariščih, kot so Tajvanska ožina, Severna Koreja ter Vzhodno- in Južnokitajsko morje, nadvse zaskrbljujoče. Čeravno je kitajski vzpon pospešil procese regionalizma in oblikovanje novih integracij, se med vzhodnoazijskimi državami povečuje nelagodje glede kitajskih strateških namer in ambicij. Prispevek temelji na tezi, da odsotnost zaupanja ob čedalje večji vojaški potrošnji posledično ustvarja varnostno dilemo, ta pa je zaradi geostrateškega pomena, ki ga imajo vsa omenjena območja, težko rešljiva. Brez prisotnosti ZDA v regiji ni stabilnosti, prav tako pa je ta ogrožena zaradi napetih odnosov med ZDA in Ljudsko republiko Kitajsko. Medtem ko kitajska vlada vse glasneje nasprotuje ameriški navzočnosti v regiji in ne skriva svojih ambicij po vzpostavitvi nove multilateralne varnostne strukture, ZDA dobivajo vse več somišljenikov v svoji opredelitvi Ljudske republike Kitajske kot revizionistične sile, ki ogroža obstoječi svetovni red.

**Ključne besede:** Vzhodna Azija, varnostno sodelovanje, ZDA, Ljudska republika Kitajska, Južnokitajsko morje, Tajvan, svetovni red

## **1 Introduction**

**E**ast Asia is actually a rather enigmatic term. Although the name has been in use among academics and government institutions for several decades, international bodies still do not agree on a common definition of the region and its members. This is because regions are primarily political formations, ideological and social constructs shaped by political-economic and social processes. As a result, there are quite different ideas about the delimitation of the Asian region. In a broader geographical sense, East Asia can be defined as a region consisting of two sub-regional entities: Southeast Asia, which includes Brunei, the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and East Timor (Timor-Leste), and Northeast Asia, which includes Japan, South Korea, the People's Republic of China (including the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macao), Mongolia, North Korea and Taiwan. In most cases, the term East Asia refers only to the area of the Korean Peninsula (South and North Korea), the People's Republic of China, Taiwan and Japan.

Regardless of whether we view the region in the broader geographical or narrower cultural-political sense, East Asia is undoubtedly the largest and most populous continent in the world and plays an increasingly important role in global political, economic and security affairs. Over the past two dec-

ades, the countries of East Asia have grown noticeably closer together, especially in the formation of a common regional identity and the search for unique regional values, such as Confucianism, which, given the extraordinary diversity of the region, justifies its regional cohesion more than anything else (Rošker 2016). The diverse physical landscape undoubtedly had a strong influence on the uneven development of the region and the different levels of development and living standards of its countries. The idea of uniformity is also complicated by vastly different religious traditions, ethnic and linguistic groups and the contrasting economic and political systems. Nevertheless, the diversity of the region has never diminished the importance of its role in the world. In fact, for most of recorded human history, Asian civilisations have been among the world's most advanced and sophisticated in the fields of science and technology, trade, agriculture, and infrastructure, whereas Europe was still rather backward before the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Historical sources attest that up until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, East Asia was more productive and had much more power and influence on the global economy than the West (Frank 1998, 174). However, isolationism and numerous wars abruptly reversed this trend.

Only in recent decades has relative peace enabled stable development of the region. In addition, it fostered the development of various integrative economic, political and social processes – i.e. processes of regionalism.<sup>2</sup> These processes defined the regional borders more precisely and strengthened the sense of togetherness and belonging to the East Asian region. A particularly intensive development also took place in the area of economic integration. This was triggered, ironically, mainly by the Asian financial crisis of 1997/98, which highlighted the close connection of regional economies and thus also their vulnerability. As a result, the countries realised that it would be much easier and more effective to defend their interests if they worked together and acted in a more institutionalised form. Thus, the East Asian region was gradually swept by a wave of regionalisation processes, which, due to the complexity and interconnectedness, acquired a picturesque metaphor with the phrase “the noodle bowl” (Baldwin 2006).

Although economic integration in the region has reached its peak in the last two decades, cooperation in the security field is still severely limited, which is extremely worrying given the regional crisis hotspots such as the Taiwan Strait, North Korea and the East and South China Seas. Moreover, there is

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2 Regionalism can be defined as ‘structures, processes and agreements that are working towards greater coherence within a specific international region in terms of economic, political, security, socio-cultural and other kinds of linkages’ (Dent 2008, 7).

no institution in the region (such as NATO) whose members would maintain and develop their own defence forces and provide the basis for collective security. The region's security structure is mainly based on individual bilateral security agreements, in which the USA also plays a key role (*ibid.*).

## 2 Review of Security Cooperation

The trouble spots mentioned are only a small part of the security challenges in East Asia. The region is also heavily burdened by many non-traditional security problems, such as cross-border crime, terrorism, piracy, pandemics, natural disasters, and so on. A broad spectrum of security challenges has stimulated the formation of a rather complex network of overlapping bilateral and multilateral security agreements, which, however, compared to similar alliances formed in Europe, are still relatively weakly institutionalized and are more or less limited to addressing non-traditional threats to regional security. The backbone of the security structure in the region are the bilateral security alliances between the US and its most important East Asian allies: Japan (1951), South Korea (1953), Thailand (1954), and the Philippines (1951). Security cooperation between the US and Singapore and between the US and Taiwan is also very strong. In the latter case, *Taiwan Relations Act* of 1979 plays a key role guaranteeing the island a regular supply of defense weapons to protect it from a possible Chinese attack. This so-called "hub and spoke" system, in which the US is the hub and its allies are the individual spokes, has only grown stronger in recent years, in parallel with China's economic and military rise in the region.

Although many regional agreements were concluded in the 1950s and 1960s to increase the security and stability of the East Asian region, most of them did not last. The *South East Asia Treaty Organisation* (SEATO), a defence alliance founded in 1954, was seen as a kind of Asian NATO, but dissolved completely by 1977. Despite the common desire to prevent the spread of communism, the member states had completely different ideas about the "common enemy". The rapid disintegration of the *Association of Southeast Asia* (ASA) and the *Asian-Pacific Council* (ASPAC), which were founded in the early 1960s, was followed by the successful establishment of the key *Association of Southeast Asian Nations* (ASEAN)<sup>3</sup> in 1967. ASEAN is the only institutionalised organisation in the Asian region to have survived the Cold War and, to-

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3 The current members of ASEAN are Brunei, the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

gether with the *Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation* (APEC),<sup>4</sup> is now, the most important political and economic alliance in the Asian region. Although ASEAN initially pursued security policy objectives aimed at curbing the growing power of communism in the region, the economic interests of the member states soon prevailed (*ibid.*). This was confirmed in 2015 with the establishment of the *ASEAN Economic Community* (AEC), which was modelled on the European Union (EU) to create a comprehensive free trade area in the region. In 2017, ASEAN was already the sixth largest economy in the world and is expected to reach fourth place by 2030 (*Singapore Business Review* 2018).

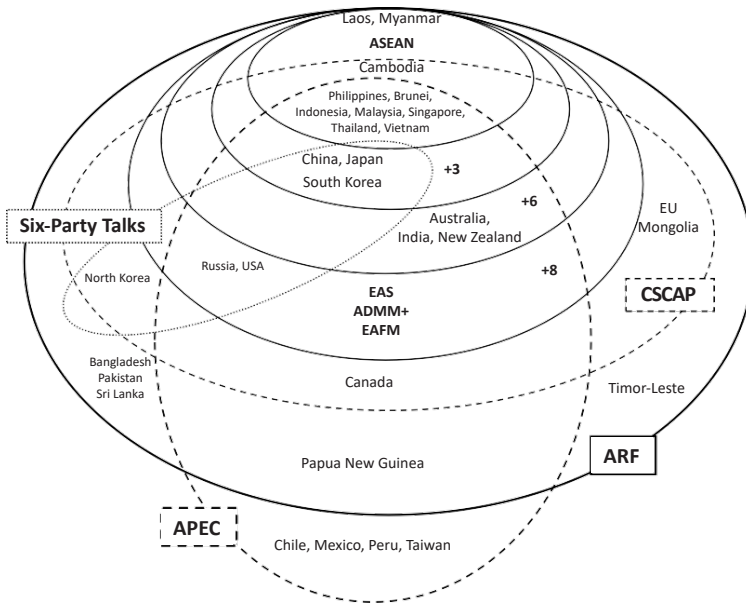
In line with this extremely rapid economic growth, ASEAN is increasingly looking for member states to take a more proactive approach to resolving pressing security issues in the region. However, despite these aspirations, the association remains only a forum for regional dialogue. As a result, ASEAN is not comparable to an institution like the EU that can concretely solve pressing problems in the region. The informal nature of decision-making, the principle of non-interference and discretion have led to a code of conduct, nicknamed the “ASEAN way”. The code allows members to engage in a kind of political dialogue behind the scenes and prevents the public media from finding about it, since media exposure often means a loss of face for state leaders, which is particularly sensitive in Asian cultures. This informal nature often leads to many non-binding compromises or “empty” words uttered by member states (*ibid.*). For example, while the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meetings (ADMM and ADMM+)<sup>5</sup> and the ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum)<sup>6</sup> represent a very important security dialogue, they do not provide fundamental collective security and remain at the level of mere “dialogue” (*ibid.*). This is most evident in the region when it comes to disputed territories such as the South China Sea. Making a joint declaration that would suit everyone is a major problem for state leaders, with the People’s Republic of China being the “elephant in the room” (*The Straits Times* 2015, *Lendon and Murray* 2018).

4 APEC was founded in 1989 and has 21 members: Australia, Brunei, Chile, Philippines, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Canada, People’s Republic of China, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, Vietnam and the US.

5 The ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) began in 2006. It is the highest defense mechanism within ASEAN and, in addition to the ASEAN members, includes the US, PRC, Russia, Japan, India, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. In 2010, with the ADMM+ mechanism, the programme set additional goals in the areas of maritime security, counter-terrorism, response to natural disasters, peacekeeping operations and military medicine (ADMM, 2015).

6 The ASEAN Regional Forum, ARF, was established in 1994 and is considered the first formal multilateral forum for consultations on security issues in the Asia-Pacific region (ARF, 2015).

In 2016 for example, the Philippine government turned to the International Court of Justice in The Hague for help in resolving territorial disputes in the South China Sea, rather than ASEAN. Similarly, issues related to Taiwan cannot be included in any core ASEAN security dialogue due to opposition from the Chinese government.



Graph 1: Intertwining of regional formations in East Asia (source: the author).

Although the East Asian countries see China’s rise primarily as an economic opportunity and are endeavoring to forge closer ties with the People’s Republic of China, they are also deeply concerned about the country’s strategic intentions and ambitions. The fact is that the tactics chosen by the government in Beijing to deal with territorial disputes allow the use of military force, whether in the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait. And the lack of mutual trust in the face of rising military spending understandably creates a security dilemma<sup>7</sup> that makes the US presence in the region all the more desirable. Although economic integration and the resulting interdependence of countries is a relatively effective mechanism for building trust and avoiding

7 The so-called “security dilemma” in international relations stems from the notion that the competition for security between countries leads to a situation where the efforts of one country to achieve its absolute security trigger a feeling of absolute threat in other countries. As a result of connecting the security of the state with the accumulation of power and armament, a vicious circle is created (Hertz 1950).

conflict, it cannot act as a sufficiently powerful “weapon” to guarantee the security of countries.

### 3 The Role of the People’s Republic of China

The economic rise of China has predictably further accelerated the processes of regionalism and the creation of new economic integrations in East Asia. All countries in the region want to participate in the opportunities offered by the gigantic Chinese market. The People’s Republic of China is thus already the largest economic partner of most East Asian countries and the ASEAN community as a whole (CGTN 2018). Economic factors are the key driver of regionalism processes, which is reflected in new initiatives in the area of comprehensive free trade agreements such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)<sup>8</sup> and the Regional Economic Partnership (RCEP).<sup>9</sup> Most attention is focused on the initiatives of the People’s Republic of China, as they could change the balance of the global economy and greatly increase China’s influence. Two of its initiatives take centre stage: the multi-billion-dollar New Silk Road, or the Belt and Road project,<sup>10</sup> which aims to improve connectivity between Asia and Europe, and the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), which could become a serious competitor to the US-led World Bank.

These large-scale projects have understandably caused considerable unease among the existing global superpowers, particularly the US. The administration led by President Donald Trump has created an explicit narrative of the People’s Republic of China as a major strategic rival and revisionist power<sup>11</sup> that threatens American interests. By expanding its state-led model of capitalism, Beijing is allegedly destroying the geopolitical order created after the

8 This is a mega-regional free trade agreement aimed at increasing trade and investment, which the US promoted in 2005, although it later withdrew from negotiations in 2017. At present, 11 countries in the Asia-Pacific region are negotiating a renewed partnership.

9 A free trade agreement between ASEAN members and six partners with whom ASEAN already has a free trade agreement: Australia, India, Japan, the PRC, New Zealand and South Korea. Negotiations began in November 2012 at the initiative of the PRC.

10 China’s ambitious global initiative “(One) Belt and (One) Road” (一帶一路 *yi dai yi lu*, Belt and Road Initiative – BRI), which Xi Jinping first presented to the public in 2013, includes land and sea connectivity with a strategy of developing large-scale infrastructure projects and new transport connections. It represents a key component of China’s economy, diplomacy and military strategy and systematically strengthens China’s influence in the world.

11 The term “revisionist” here denotes a power that seeks to replace the existing power relations.

Cold War and attempting to create a world that would be completely incompatible with US values and interests. Thus, the People's Republic of China is clearly defined as one of the greatest threats and enemies of the United States in the US National Security Strategy (NSS) report published at the end of 2017, which was also confirmed by all the measures proposed by the Pentagon (The White House 2017 and the US Department of Defense 2018b).

In turn, the Chinese government is increasingly rejecting the American presence in Asia and makes no secret of its ambitions to establish itself as a regional and global superpower and build a new multilateral security structure, as the latest report of the Party Congress shows (Xi 2017). For the party regime in Beijing, the weakening of US security ties in the region is of crucial importance. The regime's ideal Sinocentric regional order would subordinate America's democratic allies to the PRC and significantly limit US trade, physical and perhaps even virtual access to the world's most dynamic region, while consolidating a group of countries that would consistently support Beijing leadership's policies. Many analysts compare China's approach to the strategy pursued by the US after the Second World War. Back then, America took a leading role in steering the world's capitalist economy and successfully won over the world's most developed countries to its side (Overholt 2015, 2). It seems that a new structure is emerging that is quite similar to the American system of hub and spokes, except that the ties that the PRC is forging with its Asian partners are mainly based on economic cooperation and non-traditional security issues (Lee 2015).

Due to the lack of trust, China's major investments in the New Silk Road quickly became the subject of heated debate among governments on all continents of the world. Not only do many nations fear that these investments could have a major impact on their critical infrastructures and potentially threaten national security, but they are also concerned about indirect effects. Attractive Chinese investment acts as an invisible force behind the scenes, guiding each country's stance on issues of critical importance to Beijing, such as disputed territories or human rights. In 2016, for example, Hungary and Greece prevented a unanimous EU agreement on China's disputes in the South China Sea, and in 2017 Greece even blocked the EU's condemnation of human rights violations in China (*MERICs Report* 2018, 16). The desire for capital is increasingly leading to ruthless self-censorship by Chinese partners, be it in the economic, political or academic sphere. Many economists, politicians and academics are increasingly critical of China's rhetoric, even though it overlaps with the national interests of their own countries. Due to shrinking financial resources, many global media



outlets are embracing Chinese propaganda with open arms as it brings them guaranteed profits (*MERICCS Report 2018*, 20-27). Similarly, many publishers are reluctant to print books that are too critical of the Chinese authorities because they do not want their books to be excluded from the huge and profitable Chinese market.<sup>12</sup> Chinese takeovers of companies in strategic industries and the strengthening of Chinese influence have significantly increased the concerns of governments in many countries. The US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the EU have already prepared special mechanisms to control “foreign” investments (Edwards 2018).

It is clear that the PRC has become more self-confident and determined because it wants to gain a greater voice, more power and influence in the global world. It wants to be at the forefront and be a responsible and respected member of the international community, with very ambitious long-term geopolitical plans, and its rise is already gradually contributing to the reshaping of the international order. It is visibly assuming an increasingly influential role in global governance – at the G20 summit, in the multilateral development banks and in the associations mentioned above. The question that remains unanswered, however, is what kind of world order the Chinese government actually wants. There is no doubt that regional dominance would provide China with a secure base from which it could extend its power to the Western hemisphere. The government in Beijing has long been dissatisfied with the existing status quo in East Asia, particularly in the maritime area to the east and south of its coast. Its main goal is to gain supremacy over all waters, territories and resources in the South China Sea and over a large part of the East China Sea. It also wants to take control of Taiwan, which Beijing sees as a dangerous example of a successfully established democracy in an ethnic Chinese society and thus as a significant ideological threat. Numerous current analyses confirm that the South China Sea and Taiwan are among the most important potential trouble spots where an armed conflict could break out at any moment (Zheng 2018).

#### 4 China’s desire for domination over the South China Sea

The South China Sea stretches from Singapore to the Strait of Malacca in the south-west and the Taiwan Strait in the north-east. It is surrounded by the PRC, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia. It is

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12 Even the world’s two largest academic publishing houses bowed before Chinese pressure, censoring more than 1,000 articles on their online portals (Hernández 2017).

one of the most important trade routes in the world, with more than 70% of the world's total shipping traffic passing through its international waters. It has excellent geological conditions necessary for the formation of hydrocarbons, especially oil and natural gas (EIA 2013). This area therefore plays an important strategic and political role in the Asia-Pacific region, and territorial claims and disputes over jurisdiction over maritime areas lead to constant conflict. The greatest tension in the area are caused by the PRC, which is attempting to appropriate up to 90% of the waters and encroach on other countries' special economic zones by building facilities and artificial islands.<sup>13</sup> It is also rapidly expanding its navy and extending its military arsenal in the vicinity of the disputed islands.

In July 2016, the government in Beijing coolly rejected the decision of the Hague Arbitration Court, which stated that there was no evidence that China had ever exercised exclusive control over the waters and resources of the South China Sea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2016). The arbitration tribunal thus ruled that the country has no legal basis to claim historical rights to the islands in the sea. The PRC bases its sovereignty over almost the entire surface of the South China Sea on the concept of its historical right, which it imposes rather dominantly on all its neighbours with whom it has a territorial dispute. By secretly occupying the sea, which it regards as "its lake", it has effectively already created a new status quo. With the extensive militarisation of the area, the South China Sea has effectively become a dangerous area, despite the 2017 Code of Conduct between the PRC and ASEAN states. The government in Beijing does not accept or recognise the ruling of the international court and continues to build facilities on the disputed islands and deploy anti-ship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missiles without interruption, significantly increasing the possibility of conflict (Davis 2018). Former US Secretary of Defence James Mattis was very clear when he stated that the "Ming Dynasty appears to be their model, albeit in a more muscular manner" (US Department of Defense 2018c). During the Ming dynasty, i.e. between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, China conditioned the entry of smaller neighbours into its market with demands for territorial and economic concessions. To counter the spread of Chinese influence in the South China Sea, the US is rapidly expanding its strategy for a free and open Indo-Pacific region, working with Japan, India, Australia and other like-minded countries (AFP 2018).

13 The US Department of Defense has stated that by June 2015, China had already reclaimed more than 2,900 acres (1,174 hectares) of South China Sea territory by putting sand on the slopes of the Spratly Islands (*Nansha qundao* 南沙群島). For more detailed information, see US Department of Defense (2015, 16).

The South China Sea has thus become the theatre where the struggle between the two superpowers, China and the US, is most evident. While Beijing publicly asserts that Washington cannot interfere with its plans, the US assures the countries in the region that it is still an important player (Ghosh 2018). For Taiwan, US support is certainly vital, as without it Taiwan would most likely have lost its current autonomy, while for the US, with its geostrategic location, Taiwan is also a key player in maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific region. Like the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait is an extremely important international waterway that is deeply embedded in global trade flows.

## 5 China's desire for domination over Taiwan

While China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea are worrisome, Beijing's continued provocations towards Taiwan are far more ominous. It is quite clear that the Communist Party's goal is not the preservation of the current situation, but the forced unification of Taiwan with the PRC, even at the risk of bloody war. For Beijing, maintaining Taiwan's status as a *de facto* independent and consolidated democratic state is one of the biggest obstacles to the realisation of China's long-term strategic plans. Therefore, the government in Beijing has made it clear on several occasions that it is prepared to jeopardise stability in the Taiwan Strait. Beijing's threats have been a constant since 1949. Not only does the Chinese military have around 1,500 warheads and more than 1,000 advanced aircraft aimed at Taiwan, but the possible use of military force against Taiwan has even been legalised.<sup>14</sup> The year 2049, when the People's Republic of China will celebrate its centenary, is increasingly being cited as the date for unification. The statements of the Chinese leadership are becoming increasingly relentless. In October 2017, President Xi Jinping threatened in a speech at the Central Party Congress: "We will never allow anyone, any organization, or any political party, at any time or in any form, to separate any part of Chinese territory from China" (*Xinhua* 2017b). At the beginning of his second presidential term in March 2018, he was even a shade harsher in his address: "It is never allowed and it is absolutely impossible to separate any inch of our great country's

14 Article 8 of the Anti-Secession Law states: "In the event that the 'Taiwan independence' secessionist forces should act under any name or by any means to cause the fact of Taiwan's secession from China, or that major incidents entailing Taiwan's secession from China should occur, or that possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted, the state shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

territory from China. Any actions and tricks to split China are certain to meet with the people's condemnation and the punishment by history." He also warned that the PRC is ready for a "bloody battle" to regain its rightful place in the world (*Xinhua* 2018). In January 2019, however, Xi gave his most incisive speech yet, saying that the unification of Taiwan with China was imminent and that it must be carried out by the current generation of Chinese leaders. He warned again that Beijing is also ready for military intervention, if necessary. He warned the international community that his country would not tolerate "external interference", which was undoubtedly aimed primarily at the US (*Xinhua* 2019).

It is quite obvious that this extremely strong nationalist charge will not allow the Chinese regime, elite or people to agree to Taiwan's sovereignty in the near future. Moreover, the leadership in Beijing is well aware that unification with the developed island would bring it rich economic and military assets and strategically strengthen China's power. All this explains Beijing's unwavering desire to curb Taiwan's current *de facto* independence. The continued rise of China will certainly have a very large and mainly negative impact on Taiwan. Over the past decade, the balance of military power in the Taiwan Strait has shifted significantly in favour of the PRC (US Department of Defense 2018a). The rapid modernisation of China's military has fundamentally changed Taiwan's security options. Moreover, a costly and exhausting war with China's powerful military in the remote Taiwan Strait is most likely not in the interests of the US, Taiwan's most important security ally. This is confirmed by past heated debates about whether it would not be much more beneficial for the US to stop supporting the island (Bernkopf Tucker & Glaser 2011). However, Washington's current security policy guidelines show that the vast majority of American analysts agree that Taiwan remains an important component of US security strategy. Many analysts also believe that the Chinese army is not yet capable of mounting a fully successful amphibious assault on Taiwan or countering a serious blockade (Beckley 2017). And even if Washington is unwilling to intervene directly in such a war, it has the power to thwart the Chinese military's plans. The US undoubtedly has a very strong motivation to strengthen Taiwan's role in its anti-China coalition. They do not want China to occupy an island that plays such an important strategic role in the Pacific, i.e. in the area where the most important air and sea routes run.

Together with the US, Taiwan will therefore try above all to dissuade Beijing from assuming that the Chinese army could conquer Taiwan without a bloody battle, enormous costs and major complications. It will certainly do everything in its power to maintain the current political status quo. The fact

is that even in the event of a successful Chinese military intervention, there would be prolonged uprising by the Taiwanese people, which would be very exhausting. Therefore an attack on Taiwan is not a rational option in Beijing's eyes for the time being. Undoubtedly, a victory without war, with a gradual and peaceful annexation, would be most desirable for Beijing. So far, however, all of China's multi-year strategies based on political, economic and psychological pressure have not yet led to the desired results. Although Beijing is increasingly clipping Taiwan's wings on the international stage and trying to marginalise the island by imposing the mould of one China, the people of Taiwan are also increasingly telling the world that they do not want to be part of today's authoritarian PRC.<sup>15</sup> As a result, the gap between the left and right sides of the strait is widening, and any possibility of peaceful unification is becoming increasingly remote.

## 6 Conclusion

The paper outlines various security policy challenges facing the East Asian region. Among them, Taiwan and the South China Sea stand out in terms of their complexity and their potential (destructive) impact on the region, as the focus there is on the battle for the balance of power between two super-powers – the US and the PRC – that are at a very dangerous crossroads. Both are convinced that each wants to harm the other, and so both are endeavouring to overtake the other in achieving their own national strategic goals. China's economic and political rise has significantly energised the Chinese government's expansionist ambitions, the establishment of regional dominance and the assertion of national interests on a global scale. As a result, China has come into conflict with the existing world order, with the established system of rules and values, which it sees as an obstacle on the way to achieving its goals. Despite the Chinese leadership's constant assurances that "the People's Republic of China has promised the world that it will not seek hegemony or engage in expansionist endeavours, its moves often raise legitimate concerns (*Xinhua* 2017a). These are greatest in territorially disputed areas, where China's quest for dominance is more than evident. This is also a major challenge for the US, as military dominance over the Western Pacific is one of its fundamental national interests. As a result, China has been publicly labelled a "revisionist power" that uses technology, propaganda and coercion to reshape the world against American interests and values (US Department

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15 Only 3% of the Taiwanese people want immediate unification with China (Election Study Center 2018).

of Defense 2018b). Due to the escalation of geopolitical competition with the US, the PRC is trying to secure the strongest possible friendships within the international community, and its most important tool for strengthening relations is undoubtedly economic diplomacy.

Observers can only hope that Washington and Beijing do not get caught up in a vicious circle that would spiral out of control. Although most East Asian countries do not want to publicly declare their allegiance to one side or the other, in the event of a direct strategic conflict between the US and China, the US side would probably receive more support (Pei 2018). The fact is, however, that if China's economic growth remains relatively high and the country has no serious domestic political problems, a completely new security scheme will emerge on the regional geopolitical stage. In the world at large, too, completely different ideas of authoritarianism and a development model without political reform could emerge. We can only guess what would follow, but the direction the current leadership in Beijing is taking is worrying.

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