



Isabelle Lasserre, Céline Lussato and François-Xavier Priollaud

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Isabelle Lasserre

ground, as a demand for a redefinition of the relationship between Africa and France. François-Xavier Priollaud asked: 'Should we redefine our foreign policy, then?' 'Clearly,' said Ulysse Gosset. However, he maintained that we should do so by listening to what Africans have to say and what they want.

The journalist believes that the rise of populism, observed in Europe, Asia and India, is forcing France to adapt if it wants to retain its influence and power of intervention. 'Because a paradigm shift is taking place on a global scale, and new conflicts could reshuffle the cards', posited François-Xavier Priollaud: a possible war between China and the USA if the latter were to invade Taiwan.

'This is the illustration of the impotence of France and Europe', noted Isabelle Lasserre. 'We are showing up unarmed in the face of global players who have been arming themselves for thirty years.' In her view, it would be in Europe's interest 'to reconstitute itself politically, culturally and militarily, so that it can then assert itself on the international stage and re-establish healthier alliances'. Otherwise, history could well be written without it.



Watch the full debate on YouTube



Ousmane Ndiaye

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DEBATE

XI JINPING, HIS DRIVE FOR POWER?

Friday 29 September 2023, 2p.m. – 3.30p.m., Plenary Hall



Stéphane Corcuff and Emilie Aubry

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China and Taiwan, patience and militarisation

In the run-up to Taiwan's presidential elections in 2024, where the main issue is the island's tension with Xi Jinping's China, a 'symbolic opposition between the small democratic territory and the world's largest dictatorship', Emilie Aubry kicked off this discussion with a screening of the latest episode of her programme "Le Dessous des Cartes", fleshed out by a report from Taiwan in June 2023 to ask: will the war take place?

After asserting in an introductory answer that China will be content with the status quo 'as long as the USA remains the guarantor of Taiwan's security', the sinologist endeavoured to explain the origin of a discourse that assigns respon-

sibility for tension to US provocations, reminding us that 'it's perverse to justify Russian and Chinese policies by denouncing American imperialism.' On the issues at stake in the current Taiwanese presidential campaign, Stéphane Corcuff pointed out that there is 'essentially a political debate in Taiwan, with candidates setting themselves apart primarily for electoral reasons, because you can only really govern from the centre, despite the political leanings of the parties.' Since the end of the Kuomintang dictatorship (1949-1990s), which looked towards mainland China, more and more Taiwanese 'see their future in the Taiwanese identity.' However, 'this fault line

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Stéphane Corcuff

MODERATOR:

Émilie Aubry, editor-in-chief and presenter of Le Dessous des Cartes, Arte

SPEAKERS:

Stéphane Corcuff, academic, internationalist political scientist and sinologist



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is gradually diminishing because it's not possible to propose reunification or independence de jure'.

When asked about the issue of 'reunification by nibbling', i.e., the growing influence of Chinese capital and soft power on the island, the academic asserted that it has 'already been at work for a long time, but Taiwan is holding out.' Beijing 'isn't barring itself from any options; a rational Xi Jinping is aware of the American presence, reaffirmed under the presidency of Joe Biden, and is therefore applying a strategy of military reinforcement to be ready if the geopolitical situation were to change, particularly in the event of a change in the American executive', he explained. However, 'since he has set 2049 as the deadline for this reunification and has stated that we won't pass the buck to another generation of leaders', this raises a number of questions.

Responding to the recurrent description of a 'new Cold War', Stéphane Corcuff preferred to raise 'the methodological problem of using the term: it's better to characterise the content of the risks than to compare expressions', a point echoed by Émilie Aubry on the 'multipolar dimension of the world which renders the Cold War vision obsolete today.' In this vein, the academic responded to questions from the audience about the possibility of supporting neither the American nor the Chinese side in this debate, saying that 'fortunately the question has not yet been asked, but it's important to maintain intellectual independence and to make rational assessments of the two countries, bearing in mind: if China were to act without an American response, what would be the consequences for the world?' 'In the face of the persistent idea of a 'Chinese cultural aversion to war', the French sinologist explained that 'there's no greater prejudice about China than this. Its entire history is made up of war and the assimilation of conquered populations', he continued, and this prejudice is nothing more than 'a discourse skilfully disseminated by the Chinese to appear less worrying, and wrongly repeated by certain observers.' He also pointed out that 'China's current borders are inherited from the Manchu Empire, which was in power from 1644 to 1912, a period during which China didn't exist as a subject of international law.'

Returning to the question of contemporary Chinese expansionism, which is 'grudgingly accepted by the West', Stéphane Corcuff drew an 'important distinction between the immediate environment and the rest of the world.' In the first case, 'China has an imperial vision, reinforced by its emergence on the world stage' and 'believes that the world is against it, that it's being denied access to its rightful status as the world's leading power.' In the second case, 'although the structure of the New Silk Roads gives an impression of expan-



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sionism, the Chinese have understood that being the world's leading power, the world's policeman, has a political and financial cost that they don't want to assume.' Today, 'Xi Jinping's China is putting elements in place to advance the country's power, but does not want to play this role and has no interest in doing so.'

Before raising the question of the participation of other states in a Sino-Taiwanese war, the academic pointed out that the likelihood of a conflict is still low because 'everything is being done today to dissuade China from invading Taiwan and there are many stages to go through before that happens: the failure of alliances, the reversal of policy in Washington, Beijing's rational determination or otherwise, the success of an air and sea blockade and then the deployment of troops.' However, 'Japan would be directly affected by an attack, since the Nansei archipelago, where Okinawa is located, is claimed by the Chinese government, which covets all the lost borders of the Manchu empire.' Despite this, Stéphane Corcuff stressed that 'the sensitive issue remains the preparation of an Indo-Pacific response without offering casus belli to Beijing.' 'The balance of power remains unfavourable in relation to China to date', he continued, 'because it's a power with which we

want to trade not wage war, even if it's preparing to do so.' However, 'no one's in a position of strength on their own, even the United States.'

To understand all the geopolitical issues, it is 'necessary to analyse China's domestic policy', maintained the sinologist. Indeed, as 'the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been obsessed with the issue of regime stability since 1949, and the Chinese leader must, in his own personal interest and that of the party, ensure that the CCP consolidates its power over China, the case of Taiwan is very dangerous.' As a result, 'unless he is cornered, Xi Jinping will not take the decision to attack until he's certain of victory, because a defeat would shatter his legitimacy to lead the party and

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the country.' However, 'with the cynicism peculiar to the CCP, one might think the regime capable of inventing a far-fetched casus belli in order to claim to have defended China's vital interests in the event of defeat.'

When asked about the Taiwan issue, he stated that the Chinese are 'in principle in favour of it, as economic issues take precedence in practice.' 'The air and sea blockade that an invasion would require would be immense and would bring China's economy to a standstill', concluded the sinologist, adding : 'and now is not the time - the CCP would be heading for disaster.'