

ASIA: REGIONAL ALLIANCES CHALLENGED BY INTERNATIONAL TENSIONS

Vendredi 27 septembre, 2:00 p.m. - 3:30 p.m., Nacre room



In the aftermath of the Second World War, in 1947, China drew a nine-dash line on its maps to demarcate a maritime zone of two million square kilometres in the South China Sea, or more than a fifth of China's land territory. It thereby took over a space claimed by all the neighbouring countries: Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and more recently Brunei. In 2016, on a state

visit to the United States, Chinese President, Xi Jinping, made a commitment to Barack Obama to respect freedom of navigation and overflight, and to stop the militarisation of this zone. The same year, the Court of Justice in The Hague, seized by the government of the Philippines, ruled that China's expansion on these islands had no international legal basis.

MODERATION

Philippe Le Corre, Researcher at the China Analysis Centre of the Asia Society Policy Institute and geopolitical advisor to Asia Society France

SPEAKERS

Delia Albert, Ambassador, former Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Philippines

Bates Gill, Research fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research and former Executive Director of the Asia Society's China Analysis Centre

Eunjung Lim, Professor of the Division of International Studies, Kongju National University

Thailand may even surpass China's GDP per capita in a few years

Delia Albert

Yet today, nothing has changed. Trade conflicts in this popular fishing area have still not ended. 'We do not agree', stated Delia Albert, ambassador and former Foreign Minister of the Philip-



We experienced a terrible civil war that led to an international conflict

Eunjung Lim

pires. We believe that it is a sea that should be open to everyone. This nine-dash line has no reason to exist, and we should be free to move around in it, just like other countries around it, under international law.' By not respecting the decision of the Hague Tribunal, China has exposed itself to major sanctions and strong opposition from the United States, an ally on the subject in the Philippines, a former historic colony, with which a reinforced cooperation agreement on defence, signed during the Cold War, still exists.

Added to this is the rapprochement between China and Russia and North Korea, a country whose leader Kim Jong-Un is fuelling tensions with its southern neighbours by continuing its nuclear development. These sprawling and polarising alliances raise fears of future conflict, even as others, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), founded in 1967 and including the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, seek to maintain peace and economic and cultural understanding in Asia. 'It is a highly progressive region with very strong economic

growth. We may even surpass China's GDP per capita in a few years,' explained Delia Albert. 'I think no other region is as diverse as ASEAN. There are Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, and we have come to know each other.'

This cultural and religious diversity within ASEAN is one thing. However, Eunjung Lim, Professor of the Division of International Studies at Kongju National University in South Korea, was also concerned about the escalation of tensions with her neighbour, North Korea. These two countries, divided after a three-year civil war between 1950 and 1953, have seen it all. 'From being a Japanese colony, we experienced a terrible civil war that led to an international conflict that remains unresolved to this day.' But while South Korea has been moving towards a democratic society since 1987, it is experiencing intense divisions within itself between a conservative camp in power and a progressive camp.

The first shows a very strong desire for opposition towards the northern neighbour. It believes that the two countries are irreconcilable and that no compromise between them is possible. The second considers the population of North Korea as 'brothers



*Watch
the full
debate on
YouTube*

with whom dialogue must be restored', explains Eunjung Lim. 'This opposition is sometimes violent, with attacks on physical integrity. And the situation is only getting worse with the provocations of North Korea, which continues to wave its nuclear weapons programme to scare the population.' This is all the more necessary since, in order to confront the new alliance between North Korea, Russia and China, South Korea and Japan seem to be moving closer together. Their initiative, however, still raises many questions. The recent election of Shigeru Ishiba as Prime Minister of the Japanese government should be a move in this direction. The latter works in particular for the creation of an Asian version of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). 'Sustainable initiatives have been taken. China has always been our enemy, even though we now have very significant economic relations. We must fight for more dialogue with Beijing, Tokyo and Washington, because the threat from North Korea is extremely serious.'

But does Washington intend to change its policy in Asia? 'There is no indication of this,' said Bates Gill, a researcher at the National Bureau of Asian Research and former Executive Director of the Asia Society's China Analysis Centre. Both camps, Democrats and Republicans, with their respective candidates for the American presidency, Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, have already led the White House. Accordingly, 'We already have an idea of the policy of these two camps and we can assume that it will not change, even if it is more uncertain in regard to Donald Trump. To what extent his side will agree to maintain its security and defence role at international level, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, no one knows.' One thing is certain: the United States will ask its Asian partners to better ensure their own defence and to be more demanding in their relations with China and North Korea. While these are not formal, Bates Gill argued that new forms of partnerships, bilater-

al and trilateral, are underway alongside AUKUS, a military agreement between Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom whose objective, since its creation in 2021, has been to counter Chinese expansion in the Indo-Pacific. 'U.S. officials like to refer to these trios, interspersed with different partnerships to make them more powerful and effective.' The risk is that if China and North Korea continue to be proactive in the defence field and AUKUS, under the political impetus that could be the election of Donald Trump to the White House, does the same, a military conflict in this region cannot be ruled out.

Cybersecurity and space are critical issues

Eunjung Lim

In fact, Eunjung Lim stated that she is in favour of the integration of her country, South Korea, into AUKUS, in particular, to strengthen cooperation between high-tech countries. 'Cybersecurity and space are critical issues in maintaining our sovereignty against North Korea. Not to mention that China is equipping its army with cutting-edge technology and making increasing use of artificial intelligence.' Another development is concerning for the highest echelons of her country: the decline in the birth rate, which has now reached 0.7 children per woman, one of the lowest in the world, and could have damaging consequences for South Korea's economic growth. The government, which has tried to invest 200 billion euros since 2006, has not managed to curb this trend.