

Treating China differently



CLINT FLORES

Avid followers of international politics surely did not miss the ensuing escalation and the hostilities in the Indo-Pacific, after the visit of the US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan.

When Pelosi landed in Taipei an article was published citing the reasons of her visit. Unsurprisingly, the trip sparked tensions in the region with China strongly condemning the visit. China regarded the trip as the highest-level US visit in 25 years and considered it as a provocation to the permanence of the region that threatens peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. In response, the Chinese commenced military drills in the strait of Taiwan, showcasing a fraction of their military capabilities.

Some sections of the media reported that President Joe Biden disagreed with the trip. However, we still need to see in which context he disagreed, as John Kirby, the National Security Council Strategic Communications coordinator, told reporters that the President of the United States respects the Speaker's decision to travel to Taiwan. He further stated that the visit is coherent and in line with the American policy. Hence, I could not follow the logic of the disagreement of the visit and personally regarded the statement as a non sequitur, given that no further information was provided to the public.

Meanwhile, High Representative Josep Borrell was in Cambodia that week, representing the EU at the ASEAN Regional Forum Ministerial. The main topics that dominated the ASEAN Summit were the visit of Pelosi in Taiwan and Myanmar's military execution of civilian activists. While the High Representative was in Cambodia the European Union issued a statement calling for tensions over the visit of the US House of Representatives Speaker to Taiwan to be resolved through dialogue. Also, the EU called for communication channels with China to be kept open to avoid miscalculations and to resolve any cross-strait issues through peaceful resolution. The EU did the right thing to issue such a statement and to further position itself as a diplomatic Union rather than a confrontational block. In response, Beijing's mission to the EU hit back and dubbed the G7 and the EU statements as heinous. Frankly, the EU's narrative in that statement was quite diplomatic. Equally, the EU went a step further and explicitly stated that it has an interest in preserving peace and status quo in the Taiwan Strait.

However, at that point I paused for a minute and wondered whether the penholder of the statement was indeed the EU. France has a strong interest in the Indo-Pacific and certainly pushed the EU to issue a diplomatic statement. Undoubtedly, the EU does not afford to be entangled in another conflict. The continent is already sandwiched and used as a buffer between the US and Russia over the invasion of Ukraine.

Certainly, I welcomed the EU's diplomatic statement and strongly commended the High Representative for standing his ground to reposition himself, as the EU Foreign Affairs and Security chief. This time, the EU's approach was completely different when comparing the Chinese military drills and the Zapad-2021 Russian military exercise that eventually resulted in an invasion of a sovereign country. Notwithstanding that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is condemnable; I think that back then, the EU could have called on both sides to retain a diplo-



US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, left, speaks during a meeting with Legislative Yuan Deputy Speaker Tsai Chi-chang in Taipei, Taiwan.

matic channel and to resolve the issues through dialogue and peaceful resolution, namely the reconvening of the Normandy format.

France tried to keep this channel of dialogue through its President. Strangely, diplomacy was not producing any results. Au contraire, the uncooperative behaviour of some, even at EU level, led to a disastrous diplomatic outcome. Consequently, President Macron abandoned the diplomatic engagements to focus on the French Presidency of the Council of the EU and more importantly his own presidential elections.

If we hypothetically apply the EU's approach towards Russia on China the political discourse would be totally different, both for the current situation in the Taiwan Strait, as well as for when China tightened its grip on Hong Kong and discarded the "One country, two systems" policy. Indeed, in the case of Hong Kong I do not recall the EU implementing any sanctions or restrictive measures to deter China's tightening grip. What the EU did was to eventually adopt restrictive measures on Chinese officials but for unrelated matters. The sanctions were imposed on Chinese officials involved in alleged human rights violations of the Uyghur community in China in the western region of Xinjiang. The EU adopted restrictive measures and sanctions through an instrument at its disposal known as the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, which is similar to the US's Global Magnitsky Act.

The restrictive measures on Chinese individuals were adopted in March 2021, while I was still representing Malta in the Political and Security Committee (PSC) seat. In response, China announced countersanctions on 10 individuals and four entities in the EU, including Members of the European Parliament and the Political and Security Committee. The countersanctions were announced during the March session of the Foreign Affairs Council, and I recall receiving a text message from our press officer informing me about my own sanctioning. While I was replying to his text message, he sent me the online link with the announcements. Obviously, the countersanctions were also extended to the members of the PSC Committee. This meant that I could not enter or do business in China, Hong Kong and Macao. The reasons cited by the Chinese were *inter alia* that the PSC committee severely harms China's sovereignty and that we maliciously spread lies and disinformation to undermine Chinese interests.

In fact, last June the European Parliament adopted a non-binding resolution condemning the systematic repression of the Uyghur community in China. However, China's demarche is pointing towards mitigating any foreign interference, both with its response of the military drills and the countersanctions, as well as its message within the diplomatic circles. In effect, some segments of the media reported that at a reception in Beijing a senior Chinese official warned the outgoing Ambassador of

the EU, Nicolas Chapius that any statements and deeds by European lawmakers would be interpreted as official EU policy. The European lawmakers are the European Parliament and the Council, with the European Commission having the right of initiative to issue legislative proposals. Unquestionably, China is not ready to deal with two different sides of the EU, and any action taken either by the Council, the European Parliament or the European Commission would be interpreted as official EU policy, regardless of the institution taking the initiative. And I interpret this discourse, as Beijing's strong positioning to counter foreign interference, also in response to the European Parliament's resolution.

It is important to mention that the European Parliament has no competences when it comes to Common Foreign and Security Policy other than issuing resolutions to convey a political message and for the High Representative to present a report to the European Parliament, perhaps twice or three times a year about the work of his Office. On the other hand, the European Commission has the right of initiative and can also present packages of sanctions, but the approval ultimately comes from Council. Then again, nobody can deter Members of the European Parliament or officials from the European Commission to visit Taiwan. However, I truly hope that this time the EU and its institutions take note of the current Chinese political discourse and hostile response and coordinate between themselves to hopefully avoid another escalation.