

“Campism” (France): Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s China stance causes tensions on French Left

Sunday 2 October 2022, by [BOUGON François](#), [DEJEAN Mathieu](#) (Date first published: 5 August 2022).

The broad leftwing alliances NUPES became a major force in France’s National Assembly following legislative elections in June. However, several leading figures in the alliance have voiced their strong disagreement with its main architect, the veteran radical left politician Jean-Luc Mélenchon, over the latter’s stance on China and Taiwan. As François Bougon and Mathieu Dejean argue here in this opinion article, Mélenchon’s rehashing of Chinese state propaganda stems from deep-seated anti-Americanism.

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It just took one blog from Jean-Luc Mélenchon to highlight the gaping foreign policy divide between various groups in France’s broad-left alliance, the Nouvelle Union Populaire Écologique et Sociale or ‘NUPES’, and cause a stir on the Left in the middle of the holiday season.

Mélenchon, who heads the dominant party within NUPES, La France Insoumise (LFI), was responding to the visit by Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, to Taiwan, the island that Beijing claims as part of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In a [post on his blog](#) on August 4th the veteran politician attacked what he called the “USA’s provocation” which was “laden with consequences”. His words came just as the Chinese military staged large-scale military exercises in a bid to intimidate the Taiwanese people.

In the short post he set out his continuing ‘non-aligned’ vision of foreign policy. “Since 1965 and General [*Charles*] de Gaulle, as far as the French people are concerned there’s only been one China ... We can clearly see that the USA wants to open a new front. ... Whatever the scale and level of criticism that can be addressed to the Chinese government we must refuse to back war on China to satisfy the USA’s views on Taiwan. If I’d been elected [*editor’s note, as president in the April 2022 elections*] I’d have made this case to the US government,” he wrote from Colombia, where he was wrapping up a visit to Latin America.

Embarrassing support from Chinese Embassy

In fact, Nancy Pelosi’s visit did have consequences. Following her trip, and in addition to those military exercises, China announced the end of its cooperation with the United States on several fronts including “Chinese-American negotiations on climate change”. On [Twitter](#) an expert on the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), François Gemenne, described

this as: “A total catastrophe for the climate.”

But on a smaller scale the French Left has also become a victim of the China-US-Taiwan dispute, which has exposed foreign policy divisions within the leftwing alliance. These divisions are nothing new; during the creation of NUPES ongoing disagreements over international and European policy, which divide the alliance’s members - the Socialist Party (PS), the green Europe Écologie-Les Verts (EELV) and LFI - meant that discussions on these issues were put on hold until the future.

On August 4th the Chinese Embassy in Paris picked up Mélenchon’s words and thanked him for his “constant support for the one-China policy”. This unwelcome backing quickly led to a surge of criticism from other groups within NUPES.

Without making immediate reference to Jean-Luc Mélenchon himself, the PS’s first secretary Olivier Faure tersely noted: “The advisability of N. Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan is debatable, the desire of the Taiwanese to live in a democracy is not.”

Leading members of EELV were also quick to react. “This declaration is clearly yet another provocation and a provocation too far. Fighting against oppression is not something you can adjust to suit your needs,” wrote Marine Tondelier, a member of the EELV’s executive committee. Meanwhile the party’s national secretary [Julien Bayou](#) noted Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s tendency to downplay other imperialistic threats because of his disapproval of the United States, pointing to his initial reaction to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as evidence.

Questioning the advisability of such a visit doesn’t meaning having to line up behind the People’s Republic of China’s propaganda, adopting an anti-Americanism inherited from old Cold War struggles .

The former presidential candidate for the greens, Yannick Jadot, the most dogged of Mélenchon’s critics over the Ukraine war, was also very clear in his reaction: “‘One sole China’ means first and foremost ‘one sole dictatorship’. Freedom and democracy are the jewels at the heart of our political struggles. Everywhere!”

These differences in interpretation within NUPES were clearly apparent in the EELV statement published on August 5th which stated that Nancy Pelosi’s visit “gave the Chinese regime an excuse for fresh escalation”. The party’s spokespeople Chloé Sagaspe and Alain Coulombel then continued: “China is a dictatorship. This regime organises genocide of the Uighurs, and the repression of other peoples such as the Tibetans represents daily abuse of human rights on its territory.”

A battle over culture and identity

While Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan was criticised by the Chinese, it was also questioned by the US’s allies in the region, who did not appreciate having this dispute foisted upon them when the situation there was already volatile. But questioning the advisability of such a visit does not mean

having to line up behind the Chinese People's Republic's propaganda by adopting an anti-Americanism inherited from past Cold War struggles.

Such an approach attaches little importance to the views of the Taiwanese themselves who, overwhelmingly, reject President Xi Jinping's 'China model' - the omnipotence of the Party-State, widespread repression and Han nationalism. It is a model which stands in stark contrast to what Taiwanese society has become since the democratisation of the 1980s.

From Dutch colonial rule in the 17th century, to subjugation by Japan at the end of the 19th century, and then the huge influx of mainland Chinese after the victory of Mao's Communist Party in 1949, society in Taiwan is the result of waves of successive colonisation. The late sinologist Arif Dirlik wrote - in an article in the periodical [Boundary 2](#) published in 2018, a year after his death - that Taiwanese identity is "not merely a local version of some abstract 'Chineseness' but an independent identity, the product of a process not of 'sinicization' but Taiwanization".

"Recognizing Taiwan not merely as a provincial variant of Han culture but as a separate national formation with a distinct identity of its own formed out of interactions between Aboriginal cultures, successive waves of Hoklo and Hakka immigrants from Southeastern China, and post-1945 'refugees', stamped by complex legacies of the island's colonial experience, calls into question the ideology of 'sinicization'..." [wrote](#) Dirlik.

The example of Taiwan suggests that it is possible to have a Chinese culture that is not purely Han, one that is mixed and open. It was the first country in Asia to [legalise](#) same-sex marriage, while China [detains leading militant feminists](#). It is a country where, after her election in 2016, President Tsai Ing-wen formally apologised to the island's indigenous people. "For the past 400 years, each regime that came to Taiwan has brutally violated indigenous people's existing rights through military might and land looting," she [declared](#). Meanwhile the regime in China ferociously represses the Uighurs, the mostly Muslim ethnic group in the north-west of the country.

Young people in Taiwan are strongly attached to this postcolonial face of their society, as shown by the island's cultural effervescence and enthusiasm for politics. It is this that the most fervently nationalist Han within China's Communist Party cannot accept. One just has to listen to the Chinese ambassador to France, Lu Shaye, to understand this. Speaking on [BFMTV](#) news channel he promised the Taiwanese people full ideological 're-education' to bring them into line, as happened in China itself in the 1950s. "After reunification we will carry out re-education. I'm sure that at that time the population of Taiwan will become in favour of reunification and will become patriots," he said, with the customary disdain of a zealous bureaucrat. It is not hard to understand why the people of Taiwan have no great desire to go through that and are fighting to defend their freedoms.

Video

Taiwan: "Après la réunification, on va faire une rééducation", affirme l'ambassadeur de Chine en France

Taiwan: "After the reunification, we will do a re-education", says the Chinese ambassador in France

The Chinese ambassador to France, Lu Shaye, on BFMTV August 3rd 2022. © BFMTV

This battle over culture and identity is indeed one of the hidden aspects of the confrontation with continental China. Taiwan is a “hotspot” because the island challenges Xi Jinping’s and the Party-State’s “national narrative” about China.

Anti-imperialism made to measure

In fact, the Taiwan issue has “unwelcome implications for the PRC’s national identity and ethnic politics,” argued Melissa J Brown in her [book](#) ‘*Is Taiwan Chinese? The Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing Identities*’ published in 2004. “...[I]f Taiwanese are allowed to ‘leave’ the nation because of ethnic differences, then why not Tibetans, or Turkic Muslims (such as the Uighur), or even Cantonese? Taiwan independence could have a domino effect that would break up the PRC, like the USSR or, worse, Yugoslavia,” she wrote.

It is still a hot topic. After Hong Kong, Taiwan is a crucial issue for President Xi, for whom the island represents an alternative model he must rid himself of. Contrary to what Jean-Luc Mélenchon wrote, it is not the Taiwanese who are seeking war against the Chinese but in fact Beijing which is carrying out military exercises with live rounds and ballistic missiles.

All imperialism must be denounced, not just United States imperialism and its disastrous impact in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, but also the Russian imperialism which attacks Ukraine and the Chinese imperialism which intimidates its neighbours and Taiwan, and which has brought Hong Kong’s inhabitants into line. Looking at the world through old lenses prevents you from understanding it and keeps you trapped in old, outmoded thinking.

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P.S.

• “Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s China stance causes tensions on French Left”. Mediapart. AUGUST 11, 2022:

<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/110822/jean-luc-melenchons-china-stance-causes-tensions-french-left>

The original French version of this article can be found [here](#).

Les articles de Mathieu Dejean sur Mediapart :

<https://www.mediapart.fr/biographie/mathieu-dejean-0>

Les articles de François Bougon sur Mediapart :

<https://www.mediapart.fr/biographie/francois-bougon>

• English version by Michael Streeter.