



ASIA MAIOR

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Asia in 2021: In the grip of global and local crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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*In memory of Nicola Mocci
(22 September 1969 - 29 January 2022),
scholar and gentleman.
Farewell Nicola. We miss you!*

FOREWORD

ASIA MAIOR IN 2021: PANDEMIC CRISIS; US-CHINA CONFRONTATION; AUTHORITARIAN INVOLUTION

The political and social evolution of Asia Maior¹ during the year 2021 was shaped by three main developments: the COVID-19 pandemic; the US-China confrontation; the authoritarian involution of the region. All three developments, far from representing something new, were the continuation of trends which had started before – at the end of 2019 in the case of the pandemic; several years before in the other two cases.

The continuation of the pandemic can be considered as both the unwelcoming backdrop against which the other two main developments unfolded and a contributing cause to the worsening of the negative results that they were anyway bound to cause. The US-China confrontation affected the regional relations of all of Asia and, indeed, of the remainder of the world. As a consequence, it impacted on all countries in the region to a lesser or greater extent. On its part, authoritarian involution affected the internal situation of most but not all the Asian countries analysed in this volume. What made it particularly relevant was that one of the countries most affected by it was the nation which still claims to be – and is often considered as – the largest democracy in the world, namely India.



In the year under review, the different Asian countries reacted to the pandemic in different ways and with different results. At one end of the spectrum there was India, which – as shown in this volume – grossly mismanaged the pandemic emergency, allowing a catastrophic loss of human lives.² At the other hand of the spectrum, there were some East Asian countries – China, the Koreas, Taiwan – which, although in some cases coping with new waves of the pandemic, kept the situation under control, although by following widely different policies. By the end of the year, these countries appeared, perhaps illusorily, to be heading towards an exit from the pandemic crisis.

1. The Asia Maior think tank and this journal define Asia Maior as that part of Asia stretching east to the Pacific Ocean, south to the Indian Ocean, west to the political border with Turkey and the Arab countries, and north to the highest ridge of the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea and the southern border of the Russian Federation from the Caspian Sea to the Sea of Japan.

2. Diego Maiorano, 'India 2021: Politics amid the pandemic', in this volume.

The remaining Asian countries were distributed at various point of the space between these two extremes. Among the countries analysed in this volume, the situation in Myanmar, Cambodia, Malaysia, and the Philippines was only marginally better than in India, although human losses were decidedly more contained. Less bleak was the situation in the other countries – Japan, Thailand, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Iran and Azerbaijan – although, in some cases, this did not prevent conspicuous political backlashes.³ Finally, it is difficult to assess the pandemic situation in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover because of the lack of trustworthy hard data.



The pandemic adversely affected most Asian economies, including some – as in the case of Japan and Thailand – where the situation was not particularly bad as far as human losses were concerned.⁴ The general worsening of the Asian economy was analysed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in a report released on 19 October 2021.⁵ The IMF downgraded its previous 2021 economic growth forecast for Asia from 7.6% to 6.5%. According to the Washington financial institution, this worsening was the compounded result of the fresh waves of infection, hitting the region in the first half of the year, and the slowness in vaccinating the local populations. According to the IMF analysis – which coincides with many of those published in this volume – the resurgence of the pandemic caused most Asian governments to take stricter containment measures, which adversely affected the service sector and led to the shutdown of factories. The result was the dampening Asia’s economic outlook, notwithstanding the strong demand for exports.

Interestingly, the IMF, while downgrading its forecast for Asia, highlighted that Asia remained the region characterized by the fastest economic growth worldwide. In the IMF estimate, economic progress in Asia would be led by China, with a GDP growth of 8% in the year under review, and by India, with a GDP growth of 9.5% during the same period. This was a thought-provoking forecast, as, whereas China had successfully implemented a strict anti-COVID policy,⁶ India, as already noted, had grossly mismanaged it. While there is considerable uncertainty concerning the real COVID-caused

3. In Japan, the perceived mismanagement of the pandemic played a role in Prime Minister Suga’s fall from power. See Giulio Pugliese & Corey Wallace, ‘Japan 2021: The Liberal Democratic Party Emerges Stronger Despite Domestic Tumult’, in this volume.

4. *Ibid.*; Edoardo Siani, ‘Thailand 2019-2021: Military, monarchy, protests’, in this volume.

5. International Monetary Fund, *Regional Economic Outlook. Asia And Pacific. Navigating Waves of New Variants: Pandemic Resurgence Slows the Recovery*, October 2021.

6. Silvia Menegazzi, ‘China 2021: Coping with the resilience dilemma of the Chinese model’, in this volume.

death toll, as compared to the official ones, few doubts are possible about the fact that India's death losses were several times those of China.⁷

As shown by an Oxfam report released in the first half of January 2022, the pandemic had not only adversely impacted Asia's life expectancy and economic development, but also social justice.⁸ In fact, 20 new «pandemic billionaires» had been created in Asia since the beginning of the pandemic, who had built their newly-gained fortunes on the manufacture of equipment and pharmaceuticals and the offer of services required for coping with COVID-19. The coming to prominence of the new «pandemic billionaires», nonetheless, was not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it was part of a wider trend characterized by the increasing concentration of wealth in fewer hands. According to the Oxfam report, the «pandemic billionaires» were only a fraction in the number of new billionaires who had come to the fore in the Asia-Pacific since the pandemic began. In November 2021, the billionaires in the Asia-Pacific area numbered 1,087, which represented a little less than one third increase since the pre-pandemic period. At the same time, no less than 140 million people across Asia were pushed below the poverty line. At the end of 2021, the richest 1% in the region owned more wealth than the poorest 90%.⁹

The rise in inequality was particularly visible in the three more important Asian countries: China, India and Japan. In China the rise in wealth concentration from March 2020 to November 2021 saw the passage from 387 billionaires holding US\$ 1,177 billion to 556 billionaires holding US\$ 2,310; in India, there was the passage from 102 billionaires holding US\$ 312.6 to 142 holding US\$ 719; in Japan there was the passage from 26 billionaires holding US\$ 110 to 45 billionaires holding US\$ 191.¹⁰

As pointed out in the Oxfam report, the concentration of wealth taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic, although conspicuous and incremented by the pandemic, was far from being a sudden and unexpected phenomenon. It was the continuation of a long-term trend that had started more than three decades ago. According to the report: «Since the 1990s,

7. Oommen C. Kurian, 'COVID-19 pandemic response: Comparing the Indian and Chinese approaches', *ORF*, 20 September 2021; Jon Cohen, 'COVID-19 may have killed nearly 3 million in India, far more than official counts show', *Science*, 6 January 2022; David Adam, 'The pandemic's true death toll: millions more than official counts', *Nature*, 18 January 2022; Haidong Wang *et al.*, 'Estimating excess mortality due to the COVID-19 pandemic: a systematic analysis of COVID-19-related mortality, 2020–21', *The Lancet*, Vol. 399, 2022, pp. 1513–36. See also, Rakesh Kochhar, 'India's middle class shrinks while China sees smaller changes', *Pew Research Center*, 18 March 2021.

8. Emma Seery, 'Rising to the Challenge: The case for permanent progressive policies to tackle Asia's coronavirus and inequality crisis', *Oxfam Briefing Paper*, January 2022.

9. *Ibid.*, *passim*.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 18, figure 1.

neoliberal policy, a failing global tax system and unequal pay and reward, have channelled income and health into the hands of an elite few». As a result: «Between 1987 and 2019, the number of billionaires in Asia skyrocketed from 40 to 768». ¹¹ In turn, the concentration of wealth had adversely affected the Asian health systems, making them unable to cope with the pandemic in an effective way. According to the Oxfam report: «Longstanding underinvestment and poor government oversight of public health systems has led to an inadequate and unequal public health response to the pandemic in many countries». This unequal response had affected «poor and marginalized people most». This situation had resulted in high levels of «out-of-pocket (OOP) expenditure for healthcare in the region», which had «created great health inequalities between rich and poor». In turn, these inequalities «are being exploited by coronavirus», with 13% of households in Asia «experiencing ‘catastrophic’ expenditure on healthcare» already before the pandemic. ¹² In this situation, the deadly impact of COVID was not only direct, represented by the number of deaths officially caused by the pandemic, but also indirect. As pointed out by the report, «in regions most affected by HIV, TB and malaria, *such as South Asia*, the knock-on effects of COVID-19 on these three diseases in terms of deaths could outweigh the direct impact of the virus itself». ¹³

Particularly bleak was the situation in India, as its health system suffered «from chronic underinvestment and great inequality». This had «played a significant role in facilitating the spread of the virus». As noted by the report: «India has the fourth-lowest health budget in the world and a large private for-profit healthcare sector». Consequently: «More than 70% of the nation’s health spending is met by individuals, through OOP payments, and 17% of the population experience catastrophic OOP spending on healthcare». Not surprisingly: «By the end of 2020, the country had seen 10.3 million cases, constituting an infection rate of 7,400 per million, compared to just 15 per million in Vietnam at this point, and had registered at least 148,000 COVID-related deaths». ¹⁴



The adverse consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic were also felt at the political level, both by «cementing Sino-American strategic rivalry and crystallizing Washington’s maximalist pushback against Beijing, with implica-

11. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

13. *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

14. *Ibid.*, p. 29. See also Diego Maiorano, ‘India 2021: Politics amid the pandemic’. As noted – see fn. 7 – the number of COVID-related deaths could be considerably higher.

tions that go well beyond the region».¹⁵ The pandemic also allowed states «to further centralize control over economic and social affairs – arguably for good reasons», and «lent legitimacy to a recrudescence of nationalist and protectionist instincts, effectively empowering many of the world's strongmen».¹⁶

Differently put, the pandemic was not only the backdrop against which the other two developments that characterised the evolution of Asia Maior in 2021 manifested themselves, but also a factor that contributed to enhancing them. It is to the first of these remaining two developments – the US-China confrontation, that it is now necessary to turn our attention.



As just noted, the second main development which shaped the political, economic and social evolution of Asia during the year 2021 was the continuation of the US-China confrontation. As hinted above, this was far from being a new development and, in fact, this journal has continuously analysed it since its beginning, highlighting the rise of China and the *relative* decline of the US. In so doing, this journal – by drawing not only on the analyses of the present, published in this and other academic journals, but also on the history the archetypal world empire in Western history, namely the Roman Empire – pointed out, in an introductory essay written as long ago as 2009,¹⁷ two main and sometimes overlooked characteristics of the US's decline. The first was that, as in the case of most world empires of the past, US decline was bound to be a very long-drawn affair. So long-drawn, in fact, that it was unlikely that anyone then reading that 2009 essay would witness the definitive conclusion of that process.¹⁸ The second characteristic was that decline does not exclude the possibility of impressive, significant and lasting (although impermanent) comebacks.¹⁹ This means that, even if we accept the idea that, in the long run China will emerge as the winner in the confrontation with the US (but, as Keynes rightly pointed out, in the long run we are all dead), how things will go this year, this decade or the next several decades is an absolutely open question. Therefore, emphasising – as

15. Giulio Pugliese, 'COVID-19 and the Reification of the US-China «Cold War»', *The Asia Pacific Journal*, Vol. 18, Issue 15, No. 3, 2020, p. 2.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

17. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Declino e continuità dell'egemonia americana in Asia (Decline and continuity of American hegemony in Asia)', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XIX/2009, pp. 9-31.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

19. The ability of the Roman Empire to victoriously overcome a crisis as catastrophic and extensive as that of the 3rd century is a case in point. See, e.g., Michael Grant, *The Collapse and Recovery of the Roman Empire*, London: Routledge, 1999. Of course, this did not prevent the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century.

the Chinese leadership and intellectuals often do – that the US is a declining power is, at most, a good propaganda tool – and, sometimes, not even that. It is not, by all means, an analytical instrument sharp enough to give an in-depth and nuanced vision of the manifold and evolving features which are moulding the US-China contraposition.

What is clear beyond any possible doubt is that the US-China contraposition has by now become the most important element in characterising international relations not only in Asia, but in the world at large. Accordingly, before introducing the history of US-China relations in the year under review, it is not without merit to highlight some basic long-term characteristics of the ongoing confrontation.



A first characteristic of the US-China contraposition is that, as pointed out by Ryan Hass: «The gap in national power between the United States and China compared to every other country in the world is widening».²⁰ Both economically and militarily any other country not only is well behind the two front-runners, but the distance between the two front-runners and even the most successful and strongest among those who follow is widening. This means that nowadays two nations have emerged as the dominant world powers and that, sometimes at the beginning of the present century, the world – unipolar since the collapse of the USSR in 1991 – has once again become bipolar.

This has been a process that, viewed from the perspective of the formerly sole world hegemon, could neither fail to be perceived and analysed with concern, nor avoid to elicit a reaction. In turn, a power that is emerging as potentially hegemonic on the world stage – and, accordingly, potentially destined to remove the former hegemon from its position of prominence – cannot fail to foresee the materializing of resistance to its rise and, consequently, it is bound to put in place counter-strategies aimed at overcoming such resistance.

Historically this is a kind of situation in which a confrontation for hegemony is bound to happen. This being the situation, it becomes superfluous or even fatuous to look for the party which fired, so to speak, the «first shot» in the «war» for hegemony, putting on it the responsibility and blame for the ongoing confrontation. Heuristically more relevant is to highlight that any conflict – and, therefore, even the US-China confrontation for world hegemony – is played out according to, and inside, a set of frame-

20. Ryan Hass, 'Beijing's Response to the Biden Administration's China Policy', *China Leadership Monitor*, 1 March 2022. I want to unambiguously highlight my intellectual debt to Hass's work, which is only partially underscored by the footnotes to this foreword. But, of course, it goes without saying that how I have read – or, maybe, misread – Hass's work is only my own responsibility.

works – political, military, economic, cultural, chronological – which powerfully condition the ways and outcome of the conflict itself. It is through the individuation and analysis of this set of frameworks that we can arrive at a clearer vision of an ongoing or future conflict.

While the attempt to identify the set of frameworks which condition the US-China confrontation is ongoing and absorbing an increasing amount of intellectual energies both in the West and in China, the fact remains that these efforts, particularly in the West, are carried out and organised according to one or another of two axiomatic views of the conflict: the «Thucydides Trap» theory and the «New Cold War» theory.

As noted by Richard Hanania: «The idea that United States and China are potentially headed for war has become commonplace among knowledgeable observers».²¹ In turn, this is an idea which, from a theoretical viewpoint, is largely based on the reading – or, perhaps, misreading – of Graham Allison's extremely influential and fortunate monograph, *Destined for War*.²² In it, Allison argues that China and the United States are heading toward a war neither want as result of «a deadly pattern of structural stress», which naturally comes into being when a rising power challenges a ruling one. A deadly pattern that Allison, with reference to Thucydides' thesis on the origin of the Peloponnesian War, christens the «Thucydides' trap».

Quite apart from the many scholarly weaknesses of Allison's monograph, the fact remains that the conclusion drawn from his work are weakened by the fact that an all-out war for hegemony between China and the US is made highly improbable by two key elements. The first is the existence of a classical «mutually assured destruction (MAD)» military situation. Both the US and China have enough nuclear weapons to destroy the world not once but several times, and there is no possibility that a «first strike» could totally eliminate, and not even make irrelevant, the nuclear capabilities of the state at the receiving end.

The second key element that appears to preclude a war is cultural. Neither in the US, nor in China (in spite of the contrary opinion of some Sinophobic hawks in the West), the ruling circles and the public opinion at large consider genocidal warfare (as an atomic war would be) an acceptable means of resolving international disputes.

The perception that an all-out US-China war is if not impossible, at least highly improbable, has prompted some academics and many Western media analysts to resort to another possible interpretive scheme. They have been describing the ongoing US-China confrontation as a new Cold War. In the Cold War between the US and USSR, warfare was indeed employed, but only in peripheral theatres. The real challenge was played out

21. Richard Hanania, 'Graham Allison and the Thucydides Trap Myth', *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Winter 2021, p. 13.

22. Graham Allison, *Destined for War: can America and China escape Thucydides's trap?*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

by recourse to a set of strategies – diplomatic, ideological, economic – which excluded global warfare.²³ These strategies eventually caused the state collapse of one of the two competitors, namely the USSR.

Quite apart from the fact that, at least up to the time when these lines are written, there was not the slightest indication of the impending state collapse of either of the two contenders for world hegemony, another aspect of the problem must be considered. Although superficially enticing, the categorization of the US-China confrontation as a new Cold War is «an intellectually lazy and misleading trope».²⁴ The US-China confrontation is profoundly different from the US-USSR confrontation because, in the latter, the two conflicting world hegemonies headed two separated economic systems, with only extremely tenuous interconnections. As a consequence, the collapse of one of them could have only a very limited, if any, adverse impact on the other. When the URRS economy collapsed, determining US victory in the cold war, this event, far from damaging the US and other Western economies, potentially opened the former URRS economic space to them. Nowadays, on the contrary, the US and China are deeply and massively interconnected at the economic level «by supply chains of historically unprecedented scope, complexity and density».²⁵ These supply chains can be modified and diminished – as some advise to do, or have attempted to do. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that decoupling the two deeply interconnected major world economies is a goal which can be pursued only slowly and, besides, in a very limited way. Any sudden and extensive rupture of the supply chains connecting the US and China economies (and most of the remaining economies) could not but cause catastrophic and irreversible damages to *both* economies (and to the world economy as a whole). This means that, as this journal already noted several years ago, the deep-seated economic interconnection between the two major world economies has created a MAD situation at the economic level.²⁶ Therefore, all-out confrontation, not only from a military point of view, but also from an economic one, has become a near impossibility.

Here, however, the key word, is «all-out». As already pointed out by this journal more than ten years ago, «reasoning by analogy with the state

23. A non-exhaustive list of these strategies includes the search for economic hegemony on the part each of the two competing hegemonic powers; their arms race with their consequent economic costs; the pursuit of world-wide ideological hegemony; the building and expansions of two counterpoised networks of military alliances; the parallel creation of two separated economic networks and markets.

24. Bilahari Kausikan, 'In U.S.-China Standoff, Is America a Reliable Ally?', *Foreign Policy*, 18 October 2021.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Nicola Mocci & Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Il ritorno degli USA nell'Asia delle tre crisi' (The US' return to the Asia of the three crises), *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXI/2011, pp. 24-26. Mocci and Torri's analysis was indebted to the insights in Ashley Tellis, *Out-bound: contextualizing and embedding China's return to global preeminence*, lecture delivered as part of the ToAsia Summer School, University of Turin, 30 June 2011.

of affairs before the Cold War, it is clear that the situation of economic MAD between the US and China does not mean that conflict has become impossible. It only means that it takes place within parameters that prevent a chain reaction leading to the total destruction of both sides». In turn, this implies that, from a certain point of view, MAD, far from guaranteeing peace, makes conflict possible – indeed unavoidable – albeit a conflict which does not degenerate into total war and the destruction of either or both sides. But a conflict which, as it was the case in the Cold War, is ultimately destined to end with the victory of one side and the defeat of the other. Summing up: «The economic MAD [...] has demarcated the battlefield, established the rules that the contenders must necessarily abide by (on pain of their own destruction, as well as that of their opponent). A clash in which many moves are not allowed, but which does not, however, cease to be a decisive clash».

In the more than ten years that have gone by since the above analysis was penned, the only change has been that the confrontation between the two major powers has become much more complex, expanding from the economic level to include a multiplicity of other levels – ideological, diplomatic, cultural and, of course, even military. The relevant aspect of this confrontation, however, remains that, in the final analysis, it is still MAD-constrained, which means that it could go beyond certain security parameters only following an always possible, but highly improbable, mistake or set of mistakes.

In conclusion, both the «Thucydides trap» and the «New Cold War» views of the US-China conflict, although widespread and influential, are unsatisfactory and possibly misleading models of analysis.



Both China and the US entered the year 2021 in a situation of difficulty. It was the new US President himself, Joe Biden, who, in his first speech to the Congress as president, claimed that he had inherited a nation «that was in crisis». This was the result of: «The worst pandemic in a century. The worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. The worst attack on our democracy since the Civil War».²⁷ On their part, the top echelons of Chinese power were engaged in managing a set of crises which were not radically different from those confronting the US. In the case of China, the COVID-19 pandemic was a main problem both in domestic and foreign policies. Despite the Chinese authorities' highly effective management of the pandemic crisis after a first period of inaction, the intrusive methods they had adopted to cope with the crisis and their aggressiveness in attempting to impose China's COVID-related official narrative had dented China's image at the

27. The White House, *Remarks by President Biden in Address to a Joint Session of Congress*, 29 April 2021. The speech was delivered on 28 April.

international level.²⁸ Beside the pandemic-induced problems, there were those brought to the fore by an economy that had entered a «new normal», characterised by a slower rate of growth and unable to bridge «the ever-widening range of social disparities» and to «focus on human development rather than just GDP».²⁹ Finally, the political system continued to be characterized by the growing concentration of power in the hands of a single person, the President, in a process that was not without dangers.³⁰

Although mainly focussed on their internal problems, Washington and Beijing could not overlook the foreign policy challenges in front of them. In the year under review, Washington, completing a path already started by the Trump administration, put an end to the expensive and basically irrelevant engagement in Afghanistan, focussing its attention on the Asia-Pacific. It also put much effort in rebuilding the connections with treaty and non-treaty allies, badly damaged by the previous presidency. Beijing, on its part, pursued the improvement of its negative image at the world level and the expansion of its role in global governance, trying to minimise any possible adverse reaction from the international community.

In the final analysis, the foreign policies implemented by Washington and Beijing were prodromic or complementary to managing what was the overriding foreign policy problem for both countries: the competition with the other major world power.



It is possible that Beijing hoped that the end of the Trump presidency would coincide with the end of the aggressive anti-China policy carried out by his administration. These hopes, however, were soon dispelled. The elements of continuity between the Trump and Biden administrations, as far as the China policy was concerned, became clearly visible in the first months of the year under review, both in the speech of the new secretary of State, Antony Blinken of 3 March 2021 and in Joe Biden's speech to the US Congress of 28 April 2021.

According to Blinken, the relationship with China was the US «biggest geopolitical test of the 21st century», because China was «the only country with the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to seriously challenge the stable and open international system». An international system which, in Blinken's words, was made up of «all the

28. Barbara Onnis, 'COVID-19 and China's Global Image', *Asia Maior*, Special Issue No. 2, 2022 (forthcoming).

29. Silvia Menegazzi, 'China 2021: Coping with the resilience dilemma of the Chinese model'.

30. *Ibid.* See also Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2021: China*, and Kenji Bando, 'Opinion: The risk of China's concentration of power', *The Mainichi*, 6 January 2022.

rules, values, and relationships that make the world work the way we want it to, because it ultimately serves the interests and reflects the values of the American people». ³¹ Hence, according to Blinken: «Our relationship with China will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be. *The common denominator is the need to engage China from a position of strength*». ³²

On his part, President Biden, in his speech to the Congress of 28 April, stated that the US was «in a competition with China and other countries to win the 21st century». ³³ Biden also clarified that the economic policy that he was proposing in that same speech had among its explicit objectives that of helping the US to outcompete China. ³⁴ The US President also stated that, from what he himself had gathered talking with Xi Jinping, the Chinese President was «deadly earnest» about making China «the most significant, consequential nation in the world». An attitude that Biden had countered by pointing out that «we'll maintain a strong military presence in the Indo-Pacific, just as we do with NATO in Europe -- not to start a conflict, but to prevent one». ³⁵

Between the Blinken's and Biden's speeches, the first important bilateral US-China meeting during the Biden administration took place on 8 March at Anchorage. It involved Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan on the US side, and Politburo member Yang Jiechi and Foreign Minister Wang Yi on China's side. During the opening remarks, which took place before the close-door sessions, «angry words» were exchanged. ³⁶ The «angry words» of both parties attracted the attention of observers and analysts, who read the «unusually undiplomatic sparring match» as a demonstration as clear as any that the US-China relation, rather than

31. U.S. Department of State, *A Foreign Policy for the American People*, Speech by Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State, 3 March 2021.

32. *Ibid.* (Emphasis added.)

33. 'Full transcript: President Biden's first speech to Congress', *Nikkei Asia*, 29 April 2021. Biden statement was received with «a standing ovation». See Alex Fang, 'Biden: «We are in a competition with China to win the 21st century»', *Nikkei Asia*, 29 April 2021.

34. «There is simply no reason why the blades for wind turbines can't be built in Pittsburgh instead of Beijing. No reason. None. No reason», Biden declared. See 'Full transcript: President Biden's first speech to Congress'.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Blinken spoke of the US' «concerns with actions by China, including in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, cyber attacks on the United States, economic coercion of our allies», stating that each of these actions threatened «the rules-based order that maintains global stability». On his part Yang Jiechi stated that the US was not in a position to «speak from a position of strength» when criticising China and accused Washington of using its military might and financial supremacy to suppress other countries. He also decried the dismal state of human rights in the US, where black Americans were «slaughtered». 'US and China trade angry words at high-level Alaska talks', BBC News, 19 March 2021.

improving was worsening.³⁷ What transpired of the discussions held behind closed doors only strengthened this evaluation. According to the *Washington Post*, «what the Chinese really wanted was for the Biden administration to cease all criticism of anything Beijing considered a core – and therefore – untouchable issue». In fact, according to the same sources, reporting the words of an anonymous American official: «Behind close closed doors [...] it was quite clear [that] both Yang and Wang really came to the table essentially saying, ‘Roll back all the Trump administration’s policies’».³⁸

It was a request that the new US administration was totally unwilling to accept, as also shown by the fact that the Anchorage meeting was sandwiched between Washington’s announcement (the day before the meeting) of sanctions on 24 Chinese Communist Party officials, involved in the crack-down on democracy in Hong Kong, and (three days after the meeting) of an analogous announcement of sanctions against two Chinese government officials, involved in continued human rights abuses against the country’s minority Uyghur population.³⁹

The Blinken’s and Biden’s speeches and the Anchorage meeting set the tone of US-China relations for the remainder of the year. To the «surprise of many in Washington and Beijing»,⁴⁰ the new administration was carrying out a policy of confrontation with China which differed from the one executed by Trump only in style and in the intelligent involvement of treaty and non-treaty allies in its implementation.⁴¹

A series of US moves against China’s ICT (Information and Communication Technology) companies and research institutes, started in March, culminated in an order signed by the President on 3 June. It amended and expanded a ban initially imposed by his predecessor on US investment in 59

37. On the unusual opening of the Anchorage meeting see also Adam Taylor & Emily Rauhala, ‘The Biden administration gets a taste of China’s «wolf warrior» diplomacy’, *The Washington Post*, 19 March 2021; Matthew Knott, ‘US-China meeting in Alaska begins with on-camera confrontation’, *The Sidney Morning Herald*, 19 March 2021; Consulate General of The People’s Republic of China in Los Angeles, *Yang Jiechi Puts Forth China’s Stands at the Start of China-U.S. High-level Strategic Dialogue*, 19 March 2021.

38. Josh Rogin, ‘Opinion – Biden doesn’t want to change China. He wants to beat it’, *The Washington Post*, 10 February 2022. That this surprise was not so justified after all is explained by Giulio Pugliese. See his ‘COVID-19 and the Reification of the US-China «Cold War»’, p. 4.

39. *Ibid.* See also, Dareh Gregorian & Abigail Williams, ‘Biden admin sanctions Chinese officials for abuses against Uyghurs’, *NBC News*, 22 March 2021.

40. Josh Rogin, ‘Opinion – Biden doesn’t want to change China. He wants to beat it’.

41. As noted by Bilahari Kausikan of the National University of Singapore Biden’s administration’s China Policy «is essentially Trump’s – except that it is implemented and communicated in a more orderly manner, entails more consultation with allies and partners, and leaves out the histrionics». Bilahari Kausikan, ‘In U.S.-China Standoff, Is America a Reliable Ally?’, *Foreign Policy*, 18 October 2021.

Chinese companies, including ICT giant Huawei.⁴² On 4 October, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai delivered a major speech on the new administration's trade policy towards China. Although «short on details», the speech affirmed that negotiating with China «from a position of strength» was a main US priority. Ambassador Tai also highlighted the administration's demand that China honoured the commitments made in the 2020 China-US trade deal.⁴³ Finally, no indication was given that the 301 tariffs on Chinese trade, put in place by the Trump administration, would be terminated anytime soon.⁴⁴

While the Trump-initiated trade war with China continued, the Biden administration, following up on a series of previous diplomatic steps, in some cases made directly by President Biden,⁴⁵ initiated the implementation of strategies aimed at promoting «new forms of cooperation and coordination between the US and 'like-minded partners'».⁴⁶ In the Asia-Pacific, this strategy was mainly focussed on the relaunching and transformation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad, a de facto anti-China alliance in progress, involving, besides the US, Japan, Australia and India. First at a virtual summit meeting held in March⁴⁷ and then in «the first-ever in-person Leaders' Summit of the Quad»,⁴⁸ held in Washington on 24 September, the US worked to transform a de facto anti-Chinese military alliance in progress into an organisation that, without losing its original connotation as an anti-China military entente, would compete with China «more on the provision of global public goods, such as COVID-19 vaccines, humanitarian

42. E.g., Jennifer Jacobs, 'Biden blocks 59 Chinese companies including Huawei in amended Trump order', *Business Standard*, 4 June 2021.

43. Silvia Menegazzi, 'China 2020: Amidst strengthening resilience, fading responsibility, growing uncertainty', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, p. 54. Among other engagements, the deal swapped China's commitment to increase purchase of American products and services by at least US\$ 200 million on the next two years with a 50% cut in tariffs by the US on a US\$ 120 billion list of Chinese goods. Tai complained that Beijing had not honoured its commitment. On its part, Beijing pointed out the role of the pandemic in making difficult to keep the January 2020 engagements.

44. Ana Swanson & Keith Bradsher, 'U.S. Signals No Thaw in Trade Relations with China', *The New York Times*, 4 October 2021 (updated 16 November 2021); Emily Kilcrease, 'Taking Stock of the New U.S. Trade Policy on China', *Lawfare*, 18 October 2021. See also Office of The United States Trade Representative, *Remarks As Prepared for Delivery of Ambassador Katherine Tai Outlining the Biden-Harris Administration's "New Approach to the U.S.-China Trade Relationship"*, October 2021. On the 2020 trade deal see Ana Swanson and Alan Rappeport, 'Trump Signs China Trade Deal, Putting Economic Conflict on Pause', *The New York Times*, 15 January 2020.

45. Before finally accepting the first call from Xi Jinping on 10 February, Biden had spoken with his counterparts in Japan, Australia and South Korea.

46. Giulio Pugliese & Corey Wallace, 'Japan 2021: The Liberal Democratic Party Emerges Stronger Despite Domestic Tumult'.

47. *Ibid.*

48. The White House, *Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders' Summit*, 24 September 2021.

assistance, disaster relief, climate change mitigation, infrastructure investment, and technology cooperation».⁴⁹

The morphing of the Quad did not prevent the US from maintaining and strengthening the anti-China military arc of containment in the Indo-Pacific area originally put in place during the concluding years of the second Obama presidency. In the year under review, a massive military exercise took place in the Western Pacific from 2 to 27 August. It involved «more than 30 ships, 200 aircraft, and 30,000 military personnel from UK Armed Forces, the Australian Defence Force and Japan Self-Defense Forces and five U.S. combatant commands».⁵⁰ During the four-week long exercise, the forces involved «conducted and simulated operations in all domains of modern warfare, including air, land, sea, cyber, space, and electro-magnetic spectrum».⁵¹

This was followed, on 15 September, by the announcement of AUKUS, a new trilateral military pact involving the US, the UK and Australia. It committed the first two partners to help the third to acquire nuclear submarine technology.⁵²

Washington's tightening of the strategic anti-China arc of containment was coupled with two other initiatives. The first was the attempt to marshal the resources of the Group of 7 (G7) – namely the seven richest democracies – to offer developing nations an infrastructure plan which could compete with China's BRI. The G7 leaders, meeting in Carbis Bay, England, on 12 June, launched the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative. In the words of an anonymous senior US official, the B3W initiative aimed to offer «a positive alternative that reflects our values, our standards and our way of doing business».⁵³ According to the official White House communiqué, the B3W plan would «collectively catalyze hundreds of billions of

49. Giulio Pugliese & Corey Wallace, 'Japan 2021: The Liberal Democratic Party Emerges Stronger Despite Domestic Tumult'. See also: The White House, *Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders' Summit*, 24 September 2021; The White House, *Joint Statement from Quad Leaders*, 24 September 2021.

50. U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, *With Allies and Partners, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Successfully Completes LSGE 2021*, 21 September 2021. See also 'US Indo-Pacific Command commences Large Scale Global Exercise 21', *Naval Technology*, 3 August 2021.

51. *Ibid.*

52. According to what said by a senior US official to Josh Rogin of The Washington Post, the AUKUS pact was not a Biden administration's initiative. Rather, it was the result of the diplomatic démarche of Australia and UK. In Rogin's words: «China had been battering Australia economically throughout the pandemic in relation for its government calling for an independent investigation into the origins of coronavirus. Meanwhile, Britain was looking to shore up its alliances following Brexit». Josh Rogin, 'Opinion – Biden doesn't want to change China. He wants to beat it'.

53. 'G7 rivals China with grand infrastructure plan', *Reuters*, 13 June 2021. See also The White House, *FACT SHEET: President Biden and G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership*, 12 June 2021

dollars of infrastructure investment for low- and middle-income countries in the coming years». The problem, of course, was that, in the year under review, the B3W initiative represented a set of beautiful promises as opposed to the concrete reality of BRI.

The second strategy was Washington's decision to compete with China in the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines. This was a strategy which President Biden launched in mid-year, when he announced that the US had committed US\$ 4 billion to support COVAX⁵⁴ and launched «partnerships to boost global capacity to manufacture more vaccines».⁵⁵ Also, according to Biden, «by the end of June» the US would share 80 million doses of its vaccine supply with the world.⁵⁶

By the time of Biden's announcement, Beijing – according to an independent source – had already distributed 16.57 million doses and pledged to supply an additional 10 million doses to COVAX.⁵⁷ This, against the backdrop of the lack of generosity hitherto shown by the West in general and the US in particular in helping needy nations, had conveyed the impression that China, differently from the US and other Western democracies, was a reliable partner willing to help.

In the following months, although the difficulty in acceding to unbiased and transparent sources makes doubtful any conclusion, the impression is that the number of vaccine doses donations from the US clearly exceeded the number of donations from China. Less doubtful is the conclusion that, by the end of the year under review, the related media battle over who was the most generous donor had ended in Washington's favour.⁵⁸

54. COVAX, namely the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access, is a worldwide initiative aimed at equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. COVAX is directed by the GAVI vaccine alliance, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), and the World Health Organization (WHO) and employs UNICEF as its key delivery organization.

55. The White House, *Statement by President Joe Biden on Global Vaccine Distribution*, 3 June 2021.

56. *Ibid.*

57. 'Factbox -Vaccines donated by the United States and China', *Reuters*, 9 June 2021. COVAX, namely the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access, is a worldwide initiative aimed at equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. COVAX is directed by the GAVI vaccine alliance, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), and the World Health Organization (WHO) and employs UNICEF as its key delivery organization.

58. E.g., The White House, *FACT SHEET: President Biden Announces Major Milestone in Administration's Global Vaccination Efforts: More Than 100 Million U.S. COVID-19 Vaccine Doses Donated and Shipped Abroad*, 3 August 2021; 'China pledges USD 100 million towards equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines for lower-income countries', *GAVI*, 6 August 2021; 'Covid-19 vaccines: Has China made more than other countries combined?', *BBC News*, 10 October 2021; 'Data shows the U.S. is the world's largest Covid vaccine donor — way ahead of China', *CNBC*, 9 September 2021.

Beijing reacted to the continuation of Trump's policy by taking stock that, given the prevailing view in the US of China as an enemy which had to be confronted and defeated, no improvement in the bilateral relation was in the offing. China's reaction, therefore – apart from self-strengthening by taking care of its internal problems⁵⁹ – was the implementation of two sets of strategies. The first was the consolidation of its international position by strengthening its relationship with Russia and by increasing its influence in much of the developing world.⁶⁰ The second, which was almost mirror-like the one advocated by Blinken, aimed «to smooth frictions with the United States and the West where possible, and to react vigorously and visibly when Beijing believes its interests or dignity have been violated».⁶¹

The tightening of China's relation with Russia saw a conspicuous expansion of the military cooperation, which found expression in «conducting combined war games on Chinese territory and elevating the sophistication and geographic range of joint exercises».⁶² These exercises culminated in the war games held in the Sea of Japan, which ran from 14 to 17 October and involved warships and support vessels from Russia's Pacific Fleet, including mine-sweepers and a submarine.⁶³ At the political level, the increasingly close bilateral relation culminated in a joint statement by Xi and Putin, issued on 28 June, announcing the extension of the China-Russia Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation. Originally signed by Jiang Zemin and Vladimir Putin on 16 July 2001, the treaty was extended for a further 5-year period.⁶⁴

59. Silvia Menegazzi, 'China 2021: Coping with the resilience dilemma of the Chinese model'.

60. Ryan Hass, 'Beijing's Response to the Biden Administration's China Policy', *China Leadership Monitor*, 1 March 2022.

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*

63. 'Russia and China hold joint naval drills in Sea of Japan', *Reuters*, 15 October 2021.

64. 'Xi, Putin announce extension of China-Russia friendly cooperation treaty', *China Today*, 29 June 2021. For the text of the announcement, see, e.g., The Embassy of The Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, *Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the Twentieth Anniversary of the Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, 28 June 2021*, 29 June 2021. For a discussion of the original treaty and the indication of where to find its full text, see, e.g., Elizabeth Wishnick, 'Russia and China', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 41, No. 5 (September/October 2001), pp. 797-821, and Anastasia Solomentseva, 'The «Rise» of China in the Eyes of Russia: A Source of Threats or New Opportunities?', *Connections*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Winter 2014, pp. 3-40.

While tightening the connection with Russia, China continued to implement a complex set of policies aimed at strengthening its influence particularly on developing countries, but not only on them. A main tool in this search for influence remained the Belt and Road Initiative, whose financial dimension, however, declined in 2021 in both absolute and relative terms.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, this was coupled by the expansion of China's foreign trade.⁶⁶ Whereas growing trade connections not always translate into political influence, there is little doubt that this happens in a trade relation between two countries where one of the partners has a massively superior weight in comparison to the other. More generally, as noted by Ryan Hass, China, through its trade and investment links, was «raising the costs and risks to countries of challenging it on issues it deems fundamental to its interests».⁶⁷

Another tool employed by Beijing in its search for influence was its COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy. Although Chinese vaccines were considerably less efficient than Western vaccines, they offered a certain level of immunization which, as noted by Fabrizio Bozzato of Tokyo-based Ocean Policy Research Institute, was, of course, «always better than no immunization at all».⁶⁸ While the US and EU were absorbed by the internal struggle against the pandemic and hesitant in diverting part of their resources to help nations in need, Beijing, by generously distributing its not particularly efficient vaccines, was able to build for itself the image as a «reliable partner that's willing to help»⁶⁹ in much of Asia. Still as late as September, a knowledgeable analyst as Bozzato, noted that: «It appears that China's vaccine diplomacy is working very well, to the detriment of the West, given the impression that it's keeping the best weapons against COVID-19 to themselves».⁷⁰ It was an impression which was bound to linger on, notwithstanding the massive effort that, as noted above, had been deployed by Washington since June and whose results, on the propaganda level, would be felt only gradually.

65. The BRI finance and investment declined from US\$ 60.5 billion in 2020 to US\$ 59.5 in 2021. Also, in global comparison BRI investment trends underperformed global trends of foreign direct investment. See Christoph Nedopil, 'China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2021', *Green Finance & Development Center (FISF Fudan University, Shanghai)*, January 2022, p. 3.

66. According to official data, China's total import and export of goods expanded 32.2% year-on-year to 5.44 trillion yuan (US\$834.49 billion) in the first two months of 2021. 'China's booming foreign trade brings benefits to the world', *China International Import Expo*, 24 March 2021.

67. Ryan Hass, 'Beijing's Response to the Biden Administration's China Policy'.

68. Ralph Jennings, 'China's COVID-19 Vaccine Diplomacy Reaches 100-Plus Countries', *VOA News*, 18 September 2021.

69. *Ibid.*

70. *Ibid.* On China's COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy see also On China's COVID diplomacy see: Moritz Rudolf, 'China's health diplomacy during Covid-19: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in action', *SWP Comment*, No. 9 January 2021; Atmaja Gohain Baruah, 'China's Health Diplomacy: Taking Forward the Health Silk Road in Southeast Asia', *Focus Asia. Perspective & Analysis*, September 2021.

Beijing also promoted its influence in Asia and world-wide by dispatching «equipment and advisers to support a restoration of law and order», while Chinese companies were exporting «surveillance and facial recognition technology to help foreign governments monitor activities by their citizens».⁷¹

While strengthening itself at the domestic and international levels, in the year under review China appeared engaged in the attempt to stabilize its relations with the US or, failing that, to keep the rate of deterioration to a minimum. The Chinese were certainly aware that, although the hegemonic view of their country had become starkly negative in the US, nevertheless there was a minority opinion – shared by state officials, members of the business community and a few politicians and intellectuals – which, although for very diverse reasons – was averse to the continuation of the confrontational Trump-Biden China approach.⁷² Whatever the reasons for these mellowed positions towards China, Chinese diplomats tried to leverage them, albeit without much success.⁷³ In particular, they tried to enlist the support of members of the US business community, counting on the fact that the continuation of the Washington-Beijing trade war was costly even for, and therefore criticized even in, the US.⁷⁴



Although not particularly emphasised by either side, a key element characterizing the Sino-US confrontation in the year under review (and before) was the Taiwan issue. In 2021, it became increasingly clear that Washington, in spite of formally accepting the «One China» principle – namely acknowledging Beijing’s position that there is only one China, and that

71. Ryan Hass, ‘Beijing’s Response to the Biden Administration’s China Policy’. As noted by Hass, «such practices also help normalize China’s own domestic law-enforcement practices by making them seem more commonplace around the world». See also: Leigh Hartman, ‘China exports tools of repression to the world’, *ShareAmerica*, 6 May 2019; Arjun Kharpal, ‘China’s surveillance tech is spreading globally, raising concerns about Beijing’s influence’, *CNBC*, 8 October 2019.

72. The reasons varied from the conviction entertained by a part of the business community that the trade war with China was damaging the US economy to the view that China, as pithily argued by Senator Bernie Sanders, had to be challenged «by demonstrating that democracy can actually deliver a better quality of life for people than authoritarianism can». See Bernie Sanders, ‘Washington’s Dangerous New Consensus on China’, *Foreign Affairs*, 17 June 2021; also available at also available on Bernie Sanders’ personal website at <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/op-eds/washingtons-dangerous-new-consensus-on-china/>.

73. Ryan Hass, ‘Beijing’s Response to the Biden Administration’s China Policy’ and the bibliography there listed in footnotes 18-20.

74. E.g., Yukon Huang, ‘The U.S.-China Trade War Has Become a Cold War’, *Carnegie*, 16 September 2021.

Taiwan is part of it – was strengthening his connection with and support to Taipei.⁷⁵ In the final analysis, given the deepening US-China confrontation and the strategic and economic relevance⁷⁶ of the island state, Washington simply cannot countenance its annexation by China. Conversely, Beijing considers Taiwan's annexation – or, rather, in Beijing's view, its reunification with the motherland – as a fundamental policy objective which cannot be abandoned. It is an objective to be pursued preferably by diplomatic means, but also with the employment of force, if necessary. What has made the situation increasingly dangerous is that, as documented by this journal in this and past issues, since the ascent to the Taiwan presidency of Tsai Ing-wen in January 2016 the island state has set out with increasing determination on the road to the formal declaration of its status as an independent nation. This policy, by progressively diminishing the chance of a reunification with China by peaceful means, has gradually raised the possibility of war, potentially putting Beijing and Washington on a collision course.

Both sides have hitherto appeared hesitant to follow this path to its conclusion, given the danger to trigger a chain reaction ending in nuclear war. Nonetheless, during the year under review, both China and the United States highlighted their determination not to stray from their final and opposite objectives. On the US's part there were several high-profile visits to the island state by US lawmakers, the continuation of US arms sales to the island state,⁷⁷ President Biden's public acknowledgement that the US would defend Taiwan if it was attacked by China (21 October), and Secretary of State Blinken's statement supporting Taiwan's participation in the UN system (26 October). On China's part, there was the repeated and increasingly massive violations of Taiwan's air defence identification zone on the part of the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and Navy (PLAN). Nonetheless, as argued by Aurelio Insisa in this volume, the logic behind the PLA activism «was largely reactive and designed to provide an immediate re-

75. Washington de facto accepted the «One China» principle in February 1972, by subscribing the joint US-China Shanghai Communiqué. The Communiqué acknowledged that «all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China» and that the US did not challenge that position. For a perceptive overview of the role of the Taiwan problem in the US-China relations, see Zhiqun Zhu, «One China» in the Beijing-Washington-Taipei Trilateral Relationship», *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 20, Issue 2, No. 3, 2022.

76. On the increasing economic relevance of the island state, particularly in the crucially important field of semiconductor manufacturing, see Aurelio Insisa, «Taiwan 2021: Heightened geo-economic relevance amid raising cross-strait tensions», in this volume.

77. The Biden administration approved its first arms sale to Taiwan in August. See, e.g., «First Taiwan Arms Sale in Biden Administration Is Approved», *Bloomberg*, 4 August 2021.

sponse to each step taken by the Biden and Tsai administrations to expand and further solidify ties between Washington and Taipei.⁷⁸



Summing up, the leitmotiv of the US-China relation in 2021 was the continuing tension between the two countries. It is true that on 15 November, there was a virtual Biden-Xi meeting, where the two parts agreed on the necessity to jointly pursue «strategic stability». The meeting was publicly hailed as «a needed improvement to the tense relationship». Nonetheless, more realistically, some Biden administration's insiders judged it nothing more than «a steam release valve». A better indication of the real state of the bilateral relation came soon after the virtual meeting, in early December, when the Biden administration announced its decision not to send officials to the Winter Olympics in Beijing, as a protest against «China's extensive human rights abuses».⁷⁹



The third main development which shaped the political and social evolution of Asia during the year 2021 was the authoritarian involution of the region. Like in the case of the US-China confrontation, it was not a new phenomenon and did not influence Asia only. The two main democracy-monitoring yearly publications, *Freedom in the World* of Freedom House (hereafter FW) and *Democracy Index* of the Economist Intelligence Unit (hereafter DI), point out that the expansion of authoritarianism and the weakening of democracies is a world-wide phenomenon, which has been going on for several years and which has one of its epicentres in Asia.⁸⁰ On its part, this journal has been highlighting the same phenomenon in the more limited geopolitical area on which its analyses are focused.

Of central importance in the authoritarian involution which is ongoing in the world at large, but in particular in Asia, is China. Having never been a democracy or a quasi-democracy, China has nevertheless transitioned from the institutionalized collective leadership and decentralized system of power created by Deng Xiaoping to the increasingly centralized and increasingly powerful one-man rule created and controlled by Xi Jin-

78. Aurelio Inisa, 'Taiwan 2021: Heightened geo-economic relevance amid raising cross-strait tensions'.

79. Josh Rogin, 'Opinion – Biden doesn't want to change China. He wants to beat it'.

80. Sarah Repucci & Amy Slipowitz, 'Freedom in the World 2022. The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule', Freedom House; 'Democracy Index 2021. The China challenge', Economist Intelligence Unit.

ping.⁸¹ Most analyses – even if not all – also underline the key role played by China in promoting autocratic norms world-wide – and, therefore, Asia-wide – and in supporting newly-created or long-standing authoritarian regimes.⁸²

The analyses published by this journal along the years – not only those focussed on China, but also many of those focussed on other Asian countries – support the above sketched view of China as an increasingly authoritarian state, which often plays the role of supporter for other authoritarian states. Nonetheless, since 2014 this journal has continued to underline a hardly less negative phenomenon, namely the catastrophic decline of liberty in what used to be considered – and it is still officially considered by Western democracies and much of Western public opinion – as the largest word democracy, namely India.

Democracy-monitoring organizations such as FW and DI, without being completely oblivious to the democratic crisis in India, nevertheless have not given India's backsliding from democracy to an increasingly intolerant authoritarian system (badly masked by the maintenance of the external trappings of formal democracy) the negative relevance it deserves. Differently from FW, DI and most international press, this journal has been following with increasingly preoccupation the decline of India's democracy, since it has become apparent in 2014.⁸³ In particular, it has carefully analysed it,

81. For the mainstream interpretation see, e.g., Susan L. Shirk, 'China in Xi's "New Era": The Return to Personalistic Rule', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 29, Issue 2, April 2018, pp. 22-36

82. E.g., Peter Burnell, 'Is there a new autocracy promotion? FRIDE Working Paper 96, March 2010; Julia Bader, Jörn Grävingholt & Antje Kästner, 'Would autocracies promote autocracy? A political economy perspective on regime-type export in regional neighbourhoods', *Contemporary Politics*, Volume 16, 2010 - Issue 1, pp. 81-100; Peter Burnell, 'Promoting democracy and promoting autocracy: Towards a comparative evaluation', *Journal of Politics and Law*, Vol. 3, No. 2; September 2010, pp. 3-14; Alexander Brand, Susan McEwen-Fial & Wolfgang Muno, 'An 'Authoritarian Nexus'? China's Alleged Special Relationship with Autocratic States in Latin America' *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies/ Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, No. 99, October 2015, pp. 7-28; Elizabeth Economy, 'China's Assertive Authoritarianism', *Democracy. A Journal of Ideas*, No. 62 - Special Issue, 2021; Charles Edel & David O. Shullman, 'How China Exports Authoritarianism', *Foreign Affairs*, 16 September 2021. For a case study challenging the mainstream interpretation, see Donald M. Seekins, 'China and the February 1, 2021 Coup d'Etat in Burma: Beijing's Geopolitical Nightmare', *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 19, Issue 10, No. 1, 2021.

83. Several authors agree that the roots of India's authoritarian involution go back in time to the 1970s or to independence. See, e.g., Arvind Narrain, *India's Undeclared Emergency. Constitutionalism and the Politics of Resistance*, Chennai: Context, 2021; Debasish Roy Chowdhury & John Keane, *To Kill a Democracy. India's Passage to Despotism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. See also Elisabetta Basile, 'The unhappy ending of the «India story»', in this volume.

particularly – but not exclusively – since it catastrophically quickened its tempo in 2019. The rise to hegemonic status of *Hindutva*, an ideology which considers non-Hindus as at best second-class citizens and at worst public enemies; the erosion of democratic institutions, including the side-lining of the parliament; the centralization of power in the hands of Prime Minister Modi; the manipulation of party funding to favour the BJP, Modi's party; the state repression of all forms of dissent, usually by the pretextual use of draconian and illiberal anti-terrorism laws; the deployment of fascist-like squads which attack the opponents of the regime while the police, at best, turn a blind eye to their criminal activities; the persecution of the religious minorities, Muslims as well Christians; the abolition of the only Muslim-majority state in the Indian Union; the enactment of a law which reworks the concept of nationality according to religious parameters that privilege Hinduism; the reduction to stateless status of hundreds of thousands of people in Assam; the toleration of the widespread phenomenon of lynching, of which Muslims are the main victims are all phenomena which have been carefully and persistently analysed by this journal.⁸⁴ It is on the basis of these analyses that it is possible to claim that India's democratic crisis is, after China's rising authoritarianism, the most worrying anti-democratic development taking place in Asia. Disregarding its seriousness is an error in perspective that must be corrected.



While China and India represent the two most worrying examples of authoritarianism in the area of the world on which this journal is focussed, the two negative developments that most affected world public opinion in 2021 occurred in Afghanistan and Myanmar. In Myanmar, a coup brought back to power the military on February 2021; in Afghanistan, the Taliban took over the country on 15 August. While neither pre-coup Myanmar, nor Afghan before the Taliban August take-over were, by any stretch of imagination, model democracies, they were, at the very least, partial democracies which guaranteed a series of substantial although incomplete political rights to their citizens. After the February coup in Myanmar and the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, no democratic rights survived in either country, while the concept itself of citizenship disappeared or became empty of content.⁸⁵

84. Beside the already quoted Maiorano's article in this volume, see, by the same author, 'Democratic backsliding amid the COVID-19 pandemic in India', *Asia Maior*, Special Issue No. 2, 2022 (forthcoming). See, also, Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democracy; building a kingdom of cruelty and fear', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXX/2019, pp. 345-395, and, of the same author, 'India 2020: The deepening crisis of democracy', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 331-375.

85. Matteo Fumagalli, 'Myanmar 2021: Repression and resistance in a multi-cornered conflict', and Filippo Boni, 'Afghanistan 2021: Us withdrawal, the Taliban return and regional geopolitics', both in this volume.

Only marginally less disheartening was the political situation in the other East-Asian and South-Asian countries. While Laos is a non-free country, Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia and the Philippines, namely the other South-east Asian countries analysed in this volume besides Myanmar, have all seen more or less pronounced processes of authoritarian involution.

Laos is a one-party state where all power is in the hands of a communist party, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), which dominates all aspects of politics and severely restricts civil liberties. As shown in the related article in this volume, the LPRP leadership is not a monolithic bloc but a set of different factions «which reshuffle not only on ideological grounds but even on different issues».⁸⁶ This, however, has not translated into the creation of spaces of political freedom. On the contrary, in the period analysed in this volume (2017-2021), Laos has seen a tightening of political and social control by the LPRP.

In Thailand during the triennium 2019-2021 – the period analysed in this volume – the military leaders headed by General Prayuth Chan-ocha, who had seized power in May 2014, formed a civilian government in June 2019, «via a carefully managed general election». The previous month, the controversial new king, Maha Vajiralongkorn, on the throne since 2016, had undergone his formal coronation and – as put by Edoardo Siani with delightful understatement – had started to exercise «his influence over politics in ways deemed unusual for a country that calls itself a constitutional monarchy». Since then, the country has been run by a two-headed authoritarian system where «Military and Monarchy consolidated their power, often acting in tandem».⁸⁷

In Cambodia, the four-year period from 2018 to 2021, analysed in this volume, saw the continuation of the rolling back of democracy, the systematic dismantling of human rights and civil liberties, and the final transformation of the political system from an imperfect democracy into a personalistic autocracy.⁸⁸

Somewhat less worrying – but far from being satisfactory – was the situation in the Philippines and Malaysia, whose fragile democratic set-ups were put under pressure. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte continued to deploy his authoritarian style of government by attacking constitutionally independent agencies, guilty of scrutinizing «the executive branch's alleged excesses, partiality, and incompetence», and targeted left-leaning activists and the media.⁸⁹ On its part, in 2021 Malaysia «witnessed

86. Boike Rehbein, 'Laos 2017-2021: Revival of the subsistence ethic', in this volume.

87. Edoardo Siani, 'Thailand 2019-2021: Military, monarchy, protests'.

88. Caroline Bennett, 'Cambodia 2018-2021: From democracy to autocracy', in this volume.

89. Miguel Enrico G. Ayson & Lara Gianina S. Reyes, 'The Philippines 2021: Populist legacy and looming uncertainties', in this volume.

the worsening of a political legitimacy crisis, propelled by poor government performance in key policy areas». ⁹⁰

In 2021, the political situations of the South Asian countries analysed in this volume and not yet discussed in this foreword – Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – were all characterized by the working of political set-ups where, behind a façade represented by the holding of regular elections under apparently competitive multiparty political systems, the democratic space either remained limited or contracted. The former are the cases of Bangladesh and Pakistan; the latter is the case of Sri Lanka.

In Bangladesh, the year 2021 «recorded continued erosion of political and civil freedoms with numerous instances of political control over the police and the judicial process and violent repression of dissent». ⁹¹ Also, according to the Bangladeshi human rights NGO Odhikar, during the same period the country saw «107 extrajudicial killings, 23 enforced disappearances, 134 arrests under the Digital Security Act for material deemed derogatory against the Prime Minister or the Awami League party or offensive of religious sensibility, and 114 attacks on journalists». ⁹²

In Pakistan, the democratic space continued to be radically limited by the enormous influence exerted by the military over security and other policy issues, by their habit to intimidate the media, and by the virtual impunity that they enjoyed when making use of indiscriminate or extra-legal use of force. On their part, civil authorities continued to impose selective restrictions on civil liberties, and Islamist militants continued to carry out attacks on religious minorities and any group that, for one reason or another, was seen as consisting of non-believers or, in any case, potential adversaries. ⁹³

Even more worrying – because, witnessing the rapid contraction of the space of freedom in an outwardly democratic system – is the case of Sri Lanka. Here, the return to power of Mahinda Rajapaksa, following his landslide victory at the presidential election of August 2020, opened the way to the manipulation of the democratic system and the gradual reduc-

90. Emanuela Mangiarotti, 'Malaysia 2021: A widening political legitimacy crisis', in this volume.

91. Silvia Tieri, 'Bangladesh 2021: The year of the golden jubilee and the second wave of pandemic', in this volume.

92. *Ibid.*

93. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2021. Pakistan*. In the Pakistan-related article published in this volume, its author, Marco Corsi, touches only marginally these problems. Corsi, however, has been documenting the political evolution of Pakistan from uncertain democracy to military dictatorship and from military dictatorship to uncertain democracy since 1996 (see *Asia Major*, Vol. VII/1996 and the following issues). Accordingly, Corsi has documented in detail the troubles of Pakistan's weak democracy since its restoration, following the end of General Pervez Musharraf's rule. Accordingly, Corsi has highlighted and analysed the phenomena we have just summarised on the basis of the FW report, in the precedent articles published in this journal.

tion of political liberties.⁹⁴ The continuation and deepening of this process in the year 2021, analysed in this volume, highlights as Rajapaksa's return to power «brought about the return of both a majoritarian agenda, centred upon the supremacy of the Sinhalese Buddhist majority, and an authoritarian and militarized form of government».⁹⁵ Also, the fear that this is only a transition in progress from a freer form of democracy to a fully authoritarian state, controlled by the Rajapaksa's family, is strong in both the author of the Sri Lanka's article published in this volume and most analysts who deal with the political evolution of the island state.⁹⁶

Also discouraging was the state of political liberty in the West Asian countries analysed in this volume: Iran and Azerbaijan. Iran is characterized by possibly the most peculiar political systems world-wide. A deeply authoritarian system – headed by a life-long *rahbar* or supreme leader, who has unparalleled powers on all branches of the state – has nonetheless allowed the persistence within it of a relatively large space of political liberty. In this space, power flows from the bottom to the top through the popular election of the president of the Iranian republic, who, although subordinate to the ultimate authority of the *rahbar*, is far from devoid of real power. In 2021, however, this space of liberty drastically contracted as a result of that year presidential election. As documented in this volume, the controversial vetting process of the potential presidential candidates, conducted by the Guardian Council as in every electoral process, resulted in a brazenly unbalanced official list of approved candidates. This list openly paved the way for victory to Ebrahim Raisi, namely the politician destined for victory by conservative establishment. From the list, in fact, all potential candidates had been excluded who had any popular support or were known enough to attract a substantial number of votes, potentially endangering Raisi's pre-ordained victory.⁹⁷

Raisi's victory was a highly significant event, and not only for the utter disregard of any criterion of democratic fairness. His ascent to the Iranian presidency represented the end of an era which had seen a number of reformist-pragmatist politicians take office. These presidents, including the last of the line, Hassan Rouhani, had attempted to implement policies aimed at creating more relaxed relations with the West and fostering a domestic political environment less dominated by the forces of conservation. These policies had ultimately failed for several reasons, documented in the previous issues of this journal, among which the aggressive anti-Iran policy by US President Donald Trump played a non-irrelevant role. In turn, this

94. Shamara Wettimuny, 'Sri Lanka 2019-2020: Extremism, elections and economic uncertainty at the time of COVID-19', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 407 ff.

95. Diego Abenante, 'Sri Lanka in 2021: from pandemic emergency to political and economic crisis', in this volume.

96. *Ibid.*

97. Luciano Zaccara, 'Iran 2021: The year of transition', in this volume.

failure undoubtedly contributed to strengthening the hand of the conservative Iranian establishment, opening the way for the «engineered electoral process» resulting in Raisi's ascent to the Iranian presidency. The end result – as argued by Luciano Zaccara in the Iran-related article in this volume – was the beginning of a new political era in Iran, in which the pre-existing space of political freedom was radically compressed and the political power fully transferred in the hands of the conservative establishment.

On its part, Azerbaijan is authoritarian regime, where power is heavily concentrated in the hands of the so-called Aliyev dynasty, namely Ilham Aliyev, president since 2003, and his extended family. In Azerbaijan, to all effects a rentier state, rent redistribution allows the ruling élite to buy consent through patronage, while hindering the formation of civil society independent groups. The resulting co-optation process is pursued through both informal channels and official/institutional ones.⁹⁸ This relatively benign *modus operandi* aimed at maintaining and solidifying the authoritarian rule of the Aliyev dynasty has however been preceded and is still coupled by the employment of much more distasteful repressive instruments. As noted by Freedom House, formal political opposition in the South Caucasian country «has been weakened by years of persecution». Also, the local authorities «have carried out an extensive crackdown on civil liberties in recent years, leaving little room for independent expression or activism».⁹⁹

In the East Asian countries examined in this volume beside China – Japan, North Korea, South Korea and Taiwan – the spaces of freedom allowed by their respective political systems is not a specific object of discussion in the related articles published in this volume. Nonetheless, the in-depth discussions of the political developments taking place in each of these countries clarify beyond any possible doubt what is the state of political freedom in each of them.

North Korea remains the possibly most autocratic and totalitarian state in the world, led by a dynastic regime which makes a pervasive use of surveillance, arbitrary detention and severe punishments for political offenses, which can include deportation in camps where «torture, forced labor, starvation, and other atrocities take place».¹⁰⁰ Fortunately, the situation in the other East Asian countries examined in this volume is completely different. They are all countries characterized by a robust political pluralism, where the main parties represent conservative and liberal views, and where civil liberties are generally respected. In particular, according to the DI, in 2021 Taiwan became Asia's No. 1 democracy.¹⁰¹

98. Carlo Frappi, 'Azerbaijan 2021: Towards a new beginning?', in this volume.

99. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2021. Azerbaijan*.

100. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2021. North Korea*.

101. Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2021. The China challenge, passim*.



Whereas authoritarian regression remained a main theme in the political evolution in Asia, it must be stressed that in at least some countries it was vigorously countered. The most striking example was represented by Myanmar. As documented in this volume, the coup triggered a nation-wide mass-opposition to the military, which found expression in extensive demonstrations and protests. In spite of the increasingly brutal military repression, the anti-coup movement gradually enlarged to include a broad-based social coalition, expression of the country's diversity and plurality. While repression on the part of the military hardened, the anti-coup became stronger and more daring in challenging them. What followed was a kind of low intensity civil war which, at the end of 2021, had reached a deadly stalemate, with neither side getting the upper hand.¹⁰²

In nearby Thailand, young people, enraged by political instability, economic stagnation, public health emergencies, and deepening relations with China, protested nationwide. As noted in this volume: «Their mobilization marked the biggest instance of generational resistance since the student protests of the 1970s».¹⁰³

South of Thailand, in Malaysia, young people were once again in the forefront of widespread political protest over a number of pressing matters, from refugee rights to healthcare policies and environmental causes. They self-organized and mobilized support by the deftly use of social media. Their protests, however, did not translate into a well-organized movement, pursuing a clear-cut political objective, which make dubious the possibility that it will reach any long-lasting and substantial political result.¹⁰⁴

Finally, in India, a massive farmer movement protested against three laws, passed in a democratically dubious way by the Modi government in 2020 and aimed at favouring the corporate takeover of much of the agricultural sector by big corporations. In spite of the use of force on the part of the Modi government to quell the farmer movement, in the end it was the government that gave up, scrapping the farm laws in December.¹⁰⁵



Summing up, in Asia the year 2021, not differently from the year 2020,¹⁰⁶ was signed by deep crises, which badly impacted on both people and polit-

102. Matteo Fumagalli, 'Myanmar 2021: Repression and resistance in a multi-cornered conflict'

103. Edoardo Siani, 'Thailand 2019-2021: Military, monarchy, protests'.

104. Emanuela Mangiarotti, 'Malaysia 2021: A widening political legitimacy crisis'.

105. Diego Maiorano, 'India 2021: Politics amid the pandemic'.

106. Filippo Boni, 'Asia in 2020: The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 9-17.

ico-social systems. In this foreword, on the basis of the 17 articles included in this volume, three main crises have been outlined and briefly analysed as the main ones taking place in Asia: the pandemic-induced crisis, the continuing and deepening US-China confrontation and, last but not least, the authoritarian involution which characterised most Asian policies. While this journal – being a history journal – programmatically avoids sketching future scenarios, it is safe to say, on the basis of the richly nuanced analyses present in this volume, that, when the pandemic will disappear, it will leave behind a trail of economic, social and, probably, political ruin. Also, history teaches us that pandemics, it does not matter how devastating and deadly, run their course over a period of a few years. On the contrary, there is no assurance that the other two crises – US-China confrontation and authoritarian involution – are bound to disappear or be solved any time soon. Hence, they will continue to unfold on the ruin left behind by the COVID-19 crisis in the foreseeable future, continuing to negatively affect Asian societies and their populations. Any optimism in this regard, unfortunately, seems to be misplaced.

Michelguglielmo Torri