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


# ASIA MAIOR

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# Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution

**Edited by**
**Michelguglielmo Torri**
**Nicola Mocci**
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## Contents

*When this* Asia Maior *issue was finalized and the Covid-19 pandemic raged throughout the world, Kian Zaccara, Greta Maiorano and Giulio Santi, all children of* Asia Maior *authors (Luciano Zaccara, Diego Maiorano and Silvia Menegazzi), were born. We (the* Asia Maior *editors) have seen that as a manifestation of Life, reasserting itself in front of Thanatos. It is for this reason that we dedicate this issue to Kian, Greta and Giulio, with the fond hope that they will live in a better world than the one devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic.*

# China's 2019: Xi Jinping's tireless summit diplomacy amid growing challenges

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*The aim of this article is to analyse the developments in Chinese foreign policy in 2019, which can be summarised by two main trends. On the one hand a strong diplomatic activism by the Chinese paramount leader aimed at both deepening the tendencies that had become apparent in 2018 – the mending of fraught relations with some neighbours and the reassurance of some partners about Chinese intentions – and confirming Beijing's vocation to the cause of peace and global governance. On the other hand, China had to face serious challenges to its leadership and its international reputation that risked seriously undermining Xi Jinping's long-term plans. Above all, the protracted trade war and growing antagonism with the US was certainly the greatest challenge and fraught with consequences. On this basis, the article describes the major events that best represent both trends. The final part of the article is dedicated to the 2nd BRI Forum and the increasingly heated debate around the Initiative, both domestically and internationally.*

## *1. Introduction*

In the year under review China's foreign policy was characterised mostly by two trends.

One was strong diplomatic activism by President Xi Jinping who undertook seven overseas trips (four in June alone) and attended hundreds of bilateral and multilateral meetings. Its first aim was to continue and deepen the tendencies that had become apparent in 2018. In particular, the mending of fraught relations with some of China's neighbours, notably India and Japan; the reassurance of some partners about Chinese intentions, as in the case of Europe and the EU in particular. A separate objective was represented by the visit to North Korea where Xi Jinping finally made his long-awaited first trip on 20-21 June, exactly a week before the G-20 summit in Osaka, when Xi was expected to meet with US president Donald Trump. The second aim was to confirm Beijing's vocation to the cause of peace and global governance by hosting important global events, namely the 2nd Belt and Road Forum, the International Horticultural Exhibition, the Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilization, and the 2nd China International Import Expo. Arguably the first of these was the most relevant diplomatic event of the year, which saw extensive consensus reached on promoting high-quality cooperation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

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On the other hand, when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was preparing to celebrate its 70th anniversary, it faced serious challenges to its political leadership and international reputation. The year 2019 was in fact a very sensitive period because of the many politically delicate commemorative anniversaries (from the May 4th Movement to Tiananmen), which caused some criticism and charges of alleged interference from the West. Apart from the protracted trade war with Washington which escalated into a full-on rivalry, and represented one of the main causes of China's economic slowdown – in 2019 the economic growth reached its lowest rate since 1992 – months of protests in Hong Kong captured global attention and mobilised citizens to push back against Beijing's influence over the former British colony. In November the publication in «The New York Times» of the so-called *Xinjiang Papers*, more than 400 pages of internal documents detailing PRC's progressive mass detention of Muslims in the Xinjiang autonomous region, contributed to further embolden global critics. Because of these «converging crises», the year under review turned out to be a sort of «annus horribilis» for China.[1] These challenges did not materialise out of the blue. In a speech on 21 January, at the Central Party School of the CCP, Xi Jinping himself sounded the alarm warning officials that, globally, sources of turmoil and points of risks were multiplying. Accordingly China had to be ready to face major risks (重大风险)[2] on all fronts, comparable to «black swans» (黑天鹅) and «grey rhinos» (灰犀牛).[3] Chinese worries had been amplified by what party journals warned was an increasingly hostile bloc of Western governments led by Washington aiming to «shake our ideological foundation, destroy people's self-confidence and cohesion, and finally fundamentally subvert the leadership of the Communist Party and the guiding position of Marxism».[4] In short China had to fight to protect the country's «political security», preventing the spread of «colour revolutions» (颜色革命).[5] According to Minxin Pei, the majority of the setbacks which occurred in 2019 had their roots in the period preceding Xi Jinping's rise to power, but their escalation could be considered a direct result of PRC's excessive

1. Minxin Pei, 'Xi Jinping's Annus Horribilis', *Project Syndicate.org*, 16 December 2019.

2. '习近平在省部级主要领导干部坚持底线思维着力防范化解重大风险专题研' [Xi Jinping insists on bottom-line thinking at the provincial and ministerial level to focus on preventing and resolving major risks], *Xinhuanet.com*, 21 January 2019.

3. A «black swan» refers to a serious, unforeseen incident that defies conventional wisdom; while a «grey rhino» indicates a potential risk that is highly obvious but tends to be overlooked. Generally, the terms are used in investor jargon, indicating surprise economic shocks and financial risks hiding in plain sight.

4. Chris Buckley, '2019 Is a Sensitive Year for China. Xi Is Nervous', *The New York Times*, 25 February 2019; 蔡晓红,李春华[Cai Xiaohong, Li Chunhua], '以«三个自信»筑牢意识形态安全屏障' [Building ideological security barriers with «three confident»], 中国社会科学网 [Chinese academy of Social Sciences.com], 24 January 2019.

5. *Ibid*.

centralisation of power under Xi's administration. For Pei, China's former collective leadership, despite its corruption and indecisiveness, had managed to limit the escalation of these crises, thanks largely to their aversion to risk. Conversely, «Xi's intolerance of dissent and vulnerability to bad information has made his government much more prone to policy blunders».[6]

That said, the biggest challenge China faced in 2019 was undoubtedly the fierce battle with the US for both trade and dominance over high technology, with the two countries apparently locked in a prolonged trade war, with «no end» in sight. Despite the existing tensions, on 13 December the two countries were able to reach an agreement on a «phase one» trade deal. It required structural reforms and other changes to China's economic and trade regime in the areas of intellectual property, technology transfer, agriculture, financial services, currency and foreign exchange, which left China only partially satisfied.

A second, though non-secondary, crisis, was related to the increasing criticism around the activities of the Confucius Institutes – one of the major soft power instruments of Chinese cultural and public diplomacy. They were accused of interference in the academic work of the host universities and, even worse, in the national security of the host countries. As a result of some specific events which occurred in the UK and Belgium, a heated debate spread around the world and reached countries with a long tradition of cultural ties with China. At the end of December, well-known Italian sinologist Maurizio Scarpari wrote a very harsh commentary, inviting the prestigious Venice University of Ca' Foscari to set an example in Italy by closing its Confucius Institute.

There is no doubt that PRC's image and international reputation suffered a severe setback from these episodes and risked seriously undermining Xi Jinping's long-term plans. Interestingly, most observers' analyses emphasised how Xi Jinping's triumphalism had receded in just one year, and offered mixed evaluations (tending to pessimism) in their year-in-review reports. Some analysts went so far as to argue that, given the evidence, 2020 would be even worse.

In the following analysis the article explores the major events which occurred in both the aforementioned trends. The last part of the article will focus on the 2nd BRI Forum, which took place in Beijing from 25 to 28 April, and the increasingly heated debate around the Initiative, both domestically and internationally.

6. Minxin Pei, 'Xi Jinping's Annus Horribilis'. Reportedly, since Xi abolished the term limit on his presidency in 2018, murmurs of discontent have risen among academics, the business comaormer officials, despite censorship and the security police. See Chris Buckley, '2019 Is a Sensitive Year for China.'

## *2. Xi Jinping's strong diplomatic activism*

2019 was a year of strong diplomatic activism for Xi Jinping, which produced notable achievements on different fronts, not only symbolically but also in substantial terms. In truth the total number of the overseas trips made by Xi was quite in line with the average number of foreign visits undertaken since his arrival in power. Strikingly, they were mostly concentrated in the month of June, when Xi also attended hundreds of bilateral and multilateral meetings. In some cases these trips were important «first times» for Xi Jinping; on other occasions, they represented a confirmation of the importance attached by Beijing to its bilateral relations. One of the key elements of Xi's diplomatic activism has been the «personal component» in the conduct of international relations, which has always been a privileged tool for Chinese diplomacy and one that Xi Jinping has exploited with great intelligence.

The destination of the first official trip of the Chinese president in 2019, from 21 to 26 March, was Europe. It was Xi's second trip to Southern Europe in five months and the first state visit to Italy and France in ten and five years respectively. The two visits were part of a bigger European trip which also included a visit to Monaco, the first time a Chinese head of state has visited the Principality, while Prince Albert II has paid ten visits to China since 1993.

A common topic during the visits to both Italy and France was the BRI. In Rome the two parties signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in the area of the Economic Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road, making Italy the first G-7 country to formally back the BRI. It took place amid a heated debate, both internally and externally.[7] The signing of the MoU for the BRI on 22 March was presented by the Italian government, in particular by the Five Star Movement, the driving force behind Italy's collaboration in the BRI, as an opportunity to help Italy revive its sluggish economy by obtaining greater access to China's huge market. But there were some discordant voices (including a component of the Italian government itself) that interpreted the agreement with China as a move going against both the European integration project and the traditional Euro-Atlantic alliance.[8] Italy decided to sign the agreement in defiance of Washington's loud warnings, according to which endorsing BRI would lend legitimacy to China's predatory approach to investment and bring no benefits to the Italian people, as well as the more quietly-voiced concerns from some countries in Europe.[9] In particular, Brussels feared that the accord between Rome and

7. Teresa Coratella, 'Italy's China dilemma', *ECFR*, 20 March 2019.

8. Angela Giuffrida, 'Italy rattles US and EU with likely support for China's Belt and Road', *The Guardian*, 20 March 2019.

9. Nick Squires, 'Italy to sign up China's Belt and Road despite concern from allies', *The Telegraph*, 6 March 2019; Vernon Silver & Sheridan Prasso, 'Italy's Embrace of China's «Belt and Road» Is a Snub to Washington', *Bloomberg*, 19 March 2019.

Beijing would deepen the divisions with member states wary of Beijing's expansionist goals.[10]

France, one of the «heavyweights» of the EU, was one of the most vocal critics of the BRI, and only a month before Xi's visit to France, Clement Beaune, adviser to French president Emmanuel Macron, had said: «Five years ago, the [EU] member states were still divided and naive in relation to China, now the time of naivety is over».[11] On his arrival in France, Xi Jinping tried to reassure his French counterpart (and implicitly Brussels) pledging that China would continue to improve market access for foreign companies, would strengthen intellectual property protection, and would continue to open-up the economy. For his part, French President Emmanuel Macron, as reported by Xinhua, expressed a willingness to increase French cooperation on connecting to the BRI.[12]

The most substantial result of the bilateral meeting was the signing of 15 business contracts, including a € 30 billion deal for China to buy Airbus aircraft.[13] As part of the French visit, Xi had the occasion to meet also with German chancellor Angela Merkel and the EU Commission President, Jean-Claude Junker, as France pushed for a coordinated response to China. The leaders of China, France, Germany and the EU held in Paris «unprecedented talks» on building a new global governance, recognising that the challenge for Europe was how to balance ties in the face of Beijing's growing global influence.[14]

The second overseas trip took Xi Jinping to Moscow at the beginning of June (5-8). It was Xi's eighth visit to Russia and the twenty-first meeting with Russian president Vladimir Putin since Xi's rise to power, which gives an idea of the absolute relevance attributed to the bilateral relationship by Beijing. Actually, while Xi did not hesitate in defining Putin his «best friend among global leaders», and stating that the China-Russia relationship was «at its best in history», the visit represented the occasion to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the bilateral diplomatic relationship and upgrade the bilateral relations to a «comprehensive strategic partnership of coordi-

10. Exactly a week before the deal between Rome and Beijing was due to be signed, the European Commission released a joint statement on *China's growing economic power and political influence* that underlined the need to «review» relations. 'Italy joins China's New Silk Road project', *BBC.com*, 23 March 2019. On the European Commission statement, see European Commission, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 'EU-China: A strategic outlook', 12 March 2019.

11. Keegan Elmer, '«The time of naivety is over»: Europe's China problem is on the agenda at next European Commission meeting as states focus on competition', *South China Morning Post*, 27 February 2019.

12. Lu Zhenhua, 'Xi Jinping urges France to help build trust with China ahead of meeting with Germany and EU', *South China Morning Post*, 26 March 2019.

13. *Ibid*.

14. 'Xi, Merkel, Macron and Junker meet in Paris', *Deutsche Welle*, 12 March 2019.

nation for a new era».[15] China-Russia relations were actually one of the few bilateral relations mentioned in the White Paper released in September by the Chinese government, on the eve of the celebrations for the PRC's 70th anniversary. Titled *China and the World in the New Era*,[16] the paper confirmed the importance of the «Beijing-Moscow axis» for China's foreign relations, despite their potential clash of interests in the Central Asian region.[17]

Central Asia was the destination of Xi's third trip. From 12 to 16 June Xi visited Kirghizstan, to take part in the 19th SCO summit, and Tajikistan, to participate in the 5th summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia. On each occasion Xi Jinping had the opportunity to meet with his counterparts. Both Kirghizstan and Tajikistan have very positive relations with China and are included in the BRI trajectory. In particular, China is the largest investor and trading partner of Bishkek and Chinese companies are carrying out several projects aimed at strengthening the infrastructures of the mountainous country. China and Kyrgyzstan signed a strategic partnership in 2018 and the meeting between the two presidents just before the SCO summit contributed to further strengthening the partnership. China is very active in Tajikistan as well. At the meeting with the Tajik president, Xi pledged China's support and experience-sharing in the development of special economic zones, to make the Central Asian country more attractive to foreign investors.[18]

From 20 June Xi was in Pyongyang for a two-day state visit. It was his first official trip to the country since he came to power in 2012, and also the first visit of a Chinese president in 14 years.

One week later Xi Jinping was in Japan – the first time for Xi and the first of a Chinese president in seven years – to take part in the G-20 group summit. Xi's visit to Japan continued the positive trend in the personal relationship between the Chinese president and Abe Shinzō, begun the year before. The Osaka meeting followed Abe's visit to Beijing in October 2018 – the first official visit to China by a Japanese leader in seven years – and a bilateral meeting in December on the side-lines of the G-20 summit in Argentina.

15. 'China, Russia agree to upgrade relations for new era', *Xinhuanet.com*, 6 June 2019.

16. The White Paper listed all the successes achieved by China in various fields, confirming the fundamental role played by the country on the world stage. Interestingly the Paper made reference to some Western authoritative sources to corroborate China's results. See: The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *Full Text: China and the World in the New Era*, 27 September 2019.

17. An interesting analysis of the state of the relations between the two parties, including potential clashing geopolitical interests in Central Asia, is offered by Nadège Roland, 'A China-Russia Condominium over Eurasia', *Global Politics and Strategy*, vol. 61, 1, February-March 2019, pp. 7-22.

18. 'Xi Jinping's visit to Central Asia (1): Kyrgyzstan'; 'Xi Jinping's visit to Central Asia (2): Tajikistan', *Oboreurope.com*.

In autumn Xi made two further significant trips abroad. From 11 to 12 October he was in India for an «informal» summit with Narendra Modi in the southern coastal city of Chennai, the second in just over a year. The trip confirmed the importance of building personal relationships to address the trust deficit between the two countries and set out a clear blueprint for the long-term and strategic development of bilateral ties.[19]

Right after the Chennai summit, Xi Jinping paid a state visit to Nepal – the first of a Chinese president since 1996 – which resulted in the two sides signing 20 deals covering railway, port and energy projects, including a trans-Himalayan railway to connect the two countries.[20] This was confirmation of the crucial importance the Himalayan country had for Beijing and the potential frictions the increasingly close Kathmandu-Beijing connection could cause between New Delhi and Beijing.

Xi Jinping's last tour abroad in the year under review, which was hailed by officials and observers as a major diplomatic success, included Greece and Brazil. According to the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Xi Jinping used his time in Greece to «cement ties with the European Union member, deepening pragmatic co-operation and exchanges between civilizations.»[21] At the same time, he used the visit to stress the strategic significance of intensified relations between China and the EU, arguing that positive interactions and mutually beneficial co-operation were in line with their common interests. Despite the official rhetoric, it is worth mentioning that Greece is considered to be one of those states which China can use to gain access to the EU and its market, owing to Greek resentment towards the EU and its need for investments. It is no coincidence that Greece was among the first countries in the EU to sign an intergovernmental co-operation document with China aimed at promoting co-operation in the BRI. Moreover, in April, Greece joined the Sino-CEEC co-operation mechanism (the so-called 16+1 Format) as a full member, creating new opportunities for the development of the mechanism, as well as new potential frictions with Brussels.[22]

In Brazil Xi attended the 11th BRICS summit and took the opportunity to push for the strengthening of the strategic partnership within the bloc, encouraging its member states to jointly deal with the various risks and challenges, and to safeguard their national sovereignty, security and development interests. Xi also used the gathering to call for multilateralism in pursuit of world peace and common development as well as international fairness, justice and win-win co-operation. The BRICS leaders reiterated

19. Shi Jiangtao, 'Xi Jinping's trip to India and Nepal «was a much-needed win for China at critical time»', *South China Morning Post*, 15 October 2019.

20. *Ibid*. 'Chinese President Xi Jinping's Visit to Nepal: Highlights, Agreements and Announcements', *Nepali Sansar*, 15 October 2019.

21. Cao Desheng, 'Xi's visit to Greece and Brazil widely praised', *The Telegraph*, 25 November 2019.

22. *Ibid*.

the fundamental importance of rule-based, transparent, non-discriminatory, open, free and inclusive international trade, stating their continuing commitment to preserving and strengthening the multilateral trading system with the World Trade Organization at its centre.[23]

At home, China hosted four important big events: (1) the second Belt and Road Forum for international cooperation, in April – arguably the most relevant one, and to which a specific paragraph is dedicated in this same issue of *Asia Maior*; (2) the International Horticultural Exhibition, the largest expo of its kind in the world, that reflected China's vision of green and sustainable development and its unwavering commitment to improving the global environment; (3) the Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations, on 15 May, which served as a platform for dialogue and exchanges on an equal footing among Asian and world «civilizations»; (4) finally, the 2nd China International Import Expo, that took place in Shanghai from 5 to 10 November, with the participation of more than 3,800 enterprises from 181 countries and regions across the world. Focused on China's achievements in economic development on the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the expo represented a clear confirmation of China's openness for business.[24]

These events were all included among the diplomatic successes mentioned by Xi Jinping in his New Year Speech on 31 December, even if its focus was on the increased number of countries that had established diplomatic ties with China (180) and the fact that China had «friends in every corner of the world».[25]

### *2.1. China-India's second «informal summit»: The growing understanding between Xi and Modi*

In October Xi Jinping reciprocated the informal visit Narendra Modi had made to Wuhan in April 2018, with another informal visit to the Indian southern coastal city of Chennai. Not unlike Modi's visit to China, which took place when bilateral relations were strained because of the «Doklam

23. *Ibid*. For the 'Declaration of the 11th BRICS Summit' see http://brics2019.itamaraty.gov.br/en/2-uncategorised/109-declaration-of-the-11th-brics-summit.

24. 'China in 2019: Diplomacy breaks new ground', *CGTN.com*, 26 December 2019.

25. 'Full Text: Chinese President Xi Jinping's 2020 New Year Speech', *CGTN.com*, 31 December 2019. Actually, in September, Beijing obtained two relevant diplomatic results since it began diplomatic relations with two tiny but «very significant» countries, namely the Solomon Islands and the Republic of Kiribati, that cut ties with Taipei within just a week of each other, leaving Taiwan with only 15 formal allies. See Kate Lyons, 'Taiwan loses second ally in a week as Kiribati switches to China', *The Guardian*, 20 September 2019; John Braddock, 'Solomon Islands and Kiribati cut ties with Taiwan, shift to China', *World Socialist Web Site*, 28 September 2019.

standoff»,[26] Xi's visit to India came at a time when bilateral relations were shaken by New Delhi's drastic move to revoke the special autonomous status of India-administered Kashmir. That is why the majority of analysts – based on official statements released separately by the two sides – considered the Chinese president's visit «more symbolic than substantial», as both leaders avoided sensitive bilateral topics (from frictions over Kashmir to the Chinese telecom giant Huawei 5G aspirations in India).[27] As stated by Brahma Chellaney, professor of strategic studies at the New Delhi-based Centre for Policy Research: «The summit was big on pomp, pageantry and nice sounding phrases but short on tangible results».[28] Reportedly, during the meeting, the two leaders reaffirmed the pledge made at the Wuhan summit that both sides would prudently manage their differences and not allow differences on any issue to become disputes.[29]

According to Sun Shihai, an India expert at Sichuan University, it was not surprising that the Chennai summit failed to produce quick solutions to long-standing issues that for decades have hindered bilateral ties, and it would be unrealistic to expect breakthroughs, especially in their bitter territorial disputes in the remote Himalayan region, which saw a war in 1962 and a 70-day stand-off in 2017. Nonetheless Sun was convinced that the «personal rapport» formula was the best one, since it was useful to «address the trust deficit and set out a clear blueprint for the long-term and strategic development of bilateral ties».[30]

The fact that in Chennai, as reported by Indian Foreign Secretary Vijiay Gokhale, «the two leaders spent quality time, spending over five hours together of which all the time, except the 30 minutes of the cultural performance, were spent one-on-one […]», confirmed the importance of cultivating personal relations, and the relevance of the «informal summits».[31] So, while for Xi Jinping the occasion offered the opportunity to have «candid discussions as friends» with Modi, for the Indian prime minister the Chennai meeting marked «a new era of cooperation between the two countries».[32]

26. On the Doklam standoff see Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2017: Narendra Modi's continuing hegemony and his challenge to China', *Asia Maior 2017*, pp. 285-88.

27. Rajesh Roy, 'China's Xi and India's Modi Talk Up Trade, but Turn Aside Touchy Topics', *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 October 2019.

28. Shi Jiangtao, 'Xi Jinping's trip to India and Nepal «was a much-needed win for China at critical time»', *South China Morning Post*, 15 October 2019.

29. *Ibid*.

30. *Ibid*.

31. Kunal Purohit, 'Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi bank on chemistry as they talk trade and terrorism', *South China Morning Post*, 12 October 2019; Sidhant Sibal, 'From «Wuhan Spirit» to «Chennai Connect»: PM Modi, Xi Jinping agree to continue positive momentum', *DNA India*, 13 October 2019.

32. Shi Jiangtao, 'Xi Jinping's trip to India and Nepal 'was a much-needed win for China at critical time'.

Right after the summit with Modi, Xi Jinping paid a two-day state visit to Nepal – the first of a Chinese president since 1996 – where the two sides signed 20 deals covering railway, port and energy projects, including a trans-Himalayan railway to connect the two countries.[33] While Indian analysts had mixed views and opinions about Xi Jinping's visit to their country, they were quite critical of his trip to Nepal.[34] In recent years New Delhi had been observing with increasing concern the strengthening of ties between China and Nepal. Sino-Nepali commerce had grown rapidly and, by the year under review, China had become Nepal's top foreign direct investment partner.[35] In Kathmandu, Xi upgraded China's ties to a strategic partnership with a country that although symbiotically linked to India, in recent years has resented New Delhi's heavy-handed interference in its internal affairs and, as a consequence, has been trying to countervail India's overbearing influence by opening an alternative connection to the external world through China.[36] By taking advantage of this situation, Xi Jinping appeared to give a clear demonstration of his continuing willingness to fortify China's strategic position on India's doorstep.[37]

The moves in Kathmandu had been preceded by Xi Jinping's decision to host Pakistani prime minister Imran Khan in Beijing (Khan's third visit in less than one year) on the eve of Xi's own trip to India. The Xi-Khan meeting had among its objectives the discussion of the Kashmiri situation.[38] If one bears in mind that Beijing had already supported Islamabad in raising the Kashmir issue at the United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York at the end of September,[39] it is clear that, despite Wuhan and Chennai, the relationship between the two Asian giants remained as fragile and unstable as ever.[40]

33. 'Chinese President Xi Jinping's Visit to Nepal: Highlights, Agreements and Announcements', *Nepali Sansar*, 15 October 2019.

34. Wendy Wu, 'Xi Jinping promises to step up Chinese support for Nepal as two-day visit concludes', *South China Morning Post*, 13 October 2019.

35. 'China's Xi Jinping visits India with ties strained by Kashmir', *Deutsche Welle.com*, 10 October 2019.

36. Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2015: The uncertain record of the Modi government', *Asia Maior 2015*, pp. 396-401; Matteo Miele, 'Nepal 2015-2017: A post-earthquake constitution and the political struggle', *Asia Maior 2017*, pp. 309-330; Matteo Miele, 'Nepal 2018: The Communist search for new political and trade routes', *Asia Maior 2018*, pp. 322-336 and Matteo Miele, 'Nepal 2019: Attempts at mediation in domestic and foreign policies', in this same *Asia Maior* issue.

37. Sisir Devkota, 'The Strategic Stopover: President Xi's state visit to Nepal, *Modern Diplomacy*, 16 October 2019.

38. Tom O'Connor, 'China's Xi supports Pakistan on Kashmir, boosts military ties ahead of meeting with India', *Newsweek*, 10 October 2019.

39. 'China supports Pakistan on Kashmir', *The News*, 10 August 2019.

40. Kinling Lo, 'Steer clear of India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir, New Delhi warns Beijing', *South China Morning Post*, 11 October 2019.

*2.2. Xi in Japan: Preparing the ground for a state visit*

At the end of June, Xi Jinping was in Japan to attend the G-20 group summit in Osaka. This was his first visit to Japan as PRC's president and coincided also with the first visit of a Chinese president in nine years – after Hu Jintao's visit to Japan in 2010. In Osaka, Xi and Abe had the opportunity to deepen their «personal relationship». Begun in 2018 as a direct consequence of the US policies under the presidency of Donald Trump, the Xi-Abe personal relationship had contributed to a relaxation of the strained relations between their two countries. As stated by Da Zhigang, director of the Institute of Northeast Asian Studies at the Heilongjiang Province Academy of Social Sciences, «as another victim of U.S. protectionism and unilateralism, [Japan] shares common interest with China, and pressure from the U.S. might bring a new driving face for China and Japan to establish a new pragmatic's relationship for the new situation».[41]

The Osaka G-20 summit took place «amid a complex global situation», declared Xi Jinping during the bilateral meeting with Abe, apparently referring to the US-China trade war and the US administration's growing unilateralism; in these circumstances the two Asian leaders agreed to safeguard multilateralism and the free trade system and build an open world economy. In particular, Xi proposed to Abe that the two countries achieved «close communications on various challenges and forge[d] a common understanding»; Xi also called for the two countries to work together to «maintain a free trade system» and «give predictability and fresh energy to the global economy».[42] Abe concurred but urged the Chinese President to ensure that trade took place on a sustainable basis by refraining from forced technology transfers or the provision of subsidies to industries. He also stressed that trade disputes needed to be resolved through dialogue. As Asian economic powerhouses, the two countries shared the responsibility to join hands to promote regional stability and prosperity, especially in a context where the multilateral trading system was increasingly under attack.

That said, one of the most important goals reached in Osaka by Xi Jinping was the formal invitation Abe offered to him at the beginning of their bilateral meeting to visit Japan the following year. «We would like to welcome President Xi as a state guest around the time of the cherry blossoms next spring and wish to take Japan-China relations to a higher level».[43] Reportedly, Xi responded immediately, saying the invitation was «a good idea».[44] Abe's invitation was a definitive demonstration of improved ties be-

41. Obe Mitsuru, 'Xi and Abe inch closer under Trump's «America First» pressure', *Asia Nikkei*, 28 June 2019.

42. *Ibid*.

43. Walter Sim, 'Japan and China vow to be «eternal neighbours»', *The Straits Times*, 28 June 2019.

44. Li Xuanmin, 'Xi agrees to pay state visit after meeting with Abe', *The Global Times*, 28 June 2019.

tween the two neighbours, and certainly contributed to the opening of a new chapter between the two Asian economic superpowers.[45]

### *2.3. China-EU: A fluctuating relationship*

In 2019 China-EU relations were characterised by an evident fluctuating trend, a direct consequence of some «open issues» between the two parties (the BRI, the 16+1 Format, human rights) and the persisting variable represented by the US.

The fact that Xi Jinping opened and closed his annual overseas trips in Europe was emblematic of the relevance of Europe (and the EU in particular) for China. Furthermore, the positive conclusion of the XXI China-EU summit, held in Brussels on 9 April, confirmed the intention to further strengthen the bilateral strategic partnership. Despite the difficulties of the negotiations, the two parties agreed a joint statement setting the direction of their partnership based on reciprocity, as remarked by Donald Tusk, at the end of the summit. In the joint statement the two parties referred to their joint support for multilateralism and rules-based trade; their joint engagement to reform the World Trade Organization, and the agreement to work together to address the industrial subsidies' issue, the climate change threat, among others.[46] In Brussels the two parties also agreed to create synergies between the BRI and the EU's initiatives aimed at improving Europe-Asia connectivity.

That said, the Summit was preceded by the publication of a document by the EU commission where, depending on the policy areas, China was simultaneously and rather contradictorily defined: «a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives»; «a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests»; «an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership» and «a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance».[47] This, together with the controversies that preceded and followed the signing of the Italia-China MoU and the 16+1 Format meeting in Dubrovnik, Croatia on 12 April, which registered the new membership of Greece – an evident demonstration of China's persistent *divide et impera* strategy – underlined the «highs and lows» of the relations between Beijing and Brussels. In fact some scholars examined closely the «strategic» nature of the EU-China relations and even their existence.[48]

45. Reiji Yoshida & Tomohiro Osaki, 'Underlining improved Japan-China ties, Abe and Xi meet ahead of G20 summit', *Japan Times*, 27 June 2019.

46. Council of the European Union, *EU-China Summit Joint Statement*, Brussels, 9 April 2019.

47. Joint Communication to The European Parliament, The European Council and The Council, *EU-China – A strategic Outlook*, 12 March 2019, p. 1.

48. For a brief account of the debate, see Barbara Onnis, 'Cina-Unione Europea e la prospettiva di un nuovo ordine internazionale', *Rivista Italiana di Studi Internazionali*, vol. 2/2019, pp. 265-294.

In the year under review the bilateral relationship experienced some tensions related to the human rights issue, with Beijing accusing Brussels of intermittent interference in its domestic affairs. Particularly jarring for Beijing was the adoption, by the European parliament, of the resolution calling for the Hong Kong government to formally withdraw its highly unpopular extradition bill, just hours after Beijing accused the motion of being full of «ignorance and prejudice». Equally disturbing for China was the European parliament's condemnation of the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.[49] Adding fuel to the fire, the Xinjiang resolution was approved following the presentation by the EU parliament of the 2019 Sakharov prize – its top human rights award – to the jailed Uyghur economist Ilhalm Tohti, for «fighting for the rights of China's Uyghur minority» in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.[50]

Yet it would appear that China was unsuccessful in its attempt to reassure the EU about its intentions, and indeed the bilateral ties remain quite unstable.

### *2.4. Xi in North Korea: «All style, no substance»*

Xi Jinping's state visit to North Korea from 20 to 21 June was the first since he assumed office in late 2012 and the first by any Chinese president since 2005. Xi's visit followed four visits by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in China in 2018, apparently confirming a definitive «return to normal» between the two neighbouring countries and historical allies, and reflecting, in the words of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, «a deep and profound friendship» of both parties.[51]

Interestingly, the visit had been expected at some point during the year under review, but was then apparently arranged quickly so that the Chinese leader could use it as leverage with the US President a week later in Osaka, where the two were scheduled to meet.[52] This gave rise to speculation of its real significance.

The visit was preceded by a rare article written by the Chinese president himself, which appeared on the front page of the North Korean ruling

49. Sophia Yan, 'China criticises foreign interference as Hong Kong braces for further protests over extradition law', *The Telegraph*, 11 June 2019; Teddy Ng & Stuart Lau, 'European Parliament approves motion on Hong Kong, as Beijing calls it «full of ignorance and prejudice»', *South China Morning Post*, 18 July 2019; 'European Parliament Passes Resolution Condemning China on Treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang', *Radio Free Asia*, 19 December 2019.

50. Jailed Uighur economist Ilham Tohti receives Sakharov Prize', *Al Jazeera*, 18 December 2019.

51. Shannon Tiezzi, 'Xi's North Korea Visit: All Style, No Substance?', *The Diplomat*, 22 June 2019.

52. Jane Perlez, 'Xi Jinping Arrives in North Korea, With Many Eyes on Trump', *The New York Times*, 20 June 2019.

party's official newspaper, «Rodong Sinmun». In the article, titled «Let us continuously engrave a new chapter of the era inheriting the friendship of China and the DPRK», Xi, without giving details, wrote that China was willing to draw up a «grand plan» with North Korea, which would «realize permanent peace» on the Korean Peninsula.[53] According to Minyoung Lee, a senior analyst with NK News's sister site «NK Pro», it was the first time that a visiting Chinese president or CPC general secretary had contributed an article to North Korea's party daily, and this, taken together with the rare «state visit» status accorded to Xi's visit, underscored the significance that the two sides were attaching to the event.[54] In Minyoung Lee's opinion, Xi's article indicated that China wanted to use the visit to further elevate DPRK-PRC relations and maintain or even expand its role in Korean affairs.[55] Many other observers noticed, instead, that Xi's state visit to Pyongyang was «all pomp and circumstances». Apart from the sumptuous welcome offered by Kim to Xi Jinping and his wife, in fact there was no flurry of business, trade deals or signing of Memoranda of Understandings, that usually accompanied the Chinese President's normal visits abroad. The main reason could be found in the fact that, since the UN Security Council sanctions on North Korea were still in force, any public business would risk catching Beijing out as a sanction violator. A second reason might be found in the comprehensible reluctance on the Chinese side to invest in North Korea, given the slow progress of previously agreed-upon projects, like the special economic zones along the Sino-North Korean border, and the dramatic experience with Jang Song Taek.[56]

That said, the only concrete takeaway was that the two leaders reaffirmed their commitment to find a political solution to longstanding issues on the Korean peninsula.[57] Speaking alongside Kim, Xi pointed out that «the international community hopes that talks between the DPRK and the United States will move forward and bear fruits».[58] In the opinion of Wang Sheng, a professor at the Jilin University in Changchun, Xi's visit to North Korea was very timely, since it could facilitate denuclearisation in the Korean peninsula. The Chinese president was due to hold talks with US president Trump and South Korean leader Moon Jae-in at the upcoming G-20 summit in Japan.[59] In short, the visit served to send a dual message to the rest of the world: on the one hand it was about the unbreakable friendship

53. Dagyum Ji, 'In rare article for N. Korean party daily, Xi offers «a grand plan», *NK News.com*, 19 June 2019.

54. *Ibid*.

55. *Ibid*.

56. On the Jang Song Taek case, see Marco Milani & Barbara Onnis, 'La penisola coreana: tra «facce nuove» ed un continuo déjà vu', *Asia Maior 2013*, pp. 378-381.

57. Shannon Tiezzi, 'Xi's North Korea Visit: All Style, No Substance?'.

58. 'Xi says China supports political settlement of Korean Peninsula issue', *Xinhuanet*, 20 June 2019.

59. 'Xi Jinping arrives in North Korea', *DW*, 20 June 2019.

between China and North Korea, as Xi was preparing to meet the US president in Japan;[60] on the other hand the visit reiterated China's intention to stabilise the situation in its neighbourhood.

Andrei Lankov, a well-known Russian specialist in North Korean studies, considered Xi's decision to visit Pyongyang as being merely symbolic, as the Chinese president envisaged playing the «middle man» between Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump over the stalemate in trade talks. For Lankov it did not signal any new warmth in China's relations with North Korea.[61]

### *3. China-US: The protracted trade war and the full-on rivalry*

Arguably, one of the major challenges that China's foreign policy had to face in 2019 was the escalating tensions with the US. Being locked in a prolonged trade war was proving to be costly for both countries. At the same time it was increasingly evident that the trade war was not (only) about trade, but rather about technological dominance.

China and the US had the opportunity to end the trade war in May if Beijing had accepted the 150-page draft trade deal prepared by the Trump administration in five months. But at the last minute, China backtracked on a number of issues the American negotiators had considered settled. The Chinese wanted the US draft to be reduced to 105 pages, stating that the original version was comparable to «an unequal treaty».[62] In each of the seven chapters of the draft trade deal, China deleted its commitment to change laws to resolve core complaints, which had first led Washington to start a trade war, namely the theft of US intellectual property and trade secrets; forced technology transfers; competition policy; access to financial services; and currency manipulation. With the US also incurring high costs as a result of the trade war, President Donald Trump reacted not only by imposing new tariffs, but also escalating his efforts to limit China's access to vital technologies. Less than two weeks after the trade deal collapsed, Trump signed an executive order,[63] declaring a national emergency and barring US companies from using telecommuni-

60. Jane Perlez, 'Xi arrives in North Korea, With Many Eyes on Trump', *The New York Times*, 20 June 2019.

61. *Ibid*.

62. Jen Kirby, 'US-China trade talks end with no deal — and more tariffs', *Vox.com*, 10 May 2019; David Lawder, Jeff Mason & Michael Martina, 'Exclusive: China backtracked on almost all aspects of U.S. trade deal – sources', *Reuters*, 9 May 2019.

63. «The executive order invokes the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, which gives the president the authority to regulate commerce in response to a national emergency that threatens the United States. The order directs the Commerce Department, working with other government agencies, to draw up a plan for enforcement within 150 days», Zak Doffman, 'Trump Signs Executive Order That Will Lead To U.S. Ban On Huawei', *Forbes*, 15 May 2019.

cations equipment from manufacturers that his administration deemed a national security risk.[64] Among those manufacturers, the most prominent was the Chinese tech giant Huawei, which Trump had been targeting for months, as the arrest of Meng Wenzhou in December 2018 clearly demonstrated.[65] Moreover, the US Commerce Department placed Huawei and 70 of its affiliates on a so-called «Entity List», which was basically a blacklist that prevented the Chinese companies from purchasing US tech without government approval.[66] At the same time, the Trump administration launched an aggressive campaign warning other countries not to use Huawei equipment to build 5G networks, claiming the Chinese government could use the company for spying activities.[67]

Despite tensions over the failure to agree, in late June, top Chinese and US trade negotiators held a secret meeting on the side-lines of the G-20 Summit in Osaka. The meeting took place at a prestigious hotel where the US delegation, led by the president himself, was staying, on the eve of the long-awaited meeting between the Chinese and the American presidents. The two countries' negotiators paved the way for a temporary truce in the trade war and in December they were able to reach what they called a «phase-one» trade deal. The partial agreement came after China accepted many of the US requests.[68] Reportedly, neither Saturday's prime time news programme on state-run «China Central Television» nor the Sunday edition of the «People's Daily» dedicated a word to it, despite the media fanfare in much of the rest of the globe, clearly showing the limited satisfaction on the Chinese side.[69]

In the meantime, the hostility continued on other fronts. After China's Central Bank let the yuan weaken significantly amid the ongoing trade tensions, the Trump administration labelled China a «currency manipulator».[70] The designation, applied to China for the first time since 1994, was mainly symbolic but it came less than a week after the US president announced new tariffs for Chinese imports as a direct consequence of the failed agreement

64. The White House, *Executive Order on Securing the Information and Communications Technology and Services Supply Chain*, 15 May 2019.

65. See Barbara Onnis, 'China's Foreign Policy in 2018: Implementing the China Dream', *Asia Maior 2018*, pp. 43-68, esp. pp. 60-61. The issue is not resolved yet, as the extradition trial is still ongoing.

66. David Shepardson & Karen Freifeld, 'China's Huawei, 70 affiliates placed on U.S. trade blacklist', *Reuters*, 16 May 2019.

67. Julian E. Barnes & Adam Satariano, 'U.S. Campaign to Ban Huawei Overseas Stumbles as Allies Resist', *The New York Times*, 17 March 2019.

68. Shawn Donnan, Miao Han & Jenny Leonard, 'U.S., China Reach Phase-One Deal, Easing Trade Tensions', *Bloomberg*, 13 December 2019.

69. Katsuji Nakazawa, 'Did Xi surrender to Trump? China struggles to silence chatter', *Asia Nikkei*, 19 December 2019.

70. Donna Borak, 'Trump administration labels China a currency manipulator', *CNN.com*, 5 August 2019.

in May. Beijing's Central Bank firmly rejected the US Treasury's designation stating that the accusation could trigger financial turmoil.[71]

Amid all these events, China did not miss the occasion to openly criticise the US for its destabilising role. Two specific cases deserve to be mentioned here. In its new defence paper titled *China's National Defense in the New Era* – the first since Xi Jinping began a major military overhaul in 2015 – China accused the US of undermining global stability, by stating that it had provoked competition among major countries. «International security system and order are undermined by growing hegemonism, power politics, unilateralism and constant regional conflicts and wars», declared the defence paper.[72] Its language represented a departure from the previous report, which focused on efforts to improve military-to-military cooperation between the two countries. According to MIT professor M. Taylor Fravel, author of *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949*, the 2019 defence paper «was the first to be much more explicit about Chinese concerns regarding the United States», clearly reflecting the deepening of the tensions and rivalry between Beijing and Washington.[73] In the same vein, in early December, in a quite unusual move, the Chinese ministry of foreign affairs joined Twitter to accuse the US of being a «SUPER LIAR» (referring to the latter's remarks on human abuse against the minority Uighurs), a move that, according to some observers, showed China's nervousness.[74]

Despite everything, China continued to recognise that the China-US relationship was one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world, even if it was (and still is) living through the most complex and sensitive period since diplomatic relations were formalised in 1979. According to Xi «There are 1,000 reasons to make China-U.S. relations work, but not a single reason to derail them».[75] Apparently this was also the view of an important component of American well-educated public opinion.

On 3 July «The Washington Post» published an open letter addressed to the US president and the US Congress, written by five well-known scholars, including MIT Professor M. Taylor Fravel, former American Ambassador to China J. Stapleton Roy, senior Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Fellow Michael D. Swaine, former Acting Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Susan A. Thornton, and Har-

71. Sam Meredith, 'China responds to US after Treasury designates Beijing a «currency manipulator»', *CNBC*, 6 August 2019.

72. The State Council Information of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in the New Era*, 24 July 2019, p. 3.

73. 'China Says the U.S. is Undermining Global Stability', *Bloomberg*, 24 July 2019.

74. Lily Kuo, 'China's leaders seeking to «draw strength from weakness» in 2020', *The Guardian*, 28 December 2019.

75. Quoted by Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng, 'China's Foreign Policy in a Fast Changing World: Mission and Responsibility', Speech by Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng at the Lunch Meeting of the Eighth World Peace Forum, 8 July 2019.

vard University Professor Emeritus Ezra Vogel. It was signed by 100 well-known figures from various fields to voice their concerns about the country's current policies towards China. Entitled «Making China a U.S. enemy is counterproductive», the letter articulated seven issues which the authors had with current American policy towards China. It ended by stressing that «there is no single Washington consensus endorsing an overall adversarial stance toward China, as some believe exists.»[76] As expected, China reacted positively to such a move by American scholars. However, the government's response came indirectly a few weeks later as the Ministry of Commerce was responding to another open letter signed by more than 100 Americans (mainly veterans and former intelligence officers) to US president Donald Trump, which called on the US government to stay the course on the path of confronting China. According to Gao Feng, spokesperson of the Ministry of Commerce, the letter «is full of hegemonic thinking and Cold War mentality, defames and discredits China's domestic and foreign policies, incites "decoupling" of the two economies and provokes confrontation and conflict between the two countries.»[77] In Gao's opinion: «From the different reactions by the media and people of the two countries in response to the two letters, it can be seen that inciting confrontation between China and the United States is not supported by the majority of the U.S. public,» while «promoting win-win cooperation between the two countries accords with the wishes of the people».[78]

*4. China's reputation at risk: The Confucius Institutes «under attack»*

According to Adam Ni – co-editor of «China Neican», a Newsletter on Chinese power, and China researcher at the Department of Security Studies and Criminology at Macquarie University in Australia – 2019 was a very bad year for China's international reputation across a whole range of fronts. Months of protest in Hong Kong captured global attention and mobilised Hongkongers against Beijing's influence over the former British colony. In November two major leaks of classified government documents detailing PRC's progressive mass detention and abuse of Muslims in Xinjiang (the so-called *Xinjiang Papers*), considered «reliable» by the United Nations,[79] further emboldened global critics, and in some countries the Confucius Institutes were under attack for being perceived as a national security threat.

76. Taylor Fravel et.al., 'China is not an enemy', The Washington Post, 3 July 2019.

77. 'China's commerce ministry responds to U.S. open letter on confronting China', Xinhuanet, 26 July 2019.

78. *Ibid*.

79. Human Rights Watch, *UN: Unprecedented Joint Call for China to End Xinjiang Abuses*, 10 July 2019.

As this same issue of «Asia Maior» contains two more articles dealing with China's domestic politics as well as Hong Kong, attention is focused in this article on the Confucius Institutes.

The Confucius Institutes are officially a bridge between China and the rest of the world, promoting China's culture and language, and, *de facto*, one of the major soft power instruments of Chinese cultural and public diplomacy. In the year under review, though not for the first time, they have often been the subject of heavy criticism for their alleged political interference in host universities. The debate has been going on since the so-called Braga incident in the summer of 2014, on the occasion of the 20th biennial Conference of the European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS) held in Portugal, between Braga and Coimbra. At the time, the local Confucius Institute, by means of the Hanban Director Xu Lin, asked for the removal of the pages referring to Taiwanese academic institutions (the prestigious Jiang Jing Kuo Foundation among others) from the list of the conference organisers, included in the published programme. Xu claimed in fact that the information was «contrary to Chinese regulations».[80] Such a move was described by «The Wall Street Journal» as the «bullying approach to academic freedom»,[81] and as a direct consequence of this episode some American universities, namely the University of Chicago and the Pennsylvanian State University, left the network of the Confucius Institutes.[82] In December 2014, the Stockholm University, the first university in Europe to host a Confucius Institute, also announced its decision to terminate the programme.[83]

In relation to the year under review, some specific cases deserve to be mentioned. In the United Kingdom a report released by the British Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee at the beginning of November, just before the suspension of parliament for the December general elections, found «alarming evidence» of China's interference on UK campuses. The report indicated that these activities appeared to be coordinated by the Chinese embassy in London,[84] and accused China of infiltrating university campuses across the United Kingdom and threatening academ-

80. 'Adam Minter, 'China's Soft Power Fail', *Bloomberg*, 8 October 2014.

81. 'Beijing's Propaganda Lessons. Confucius Institute officials are agents of Chinese censorship.', *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 August 2014. An interesting analysis of the topic is offered by Christopher Hughes, 'Confucius Institutes and the university: distinguishing the political mission from the cultural', *Issues and Studies*, 50 (4), 2014, pp. 45-83.

82. Elizabeth Redde, 'Chicago to close Confucius Institute', *Inside Higher Ed*, 26 September 2014; Elizabeth Redden, 'Another Confucius Institute to close', *Inside Higher Ed*, 1 October 2014.

83. Elizabeth Redden, 'Stockholm University to close Confucius Institute', 5 January 2015.

84. Patrick Wintour, '«Alarming» Chinese meddling at UK universities exposed in report', *The Guardian*, 5 November 2019.

ic freedom.[85] In particular, the committee in charge of the report highlighted the role of China-funded Confucius Institutes' officials in confiscating papers that mentioned Taiwan at an academic conference (the above mentioned 20th biennial Conference of the European Association for Chinese Studies), the use of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association as an instrument of political interference, and produced evidence that dissidents active while studying in the UK were being monitored and their families in China harassed.[86]

The UK case was not an isolated one.[87] In Australia a task force was formed to crack down on foreign governments' attempts to meddle in Australian universities, as concerns grew over Chinese influence.[88] But the apex was reached in December when a Belgian university (the Vrije Universiteit Brussel) decided to close its Chinese state-funded Confucius Institute after Belgian security services accused Song Xinning, former head of the Institute of the University, of being a recruiter for Chinese intelligence.[89]

As a consequence of these events, a heated debate spread around the world and reached countries with a long tradition of cultural ties with China. In 2006 Italy became one of the first European countries to host a Confucius Institute (the Confucius Institute at the University of Rome «La Sapienza» was the first one established in Italy and the second in Europe). As already noted, at the end of December Italian sinologist Maurizio Scarpari wrote a very explicit article inviting the prestigious Venice University of Ca' Foscari to promote a policy less dependent on external influences and set the example in Italy by closing its Confucius Institute.[90]

### *5. China and the BRI: The 2nd Belt and Road Forum*

The 2nd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF), focused on the theme «Belt and Road Cooperation: Shaping a Brighter Shared Future», was one of the key diplomatic events in 2019. It took place in Beijing from 25 to 28 April and was attended by 36 heads of state or gov-

85. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *A cautious embrace: defending democracy in an age of autocracies*, Second Report of Session 2019, Report, HC 109, 5 November 2019.

86. Patrick Wintour, '«Alarming» Chinese meddling at UK universities exposed in report'.

87. Gordon Watts, 'How China infiltrates colleges across the globe', *Asia Times*, 8 November 2019.

88. Rod McGuirk, 'Australia tries to curb foreign interference at universities', *AP News*, 28 August 2019.

89. Stuart Lau, 'Belgian University closes its Chinese state-funded Confucius Institute after spying claims', *South China Morning Post*, 11 December 2019.

90. Maurizio Scarpari, 'Ca' Foscari dia l'esempio: sia il primo Ateneo a fare uscire l'Istituto Confucio', *Il Corriere della sera*, 19 December 2019.

ernment. Its works, however, unfolded in a context of growing scepticism, especially in Europe, on China's lack of respect for international standards and on the alleged «debt trap diplomacy» practised by Beijing, which left some small countries in precarious financial situations due to their incapacity to repay Chinese loans.

Prior to the Forum, Yang Jiechi, a member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC), and director of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs, who oversaw the preparations of the event, released an interview to the CPC mouthpiece «People's Daily» at the end of March. Yang talked about the progress in pursuing Belt and Road cooperation and stressed the fact that since its inception the BRI had received strong endorsement and warm support from the international community.[91] He pointed out that the BRI vision had been included in documents of major international institutions, including the United Nations, the G-20, the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Yang quoted World Bank studies to demonstrate that the BRI had created new impetus and opportunities for global growth. At the same time, he took the opportunity to reject accusations that Beijing was using the BRI as a «geopolitical tool» that left its partners in financial difficulty. «No country has been left in a debt crisis after taking part in the Belt and Road plan. […] Quite the contrary, it is through cooperation that many countries have got out of the 'no development' trap».[92]

Yang's comments followed and countered US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's declarations about his being «saddened» by Italy's decision to sign a BRI deal with China, during Xi Jinping's visit to Rome on 21-22 March, while at the same time accusing Beijing of practising «debt trap diplomacy».[93] In fact, as already mentioned above, this last issue remained one of the main criticisms against Beijing as well as one of the most debated in the relations between China and the EU.

As far as the Forum is concerned, an article published in «The Diplomat» on 27 April focused on the geographical origin of the attendees and proposed some interesting points of reflection.[94] The first was that, despite frictions related to the South China Sea and lingering concerns over the

91. By the end of March 2019, a total of 124 countries and 30 international organisations had signed 173 cooperation agreements with China under the BRI framework.

92. 'Full Text: Yang Jiechi on the Belt and Road Initiative and Preparations for the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation', *Xinhuanet*, 8 April 2019.

93. 'US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo «saddened» as Italy signs up for China's belt and road project', *South China Morning Post*, 28 March 2019.

94. Shannon Tiezzi, 'Who Is (and Who Isn't) Attending China's 2nd Belt and Road Forum?', *The Diplomat*, 27 April 2019. The complete list of heads of state and government in attendance at the Second Belt and Road Forum can be found in 'Second Belt and Road Forum Top-Level Attendees', *The Diplomat*, 27 April 2019.

debt trap, the BRI was booming in its core regions, namely China's immediate periphery. Beijing secured the participation of top leaders from nine out of the ten ASEAN member states, with Indonesia being represented by its vice-president.[95] Similarly, four out of the five Central Asian countries sent their top leaders. The only exception was Turkmenistan, notoriously adverse to multilateral cooperation projects.

The second consideration referred to the fact that European countries accounted for one third of the top-level attendees – 12 of the 36 heads of state and government came from the European continent (including Russia and Azerbaijan). This demonstrated that, despite some pushback from Brussels, the BRI was arousing growing interest especially among the smaller European countries. The list of those sending top-level representatives to the Forum – Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Russia, Serbia, Switzerland – included seven EU members. However, as expected, the EU «heavyweights», namely France and Germany, did not send their representatives, being the most vocal in expressing concern about the initiative. A further consideration was that the BRI was apparently eliciting a growing interest in Africa as well. While in 2017 there were just two African heads of state (Ethiopia's prime minister and Kenya's president), in 2019 the figure jumped to five (in addition to Ethiopia and Kenya there were also top-level representatives from Djibouti, Egypt, and Mozambique).

«The Diplomat»'s article reflected on some remarkable absences, some expected, others not. Among the first was the absence of India (despite the growing understanding between Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi), and other South Asian countries – of the eight SAARC member states only Pakistan and Nepal sent their representatives.[96] Similarly, another remarkable, but predictable absence, was that of the US, considering the difficult state of China-US relations (while in 2017 Washington sent its NSC senior director for Asia). Among the unforeseen absences were those of the Middle East, despite the region's prominence on the historical Silk Road and the

95. Jakarta was actually represented by its vice-president, which was likely due to the close timing after President Joko Widodo's re-election bid, rather than being a deliberate snub.

96. As already mentioned in previous *Asia Maior* volumes, India continued to be deeply concerned that the CPEC – one of the six economic corridors – passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Apart from this specific aspect related to the CPEC, according to a study conducted by Alicia Garcia Herrero and Xu Jiangwei, India, Buthan and the Maldives feature in the list of top ten countries with the most negative attitude towards the BRI, reflecting the region's long term competition with China over border and economic issues; another relevant aspect to consider is the fact that some South East Asian countries are among the most affected by the so-called «debt trap diplomacy» (Sri Lanka and the Maldives). See Alicia Garcia Herrero & Jiangwei Xu, 'Countries' Perceptions of China's Belt and Road Initiative: A Big Data Analysis', *Bruegel Working Paper*, no.1, 6 February 2019.

friendly ties China had with major regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel. Only the United Arab Emirates sent its top-level representative.

In conclusion, while in numerical terms the 2nd BRF could be considered a relative diplomatic success (particularly considering that the heads of state and government who had participated in the 1st Forum in 2017 numbered only 29), it is evident that China still has a lot of work to do to promote the BRI outside of the Silk Road's historical region of significance, and needs to revise some critical aspects of the project. In fact, Xi Jinping acknowledged the criticism levelled against the initiative and pledged to reform it in a number of ways, making it more sustainable and more respectful of international standards.[97]

*5.1. The domestic debate: Reassessing the BRI*

Ahead of the Forum, the Chinese media focused on Italy's signing of the MoU, considered as a «landmark event», Italy being the first G-7 country to participate in the BRI. Italy's decision was perceived as helping to absolve China of the allegations of practising predatory economics and confirming the appeal of the initiative despite the criticisms and negative publicity surrounding it.[98] Meanwhile, Chinese strategic circles were animated with debate and discussion, some focusing on a strategic review of the BRI constructions over the past five years, others finding problems, analysing the causes and trying to propose solutions, in order to ensure the BRI smooth implementation over the following years.

A report released on 28 March by the Institute of International Strategic Chinese at Beijing University, titled反思"一带一路"：问题与应对 (*Reflections on the Belt and Road: Problems and Responses*) emphasised how over the course of previous five years the scope of the project had been expanded beyond recognition and Chinese investments under the initiative had even superseded those of the post-World War II Marshall Plan.[99] The study also reported that the «unrestricted global investments» (无限制的全球性投入) under the BRI were causing an unprecedented burden on China's foreign exchange reserves and risked becoming unsustainable for the country.[100] Moreover, China's resulting hyperactivity alarmed the US, Europe and other major powers, who interpreted it as a «comprehensive attack on the Western-led world order and thereby taking several countermeasures aimed at

97. Bickram Rana Pradumna & Ji Xianbai 'Belt and Road Forum 2019: BRI 2.0 In the Making?', *RSIS Commentary*, No. 086, 2 May 2019.

98. Antara Ghosal Singh, 'China's Belt and Road Debate', *The Diplomat*, 26 April 2019.

99. 反思"一带一路"：问题与应对 (Reflections on the Belt and Road: Problems and Responses), 北京大学国际战略研究院, 第 79 期，2019年3月28日, Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Peking University, n. 79, 28 March 2019, p. 2.

100. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

checking not just the progress of the BRI but also the overall rise of China».[101] That is why China had to rationally «slim down» (瘦身) the initiative,[102] trying to redraw its boundaries by focusing primarily on Central Asia or China's immediate neighbourhood, namely the regions of major success, as shown by the presence of the attendees at the 2nd BRF.

A previous report released in 2017 by the authoritative think-tank China Institute of International Studies (中国国际问题研究院) had already focused on the striking rhythm impressed to the construction of the BRI. In the short term, that created the global impression of being too aggressive, raising too many suspicions over Beijing's intentions. The report argued that, the BRI being a long-term project, it had to be executed in a phased manner, through a step-by-step approach, to avoid all unnecessary noise around it.[103]

### *5.2. The international debate: The «debt trap» and the «debt trap diplomacy»*

In 2019 the international debate around the BRI persisted in focusing on the «debt trap» and on the alleged «debt trap diplomacy» pursued by Beijing. Some new elements of reflection were introduced by the American scholar Deborah Brautigam, a renowned specialist on China-Africa relations and director of the China-Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University. In an article written for «The New York Times», titled *Is China the World's Loan Shark?* and published on 26 April, Brautigam reported both the information collected by the China-Africa Research Initiative on more than 1,000 Chinese loans in Africa between 2000 and 2017, totalling more than US$ 143 billion, and the findings of the Boston University's Global Development Policy Center, which had identified and tracked more than US$ 140 billion in Chinese loans to Latin America and the Caribbean since 2005.[104] She concluded that, according to the findings of both institutes, the risks of BRI were often overstated or mischaracterised. In Brautigam's words: «[…] a number of us academics who have studied China's practices in detail have found scant evidence of a pattern indicating that Chinese banks, acting at the government's behest, are deliberately over-lending or funding loss-making projects to secure strategic advantages for China.»[105]

101. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

102. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

103. '一带一路"倡议 在南亚的机遇与风险' (Opportunities and Risks of the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia), 中国国际问题研究院, 第 17 期, April 2017, p. 40.

104. Deborah Brautigam & Jyhjong Hwang, 'China-Africa Loan Database Research Guidebook', China-Africa Research Initiative, John Hopkins University; Margaret Meyer & Kevin Gallagher, 'Cautious Capital Chinese Development Finance in LAC, 2018', China-Latin American Report, February 2019.

105. Deborah Brautigam, 'Is China the World's Loan Shark?', *The New York Times*, 26 April 2019.

In her article, Brautigam also focused on the case of Sri Lanka, «often cited as the poster child for the ills of Chinese debt-trap diplomacy», reporting the conclusions of a study conducted by two Sri Lanka scholars, Dushni Weerakoon and Sisira Jayasuriya. According to Weerakoon and Jayasuriya, the Hambantota loans – which at the end of December 2017 determined the decision of the Sri Lanka government to formally hand over its southern port to China on a 99-year lease – accounted for only a tiny share of Sri Lanka's overall debt; and most importantly, only 10% of it was owed to China.[106]

## *6. Conclusion*

This article has focused on the main developments in Chinese foreign policy in 2019 and highlights two key trends. The first, that Xi Jinping's attempt to address the trust deficit making difficult China's relations with a series of important international players, registered both positive and negative results. Xi Jinping was successful in pursuing increasingly close personal relations with his Indian and Japanese counterparts, which could be used to address the lack of trust of those neighbouring countries towards China. The same, however, cannot be said for the Chinese government's attempts to reassure one of its most relevant partners, namely the EU. In particular, the persistent *divide et impera* approach adopted by Beijing in its relations with Brussels and the smaller European countries, together with the debate around Italy's decision to sign the MoU on the BRI, only confirms the unstable nature of China-EU relations.

The second trend was characterised by China's attempt to confront and contain several challenges which seriously risked undermining Xi Jinping's long-term plans. These challenges included Washington's unrelenting hostility, the growing international criticism of China's management of the Hong Kong protests, the alleged abuses against the Xinjiang Uyghur minorities, and the activities of the Confucius Institutes.

Finally, apart from the discussion of the above two main trends, the article provides an update on the 2nd Belt and Road Forum and sums up the main points of the debate around the Initiative both at the domestic and international level.

Summarising, China's foreign policy in the year under review strived to contain the adverse reactions triggered internationally by its own rapid rise in world power and influence, but was only partially successful in its effort.

106. Dushni Weerakoon & Sisira Jayasuriya, 'Sri Lanka's debt problem isn't made in China', East Asia Forum, 28 February 2019.