



# ASIA MAIOR

Special Issue 2 / 2022

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## US-China Competition, COVID-19 and Democratic Backsliding in Asia

Edited by  
Giulio Pugliese  
Andrea Fischetti  
Michelguglielmo Torri

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A large, intricate, golden-brown mandala graphic on the right side of the cover. It features complex, repeating geometric and floral patterns, resembling traditional Indian or Middle Eastern art.

ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES - EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE

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## FOREWORD

### US-CHINA COMPETITION, COVID-19 AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN ASIA

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic emergency has had a major impact in Asia – from South Asia, through Southeast Asia all the way to North Korea. It has allowed states to further centralize control over economic and social affairs – arguably also for good reasons – and has lent legitimacy to a resurgence of nationalist and protectionist instincts, effectively empowering many of the region’s strongmen. The ripple effects of a post-pandemic depression, compounded by Russia’s war in Ukraine and the spectre of stagflation, are hard to discern.

As popular discontent mounts, populist strongmen and democratic leaders alike have exhausted the charisma acquired through COVID-19 crisis-responses, ushering the way to two broad scenarios. A pessimistic outlook suggests further political decay and deepening geopolitical tensions as national interests more readily clash, and leadership seeks to divert attention from socio-economic grievances. Alternatively, contemporary history has demonstrated that genuine political evolution, new social compacts, redistributive political economies and multilateral systems of governance may acquire a new shine following a major crisis.<sup>1</sup> Still, COVID-19 is among the factors that have widened the rift between the United States and China: US-China zero-sum interactions across the geopolitical, economic, technological and political domains have spiralled towards a race to the bottom in 2020. The Biden administration’s more nuanced approach, and more courteous rhetoric, towards Beijing hasn’t changed that dynamic. Lastly, at a time of crisis, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine inflicted another crucial blow to the already precarious international system.

As the world grappled with the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2, the global crisis that could have fostered cooperation became a source of frictions instead. Different approaches to facing the pandemic emerged during its early stages, and the consequent global recession further complicated international relations. What initially represented an opportunity to promote diplomatic initiatives, soon morphed into a catalyst for indirect confrontation. The values gap between different countries and the diverse ways in which they managed lockdowns and sanitary restrictions highlighted latent political, social, and moral values differences. This, in turn, reignited

1. Francis Fukuyama, ‘The Pandemic and Political Order: It Takes a State’, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020, pp. 26-32.



a long-standing debate regarding the tenability of the so-called liberal international order. The quest for personal protective equipment and vaccine diplomacy alighted the debate on economic security and how to best manage the relationship with the world's second largest economy, China. In fact, the global image of the People's Republic of China (PRC) further plunged not just in Western Europe and the US, but across East Asia.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the COVID-19 crisis could have been indeed a source of enhanced global cooperation, one that would have necessarily included strategic adversaries and autocratic governments alike to tackle a distinctively transnational security challenge. Preliminary evidence from this special issue's contributions suggest that the pandemic has indeed accelerated geopolitical conflicts *and* domestic political involution.

Moreover, on top of logistic disorders and export restrictions across the globe, governments took action to counterweight the effects of the fragmentation of global value chains and the disruption of the supply chains.<sup>3</sup> The pandemic provoked an exogenous shock to the global economy as a result of the restrictions to the movement of people, workers, and goods. State-led initiatives attempted to offset the damage, and it was not only the US that intensified its efforts to partially decouple, or more simply diversify from China.<sup>4</sup> The Japanese government's strategy to that effect – which that took the form of subsidies and mini-lateral fora – was emblematic, due to Japan's heft and relevance. Risk-awareness about overdependency on supply-chains at a time of uncertainty spread beyond East Asia, also in light of the growing relevance of human rights and environmental sustainability considerations.<sup>5</sup> From an economic perspective, Washington remained the main opponent to Beijing's increasing assertiveness and more proactive stance on the international stage. However, the pandemic did not simply cement the pre-existent strategic rivalry between the US and China, but heightened awareness on China across the Eurasian landmass.

At the same time, the US-China confrontation spread across the globe. As the Sino-American rivalry affected economic, political, and security dynamics, it also reified a new kind of «Cold War». In this context, cooperation regarding vaccines and international trade gained particular significance during the pandemic, as both Washington and Beijing turned to their allies and client states at a time of crisis. On the American side, the

2. Laura Silver, Kat Devlin & Christine Huang, 'Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries', *Pew Research Center*, 6 October 2020.

3. Bernard Hoekman *et al.*, 'COVID-19, public procurement regimes and trade policy', *The World Economy*, Vol. 45. Part 2, February 2022, pp. 409-29.

4. 'Australia, Japan and India Form Supply Chain Initiative to Counter China', *Bloomberg*, 28 April 2021.

5. European Commission – Justice and Consumers, *Proposal for a Directive on corporate sustainability due diligence and annex*, 23 February 2022 ([https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/proposal-directive-corporate-sustainable-due-diligence-and-annex\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/proposal-directive-corporate-sustainable-due-diligence-and-annex_en)).

main problem was that of dealing with the US' relative decline and fading hegemonic power, now effectively steered towards containing China's rise as a peer competitor. On China's side, the main problem appeared to be the mounting suspicion from neighbouring partners, given Beijing's unabated assertiveness and draconian domestic policies. The global sanitary and economic crises hard tested both sides, and eventually widened the political rift, with a clear impact on third countries.

When on 24 February 2022 the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine, amid what Moscow defined as a «special military operation», the course of world events confirmed these authors' pessimistic view on the course of the pandemic. The virus spread was seemingly tamed by an effective vaccine campaign in numerous states, but Sino-American rivalry was still prominent, while the political fallout of the pandemic arguably worsened. Moreover, the virus still was, and still is, a major global issue –and not just in developing countries. Moscow's operation overshadowed both the ongoing centrality of the fight against COVID-19 (and of its fallout) and US-China strategic competition. In defiance of *jus cogens* norms and international customary law, Russia invaded a sovereign country, and as early investigations by the International Criminal Court suggest, became responsible for war crimes. The international response has been unprecedented, with action taken by historically neutral parties such as Switzerland and, more importantly, a strong and repeated wave of sanctions from the United States, the European Union and Japan. Putin's hazardous move has seemingly cemented the divide suggested by the new Biden Administration between «techno-democracies» and «techno-autocracies».<sup>6</sup> This is a catchy but simplistic division that nonetheless suggests that great power competition is here to stay and is bound to have important consequences on third parties for years to come.



The fight against COVID-19 and its aftermath, democratic backsliding, China's assertiveness and the US pushback are making the Asian seas stormier. How have regional powers navigated these seas? Potential answers have been provided by a number of specialists in contemporary Asia linked to the Italian academic association Asia Maior and are collected in this volume.

Firstly, Axel Berkofsky analyzes the current state of the US-Japan alliance vis-à-vis China, with a particular focus on the renewed threat of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Berkofsky examines the strategies implemented by the relevant parties over the last decades and offers an assessment of possible future developments. As pointed out by Berkofsky, the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, adopted in 1960, states that the US will defend Japan in case of an attack on Japanese territory. Since then,

6. David Ignatius, 'Biden's ambitious plan to push back against techno-autocracies', *The Washington Post*, 11 February 2021.

and especially in the post-Cold War years and during Abe Shinzō's premiership, Japan has stepped up its game to provide rear-area support and come to the defence of its ally when this imperils «Japan's survival». In fact, Japan has progressively shouldered greater responsibility, thus transforming the nature of the US-Japan alliance in a number of ways; more recently, the alliance has also been reinterpreted to potentially include the defence of Taiwan as part of a more robust defence policy vis-à-vis China. This became especially evident by 2021. On its part, China has recently adopted a strategy aimed at maximizing its maritime and territorial interests, which appears to menace the peaceful equilibrium in the area. This strategy includes a law that enables the Chinese Coast Guard to fire at foreign ships in disputed territorial waters and the escalation of Chinese military activities around Taiwan. Berkofsky argues that since Beijing would have little to gain from an attempt to unify Mainland China with Taiwan by force, the scenario of an attack to Taiwan is very unlikely. Yet, in such a scenario, Japan is believed to grant full support to Washington's operations.

Secondly, Francesca Congiu explores another aspect of relations between the US and China, that of the problem stemming from a dichotomist approach on human rights. Congiu investigates the discourses on COVID-19 and human rights amid the pandemic of 2020 as a timely case-study, highlighting the importance of a less apparent but increasingly relevant field of confrontation. The author argues that a critical aspect of US-China relations is the persistence of the dichotomous vision over human rights that appeared during the Cold War. Congiu's analysis of political speeches and mass media reporting during the pandemic demonstrates that this dichotomy is still exploited for advancing geopolitical and economic interests. Such a vision negatively affected politics and has had an evident impact on bilateral relations, especially in situations such as the pandemic-induced health crisis. Crucially, it is argued that the dichotomist approach needs to be observed through historical lenses, considering the origins and the evolution of human rights.

Following Congiu's analysis on US-China relations and human rights, Beatrice Gallelli, in the third article of this volume, examines the narratives proposed by Chinese authorities regarding the recent escalation of state-perpetrated violence against the non-Han ethnic minorities in the border province of Xinjiang. Gallelli identifies three official narratives on Beijing's part: the first refers to a new approach to interethnic unity, which involves promoting a Han-centred identity for «finding a national form compatible with its state form». The second one features a rationalization of the repressive measures, explained as necessary to propel economic development in the area, and described as propaedeutic for achieving human rights. Lastly, the Xinjiang issue is reframed as part of the global «war on terror». Furthermore, Gallelli shows that state repression of religion is also part of the Chinese Communist Party's strategy aimed at stressing its role as the guide

within the country. Xinjiang is therefore an emblematic example of Beijing's will to proactively defend its «core interests» at home and abroad.

Xinjiang has been crucial in causing China's image to deteriorate internationally. Along a similar line of enquiry, Barbara Onnis, in the fourth article of this volume, discusses the impact of another vital element on China's global image: that of the COVID-19 pandemic. What has been an economic crisis for most of the world, including China, has also been affecting the PRC's prestige and image on the international stage. Onnis' investigation offers an overview of China's image building in the last century, highlighting the importance of being perceived as a country with a good reputation in order to gain international legitimacy. Of course, as noted by Onnis, this is an objective that is especially true for an emerging power such as China. According to Onnis, nonetheless, China's good reputation, already dented before the beginning of the pandemic, has further suffered after its onset. This has happened in spite of Beijing's attempts at turning the pandemic crisis into an opportunity to relaunch the country's global image. Onnis argues that China's efforts to fight the pandemic have been showing Beijing's efficiency and pragmatic approach to managing the health crisis. Nonetheless, its methods have not always been welcomed by international audiences and have often been seen as a further limit to an already scarce personal freedom inside China. Conversely, Beijing's vaccine diplomacy has been somewhat less criticized. Yet, the extent to which it can aid China's image remains to be seen, considering its logistical and technical limitations.

After having looked at Japan's role in US-China competition, and China's policies amid the pandemic, the focus shifts on the role of South Korea in the current competition between China and the United States. Marco Milani argues that Seoul is now pursuing autonomy on the international stage, which has enabled the country to adapt a more «flexible» strategy and maintain a moderate position of middle ground between the US and China. However, this strategy has been challenged by the mounting US-China tensions and by American calls for a tougher stance on China in the region. Historically, South Korea's position has often been influenced by other great powers in the region. The country has repeatedly got caught in rivalries and competition between bigger powers, starting from Japan and the Chinese empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and continuing with the US and the USSR during the Cold War. After having analysed South Korea's history from this perspective, Milani examines the policies and actions that contributed to the country's delicate balance amid US-China frictions. He points out that, in recent years, South Korea has been able to develop a more autonomous foreign policy and achieve an equilibrium vis-à-vis Washington and Beijing. Therefore, the country managed to entertain friendly relations with both powers. Hence Milani's conviction that a more active role for South Korea in the region could indeed better serve the interests of both the US and China.

Moving on from Northeast Asia, Diego Maiorano outlines the democratic erosion of India's democracy, under the rightist Bharatiya Janata Party government led by Narendra Modi. This erosion, ongoing since Modi became prime minister in 2014, accelerated during and as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Maiorano analyses the functioning of the legislative, executive, and judicial systems and their recent involution. He points out that the erosion of the democratic system is highlighted by a number of factors, including the reduction of the parliamentary activity, the lack of control of the legislative and judicial institutions over the management of the pandemic, the erosion of the accountability mechanisms, the «corrosion» of the electoral process so as to benefit the party in power, and the erosion of the civil liberties, with special attention to the reduction of the freedom of expression of the ethnic minorities. Maiorano concludes that whereas the Modi's regime was already drifting towards authoritarianism before the onset of the pandemic, the COVID-19 has critically exacerbated this process, making it impossible to identify India as a full democracy.

Keeping the focus on this area, Michelguglielmo Torri analyses the evolution of India's relations with China and the US in the last decades. Following the expansion of US connections with India in 2005, India's relations with China took a hit, and the frictions became apparent in 2020 with the border crisis in the Galwan Valley. Torri states that the evolution of bilateral relations between China and India follows two themes: the historically unresolved border dispute and India's increasing strategic and military closeness with the US. The article mainly focuses on three historical periods, and Torri identifies the turning points that led to the border crisis. The perception of China in India has been increasingly negative, and the US-sponsored anti-China discourse has been gaining momentum. More importantly, through the analysis of India's relations with both China and the United States, Torri argues that, differently from what claimed by most Western and Indian analysts, Beijing's foreign policy vis-à-vis India, rather than the end product of China's new aggressiveness vis-à-vis its neighbours, which became visible under Xi Jinping's leadership, can be understood as a symmetric response to New Delhi's alignment with the US.

Filippo Boni then examines the re-emergence of China as a great power, its competition with the US, and the implications of both developments on regional stability. Following the escalation of global US-China competition, third countries, and Asian countries in particular, found themselves in a difficult situation, forcing them to what Boni describes as «hedging between China and the US». Boni focuses on South Asia, and more specifically on Pakistan's hedging strategy. The article argues that the country is facing a «hedging dilemma», which can be retraced through an overview of regional history. While Pakistan's options were more numerous during the Cold War, nowadays Islamabad's options have been radically reduced. Beijing's China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and Washington's chang-

ing posture in the region are two examples of the growing pressure from the US and China on South Asia, including Pakistan. South Asian countries are therefore facing external pressures to align to either side, which in turn creates vigorous domestic debates, as exemplified by Pakistan's case.

Moving on to the other side of the Indian subcontinent, Silvia Tieri discusses the securitization of migration with a particular attention to its often-overlooked South-South dimension. Focusing on migration from Bangladesh to India, Tieri investigates the consequences of the increasingly securitized approach to dealing with borders management and migration from Bangladesh to India, exploring its implications for bilateral relations. Bangladesh is also the country of origin for numerous migrants headed to Europe, and the article broadens the spectrum of analysis by developing a theoretical framework that assesses the benefits and costs of the process of securitising migration. As the focus of the article remains on the India-Bangladesh border, particular attention is also given to the consequences of the problem on the domestic politics and political discourses of the two countries. In particular, Tieri underlines how, in India, the securitization of migration has brought about the criminalization of Bangladeshi migrants to India, which has become an increasingly important trend in Indian politics.

Lastly, in an effort to identify the deep roots of recent events, this volume hosts Gianluca Coci's essay, focused on one of the greatest figures in modern Japanese literature, Abe Kōbō. Coci's essay highlights Abe's involvement in artistic-literary societies that greatly contributed to post-war Japan's cultural renaissance. Coci beautifully describes Abe Kōbō's active role in Japanese literature and artistic societies and argues that his work represents a bridge between modern and contemporary times. In particular, Coci argues that the Yoru no kai (Night Society) and the Seiki no kai (Century Society) played a crucial role in Japan's artistic and cultural rebirth, following the atomic bombings and levelling of Japanese cities. In this context, Abe Kōbō was uniquely positioned as member of both the Yoru no kai and the Seiki no kai, being, moreover, the only one to have such dual affiliation at the time. As Coci argues in his essay, Abe naturally assumed the role of a connecting link between two generations, at the dawn of a new era for Japan. Eventually, Abe Kōbō promoted an innovative cultural crossover that originated from literature and soon attracted exponents from other arts.

Although seemingly dissimilar to the topics covered in the other essays, the editors felt it appropriate to include Coci's essay, not only because of the high standard of its contents and the acknowledged excellence of its author, a preeminent scholar and translator of contemporary Japanese literature, but also because, as hinted above, the approach followed by Asia Maior is historical in nature.<sup>7</sup> From this point of view, the analysis of a fun-

7. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Giorgio Borsa, Asia Maior e la storia dell'Asia come storia del presente' (Asia Maior and the history of Asia as history of the present time), *Quaderni Vietnamiti*, Vol. X/XII, n. 10-12, 2011-13, pp. 69-88.

damental junction in the cultural-political evolution of a key Asian state such as Japan can only help shed light on the present of Asia and, thus, on the present of the world.

Giulio Pugliese & Andrea Fischetti

# THE US-JAPAN SECURITY ALLIANCE – READY AND EQUIPPED TO DEAL WITH CHINA?

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*In 2021 Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait have made it back into US-Japan joint statements. Tokyo and Washington have talked (more or less) openly and on the record about what to do jointly in the worst-case scenario: a US-Chinese conflict over Taiwan. The quality and scope of Japanese contributions to US-led military operations in a Taiwan/Taiwan Strait crisis scenario depend on the circumstances and the crisis scenario. The devil would be very much in the details. However, China is very unlikely to attack or invade Taiwan (any time soon) even though Tokyo and Washington – together with other like-minded countries in the region – are preparing for various worst-case scenarios. What China calls Western containment to «suppress» China and secure US (military) hegemony in the region is in reality Tokyo and Washington jointly preparing for various worst-case scenarios in reaction to Chinese very assertive regional security policies in general and policies related to territorial claims in particular.*

KEYWORDS – US-Japan Alliance; China containment; Taiwan; Taiwan Strait.

## 1. Introduction

The US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security was adopted in 1960.<sup>1</sup> In the treaty – usually referred to as the US-Japan Security Treaty<sup>2</sup> – Japan agreed to provide US forces with basing rights on its soil in exchange for the provision of security against external threats (see its Article VI). The treaty's Article V stipulates that the US will defend Japan militarily in the case of an attack on Japanese territory. The treaty, however, does not oblige Japan to defend the US and US territory in the case of an attack on US territory. When a revised version of the US-Japan defence guidelines was adopted in 2015<sup>3</sup>, Japan was still not obliged to militarily defend US territory or US troops stationed on Japanese territory in the

1. See Japan-US Security Treaty/Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States of America (<https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html>).

2. Initially (in 1952) called the Mutual Security Pact (1952) until it was renamed in 1960.

3. See 'The Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) Japan*, 27 April 2015 (<https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000078188.pdf>).



case of any given regional military contingency. However, in 2015 Japan's Self-Defence Forces (SDF) were authorized to fight alongside and defend US military forces if a regional military contingency/conflict poses a direct threat to Japan's national security. This was authorized in a set of national security laws adopted in the same year and by the Japanese Cabinet Legislation Bureau (CLB) which on the government's behalf re-interpreted the right to collective self-defence stipulated in Chapter VII Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, in the case of a regional military contingency that involves the US but not necessarily poses an imminent and direct threat to Japanese national territory, it is indeed very likely that Japan would always and even before constitutional re-interpretation have militarily collaborated with the US. Japan's constitutional re-interpretation in 2015 was controversial<sup>5</sup> but equipped Japan's military with a legal base to execute the right to collective self-defence. That was welcomed by those and inside and outside Japan who for a long time had been wanting the country to become 'normal', i.e. a country that authorizes its armed forces to military defend themselves and other countries' soldiers in the case of a military contingency. The critics at the time feared that Tokyo's national security laws could be interpreted and applied so as to allow Japanese armed forces not only to execute the right to collective self-defence in the case of US-Japanese military cooperation for the purpose of defending Japanese national territory, but instead and also used to authorize the Japanese military to fight alongside the US military even if the conflict in question did not pose a direct threat to Japanese territory. Moreover, the definition and interpretation of what constitutes «individual self-defence», i.e. defence of Japanese territory in the case of an attack on Japanese territory, is «adjustable» as Tokyo has demonstrated when it contributed to the US-led military operations in Afghanistan (2001-2009) and Iraq (2004-2006). At the time, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi declared that Japanese (non-combat) contributions to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq constituted acts of individual self-defence (as opposed to acts of collective self-defence) and therefore did not violate Article 9 of the Japanese constitution. Koizumi explained that assisting the US – in Afghanistan with rear-area logistical support supplying naval vessels with fuel in the Indian Ocean and in Iraq with reconstruction work in southern Iraq – were both acts of individual self-defence as such contributions contributed to – at least as far Koizumi at the time was concerned – fighting international terrorism. This in turn, Koizumi explained at the time, made a contribu-

4. Until 2015, the Cabinet Legislation Bureau stipulated that Japan as a member of the United Nations has the right in principle to execute collective self-defence. However, Japan's war-renouncing constitution (Article 9 of the Japanese constitution) prohibits Japan's Self-Defence Forces from actually executing that right.

5. Leading the political opposition and parts of Japan's civil society to accuse the LDP of violating Japan's war-renouncing constitution.

tion to keeping international terrorists from entering Japan.<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, this was not a very credible attempt to sell Japanese contributions to the war against terror to the Japanese but was certainly good and credible for those in LDP policymaking circles who like Koizumi wanted Japan to make more substantial and in-person contributions to international security at the time.

Roughly 55,000 US troops are stationed in US bases on Japanese territory. Roughly 75% of these troops<sup>7</sup> are stationed in Okinawa, and US military bases occupy close to 20 per cent of Okinawa's land mass. The US maintains 89 military facilities on Japanese territory and the Japanese government is paying nearly \$2 billion a year for the stationing of US forces in Japan (the so-called 'host nation support'). In April 2015 Tokyo and Washington adopted new bilateral defence guidelines, i.e. guidelines which define the nature of and procedures for bilateral US-Japan security and defence cooperation. The 2015 defence guidelines stipulate joint development of military technology, bilateral cooperation on cyber-security, the use of space for defence purposes and ballistic missile cooperation. Furthermore, the guidelines contain provisions which enable Washington and Tokyo to jointly defend the Japanese-controlled Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea and provisions on the joint defence of sea lanes and Japanese contributions to US military operations beyond East Asia. The guidelines also foresee increased US-Japanese joint military training activities and shared use of military facilities to further enhance interoperability between US and Japanese military forces.

Is the US-Japan security alliance equipped with the instruments to counter China in the case of a Chinese kinetic attack on Taiwan? Yes. Will it have to do this in the months and years ahead? Probably not. Indeed, for the time being, it remains unlikely that Washington and Beijing will go to war over Taiwan. That said, however, China's increasingly frequent intrusions into the south-western sector of Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ) have undoubtedly increased the likelihood of Chinese-Taiwanese clash over Taiwan's ADIZ. This in turn could lead to US involvement in a Chinese-Taiwanese conflict if Washington – alone or with Japan – decided to militarily defend Taiwan. Against the background of increasingly assertive and aggressive Chinese behaviour over Taiwan's ADIZ and in Japanese-controlled territorial waters in the East China Sea, Washington and Tokyo have in 2021 repeatedly reiterated that Taiwan/Taiwan Strait and East China Sea crisis scenarios are part of bilateral US-Japan defence planning.

6. For details, see Aurelia George Mulgan, 'Japan's Defence Dilemma', *Security Challenges*, Vol 1, No.1 2005, pp. 59-72. This constitutional interpretation was very controversial in Japan, like the Japanese missions in the Indian Ocean in support of the US-led war in Afghanistan and Iraq themselves.

7. Roughly 30,000.

Almost needless to say that Beijing warns that Washington and Tokyo equipping their bilateral security with the resources and instruments to deal with a Taiwan Strait crisis further aggravates an already existing security dilemma in East Asia.<sup>8</sup> A part of East Asia's security dilemma involving the US and China can be summarized as follows: measures and policies declared as «defensive» by the US and Japan are interpreted as «offensive» by China, in turn motivating Beijing to adopt «defensive» policies of its own (which in turn are then interpreted as «offensive» by Washington and Tokyo) However, that is – putting it bluntly – not what is taking place in East Asia. Instead, it is accurate to conclude that the aforementioned Chinese policies are not the result of such a security dilemma. This is because China is actively challenging and changing the existing territorial status quo in Asia, which is clearly not a defensive policy. Instead, intruding in the territorial waters and airspace of other countries and building military bases on artificial islands in disputed areas are aggressive policies and are indeed being perceived as such in Washington and Tokyo. Consequently, this is not an action-counteraction chain of events that could be interpreted as a security dilemma. Frequent intrusions into Taiwan's ADIZ, intrusions in Japanese-controlled territorial waters in the East China Sea,<sup>9</sup> and the construction of military bases on Chinese-built artificial islands/geographical features close to and around disputed islands in the South China Sea have consequences for East Asian security.<sup>10</sup>

8. For further details see e.g. Ryo Sahashi, 'Japan's Strategy Amid US-China Confrontation', *China International Strategy Review* 2 November 2020, pp. 232-245

9. Around the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands.

10. China has built military bases on artificially built islands close to disputed islands in the South China Sea. Satellite footage shows that Beijing has over recent years accelerated the construction of military facilities in the South China Sea. This footage shows what is most probably infrastructure for radars and antennae mounts as part of a military base on Mischief Reef. The Mischief is a ring-shaped coral reef located roughly 250 km from the Philippines and has de facto been occupied by China since 1995. It is the kind of reef that China cannot legitimately claim as part of its territory as the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruled in 2016. Other satellite pictures taken earlier in March 2021 show that China has reclaimed land to extend Subi Reef in and around the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Furthermore, since 2014, China has transformed numerous reefs and sandbars – typically far from its own shoreline – into man-made artificial islands fortified with missiles, runways and various weapons systems. In the Spratly archipelago, claimed by Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam, Beijing has built roughly 13 square kilometres of artificial islands on top of reefs and rock (on which it has deployed missiles). For details, see e.g., 'South China Sea: Satellite Images Show China Building Full-Blown Military Bases on Artificial Islands', *NZ Herald.co.nz*, 21 February 2021 (<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/south-china-sea-satellite-images-show-china-building-full-blown-military-bases-on-artificial-islands/DAM22R4VYCYKYZRPRION7ISXU/>). Also Kristin Huang, 'South China Sea: China has Extended another Spratly Islands Reef, Photos Show', *South China Morning Post*, 24 March 2021 (<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3126656/south-china-sea-beijing-has-extended-another-spratly-islands>).

Beijing in turn is brushing all of this off as «interference» or «meddling» in Chinese internal affairs, but unlike Beijing, Tokyo and Washington and (many) other like-minded countries in the region agree that security in the Taiwan Strait and safeguarding Japanese territorial integrity in the East China Sea do not fall in the category of Chinese «internal affairs.» In reality, i.e. reality is defined outside of Chinese policymaking and propaganda circles, they are security issues relevant to regional stability and security. Certainly, US-Japanese military cooperation in the case of a Taiwan crisis scenario, i.e. US-Japanese military cooperation defending Taiwan in the case of a Chinese attack, has undoubtedly always been on the US-Japan policy planning agenda. When in 1997 the US and Japan revised their bilateral defence guidelines, the guidelines spoke about US-Japanese military cooperation in «areas surrounding Japan» While it was clear and obvious that both Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait are part of the geographical concept of «areas surrounding Japan», Tokyo and Washington at the time maintained that «areas surrounding Japan» was not a geographical concept but instead defined as a «situational concept». While it was indeed obvious and perceived and interpreted as such by scholars and policymakers at the time (especially and obviously among Chinese policymakers and scholars) that «areas surrounding Japan» was without much doubt an euphemism for Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait, Washington and Tokyo maintained that such areas can be anywhere and beyond and outside Asia – areas where the US and Japan decide to cooperate militarily when the «situation» calls for such cooperation, e.g. Japan's contributions to the US-led wars in Afghanistan in 2001-2009<sup>11</sup> and Iraq in 2004-2006.<sup>12</sup> While Japan's missions in the Indian Ocean refuelling US and British warships engaged in the military campaign in Afghanistan and Tokyo's Iraqi reconstruction mission were authorized by laws adopted under Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, the missions at the time were interpreted as confirmation that the aforementioned US-Japan cooperation in «areas surrounding Japan» is indeed not a geographical but instead the aforementioned «situational» concept.

11. Japanese navy vessels were engaged in a refuelling mission in the Indian Ocean, providing US and British navy vessels with fuel. The US and British vessels brought military troops to and back from Afghanistan.

12. 1,000 Japanese Self-Defence Forces (SDF) were at the time deployed to Samawah in southern Iraq engaged in a reconstruction mission. Due to Japan's war-renouncing constitution, Japanese troops were deployed to Iraq on the condition that they would face next to no risk of getting involved in military fighting in Iraq.

## 2. *Putting China Containment on Paper*

A US Department of State document published in March 2021 declared that the US and Japan are committed to working together on shared challenges, including «countering malign influences and PRC provocations in Asia and around the world».<sup>13</sup> This was shortly before Washington and Tokyo's foreign and defence ministers met for their «Two-Plus-Two» dialogue. Washington and Tokyo voiced their joint concerns about a newly adopted Chinese law that authorizes its coast guard to fire at foreign ships in contested Asian territorial waters, including in the South China Sea. In January 2021 Beijing adopted a law that explicitly authorizes the country's coast guard to fire at foreign vessels.<sup>14</sup> The new Chinese coast guard law has led to concerns in Japan as the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) in 2020 and 2021 sailed hundreds of times into Japanese-controlled territorial waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.<sup>15</sup> While this is not to say that Beijing is deploying coast guard vessels in the East China Sea to pick a fight with the Japanese navy and/or coast guard, it nonetheless signals that in principle it allows its coast guard to «defend» Chinese-claimed territorial waters and territories far from the Chinese coastline.<sup>16</sup> In fact, Beijing has (in the South China Sea) in the past used its coast guard to force foreign fishing vessels out of waters in the South China Sea that China claims are part of Chinese territory. Certainly, these waters are not contested and are – at least as far as China is concerned – «unalienable» parts of Chinese territory – like more than 90% of the 3.5-million-square-kilometre South China Sea.<sup>17</sup>

13. Kobara, Junnosuke, 'US and Japan Take on China Provocations with Unbreakable Alliance', *Nikkei Asia*, 15 March 2021 (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/US-and-Japan-take-on-China-provocations-with-unbreakable-alliance>).

14. See e.g. 'Force Majeure, 'China's Coast Guard Law in Context', *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Washington D.C., 30 March 2021 (<https://amti.csis.org/force-majeure-chinas-coast-guard-law-in-context/>). Furthermore, see Yew Lun Tian, 'China Authorises Coast Guard to Fire on Foreign Vessels if Needed', *Reuters*, 22 January 2021 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-coastguard-law-idUSKBN29R1ER>). Also see Gurjit Singh, 'Return of the Samurai Spirit – Japan Defense White Paper 2021', Chanakya Forum, 18 July 2021 (<https://chanakyaforum.com/return-of-the-samurai-spirit-japan-defense-white-paper-2021/>).

15. Among other things, the law allows Chinese coast guard personnel to demolish other countries' structures built on Chinese-claimed reefs and inspect foreign vessels in waters claimed by China.

16. Certainly, China claims the Senkaku Islands as part of its national territory, meaning that how China defines its coastlines is fundamentally different to how other countries define them.

17. See also Ralph Jennings, 'Increase in South China Naval Activity Expected to Provoke Beijing', *VOA News*, 27 August 2021 (<https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/voa-news-china/increase-south-china-sea-naval-activity-expected-provoke-beijing>).

The aforementioned Chinese maritime and territorial expansionism had consequences in 2021 - the year that «Taiwan» and «peace and security in the Taiwan Strait» made it again<sup>18</sup> into official Japanese, US and US-Japan statements. In April 2021, US President Joe Biden and then Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga<sup>19</sup> held a bilateral summit. Biden and Suga jointly announced they would «take on the challenges from China and ensure that the future of the Indo-Pacific is free and open.»<sup>20</sup> Security in the Taiwan Strait was also mentioned in the statement: «We underscore the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encourage the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues».<sup>21</sup> While press reports after the summit pointed out that the last time Taiwan was mentioned in a US-Japan joint statement was in 1969 (during a meeting between then US President Richard Nixon and Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato), Adam Liff from the Brookings Institution pointed out that «Taiwan» was not even mentioned in that statement. Instead, it mentioned the «Taiwan Strait», leading Liff to conclude that part of the joint statement was «anodyne» and was in line with Japan's «strategic ambiguity» towards Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait.<sup>22</sup> Certainly this did not – at least judging by the reaction of the Chinese state-controlled press – make a difference to China: whether Taiwan or instead «only» the Taiwan Strait was mentioned in the official US-Japan statement is irrelevant: both are «interference» in China's internal affairs as far as Beijing is concerned. In other words, the effectiveness and *raison d'être* of Japan's alleged «strategic ambiguity» must be put in doubt as it not perceived as such in Beijing. For Beijing, at least so it seems, it is sufficient to hear «Taiwan» as in «Taiwan Strait» to conclude for itself that an allegedly ambiguous concept is instead a very unambiguous one.

18. After decades of not and never being mentioned in joint official US-Japan statements.

19. On September 3, Suga announced he would not run for election as LDP party leader later in September.

20. See Ken Moriyasu, 'Biden and Suga Refer to 'Peace and Stability of Taiwan Strait' in Statement', *Nikkei Asia*, 17 April 2021 (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Biden-and-Suga-refer-to-peace-and-stability-of-Taiwan-Strait-in-statement>).

21. See 'US-Japan Joint Leader's Statement: US-Japan Global Partnership for a New Era', *The White House*, 16 April 2021 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/16/u-s-japan-joint-leaders-statement-u-s-japan-global-partnership-for-a-new-era/>)

22. Adam P. Liff, 'Has Japan's Policy Toward the Taiwan Strait Changed?', *Brookings*, 23 August 2021 (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/08/23/has-japans-policy-toward-the-taiwan-strait-changed/>).

Finally, Washington in March 2021 reiterated its policy stating that the Senkaku Islands/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea<sup>23</sup> are covered by Article 5 of the US-Japan Security. In that month, the US State Department published a US-Japan alliance fact sheet entitled «Reaffirming the Unbreakable US-Japan Alliance». «The United States' commitment to the defense of Japan is absolute», the fact sheet reads. «The United States affirms the Senkaku Islands fall within the scope of Article V of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, and we remain opposed to any unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the East China Sea or undermine Japan's administration of these islands».<sup>24</sup>

Japan's defence white paper entitled «Defense of Japan» published in July 2021 is also explicit about Tokyo's interest in and commitment to making – together with its alliance partner Washington – a contribution to keeping China from attacking and invading Taiwan. The paper mentions the Taiwan Strait several times and among other things points out that «China has further intensified military activities around Taiwan including Chinese aircrafts entering the southwestern airspace of Taiwan. Stabilizing the situation surrounding Taiwan is important for Japan's security and the stability of the international community». Furthermore, the paper is explicit about the need to continue equipping Taiwan with weapons and weapon technology to defend itself against China: «The overall military balance between China and Taiwan is tilting to China's favour, and the gap appears to be growing year by year. Attention should be paid to trends such as the strengthening of Chinese and Taiwanese forces, the sale of weapons to Taiwan by the United States, and Taiwan's own development of its main military equipment», the paper reads.<sup>25</sup> In 2014, Japan lifted its ban on exporting weapons and weapon technology and since then Japanese weapons contractors have been cooperating with US and also European counterparts (the UK, France and Germany). Fur-

23. The Senkaku Islands have been part of Japanese territory since the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894-1895. China, however, claims that the islands (which are referred to as the Diaoyu Islands in China) have since the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) been part of Chinese territory. When Tokyo annexed the islands in 1895, it maintained that they were instead «terra nullius» and hence not part of Chinese territory. Because the Senkaku Islands were not part of the territories Japan was obliged to render to China with the adoption of the *San Francisco Peace Treaty* in 1951, Tokyo maintains that the islands continue to be part of Japanese territory today. The islands were under US administration until 1972 until they were – together with Okinawa - formally returned to Japanese sovereignty in May 1972. Consequently, Tokyo maintains that there is no territorial conflict with Beijing over the Senkaku Islands.

24. See 'Reaffirming the Unbreakable US-Japan Alliance, US Department of State', *Fact Sheet, Office of the Spokesperson*, 15 March 2021 (<https://www.state.gov/reaffirming-the-unbreakable-u-s-japan-alliance/>).

25. 'Defense of Japan 2021', *Ministry of Defense (MOD)*, July 2021 ([https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w\\_paper/wp2021/DOJ2021\\_Digest\\_EN.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2021/DOJ2021_Digest_EN.pdf)).

thermore, since lifting the ban Japan has sold defence equipment to the Philippines,<sup>26</sup> and in 2020 it signed a bilateral weapons export agreement with Vietnam.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, in April 2021 it was reported that Tokyo will be selling up to eight of its new Nogami-class stealth frigates to the Indonesian Navy.<sup>28</sup> While the Japanese defence white paper does not say anything about Tokyo and Japanese weapons contractors cooperating with Taipei and Taiwanese weapons contractors, Tokyo and Taipei have very recently started jointly thinking out loud about military exchanges and co-operation. During a meeting between Japanese Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP) lawmakers and lawmakers from Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in August 2021, bilateral military exchanges were discussed, including cooperation between their coast guard forces.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, it is probably not unrealistic to assume that Tokyo and Taiwan – either bilaterally or together with Washington – are engaged in off-the-record consultations on how to militarily cooperate in a Taiwan Strait crisis scenario. Already in 2019 it emerged e.g. that Japanese experts are believed to have assisted Taiwan with the development of the country's indigenous submarine programme.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, it cannot be excluded that – should China continue to increase military pressure onto Taiwan – Japan joins the US in exporting weapons and weapons technology to Taiwan. To be sure, Japan lifting the ban to export weapons and weapons technology in 2014 did not authorize Japanese weapons contractors to export weapons to countries part of or involved in a military conflict. However, growing Chinese military pressure onto Taiwan and the aforementioned unlawful Chinese territorial expansionism in the East and South China Seas might in the future encourage Japanese policymakers to join US counterparts in arming Taiwan.

26. In June 2020, Mitsubishi Electric sold maritime radars to the Philippines.

27. See John Wright, 'Japan's Arms Exports: A Prudent Possibility Amid Enduring Challenges', *The Diplomat*, 26 January 2021 (<https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/japans-arms-exports-a-prudent-possibility-amid-enduring-challenges/>).

28. <sup>25</sup> Built by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and Mitsui Engineering and Shipbuilding at Shipyards in Tamano and Nagasaki. For details see Sebastian Strangio, 'Japan could Deliver 8 Cutting-Edge Frigates to Indonesia', *The Diplomat*, 8 April 2021 (<https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/japan-could-deliver-8-cutting-edge-frigates-to-indonesia/>).

29. See 'Taiwan, Japan Ruling Parties Discuss China, Military Cooperation', *Reuters*, 27 August 2021 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-japan-ruling-parties-discuss-china-military-cooperation-2021-08-27/>).

30. See Howard Wang, 'Japan Considers a New Security Relationship Via Networking with Taiwan', *China Brief* 29 May 2019 (<https://jamestown.org/program/japan-considers-a-new-security-relationship-via-networking-with-taiwan/>).



### 3. *Worst-case Scenarios*

Shortly after the aforementioned US-Japan summit in April, then Japanese Prime Minister Suga struck a more cautious tone, saying that mentioning the Taiwan Strait in the April 2021 joint US-Japan statement «does not presuppose Japanese military involvement» in a Taiwan crisis scenario. While the South China Morning Post at the time concluded that Tokyo seemingly got «cold feet» and therefore decided to downplay what was jointly issued with Washington on Taiwan in April<sup>31</sup>, Rand scholar Jeffrey Hornung argues that what Suga said in the Japanese parliament does not contradict what Tokyo and Washington jointly said and issued on Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait. «Not being a formal ally of Taiwan, it would be odd for Japan to declare an unconditional military commitment in any situation. Suga's statement could best be interpreted as taking a page out of the United States' own playbook on strategic ambiguity. As long as Japan stays vague on its level of commitment, China is forced to consider both US and Japanese possible involvement in any plans it has to invade Taiwan», he writes in *Foreign Policy*.<sup>32</sup> Maybe. However it can also be assumed that Chinese foreign policymakers have already a long time ago concluded that Japan would in any event – either directly or indirectly – be involved in any possible US-Chinese military clash over Taiwan. Put differently: Beijing knows that Tokyo would be part of a military clash with Washington and is prepared (and preparing) for such a scenario even if it meant a military confrontation not with one but indeed two heavily armed opponents. This in turn could/would mean that Beijing does not consider the aforementioned Japanese ambiguity an obstacle standing in the way of attacking Taiwan. In the same *Foreign Policy* article, Jeffrey Hornung outlines what Washington could/would in the case of a Taiwan Strait crisis scenario request from Japan and what Japan would be able and prepared to provide the US with

31. See also Julian Ryall, 'Japan Troops Won't get Involved if China Invades Taiwan, PM Yoshihide Suga Says', *South China Morning Post*, 21 April 2021 (<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3130423/japan-troops-wont-get-involved-if-china-invades-taiwan-pm>).

32. Jeffrey Hornung 'What the United States Wants from Japan in Taiwan', *Foreign Policy*, 10 May 2021, (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/10/what-the-united-states-wants-from-japan-in-taiwan/>). See also Julian Ryall, 'Japan Troops Won't get Involved if China Invades Taiwan, PM Yoshihide Suga Says', *South China Morning Post*, 21 April 2021 (<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3130423/japan-troops-wont-get-involved-if-china-invades-taiwan-pm>). Japan's defence minister Nobuo Kishi has in September 2021 been less ambiguous about a possible Japanese involvement in a Taiwan Strait crisis scenario when he said that «as Taiwan is an important ally of Japan and the two are only separated by a short distance, Tokyo cannot stand aside when events in Taiwan occur.» Cited in Matthew Strong, 'Japan's Defense Minister Says Tokyo Cannot Stand Aside from Developments in Taiwan', *Taiwan News*, 7 September 2021 (<https://www.taiwanews.com.tw/en/news/4282365>).

in terms of support. What Hornung calls «minimum» Japanese support for the US in the case of a conflict with China is Japan allowing Washington to use US bases in Japan for combat operations (deploying troops, navy vessels and aircraft from the bases). In 1960, Tokyo<sup>33</sup> and Washington agreed through a so-called «exchange of notes» that they would have what was referred to as «prior consultations», during which Washington would (have to) explain to Tokyo which purpose US bases on Japanese territory would be used for (however, in that agreement it was not mentioned or clarified whether Tokyo would have the option to not allow the US to use US bases on Japanese territory for combat operations in Asia).<sup>34</sup> Certainly, not being informed in advance on the nature of a US operation using US bases on Japanese territory could also be interpreted as «convenient» in Tokyo, shielding Japan from the accusation of directly contributing to US-led military wars. When in 1996 Washington deployed a Japan-based aircraft carrier in the Taiwan Strait to react to Chinese attempts to intimidate Taipei when it was holding its (first) democratic presidential election, then Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto countered Chinese accusations that Japan was contributing to and participating in what China at the time referred to as an «act of aggression against China» by being ambiguous: he did not specify whether or not he and his government were informed by the US about the purpose of the aircraft carrier's deployment (or destination) before it was deployed to the Taiwan Strait. At the time this also worked very well for the US. The Japanese journalist Yoichi Funabashi wrote in his book «Alliance Adrift» (1999) that Washington's policymakers chose not to opt for prior consultations with Japan in order to avoid receiving official permission from Japan to deploy a US aircraft carrier from a US base on Japanese territory in the Taiwan Strait.<sup>35</sup>

The aforementioned first scenario of Japanese indirect and/or rear-area support is realistic, Hornung points out, in the case of a US-Sino military conflict that does not include a Chinese military attack on Japan. Further Japanese (more direct) contributions that go beyond allowing Washington to use its bases in Japan, Hornung explains, depend on how Tokyo «defines» the situation. If Japan continues not to be directly attacked in the case of a US-Chinese conflict, Tokyo, Hornung argues, could define that the conflict has «important influence» on Japanese security. In that case, Japanese contributions would continue to remain limited to non-combat

33. At the time governed by the very controversial and convicted A-class criminal of war Kishi Nobusuke, grandfather of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo.

34. For details, see 'Exchanged Notes, Regarding the Implementation of Article VI of Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States of America', *Japan's Foreign Relations-Basic Documents Vol. I*, pp. 963-965, 19 January 1960 (<https://worldjpn.grips.ac.jp/documents/texts/docs/19600119.T2E.html>).

35. For details, see Yoichi Funabashi, 'Alliance Adrift', *Council on Foreign Relations Book*, Council on Foreign Relations Press 1999, pp.351-366.

«rear-area support», such as logistical support in Japan, including supply, maintenance, transport and medical support and services. However, it is not clear – because consecutive Japanese governments have never officially clarified that – whether an attack on US military forces stationed on Japanese territory would indeed constitute a direct attack on Japan. Certainly, under realistic crisis scenario circumstances the above would most probably amount to little more than semantic hair-splitting, as it would be very difficult (if not possible) for a Japanese government to decide not to respond – together with the US military – with military force to an attack on US forces stationed on Japanese territory.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. *And Taiwan again*

In June 2021 Japanese State Minister of Defence Yasuhide Nakayama gave a speech at the Hudson Institute in the US during which he was very explicit about Japanese concerns about Sino-Russian military cooperation in Asia. Nakayama said that such cooperation is posing a potential threat to Japan and also Taiwan. Therefore, Nakayama explained, Japan and its allies are charged with the task of protecting Taiwan as a «democratic country» Nakayama talked about improving and expanding US-Japan interoperability, and suggested that bilateral US-Japan interoperability could be extended to trilateral US-Japanese-Taiwanese interoperability.

Sidhart Kaushal from RUSI in London goes beyond possible Japanese rear-area support and suggests Japan should take a much more active role in a Taiwan Strait crisis scenario, calling Tokyo a «key actor» defending Taiwan: «In the longer term, should the country eventually shake off its self-imposed restrictions on the use of force, Japan could become a key actor in any effort to secure Taiwan. This, coupled with military and technological development allowing Taiwan itself to play a greater role in its own defence, would make it possible for the US to play the part of an enabling power in a Taiwan scenario, intervening with forces sufficient to tip the scales in favour of local partners, rather than achieving preponderance in a contested theatre itself», he writes. For this scenario to be realistic, i.e. Japan becoming a «key actor», the Japanese constitution would not even have to be revised.<sup>37</sup> Kaushal goes on to argue that Taiwan is «vital to the security of Japan by the very nature of its position» (as a large part of Japanese energy imports are

36. See Jeffrey Hornung, 'Japan's Contributions in an East China Sea Contingency', *Rand Corporation Research Report* 2020 ([https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA314-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA314-1.html)).

37. See Sidhart Kaushal, 'Japan's Evolving Policy on Taiwan and the US-Japan Alliance: Towards a Nixon Doctrine for Northeast Asia?', *RUSI Commentary*, 30 July 2021 (<https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/japans-evolving-policy-taiwan-and-us-japan-alliance-towards-nixon-doctrine-northeast-asia>).

shipped through the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, as he points out) and maintains that the Japanese navy (Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, JMSDF) would be better positioned to defend Taiwan than US forces. «Unlike rotationally deployed US forces that must be redeployed from the continental US – straining readiness cycles – the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) is regionally postured», he writes. The Japanese navy, Kaushal writes, has 34 destroyers and 11 frigates, and is therefore Northeast Asia's largest force of permanently stationed major surface combatants (vessels of destroyer size or greater): «Japan's large and capable fleet of Soryu-class diesel-electric submarines could arguably be better suited to denying shallow littoral waters in and around the Taiwan Strait to PLA Navy vessels than US nuclear-powered submarines, which are optimized to operate in deeper waters».

### 5. *How far can China go?*

The scholar Berkshire Miller writes that «Tokyo and Washington will have to focus on a range of longstanding security irritants in the region and challenges to the rules-based order. In the South China Sea, Beijing continues to practice salami-slicing tactics aimed at ensuring its de-facto control of much of the key waterway through extensive land reclamation, the deployment of military equipment and the diplomatic splitting of states in ASEAN.<sup>38</sup> While China is – to put it bluntly – doing all of this, Miller, however, does not suggest what the US and Japan should do when he writes that Washington and Tokyo have to «focus on a range of longstanding security irritants». From a policy point of view, the question is indeed or should be what the US and Japan will do about all of that: will they – individually or jointly – continue to monitor the above-mentioned aggressive and coercive Chinese regional policies or will they instead jointly formulate and adopt policies on the ground deterring and keeping China from unlawfully building bases on disputed islands in the South China Sea and deter Chinese coast guard vessels from intruding in Japanese-controlled territorial waters? For now it is the former: Washington and Tokyo voice their concerns about China's aggressive and expansionist regional policies without doing anything about them. Put differently, the US and Japan are not – at least not yet – able and/or willing to oblige China to not continue building military bases on disputed islands in the South China Sea and do not intervene when

38. See Berkshire J. Miller, 'Anchoring the US-Japan Alliance in the Suga-Biden Era', *Global Asia*, Vol. 16, No. 2, June 2021 ([https://www.globalasia.org/v16no2/feature/anchoring-the-us-japan-alliance-in-the-suga-biden-era\\_j-berkshire-miller](https://www.globalasia.org/v16no2/feature/anchoring-the-us-japan-alliance-in-the-suga-biden-era_j-berkshire-miller)). On Taiwan-Japan relations in 2021 see also: Giulio Pugliese & Corey Wallace, 'Japan 2021: The Liberal Democratic Party Emerges Stronger Despite Domestic Tumult', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXII / 2021, pp.63-94.

Chinese fighter jets intrude in Taiwan's ADIZ. This in turn raises the question of what China will have to do in order to provoke a joint US-Japanese reaction – a reaction going beyond words – to Chinese aggressive policies with an indirect or direct impact on US and Japanese security interests. Will it have to invade Taiwan and/or occupy the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea?

In May 2021 the scholars Tsutsui Kiyoteru and Charles Grabtree wrote that «the US-Japan alliance is obviously central in the coalition of democratic nations concerned about China's ambitions. The primary goal of these countries ought to be walking the thin line between demonstrating their resolve to counter any aggressive behaviour by China with force and avoiding any unnecessary provocation against China».<sup>39</sup> Again and like Berkshire Miller above, Kiyoteru and Grabtree do not suggest and/or explain what exactly Washington and Tokyo should do to counter the aforementioned aggressive Chinese behaviour. Their attempt to add further substance in terms of policy prescriptions does not necessarily add much substance either on how to deter Chinese aggressive policies in general and territorial expansionism in particular when they write that «toward that end, the most promising framework is the Quad that includes India and Australia in addition to Japan and the US». While Beijing publicly downplays the significance of the Quad (typically portraying it as an ill-fated US-led grouping of countries to «suppress» China<sup>40</sup>), for Beijing the Quad is part of a US-led China containment policy.<sup>41</sup> In August 2021, the Quad provided Beijing with further 'evidence' towards that end. Without revealing details, the US Department of State announced at the time that during the virtual meeting of Quad country leaders «peace and security in the Taiwan Strait» were discussed.<sup>42</sup>

39. See Kiyoteru, Tsutsui, Grabtree, Charles, 'China Looms Large, Despite a Strong US-Japan Alliance', *Commentary Stanford Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University*, 14 May 2021 (<https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/china-looms-large-despite-strong-us-japan-alliance>).

40. First proposed by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Among other things, the four Quad countries conduct military exercises in the region and invite other like-minded countries with a naval presence in the region (like the UK and France) to join these exercises. For further details, see, e.g., Patrick Gerard Buchan, Benjamin Rimland, 'Defining the Diamond: The Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue', *CSIS Brief, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 16 March 2020 (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/defining-diamond-past-present-and-future-quadrilateral-security-dialogue>).

41. See also 'The Quad is Finding its Purpose, at Last', *The Economist*, 12 June 2021 (<https://www.economist.com/asia/2021/06/12/the-quad-is-finding-its-purpose-at-last>).

42. See 'US, Japan, other Quad Members Discuss Taiwan's Peace and Security', *Kyodo News*, 13 August 2021 (<https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2021/08/b317c-cd991eb-us-japan-other-quad-members-discuss-taiwans-peace-and-security.html>).

## 6. *What does China want anyway?*

Chinese policymakers and diplomats claim – continuously and through numerous channels<sup>43</sup> – to be victims of Washington and Tokyo teaming up to contain and «suppress» China. Beijing claims that Washington is using its allies and alliances in the West and Asia (including Japan and Australia) to turn its bilateral conflicts and disagreements with China into conflicts and disagreements between China and the West in general.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, Beijing and the government’s state-controlled nationalist tabloid newspapers like the *Global Times* publish a constant stream of articles and editorials which depict the US – together with its allies – as determined to «suppress Chinese economic development»,<sup>45</sup> bad old Cold War-style containment, Beijing’s policymakers and their so-called ‘wolf-warrior’ diplomats complain about via Twitter in a (very) frequent basis.

But is China preparing to attack and invade Taiwan at all, or anytime soon? Richard Bush, Bonnie Glaser and Ryan Haas do not think so and caution that what they call «doomsday predictions» of Beijing attacking Taiwan as soon as it is able to do not reflect what China is planning to do in the years ahead. China, they argue, has little to gain from attacking and seeking to unify Mainland China with Taiwan by force.<sup>46</sup> Instead, the three scholars point out, China’s priority today and in the foreseeable future is to deter Taiwanese independence as opposed to achieving reunification through military force. Attempts to invade Taiwan would, as they write, «very likely invite a military conflict with the United States. Such a conflict would be difficult to limit from escalating or spreading beyond the Taiwan Strait. Under such circumstances, Beijing could not be assured of absolute victory, and anything short of quick and absolute unification would risk undermining Chinese Communist Party legitimacy at home». Instead, they conclude that Beijing is putting Taiwan under pressure with different (non-military) means (and will continue to do so). «China has targeted Taiwan economical-

43. Increasingly often via Twitter, which is used a lot by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to spread Chinese government propaganda, conspiracy theories and enormous amounts of disinformation (while Twitter is not accessible to ordinary Chinese citizens). The US and US policies towards China are the favourite targets of the ministry’s disinformation campaigns. Referring to the US-Japan alliance as directed against China and an instrument to contain China, facilitate Japanese rearmament and secure US military hegemony in Asia is part of this.

44. See, e.g. ‘China should Work to Tear Down US-Built «Western Wall»’, *Global Times*, 3 August 2021 (<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1230495.shtml>).

45. ‘US Attempt to Use «Small Digital Circle Containment» Set to Fail’, *Global Times*, 13 July 2021 (<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1228580.shtml>).

46. See Richard Bush, Bonnie Glaser, Ryan Haas, ‘Opinion: Don’t Help China by Hying Risk of War over Taiwan’, *NPR*, 8 April 2021 (<https://www.npr.org/2021/04/08/984524521/opinion-dont-help-china-by-hying-risk-of-war-over-taiwan>).

ly, sought to induce a brain drain of Taiwan's top engineers to the mainland, isolated Taiwan on the world stage, fomented social divisions inside Taiwan, launched cyberattacks and undertaken displays of military force». All of this together with and in addition to the current Chinese sabre-rattling as part of a strategy of seeking to send a defiant message of strength to the outside world in general and the US in particular. A message to the outside world which is probably also meant as re-assuring message to those in China who – like e.g. the country's so-called «Neo-Maoists» – accuse the political leadership of being «too soft» or «weak» in defending China against (alleged) «interference» in China's «internal affairs». <sup>47</sup>

Former high-ranking Japanese diplomat Hitoshi Tanaka <sup>48</sup> sounds optimistic (or over-optimistic for those who are sceptical about Tokyo's mediation and/or charm offensive skills) that Tokyo can facilitate dialogue between Washington and Beijing when he wrote in June 2021 that «Japan, as both a US ally and a neighbour with deep historical and cultural connections to China, can play an important role in helping facilitate deeper communication between the United States and China to ensure that tensions in the region do not escalate». <sup>49</sup> On paper this sounds conciliatory. Reality, however, as we have seen above, is very different: Japan today is clearly not in a position to «facilitate» «deeper» or – for that matter – any communication with China. China and its regional policies are largely to blame for this. Furthermore, if Tokyo were able to facilitate dialogue between Washington and Beijing (which it is not, at least not currently), the recent past has made it unambiguously clear that Beijing is not adjusting or changing its policies in accordance with «advice» from other countries. Instead, «advice» is instantly referred to as «interference» by Chinese policymakers. However, it should not go unmentioned that the kind of mediation proposed by the aforementioned Tanaka is also motivated by a Japanese fear of «entrapment», namely of involuntarily becoming part of a US-led war against China. <sup>50</sup>

47. China's «Neo-Maoists» (also referred to «New Left») have concluded that armed conflict with the US is as good as inevitable. For a detailed analysis on who the «Neo-Maoists» are and what they want, see Jude Blanchette, *China's New Red Guards: The Return of Radicalism and the Rebirth of Mao Zedong*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

48. Among others, Japan's former North Korea chief negotiator.

49. Hitoshi Tanaka, 'Deepening US-Japan Strategic Cooperation on China and the Indo-Pacific', *JCIE East Asia Insights*, June 2021 (<https://www.jcie.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/EAI-Jun-2021.pdf>).

50. For details, see, e.g., Yasuhiro Izumikawa, 'Explaining Japanese Anti-Militarism', *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Fall 2010), pp. 123-160.

## 7. *Conclusions*

As mentioned above, after the US-Japan summit in April 2021 Tokyo was quick to emphasize that Japan would only make a direct military contribution to a US-Chinese conflict over Taiwan if the security of Japanese territory were directly affected. As elaborated above, it is hard to imagine how any US-Chinese clash in East Asia and/or the Taiwan Strait could not have a direct impact on the security of Japanese territory. This in turn would/could mean that in the case of a military conflict with China Washington would in any event request a direct Japanese military contribution in support of US military operations (even if Japanese territory were not under attack). In the unlikely event of a US-Chinese military conflict over Taiwan, Japan would – at least indirectly if the situation/crisis is interpreted as not directly threatening Japanese territory – make a contribution to US military operations and fighting in the region. It would do this through «rear-area support», namely by providing the US military stationed on Japanese territory with logistical and medical support. However, the concept of «rear area support» is ambiguous: there is no consensus in the literature and in policymaking circles on whether such «rear area support» already constitutes a «real» contribution to a military crisis scenario.

In the past, Japanese scholars and policymakers have at times been concerned that US antagonistic policies towards China would have negative repercussions for Japanese-Chinese political, trade and investment relations. In other words, they feared becoming ‘entrapped’ in a conflict between Washington and Beijing. Such concerns are still around in Tokyo today but are arguably (far) less vocal than they were in the past. Because of the (very) assertive and indeed aggressive and expansionist Chinese regional policies, there is very little talk in Tokyo (as in Washington, Brussels and many EU member states too) of policies aimed at engaging with China. This is not because Japan and other like-minded and democratic countries are not willing to engage with China but because China has made it very clear that it does not see the need to get engaged. «Engagement» – at least in current circumstances and under the current political leadership – is a synonym for unwanted «interference» in China’s «internal affairs».

Beijing’s policymakers cannot be blamed for concluding that the US-Japan security alliance and the Quad are aimed at militarily containing China. They quite clearly are. What they can be accused of is pretending that China’s regional foreign and security policies in general and those related to territorial claims in the South China Sea in particular do not provoke a reaction. Put bluntly, sooner or later Beijing had to expect a reaction to its decision to dismiss international law as irrelevant and build civilian installations and military bases on disputed islands in the South China Sea, authorize its coast guard to fire at foreign vessels in disputed territorial waters, constantly violate Taiwan’s ADIZ and order Chinese fishing and coast guard



vessels to sail into Japanese-controlled territorial waters in the East China Sea. Certainly, Beijing sees all of this very differently by claiming «historical rights»: the islands Beijing is building military bases on in the South China Sea have been part of Chinese territory since the Ming Dynasty<sup>51</sup>, the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea were annexed by Japan in 1895 and Japan failed to return them to China after World War II and finally Taiwan is a Chinese province and hence an «internal» Chinese affair.

51. 1368-1644, followed by the Qing Dynasty, China's last imperial dynasty.

CHINA, UNITED STATES, COVID-19 AND THE LONG-STANDING QUESTION  
OF HUMAN RIGHTS:  
PROBLEMS OF A DICHOTOMOUS APPROACH

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*The paper aims to argue that the conflictual debate on human rights between China and United States is characterized by a dichotomous approach which still reflects a Cold War logic and can have a detrimental impact on the full understanding of social, economic, political processes which are undergoing during our age. The argument has been built through a case-study on US-China public discourses on COVID-19 and human rights, which posits that a dichotomous approach has prevented an objective reading of the pandemic processes underway and thus influenced the health crisis' management on both sides.*

KEYWORDS – Human rights; Chinese authoritarianism; COVID-19; dichotomy; historical perspective.

### *1. Introduction*

The issue of human rights (HR) has always featured strongly in US-China relations. It is a question that involves both cultural, economic and geopolitical relations. And it is, at the same time, a litmus test for the quality of the relationship itself.

The aim of this work is to highlight one of the main problems concerning the issue of human rights in the US-China relationship. The topic has indeed taken on a dichotomous dimension since the time of the Cold War, one that is identifiable in literature, public discourses and in the policies implemented, in particular, by the United States towards China. Thus, notwithstanding the fact that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 has, at least formally, sanctioned the indivisibility of these rights two diverse perspectives on human rights dominates acts and communications between these two countries. This difference in vision has also emerged in two distinct declarations: the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights promulgated in 1966, which came into force in 1976. These proclamations present political and civil rights protection which is formally guaranteed in liberal democracies in particular, and, conversely,

social and economic rights which, due to their collective character, are associated with socialist governments<sup>1</sup>.

The first part of the article is dedicated to a brief overview of the dichotomous perspective on human rights in the literature and on the historical origins of this perspective and its political use. In its second part, the paper discusses how this dichotomy still influences US-China public discourses on human rights using the case study of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper analyses the pandemic case-study through political speeches, reports and mass media representations. The study demonstrates how the dichotomy takes the form of an opposition between liberal democracy and Chinese authoritarianism and produces a stereotypical image of ‘The Other’ party, which prevented an objective assessment of the pandemic processes underway.

## 2. *A dichotomous approach on human rights: the literature’s major arguments*

The literature on China, United States and human rights is quite vast. Here the scope is to present a brief overview of the main arguments.

For decades, the debate on human rights and China has been animated by liberals and realists. The debate was focused on the study of the entrance of the People’s Republic of China into the international system of human rights and differences between the two perspectives concerning whether China would totally conform to the rules and values of the system.<sup>2</sup> Risse and Sikkink called this development ‘socialisation’, in which the final stage should have been the internalisation of the human rights norms into domestic practice, with a radical political transformation of the behaviour and of the internal structure of a state.<sup>3</sup> This transformation would entail a process of liberal democratisation and thus, as a matter of fact, these two perspectives were mainly focused on political and civil human rights, rather than on the economic and social ones. Liberals supported the success of the socialisation process in China. They believed that international cooperation would bring about a final acceptance of the norms and, consequently, a be-

1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations General Assembly (Resolution 217 A), Paris, 10 December 1948 (<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>).

2. Andrew Nathan, ‘Human Rights in Chinese Foreign Policy’, *The China Quarterly*, No. 139, September 1994, pp. 622-643; ‘China and the International Human Rights Regime’, in Elisabeth Economy & Michael Oksenberg, *China Joins the World: progress and prospects*, New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1999, pp. 136-160.

3. Thomas Risse & Kathryn Sikkink, ‘The socialization of international human rights’ norms into domestic practices: introduction’ in Risse Thomas, Ropp Stephen C. & Sikkink Kathryn (eds.), *The Power of Human Rights*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 1-38.

havioural change and a 'genuine commitment' to the human rights cause.<sup>4</sup> Realists, on the other hand, believed that the concern for state interests was stronger among the Chinese elite than was cooperation, and that China would never incorporate international norms on human rights into internal values and, as a consequence, would never change its political framework<sup>5</sup>. Recently, and in particular, since the beginning of Xi Jinping's government in 2012, the focus of the debate has changed and mainly targets the nature of China's own agenda of international human rights policy. There is a concentration on the prime reasons for the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) resilience and a study of the obstacles to the country's liberal democratisation. Furthermore, great attention is placed on the revisionist international influence of the Chinese illiberal model of national development as a new universal framework for the international human rights system.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the above-mentioned debate is viewed as an expression of US imperialism, from a left-wing perspective which takes up the argument of the Chinese New Left of the 90s.<sup>7</sup> According to this perspective, this hegemonic view on human rights is cast as a universal one which privileges civil and political rights and downsizes the importance of the collective economic and social rights to which China has chosen to give priority. This perspective dangerously contends that the Chinese political, social and economic system, for numerous reasons including China's territorial and demographic extension and Confucian tradition too, are not compatible with the protection of civil and political rights, especially if the People's Republic of China (PRC) plans to continue granting economic and social entitlements. The government often makes exceptions to human rights' international standards in the name of 'national conditions or interests', which usually involve social stability and territorial unity.<sup>8</sup> Currently this view is particularly evident in the contributions of the *Qiao Collective*, formed in January 2020 by intellectuals and activists of the Chinese diaspora, with the main aim of defending China, and what is considered to be 'Chinese socialism', against imperialist aggression.<sup>9</sup> This view does not take into consideration the fact that, at present, advocating civil rights in China also means

4. G. John Ikenberry, 'The future of liberal world order: internationalism after America', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90. No. 3, May/June 2011, pp. 56-68.

5. R. J. Vincent, *Human Rights and International Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986; Rosemary Foot, *Rights beyond borders: the global community and the struggle over human rights in China*, 2001

6. Chen Titus C & Hsu Chiahao, 'China's human rights foreign policy in the Xi Jinping era: normative revisionism shrouded in discursive moderation', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 1, May 2021, pp. 228-247.

7. Cfr. Wang Chaohua, *One China, Many Paths*, London: Verso, 2003.

8. Kang Xiaoguang, 'China: political development and political stability in the reform era', *Modern China Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2002.

9. For an overview of their major arguments please see 'China and the Left', *Monthly Review* on line, 1 October 2021.

supporting the social organisations and the assistance of poor and vulnerable people. The crackdowns on civil and political rights are detrimental for grassroots mobilisation in the name of equal social and economic rights.<sup>10</sup>

The past and the current human rights literature are thus characterized by a dichotomous perspective, pitting liberal democracy against Chinese authoritarianism.

### *3. A false and instrumental dichotomy: an historical perspective on human rights and China*

It is, thus, worth wondering when this dichotomous approach emerged and why. Historiography on the human rights debate in China and on the study of the emergence of the international human rights regime and China's role inside it, provides important instruments to stimulate a discussion and to unveil the origins of the dichotomy and its epistemological groundlessness in the current debate on human rights.

Recent findings pushed human rights historians to move beyond what research outcomes had argued. For a long time, the thought was that the international human rights regime, born in the aftermath of the Second World War with the promulgation of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, was mainly a by-product of the Western capitalist bloc. The declaration suggests that, on the contrary, the regime is the by-product of a concerted effort. Marina Svensson, in her work, indeed asserts that 'the deliberations of the UDHR do not reveal a simple West-East or North-South dichotomy'.<sup>11</sup> Historical results show, in fact, a convergence of the democratic liberal vision and the socialist one. The first, expressed in the civil and political rights, implied a limitation of the extension of the state-power described from article 5 to article 21. The latter, expressed in the social and economic rights, concerning the entitlement to social security, to work and to equal pay and work, the right to form trade unions, the right to rest and leisure, the right to adequate standard of living (food, clothing, housing, health) and the right to education. They all implied state programmatic and interventionist characters and are detailed from art. 22 to 27.<sup>12</sup>

10. The benefits of the Chinese well-known extraordinary economic growth are indeed far from been equally distributed. The Gini coefficient, which measures economic and social inequality has grown significantly from 0,29 in the Eighties to 0,46 in 2019. United Nations Development Programme, 'China in Numbers', *Issue Brief*, March 2021, p. 6.

11. Marina Svensson, *Debating Human Rights in China. A Conceptual and Political History*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC., 2002 (ebook - chapter eight).

12. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations General Assembly (Resolution 217 A), Paris, 10 December 1948 (<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>).

It should be also emphasized that that the two UDHR covenants postulated an implicit hierarchy between civil and political rights and economic and social rights. The first were indeed constructed as “negative rights” meaning they require governments to abstain from actions that may interfere with individual liberty and political freedoms. The latter appeared as “positive rights” meaning that they require the actions of the governments in order to provide a certain level of access to housing, food, and education. The concept of “progressive realisation” has thus become the key concept underpinning the second covenant. Consequently, while civil and political rights, seen as a legacy of the Enlightenment, were considered more immediately applicable in democratic contexts, the protection of economic and social rights could be postponed to a ‘progressive realisation’. This differentiation between rights reflected the Cold War divide, where economic and social rights were believed to derive mostly from socialist ideologies.<sup>13</sup>

It is quite interesting to underline the role held by China in the drafting processes of the charter held between 1945 and 1948 when the country was still run by the nationalist party and the communists had not occupied yet their ruling position.<sup>14</sup> The Republic of China participated, with the other great powers, at the preparatory conference at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington in 1944.<sup>15</sup> In 1946 the human rights commission in charge of drafting the charter was set up, headed by Eleanor Roosevelt (wife of the then US President Franklin Roosevelt) and by two vice-chairs (one of them was the Chinese representative, Zhang Pengjun). The commission was composed of representatives from the US, the UK, the USSR, Lebanon, France, China, Chile, Australia. During the discussions, Chinese representatives did

13. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘Frequently asked questions on economic, social and cultural rights’, Fact Sheet n. 33, Geneva (<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/factsheet33en.pdf>).

14. At that time, the Republic of China (not yet People’s Republic of China) was still ruled by the nationalist party (GMD – Guomindang). As Marina Svensson and Stephen Angle demonstrate there has been a long discourse on human rights in China even before the second post-war. China has had indeed a rich and contested debate on human rights since the late Qing dynasty. In particular, the twenties, beginning with the 1919 May Fourth Movement, have been a very prolific period. In 1920 a *Manifesto for the struggle for freedom* was published demanding freedom of speech, publication, assembly, association. Together with civil and political liberties, Chinese intellectuals, such as Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Lu Xun, began to debate about economic rights, including the right to subsistence. In 1922 another manifesto was published called *Our political proposal*, requesting the welfare for all the people. Marina Svensson, *Debating Human Rights in China.*; Stephen C. Angle & Marina Svensson (eds.), *The Chinese Human Rights Reader. Documents and Commentary 1900-2000*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001.

15. At the time of the drafting processes of the UDHR, the People’s Republic of China had not been founded yet. It was born indeed on October 1 1949. As a matter of fact, who took part to the drafting processes between 1945 and 1948 was the Republic of China, born in 1912, and its Nanjing government started in 1927.

not concentrate on economic and social rights but stressed provisions regarding equality, freedom of speech and expression. The draft declaration submitted by China to the commission on human rights contained ten articles, among which only one dealt with economic and social rights. However, at the final stages of the drafting process, China delegates supported the introduction of the right to food and clothing (art. 25). When the charter was finally put to a vote, many communist countries abstained, and China, which was not communist yet, voted for all kind of human rights to be applicable to all cultures.<sup>16</sup>

It should be underlined that, notwithstanding this liberal position adopted at the international level, the Chinese nationalist government was profoundly illiberal and authoritarian in the domestic contest. Nevertheless, the dichotomy between liberal democracy and Chinese authoritarianism emerged only later, with the birth of the People's Republic of China (1949) and with the emergence of the Cold War, as a marker of East and West identities and of the ideological and political differences of the two blocs. On the Chinese side, the CCP dismissed liberal democratic human rights as a bourgeois slogan but Chinese society (students, workers, intellectuals, women), although controlled, persecuted and repressed, never stopped demanding civil liberties in a planned economic system and later, in a state-led capitalist economy: from 1957 with the Hundred Flowers Bloom Movement, in 1967-69 with the Cultural Revolution, in 1976-78 with the Democracy Wall Movement, in 1989 with the Tian'anmen Movement, in 2008 with the movement of the Charter 08. In the West, civil and political rights were presented as the marker of the 'free world', and taunted as the only way to achieve market development and economic well-being. At the same time, market development was presented as the best incentive to democratisation. In this contest, as the next paragraph will argue, human rights were both embodying the old Western civilisation mission and being used in anti-Soviet terms.

During the last phase of the Cold War, human rights were effectively used by the US as a political anti-Soviet tool. The key legislative measure which made this possible in practice was the Jackson-Vanik Amendment to the US Trade Act of 1974, which became effective one year in advance of the two separate International Covenants on Human Rights (1976). The amendment definitely transformed the human rights' concept by limiting it to its political

16. Paul Gordon Laurent, *The Evolution of the International Human Rights: Visions Seen*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998; Johannes Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting, and Intent*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. Pierre-Etienne Will, 'The Chinese Contribution to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1947-1948', in Mireille Delmas-Marty & Pierre-Etienne Will (eds.), *China, Democracy and Law. A Historical and Contemporary Approach*, Leiden: Brill 2012, pp. 299-374; Marina Svensson, *Debating Human Rights in China*.

and civil rights' meaning. It acted as an instrument of exclusion/inclusion of all communist regimes from international aid and lending schemes. A relaxation of the rules of exclusion was proposed for those regimes that, although still communist, were in open contrast with the Soviet Union and could represent, at the same time, an attractive opportunity of investment and trade.<sup>17</sup> This has been the case for the People's Republic of China.<sup>18</sup>

Since the 70s, human rights issues featured in US engagement strategies. These meant to include China in the international capitalist system, to make her abide by the rules, and to justify her inclusion in front of the international public by promising the potential of feasible democratisation.<sup>19</sup> However, whenever there was government repression of public demonstrations demanding civil liberties or alternative forms of political and social representations paralleled by liberalist economic reforms, United States chose to prize the latter and to fly over the former. In the year 1980, soon after Deng Xiaoping launched the liberalist economic reforms and, at the same time, repressed the Democracy Wall Movement, the People's Republic of China gained the MFN (Most Favoured Nation) status, which guaranteed equal rights in international trade, aids, loans and other credits, together with the entry into the World Bank. This status was subjected to an annual control of progressive steps toward a higher level of protection of human rights. In 2000, after the 1989 Tiananmen military repression, but also after the extensive privatisation campaign of the Nineties, the annual control procedure of the human rights

17. The amendment was proposed to deny permanent normal trading relations to non-market economies, starting with the Soviet Union, that restricted emigration rights and that committed other human rights violations. See F. Joseph Dresen & William E. Pomeranz (eds.), *The Legacy and Consequences of Jackson-Vanik: Reassessing Human Rights in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Russia*, Conference Proceedings, Occasional Paper n. 305, Kennan Institute, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, 2011.

18. Please see: Roberta Cohen, *People's Republic of China: The Human Rights Exception*, Occasional Papers, Reprint Series in Contemporary Asian Studies, n. 3, University of Maryland, 1988.

19. After joining the WTO, the People's Republic of China continued to implement new economic reforms, liberalizing trade and proceeding with its integration in the global economy. The financial sector was liberalized, tariffs were lowered and non-discriminatory trading rights were introduced. The average tariff rate was reduced from 43% in 1992 to less than 10% in 2004. In ten years, after China's accession to WTO, the volume of China-US trade increased from US\$80.5 billion to \$385.3 billion according to Chinese data or from \$121.5 to \$485.8 billion according to US data. American exports to China increased by 80% in three years after China joined the WTO (34% was the growth of the three preceding years); American imports from China rose by 92% (46% was the growth of the three preceding years). Walmart, in 2004 American's largest corporation, had 80% of its 6.000 suppliers in China (its revenues made up 2% of US Gross Domestic Product). In 2011 Starwood Hotels & Resorts built in China one hotel every two weeks and China represented 30% of its worldwide growth. Wang Dong, *The United States and China. A history from the eighteenth century to the present*, Rowman and Littlefield Publisher, Plymouth, 2013, pp. 312-3.



situation was abolished. China was invited to join the World Trade Organization and received permanent MFN status<sup>20</sup> the following year.

Today, twenty years after the WTO entry and more than thirty from the end of the Cold War, the US, the European Union, followed by the UK and Canada, took the decision to sanction again China for human rights violations. Their legislative instrument has been the Magnitsky Act, a bipartisan law passed in December 2012 during the Barack Obama administration to repeal the application of the Jackson–Vanik Amendment to Russia and to open the way for US trade relations to Russia and Moldova. From July 2020, the Magnitsky Act began to be applied to China. However, this new system, which has been called the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, does not held governments (both central or local) accountable for human rights violations. It specifically targets Chinese individuals and companies, guilty of gross human rights violations, with sanctions such as travel bans, asset freezes, and a prohibition on funds and economic resources.<sup>21</sup>

This brief historical overview over the relationship between China and the human rights regime has shown how the false dichotomy between civil and political rights and economic and social rights has been created and used for political and economic purposes. In the next paragraph, it will be shown how this dichotomous approach still influences and characterizes the main arguments used in public discourses concerning China and United States and how it can affect the understanding of the deeper logic behind contemporary political, social and economic processes, as the case on COVID-19 can demonstrate.

#### *4. The dichotomous approach in public discourses: the COVID-19 case*

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a test for democratic and non-democratic governments. As a pandemic with serious potential consequences for the health, economic conditions and the civil freedoms of citizens, COVID-19 represents a particularly interesting case-study to analyse the presence of the dichotomous approach on human rights in public discourses. Here, attention has been directed to political speeches and reports and on mass media representations.

20. Vladimir N. Pregelj, ‘The Jackson-Vanik Amendment: A Survey’, Congress Research Service, August 2005; William H. Cooper, *The Jackson-Vanik Amendment and Candidate Countries for WTO Accession: Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, 26 July 2012

21. ‘The Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act’, Congressional Research Service, 28 October 2020; United States Code, Chapter 22 (Foreign Relations and Intercourse), § 2304 – Human Rights and security assistance, in Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School, accessed 16 September 2021; Council Regulations (EU) 2020/1998 of 7 December 2020, Concerning Restrictive Measures against Human Rights Violations and Abuses, Official Journal of the European Union, vol 63, 7 December 2020.

The current Western public discourse on human rights and COVID-19 is characterized by a dichotomous culturalist clash between Western liberal democracy and Chinese authoritarianism. Western liberal democracy sanctions human rights protection (in their civil and political rights version), economic development and geopolitical influence, and argues for an efficient management of pandemics. Liberal democracy still entails a sense of superiority. This sense of superiority implies the impossibility of making parallels between Western liberal democracy's style of governance and Chinese authoritarianism, as the case of COVID-19 narrative may explain.<sup>22</sup>

Two years after the emergence of the pandemic<sup>23</sup>, several studies are proving that the People's Republic of China, along with other East Asian countries, both authoritarian and democratic ones (Taiwan; Singapore; South Korea), has been more able and more efficient in containing the illness, even with scarcely effective vaccines in comparison to the high effectiveness of the EU and US vaccines, and thus in quickly and massively granting the protection of the economic and social rights to health, life and work to citizens than has any other US or European country.<sup>24</sup> At the expense of only two-months of severe lockdown (which, contrary to what happened in Europe or the US, was only concentrated in outbreak's areas), China was able to contain the virus using a zero-COVID approach, whereas European countries and the United States were still, at the end of 2020, exercising quarantines intermittently and frequently using the status of emergency to justify the suspension of basic rights, such as freedom of movement, thereby provoking a disastrous economic recession. China's COVID-19 emergency management model was based on a sophisticated regulatory and organisational framework, inherited from the 2003 SARS experience, and grounded in a highly-centralized, technological system.<sup>25</sup>

22. See 'US-Chinese rivalry is a battle over values. Great-power competition can't be won on interests alone', *Foreign Affairs*, 16 March 2021.

23. The present article was handed in December 2021 so it takes into consideration a pandemic time between December 2019 and December 2021.

24. It must be underlined that the paper is referring to the World Health Organization's database that, as far as the PRC is concerned, has been relying on the Chinese National Statistics Council's data. 'Doubts over efficacy of Chinese vaccines stoke anxiety at home and abroad', *Financial Times*, 7 December 2021.

25. Cfr. Francesca Congiu, 'China 2020: The successful struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic and the Xinjiang question', in *Asia Maior*, vol. XXXI/2020, Viella, Bologna, 2021, pp. 19-43. See also 'China beat the coronavirus with science and competent public health measures, not just with authoritarianism', *The Conversation*, 24 November 2020; Ottavio Marzocchi, 'The Impact of Covid-19 Measures on Democracy, the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights in the EU', *Briefing Requested by the LIBE* (civil liberties, justice and home affairs) committee, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament, April 2020 (<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/207125/Final%20version%20of%20the%20Briefing%20note.pdf>); 'China returns to pre-pandemic growth in Q4 2020', *Statista*, 18 January 2020.

Initially, US and the European Union (EU) governments, watching what was happening in China, did not have a proper capacity to measure the danger concerning COVID-19. This was partially due to the behaviour of the World Health Organization that, following the first information and data coming from Chinese authorities, was reluctant to declare the existence of a public health emergency of international concern.<sup>26</sup> However, another major source of this limited capacity to assess the pandemic processes in China, which brought about a *priori* rejection of the Chinese model of governing the illness (with few exceptions, among which the Italian case), has been the dichotomous view between liberal democracy and Chinese authoritarianism. One of the outcomes of this view is a US (or Western) self-representation as radically different from China, in terms of political culture. This diversion in perspective has made the Chinese, the EU and the US Federal governments' models of the health crisis' governance totally incomparable and thus prevented a critical and realistic reading of the facts that could have been helpful for a more efficient political management of the illness.

In the case of COVID-19, the PRC argues that liberal democracy, based on the protection of civil and political rights, is incapable of preserving economic and social rights when confronting a pandemic. The top of the agenda, is the protection of lives and jobs, states China. Civil and political rights, such as the freedom of press, information and speech needs must come second, in order to prevent the spread of an epidemic and to fight against it. During the pandemic, and especially at the beginning, Chinese central and local governments put heavy restrictions on civil and political liberties, causing a significant delay in the transmission of information, which is fundamental to contain the spread of the illness. For at least one month, the virus was conceived of, by local authorities, as 'non-transmittable from human-to-human' and later considered 'preventable and controllable'. When the first cases emerged, Wuhan doctors started to send samples of the pathogen to private local laboratories and, in December 2019, they began to discuss the results across Chinese social networks. This behaviour was soon condemned by political authorities: both local and central governments controlled unauthorized release of information. In an emergency notice of December 30 2019, the Wuhan Health Municipal Commission cautioned individuals and organisations about releasing information without authorisation and the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention issued an order prohibiting medical personnel from speaking with reporters. In addition, internal notices

26. 'How WHO became China's Coronavirus Accomplice', *Foreign Policy*, 2 April 2020.

from local hospitals informed staff who had gone to Wuhan stated: 'Keep yourself politically disciplined' and 'Do not talk to outsiders in private'.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4.1. *The US/Western approach*

Though the human rights issue was not at the forefront of either the Barack Obama (2009-2017) or the Donald Trump (2017-2021) administrations, although always an aspect of their political agendas,<sup>28</sup> the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic between 2019-2020 gave new strength to the criticism of China through the human rights lens. The US media and political discourses immediately engaged in a denunciation of the Chinese political system. In Western public discourses, the global spread of the epidemic and later, China's successful battle against it, were both due to Chinese authoritarian characteristics. In the first case, the lack of freedom of expression, information, and the overly rigid bureaucratic structure, were held accountable for the emergence of the pandemic,<sup>29</sup> publicly labelled by Trump as 'the Chinese virus'. Trump accused the Chinese government of allowing people to leave China in the early stages of the outbreak and demanded that the United Nations 'hold accountable the nation which unleashed this plague onto the world'.<sup>30</sup> In May, US Secretary of State, Michael Pompeo again attributed the virus' spread to Chinese authoritarianism: "This is an enormous crisis created by the fact that the Chinese Communist Party reverted to form, reverted to the kinds of disinformation, the kinds of concealment,

27. '武汉疾控证实：当地现不明原因肺炎病人，发病数在统计' ('Wuhan disease control confirmed: there are pneumonia patients of unknown cause in the local area, and the number of cases is in statistics'), 新北报, 31 December 2019. 疫情與輿情十七年：被瞞報的SARS與被孤立的武漢, ('Seventeen years since the spreading of the epidemic and public opinion: the underreported SARS and the isolated Wuhan'), *The Initium*, 25 January 2020.

28. 'Pressing Asia Agenda, Obama Treads Lightly on Human Rights', *New York Times*, 7 September 2016; 'Obama kowtows to China on human rights, critics say', *Politico*, 23 September 2015; 'Barack Obama's Shaky Legacy on Human Rights', *Human Rights Watch*, 9 January 2017; 'Trump says he avoided punishing China over Uighur Camps', *New York Times*, 9 July 2020.

29. 'China is the real sick man of Asia', *Wall Street Journal*, 3 February 2020. On the Othering and securitization of China-specific discourses in the US and Western countries see also: Giulio Pugliese, 'A Global Rorschach Test: Responding to the Belt and Road Initiative', *Defence Strategic Communications*, NATO Excellence Centre Riga, Vol. 7 (2), December 2019, pp. 113-32; Giulio Pugliese, 'COVID-19 and the Reification of the US-China Cold War', in Jeff Kingston-edited special issue 'COVID-19 in Asia', *Asia-Pacific Journal*. Volume 18, Issue 15, Number 3, Article ID 5436.

30. 'Senator Tom Cotton repeats fringe theory of coronavirus origins', *New York Times*, 17 February 2020; 'US-China tensions take center stage at UN as Trump accuses Beijing of unleashing 'plague'', *Reuters*, 22 September 2020.

that authoritarian regimes do<sup>31</sup>. The reference here was in particular to the punishment of medical staff by Wuhan authorities for spreading rumours about the COVID-19 outbreak, among which the case of Li Wenliang, a Wuhan ophthalmologist, gained particular prominence in the international media. The doctor, who had been very active in warning colleagues about the spread of the virus, was obliged by the local Public Security Bureau to sign a letter in which he was accused of ‘making false comments’ that had ‘severely disturbed social order’.<sup>32</sup> His coronavirus death has often been associated with his imprisonment and presented as the symbol of China’s failure, wherein the virus was condemned as the ‘Chinese Chernobyl’.<sup>33</sup>

Later, when the Chinese government reacted with an iron lockdown to contain the spread of the virus, in the West there was a total rejection of those methods as Maoist, illiberal, anachronistic, medieval and exaggerated, on the part of the mainstream international press. The lockdown was described as a totalitarian measure and as the response of the authoritarian nature of the Chinese political system. At that time, it seemed impossible that Western democracies would ever adopt those same methods, judged as radically opposite to Western political values.<sup>34</sup> However, when, in April 2020, the infections in China were decreasing and Europe and US were considering which system, democratic or authoritarian, was better able to deal with the pandemic, China was accused of having built a narrative useful to its search for hegemony; this narrative constituted a threat to democracy because it extolled authoritarian methods for containing the epidemic.<sup>35</sup> In May 2020, a Florida representative affirmed on the *Fox News Channel* that

31. For references, please see Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky, Runya Qiaoan, ‘The Politics of Blaming: The Narrative Battle between China and the US over COVID-19’, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, No. 26, September 2021, pp. 295-315 (p. 310).

32. Minitrue: Delete “Disciplined Doctor Now in Isolation Ward”, *China Digital Times*, 30 January 2020; Li Wenliang: ‘Coronavirus kills Chinese whistleblower doctor’, *BBC News*, 7 February 2020; P. Hessler, ‘Letter from Chengdu. Life on lockdown in China. Forty-five days of avoiding the coronavirus’, in *The New Yorker*, 30 March 2020.

33. ‘Li Wenliang’s death exposes the costs of China’s authoritarianism’, *The Economist*, 13 February 2020; ‘«Hero who told the truth»: Chinese rage over coronavirus death of whistleblower doctor’, *The Guardian*, 7 February 2020; ‘L’épidémie de coronavirus peut-être le Tchernobyl de Xi Jinping’, *France Culture*, 10 February 2020.

34. ‘To Tame Coronavirus, Mao-Style Social Control Blankets China’, *The New York Times*, 20 February 2020.

35. ‘China, the coronavirus and the liberal international order’, *OpenGlobalRights*, 24 April 2020; ‘Coronavirus, the rise of “acceptable authoritarianism” and the battle for democracy’, *Prospect Magazine*, 5 June 2020; Eugénie Mérieau, ‘Covid-19, authoritarianism vs democracy: what the epidemic reveals about the orientalism of our categories of thought’, ‘Democracies are better at fighting outbreaks’, *The Atlantic*, 24 February 2020; ‘China’s Covid success story is also a human rights tragedy’, *Human Rights Watch Organization*, 26 January 2021; ‘The Myth that democracies bungled the pandemic’, *The Atlantic*, 4 October 2021.

China, similar to the Soviet Union during the Cold War, posed the ‘most existential threat to the United States, to liberty around the world, to a free world order that we’ve ever faced’.<sup>36</sup>

In the most recent US presidential electoral campaign, China’s human rights question was one of the most commonly used issues to challenge the president in charge on critical foreign policy issues. During the election campaign, the Council on Foreign Relations invited presidential candidates to answer twelve questions on critical foreign policy issues. Joe Biden’s answer on that occasion already contained the seeds of the sharp contraposition between values (democracy vs authoritarianism) that became clear during his presidency: ‘The United States should push back on China’s deepening authoritarianism, even as we seek to cooperate on issues where our interests are aligned.’ Biden asked the so called “free world” ‘to come together and to compete with China’s efforts to proliferate its models of high-tech authoritarianism’. Since Biden became president, US political discourse on human rights in China has remained locked into this sharp contraposition between political values, especially in discussions concerning the Xinjiang and Hong Kong situations.<sup>37</sup> In his public comments, President Biden frequently underlined the cultural cleavage between Western democracies and autocracies. On the occasion of his first call as president of United States in a meeting with Xi Jinping, the President of the People’s Republic of China, Biden expressed his concern for the Hong Kong crackdown and human rights abuses in Xinjiang.<sup>38</sup> Some days later, at a televised CNN event in Wisconsin, he declared that ‘the United States will reassert its global role in speaking up for human rights’.<sup>39</sup> In April, in his remarks in an address to a Joint Session of Congress regarding Xi Jinping, he stated that: ‘he (Xi Jinping) and others – autocrats – think that democracy can’t compete in the 21st century with autocracies because it takes too long to get consensus’.<sup>40</sup> In September, in his State of the Union Address, referring to the assault of Capitol Hill on the 6 January 2021, Biden asserted that the US was living the worst attack on democracy since the

36. For references please see Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky, Runya Qiaoan, ‘The Politics of Blaming: the Narrative Battle between China and the US over COVID-19’, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, No. 26, September 2021, pp. 295-315 (p. 309). See also Luke Cooper, Guy Aitchison, *The dangers ahead. Covid-19, Authoritarianism and Democracy*, LSE Conflict and Civil Society Research Unit, June 2020.

37. Here the reference is to the two major human rights questions concerning current US-China relations: the persecution and detention of civilians Uighurs in Xinjiang where accusations of terrorism mask Chinese countermeasures against separatism; the crackdown of Hong Kong movement for democracy.

38. ‘Readout of President Joseph R. Biden Jr. Call with President Xi Jinping of China’, *The White House*, 10 February 2021.

39. ‘Biden says China to face repercussions on human rights’, *Reuters*, 16 February 2021.

40. ‘Remarks by President Biden in Address to a Joint Session of Congress’, *White House – briefing room – speeches-remarks*, 28 April 2021.

Civil War and reiterated his intention to revitalize US democracy against the will of ‘the autocrats of the world’.

#### 4.2. *The Chinese approach*

The Chinese approach is based on the belief that emphasis on social and economic rights is the best way to manage a pandemic and to build a more developed and equitable society. The capacity to raise a population’s standard of living is more important than granting civil and political liberties, and is achievable only through the governance of the single-party system led by the CCP. This kind of message, often in reaction to US narrative, is traceable in many articles in Chinese official newspapers. Following here are a few examples of it. The *People’s Daily* on November 9, 2021 argued: ‘if China had dealt with the pandemic as the United States did, its death cases would have been well over three million. [...] Human lives are invaluable. The sufferings, miseries and pains of the patients and their families cannot be measured by “economic cost”’.<sup>41</sup> The *People’s Daily* in August discussed official efforts to punish officials or make them to step down because of their mishandling of the pandemic. This practice was described as being indicative of a prioritisation of the people’s interests and lives, and respect for science and responsibility. In contrast, the article asserted, the US authorities did not punish a single official. This was considered a sign of a ‘loose political environment’ and partly due to the two-party electoral system, which entails a continuous quarrel over who should be held accountable for the policy failure. Although, according to the article, drawing a parallel between China and US is vain, the major difference between China and US is thought to be ‘the governing ideas of the ruling party’. In the US, the ruling party works ‘on behalf of its own interest groups’. In the People’s Republic of China, the CCP ‘has no special interests of its own and always represent the interests of all Chinese people’ as its anti-pandemic work, the article adds, has demonstrated: ‘Since the onset of the pandemic, China, insisting that the rights to subsistence and development are fundamental human rights, has been putting the lives and health of its people front and centre. Compared to the US, which values capital more than its people, China has placed people’s lives even above economic growth. When the virus struck, China took strict and comprehensive control measures, even at the cost of a short-term economic downturn. Nothing is more precious than people’s lives’.<sup>42</sup> In another issue of August 2021, the *People’s Daily*, in referring to US, stated: ‘Behind the chaos of the nation’s COVID-19 response is the indifference of its

41. ‘Stop questioning China’s zero-COVID approach’, *People’s Daily online*, 9 November 2021.

42. ‘One world, two systems: how China and US deal with derelict officials during COVID-19’, *People’s Daily online*, 19 August 2021.

politicians to basic human rights'.<sup>43</sup> In May 2021, referring to 1) Donald Trump's decision to cut World Health Organization funding because the organisation was found to be on China's side of the COVID-19 matter and 2) to US mismanagement of the epidemic, the *People's Daily* argued that the pandemic has revealed the hypocrisy of American democracy, which did not value the rights to life and health as basic human rights: 'Obviously, the American democracy is inhumane'.<sup>44</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

The paper has argued how the dichotomous vision over human rights was born during the Cold War and how it has been instrumentally used for geopolitical and economic purposes. Using the COVID-19 case-study, the paper has shown as well, how profoundly this dichotomy still permeates US-China public discourses on human rights and how this could affect the mutual perception of the processes concerning the development of the pandemic.

The US and China narratives on COVID-19 and human rights paradoxically reveal the uselessness of the dichotomous approach of liberal democracy versus Chinese authoritarianism in understanding the processes behind the pandemic: '[...] crises are moments of extreme fluidity, conducive to anomy. That is how, with the COVID-19 epidemic, the entire identity-based narrative framework of democracy versus authoritarianism, or the West vs. the Rest, has been profoundly shattered'.<sup>45</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic is a global health crisis that has exacerbated the ongoing global economic recession as well as conditions for a polarisation of social conflict. It has posed, at once and across all the world, the crucial and historical question of the indivisibility of all human rights. Both the violation of civil and political rights or of economic and social rights, as is evident, have made it more difficult to prevent the pandemic and to struggle against it. As a matter of fact, the perspective of how to handle the pandemic was an opportunity for making liberal democracy and Chinese authoritarianism more comparable, revealing the differences as well as the similarities between these frameworks. This opportunity should be exploited by intellectuals, thinkers, and analysts of US-China relations in order to build a methodological framework of analysis able to better look at the dynamics behind the economic and political international system by moving away from the fictitious ideological contrapositions of our Post-Cold War era.

43. 'Commentary: US fails miserably in COVID-19 response', *People's Daily online*, 10 August 2021.

44. 'COVID-19 pandemic reveals hypocrisy of so-called American democracy', *People's Daily online*, 28 May 2021.

45. Eugénie Méricau, 'COVID-19, authoritarianism vs. democracy: what the epidemic reveals about the orientalism of our categories of thought', *SciencePo, Center for International Studies*, 28 August 2020.





CHINA'S OFFICIAL NARRATIVES ON XINJIANG:  
INTERETHNIC MINGLING, ECONOMIC PROSPERITY AND RELIGIOUS TERRORISM\*

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*The northwest province of Xinjiang in the People's Republic of China has drawn international attention recently because of state-perpetrated violence towards its non-Han population. This paper examines how Chinese authorities construct their narratives about the Xinjiang issue and justify their actions in the region. The analysis will focus on official white papers published by the State's Council Information Office. Through the investigation of these documents, three main narratives on Xinjiang will be presented, together with the way they have developed over the past decades. Each will then be situated within the larger transformation of Chinese politics and political discourse in recent years, especially since General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping has taken office. Instead of considering Beijing's narratives on Xinjiang as an exception, this essay maintains that their underlying paradigms accord with Chinese governmental strategy as a whole, although the repression in Xinjiang represents their extreme consequences.*

KEYWORDS – China's official narratives; Xinjiang; China's ethnic policies; State developmentalism; counterterrorism.

### *1. Introduction*

Little known until a few years ago, the northwest province of Xinjiang in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its dominant nationality, the Uyghurs, now figure frequently in press reports worldwide. Xinjiang is mostly populated by Uyghurs – which is a predominantly Muslim population speaking a Turkic language – but it is also the homeland of Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Sarikoli, Tajiks and other nationalities. The Uyghurs are one of the 56 officially recognized ethnic groups living in the PRC, with the majority represented by the Han.

The global attention has intensified since the emergence of mass internment camps, about which, in August 2018, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination of the United Nations expressed its concerns.<sup>1</sup> In the past three years, there has been an escalation in intensity

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of the debate and research among Western governments, foreign media and scholars and international organisations on what is going on in Xinjiang.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, a 'discursive war' between Beijing and foreign countries has heightened. The peak was reached in March 2021 when the United States, Canada, the European Union and Britain imposed sanctions on the Chinese officials deemed responsible for the 'human rights abuses' in Xinjiang. While the US had already implemented sanctions the year before, those levied by the EU were the first since 1989, after the violent repression of the so-called Tiananmen movements.<sup>3</sup> Chinese sanctions soon followed, targeting, among others, the Political and Security Committee of the Council of the European Union, Members of the European Parliament, research centres such as the Berlin-based think-tank, MERICS, and scholars, including Adrian Zenz (Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, Washington, DC) and Joanne Smith Finley (Newcastle University) who have long produced work on Xinjiang.<sup>4</sup>

Scholarly literature has already highlighted the repressive measures applied to Xinjiang in recent years: mass 'reeducation' camps where Uyghurs and other non-Han nationalities are coercively detained, or at least, non-voluntarily detained, and submitted to forced labour as both a 'poverty alleviation' measure and a solution to 'religious terrorism'.<sup>5</sup> There have

1. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 'Concluding observations on the combined fourteenth to seventeenth periodic reports of China (including Hong Kong, China and Macao, China)', 30 August 2018 ([https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CERD/Shared%20Documents/CHN/CERD\\_C\\_CHN\\_CO\\_14-17\\_32237\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CERD/Shared%20Documents/CHN/CERD_C_CHN_CO_14-17_32237_E.pdf))

2. Joshua Chin and Megha Rajagopalan were the first journalists to report the repressive mechanisms implemented in Xinjiang already in 2017: Joshua Chin, 'Twelve Days in Xinjiang: How China's Surveillance State Overwhelms Daily Life', *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 December 2017; Megha Rajagopalan, 'This Is What A 21st-Century Police State Really Looks Like', *BuzzFeed News*, 17 October 2017. Since 2017 many other newspapers articles and reports have been published. Furthermore, part of the debate in Western countries have centred on whether the repression in Xinjiang should be called 'genocide' or not. The debate is still ongoing. A three-day conference organized at Newcastle University, 'The Xinjiang Crisis: Genocide, Crimes Against Humanity, Justice' (1-3 September 2021) addressed this topic.

3. Lucas Niewenhuis, 'EU issues first sanctions on China since 1989 over treatment of Uyghurs', *SupChina*, 22 March 2021.

4. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Announces Sanctions on Relevant EU Entities and Personnel*, 22 March 2021 ([https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/t1863106.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1863106.shtml)).

5. Adrian Zenz, '«Thoroughly Reforming Them towards a Healthy Heart Attitude»: China's Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang', *Central Asian Survey*, Issue 38, No. 1, 2 January 2019, pp. 102–28; Adrian Zenz, 'Beyond the Camps: Beijing's Long-term Scheme of Coercive Labor, Poverty Alleviation and Social Control in Xinjiang', *Journal of Political Risk*, Issue 7, No. 12, 2019; Adrian Zenz, 'The Karakax List: Dissecting the Anatomy of Beijing's Internment Drive in Xinjiang', *The Journal of Political Risk*, Issue 8, No. 2, 2020.

been reports of the demolition of mosques and sacred shrines as well as other sites that are centres of Uyghur cultural, religious and social life;<sup>6</sup> the secularisation of Xinjiang's non-Han through the Han population's surveillance on their private life;<sup>7</sup> not to mention the disappearance, imprisonment or death of many Uyghurs who dared to raise their voices against the state-perpetrated violence.<sup>8</sup> These are just a few of the techniques of repression that scholars have pointed out so far.<sup>9</sup>

The common explanation provided by foreign scholarly literature for the mounting state repression in Xinjiang are: 1) a shift in the CCP's ethnic policy;<sup>10</sup> 2) the increased contention in the region resulting from 'terrorist attacks' (as they are referred to officially);<sup>11</sup> 3) the CCP's perception of security threats from international terrorism organizations (especially jihadist) and the connections between them and non-Han population in China<sup>12</sup> and

6. Nathan Ruser *et al.*, 'Cultural Erasure: Tracing the destruction of Uyghur and Islamic spaces in Xinjiang', *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, No. 38, 2020; Rian Thum, 'The Spatial Cleansing of Xinjiang: Mazar Desecration in Context', *Made in China Journal*, Issue 5, No. 2, 24 August 2020.

7. Darren Byler, 'Violent Paternalism: On the Banality of Uyghur Unfreedom', *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Issue 16, No. 24, 2018.

8. Professor İlham Tohtu is perhaps the most prominent figure who was repressed by the authorities for challenging the Party's approach to developing Xinjiang and managing inter-ethnic relations. He was charged with «separatism» and sentenced to life in prison. For an updated list of the victims, see Xinjiang Victims Database (<https://shahit.biz/eng/#stats>).

9. The University of British Columbia created a website to collect primary materials and scientific studies on Xinjiang that is available at: <https://xinjiang.sppga.ubc.ca/>. Magnus Fiskesjö constantly updates the bibliography related to the repression of the Uyghurs (<https://uhrp.org/bibliography/>).

10. On the new ethnic policy see: Uradyn E. Bulag, 'Minority Nationalities as Frankenstein's Monsters? Reshaping «the Chinese Nation» and China's Quest to Become a «Normal Country»', *The China Journal*, No. 86, 2021, pp. 46-67. Other sources are quoted in the following section of this essay.

11. Over the past decades, there have been several violent acts that involved Uyghurs. However, from the 1990s up to 2013, no incident fits into the definition of terrorism, i.e., politically motivated violence on random civilians. Since 2013, there have been attacks by Uyghurs that may be called terrorism, specifically: a vehicular attack in Tiananmen square in Beijing (October 2013); a mass knifing at the Kunming railway station (March 2014), a knife and bomb attack at the Urumqi train station (April 2014), and a vehicular and explosive attack at a market in Urumqi (May 2014). Roberts explains the escalation of the violence – some of which can fall under the category of terrorism – in terms of the 'self-fulfilling prophecy' that helps us understand how PRC's policies against alleged 'terrorist threats' facilitated an increase in Uyghurs militancy. Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020, pp. 161–98.

12. Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Myunghee Lee & Emir Yazici, 'Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression: China's Changing Strategy in Xinjiang', *International Security*, Vo. 44, No. 3, 2020, pp. 9-47.

4) the appointment of Chen Quanguo as Xinjiang Party Secretary.<sup>13</sup> In addition, scholarly literature pays increasing attention to the connections and linkages between the state-perpetrated violence in Xinjiang and global economic and ideological dynamics.<sup>14</sup> These explanations greatly contribute to understanding the rationale behind the CCP's policy towards Xinjiang, and indeed, the following section will show how they (except for the role played by Chen Quanguo, which is beyond the scope of this analysis) are crucial in China's official narrative on the Xinjiang issue, as is emerging from the analysis of official documents.

However, this paper attempts to look at the Xinjiang issue from a different perspective, placing it in the broader political configuration that has taken shape in the PRC in recent years, especially since Xi Jinping took office. Therefore, instead of emphasising the peculiarities of Beijing's activities in the region and/or towards ethnic minorities in the PRC, this paper posits that the paradigms sustaining the official view on Xinjiang are by no means limited to this region but characterize the country's overall strategy of governance. This is particularly apparent when it comes to the CCP's control over the society and the new security strategy in the era of slower economic growth. The special approach of this paper arises from fact that the binary view 'authoritarianism vs democracy' not merely conceals the global connections linking the Xinjiang issues with global capitalism,<sup>15</sup> but also fails to capture the internal transformations in the world of Chinese politics, simplistically defined as an 'authoritarian regime'. Contextualising the way in which the Xinjiang issue is officially framed in the larger context helps us to grasp the continuities and discontinuities in China's political discourse, gauging that it is also part of broader transformations that are taking place.

The materials used to understand how Beijing articulates its narrative on Xinjiang are the white papers (WPs, hereafter) released by State's Council Information Office and dealing specifically with Xinjiang. WPs are generally created by governments with the aim of communicating their standpoint and informing the public on specific issues. However, in China they are characterized mainly as a reaction to external criticism.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the first WP Beijing ever issued was in 1991 in reply to criticism by the international community of the violent repression of the 1989 movement. The

13. Adrian Zenz & James Leibold, 'Chen Quanguo: The Strongman behind Beijing's Securitization Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang', *China Brief*, Vol. 17, No. 12, 2017, pp. 16-24.

14. Darren Byler, Ivan Franceschini & Nicholas Loubere (eds.), *Xinjiang Year Zero*, Canberra: Australian National University, 2022.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Martin Lavička, 'Narrating Xinjiang through the Lens of Governmental White papers', paper presented at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Biannual Conference of the European Association of Chinese Studies, 24 August 2021.

first WP pertaining specifically to Xinjiang was released in 2003. From 2003 to August 2021, 11 documents have been issued, with a growing intensity in recent years (in 2019, three WPs focusing only on Xinjiang were released). Most of the WPs are available in Chinese and English, from which it can be inferred that they aim to ‘tell China’s story’ – quoting Xi Jinping’s well-known phrase of 2013 – both abroad and at home.<sup>17</sup>

The results of the analysis reveal that three narratives structure China’s official view: 1) the creation of the ‘Chinese nation’ through a new approach to interethnic relations; 2) China’s developmentalism and China’s ‘civilising’ project; and 3) the Xinjiang question as part of the US-led global war on terror. In the following pages, these narratives on Xinjiang will be explained and then situated in the larger context of contemporary Chinese political discourse. A final section will be devoted to placing the Xinjiang issue in the context of the current re-centralisation of power in the hands of the CCP and of the party’s new approach to ‘stability maintenance’.

## 2. China’s official narratives on Xinjiang

### 2.1. A new paradigm for interethnic relations within the Chinese nation

The official narrative on Xinjiang is based on the ‘three histories’ (*san shi* 三史): 1) the history of Xinjiang; 2) the history of the development of ethnic minorities; and 3) the history of the evolution of religions. Underlying these three histories is the view that Xinjiang has belonged to China since ancient times, a point that almost all the WPs stress. The one published in 2003 specifies that ‘since the Western Han (206 BC- 24 AC) [Xinjiang] has become an inseparable part of China’s unified multi-ethnic country’ and that, in 60 BC, the Han dynasty established the Western Regions Frontier Command in Xinjiang.<sup>18</sup> At the time, Xinjiang was part of the ‘Western Territories’ (*xi yu* 西域). With the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Xinjiang was reportedly ‘peacefully liberated’ (*heping jiefang* 和平解放). This ‘history of Xinjiang’ is informed by the well-established assumption that the contemporary PRC is the natural heir of imperial China; China’s history would thus be characterized by a political continuity that legitimizes the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over Xinjiang as well as over other provinces and territories. In the official view, this makes the Chinese nation unique in the annals of civilisations for its uninterrupted history of five millennia.

17. The first two White Papers on Xinjiang are available only in Chinese. Since 2014 both Chinese and English versions are released. All the White Papers are available at <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/>.

18. State’s Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 新疆的历史与发展 (History and development of Xinjiang), 26 May 2003 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/2003/Document/307907/307907.htm>).

The Han (206 BC – 220 AD) and Tang (618-907) empires ruled over parts of the territories that are nowadays known as Xinjiang, and the people living in those territories had quite close contact with the states commonly defined as Chinese dynasties.<sup>19</sup> However, today's Xinjiang has not been part of all the Chinese empires, nor has it always been a unified political entity. The Qing empire (1644-1912) – whose rulers were clearly identified as being Manchu, thus non-Han – placed Xinjiang under its control in 1759.<sup>20</sup> At the time, the north-western frontiers were defined through a complex system of alliances with local Muslims, in which Muslims, as well as the other cultural blocks (Han, Manchu, Mongols, and Tibetans), enjoyed recognition.<sup>21</sup> The imposition of the nation-state paradigm by foreign imperialism made this system unworkable, forcing movement towards a new conceptualization of the Qing State based on territorial integrity. When the Qing empire collapsed in 1911, 'territorial integrity' defined by clear-cut borders became one of the main criteria defining 'China' as a political entity, and keeping the territories of the ex-Qing empire united was perceived by early nationalists, and later also by Communists, as a priority.<sup>22</sup> In 1949, the PRC built its territorial sovereignty on the legacy of the Qing empire. Later, along with the consolidation of political power by the Party, 'national sovereignty' and 'territorial integrity' were elevated to being two of China's non-negotiable 'national core interests',<sup>23</sup> intimately linked to the principle of 'non-interference' in domestic affairs which has been advocated since the 1950s.<sup>24</sup> Indeed,

19. In using 'empire' in place of 'dynasties', I follow James A. Millward, who has recently raised awareness on the language used to describe China's history. James A. Millward, *Decolonizing Chinese Historiography with special attention to Xinjiang*, video of full lecture with presentation slides, sponsored by Cornell East Asia Program, co-sponsored by the Levinson China and Asia-Pacific Studies (CAPS) Program, Cornell University, 25 October 2021 ([https://vimeo.com/639170697?fbclid=IwARIG5qnxOS-It\\_YMyZijxKdYxe33iBWUmzK3CP\\_Ahc2lWivP5UyJFQPd9Ps](https://vimeo.com/639170697?fbclid=IwARIG5qnxOS-It_YMyZijxKdYxe33iBWUmzK3CP_Ahc2lWivP5UyJFQPd9Ps)).

20. James A. Millward, *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759-1864*, Stanford (California): Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 32.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 197-202.

22. On the process of nation-building from late Qing to the PRC, see also Ye Hui, 'Nation-building as epistemic violence', in Darren Byler, Ivan Franceschini & Nicholas Loubere (eds.), *Xinjiang Year Zero*, Canberra: Australian National University, 2022, pp. 19-30.

23. According to the WP issued in 2011 'China's Peaceful Development', China's core interests include: 1) state sovereignty; 2) national security; 3) territorial integrity; 4) national reunification; 5) China's political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability; and 6) basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development. State's Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China issues white paper on peaceful development*, 7 November 2011 ([https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/whitepaper\\_665742/t856325.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/whitepaper_665742/t856325.shtml)).

24. Jerker Hellström, 'Sovereignty / 主权, 国权', in *Decoding China* (<https://decodingchina.eu/sovereignty/>).

'national sovereignty' and 'territorial integrity' are often cited to counter criticism of state-led violence in Xinjiang.<sup>25</sup>

Against the backdrop of the 'continuity paradigm' projected by China's state authorities, however, the relations between the various nationalities constituting the country's ethnic patchwork have seen an important evolution. In 2014, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping delivered a speech at the Central Xinjiang Work Symposium where he specified that the solution for the 'Xinjiang issue' (*Xinjiang de wenti* 新疆的问题) is to reinforce unity among nationalities, a goal which must be achieved through increasing interethnic 'contacts, exchanges and mingling' (*jiaowang, jiaoliu, jiaorong* 交往交流交融) as well as through promoting the 'consciousness of the unified community of the Chinese nation' (*Zhonghua minzu gongtongti yishi* 中华民族共同体意识)<sup>26</sup>.<sup>27</sup> After Xi's talk, both expressions began to be widely used in WPs.

Xi Jinping's call for interethnic 'mingling' as a way out of the 'Xinjiang issue' represents a turning point in the CCP's ethnic policy.<sup>28</sup> Since its early days, the CCP has committed itself to recognising the existence of ethnonational diversity within the territory of the ex-Qing empire. This pledge by the CCP stood in contrast to the assimilationist approach of the Nationalist Party, i.e., Guomindang, which saw the integration of the non-Han nationalities into the Han majority as unavoidable. By adopting a different attitude towards non-Han population, the members of the CCP presented themselves as the 'good Han',<sup>29</sup> and were able to win support from non-Han peoples during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting that the CCP's recognition of 'national identities' living within the territories of the ex-Qing empire did not mean guaranteeing their right to political secession:

25. Reuters Staff, 'China tells UN rights chief to respect its sovereignty after Xinjiang comments', *Reuters*, 11 September 2018.

26. I translate *gongtongti* 共同体 as 'unified community', instead of giving the usual translation 'community', because 'unified community', as Bulag also argues, better captures the intended meaning. Interestingly enough, this meaning is also conveyed by the morphemic composition of the term itself, which gives the idea of sharing a unified 'body' (*ti* 体). Uradyn E. Bulag, 'Minority Nationalities as Frankenstein's Monsters? Reshaping «the Chinese Nation» and China's Quest to Become a «Normal Country»'.

27. Xinhua, 习近平在第二次中央新疆工作座谈会上发表重要讲话 (Xi Jinping's speech at the second Central Xinjiang Work Symposium), 29 May 2014 ([http://www.xinhuanet.com/photo/2014-05/29/c\\_126364529.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/photo/2014-05/29/c_126364529.htm)).

28. James Leibold, 'Xinjiang Work Forum Marks New Policy of «Ethnic Mingling»', *China Brief Volume*, Issue 14, No. 12, 2014, pp. 3–6.

29. Uradyn E. Bulag, 'Good Han, Bad Han: The Moral Parameters of Ethnopolitics in China', in Thomas S. Mullaney *et al.* (eds.), *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012, pp. 92–109.

30. Uradyn E. Bulag, 'Minority Nationalities as Frankenstein's Monsters? Reshaping «the Chinese Nation» and China's Quest to Become a «Normal Country»'.



the Leninist principle of self-determination for non-Han nationalities was deleted from the Constitution of the Chinese Communist Government already in the 1934.<sup>31</sup> From the 1950s onwards, the newly centralized state of the PRC based its legitimacy on the political configuration of 'the people of all nationalities' and defined itself as a 'unitary multinational state'. It established a system borrowed from the Soviet Union, based on granting territorial autonomy to those areas populated mostly by non-Han nationalities.<sup>32</sup> The Xinjiang Uyghurs Autonomous Region was the product of this political stance, along with the other four autonomous regions of Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Tibet, and Ningxia. Accordingly, over the past few decades, the central government has tended to emphasize the peculiarities of each of the 55 'national minorities' (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) living in the PRC's territory, portraying itself as the guarantor of their cultural customs.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, for which regional nationalisms were held responsible, sparked an intellectual and political debate on the soundness of the autonomous system. The relation between the state and the national minorities living in the PRC is increasingly perceived as 'antagonistic'.<sup>33</sup> As a consequence, since the early 1990s, discussions on the need for a 'second-generation nationality policy' (*di er dai minzu zhengce* 第二代民族政策) among Chinese intellectuals emerged, with some state intellectuals, such as Hu Angang, advocating for a new approach that would place more emphasis on a shared national identity, rather than on individual ethnic nationalities within China.<sup>34</sup> Xi Jinping's speech at the Central Xinjiang Work Symposium in 2014 tacitly approved this view on interethnic relations. Interestingly, the new approach resembles the assimilationist one advocated by the Guomindang and Sun Yatsen (the so-called 'father of the nation') from which the CCP was trying to distinguish itself.

Since 2014, interethnic 'mingling' has become a mantra in the official narrative on Xinjiang. It has even been applied retrospectively, emphasizing the role of 'interethnic fusion' in shaping both the Uyghurs as well as the Han. However, the formation of the Han majority is described as differing greatly from the ethnogenesis of the Uyghurs. The WPs tell us that Uyghurs are the product of 'long-term migrations and interethnic mingling'

31. On the ambiguity of the CCP towards the Leninist principle of self-determination, see James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2007, pp. 88–93.

32. The system of territorial autonomy implies, for instance, that positions of local leadership should be reserved for officials belonging to local minority nationalities. However, the degree of this autonomy is debated, and largely varies from one area to another.

33. Uradyn E. Bulag, 'Minority Minority Nationalities as Frankenstein's Monsters? Reshaping «the Chinese Nation» and China's Quest to Become a «Normal Country»'.

34. James Leibold, 'Toward A Second Generation of Ethnic Policies?', *China Brief Volume*, Issue 12, No. 13, 2012, pp. 7–10.

and that, despite their ethnic Turkic origins, they are not descendants of Turks; only in 1934 did the name 'Uyghur' emerge as the standard Chinese appellation for the people residing in Xinjiang.<sup>35</sup> It goes without saying that this had an evident intent of discrediting separatist tendencies. It cannot be denied that the Uyghurs were neither a single unitarian population nor a nationality that avoided mingling with other peoples over the centuries; yet, it should also be underlined that the question of ethnicity did not feature so crucially, before the formation of nation-states.<sup>36</sup>

As far as the ethnonym *Hanzu* (汉族) is concerned, it is also a neologism coined in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>37</sup> but in this case China's official narrative adopted a different attitude. The *Hanzu* is described as being extremely ancient, so ancient that it can be traced back centuries: 'The Huaxia people who appeared in the pre-Qin period, after years of integration with various other peoples, and especially after 500 turbulent years of cultural convergence in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, further integrated with other peoples in the Qin and Han dynasties, to form the Han people (*hanzu* 汉族), a majority group in the Central Plains and the major people in Chinese history'.<sup>38</sup>

Leaving the debate of ethnogenesis aside, this new approach to interethnic relations goes hand in hand with a new emphasis on Chineseness and Chinese identity. The newly promoted concept of 'consciousness of the unified community of the Chinese nation' mentioned above leverages on the sense of belonging to a common 'Chinese nation' (*Zhonghua minzu* 中华

35. 'Uyghur' is used also in the Chinese version of the White Paper. See: State's Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 新疆的反恐、去极端化斗争与人权保障 (*The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang*), 18 March 2019 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/39911/Document/1649848/1649848.htm>).

36. As Gladney points out, nomadic steppe people called 'Uyghurs' have existed since the 8<sup>th</sup> century, but their cultural and religious identity was neither fixed nor internally coherent. We lack hard evidence to understand the exact time when the ethnonym Uyghur was used for the settled Turkic-speaking Muslim people. It became recognized by the Soviet Union and the newly created Chinese nation in 1940s. Dru C. Gladney, 'The ethnogenesis of the Uighurs', *Central Asian Survey*, Issue 9, No. 1, 1990, pp 1-28.

37. The name Han comes from the Han River (Hanshui) flowing from modern Shaanxi through to Hubei, where it joins the Yangzi River. Han became the name of the state founded by Liu Bang, the Han empire. However, at that time Han refers to the people under the political domination of the Han empire, without reference to culture, language or any other features bounding together the members of an ethnic group. Mark Elliott, 'Hushuo: The Northern Other and the Naming of the Han Chinese', in in Thomas S. Mullaney *et al.*, (eds.), *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority*, pp. 173-190.

38. State's Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 新疆的若干历史问题 (Historical matters concerning Xinjiang), 21 July 2019 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/39911/Document/1649848/1649848.htm>).

民族). This latter is an expression coined by the reformist and intellectual Liang Qichao at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In an essay written in 1905, Liang Qichao defined the ‘Chinese nation’ as basically a synonym for *Hanzu*, which at the time was ambiguously used to refer to the Han race and the Sinic cultural community.<sup>39</sup> Notwithstanding his emphasis on the inclusive nature of the ‘Chinese nation’, the introduction of this terminology by Liang paved the way for a conceptualisation of a Han-centred Chinese nation by Republican-era elites, for whom *Hanzu* was a racial category clearly distinct from the Manchu, Tibetans, Muslims, and Mongols.<sup>40</sup> After the founding of the PRC, as mentioned above, the idea of a Han-centric Chinese nation was partially side-lined by the political identity of ‘the people of all nationalities’. Recently, however, it has come to the fore again. In 2018, the expression ‘Chinese nation’ was enshrined in the country’s constitution, in relation to the goal of realising its ‘rejuvenation’ (*fuxing* 复兴),<sup>41</sup> a signature slogan under Xi Jinping which recalls Sun Yatsen’s call to ‘reinvigorate’ (*zhengxing* 振兴) China.<sup>42</sup>

‘Interethnic mingling’ within the ‘Chinese nation’, namely the building of the Chinese on Han ethnic majoritarianism, appears to be more an integral part of China’s overall strategy, than just a means to solve interethnic conflicts. The ‘consciousness of the unified community of the Chinese nation’, the ‘identification with Chinese culture’ (*Zhonghua wenhua rentong* 中华文化认同),<sup>43</sup> and the promotion of a ‘China spirit’ (*Zhongguo jingshen* 中国精神) (another expression which echoes Sun Yatsen’s vocabulary of the

39. When quoting Liang Qichao’s article, Bulag does not clarify the meaning of *Hanzu*. Bulag, ‘Minority Nationalities as Frankenstein’s Monsters? Reshaping «the Chinese Nation» and China’s Quest to Become a «Normal Country»’, p. 47. Leibold instead maintains that *Hanzu* at the turn of the century was mainly used to refer to the Sinic cultural and political community. Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism*, p. 186. Thus the term is quite ambiguous.

40. Wang Hui indeed refers to Liang Qichao’s nationalism as ‘Chinese nationalism’, setting it apart from the kind of ‘Han nationalism’ advocated by the revolutionaries. Wang Hui, *Impero o Stato-Nazione? La modernità intellettuale in Cina* (Empire or Nation-State? Intellectual modernity in China), Milan: Academia Universa Press, pp. 60-64.

41. Ma Rong, a state-intellectual, notes that ‘Chinese nation’ was absent in the previous versions of the PRC’s Constitution before 2018. Ma Rong, 中国民族区域自治制度的历史演变轨迹 (The Historical Evolution China’s System of Autonomous Ethnic Regions), *Zhongyang shehuizhuyi xueyuan xuebao*, 2019, pp. 94-101, p. 108. The Constitution of the People’s Republic of China is available at: [http://www.gov.cn/guofqing/2018-03/22/content\\_5276318.htm](http://www.gov.cn/guofqing/2018-03/22/content_5276318.htm).

42. Orville Schell & John Delury, *Wealth and Power: China’s Long March to the Twenty-first Century*, New York: Random House Inc., 2013.

43. The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *The fight against terrorism and extremism and human rights protection in Xinjiang*.

early 20<sup>th</sup>-century vocabulary)<sup>44</sup> are all indicators of an attempt to forge a nation-mindedness – with a strong Han accent – aiming to ‘unite’ the Chinese people around the CCP, a project which goes far beyond the borders of the PRC and includes overseas Chinese.<sup>45</sup>

In recent years, official propaganda has attempted to define the so-called ‘Chinese characteristics’ and Chineseness, which, in sum, are ‘Han characteristics’, much in the same way as the ‘standard national language’ (*guojia tongyong yuyan wenzi* 国家通用语言文字) is defined as *Hanyu* (汉语), the language spoken by the Han majority, i.e., the Mandarin language.<sup>46</sup> The results of these efforts are, for instance, the ‘socialist core values’ (*she-huizhuyi hexin jiazhiguan* 社会主义核心价值观) promoted since 2012, which marry values belonging to the Confucian tradition with modern principles.<sup>47</sup>

The ‘socialist core values’ are also quoted in one of the WPs issued in 2019, and are placed in relation to the need to ‘Sinicize [its] religions’ (*zongjiao Zhongguohua* 宗教中国化): ‘We must carry forward the historical tradition of sinicization of religions, use the socialist core values as a guide (*yindao* 引导) and penetrate various religions in China with Chinese culture, [...] and actively guide various religions, including Islam, to follow the path (*daolu* 道路) of sinicization (*Zhongguohua* 中国化)’.<sup>48</sup> Before Xi, references to the process of ‘sinicization’ were made primarily with regard to the ‘sinicization of Marxism’ (*Makesizhuyi Zhongguohua* 马克思主义中国化), that is the adaptation of Marxism to China’s socio-economic reality. By looking at the way in which the view of ‘religious sinicization’ is conveyed in the WP, it seems to refer to a set of top-down rules that the religious practitioners

44. Beatrice Gallelli, ‘*Jingshen* 精神: A Governmental Keyword in 21st Century China’, in Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova (ed.), *From Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping: The Political Discourse of China Re-examined through Discourse Analysis Theories*, London & New York, Routledge, forthcoming.

45. Sheng Ding, ‘Engaging Diaspora via Charm Offensive and Indigenized Communication: An Analysis of China’s Diaspora Engagement Policies in the Xi Era’, *Politics*, Issue 35, No. 3–4, April 28, 2015, pp. 230–44.

46. State’s Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 新疆的文化保护与发展 (Cultural protection and development in Xinjiang), 15 November 2018 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/37884/Document/1641510/1641510.htm>).

47. The ‘socialist core values’ are organized on three levels: the values pertaining to the state (‘wealth and power’, ‘democracy’, ‘civility’, ‘harmony’); to the society (‘freedom’, ‘equality’, ‘justice’, ‘rule by law’) and third, those pertaining to individual citizens (‘patriotism’, ‘dedication’, ‘integrity’, and ‘friendship’). Their structure, based on three layers of morality, is connected to the doctrine of Mencius (372-289 BCE), one of the most important of Confucian philosophers, according to whom: ‘Among the people there is the common saying, “The empire, the state, the family.” The empire has its basis in the state; the state has its basis in the family, and the family has its basis in oneself’. Mencius 4A5, in Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Mencius* - Translated by Irene Bloom. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, p. 76.

48. State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang*, Glasgow: Good Press, 2021.

should abide by, rather than a process of hybridisation and adaptation of religious beliefs and customs to China's broad culture and aesthetics. Indeed, 'sinicization' is metaphorically represented by a 'path' (*daolu*) that religions in the PRC should follow.

## 2.2. *Promoting economic development and increasing peoples' quality*

As a Leninist Party, the CCP views material progress as a linear path. Not all the peoples, however, are deemed to progress at the same pace, and non-Han nationalities have been denigrated as lagging behind China's dominant ethnicity, the Han, in terms of socioeconomic development.<sup>49</sup> This view has been, since the founding of the PRC, the leitmotiv of Beijing's approach to non-Han nationalities, including the Uyghurs. In other words – and similar to the colonial 'civilising' mission – non-Han populations are backwards and need Han intervention in order to benefit from development and modernity. This assumption is implicit in the above-mentioned 'peaceful liberation' phrase: emphasising that Xinjiang gained its freedom thanks to the CCP tacitly implies that the local population was unable to reach freedom by themselves.

All the WPs try to substantiate this argument by comparing the backward economic structure in Xinjiang and the development brought about by the founding of the 'New China' (*xin Zhongguo* 新中国), that is the PRC. Quantitative data are used to this end. For instance, the 2003 WP provides detailed quantification of the increase in Xinjiang's GDP, of the technological improvements in the agricultural sector, of the increase of industries and of industrial production, of infrastructure and telecommunication thanks to the support of China.<sup>50</sup> Grounded on a view of 'science' as the 'authoritative knowledge' and 'ultimate arbiter of "truth"' in modern society,<sup>51</sup> precise quantification and extensive use of numerical data demonstrate the objectivity and incontrovertibility of the authorities' arguments about Xinjiang's improvements since 1949.

Although state-sponsored development projects and massive economic investment – such as the 'Great Development of the West (*Xibu da kaifa* 西部大开发) – have fallen short of expectations, especially with regard to improving living standards for Uyghurs and non-Han nationalities in the region,<sup>52</sup> China's authorities' official narrative seemingly utilizes 'develop-

49. James Leibold, 'The Beijing Olympics and China's Conflicted National Form', *The China Journal*, No. 63, 2010, pp. 1–24.

50. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *History and development of Xinjiang* (<https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ccin/eng/ssygd/UrumqiRiot/t573267.htm>).

51. Susan Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

52. James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, London: C. Hurst&Co., 2021, pp. 363–368.

ment' as a shield to protect from international and domestic criticism on the Xinjiang issue. More recently, the claimed 'success' in the fight against absolute poverty reported in 2020 as well as the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative which feature in Xinjiang have further fueled this reasoning. Interestingly enough, China's official narrative uses the floating signifier 'human rights' (*renquan* 人权) as a discursive tool in order to defend itself from the charge of human rights violations in Xinjiang. Indeed, the last of the WPs issued in 2021 is entirely dedicated to clarifying the 'rights' enjoyed by the Chinese people and, in particular, by Xinjiang's population. In the long introduction, it describes how the population in Xinjiang was oppressed by 'imperialist forces, the feudal exploiting class and the privileged religious hierarchy' and 'deprived of basic human rights', and notes the way in which, thanks to the CCP, they gained a 'better protection of human rights'.<sup>53</sup> In this way, the WP also promotes a definition of 'human rights' that attaches major importance to the 'right to subsistence' (*shengcun quan* 生存权) and 'right to development' (*fazhan quan* 发展权), defined as the 'most important human rights'.<sup>54</sup> In particular, the 'right to development' is further described as 'the essential precondition for the realisation of all human rights'.<sup>55</sup> The 'right to subsistence' and the 'right to development' are included in international human rights, alongside civil and political rights. But in the PRC's official discourse on human rights, they are at the heart. Beijing started participating in the work on human rights since the 1980s, as in Maoist China human rights were rejected as 'bourgeois slogans'. But it is in the post-June Fourth era that the PRC's authorities have adopted a more proactive policy on human rights.<sup>56</sup> In 1991, Beijing published its first White Paper ever, which indeed dealt with human rights.<sup>57</sup> Starting as a reaction to international criticism on the violent repression of the Tiananmen movement, the official stance on human rights in China soon evolved into an active promulgation of its own position internationally. In its appropriation of the concept of human rights, China's authorities maintain that safeguarding human rights depends on the level of economic development.

In light of the above, it is not surprising that the officially named 'vocational education and training centres' (*zhiye jineng jiaoyu peixun zhongxin* 职业技能教育培训中心), known abroad as 'reeducation camps' operate in

53. State's Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 新疆各民族平等权利的保障 (Respecting and protecting the rights of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang), 14 July 2021 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/42312/Document/1687708/1687708.htm>).

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

56. Marina Svensson, *Debating Human Rights in China*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002 (eBook).

57. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 中国的人权状况 (Human rights in China), 1 November 1991 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/1991/Document/1715811/1715811.htm>).

order to uphold the protection of human rights. This is where Xinjiang's non-Han population (mostly Uyghurs) have been interned since 2017. The PRC's justification: 'the protection of labor rights entails the safeguarding of human dignity, and therefore protects human rights' (*baozhang laodong quan jiu shi weihu ren de zunyan, jiu shi baozhang renquan* 保障劳动权就是维护人的尊严, 就是保障人权).<sup>58</sup> According to this narrative, the 'vocational education and training centres' are thus framed as a way to increase job opportunities and therefore a leverage for the economic prosperity of the region. This, in turn, entails that they guarantee the protection of the most important human right from Beijing's perspective, namely the 'right to development'.

Interestingly, Muller argues that since the mid 2010s, the emphasis in China's official discourse on human rights has switched 'from subsistence to development'.<sup>59</sup> This is even more interesting in light of the meaning of 'development' in China's official discourse. The concept of development that the official narrative refers to is not limited to economic growth or the amelioration of living standards but also includes the civilising project of non-Han nationalities. Indeed, one of the three WPs issued in 2019 revolves around the vocational education and training centres, and states that their aims are to 'help the trainees to emancipate their minds, improve their quality (*suzhi* 素质) and their development prospects'.<sup>60</sup> The discourse on *suzhi* arose in the debate on the need to control the demographic growth of China in the late 1970s. The underlying idea was that by reducing the population, it might be possible to increase its inherent quality. This view led, for example, to the implementation of family planning policies for the whole Han population starting in 1979.<sup>61</sup> For the non-Han population, the policy was less rigid, usually allowing non-Han couples one additional child: only one child was allowed for Han Chinese living in urban area and two for those living in the countryside, while non-Han population in urban areas were permitted to have two children and three in rural areas. Nowadays, while the strict limits once imposed are gradually relaxing, the distinctions

58. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 新疆的劳动就业保障 (Employment and labor rights in Xinjiang), 17 September 2020 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/42312/Document/1687708/1687708.htm>).

59. Wim Muller, 'Subsistence, poverty alleviation and right to development: between discourse and practice', in Sarah Biddulph & Joshua Rosenzweig (eds.), *Handbook of Human Rights in China*, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2019, pp. 128-131.

60. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 新疆的职业技能教育培训工作 (Vocational education and training in Xinjiang), 17 August 2019 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/39911/Document/1662044/1662044.htm>).

61. Susan Greenhalgh & Edwin A. Winckler, *Governing China's Population: From Leninist to Neoliberal Biopolitics*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005; Susan Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China*, Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008.

between Han and non-Han population have been erased and the birth-control policy has been coercively applied to the Uyghurs since 2017.<sup>62</sup> As was the case four decades ago, the underlying view is still informed by the discourse on civilising China's population and improving 'people's quality'. Therefore, the goal of developing Xinjiang is not limited to improving its economy in the various sectors and proving 'job opportunities'. In fact, a great deal of emphasis is placed on social engineering aimed at transforming the population into an ideal community of 'modern citizens' that are compliant with the developmental vision promoted by the authorities.

### 2.3. *The people's war on terror*

Scholarly literature has already demonstrated that two discourses in the international sphere have played a key role in the development of China's official narrative on Xinjiang: first, the one on the 'three evils' (*san gu shili* 三股势力) elaborated within the framework of the Shanghai Five, (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), and, second, the US-led global war on terror.<sup>63</sup>

The Shanghai Five was formed in 1996 as a platform to resolve issues of border demarcation. However, it soon included in its agenda security issues, and, in 1998, elaborated the notion of the 'three evils' (terrorism, separatism and extremism). In 2001 Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Five, which soon afterwards was rebranded Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). A few months before the attack on the Twin Towers (11 September 2001), the SCO adopted the 'Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism'.<sup>64</sup> The concept of the 'three evils' unified 'separatism', 'terrorism' and 'extremism', paving the way for Beijing authorities branding all perceived 'separatist' threats as 'terrorism'.<sup>65</sup>

The Twin Towers attack represents a turning point in Beijing's discursive strategy. US President George W. Bush's announcement of a global 'war on terror' in 2001-2002 provided a further justification for China's state-led suppression of dissenting voices as well as religious practices in Xinjiang.

62. Nathan Ruser & James Leibold, 'Family De-planning: The Coercive Campaign to Drive Down Indigenous Birth-rates in Xinjiang', *The Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, No. 44, 2021. Adrian Zenz, *Sterilizations, IUDs, and Mandatory Birth Control: The CCP's Campaign to Suppress Uyghur Birthrates in Xinjiang*, Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, June 2020 (<https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Zenz-Internment-Sterilizations-and-IUDs-REVISED-March-17-2021.pdf?x90712>).

63. James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, pp. 69-75; Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*.

64. All the documents, including the Convention, delivered by SCO are available at <http://eng.sectsc.org/documents/>.

65. Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*, p. 68.



Chinese authorities defined as terrorism certain acts of violence among the Uyghurs over the previous decades, which had in truth been the product of spontaneous outrage against abuses, rather than of predetermined plans. According to the official narrative, these episodes of violence had been carried out by Uyghurs' terrorist organisations, namely the 'Eastern Turkistan Terrorist Forces' that were allegedly supported by the Taliban in Afghanistan.<sup>66</sup> Probably in an attempt to gain China's support for its own global war on terror, in August 2002, the US government supported Beijing's claims by designating the East Turkestan Islamic Movement as an international 'terrorist organisation' linked to Al Qaeda and, therefore, a threat for the US too. While Chinese authorities had pointed to various organisations belonging to the elusive 'Eastern Turkistan Terrorist Forces', the US blamed only one of them, i.e., East Turkestan Islamic Movement itself, as the organization responsible for all the violence. This slip by the US was later incorporated into by China's official narrative. Thus, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement became singled out as the sole organization responsible for all the alleged Uyghur-perpetrated violence that occurred over the previous decades in China.<sup>67</sup>

Surfing the wave of Islamophobia worldwide,<sup>68</sup> in 2014 China declared the beginning of the 'people's war on terror' (*fan kong renmin zhanzheng* 反恐人民战争). The same year, Beijing amended the 1994 Regulations of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region on Religious Affairs that, as Lavička demonstrates, 'attempt to uproot religion from society and everyday life'.<sup>69</sup> In 2015, Beijing passed a new 'Counterterrorism Law' that further codified and justified (in terms of 'rule by law' (*fazhi* 法治)) the assimilationist policies and anti-Islamic practice put into place in Xinjiang.<sup>70</sup> In 2017, counterterrorism measures began to be applied on a mass scale, marking the shift from selective to collective repression.<sup>71</sup> This shift has implied that, in addition to punitive detention on specific individuals, increased surveillance and mass political re-education started targeting a wide swath of Xinjiang Muslim population.

66. James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*, pp. 330–32. Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*, pp. 69–75.

67. Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*, pp. 78–79.

68. David Brophy, 'Good and Bad Muslims in Xinjiang', *Made in China Journal*, Issue 4, No. 2, 9 July 2019.

69. Martin Lavička, 'Changes in Chinese Legal Narratives about Religious Affairs in Xinjiang', *Asian Ethnicity*, Issue 22, No. 1, 2021, p. 69.

70. Counterterrorism Law of the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国反恐恐怖主义法). For comments on the Law, see Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*, p. 178.

71. Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Myunghee Lee & Emir Yazici, 'Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression: China's Changing Strategy in Xinjiang', *International Security*, Vo. 44, No. 3, 2020, pp. 9–47.

The repressive measures applied in Xinjiang were, therefore, no longer framed as merely combating the ‘separatism’ that threatened China, but as part of global efforts to thwart ‘terrorism’ and fight ‘religious extremism’. ‘Separatism’ was initially deemed to be the ‘hotbed’ (*wenchuang* 温床) of the other two ‘evils’, to use official terminology,<sup>72</sup> but has been less emphasized since the declaration of the ‘people’s war on terror’. The lesser importance now attached to ‘separatism’ is apparent when one looks at the ostensible mission of the ‘vocational education and training centre’, which is fighting ‘religious extremism’ and ‘terrorism’, but does not explicitly target ‘separatism’.<sup>73</sup> This emphasis is based on a cause-effect link between the ‘increase of religious extremism worldwide since the end of the Cold War’ and the rise of ‘religious terrorism in Xinjiang’.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, scholarly literature argues that the CCP’s concerns for the ties between Uyghurs and jihadist groups abroad resulted, on the one hand, in the upgrade of repressive measures in Xinjiang and, on the other, in China’s growing involvement in counterterrorism cooperation abroad.<sup>75</sup> In this way, the Chinese ‘people’s war on terrorism’ evolved into a ‘global war on terror’.

#### 2.4. *Placing the Xinjiang issue in the larger context: The Party’s leading role and a new approach to ‘stability maintenance’*

While the three main narratives underlying the Xinjiang issue have been outlined, two main trends featuring Chinese politics in recent years also deserve our attention for the deep impact they have had on the Xinjiang issue: first, the recentralization of power in the hands of the CCP; second, the role played by a new approach to ‘stability maintenance’ in China’s political discourse.

To start with the first, in recent years, and even more so since Xi Jinping took office, the CCP has placed under its direct control all spheres of contemporary Chinese society, from the cultural to the economic, and also the religious. The well-known wording of the political report issued at the 19<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress sums up this trend: ‘Party, government, military, society and education, east, west, south, north, the Party leads everything’ (*dang zheng jun min xue, dong xi nan bei Zhong, dang shi lingdao yiqie*

72. The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *The fight against terrorism and extremism and human rights protection in Xinjiang*.

73. The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, ‘*Vocational education and training in Xinjiang*’.

74. The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 新疆的宗教信仰自由状况 (*Freedom of religious belief in Xinjiang*), 2 June 2016 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/34120/Document/1479257/1479257.htm>).

75. Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Myunghhee Lee & Emir Yazici, ‘Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression’.

de 党政军民学，东西南北中，党是领导一切的).<sup>76</sup> Specifically as regards religious affairs, this recentralisation of power under the CCP finds its concrete application in the restructuring of the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, which, in 2018, absorbed the State Administration for Religious Affairs (a state organ under the State Council) causing the dissolution of the latter.<sup>77</sup> The re-establishment of CCP leadership over religious life signals a U-turn from the political practice implemented in post-Maoist China. Notwithstanding the adherence to Marxist, Leninist and Maoist views asserting there is no place for religion in China, the years following the end of the Cultural Revolution permitted a relative freedom of religious belief for Chinese citizens. The re-centralisation of control over religious practice under the CCP represents the materialisation of the view of religion as ‘an obsolete aspect of Chinese culture, and thus it has to be controlled by the “modern and atheistic” Party’.<sup>78</sup> By repressing religious beliefs and practices, the Party also weakens faith systems that might challenge its monopoly on ideology and its own promoted ‘faith’, i.e., top-down ‘patriotism’. The current crackdown on religions, and on Islam in particular, is part of a broader process aimed at re-establishing the CCP’s control on ideology in all fields of China’s society. As stated above, this process is officially called ‘sinicization’, but it is not limited to religions. It has been applied also to the ‘cultural sphere’. When Xi Jinping addressed writers and artists at the Forum on Literature and Arts in 2014, for instance, he warned against the threat of ‘de-sinicization’ (*qu Zhongguohua* 去中国化).<sup>79</sup>

In addressing the new approach to ‘stability maintenance’ adopted by the Party, scholars have emphasized that, in Xinjiang, ‘the CCP had inverted its formerly declared relationship between development and stability’.<sup>80</sup> In other words, China’s authorities no longer believe that economic development and prosperity are tools to achieve ‘social stability’. This view has been further fuelled by the CCP’s perception of growing threats coming

76. Xi Jinping, ‘Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era’, 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 18 October 2017 ([http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi\\_Jinping%27s\\_report\\_at\\_19th\\_CPC\\_National\\_Congress.pdf](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping%27s_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf)).

77. Alex Joske, ‘Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work’, *China Brief Volume*, Issue 19, No. 9, 2019.

78. Martin Lavička, ‘Changes in Chinese Legal Narratives about Religious Affairs in Xinjiang’, Issue 22, No. 1, 2021, pp. 61–76.

79. Xi Jinping, 习近平在文艺工作座谈会上的讲话 (Xi Jinping’s speech at the Forum on Literature and Arts), *Xinhua*, 24 October 2015 ([http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-10/14/c\\_1116825558.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-10/14/c_1116825558.htm)).

80. Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China’s Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority: China’s Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*, p. 175.

from the ties between Uyghurs and jihadist groups abroad and by the CCP's concern that Xinjiang Muslim population are vulnerable to religious extremism, and thus need to be 'immunized'.<sup>81</sup> This has led to the adoption of a new approach based on 'preventive' (*yufang* 预防) measures implemented in the region since the early 2000s. These measures are informed both by 'foreign models' (such as United States-led occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan) and Chinese intellectuals' theoretical contributions.<sup>82</sup> A WP issued in 2019 defines 'preventive' measures as 'top priority (*yufang di yi wei* 预防第一位).<sup>83</sup> 'Prevention' manifests as 'transformation through education' (*jiaoyu zhuanhua* 教育转化), a practice which was previously applied to the members of the Falun Gong. In Xinjiang, this same practice led to the construction of the reeducation camps.<sup>84</sup>

While it cannot be denied that this new approach to 'stability maintenance' finds its extreme consequence in Xinjiang, this paper argues that this perspective can be viewed as part of a broader governance strategy that was being developed even before Xi Jinping's emergence, though it has escalated under his leadership. Against the backdrop of China's lower GDP growth rate, the CCP has been still harsher in repressing all those voices that may represent a threat to its rule, but it has even silenced those potentially inconvenient voices that do not express any direct dissent.<sup>85</sup> In other words, whether it be explicit dissidents or within-the-system changemakers, such as NGOs or labour activists,<sup>86</sup> all are now the target of state repression. A new emphasis on ideology has gone hand in hand with new limitations on freedom of expression.<sup>87</sup> In light of this, the CCP applies a 'preventive' approach to the whole society, attempting to bar anything that may threaten its leadership. This approach is developing alongside a growing emphasis on the need to safeguard China's 'security'.

81. Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Myunghee Lee & Emir Yazici, 'Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression'.

82. Darren Byler, 'Preventative Policing as Community Detention in Northwest China', *Made in China Journal*, Issue 4, No. 3, 2019.

83. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *The fight against terrorism and extremism and human rights protection in Xinjiang*.

84. Adrian Zenz, '«Thoroughly Reforming Them towards a Healthy Heart Attitude»'.

85. Chloé Froissart, 'Changing patterns of Chinese civil society: Comparing the Hu-Wen and Xi Jinping eras', in Willy Wo-Lap Lam (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Communist Party*, London & New York: Routledge, 2018. The crackdown has involved also the media

86. Human rights organisations argue that already during the first five-year term of Xi Jinping's administration, the number of activists detained has tripled from the previous year: 'Detentions of Chinese Activists Tripled Last Year: Report', *Radio Free Asia*, 3 March 2014.

87. Jean-Philippe Béja, 'Reform, repression, co-optation: The CCP's policy toward intellectuals', in Willy Wo-Lap Lam (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Communist Party*, London & New York: Routledge, 2018.

According to Sulmaan Wasif Khan, preserving security has always been part of the ‘grand strategy’ of China’s leadership.<sup>88</sup> Yet, while the previous generation of leaders adopted at times flexible approaches to ‘stability maintenance’, under Xi zero tolerance is shown. A series of country-level reforms provides evidence of this new discursive emphasis. In 2013, a Central National Security Commission (*Zhongyang guojia anquan weiyuanhui* 中央国家安全委员会) under the direct control of the general secretary of the Party was established; in 2015, a new National Security Law was issued, i.e. National Security Law (*guojia anquan fa* 国家安全法), and April 15 was chosen as National Security Education Day (*quanmin guojia anquan jiaoyu ri* 全民国家安全教育日). The definition of ‘national security’ is quite broad: “national security” means a status in which the regime, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, welfare of the people, sustainable economic and social development, and other major interests of the state are relatively not faced with any danger and not threatened internally or externally and a status in which security is constantly maintained’.<sup>89</sup> Thus, it encompasses both internal and external threats. Interestingly, the 2015 legislation defines ‘prevention as the priority’ (*yufang wei zhu* 预防为主), a point which was not included in the previous versions of the law.<sup>90</sup> The ‘preventive’ measures address all the events that harm or ‘could’ (*keneng* 可能) harm the country. The frequency of ‘security’ measures has increased and the concept of ‘country security’ (*guojia anquan* 国家安全) has grown in importance since 2014, figuring prominently in all the WPs released since that year. Whether the ‘preventive’ approach to stability maintenance was triggered by Beijing’s heightened sensitivity towards transnational terrorist threats or not,<sup>91</sup> it has *de jure* applied to the entire Chinese society already since 2015.

### 3. Conclusion

Over the past few years, the northwest region of the PRC and its main population have seen an escalation of state-perpetrated violence. This analysis has set out to better understand the ground on which the Chinese authorities justify their actions in the region and understanding whether Beijing’s behaviour in Xinjiang is an and towards ethnic minority is an exception within the largest context of Xi Jinping’s China or not. It has investigated the 11

88. Sulmaan Wasif Khan, *Haunted by Chaos. China’s Grand Strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 2018.

89. 中华人民共和国国家安全法2015 (National Security Law of the People’s Republic of China 2015), Section 1, Article 2.

90. National Security Law of the People’s Republic of China (2015), Section 1, Article 9.

91. Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Myunghee Lee & Emir Yazici, ‘Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression’.

White Papers issued by the State's Council Information Office since 2003, which specifically address the Xinjiang issue.

It is clear that China's authorities structure their view on three main discursive layers. First, a new approach to interethnic unity lies at the centre of CCP's way of handling the Xinjiang issue. The promotion of interethnic mingling has gone hand in hand with the promotion of a 'Chinese identity' – embedded in expressions like 'Chinese nation', 'Chinese spirit' punctuating contemporary Chinese political discourse – which is nothing but Han-centric. Interestingly, they portray Xi Jinping's view of China as being closer to Sun Yatsen's idea of 'Chinese nation' than to that promoted by the CCP in its early days. This new ethnic policy manifests, as Bulag maintains, the Party's attempt to 'complete the Chinese mission of finding a national form compatible with its state form'.<sup>92</sup> Second, Chinese state developmentalism contributes to discursively justifying the repressive measures as necessary to propel Xinjiang's economic development and to improve the 'quality' of the non-Han population. By defining 'development' as the most important 'human right', Beijing reacts to foreign criticism by using the same wording and also challenges the meaning of 'human right' as it is generally used in the US and the EU. Third, the SCO's 'three evils' and the US 'war on terror' have triggered the reframing of the Xinjiang issue, making it part of a 'global war on terror'.

The analysis has attempted to provide insights into the way in which these three narratives interact with previous discourses and, in most cases, are informed by the ideological views that sustain Beijing's approach to the entirety of Chinese society, not merely Xinjiang. This is even more apparent when it comes to the CCP's level of control. Indeed, this paper argues that the state repression of religious belief accords with the Party's recent emphasis on its guiding role in all spheres of social life. This, in turn, materializes in a new approach to 'stability maintenance' aimed at uprooting all the potential threats to the Party's grip on power. This new approach to «stability maintenance» is mostly embedded in the concept of 'national security' – interestingly, another non-negotiable «core interest».

China's 'national core interests' represent the point at which China's domestic and foreign policies blur into one another. This is especially evident in Xinjiang, as it is a borderland region, crucial for realising China's Belt and Road Initiative. The state-perpetrated repression in the region and the country's reaction to external criticism are manifestations of the Party's growing assertiveness in defending 'core interests' in and out of the PRC's borders.

92. Uradyn E. Bulag, 'Minority Minority Nationalities as Frankenstein's Monsters? Reshaping «the Chinese Nation» and China's Quest to Become a «Normal Country»', p. 47.



# COVID-19 AND CHINA'S GLOBAL IMAGE

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*With the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, the PRC experienced one of its worst internal and international crises, in economic terms but above all in terms of image and prestige. The COVID-19 pandemic, in fact, came at a critical juncture in both China's internal and international relations, given that in recent years the communist Government has become a target of criticism from various internal and international issues. At the same time, it represented a crucial challenge for the CCP, while preparing the celebrations for its 100th anniversary and the achievement of its first «centenary goal».*

*Beyond the undeniable effects on the country's economy, undoubtedly the most relevant effects were recorded in terms of image and reputation, as has emerged in different global opinion polls. Despite the Chinese authorities' highly effective management of the health emergency crisis after a first period of inaction, Beijing's authoritarian rule has again been an object of consistent criticism from liberal Western democracies, both on the intrusive methods adopted to cope with the crisis and its aggressiveness in imposing its official narrative regarding events. After analysing the effects of COVID-19 on China's global image, the paper focuses on the importance of «image» for China and its quest for prestige and image-building throughout history, with special reference to the communist experience. In the last part, it reflects on the opportunity that vaccine diplomacy may represent for China to recover its reputation.*

KEYWORDS – China; COVID-19; global image; prestige; CCP's legitimacy; official narrative; aid (vaccine) diplomacy.

## 1. Introduction

2020 was a real *annus horribilis* for China as it experienced one of its worst international crises, being the first epicentre of the novel coronavirus pandemic. Beyond the effects on the country's economy, which cannot be neglected – in recent years China has recorded its lowest growth rates since 1978 – undoubtedly the most relevant effects were recorded in terms of its image and reputation.

In this article, I first analyse the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on China's global image in a very crucial period in which the Chinese Communist Party was preparing to celebrate its 100th anniversary and the achievement of its first «centenary goal». I also underline how the crisis contributed



to precipitating a situation for the country that was already evident. In the following section I briefly focus on the significance of «image» for China and the Chinese, while China's quest for prestige and image-building throughout history, with special reference to the communist experience, is examined in the successive section. In the conclusion, I reflect on the opportunity that vaccine diplomacy may represent for China to recover its image.

## 2. *The effects of the pandemic on China's global image*

In the 30th group study session of the Political Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee focused on strengthening China's international communication capacity, held in Beijing on 31 May 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping told senior Communist Party officials that it was important for the country to be “open and confident, but also modest and humble” and present an image of a “credible, loveable and respectable China” (要注重把握好基调，既开放自信也谦逊谦和，努力塑造可信、可爱、可敬的中国形象). He also spoke of the need for China to “incessantly expand its circle of friends” (不断扩大朋友圈) by revamping its image.<sup>1</sup> These remarks were quite distinct from the belligerent, arrogant and at times threatening tones Xi Jinping has repeatedly adopted in the last few years. To observers they represented a rare admission of Beijing's growing isolation, which was exacerbated by the novel coronavirus (henceforth COVID-19) pandemic, and marked a possible shift in China's diplomatic approach, considered by analysts increasingly antagonistic. The Chinese leader's comments, in fact, came amid deteriorating relations with key global powers and negative perceptions of China at record high levels in many parts of the world. The Chinese observers agree in considering Xi's call to be a recognition of Beijing's international isolation, which is exacerbated by aggressive «wolf warrior» diplomacy and ineffective propaganda, and an attempt to influence campaigns abroad to impose the country's narrative on COVID-19. It is even possible that the Chinese president had been persuaded by those, including party loyalists, who have been arguing that the «wolf warrior» approach has been counterproductive and has contributed to undermining the country's global image.<sup>2</sup>

1. ‘加强和改进国际传播工作 展示真实立体全面的中国’ (Strengthening and Improving International Communication Work to Demonstrate a Realistic, Three-dimensional and Comprehensive China), *Renmin Ribao*, 2 June 2021.

2. ‘Xi Jinping calls for more «loveable» image for China in bid to make friends’, *BBC*, 2 June 2021. Despite this apparent sort of break with a recent «Wolf Warrior» posture in Chinese political communication, in fact both the language and the arguments used by Xi Jinping in this speech are quite consistent with previous messages on the country's external political communication.

In fact, the net deterioration in the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s global image can be considered one of the worst consequences of the outbreak of the coronavirus, one which has consequently led to a marked worsening of its international environment. As emerged in different global opinion polls conducted in 2020 and early 2021, public attitudes to China have sharply changed as a direct consequence of the spread of COVID-19 in the world. Especially in relation to the initial mismanagement of the crisis and the aggressive narrative imposed by Beijing in the attempt to change the general perception of the country from «virus infector» to «world saviour». In particular, surveys by the Pew Research Center revealed that China's image had reached its lowest point since the think tank began surveying global perceptions of the country in the early 2000s.<sup>3</sup> More than two-thirds of people in the countries surveyed – fourteen largely Western and advanced economy nations, including Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Italy, South Korea, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States – declared they had no confidence in the Chinese President to do the right thing with regard to world affairs, and more than three in five on average thought China had done a bad job in dealing with the coronavirus outbreak. The most negative views on China's coronavirus performance came from three countries in its close proximity, namely Japan, South Korea and Australia. In specific contexts like in the US, the negative feelings were directly linked to China's lack of respect for human rights, together with economic issues. Similarly, in the European context there was a generalized sense of growing mistrust of the Chinese leadership and a consequent decline in Chinese soft power, as was confirmed in a report published in April 2021 by the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC), significantly entitled *China's Soft Power in Europe Falling on Hard Times*.<sup>4</sup> Other studies conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations and the Palacký University Olomouc in the Czech Republic (in partnership with other European researchers) in June and November 2020 respectively showed similar results. In particular, the Czech University's study, which was conducted in 13 European countries (including 10 EU members), revealed how perceptions of China significantly worsened in 10 of the countries, with Serbia being one of the exceptions.<sup>5</sup>

While these results could be considered an obvious outcome, the situation was no better in the PRC's neighbourhood. Particularly interesting are the results in central Asian countries, key actors in relation to the expansion

3. 'Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries', *Pew Research Center*, 6 October 2020.

4. [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Report\\_ETNC\\_China\\_Soft\\_Power\\_in\\_Europe\\_Falling\\_on\\_Hard\\_Times\\_2021.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Report_ETNC_China_Soft_Power_in_Europe_Falling_on_Hard_Times_2021.pdf).

5. 'China, Europe, and Covid-19 Headwinds', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 20 July 2020; 'European Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19', *Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS)*, 16 November 2020.

and reach of the Belt and Road Initiative, as Bonnie Girard showed in an article written for *The Diplomat*.<sup>6</sup> This is despite the fact that it was not directly related to the spread of the coronavirus. In southeast Asia the picture is mixed, as was shown by a poll conducted by Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (formerly the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) and published in February 2021. The study revealed that while most countries acknowledged that the PRC had contributed the most to the region in coping with the pandemic, the respondents appeared to be sceptical about China's prowess in the region.<sup>7</sup>

In other contexts where Chinese influence is well consolidated, the situation was apparently the same, but on closer inspection some differences can be seen. In Latin America, surveys showed a rise in anti-Chinese rhetoric at the beginning of the crisis, even in friendly countries such as Brazil and Venezuela, which imitated Trump's US in downplaying the gravity of the pandemic and calling COVID-19 «the Chinese virus». Some countries (Argentina, Brazil and Mexico) which had always expressed favourable opinions about China witnessed significant manifestations of anti-Chinese xenophobia as soon as the coronavirus reached the region.<sup>8</sup> However, Beijing's capacity to move quickly to rebrand itself as a donor rather than a recipient of aid, especially as the US interrupted international supply chains and directed all its efforts domestically (also in the context of vaccine policy giving priority to vaccinations at home), contributed to inverting the trend and strengthening the country's status in Latin America.<sup>9</sup>

In Africa the situation appeared to be more complex and multifaceted. Despite the discrimination African nationals had suffered on Chinese soil, as was exemplified by the Guangzhou incident in early April 2020, China has intentionally kept Africa high on its agenda. Its aid diplomacy has contributed to rescuing its image in the continent,<sup>10</sup> as a cooperative partner thanks to its mask and vaccine diplomacies carried out through both bilateral channels and multilateral initiatives, such as the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX initiative).

On the other hand, other reports have contributed to highlighting how Beijing used the pandemic crisis instrumentally to boost its image in

6. 'At 100 Years Old, China's Communist Party Still Can't Get Along with Its Next-Door Neighbors', *The Diplomat*, 21 June 2021.

7. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>.

8. 'Latin America Used to Be Positive Toward China. COVID-19 Might Change That', *The Diplomat*, 10 April 2020.

9. 'Vaccine diplomacy strengthens China's stature in Latin America, US congressional panel hears', *South China Morning Post*, 21 May 2021.

10. 'Coronavirus: how China plans to restore its image in Africa', *The Africa Report*, 20 April 2020; 'How «Mask Diplomacy» Rescued China's Image in Africa', *Defense One*, 10 March 2021.

global media coverage. A study by the International Federation of Journalists conducted between December 2020 and January 2021 and involving about fifty journalists from as many countries from six regions of the world (Asia-Pacific, Africa, Europe, Latin America, North America and MENA) is particularly interesting. It revealed how China's state media helped improve Beijing's image around the world during the pandemic by resorting to successful media internationalization tactics which the PRC has adopted for several years now – content-sharing agreements, free tours to China for journalists and memoranda of understanding with international outlets and unions – with results that are easy to imagine.<sup>11</sup> That said, according to Maria Repnikova, director of the Center for Global Information Studies at Georgia State University and a China specialist, interviewed by *The Guardian*, the question of how effective those efforts were in shaping public perceptions about China remained open since information flooding did not necessarily equate to a change in perceptions.<sup>12</sup>

What is certain is that the general worsening in perceptions of China globally did not go unnoticed by the Chinese communist authorities. According to the Reuters news agency, an internal report published in April 2020 by the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR),<sup>13</sup> and presented to China's top leaders at the beginning of May, revealed Beijing's awareness of the deterioration in its global image by emphasizing that global anti-Chinese sentiment was at its highest since the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. According to the internal sources who spoke with Reuters, the CICIR report even warned that China should be prepared for a possible armed confrontation in a worst-case scenario.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic came at a critical juncture in China's relations with the West and has accelerated a process that was already in motion. In recent years, the Chinese communist Government has become a target for criticism on a number of issues affecting both the internal – repression of Hong Kong's democratic activists; human rights violations against the Uyghur Muslim minority in Xinjiang – and the international sphere – the trade war with the United States, criticism of the modus operandi of the Confucius Institutes and the alleged «debt trap diplomacy»

11. 'The Covid-19 Story: Unmasking China's Global Strategy', May 2021 ([https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/IFJ\\_-\\_The\\_Covid\\_Story\\_Report.pdf](https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/IFJ_-_The_Covid_Story_Report.pdf)). On Chinese media internationalization, see Daya Kishan Thussu, Hugo de Burgh & Anbin Shi, *China's Media Go Global*, Routledge, 2017.

12. 'China has used pandemic to boost global image, report says', *The Guardian*, 12 May 2021.

13. A think tank affiliated with the Ministry of State Security.

14. 'Exclusive: Internal Chinese report warns Beijing faces Tiananmen-like global backlash over virus', *Reuters*, 4 May 2020.

exercised by Beijing within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>15</sup> This converging crisis, combined with many politically delicate commemorative anniversaries (from the centenary of the May 4th Movement to the 30th anniversary of Tiananmen), led the Sino-American political scientist Mixin Pei to define 2019 as an *annus horribilis* for China. Even more relevant is the fact that the Chinese president in a speech at the Central Party School of the CCP at the beginning of the same year sounded the alarm and warned officials that sources of turmoil and points of risk were multiplying globally. Therefore, China had to be ready to face major risks (重大风险) on all fronts, such as «black swan» (黑天鹅) and «grey rhino» (灰犀牛) events.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, many articles have been written equating the outbreak of the coronavirus with a «black swan» and/or a «grey rhino», with the majority inclined to see it as a «grey rhino», considering the pandemic was wholly predictable.<sup>17</sup> In fact, many observers had predicted it – from Nassim Nicholas Taleb, who in 2007 coined the term «black swan» in his best-selling 2007 book with that title, to Bill Gates, who in a 2015 TED talk entitled *The next outbreak? We're not ready*, spoke about the spread of a potential virus and stressed the need for the world to be well-equipped to tackle the crisis. In their views the pandemic was “a portent of a more fragile global system”.<sup>18</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that COVID-19 translated into a deterioration of China's image, both externally and internally, with potential consequences for the party and the Chinese political system in a very crucial period.<sup>19</sup> On 1 July 2021 the CCP celebrated its 100th anniversary, confirming itself as the longest-lived and most resilient communist party in con-

15. See, for instance: Giulio Pugliese, 'A Global Rorschach Test: Responding to the Belt and Road Initiative', *Defence Strategic Communications*, NATO Excellence Centre Riga, Vol. 7 (2), December 2019, pp. 113-32; Giulio Pugliese, 'COVID-19 and the Reification of the US-China Cold War', in Jeff Kingston-edited special issue 'COVID-19 in Asia', *Asia-Pacific Journal*. Volume 18, Issue 15, Number 3, Article ID 5436.

16. Barbara Onnis, 'China's Foreign Policy 2019: Xi Jinping's Tireless Summit Diplomacy Amid Growing Challenges', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXX/2019, p. 48.

17. 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.

18. "The Pandemic isn't a Black Swan but a Portent of a More Fragile Global System", *The New Yorker*, 21 April 2020.

19. Internally, the death of Doctor Li Wenliang – who first warned of the possible outbreak of an illness that resembled SARS in Wuhan at the end of December 2019, and was punished for this, before being declared «a hero» in the aftermath of his death after contracting the disease himself – led to an outpouring of national grief, angry, mistrust and criticism of the CCP and president Xi, even from executives, academics, and provincial officials. See "Hero who told the truth": Chinese rage over coronavirus death of whistleblower doctor', *The Guardian*, 7 February 2020; 'Death of coronavirus doctor Li Wenliang becomes catalyst for 'freedom of speech' demands in China', *South China Morning Post*, 7 February 2020.

temporary history. At the same time the PRC celebrated the realization of the first of its «two centenary goals» (两个一百年): completing the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects (小康社会).<sup>20</sup> The stakes were therefore very high for China and its paramount leader, who has put the «Chinese dream» and the renewal of the nation at the top of his political agenda.

### 3. *The significance of «image» for China and the Chinese*

In Chinese the word 面子 literally means «face» but it also refers to reputation and social status in terms of prestige. In Chinese culture, in fact, different factors such as prestige, dignity and reputation converge in the concept of «face». Therefore, «losing face» (丢面子) is one of the worst things that can happen in the life of a Chinese, while «saving face» (挽回面子) is an aim to be preserved at all costs. This discourse can also be applied at the level of international politics. An emblematic case is represented by the tense relations between the PRC in Xi Jinping's first mandate and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) of Kim Jong Un, when Pyongyang's erratic behaviour threatened to make China lose face, making it look like a «paper tiger» (纸老虎).<sup>21</sup>

Many scholars agree on the relevance of image considerations in the minds of Chinese decision-makers.<sup>22</sup> For Ingrid d'Hooge, very few countries «are as sensitive to their image in the eyes of other nations as China».<sup>23</sup>

20. The second refers to the centenary of the founding of the PRC in 2049, when China will have built a prosperous, democratic, civilized, harmonious and beautiful modern socialist country (富强民主文明和谐美丽的社会主义现代化国家). The two goals are an integral part of the Chinese dream and are strictly related to the rejuvenation of the Chinese people, as clearly emerges from the collection of speeches made by Xi Jinping since his coming to power and contained in the first of the three volumes dedicated to *The Governance of China* (Foreign Language Press, Beijing 2014). For an analysis of the economic implications of the goals see Ding Lu, 'China's tough battles to achieve the centenary goals', *Journal of Chinese Economic and Business Studies*, Vol. 18, 3, 2020, pp. 203-207.

21. Barbara Onnis, 'La responsabilità della Cina «a rischio». I rapporti sino-nordcoreani nell'era di Xi Jinping e Kim Jong-un', in *Wenxin Lessenza della scrittura. Contributi in onore di Alessandra Lavagnino*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2017, pp. 577-590. On the importance of «face» and «face-saving» in Beijing's international relations, see Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism. Pride, Politics and Diplomacy*, University of California Press, Berkeley and London, 2004, esp. chap. 1; Jessica Weiss Chen, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

22. See Simon Rabinovitch, 'The Rise of an Image-Conscious China', *China Security*, Vol. 4, 3, Summer 2008, pp. 33-47; Ingrid d'Hooge, *China's Public Diplomacy*, Routledge, 2015; Falk Hartig, *Chinese Public Diplomacy. The Rise of the Confucius Institute*, Routledge 2016.

23. Ingrid D'Hooge, *China's Public Diplomacy*, p. 2.

Despite its unquestioned growing weight in world politics and the global economy, China often feels misunderstood and misjudged by the international community and perceives a potentially hostile international environment due to mainly negative reporting about the country in Western media.<sup>24</sup> These perceptions are relevant to the Beijing leadership since they are believed to influence foreign governments' conduct toward the country. Therefore, the Chinese leadership keenly seeks to improve foreign perceptions of China and its policies through active public diplomacy.<sup>25</sup> A negative image is detrimental to China's national interests and can have heavy repercussions on both the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and the country's soft power appeal. Interestingly, in 2007 Joshua Cooper Ramo<sup>26</sup> argued that China's national image and the misalignment between its image of itself and how it was viewed by the rest of the world might represent its greatest strategic threat in the near future in its quest to win «hearts and minds».<sup>27</sup> Against this background, Chinese scholars agree that China needs to communicate with the world to counter the negative demonizing images spread by Western media and present the true image of the real China.

Since Xi Jinping took power, the phrase «tell China stories well» (讲好中国故事) has become a fundamental guide to China's approach to public diplomacy, and «an encouragement to use China's own communication channels to promote and testify to official Chinese views and opinions and

24. Falk Hartig, *Chinese Public Diplomacy*, chap. 2.

25. The Chinese have long referred to the term «external propaganda» (对外宣传 or 外宣) to publicize their successes and strengthen the country's image abroad. Unlike its English translation, in the Chinese language the term «propaganda» has in fact a positive connotation, being associated with essentially benign activities. It was only with the beginning of the reform policy, and as a direct consequence of the globalization process, that China's communication and external propaganda underwent a gradual process of modernization and expansion and started to be considered no longer from the perspective of propaganda, but rather from the perspective of public diplomacy. In particular, the concept of public diplomacy (公共外交) has been enthusiastically embraced by Chinese academics and bureaucratic actors since at least the early 2000s, and it was especially in the second term of Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao administration, that the term began to be used in place of that of external propaganda, as the Party-State became increasingly aware of the harmfulness of the term «propaganda» abroad. A concise but effective analysis of how the Chinese Party-State has attempted to present «propaganda» in a different light since the new millennium, is provided by David Bandurski, 'Public Diplomacy', in Malin Oud and Katja Drinhausen (eds.), *Decoding China Dictionary*, 2021, pp. 46-48, available at [https://rwi.lu.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Decoding-China-Publication\\_FINAL.pdf](https://rwi.lu.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Decoding-China-Publication_FINAL.pdf).

26. In 2004 he coined the term «Beijing consensus» to label China's model, which was increasingly attracting many developing countries in search of their own development path away from the impositions of the «Washington consensus». See Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus*, The Foreign Policy Centre, 2004 (<https://fpc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2006/09/244.pdf>).

27. Joshua Cooper Ramo, *Brand China*, The Foreign Policy Center, 2007.

to strengthen the international influence of China”.<sup>28</sup> Xi first introduced the concept in a speech to the National Propaganda and Thought Work Conference on 13 August 2013, explaining his approach to propaganda and international messaging to win the trust of international public opinion and better serve the national interest. In his words, “It is necessary to meticulously do a good job in external publicity, innovate in external publicity methods, strive to create new concepts, new categories and new expressions that integrate China and foreign countries, tell Chinese stories well and spread Chinese voices well” (要精心做好对外宣传工作, 创新对外宣传方式, 着力打造融通中外的新概念新范畴新表述, 讲好中国故事, 传播好中国声音).<sup>29</sup> It goes without saying that Xi Jinping’s understanding refers to stories that reflect the external propaganda objectives of the CCP and are premised on the Party’s control of the narrative both at home and abroad. Good examples of this understanding are the different diplomacies deployed during the pandemic, from «mask diplomacy» (口罩外交) to «vaccine diplomacy» (疫苗外交) and «wolf warrior diplomacy» (战狼外交). The first was aimed at promoting (and consolidating) an image of China as a responsible power, making effective its efforts in tackling the virus, and in particular fighting against criticism related to its initial mismanagement. Similarly, «vaccine diplomacy» presenting the vaccine as a «public good» was aimed at changing the general perception of the PRC as the spreader of the virus, instead promoting a new vision of China as the saviour of the world. While the first had mixed results,<sup>30</sup> the role played by Beijing in the global distribution of vaccines, both to single countries and within the COVAX initiative, is still under scrutiny. In fact, its success or failure depends on many factors, starting with the effectiveness of the Chinese vaccines and the availability of other vaccines.<sup>31</sup> As for «wolf warrior diplomacy», which is officially conducted by the Chinese Government through prominent diplomats and spokesmen for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the use of quite unusual channels, such as social media platforms banned in mainland China (primarily Facebook and Twitter), it was firstly intended to cope with the US narrative on the origins of the virus, which insisted on calling it the «Chinese virus» or the «Wuhan

28. Zhao Alexander Huang and Rui Wang, ‘Building a network to «Tell China Stories Well»: Chinese Diplomatic Communication Strategies on Twitter’, *International Journal of Communication*, Vol.13, 2019, pp. 2984-3007, p. 2094.

29. ‘习近平：意识形态工作是党的一项极端重要的工作’ (Xi Jinping: Ideological work is an extremely important task of the party), *Xinhuanet*, 20 August 2013.

30. Sylvain Kahn & Estelle Prin, ‘In the time of COVID-19, China’s mask has fallen with regard to Europe’, *European Issues*, No. 569, 7 September 2020; Charles Dust, ‘How China’s Mask Diplomacy Backfired’, *The National Interest*, 20 April 2021.

31. Vaccine diplomacy deserves a separate article, but for the purpose of this analysis I will briefly reflect in the conclusions whether vaccines can represent an opportunity to repair China’s damaged reputation. In fact, the vaccines game is still open, while the global vaccine shortage is offering the PRC an international soft power boost, given its prior engagement in health diplomacy.



virus», and to propose a different narrative on its origins by referring to conspiracy theories.<sup>32</sup>

All these actions adopted by the Chinese Government to change the COVID-19 narrative and disassociate itself from the novel coronavirus were emblematic of China's concerns about its image. In the words of Indian scholar Raj Verma, while intending to “portray itself as a Good Samaritan, a responsible and reliable partner and an essential global power”, Beijing's efforts to change the COVID-19 narrative also derived from “the need to maintain the CPC's regime legitimacy” considering that the outbreak had created discontent among Chinese citizens about the initial mishandling of the virus by the central and local governments.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4. *The quest for prestige and image-building in China's foreign policy*

To fully understand the importance of a good reputation and prestige for China it is important to underline that the pursuit of international status was a constant behind Chinese foreign policy even in imperial times, when China had the presumption to present itself as the centre of civilization. During the 1930s, the communists guided by Mao Zedong also aimed to create a good image and reputation for themselves, both internally and externally, in their fight against the Japanese invaders, as opposed to the nationalists headed by Chiang Kai-shek. Since 1949 it has been a key driver of the PRC's foreign policy, with restoration of China's great power status identified as a central goal of Beijing's sovereign foreign policy after the historical trauma of foreign domination during the notorious «century of national humiliation» (百年耻辱). This quest for recognition characterized China's posture in the international communist movement, where Beijing presented itself as an alternative source of ideological authority to Moscow.<sup>34</sup> Prestige continued to orient Chinese foreign policy after the end of the Cold War, when new «identity management strategies» were formulated to achieve international recognition.<sup>35</sup> While in the mid-1990s Beijing opted for a strategy of

32. Barbara Onnis, “*Serve the Nation. ‘Wolf Warrior’ diplomats in defense of the official narrative on Covid-19 between fake news and disinformation*”, in G. Borzoni, B. Onnis, C. Rossi (eds.), *Beyond Fake News. Governments, Press and Disinformation through International History*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2021, pp. 229-245. For a brilliant analysis of the role played by China's diplomatic corps in the making of an increasingly assertive Chinese foreign policy, see Peter Martin, *China's Civilian Army. The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*, Oxford University Press, 2021.

33. Raj Verma, ‘China's diplomacy and changing the COVID-19 narrative’, *International Journal*, Vol. 75, 2, 2020, pp. 255-256.

34. Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

35. Deborah Welch Larson & Alexei Shevchenko, ‘Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy’, *International Security*, Vol. 34, 4, 2010, pp. 63-95.

«social competition» with Washington, on the assumption that the international system was undergoing an inevitable process of multipolarization, in the late 1990s recognition that the international system would remain unipolar for the foreseeable future led to a new strategy of «social creativity». Since status requires acceptance by others, the “Chinese elites realized that they had to alter their behaviour to win recognition from the West”.<sup>36</sup> Great power status was therefore pursued by advancing China’s prestige through development of bilateral partnerships, involvement in existing multilateral settings and establishing new regional organizations rather than by competing with the leading hegemon.

Image-building has followed the same trajectory. During the Maoist era (1949-1976) China attempted to convince outsiders that it was a revolutionary socialist power,<sup>37</sup> projecting international soft-power messages beyond conventional diplomatic channels that consisted mainly in inviting so-called «foreign guests» (外宾) to carefully planned tours around the country, often with all expenses paid.<sup>38</sup> In the reform era (1978-present) the Beijing Government has been more committed to being recognized as a cooperative responsible player in the international system, and participation in global governance has provided an important avenue for the PRC to build a benign and responsible image. In general, China has been seeking to build a good international image, with shaping a favourable external environment for domestic development as a primary goal.<sup>39</sup> The approach has differed according to the multiple identities with which China has chosen to identify itself depending on the circumstances (a developing country; an emerging economy; a rising great power),<sup>40</sup> and therefore on the country’s capacity and international standing. In the early 1990s guided by

36. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

37. Simon Rabinovitch, ‘The Rise of an Image-Conscious China’, *China Security*, Vol. 4, 3, Summer 2008, p. 33. See also Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People’s Republic*, Rowman & Littlefield Pub Inc, 2003.

38. Julia Lovell, ‘The uses of foreigners in Mao-era China: «Techniques of Hospitality» and international image-building in the People’s Republic, 1949-1976’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 25, December 2015, pp. 135-158.

39. Rosemary Foot, ‘Chinese power and the idea of a responsible state’, *The China Journal*, Vol. 45, 2001, pp. 1–19; Li Mingjian, ‘China debates soft power’, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 2, 2, 2008, pp. 287–308.

40. China’s «multiple identities» influence Chinese leaders’ articulation of foreign policy discourse and impact the country’s international image, since its political discourse is perceived differently at the global level by different countries. On the rationale behind China choosing different types of identities according to the audience, see Dominik Mierzejewski & Bartosz Kowalski, *China’s Selective Identities. State, Ideology and Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. On the consequences generated by this contradictory posturing in decoding China’s foreign policy, see Pu Xiaoyu, *Re-branding China: Contested Status Signaling in the Changing Global Order*, Stanford University Press, 2019.

Deng's principle of "concealing one's strength and biding one's time" (韬光养晦) and "not seeking leadership" (绝不当头) China's international behaviour featured relative cooperation but limited contribution. In fact, China needed to recover from the Tiananmen crisis, which risked compromising the reform and opening-up policies and the focus on modernization. In an international environment that was openly hostile to Beijing – as China was the only great power left to represent Marxist socialism – it necessarily had to work to rebuild its image and increase its influence. Its turn to multilateralism, with gradual engagement in UN peacekeeping operations, offers a good example in this sense.<sup>41</sup> In the 2000s, a major aim of Beijing's diplomacy was to address the negative impact on its image caused by the so-called China «threat theory» (中国威胁理论), which emerged among American neoconservatives as a direct consequence of China's tremendous economic rise, soon followed by a military and geopolitical rise. As part of the new strategy, Beijing increased its contribution to and engagement in regional and global governance, conveying a message that China's development would benefit the world. The Chinese Government adopted the idea of being a responsible power and advanced a narrative that China's development was peaceful (和平发展) and represented an opportunity instead of being a threat.<sup>42</sup> China's behaviour during the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and its decision to not depreciate its currency, is widely perceived as the beginning of the effort to build and project the image of a «responsible major power» (负责人大国).<sup>43</sup> A decade later, the global financial crisis created new opportunities for the country to increase its say in global affairs, as the crisis shook faith in the liberal economic order. Many observers, including ones that had sceptically welcomed the «Beijing consensus idea» proposed in 2004 by Cooper Ramo, had to recognize the effectiveness of the so-called «China model» in dealing with the crisis.<sup>44</sup>

While the narrative of responsible power and peaceful development contributed to a relatively positive international perception of China in the 2000s, concerns and criticisms remained. Of particular concern were issues such as the Darfur crisis, China's protection of military rule in Myanmar, its growing quest for energy and other resources, and environmen-

41. M. Taylor Fravel, 'China's attitude toward U.N. peacekeeping operations since 1989', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, 11, 1996, pp. 1102–1121. See also Joan Wuthnow, Li Xin & Qi Lingling, 'Diverse Multilateralism: Four Strategies in China's Multilateral Diplomacy', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 17, 2012, pp. 269–290.

42. Zheng Bijian, 'China's 'peaceful rise' to great-power status', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, 5, 2005, pp. 18–24.

43. Deng Yong, 'China: The post-responsible power', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 37, 4, 2014, p. 120.

44. '杨继绳：我看“中国模式”'(Yang Jisheng: How I see the China model), *Yun-huang Chunqiu*, 1 January 2011.

tal pollution.<sup>45</sup> Increasingly active international behaviour and a firmer position on issues such as the South China Sea and East China Sea disputes, as well as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and even Xinjing and Tibet – part of the so-called «core interests» (核心利益)<sup>46</sup> – were also key. These led to Xi Jinping’s new China, strongly showing itself as a great power, making its voice heard by exercising its 话语权, namely its «discursive power», that broadly indicates the power to dictate international rules and set the political agenda. Xi Jinping’s definitive abandonment of Deng’s «low profile» posture, which was accompanied by a wise and refined exercise of discursive power, trespassing often and willingly into aggressive language, on the one hand contributed to putting an end to the sense of victimization once and for all. On the other hand, started a new era of growing assertiveness and arrogance (combined with an authoritarian drift domestically) that affected China’s image and its attractiveness to the detriment of its reputation and soft power.

##### 5. Conclusions: Can vaccines «save» China?

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the worst internal crises in the last few decades for the PRC, with huge repercussions on multiple fronts (political, economic, social, geopolitical), even though the Chinese Government, after a first period of inaction, demonstrated highly effective management of the health emergency crisis. When Europe, the US and most of the advanced countries were still closed in their repeated and highly debated lockdowns, daily life in China had already gone back to normal and it was one of the few countries that registered economic growth in 2020.<sup>47</sup> In other words, the Chinese party-state once again demonstrated its resilience and ability to transform a crisis into an opportunity, to generate political consensus and further nourish nationalist sentiments. Its use of highly sophisticated instruments to contain the spread of the virus domestically was a clear demonstration of the level of high technology

45. Stephanie Kleine-Ablbrandt & Andrew Small, ‘China’s new dictatorship diplomacy: Is Beijing parting with pariahs?’, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, 1, 2008, pp. 38-56.

46. The «core interests» include a set of interests that represent the non-negotiable bottom lines of Chinese foreign policy. In other words, they comprise issues on which Beijing is unwilling to compromise. See Michael Swaine, ‘China’s Assertive Behavior—Part One: On “Core Interests”’, *China Leadership Monitor*, Issue 34, Winter 2011; Zhou Jinghao, ‘China’s Core Interests and Dilemma in Foreign Policy Practice’, *Pacific Focus*, 21 April 2019.

47. ‘China’s economy grows 2.3% in 2020 as recovery quickens’, *CNN Business*, 18 January 2021.

development it had achieved.<sup>48</sup> The aid diplomacy and the production of its own vaccines and their distribution to less developed countries – in line with the Chinese view considering vaccines to be «global public goods», and in stark contrast with US President Donald Trump’s vaccine nationalism<sup>49</sup> – aimed to emphasize China’s role in international governance as a «responsible stakeholder». Nonetheless, this did not translate into a more positive view of China worldwide. With a few rare, but in some cases significant exceptions,<sup>50</sup> Chinese methods, of misuse of artificial intelligence (AI) and intrusive technology, and the surveillance system employed to track the movement of citizens in collaboration with the country’s three most famous tech giants (Tencent, Alibaba and Baidu) have been heavily criticized, as extremely invasive tools limiting the already scarce individual freedom. In other words, the authoritarian nature of the Chinese Government, that made a quick and effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis possible, has generated consistent criticism from liberal Western democracies. It thus confirmed something that was already well known: the fact that “the second largest economy in the world, perhaps soon to be the first, is still a society in which little or no space for personal privacy and freedom of speech is guaranteed”.<sup>51</sup> In this sense, COVID-19 contributed to reviving longstanding debates about China’s lack of democracy and its authoritarian practices, often and willingly set aside for economic and business reasons, further complicating its relations with the world and (again) questioning its role in the international system.

The extent to which vaccine diplomacy can help restore China’s reputation remains to be seen. According to data from Bridge Consulting, an independent mission-driven consultancy that tracks China’s impact on global health, it seems that Chinese vaccine diplomacy is working well. Despite many doubts about the effectiveness of «made in China» vaccines

48. Beyond the sophistication of the devices adopted, it was above all the political will of the Party-State to apply technologies for mass surveillances to public health management that provided China with an immediate advantage in the fight against COVID-19, at least before the introduction of the vaccines complicated the cost of so-called «zero-COVID» strategies.

49. ‘Trump signs order putting Americans at head of vaccine line, while vowing to work with world’, *The National Observer*, 9 December 2020.

50. Italy was one of these exceptions but, as is shown in the previously mentioned study by the International Federation of Journalists, it seems strictly related to the fact that at the beginning of the pandemic the country was the object of a heavy campaign of disinformation and misinformation.

51. Silvia Menegazzi, ‘China 2020: A foreign policy characterized by growing resilience, fading responsibility and increasing uncertainty’, *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, p. 49.

(Sinovac is 51% effective, while Sinopharm is 79% effective),<sup>52</sup> the global vaccine shortage is giving China an international soft power boost since, according to experts, Chinese vaccines work better than no vaccines.<sup>53</sup> So far Beijing has distributed almost 1 billion doses, mainly in the Global South, and by the end of 2021 the PRC plans to have distributed 2 billion vaccine doses abroad.<sup>54</sup> There are at least three aspects of China's vaccine diplomacy that deserve to be considered. First, the speed with which China rolled out vaccines to countries with few other options – in the first few months of 2021 it was reported that Beijing had prioritized exports over a then sluggish domestic rollout, in stark contrast with the strategy pursued by the US and Western countries in general. Second, the scale, with reference to both the number of vaccine doses shipped around the world by China, and also to the number of new vaccine candidates in the clinical stage – in early June 2021 there were 20, eight of which in phase 3. Third, the simpler logistics of Chinese vaccines compared with Western ones. The fact that the Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines require only standard refrigeration while Pfizer and Moderna need extreme sub-zero temperatures represents an advantage for many low and middle-income countries in the Global South, because of their hot climates and poor logistical systems.<sup>55</sup> In addition to exporting huge quantities of vaccines, China is also building manufacturing plants around the world, casting itself as a good global citizen even if there is no doubt that Beijing sees strategic gains from its conduct.<sup>56</sup> That said, as has already been pointed out, the vaccine game is still open and it is difficult to make any kind of prediction. Only time will tell if vaccines will be able to save China's image and reputation, and at the same time redeem its leader, who is about to receive his third term.

52. These two vaccines have been at the forefront of the PRC's vaccine diplomacy, with Sinopharm's vaccine having obtained full or emergency approval in 53 nations and Sinovac's jab in 29 countries. They were approved by the WHO in May and June 2021 respectively, while they are both awaiting acceptance by the European Medicines Agency (EMA).

53. Smriti Mallapaty, 'China's COVID vaccines have been crucial — now immunity is waning', *Nature*, 14 October 2021; Carol Pearson, 'China Promotes Vaccines Around the World but Critics Point to Lower Efficacy', *Voxnews*, 16 December 2021.

54. 'China's COVID-19 Vaccine Diplomacy Reaches 100-Plus Countries', *Voxnews*, 18 September 2021.

55. Darren Choi & Sean Janke, '«Vaccine Diplomacy»? – China's Global Vaccine Efforts and Controversies', 21 July 2021.

56. 'China's global vaccine gambit: Production, politics and propaganda', *Asia Nikkei*, 12 October 2021.



## THE ROLE OF SOUTH KOREA AMID US-CHINA COMPETITION\*

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*Due to its crucial strategic position, over the course of history Korea has several times found itself subject to the consequences of great power rivalry, with very negative results. The cases of the conflict between the Chinese Empire and Japan at the end of the 19th century and between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War are two clear examples that led to tragic effects in Korea. This complicated historical legacy resonates in the current competition between the U.S. and China and the role that South Korea has been increasingly playing in this dynamic in recent years. Although significant differences exist compared to the previous examples, this new rivalry risks becoming a matter of major concern in the country's foreign policy. For South Korea, maintaining positive relations with both great powers is crucial for its stability, economic development and security. For this reason, in recent years different South Korean governments have tried and managed to pursue a «flexible» approach avoiding taking sides between the two great powers. While the rapidly growing tension between the U.S. and China poses challenges to this approach, it still represents a suitable solution to ensure that Seoul does not get caught in the middle of a new great power rivalry that would be detrimental for its strategic interests.*

*Starting by introducing the dilemmas of Korea amid great power rivalry from a historical perspective, this paper argues that in the current competition South Korea has demonstrated a higher level of agency than in previous cases, thanks also to its greater autonomy and capabilities in the international system, and that its «flexible» approach has been successful in maintaining a middle ground between the U.S. and China. Considering the current increase in rivalry, this role has been more difficult to manage, especially with the recent push by the United States for its regional allies and partners to take a tougher stance against Beijing. However, adapting its foreign policy approach to the challenges that have emerged in recent years and avoiding taking a stance that might deteriorate relations with China, while reassuring Washington that the alliance is the main pillar in Seoul's security policy, can be considered as a possible and positive way forward for South Korea's role amid U.S.-China competition.*

**KEYWORDS:** South Korea; US-China rivalry; US-South Korea alliance; China-Korea relations; Park Geun-hye; Moon Jae-in.

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## 1. *Introduction*

The increase in tension in the rivalry between the United States and China is having important consequences for all the states in East Asia and also at the global level. With the polarization of competition, it is becoming increasingly difficult for many actors to avoid taking sides, with the risk of alienating relations with the other major power. This situation is particularly problematic for actors such as South Korea, which has a strong security alliance with the United States, a cornerstone of its foreign policy, but at the same time maintains very good relations with China, especially in terms of commercial and economic exchanges. Over recent years South Korea has been able to balance these two foreign policy priorities, but with the recent intensification of competition the space for this «flexible» position seems to be closing fast.<sup>1</sup>

From a historical perspective, the need to deal with and bear the consequences of great power competition is not new for Korea. The rivalry between China and Japan in the second half of the 19th century saw Korea as one of the main targets of the conflict between the great powers and led to the loss of independence and to 35 years of brutal colonization under the Japanese Empire. After the defeat of Japan in 1945, another great power rivalry invested the Korean peninsula, this time between the United States and the Soviet Union. The outcome was again nefarious for Korea with the division of the peninsula into two separate states, which has lasted for over 75 years, and the tragedy of the Korean war. The effects of the bipolar competition outlasted the Cold War, with the division of the peninsula still in place today.

Compared with the previous great power rivalries that have influenced socio-political developments on the Korean peninsula, the current competition between the U.S. and China presents significant differences for South Korea. First, unlike the previous examples, Seoul has managed to maintain positive relations with both great powers so far, although this privileged position could turn into a disadvantage as relations between the great powers deteriorate. Second, post-Cold War South Korea is a much more autonomous actor with the ability to pursue its own national interests and aims, while achieving a much more proactive and central role in the region and at the global level. Therefore, the agency of South Korean governments cannot be underestimated in analysing the role of the country in the competition between the U.S. and China. In this perspective, domestic variables such as the political divide between progressives and conservatives must be taken into proper consideration. At the same time, the ability to adapt traditional foreign policy approaches in order to face emerging

1. Lee Chung-min, 'South Korea Is Caught Between China and the United States', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 21 October 2020.

dilemmas, as in the case of the new great power rivalry, has led to positive outcomes for South Korea in recent years. For this reason, continuing this process of adaption to the current challenges and pursuing a balanced position – avoiding taking a stance that might deteriorate relations with China, while reassuring Washington that the alliance is the main pillar in Seoul's security policy – can be considered as a possible and positive way forward for South Korea's role amid U.S.-China competition.

This policy brief starts with a historical reconstruction of the influence of great power rivalries on Korea in order to better appreciate differences in the current situation and also to situate relations between South Korea and the two great powers in their historical context. The second part analyses the emergence of U.S.-China competition and how Seoul responded to this new challenge by keeping a «flexible» and balanced position. In the last part, the paper focuses on the most recent developments and on the current and future implications for South Korea of the competition between Washington and Beijing.

## *2. (South) Korea and the great powers in historical perspective*

From a historical perspective, political and social developments on the Korean peninsula have been strongly influenced by the presence of powerful actors in its regional environment. A relatively smaller power located in an important geopolitical position, Korea has found itself repeatedly caught in competition, rivalry and open enmity between conflicting great powers, and also subject to the strategies and actions of the same great powers. This situation has led to the emergence of a so-called «shrimp among whales complex», as South Korea is a small power surrounded by big powerful actors with competing interests harbouring potential conflicts. This situation could potentially have multiple negative consequences for the «shrimp». First, the major powers can try to exert influence on the smaller one in order to convince it – or force it – towards their interests. Second, if an open conflict between the major powers erupts, the smaller one runs the risk of getting harmed. Over the centuries, the Korean peninsula has found itself involved in this kind of problematic situation several times, with different major powers trying to assert their interests in the region.

The first of these rivalries emerged in the second half of the 19th century between the established great power, the Chinese Empire, and an emerging one, Japan. For centuries, China and Korea had been closely connected, not only because of their geographical proximity but also through a political and cultural bond that was consolidated over the course of centuries. The Joseon kingdom – which ruled the peninsula from 1392 until the annexation by Japan in 1910 – had regularly sent tribute missions to China and supported Ming dynasty orthodoxy, which they highly respected

both militarily, for the help given to Korea during the Japanese invasion of the late 15th century, and culturally, because they considered it as the truly Confucian state.<sup>2</sup> The rise of the Qing dynasty, in the 16th century, had a negative impact on the legitimacy of the Chinese Empire in Korean perceptions; nevertheless, following a policy of *sadae* ('accommodating' or 'serving' the great power), Joseon Korea decided to maintain the same relationship with the new rulers in China, sending tribute missions and recognizing its central position in the system.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore not surprising that China has for centuries represented the main point of reference for the Korean peninsula, in political, economic and cultural terms. Despite the obvious power asymmetry and the strong influence exerted by China over the peninsula, Korea also played an important role for the Chinese Empire. The peninsula had a strategic position that was fundamental for China's defence, especially in consideration of the role of Japan and its aspirations regarding the continental part of East Asia, with several sources dating back to the Ming dynasty attesting the importance of defending Korea to protect Chinese territory.<sup>4</sup> This role emerged very clearly with the Imjin war of 1592-1598, with the Japanese invasion of Korea and the intervention of Ming China to defend it, in order to protect its borders and to preserve the existing regional order.<sup>5</sup>

This situation lasted until the end of the 19th century, when the combined effects of the domestic and international decline of China and of the process of modernization and industrialization in Japan led to a power shift from the former to the latter. Imperial Japan became the main regional power as was certified by the defeat of Chinese forces in the first Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895). This crucial event also reconfirmed the central role of Korea for major regional powers, as it was one of the main causes of the conflict and one of the main battlefields.<sup>6</sup> After this victory and the following defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese war, Japan made its move on Korea with the creation of a protectorate in 1905 and annexation in 1910, until Japan's defeat at the end of World War II in 1945. With Imperial Japan out of the picture, at the end of the war, a new rivalry among great powers emerged in the region, and again Korea found itself caught in a confronta-

2. Peter C. Perdue, 'The Tenacious Tributary System', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 24, No. 96, 2015, pp. 1002-1014.

3. David C. Kang, *East Asia before the West*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 25-53.

4. Jae Ho Chung & Myung-hae Choi, 'Uncertain allies or uncomfortable neighbors? Making sense of China-North Korea Relations, 1949-2010', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2013, p. 245.

5. Kenneth M. Swope, *A Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail: Ming China and the First Great East Asian War, 1592-1598*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009; JaHyun Kim Haboush, *The Great East Asian War and the Birth of the Korean Nation*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

6. Adrian Buzo, *The Making of Modern Korea*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2017, pp. 30-35.

tional dynamic. The Cold War bipolar balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union directed Korea's post-war development towards another nefarious outcome: the division of the peninsula and the following war (1950-1953). The Cold War system kept the Korean peninsula in this situation until the end of the bipolar confrontation between the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In all these power competitions, Korea was always in the position of suffering the consequences of rivalry between bigger powers, leading to the emergence of the idea that Korea has been, throughout the years, a victim of expansionist dynamics and of the balance of power between great powers. This idea, that finds important confirmation in historical analysis, also runs the risk of depriving Korea of its agency in the regional and international system.

Given this historical legacy, the recent rise of a new competition between two great powers with conflicting interests in the region has certainly started to be a concern for South Korea's policymakers. The possibility of being caught again in a rivalry between bigger actors with potential consequences for the country's domestic and international development and with little to no say in it could be seen as a new manifestation of the old trend that seems to haunt the Korean peninsula. However, post-Cold War developments on the peninsula, in particular the new possibility and ability of South Korea to act in the international environment and the specific characteristics of the triangular relationship between Seoul, Beijing and Washington point towards a different direction that distances itself from the mostly passive role that Korea had in past experiences.

### *3. South Korea and the emergence of U.S.-China competition*

The conditions that led to an increasingly complicated position for South Korea in this triangular relationship emerged after the mid-2000s. In this period, economic relations between South Korea and China continued to flourish, with economic and trade exchanges growing exponentially.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the competition between the two great powers grew more confrontational, especially after the launch of the U.S. «Rebalancing towards Asia» strategy and the rise to power in China of President Xi Jinping. The combined effect of these dynamics led to an increasingly difficult position for South Korea *vis-à-vis* the growing rivalry between the two great powers, in which the country found itself more and more entangled.

7. Kim Min-hyun, 'South Korea's China Policy, Evolving Sino-ROK Relations, and Their Implications for East Asian Security', *Pacific Focus*, Vol. 31, No. 1, April 2016, pp. 56-78.

In order to understand how South Korean governments have dealt with foreign policy issues in recent years, it is important to analyse the role, often underestimated, of domestic political traditions and how they have shaped foreign policy strategies. Conservative and progressive foreign policy traditions are strongly rooted in South Korea and have very different characteristics. For instance, South Korean conservatives generally tend to be more aligned with the United States and to privilege deterrence and a hard-line position on North Korea, while progressives favour a more independent foreign policy, more regional cooperation and promotion of dialogue and cooperation with Pyongyang.<sup>8</sup> When applied to the role of South Korea between the United States and China, this means that conservatives usually tend to favour alignment with Washington at the expense of relations with China, while progressives are keener to promote regional cooperation and autonomy in the alliance.<sup>9</sup> This domestic political divide in foreign policy has been particularly relevant during the presidencies of Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) and Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013). Both presidents, despite coming from opposite political sides, put into practice very different approaches that were substantially in line with the priorities of the political traditions to which they referred. For example, the more autonomous position in the region for South Korea, advocated and pursued by the progressive Roh Moo-hyun during his first years in office, created frictions within the alliance with the United States;<sup>10</sup> while the full realignment with Washington operated by the conservative Lee Myung-bak and his hard-line approach towards North Korea ended up deteriorating relations between Seoul and Beijing.<sup>11</sup> These approaches, however, are not fixed but they are subject to change and transformation to address dilemmas that require adaptation of the traditions.

The rising rivalry between the United States and China, that started to become an unavoidable factor for all the regional actors in the 2010s, certainly represented one of those dilemmas that pushed South Korean presidents towards adapting their traditional foreign policy strategies. After the election of Park Geun-hye in December 2012, the new president immediately showed a willingness to reconnect with Beijing after years of relative cold relations under Lee Myung-bak (2007-2012). In June 2013, the South

8. Lee Sangsoo, 'The dynamics of democratized South Korean foreign policy in the post-Cold War era', in Milani M., Fiori A. and Dian M (eds), *The Korean Paradox: Domestic Political Divide and Foreign Policy in South Korea*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2019, pp. 16-29.

9. Marco Milani, Matteo Dian & Antonio Fiori, 'Interpreting South Korea's foreign and security policy under the «Asian paradox»', in Milani M., Fiori A. & Dian M (eds.), *The Korean Paradox: Domestic Political Divide and Foreign Policy in South Korea*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2019, pp. 1-15.

10. Scott A. Snyder, *South Korea at the crossroads: autonomy and alliance in an era of rival powers*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, pp. 135-140.

11. Suk-hee Han, 'South Korea Seeks to Balance Relations with China and the United States', *Council on Foreign Relations Report*, 9 November 2012.

Korean president made an official visit to Beijing, her second trip abroad since the inauguration after the traditional first one to Washington. The meeting confirmed a renewed understanding between the two neighbours and also an excellent personal relationship between the two presidents.<sup>12</sup> On this occasion, in addition to discussing the North Korean nuclear issue, economic relations were the most important topic at the summit, as was evidenced by the presence of a large delegation of South Korean businessmen and by progress in negotiations on signing a free trade treaty between the two countries.<sup>13</sup> This collaborative mood remained in the following two years, with Xi Jinping's visit to South Korea in July 2014 being a tangible example. Despite the very cordial atmosphere and the excellent personal relationship between the two leaders, substantial differences continued to emerge in matters concerning security and the regional situation. However, to maintain and promote positive relations these issues were left off the agenda. While the two countries seemed to have common goals in promoting positive economic relations, they did not appear to share the same strategic interests.<sup>14</sup>

These limits in the development of a real strategic partnership between South Korea and China became increasingly visible in 2015. During this year, paramount importance was given to participation by President Park Geun-hye at the military parade in Beijing to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II. The image of President Park – the only leader of a U.S. ally at the commemoration – standing on the podium with Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin was certainly a very powerful image, and it led some observers to question whether Seoul was «tilting towards China» in its strategic positioning.<sup>15</sup> In addition to Park's visit, South Korea's decision in the same year to participate in the China-led initiative of the *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)* seemed to reinforce U.S. concerns about the position of its ally.<sup>16</sup> In both cases, the idea of South Korea distancing itself from the alliance with the United States and moving towards China was an overstretch of the motivations that led to these decisions: Park Geun-hye's government was certainly interested in nurturing positive relations with China. At the same time, participation in the AIIB cannot be equated to a move against the U.S. Instead it was a de-

12. Jane Perlez, 'China to Welcome South Korean Leader, «an Old Friend»', *The New York Times*, 26 June 2013.

13. Scott Snyder & Byun See-won, 'China-Korea Relations: How Does China Solve a Problem Like North Korea?', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 15, No. 2, September 2013, pp. 97-108.

14. Scott Snyder, 'Can Beijing and Seoul Become Strategic Partners?', *The Diplomat*, 6 July 2014.

15. Lee Seong-hyon, 'Seoul's up-and-down Romance with China amid US-China Rivalry: A Korean Perspective', *China Report*, Vol. 57, No. 3, 2021, pp. 313-314.

16. Alastair Gale & Rob Taylor, 'Decision to Join China-Led Bank Tests South Korea's Ties to U.S.', *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 March 2015.

cision to not be left out of a regional financial initiative of great relevance. Similarly, Park's attendance at the commemoration in Beijing was related to similar visions that South Korea and China share about the Pacific War; their role and the role of Japan and the consequences of the war for the two countries.<sup>17</sup>

Events in the following year confirmed the idea that South Korea was not shifting from its alliance with the U.S. towards China. In the early months of 2016, renewed nuclear activities by North Korea reinforced the security relationship between Seoul and Washington. This position was reaffirmed by South Korea's decision in July to install a U.S. THAAD anti-missile system on the peninsula to defend its territory from possible North Korean missile attacks.<sup>18</sup> This action had negative effects on China-South Korean relations. Beijing had repeatedly expressed its total opposition to the deployment, which it considered a substantial modification of the regional strategic balance and therefore a threat to its national security.<sup>19</sup> For its part, Seoul affirmed that its objective was only to strengthen its defence against Pyongyang. In addition to the very vocal protests, in the second half of 2016 China began a series of asymmetrical retaliations against South Korea, mostly directed at economic and cultural factors.<sup>20</sup> When confronted with a security threat such as that of the North Korean nuclear programme Park Geun-hye's government decided to reconfirm the centrality of the alliance with the U.S., even at the expense of relations with China.

The events that took place in 2015 and 2016, and more in general the development of South Korea-China relations under Park Geun-hye, suggest that South Korea remains firmly tied to the alliance with the United States but also that it does not share the same scepticism – and distrust – of China that the U.S. and Japan have, for historical reasons and also because of elements in Korea's strategic culture, such as the view of China as a major power to be dealt with but not as the main threat, that have profound historical roots but still holds today.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, South Korea feels less threatened by Beijing's actions in the region than the other two actors and acts according to this perception and interpretation.

17. David C. Kang, *American Grand Strategy and East Asian Security in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 90-92.

18. Jonathan D. Pollack, 'South Korea's THAAD decision: Neither a surprise nor a provocation', *Brookings*, 8 July 2016.

19. Ankit Panda, 'Why China and Russia Continue to Oppose THAAD', *The Diplomat*, 4 June 2017.

20. Seema Mody, 'China lashes out as South Korea puts an American anti-missile system in place', *CNBC News*, 17 March 2017.

21. David C. Kang, *American Grand Strategy and East Asian Security in the Twenty-First Century*, pp. 82-85.

#### 4. *The triangular relationship facing new challenges and tension*

With the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in November 2016, competition between China and the U.S. significantly escalated. The trade dispute that affected relations between Washington and Beijing for most of Trump's years in office was one part of a broader rivalry that involved not only economic and commercial issues but also security interests and even different visions that the two powers have of the international order in East Asia and at the global level. This increase in the level of tension between the two great powers had – and is still having – effects also on South Korea, with the «flexible» approach implemented in 2013 becoming more and more difficult to sustain.

The election of Moon Jae-in in May 2017 marked a shift from a decade of conservative governments to a progressive one. The transition certainly also marked a change in the conduct of the country's foreign policy, with starting to steer the country's foreign policy direction towards aims and strategies more in line with those in the progressive political tradition. However, similarly to what had happened during Park Geun-hye's presidency, the new administration also tried a partial adaptation of this tradition, in particular concerning reassuring the U.S. On the one hand, Moon was able to achieve a compromise to improve relations with China based on a so-called «three no's» policy: no additional THAAD deployment, no participation in US-led strategic missile defence and no creation of a US-South Korea-Japan alliance.<sup>22</sup> This solution redirected relations between Seoul and Beijing onto a positive track without undermining the alliance with the United States. At the same time, Moon's government – mindful of the tension that had been created during the progressive Roh Moo-hyun administration in the mid-2000s – maintained an accommodating stance towards the Trump administration, for example by remaining committed to the 'maximum pressure' policy of international sanctions against North Korea and by accepting a revision of the KORUS Free Trade Agreement between the two countries.

This balancing act that Moon was able to realize brought important results in the country's foreign policy – resuming dialogue and cooperation with North Korea, maintaining a strong alliance with the U.S. and returning to good relations with China – in the first phase. However, in 2019 the situation started to deteriorate when the U.S. and North Korea failed to reach a meaningful agreement on the nuclear issue. Relations between Washington and Seoul suffered from the intransigence of the Trump administration and the rivalry between China and the United States further increased, in particular in the last year of Trump's administration. In this situation, South

22. Park Byung-su, 'South Korea's «three nos» announcement key to restoring relations with China', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 2 November 2017.



Korea was again caught up in rivalries between other powers, running a real risk of suffering the consequences.

In the broader framework of U.S.-China competition, Seoul increasingly needs to adapt its strategy to the changing – and worsening – regional environment. As one of the countries that had most benefited in the last two decades from the «era of engagement» between the U.S. and China, now that competition and rivalry are the new paradigm it needs to be able to adapt accordingly.<sup>23</sup> The change in the White House from Trump to Biden – a change that was welcomed in Seoul – while not bringing changes in terms of defusing tension between Beijing and Washington, certainly improved relations between South Korea and the U.S. However, significant differences remain between the two administrations, especially regarding China and how to manage its growing role in the region and the world. At the same time, the Biden administration has been increasingly active in trying to promote a stronger position for its allies and partners in the region towards Beijing.

With its renewed emphasis on the importance of its allies and multilateralism, the Biden administration has started a significant effort aimed at consolidating and reinforcing its alliances amid the increase in tension in its relationship with Beijing. South Korea has been more reluctant than other regional actors in this direction, as was demonstrated, for example, by Seoul's tepid reaction to the possibility of joining in some form the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue – «Quad» – which includes the U.S., Japan, India and Australia, or a «Quad-Plus» framework open to other countries – selected – countries, such as South Korea, Vietnam and New Zealand.<sup>24</sup> Moon's administration, while in general terms supporting enhanced forms of cooperation in the region, has been hesitant to join initiatives of this kind, emphasizing the importance of the bilateral alliance with the U.S. and of the inclusiveness of regional partnerships, so as not to target any specific country, i.e. China.<sup>25</sup> Maintaining a positive relationship with China, which considers these security frameworks to be intended to contain or counter its actions in the region, is still a crucial part of South Korea's foreign policy. This priority is not only related to the central role that Beijing still has in the country's economic development but also for South Korea's foreign policy priorities: North Korea is one of the core interests for Seoul, especially under the presidency of Moon Jae-in, who has put inter-Korean relations at the centre of his strategy, and cooperation with China on this issue is crucial.

23. Peter Martin, 'Biden's Asia Czar Says Era of Engagement With China Is Over', *Bloomberg*, 26 May 2021.

24. Chung Kuyoun, 'Why South Korea is balking at the Quad', *East Asia Forum*, 31 March 2021.

25. Jason Li, 'South Korea's Formal Membership in the Quad Plus: A Bridge Too Far?', *38 North Commentary*, 30 September 2021.

A further troubling factor in the possibility that South Korea joins initiatives aimed at multilateralizing the U.S.-centred system of alliances in Asia, such as the «Quad» and «Quad-Plus», is represented by the problematic relation with Japan. Tokyo is not only a cornerstone of this new system, but the very concept of a «Free and Open Indo-Pacific», which represents a key part of the U.S. regional strategy, was originally initiated by Japan. Considering the controversial relationship between Seoul and Tokyo – burdened by issues related to the legacy of the colonial period on the Korean peninsula and by the territorial dispute over the Dokdo islands – it would be difficult for the South Korean government to openly and actively endorse this concept.

The U.S. drive to create a stronger multilateral regional partnership is certainly further polarizing the situation, thus reducing the space for flexibility and neutrality. In this perspective, South Korea has partially changed its tone towards China in order to reassure Washington of its reliability. This is demonstrated by the inclusion for the first time in the joint statement released after the summit between Moon and Biden in May 2021 of a reference to opposition to «all activities that undermine, destabilize, or threaten the rules-based international order» and an explicit reference to maintaining peace and stability and defending international rules in the Taiwan Strait.<sup>26</sup> Although this was a much softer approach compared to that of the joint statement between the U.S. and Japan released a month previously, which made explicit references to China's behaviour, Beijing noticed and criticized the change in tone.<sup>27</sup> A further signal of the willingness of South Korea to expand the scope of the bilateral alliance to a broader regional level is the prospect of better coordinating one of Moon's signature policies, the so-called *New Southern Policy*,<sup>28</sup> aimed at engaging the southern part of the Asian continent, with the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, although South Korea has not taken practical steps in this direction.<sup>29</sup> Against this backdrop, for Washington, it would be beneficial to recognize that its allies and partners in the region are not all the same and do not all share the same national interests, goals and threat perceptions; accordingly, taking a more nuanced approach might actually result in a more effective policy for the U.S. and for regional actors.<sup>30</sup>

26. Tobias Harris & Haneul Lee, 'A New Chapter in U.S.-South Korea Relations: Seoul Embraces a Broader Role in Asia', *Center for American Progress*, 25 July 2021.

27. Jung In-hwan, 'China says S. Korea-US joint statement interferes in its domestic affairs', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 25 May 2021.

28. Sea Young Kim, 'How the «Plus» Factor in South Korea's New Southern Policy Plus Can Ensure Sustainability', *Korean Economic Institute*, 9 September 2021.

29. Andrew Yeo, 'South Korea's New Southern Policy and the United States Indo-Pacific Strategy: Implications for the U.S.-ROK Alliance', *Mansfield Foundation*, 22 July 2021.

30. Kuyoun Chung, 'Why South Korea is balking at the Quad', *East Asia Forum*, 31 March 2021.

In this dynamic situation, the domestic dimension of South Korean politics should also be taken into consideration. The last two presidents have tried to adapt their respective foreign policy traditions to the changed regional and international situation; however, the basic beliefs of the progressives were not abandoned by Moon Jae-in, for example with his emphasis on inter-Korean relations and rapprochement. A change in the country's leadership with the return of the conservatives could lead to the abandonment of the middle-ground position, with a renewed attention towards the alliance with the U.S., an approach of closer alignment with Washington – possibly including the participation in multilateral security initiatives – and the resulting increase in tension with China.

### 5. *Conclusions*

The dilemma of being caught in a rivalry, or even a conflict, between great powers and having to deal with the negative consequences of it is not a new situation for Korea. From a historical perspective, this has happened several times, as in the case of the power transition from the Chinese Empire to Japan at the end of the 19th century and the rivalry between the U.S. and the USSR during the Cold War. In both cases, the consequences that Korea had to suffer were extremely severe and tragic. The current situation of competition between the U.S. and China certainly presents very different characteristics, as do the international role and weight that South Korea today has in the regional and global scenarios. However, while the Sino-American competition is becoming increasingly tense, Seoul needs to move carefully in order to maintain positive relations with both powers. While in the first years of the current administration it appeared that this «flexible» approach was possible, more recently the rising tension between the two great powers and the pressure from Washington on its allies and partners to form a more solid front *vis-à-vis* China's actions in the region are making this middle-ground position more difficult to sustain.

If, on one hand, the alliance with the United States is still a cornerstone in South Korea's foreign policy and a real «tilt» towards Beijing has never materialized, on the other hand, there are still important differences in how the two allies see China and in their respective foreign policy goals and interests. For this reason, maintaining a balanced position between the two sides still represents the most suitable approach for South Korea to pursue its own goals, reassuring the United States of its reliability within the bilateral alliance, but at the same time avoiding initiatives that could antagonize China. Considering the strategic importance of the country, for Washington, pushing Seoul too hard to take a clear stance against China could turn out to be counterproductive, while endorsing and supporting a more active role for South Korea in the region could better serve the interests of both countries.

# DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN INDIA

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*The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led many analysts to worry about the fate of global democracy, as governments the world over centralised power and enacted emergency legislation. In India, the world’s largest democracy, this prediction has turned out to be accurate. However, this article will argue that the pandemic was a mere accelerator of existing trends there. The erosion of democratic institutions in India since the advent of the BJP-led government in 2014 has been so severe that it is no longer possible to classify India as a full democracy. In fact, as this article will show, the very core of India’s democracy, the electoral process, has been corroded so that it is very questionable whether Indian elections are still free and fair.*

KEYWORDS – India; democracy; COVID-19; elections; institutions.

## 1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, the quality of democracy and the respect for human rights has deteriorated in 80 countries, according to the think tank Freedom House (FH).<sup>1</sup> Experts interviewed by FH pointed to four dangers to democracy amid the health emergency: lack of transparency and information on the outbreak; corruption in the procurement of emergency material and disbursement of relief funds; lack of protection of vulnerable people; and government abuse of power. Elections have been postponed, protests have been disrupted and/or banned, freedom of expression eroded and virtually everywhere in the world governments have granted themselves exceptional powers. The European Union acknowledged these challenges in its EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2020-24), which aims at strengthening the organisation’s support for democracy worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, the pandemic has merely been an accelerator of an existing trend: democracy has been in retreat for some time. According to the Sweden-based V-Dem Institute, liberal democracies decreased from 41 in 2010 to 32

1. Freedom House, ‘Democracy under Lockdown’, Washington (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/democracy-under-lockdown>).

2. More details can be found at: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12122-EU-Action-Plan-on-Human-Rights-and-Democracy-2020-2024>

in 2020, amounting to only 14 per cent of the world population.<sup>3</sup> Electoral autocracies – regimes where the formal democratic architecture is maintained but where governments employ informal mechanisms of coercion and control – are now the most common regime type in the world. Together with closed autocracies, they host 68 per cent of the world population.

A major change for the fate of global democracy occurred in India which, in 2020, lost its status as a full democracy in all major indexes that measure the quality of governance around the world. The Economist Intelligence Unit degraded India to the ‘flawed democracy category’;<sup>4</sup> FH downgraded India from ‘free’ to ‘partly free’ status;<sup>5</sup> and the V-Dem Institute changed India’s classification from ‘electoral democracy’ to ‘electoral autocracy’.<sup>6</sup> In India, too, the year 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic were mere accelerators of processes that were already in motion.

While the severe erosion of India’s institutions and of the quality of its democracy is rarely disputed, a common caveat is that the electoral process, at least, remains robust and the minimal requirement for a democracy – free and fair elections – remains in place. In this article, I will put into question this qualification and argue that the erosion of democratic institutions reached such a point that it is a questionable whether India’s electoral process is still free and fair. I will construct my argument by outlining changes that occurred within India’s political systems in three realms: the functioning of institutions; the conduction of the electoral process and the protection of civil liberties. In all three domains there have been drastic changes since the election of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in 2014, followed by an acceleration of these changes during 2020. The changes are so radical that it is not possible to call India ‘the world’s largest democracy’ any longer. Before outlining such changes, I will briefly put them in historical context in the next section.

## 2. *India’s improbable democracy*

Since the end of the colonial regime in 1947, India’s democracy has puzzled analysts. How could a country so poor, so diverse and so poorly educated

3. Nazifa Alizada *et al.*, ‘Autocratization Turns Viral. Democracy Report 2021’, *University of Gothenburg, V-Dem Institute*, 2021 ([https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer\\_public/74/8c/748c68ad-f224-4cd7-87f9-8794add5c60f/dr\\_2021\\_updated.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/74/8c/748c68ad-f224-4cd7-87f9-8794add5c60f/dr_2021_updated.pdf)).

4. Economist Intelligence Unit, ‘Democracy Index 2020: In sickness and in health?’ (<https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020>).

5. Freedom House India Country Report 2021 (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-world/2021>).

6. Nazifa Alizada *et al.*, ‘Autocratization Turns Viral’.

stay together under universal franchise?<sup>7</sup> India was an exception in the post-colonial world, with other surviving democracies being very small (e.g. Vanuatu or Belize) or much richer (e.g. Mauritius). In fact, statistical analysis shows a strong relationship between regime type and income – richer countries tend to be democracies. India and Singapore – at the opposite ends of the spectrum – are the two most striking exceptions.<sup>8</sup> And yet, India's democracy survived and even deepened.<sup>9</sup> Until recently.

While India consolidated its democratic institutions during the 1950s and 1960s – earning the title of ‘world’s largest democracy’ – sceptics pointed out how, below the surface of (largely) free and fair elections, India’s society and the government apparatus remained highly undemocratic at the grassroots level.<sup>10</sup> It has been argued recently that, especially for the lower classes and castes, India has never been a full democracy.<sup>11</sup> Also, according to another recent view, the democratic backsliding of the last few years has been built upon a long-term process of failed democratic consolidation and institutional decay, which, together with glaring and appalling socio-economic inequalities, left the door open for demagogues, who undermined democratic institutions.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, the label ‘the world’s largest democracy’ was, at least partly, inaccurate and undeserved, particularly if one looks at India’s governance system from the bottom, up. Yet, it is undeniable that India largely functioned as a democracy – albeit an imperfect one – for many decades after independence – a remarkable achievement given that «the odds against

7. This is a long-standing debate. See the special issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, April 2007, entitled ‘India’s Unlikely Democracy’, Vol. 18, Issue 2, April 2007. For a more recent overview see Ashutosh Varshney, *Battles Half Won: India’s Improbable Democracy*, New Delhi, Penguin, 2013, from which the title of this section is borrowed.

8. Adam Przeworski et al., *Democracy and development: Political institutions and well-being in the world, 1950-1990*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

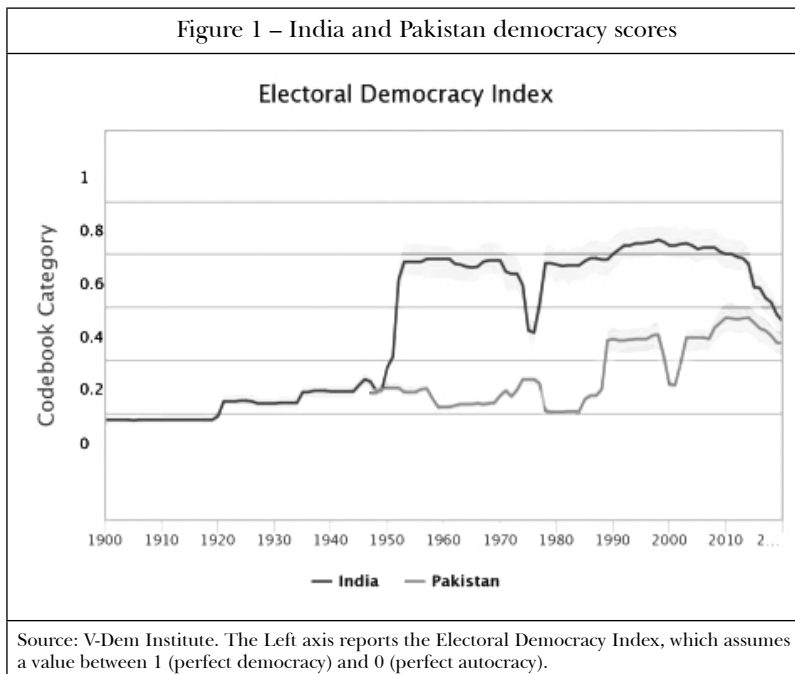
9. Christophe Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*, London: Hurst&Co., 2003.; James Manor, ‘The Electoral Process amid Awakening and Decay: Reflections on the Indian General Election of 1980’, in Peter Lyon & James Manor (eds.), *Transfer and Transformation: Political Institutions in the New Commonwealth*, Leicester and New York: Leicester University Press, 1983.

10. This includes Dr. Ambedkar, the main architect of the India’s Constitution who famously pointed out how the contradiction between India’s economic and social inequalities and its political equality put democracy in peril. See his speech to the Constituent Assembly on 25 November 1949 ([https://prasarbharati.gov.in/whatsnew/whatsnew\\_653363.pdf](https://prasarbharati.gov.in/whatsnew/whatsnew_653363.pdf)). A more recent formulation of a similar argument which suggests that India and Pakistan’s trajectories are not dissimilar is Ayesha Jalal, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

11. Christophe Jaffrelot & Pratinav Anil, *India’s First Dictatorship: The Emergency, 1975–1977*, London: Hurst&Co., 2020.

12. Debasish Roy Chowdhury & John Kean, *To Kill A Democracy: India’s Passage to Despotism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

democracy in India were extremely high.»<sup>13</sup> Figure 1 shows India’s democracy score using V-Dem data (and compares it with Pakistan, for reference). As is evident from the figure, today’s democracy score is almost as low as during the Emergency regime (imposed by Indira Gandhi between 1975-77), when elections were postponed, censorship imposed and political opponents jailed.



The main difference is that Mrs Gandhi’s regime was an institutionalized autocracy; Modi’s, similarly to many autocratic regimes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, employs informal (and only occasionally, formal) means to repress dissent, persecute minorities, and tilt the playing field in favour of his own party, without dismantling the formal democratic architecture. In fact, again, similarly to many autocratic regimes across the world, elections are a means to retain legitimacy and strengthen the regime.<sup>14</sup> Democracy in India succumbed gradually and without any radical change to its formal

13. Adam Przeworski *et al.*, ‘Democracy and Development’, p. 87.

14. Nic Cheeseman & Brian Klaas, *How to Rig an Election*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.

institutional setup. This is in line with what has occurred in most instances of democratic involution across the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>15</sup>

In the next sections, I will provide a brief overview of the nature of India's democratic involution in three domains: the functioning of institutions; the conduct of the electoral process; and the erosion of civil liberties.

### 3. *Democratic backsliding in Modi's India*

#### 3.1. *Institutional erosion*

The root cause of the severe democratic erosion after the election of Narendra Modi in May 2014 is the radical centralisation of power in the hands of the Prime Minister himself.<sup>16</sup> A crucial factor allowing for such a shift in decision-making is that in 2014, for the first time since 1984, a single party (the BJP) obtained the majority of the seats in Parliament. Given the extreme degree of centralisation within the ruling party – which is tightly controlled from above by Prime Minister Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah<sup>17</sup> – the Parliament has effectively stopped functioning as a check on the executive.

In fact, Parliament activity has been reduced to such an extent that it is barely functioning at all. For instance, during Modi's first term, only 27 per cent of the bills introduced were referred to a committee, a proportion that decreased to 12 per cent during the second term (since May 2019). During the previous two legislatures, 60 and 71 per cent of the bills were referred to a committee for discussion. In the latest parliamentary session (Monsoon Session 2021), bills were discussed in the lower house for an average of only 34 minutes.<sup>18</sup> While the Parliament has been malfunctioning for decades, there has been a steep acceleration under Modi.<sup>19</sup>

With the outbreak of the pandemic, India's Parliament virtually stopped functioning altogether. The Budget Session 2020 was cut short and so was the following Monsoon session (which sat for only 10 days). The Winter Session 2020 was not convened at all. In other words, the manage-

15. Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, New York: Random House, 2019.

16. This has been noted by many analysts. See, for instance, the collection of essays in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 56, No. 10, edited by Diego Maiorano and Ronojoy Sen (<https://www.epw.in/engage/article/exploring-centralisation-power-and-rise-new>).

17. James Manor, 'Narendra Modi's Power and Cult Endanger the BJP', *The Wire*, 3 September 2021.

18. Data taken from PRS Legislative Research available at: <https://prsindia.org/sessiontrack/monsoon-session-2021/vital-stats>

19. Ronojoy Sen, *House of the People: Parliament and the Making of Indian Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2022.



ment of the pandemic has been left to the executive, without oversight from Parliament. The government even denied a request by opposition MPs to meet virtually.<sup>20</sup>

The most glaring example of the side-lining of the of Parliament from the management of the pandemic was the proclamation by the prime minister that a national lockdown would be imposed on 24 March 2020, with *four hours* of advanced notice. The lack of discussion on the matter – not even the state governments were consulted, on whose shoulder the management of the lockdown was to fall – led to widespread violation of people’s rights, particularly those of internal migrants, who found themselves overnight without jobs, shelter and already with scant savings.<sup>21</sup> Tens of millions travelled to their home villages, often on foot for thousands of kilometres, which led to destitution, injury, death and the spread of COVID-19 to ill-equipped rural areas.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, the Prime Minister centralized the management of relief funds into a newly constituted PM CARES fund – a parallel instrument to the institutional National Disaster Response Fund (unutilized, with no explanation as to why). The PM CARES fund is not subject to any scrutiny<sup>23</sup> and the government has even denied right to information requests on the basis that the fund ‘is not a public authority’.<sup>24</sup>

The Supreme Court stepped in to monitor government activity and to regulate inter-state conflicts in the allocation of relief funds and emergency material.<sup>25</sup> However, it is doubtful that the highest court can serve as an accountability institution. Under Modi’s regime, the Supreme Court – once one of the most respected institutions in the country – has lost much of its independence. Through a series of informal mechanisms of control, including selective appointments, promises of rewards to retiring judges and blackmailing,<sup>26</sup> the government has compromised the integrity of the Court.

For instance, in 2021 a global consortium of journalists revealed that about 1,000 Indian phone numbers were hacked with the Israeli spy software Pegasus, which allows the hacker to completely control a person’s phone, from reading texts and emails to activate the camera and microphone without the user’s knowledge. Among the phones that were hacked

20. Madhav Godbole, ‘Why Is the Modi Govt Closing Forums of Public Accountability During a Pandemic?’, *The Wire*, 14 May 2021.

21. Diego Maiorano, ‘India 2020: Under the COVID hammer’, *Asia Maior*, XXXI/2020, pp. 305-330.

22. Ibid.

23. Vinay Sultan, ‘Unhealthy Secrets’, *The Caravan*, 31 August 2021.

24. Rahul Mukherjee, ‘Covid vs. Democracy: India’s Illiberal Remedy’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 31, No. 4, October 2020.

25. ‘Outreach and overreach: On judicial intervention during COVID-19 crisis’, *The Hindu*, 10 May 2021.

26. Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University press, 2021.

was that of Rahul Gandhi, at the time, president of the main opposition party, the Congress, and that of a staffer of the Supreme Court (plus the phones of her family) who had accused the Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi, of sexual harassment. Between the moment the staffer's phone was hacked and Gogoi's retirement, benches presided by him ruled repeatedly in favour of the government in highly controversial cases like the dispute around the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, the alleged corruption in the Rafale jets procurement, human rights violations in Kashmir and the legality of recently introduced so-called 'electoral bonds' to fund political activity. (After his retirement, Gogoi was, controversially, nominated by the ruling party as a member of the Upper House). It is important to note that Pegasus's developer only sells its software to 'vetted governments'.<sup>27</sup> This was the last instance of several controversies that surrounded the Supreme Court since Modi came to power in 2014, incidents which have severely damaged the court's reputation and independence.<sup>28</sup>

The above are just few examples of the erosion of independent institutions and the increasing control of the government over the state machinery. Countless other examples could be mentioned – from the Central Bureau of Investigation, to the states' governors, to the Reserve Bank of India to public universities.<sup>29</sup> Not even the Indian Council for Medical Research (India's apex health agency) has been spared and, according to an investigation by *The New York Times*, its scientists have been pressured to hide data and publish reports in line with the government's political priorities. This has had detrimental effects on the management of the pandemic.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.2. *Free and unfair elections*

The second domain where India's democracy has been eroded dramatically is the functioning of the electoral process itself. While elections remain free, its fairness has become a question mark. In fact, India's score in the V-Dem

27. Shoaib Daniyal, 'Supreme Court, EC, Opposition: Spyware attack threatens pillars of India's electoral democracy', *Scroll.in*, 20 July 2021.

28. For more details, see Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*.

29. See Michelguglielmo Torri and Diego Maiorano, 'India 2017: Narendra Modi's continuing hegemony and his challenge to China', *Asia Maior* Vol. XXVI-II/2017 pp. 267-291; Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2018: political uncertainty and economic difficulties', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXIX/2018, pp. 265-293; Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democracy; building a kingdom of cruelty and fear', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXX/2019; Diego Maiorano, 'India 2019: The general election and the new Modi wave', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020 pp. 327-345; Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2020: The deepening crisis of democracy', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 331-377.

30. 'As India's Lethal Covid Wave Neared, Politics Overrode Science', *The New York Times*, 14 September 2021.

‘Clean Election Index’<sup>31</sup> decreased dramatically in recent years, from 0.86 in 2001<sup>32</sup> – a value that was higher than that of the United States – to 0.58 in 2020 (lower than that of Morocco). The decline has been particularly steep since 2013 (when the value was 0.77). By 2019 «electoral competition was no longer a level playing field».<sup>33</sup>

Three factors contributed the most to tilting the field in favour of the government.<sup>34</sup> First, the autonomy and integrity of the electoral watchdog, the Election Commission (EC), has been compromised. The techniques used by the government to influence (or even control) the EC were similar to the ones used for the Supreme Court: selective appointments – like that of A. K. Joti in 2017, former principal secretary to Narendra Modi when he was the chief minister of Gujarat – and outright intimidation.

The most glaring example of intimidation concerns the former commissioner, Ashok Lavasa. During the 2019 electoral campaign, the EC repeatedly allowed Modi to violate the code of conduct<sup>35</sup> and turned a blind eye to the widespread use of tax raids against opposition leaders and party offices during the electoral campaign.<sup>36</sup> Lavasa, contrary to his two colleagues, had ruled against the prime minister and had taken a harsher approach towards the misuse of tax raids for political purposes. Shortly afterwards, his phone number was added to the list of phones hacked with the Pegasus software. His wife was investigated for tax evasion<sup>37</sup> and the government also investigated Lavasa for ‘undue influence’ in favour of his wife’s company.<sup>38</sup> Lavasa then accepted a job at the Asian Development Bank, thus renouncing to become (because of seniority) Chief Election Commissioner.

Second, the BJP – also thanks to recently introduced instruments for the funding of political activity – receives a disproportionate amount of funding. While it is relatively common for incumbents to enjoy greater financial resources, the gap between the BJP and what other political parties receive is such that it is difficult not to question the fairness of the whole

31. This is an aggregate measurement assessing the autonomy and capacity of the election management body, voter registration procedures, voting irregularities, government intimidation, electoral violence and the general freedom and fairness of the electoral process.

32. As all V-Dem indexes, the values range from 0 to 1.

33. Christophe Jaffrelot 2021, *Modi’s India*, Kindle Location 6335.

34. Christophe Jaffrelot and Gilles Verniers, ‘The BJP 2019 Election Campaign: Not Business as Usual’, *Contemporary South Asia*, 28, No. 2, 2020, pp. 155-77. Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, Kindle Location. 6761.

35. Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, Kindle Location 6933.

36. ‘11 Raids In A Month On Opposition, Tax Department Says Can’t Give Details’, *NDTV*, 10 April 2019.

37. James Manor, ‘A New, Fundamentally Different Political Order: The Emergence and Future Prospects of ‘Competitive Authoritarianism’ in India’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 56, No. 10, 2021.

38. Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, Kindle Location 6941.

electoral process. According to the analysis of the association for Democratic Reform (ADR), the BJP's declared income – very likely only a fraction of the party's actual income – for 2019/20 was 75% of the income declared by *all* national parties combined. In absolute terms, the BJP's income was three times higher than all national parties put together.<sup>39</sup>

Another element that makes political funding an obstacle to the conduction of free and fair elections is the opacity of the recently introduced 'electoral bonds'.<sup>40</sup> These were introduced in 2017 by the BJP-led government. In 2019/20 the bonds, issued by the State Bank of India (SBI, a public bank), constituted 88.64% of the declared income of political parties.<sup>41</sup> The bonds guarantee anonymity to the donor, who can deposit them in the bank account of a political party of their choice. However, the government can access data on donors – a privilege not extended to other political parties, leave alone to citizens. This constitutes yet another major violation of the fairness of the electoral process. Not surprisingly, the ruling BJP secured 75% of the donations through the electoral bonds. The main opposition party, the Congress, secured just 9% of the total donations.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, the media have been under increasing pressure not to criticise the government, resulting in visible instances of self-censorship.<sup>43</sup> A key mechanism is the business model of the large majority of the media conglomerates, which relies substantially on government advertisement for their revenues. This represents a large chunk of traditional media's revenues and has increased substantially since Modi came to power in 2014. On average, the Congress-led government between 2009 and 2014 spent about 8 million euros on advertising. In contrast, the Modi-led government between 2014 and 2018 increased the expenditure nearly twofold, to 13 million euros.<sup>44</sup>

While this by itself does not, in principle, erode the media's freedom, the fact is that the Modi government has allegedly 'punished' media groups that criticised it. A report by Reuters claimed that the government banned advertisement on at least three news groups (which publish, among others,

39. These are the data collected by the Association for Democratic Reform (ADR) available at: <https://adrindia.org/content/analysis-income-and-expenditure-national-parties-fy-2019-20-0>.

40. Milan Vaishnav, 'Electoral Bonds: The Safeguards of Indian Democracy Are Crumbling', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 25 November 2019.

41. ADR data available at: <https://adrindia.org/content/analysis-sources-funding-national-parties-fy-2019-20-0>.

42. 'In 2019-20, BJP got 75% of poll bonds sold, Congress just 9%', *The Indian Express*, 10 August 2021.

43. Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*, Kindle Location 6761.

44. 'The Central Government spent close to Rs 10000 crore on Publicity in the last 16 years 19', *Factly*, 4 May 2018.

The Times of India, The Hindu and The Telegraph).<sup>45</sup> Additionally, the government has been accused of using the state machinery to intimidate unfriendly media houses, especially through tax raids.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, pressure on media's owners allegedly resulted in the sacking of journalists critical of the government. For instance, an investigation by *The Wire*, claimed that Bobby Ghosh, former editor-in-chief of *The Hindustan Times*, was asked to resign after the newspaper's owner met with Prime Minister Modi. Following this meeting, several government and BJP's officials expressed discontent with Ghosh's editorial line (which was critical of the government, particularly with reference to the rights of religious minorities).<sup>47</sup>

The government's increasing intolerance towards criticism has extended to social media as well. Since the end of 2019, the Indian government has sought to regulate social media. On the one hand, during the first half of 2020, requests by the Indian government to remove content on Twitter increased almost four times,<sup>48</sup> while requests to all major social media tripled between 2019 and 2020.<sup>49</sup> This was a period when online criticism of the government was increasing in connection with protests against a new (and controversial) citizenship law, the first lockdown and the subsequent management of the COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread farmers' protests that erupted at the end of 2020 and are, at the time of writing in September 2021, still ongoing.

On the other hand, the government issued fresh guidelines to regulate the publication of content on social media in February 2021, which the Internet Freedom Foundation, an Indian NGO, dubbed as «antidemocratic and unconstitutional».<sup>50</sup> Among other things, the new rules mandate that social media must take down any content that the government deems to fall under a vague set of definitions, and require that companies set up a compliance team that resides in India (whose members have been threatened with imprisonment by the government).<sup>51</sup>

45. 'Modi government freezes ads placed in three Indian newspaper groups', *Reuters*, 28 June 2019.

46. 'India tax authorities raid media companies critical of Modi gov't', *Al Jazeera*, 22 July 2021; 'TI surveys on premises of newsportals in Delhi; NewsClick faces action by third agency', *The Indian Express*, 11 September 2021.

47. 'Hindustan Times Editor's Exit Preceded by Meeting Between Modi, Newspaper Owner', *The Wire*, 25 September 2017.

48. Shoaib Daniyal, 'Why is the Indian government at war with Twitter?', *Scroll.in*, 8 July 2021.

49. '6k social media content takedown orders this year', *Hindustan Times*, 8 June 2021.

50. Internet Freedom Foundation, 'Why India's new rules for social media, news sites are anti-democratic, unconstitutional', *Scroll.in*, 27 February 2021.

51. 'Twitter Blocks Accounts in India as Modi Pressures Social Media', *The New York Times*, 10 February 2021; 'India Threatens Jail for Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter Employees', *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 March 2021.

The pandemic led the government to tighten its grip over the media. In March 2020, the government went as far as requesting the Supreme Court to bar media from publishing any content related to the pandemic without ‘fact-checking’ through government-provided mechanisms.<sup>52</sup> The Court did not grant the request. In any case, dozens of journalists have been arrested after they published pieces critical of the government’s response to the pandemic.<sup>53</sup>

To sum up, the combination of these three factors – the erosion of the independence of the EC, the disproportionate amount of funds available to the ruling party and its monopoly over the information on donors and the increasing pressure on media not to criticise the government – have severely stacked the deck in favour of the ruling party. As a result, while elections remain largely free, their fairness has been seriously compromised. In other words, the most defining feature of a democratic system – free and fair elections – cannot be taken for granted anymore in the ‘world’s largest democracy’.

### 3.3. *The erosion of civil liberties*

Finally, the third domain where the quality of India’s democracy has been eroded and has descended into the realms of authoritarian governance is that of civil liberties. This is a crucial component of any democratic system and, in particular, of liberal democracies. In this article, I will not deal with civil liberties – or, rather, the lack thereof – in Kashmir and in other problematic areas of the country (some of the north-eastern states).<sup>54</sup> I will limit myself to ‘mainstream’ India, where conflict or security reasons cannot be used to justify violation of civil liberties.

Two areas are particularly problematic: freedom of expression and the protection of religious minorities (particularly Muslims, roughly 14% of the population). Starting with the former, the problem is twofold. On the one hand, as mentioned above, media houses are under pressure to secure revenues from the government, which might be in jeopardy if news outlets adopt too a critical editorial line. On the other hand, individual journalists, activists, intellectuals, and students have been threatened, sued, arrested and even killed, with alarming frequency.<sup>55</sup> In September 2020, Amnesty International shut down its operation in India, citing «an onslaught of at-

52. ‘Government Urges Supreme Court To Bar Media From Publishing Covid-19 Info Before Vetting Facts’, *Quint*, 31 March 2020.

53. ‘India arrests dozens of journalists in clampdown on critics of Covid-19 response’, *The Guardian*, 31 July 2020.

54. For a recent exposition of the situation in Kashmir, see Michelguglielmo Torri, ‘India 2019: Assaulting the world’s largest democracy; building a kingdom of cruelty and fear’.

55. See Michelguglielmo Torri, ‘India 2020: The deepening crisis of democracy’, section 2.3 and footnote 58 for further references.

tacks, bullying and harassment by the government»,<sup>56</sup> a scenario similar to the one described by Human Rights Watch in its 2020 Report.<sup>57</sup> For reasons of space, I will limit myself to two instances of the increasing abuse of state power against dissidents.

The first one is a key change in legislation – one of the few examples of a formal mechanism designed to repress civil liberties vis-à-vis countless informal ones. This was an amendment to the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) passed by the Indian Parliament in August 2019. The Act (1967) was already considered a draconian piece of legislation, as it allowed the government to restrict freedom of expression and association on the basis of an exceedingly vague definition of a «terrorist act»: «any act committed with intent to threaten or likely to threaten the unity, integrity, security, economic security, or sovereignty of India or with intent to strike terror or likely to strike terror in the people or any section of the people in India or in any foreign country». <sup>58</sup> The one element that offered some protection to civil liberties was that only organisations could be declared 'terrorist'. The 2019 amendment changed this key provision of the law, which, in effect, became an instrument for arresting individuals who *might* have the *intent* to threaten India's unity and integrity.<sup>59</sup> The law was used to arrest numerous activists, including prominent students-leaders Devangana Kalita Natasha Narwal and Asif Iqbal Tanha who were kept in jail for over a year without trial.<sup>60</sup> In the decision that finally granted them bail the Delhi High Court remarked that in the view of the central government the «line between the constitutionally guaranteed right to protest and terrorist activity seems to be getting somewhat blurred.»<sup>61</sup>

The second example of state abuse of power concerns the violence which occurred at Bhima Koregaon (Maharashtra) on 1 January 2018. Every year, Dalit groups celebrate the battle of Bhima Koregaon (1818), when Dalit troops of the British Indian army defeated the Maratha Peshwa Bajji Rao II (a Brahmin). In 2018 violence erupted, which resulted in one casualty. Over the following months, a dozen very prominent activists and scholars – most of whom were not in Bhima Koregaon on that day – were arrested and accused of being part of an urban cell of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), which is deemed a terrorist organisation by the Indian

56. 'Amnesty International to halt India operations', *BBC*, 29 September 2020.

57. The report is available at <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/india>.

58. See Chapter IV of the Act (<https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/A1967-37.pdf>)

59. 'What are the UAPA amendments? When is an individual designated a «terrorist»?', *The Indian Express*, 4 August 2019.

60. 'Delhi court passes release order for Devangana Kalita, Natasha Narwal, Asif Iqbal Tanha', *Hindustan Times*, 17 June 2021.

61. 'Delhi riots: HC grants bail to Devangana Kalita, Natasha Narwal, Asif Iqbal Tanha in UAPA case', *The Indian Express*, 15 June 2021.

government. What all of them had in common was that they were public intellectuals, critical of the Modi government (and, to be fair, of most previous Indian governments as well) and had associations with people actually present at the celebration.

The accused were later charged of a number of extremely serious offences, including a plot to assassinate Prime Minister Narendra Modi. However, in at least two cases, there is proof that the crucial pieces of evidence – including Word documents found on the laptops of the accused in which they allegedly admitted to being part of the CPI(M) and involved in the plot to kill Modi – was planted by unknown hackers.<sup>62</sup> (The telephone numbers of family members and associates of some of the accused in the Bhima Koregaon case were later added to the list of phones hacked through the Pegasus software mentioned above).<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, when the Maharashtra elections in 2019 saw the defeat of the incumbent BJP in the state, the new government publicly declared that keeping the activists in jail was «wrong and vengeful» and that they would start looking into the case to released them. However, the central government transferred the case to the centrally-controlled National Investigative Agency, with the result that, at the time of writing, the accused remain in jail, over two years after their arrest and with the beginning of the trial not in sight.<sup>64</sup> Given the stringency of the UAPA under which they were arrested, it is unlikely that they will be granted bail anytime soon. Consider that one of the accused, Stan Swami, an 84-year-old Jesuit priest with Parkinson's disease, was denied bail, even after he contracted COVID-19. He died in custody in May 2021.

Another domain where civil liberties have been eroded substantially is the protection of the rights of the minorities. Several prominent scholars described Modi's India as an ethnic state or an ethnocracy,<sup>65</sup> a term first used by the Israeli sociologist Oren Yiftachel to describe his own country. Yiftachel defines such a regime as one «where a dominant ethnos gains political control and uses the state apparatus to 'ethnicise' the territory and

62. 'Evidence found on a second Indian activist's computer was planted, report says', *The Washington Post*, 6 July 2021; 'They were accused of plotting to overthrow the Modi government. The evidence was planted, a new report says.', *The Washington Post*, 10 February 2021.

63. 'Indian Activists, Lawyers Were "Targeted" Using Israeli Spyware Pegasus', *The Wire*, 31 October 2019.

64. Apoorva Mandhani, '2 years, 3 charge sheets & 16 arrests — Why Bhima Koregaon accused are still in jail', *The Print*, 31 October 2020.

65. Indrajit Roy, 'India: From the World's Largest Democracy to an Ethnocracy', *The India Forum*, 30 August 2021; Katharine Adeney, 'How can we model ethnic democracy? An application to contemporary India', *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2021; Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*



society in question».<sup>66</sup> This aptly describes what the Modi government, with the support of organisations such as the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, to which Modi belonged for a substantial part of his life), has been engaged with during its terms.

The 2019 election represents a shift in this respect.<sup>67</sup> While during Modi's first term the Hinduisation of the state was mainly pursued through societal mechanisms – in particular, the legitimisation of vigilante groups in defence of the cow or of supposedly helpless Hindu girls falling 'prey' to Muslim boys – in 2019 the government decided to use the full power of the state towards the creation of a *de jure* Hindu Rashtra.<sup>68</sup> It is on the latter (and more recent) development that I will focus in the last part of this article.

Three key changes occurred shortly after the 2019 elections. First, the government, suddenly and unexpectedly – and without debate in Parliament – took away the «special status» of Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019. The special status had granted a higher degree of autonomy to the only Muslim-majority state of the Indian Union. Its revocation had been one of the pillars of the Hindu nationalist movement since independence.<sup>69</sup> The government revoked the special status and, additionally, deprived Jammu and Kashmir of its statehood, making it a Union Territory governed directly by New Delhi. At the same time, it increased military and paramilitary presence in the area, (which was already one of the most militarized in the world), blocked all forms of communications within and outside the territory for over a year, restricted access to journalists and arrested thousands of citizens, who were often jailed for long periods without trials or even formal charges.<sup>70</sup> The loss of Kashmir's special status was particularly significant because it embodied India's rejection of the two-nation theory according to which India was not a Hindu state – as claimed by the proponents of the theory – but was the homeland of all the people of the subcontinent, regardless of their faith. In August 2019, this ceased to be the case, also from a symbolic and legal point of view, illustrating «a strategy to *subordinate* Muslim-majority territories to Hindu majority ones».<sup>71</sup>

The second key change was an amendment to the Citizenship Act adopted in December 2019. The amendment legally put «one religion –

66. Quoted in Indrajit Roy, 'India: From the World's Largest Democracy to an Ethnocracy'.

67. Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*, chapter 10.

68. The creation of a Hindu Rashtra, or Hindu state or country is a long-time objective of Hindu nationalist groups such as the RSS and indeed the BJP.

69. Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India and Indian Politics*, London: Hurst&Co., 1996.

70. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democracy; building a kingdom of cruelty and fear'.

71. Indrajit Roy, 'India: From the World's Largest Democracy to an Ethnocracy'.

Islam – [...] on a lower footing than others»,<sup>72</sup> by recognising the right to apply for citizenship to non-Muslims who illegally migrated to India from neighbouring countries. This might have repercussions in the state of Assam, where the recent update of the National Register of Citizens found 1.9 million people to be illegal immigrants, making them, effectively, stateless. Non-Muslims will have the opportunity to apply for citizenship, while Muslims – a substantial share of the total – face deportation or indefinite detention in prison-like camps currently under construction. (It is unclear where they could be deported).<sup>73</sup>

Third, in July 2020, the Supreme Court ended a decades-long controversy over the land where the Babri Masjid once stood, a 15<sup>th</sup> century mosque destroyed by Hindu zealots on 6 December 1992. The Supreme Court ruled that, even though the mosque was illegally destroyed, the destroyers should be given control of the land to construct a temple dedicated to Ram – another long-time project of the Hindu nationalist movement. Prime Minister Modi laid the foundation stone of the temple on 5 August 2020 – exactly (and probably not coincidentally) one year after the revocation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir. The temple is scheduled to be finished by the next general elections in 2024. Its construction further represents the subjugation of the Muslims to the Hindu majority.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously exacerbated the Indian state's slide towards majoritarianism. One glaring example was the different treatment of two religious gatherings held over the course of 2020 and 2021. The first one, organized by the Muslim group Tablighi Jamaat, was staged in March 2020 and was later held responsible by government officials for spreading the virus throughout the country. Some BJP leaders talked of a «corona jihad»<sup>74</sup> – adding to the list of 'jihads' invented by BJP leaders, which includes «love jihad»<sup>75</sup> (supposedly a plan by Muslim men to marry Hindu women to tip the demographic balance in their favour) and «land jihad»<sup>76</sup> (a plan to turn urban areas into a «mini Pakistan»). In all three cases, Muslims were attacked by vigilante groups.<sup>77</sup> Besides the demonisation of the Muslim gathering, the Indian government adopted measures to contain

72. Madhav Khosla & Milan Vaishnav, 'The three faces of the Indian state.' *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2021, p. 113.

73. Angana P. Chatterji, Mihir Desai, Harsh Mander & Abdul Kalam Azad, 'Detention, Criminalisation, Statelessness: The Aftermath of Assam's NRC', *The Wire*, 14 September 2021.

74. 'How the coronavirus outbreak in India was blamed on Muslims', *Al Jazeera*, 18 April 2020.

75. Diego Maiorano, 'Early Trends and Prospects for Modi's Prime Ministership', *The International Spectator*. Vol. 50, No. 2, 2015, pp. 75–92.

76. Indrajit Roy, 'India: From the World's Largest Democracy to an Ethnocracy'.

77. 'In India, Coronavirus Fans Religious Hatred', *The New York Times*, 12 April 2020.

the spread of the virus, including contact tracing and punishment for the organisers.

On the other hand, the government took a completely different approach towards a major Hindu festival, the Maha Kumbh Mela, which was held in March-April 2021, just as the second wave of the virus was about to hit the country.<sup>78</sup> In fact, the government allowed the festival to take place one year in advance of its original schedule, because of the particularly auspicious date on the astrological calendar. The BJP chief minister of Himachal Pradesh, where the festival was held, was sacked and replaced, apparently because of his insistence on safety measures and restriction of access to the festival venue, which eventually attracted some 14 million people, including senior BJP leaders and Cabinet members (the Tablighi Jamaat gathering had about 8,000 people). Thousands later tested positive to the virus.<sup>79</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

This article sought to outline the severe democratic erosion that has occurred under the premiership of Narendra Modi since 2014. While building on a somewhat authoritarian soil, the degree to which institutions have been eroded, the electoral process compromised and the civil liberties violated, leaves little doubt that India has joined the (growing) club of 'competitive authoritarian' systems. These are regimes that, while maintaining the formal democratic architecture, employ informal coercive methods to maintain control, suppress dissent and ultimately skew the playing field in their favour.

The argument has been necessarily brief and could not detail all the instances where democracy has decayed. This is mainly because the problem is now so widespread that the functioning of virtually every public institution has been compromised. Furthermore, an aggressive policy of appointment of people belonging to the Hindu nationalist movement and their organisations (like the RSS) to prestigious public posts – from universities to hospitals, from school boards to museums – means that the effects of the Hinduisation of society and politics will be felt for years to come, even if the BJP eventually lose power.

In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated an existing trend in India. On the one hand, the health emergency was used to tighten the government's grip on media (traditional and social media). On the other hand, the government has used this emergency as a justification to further centralize power into its hands (similarly to what has happened in many countries in the world).

78. 'BJP fired ex-Uttarakhand chief minister TS Rawat for restricting Kumbh gatherings', *The Caravan*, 8 May 2021.

79. 'India Covid: Kumbh Mela pilgrims turn into super-spreaders', *BBC*, 10 May 2021.

THE ROAD TO GALWAN VALLEY: AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW  
OF INDIA'S RELATIONS WITH CHINA AND THE US SINCE 2005\*

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*This article analyses the reasons of the dramatic worsening of the India-China relation which became apparent in the 2020 border crisis, particularly during the confrontation which took place in the Galwan Valley. The analysis is focussed on the historical evolution of the India-China bilateral relations since the beginning of this century. It is focussed on two main themes: (a) the unsolved border dispute between the two countries; and (b) the role played in the India-China relation by India's increasing strategic and military closeness with the US.*

*The basic thesis of the article is that in 2005 the US consciously upgraded its connection with India to bring it inside the arc of containment it was building around its Asian adversaries, including China. New Delhi's new closeness with the US – a closeness which had a visible military dimension – could not but worry Beijing and cause a worsening in the India-China relationship. Up to the end of 2013, however, India's policy-makers, by implementing a complex set of policies, kept this worsening under control, reducing it to a bare minimum. Things dramatically changed in 2014, when Narendra Modi, India's new prime minister, abandoned India's previous prudent approach towards China, choosing to confront it and force it to accept India as an equal power. This brought about a downturn in the relations between the two countries which, in spite of some countertendencies, eventually resulted in the 2020 border crisis.*

KEYWORDS – India-China relations; India-US relations; India-China border dispute; «2+2» India-US dialogue; India-US «foundational pacts»; China's aggressiveness; China and Jammu & Kashmir; China and Arunachal Pradesh.

### *1. Introduction*

The COVID-19 pandemic, which badly impacted on India's domestic policy, hardly had any direct effect on its foreign policy. Nevertheless, the apex of the pandemic, namely the year 2020, coincided with two important foreign policy developments. One was the most serious, most dangerous and longest border crisis with China since 1987-88, whose highest point was

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the clash in the Galwan Valley (in the western sector of the border). The other important development was a qualitative leap in the consolidation of the strategic-military connection with the US, highlighted by the signing in New Delhi, on 27 October, of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for geo-spatial co-ordination. This was the third and last «foundational» pact between the US and India, aimed at giving a concrete content to the US-India Defence Framework Agreement, originally signed in 2005 and renewed in 2015.

Most commentators and analysts in India and the West saw the heightening of the strategic-military India-US connection as the consequence of the India-China border crisis. In turn, the India-China border crisis was explained as the end product of that same Chinese aggressiveness which was visible in the China Seas, and in China's dealings with Hong Kong and Taiwan.

The goal of this article, however, is to show that the connection between the border crisis and the coming into being of a *de facto* India-US military alliance is much more complex than it appears at first sight. Chinese aggressiveness towards India – which undoubtedly exists – is far from being the exclusive or even the main cause of the deterioration in the India-China relation highlighted by the 2020-21 border crisis. Likewise, the consolidation of the India-US strategic-military connection is far from being a purely defensive reaction on the part of India, confronted by China's unrelenting aggressiveness.

This article moves from the belief that the 2020-21 India-China border crisis is the (provisional) final link in a chain of events which was set in motion many years ago. Accordingly, it must be explained through the historical reconstruction of India-China and India-US relations and of their correlation. This is what is attempted in the remainder of this article.

This historical analysis is focussed on three main turning points. The first occurred in 2005-2008 when both the India-US and the India-China relations – both on a positive trend – dramatically changed. While the India-US relation went through a spectacular qualitative improvement, that with China visibly worsened. As argued in this article, the spectacular improvement in the India-US connection was the result of a change of policy in Washington: the US policy-makers offered unprecedented support to India in order to bring her inside the US-centred arc of containment which Washington was building around its main Asian adversaries, namely Iran and China. Not surprisingly, this caused China's reaction and the worsening of the New Delhi-Beijing relationship.

The second period on which the following historical analysis is focussed includes the years 2008-2014. It was less a turning point than a period of equilibrium, characterised by India's ability to perform a difficult balancing act, without losing her balance. In fact, India got more or less all that she wanted from the US, giving in exchange very little. In particular,

New Delhi consciously escaped a too close – and, therefore, too constraining – strategic embrace with Washington. While at the end of this period the India-US relation had somewhat cooled, the US connection remained the mainstay of India's foreign policy. On its part, Washington continued to consider India as an indispensable non-treaty ally in Asia. At the same time, and rather counterintuitively, New Delhi was able to keep the worsening of the relation with China under control. There were tensions along the India-China border but, in the final analysis, they were minor. Also, the communication lines between the two governments were kept wide open and characterized by diplomatic visits at the highest level. The possibility that the two biggest Asian countries could reach a mutually satisfactory *modus vivendi* and restart the positive trend which had characterized their relationship prior to 2005 continued to appear real.

Things, however, dramatically changed in the third period, the one beginning in 2014. This article argues that, in this last period, India willingly discarded the equilibrium policy previously followed. A central aspect of India's new foreign policy became the urge to confront China with the aim of inducing it to accept India on an equal footing. Given the spectacular imbalance of power between China and India in favour of the former, India's new China policy could be pursued only if New Delhi accepted that same tight strategic embrace with Washington that the previous Indian governments had consciously avoided as dangerous for the maintenance of India's strategic autonomy.

Summing up, if one observes and analyses the 2020 India-China border confrontation from the above standpoints, the prevailing explanation of its origins and dynamics, offered in India and in the West, namely China's unwarranted aggressiveness towards its neighbours, appears to be of doubtful validity. Likewise, it appears to be of doubtful validity the thesis that India's growing strategic connection with the US has been a purely defensive reaction to Chinese aggression. It is on the explanation of these theses that the rest of the article is focused.

## 2. *The 2005-2008 turning point in Indian international relations*

At the beginning of the present century both the India-US and India-China relations were going through a positive phase. In the former case, they were pulled by the mutual convenience in promoting stricter and growing economic interconnections. The US had been India's main economic partner since the 1950s, but, given the mainly autarchic dimension of India's economy up to the 1980s, that had not had much relevance in the strategic calculations of either country. In summer 1991, nonetheless, India embarked on a new economic policy based on the promotion of neo-liberal reforms. The new economic policy not only accelerated India's rapid economic growth,

which had become apparent already in the 1980s, but resulted in the partial but substantial and ever larger opening of the potentially huge Indian market to international capital. The US capital was ideally placed to reap most of the economic advantages accruing from the opening up of the India economy, and, in fact, made the most of it. The result was the flourishing not only of the India-US connection, but the fact that, by the year 2000, despite an obstacle to be discussed later, it became clear that Washington had come to consider New Delhi as its closest partner in South Asia instead of Islamabad, as had previously been the case.

On its part, the India-China positive trend, ongoing since December 1988, had been predicated on the decision by New Delhi and Beijing to conduct their bilateral relationship «for mutual advantage, without being hampered by their disagreement on the boundary question».<sup>1</sup> The solution of the existing border differences had been left to a newly created Joint Working Group on the boundary question (JWG). The JWG arrived at a major clarification of the issue on 7 September 1993, with the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility<sup>2</sup> along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas. The Agreement delinked the solution of the border question – namely a final agreement defining the mutually accepted international border between the two countries – from the individuation of the line dividing the area de facto controlled by India from the area de facto controlled by China, or line of actual control (LAC). Also, the Agreement decided that the parties would «reduce troop levels compatible with friendly and good relations between them» and «undertake confidence building measures along the line of actual control» including by providing notification of troop movements.<sup>3</sup> This agreement was followed by a second one on 29 November 1996, which reiterated the decision not to use force to solve border problems and, as a concrete implementation of confidence building measures, called for reduction of the respective border forces, the exchange data on them, the avoidance of large scale military exercises in close proximity of the LAC and, should anyway such large scale military exercises be deemed necessary by one side, its prior notification to the other side.<sup>4</sup>

1. Snehalata Panda, 'India—China Cooperation: Major Determinants', *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 64, No. 1-2, January-June 2003, p. 46.

2. In the Agreement, the word «tranquility» is actually spelled in the American way, rather than in the British one, usually utilized in India's official documents.

3. The full text of the Agreement is available at the Peace Agreements Database of the United Nations (<https://peacemaker.un.org/chinaindia-borderagreement93>). On the 1993 Agreement see also Snehalata Panda, 'India—China Cooperation: Major Determinants', p. 48.

4. *Agreement between India and China on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas*. The full text of the Agreement is available at the Peace Agreements Database of the United Nations (<https://peacemaker.un.org/chinaindiaconfidenceagreement96>).

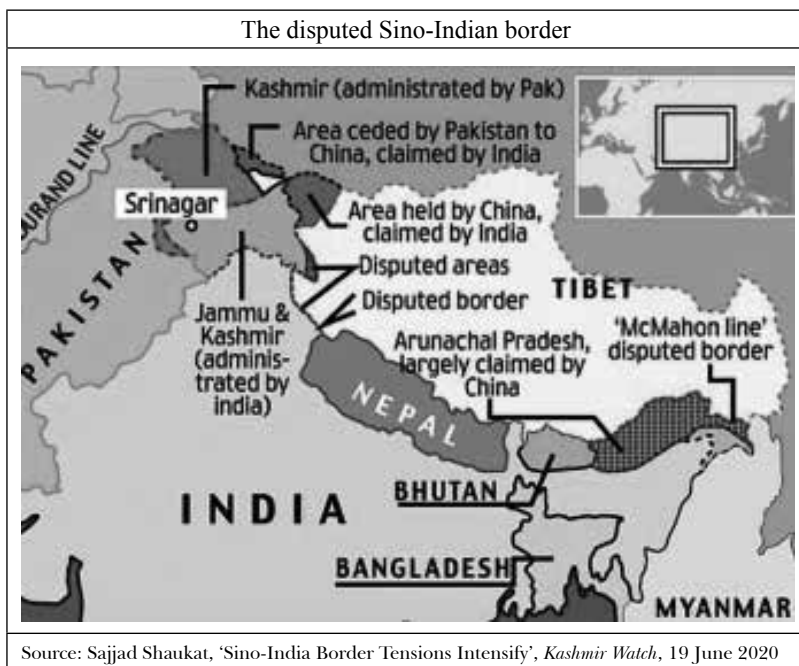
These agreements actually brought about the de-escalation of the previously simmering military tension along the still undefined and un-demarcated common border. Less successful, however, was reaching a mutually acceptable agreement on the actual layout of the LAC. In 2001, the two parties exchanged maps on the 545-km «middle sector» of the disputed border, which, however, was the least contentious of the three sectors of the border. The situation in the Western sector – where India claimed around km<sup>2</sup> 37,250 controlled by China – and the Eastern sector – where China claimed some km<sup>2</sup> 83,740 controlled by India – remained unsolved.

Summing up, the period from December 1988 to 2005 saw the implementation of a series of confidence building measures, which substantially diminished the pre-existing tension along the border. They were coupled with the setting up of a mechanism to examine and try to solve the long-standing differences concerning the definition of a mutually acceptable border.

This positive trend was briefly interrupted by two moves made by New Delhi in 1998: the first was the decision to carry out a nuclear test involving the explosion of five atomic devices; the second was the attempt, on the part of India's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, to justify the experiment, in a supposedly confidential letter to US President Bill Clinton, as due to the danger posed by a threatening northern neighbour, which, although left unnamed, could not but be China.<sup>5</sup>

5. As in the case of the first Indian nuclear experiment (1974), the motivation of the 1998 explosions had very little to do with India's foreign policy objectives, but were motivated by India's domestic situation. For an analysis of this point, see Kalpana Sharma, 'The Hindu Bomb', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 54, Issue 4, 1998, pp. 30-33; Chris Ogden, *Hindu Nationalism and the Evolution of Contemporary Indian Security: Portents of Power*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014, chapter 3 (*The Reality of Power, Pokhran II, and Domestic Dynamics*); Michelguglielmo Torri, *India's US policy 1991-2014: the gradual loss of strategic autonomy*, in Silvio Beretta, Giuseppe Iamini & Axel Berkofsky (eds), *India's Foreign and Security Policies. Friends, Foes and Enemies*, Heidelberg: Springer, forthcoming. Of course, stating that the reasons behind the nuclear tests are to be found in India's domestic situation at the time does not detract from the fact that India's policy aimed at acquiring nuclear weapons had evident foreign policy motivations. There is little doubt that India began (in great secrecy) its nuclear armament programme as a reaction to the atomic test carried out by China at Lop Nur on 16 October 1964, namely only some two years after the conclusion of the Sino-Indian war of 1962. See, e.g., George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999; Deepa M. Ollapally, 'Mixed Motives in India's Search for Nuclear Status', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 41, No. 6 (November/December 2001), pp. 925-942;





Not surprisingly, Beijing adversely reacted to the accusation made in the supposedly confidential letter to Clinton. The Indian government, however, was soon at work to remedy the consequences of their *faux pas*, and, in June 1999, Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh visited China. In July 2000, the visit to India of China's Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan signalled that «a level of comity more normal to relations between Asia's two giants had been restored».<sup>6</sup>

This mending of the India-China relations quickly progressed and culminated in Vajpayee's visit to Beijing in July 2003.<sup>7</sup> As far as the border question was concerned, two main results were reached: the first was the *de facto* recognition on the part of China of Sikkim as part of India; the second was the appointment of two special representatives (one for India and one for China), in charge of speed up the already ongoing attempt at

6. John W. Garver, 'The Restoration of Sino-Indian Comity following India's Nuclear Tests', *The China Quarterly*, No. 168, December 2001, p. 865.

7. Prabhu Chawla, 'Historic visit to China by Prime Minister Vajpayee brings Beijing and Delhi closer', *India Today*, 7 July 2003.

clarifying the reciprocal border claims and find a mutually agreed solution.<sup>8</sup> On the whole, however, the border question appeared to take second place compared to the decision to enhance the trade connections between the two countries. What is relevant from the standpoint of this article is the fact that the 1998 incident did not have any lasting consequence on the positive trend of India-China relations. In fact, Vajpayee's 2003 visit to China marked an unprecedented phase of bonhomie in the relationship between the two countries.

### 2.1. *The (positive) turning point in India-US relations*

The India-US connections, although flourishing since the early 1990s, had been somewhat hampered by an obstacle. This had been the US policy, followed since India's first nuclear experiment in 1974, aimed at forcing India to dismantle its atomic arsenal. At the beginning of the new century, the George W. Bush administration, while engaged in its «war on terror», radically reassessed India's weight on the Asian checkboard. The result was the realization of the importance of India as a «swing state» and the consequent decision to actively try to insert it in the US-centred web of treaty or non-treaty alliances spun by Washington around and against its main Asian adversaries: China and Iran.<sup>9</sup> Having realized that no Indian government would ever give up the nuclear policy hitherto followed, the Bush administration decided to change its own: up to that point in time, Washington had actively hindered India's nuclear ambitions; beginning in 2005 it started to actively favour them.

8. Between 2003 and 2009, 13 rounds of «high-profile dialogue» were conducted by the two special representatives, but without reaching «a credible breakthrough». Zhang Li, 'China-India Relations. Strategic Engagement and Challenges', *Ifri*, September 2020. The fact that, in spite of continuing negotiations, ongoing more or less continuously since 2003, India and China have been unable to clarify where the border is and not even where the LAC lay is put down to Chinese obduracy by Indian and Western commentators. This interpretation, however, is not based on any hard proofs, which will be forthcoming only when the related confidential documentation will become available (which, of course, is not going to happen in a foreseeable future). In the final analysis, therefore, the idea that is China to be responsible for the stalemate of the border dispute is preconceived. Also, it does not square either with the fact that China has been able to solve the equally intricate border dispute with Russia or with India's reputation as a nay-sayer in basically all international negotiations in which it has been involved since independence.

9. On the concept of «swing state» see: Megan Garcia, *Global Swing States and the Non-Proliferation Order*, Washington: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2012; Daniel M. Kliman & Richard Fontaine, *Global Swing States: Brazil, India, Indonesia, Turkey and the Future of International Order*, Washington: Center for a New American Security (CNAS) and the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), November 2012; Daniel M. Kliman, 'Global Swing States and U.S. Strategy', *GMF & Ifri Policy Brief*, August 2013; Ted Osius, 'Global Swing States: Deepening Partnerships with India and Indonesia', *Asia Policy*, No. 17, January 2014, pp. 67-92.

As the US was still officially in favour of a policy aimed at preventing nuclear proliferation, Washington's radical upturn needed a fig leaf. This was found in the request to India to «disentangle» the production of nuclear energy for peaceful use from the production of nuclear energy for military use. Accordingly, India concentrated the military production of nuclear energy in one third of its reactors, whereas the remainder two thirds were officially dedicated to the production of nuclear energy for civilian purposes.<sup>10</sup> At that point, Washington could put an end to its own ban on the supply of nuclear fuel and technology to India, claiming that the change of its Indian nuclear policy concerned the civilian sector only of the Indian nuclear industry. Moreover, Washington actively operated to remove the international nuclear embargo that it itself had promoted against India after the first Indian nuclear explosion in 1974.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, Washington's claim that the end of the nuclear embargo on India concerned the civilian sector only was rather disingenuous. In fact, the possibility for India to procure nuclear fuel on the international market allowed her to concentrate her own limited – but far from being irrelevant – domestic resources of nuclear fuel on the expansion of the military sector.

The removal of the political and legal barriers excluding India from the benefit of US supplies of nuclear fuel and technology was rather complex. For different reasons – on which we cannot dwell here<sup>12</sup> – there was considerable political opposition to the India-US nuclear deal both in India and in the States. Nonetheless, oppositions in both countries were eventually overcome and the nuclear deal was finalized in 2008.<sup>13</sup>

The whole debate related to the nuclear deal was so prolonged and so fierce both in India and the US that most commentators and both public opinions appeared to be oblivious of – or, anyway, spared little attention for – the fact that the whole nuclear deal had been premised and was accompanied and followed by a US-sponsored policy aimed at giving to the US-India connection a strong military component. In turn, the new military

10. IAEA, *Agreement between the Government of India and the International Atomic Energy Agency for the Application of Safeguards to Civilian Nuclear Facilities*, INFCIRC/754, 29 May 2009; Council on Foreign Relations, *The U.S.-India Nuclear Deal*, (Backgrounder by Jayshree Bajoria & Esther Pan) 5 November 2010.

11. William Burr, 'A Scheme of «Control»: The United States and the Origins of the Nuclear Suppliers' Group, 1974–1976', *The International History Review*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2014, pp. 252-276.

12. For an in-depth discussion of this topic, see the India-related articles in *Asia Maior*, Vol. XVIII/2007 and Vol. XIX/2008.

13. On the so-called Agreement 123, see, e.g., Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Accordo nucleare, violenza politica e incertezza economica in India (Nuclear deal, political violence and economic uncertainty in India)', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XIX/2008, pp. 84-94; Maria Sultan & Mian Behzad Adil, 'The Henry J. Hyde Act and 123 Agreement: An Assessment', SASSI Policy Brief 11, September 2008.

component had two distinct aspects: one was progressing towards a de facto military alliance through the signing of a series of bilateral treaties, whose purported goal was reaching a situation of full interoperability between the armed forces of the two countries; the other aspect was the US design to enter the flourishing Indian arms market, hitherto de facto closed to the US, selling huge amounts of high technology – and, therefore, highly expensive – weapons and weapon systems to India.

The new military component of India-US relations was head-started in June 2005, namely even before the formal beginning of the bilateral negotiation of the civil nuclear agreement, with the signing of a US-India Defence Framework Agreement. As stated in the agreement itself, the pact heralded the fact that the India-US relations had entered a new era and that their defence relationship had advanced in a short time to «unprecedented levels of cooperation», unimaginable only ten years before.<sup>14</sup>

The US-India Defence Framework Agreement was renewed for an additional 10 years in 2015. It was accompanied by US pressure on India to sign a series of additional «foundational» pacts aimed at making possible full interoperability between the armed forces of the two countries.

It is worth stressing that New Delhi was then interested less in arms supplies and integration between the armed forces of the two countries than in promoting stricter and wider economic connections and receiving support at the technological level. As argued in March 2005 by an official of the US Embassy in New Delhi, in a secret cable later made public by WikiLeaks, the US «sales pitch would only work if it were connected to the wider economic and technological benefits the Indian side hoped to harvest».<sup>15</sup>

No doubt, in accepting the new US policy, the Indian policy-makers were mainly interested in reaping the economic and technological advantages accruing from it. But they could not but be aware that these advantages were neither offered nor given for free, as the US administration pursued its own objectives. As already hinted, some of the US's objectives were economic, particularly cornering the profitable Indian market for weapons imports and supplying India with the new nuclear reactors which India would build after the finalization of the civil nuclear agreement. Other goals, however, had an unambiguous strategic dimension, and were aimed against Washington's main adversaries in Asia: Tehran and Beijing. In other words, the not so hidden cost required by Washington in order to make India «a major

14. Manohar Parrikar Institute For Defence Studies And Analyses, *New Framework for the India - U.S. Defence Relationship*, 28 June 2005. See also Achin Vanaik, 'The Significance of the New India-US Framework Agreement on Defence', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 40, No. 32, 6 August 2005.

15. Siddharth Varadarajan, 'U.S. cables show grand calculations underlying 2005 defence framework', *The Hindu*, 28 March 2011.

power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century»<sup>16</sup> was the overturning of the positive momentum which was then the defining aspect of both the India-Iran and the India-China relations.

## 2.2. *The (negative) turning point in India-China relations*

It is worth stressing that, whereas the anti-Iranian goal of Washington's new India policy was clearly and openly advertised since the beginning, its anti-Beijing aspect had been left undeclared. Nevertheless, it was an objective which could not go undetected to any knowledgeable observer.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, it did not go undetected in Beijing.<sup>18</sup>

The result was that, during the same years in which the new India-US relationship took shape, the India-China relationship entered a state of flux which saw the coexistence of two contradictory trends. The first, ongoing since December 1988,<sup>19</sup> was the positive relationship head-started by Rajiv Gandhi's trip to Beijing. The second was a new and highly negative countertendency, characterized by increasing tensions and suspicions between the two countries. By the end of the 2005-2008 period, the second trend, without totally removing the other, gradually emerged as the dominant one.

Still at the beginning of 2005, the positive trend characterizing the India-China relation seemed to be increasingly pronounced. In April of that year, during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to New Delhi, a series of no

16. As promised by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during her official visit to New Delhi in March 2005. See, e.g., 'US to help make India a «major world power»', *China Daily*, 26 March 2005.

17. For example, Paul Richter of the Los Angeles Times pointed out: «The White House was willing to risk losing ground in the worldwide campaign to limit the spread of nuclear weapons for a deal with India that could help it counter the rising power of China». Paul Richter, 'In Deal With India, Bush Has Eye on China', *Los Angeles Times*, 4 March 2006. On his part, Ashley Tellis, the mind behind the US-India civil nuclear deal, noted that «a buildup of India's nuclear arsenal», a necessary consequence of the deal, would cause «Beijing to worry more about India and less about the United States». *Ibid.* On his part, Charles D. Ferguson, science and technology fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, commented the US-India civil nuclear deal by saying that: «The United States is trying to cement its relationship with the world's largest democracy in order to counterbalance China». Jayshree Bajoria & Esther Pan, 'The U.S.-India Nuclear Deal', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 5 November 2010. In 2016, Subrata Ghoshroy of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, analyzing the civil nuclear deal some years later, argued that «the accord was principally about two things: first, capturing the potentially huge Indian market, and second, making India a strategic partner in US efforts to counter a rising China». Subrata Ghoshroy, 'Taking stock: The US-India nuclear deal 10 years later', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 16 February 2016.

18. E.g., Chris Buckley, 'China state paper lashes India-U.S. nuclear deal', *Reuters*, 1 September 2008;

19. This trend had been disturbed by the 1998 Indian nuclear experiments, but only briefly.

less than 12 Agreements and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) were signed, concerning the implementation of confidence-building measures along the common border, promotion of trade and cooperation, development of friendly institutional relations, financial cooperation and cultural exchanges.<sup>20</sup>

The first and possibly the most important among these MOUs was the *Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question*, setting guidelines aimed at resolving some of the border disputes between the two countries.<sup>21</sup> Wen recognized Sikkim as part of India and appeared not to oppose one of India's most eagerly pursued foreign policy goals, namely obtaining a permanent seat in the UN Security Council.

The following year, which was declared «India-China Friendship Year», saw reciprocal diplomatic exchanges and a sequel of cultural events to celebrate the excellent relations between the two countries. Also, the acknowledgement of Sikkim as part of India was followed by the re-opening of the Nathula trading pass in that area, which had been closed since the 1962 war. In 2007, the Sino-Indian trade, which had been inconsequential before Indian Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee's visit to China in 2003, was booming.<sup>22</sup> The cordiality in the relations between the two countries was also highlighted by the carrying out of the first joint India-China military exercises.<sup>23</sup> Still on 14 January 2008, namely only a few months before the finalization of the India-US civil nuclear agreement, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, while in Beijing, signed a joint India-China declaration. It set out the «shared vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> century of the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China» and the common determination «to promote the building of a harmonious world of durable peace and common prosperity through developing the Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for peace and prosperity between the two countries».<sup>24</sup>

20. The full list is in Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, Media Centre, *Synopses of Agreements/MOUs/Memoranda - Visit of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to India, April 9-12, 2005*, 11 April 2005.

21. Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, *Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question*, 11 April 2005.

22. The China-India bilateral trade, which stood at US\$ 4,946 million in 2002, reached 30,000 million in 2008. Swaran Singh, 'China-India Bilateral Trade: Strong Fundamentals, Bright Future', *China Perspectives*, Vol. 62, November-December 2005, Table 1 (China-India Bilateral Trade). See also: Phd Research Bureau, *India - China Trade Relationship: The Trade Giants of Past, Present and Future*, New Delhi: Phd Chamber of Commerce and Industry, January 2018.

23. David M. Malone & Rohan Mukherjee, 'India and China: Conflict and Cooperation', *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 1, February-March 2010, p. 144.

24. Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, *A Shared Vision for the 21st Century of the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China*, 14 January 2008.

The apparent continuation of the positive trend in India-China relations disguised Beijing's unhappiness about India's growing closeness with the US to the eyes of most observers. Nonetheless, that something was about to go seriously wrong in the India-China relationship was unambiguously signalled by an interview granted on 13 November 2006 by China's ambassador in New Delhi, Sun Yuxi, to a private Indian television channel. During the interview, Ambassador Sun claimed the entire Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh as an integral part of the People's Republic of China.<sup>25</sup>

What made the statement particularly relevant and highly worrying was that it marked a fundamental departure from the policy hitherto pursued by Beijing, concerning its border disputes with New Delhi. This policy, even after the 1962 war and so far as the eastern part of the border was concerned, had been based on China's de facto acknowledgement of the McMahon Line, namely the highest crest of the Himalaya, as the border between the two countries. During the 1962 war, China had occupied most of what was then called North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), namely the area south of the McMahon which was later (20 February 1987) to become the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. However, after vanquishing the Indian army, the People Liberation Army (PLA) willingly retreated to the line it occupied before the start of hostilities, leaving NEFA under Indian control. In 1980, Beijing had formally offered to recognize the McMahon Line as the eastern border in exchange for India recognizing Aksai Chin as part of China in the western sector. Nothing had come out of that offer, which reiterated the position already taken by China before the 1962 war.

In 1985, Beijing, for the first time, claimed territory south of the McMahon line. That claim, however, appeared, and very possibly was, less a serious request than a bargaining point aimed to strengthen China's position at the negotiation table. Significantly, Chinese diplomacy did not give much emphasis to the claim on the territory south of the McMahon line. Also, in 2005, the bilateral *Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question* was signed. It stipulated that the resolution of the border dispute would not involve the exchange of areas with «settled populations».<sup>26</sup>

Now, by claiming Arunachal Pradesh as a part of Tibet and, therefore, as a part of China, Ambassador Sun demanded a territory which was both south of the highest ridge of the Himalaya and inhabited. At the time, some

25. 'China lays claim to Arunachal', *Hindustan Times*, 19 November 2006.

26. For the text of the agreement see Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, *Agreement on Political Parameters ...*, 11 April 2005. For the whole question see, Neville Maxwell, 'Sino-Indian Border Dispute Reconsidered', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, No. 15, 10-16 April 1999, pp. 905-918; David M. Malone & Rohan Mukherjee, 'India and China: Conflict and Cooperation', p. 153; Sudha Ramachandran, 'Arunachal Pradesh: Cultural and Strategic Flashpoint for Sino-Indian Relations', *China Brief*, 13 January 2016, p. 15.

commentators explained away Sun's interview as a diplomatic gaffe, rather than the public announcement of a fundamental reassessment of China's border policy. The fact itself that China's renewal of its claim on Arunachal Pradesh had been made in an interview with an Indian television broadcaster, rather than by Chinese state or party leaders through official channels, lent credence to this interpretation. This view was further strengthened by the way China's President Hu Jintao's official visit, which took place just a week after Sun's statements (20-23 November 2006), unfolded. The visit went off cordially, with priority being given to further promoting the rapid development of bilateral economic relations. The border problem was discussed, and its early settlement was described by both sides as a «strategic objective». Although no result was reached, there was the decision that negotiations would continue, while both countries would work together to maintain peace and tranquillity in the border areas. Express reference was made to the previous agreements on that matter, including the MOUs of 2005. It was also decided to expedite work on clarification and confirmation of the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

Significantly, however, Beijing's newly advanced claim on the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh was not withdrawn.<sup>27</sup> This was an indication as clear as any that Ambassador Sun's Arunachal Pradesh-related statement, far from being a diplomatic gaffe, accurately reflected China's new position in relation to the border question. Taken together, Ambassador Sun's interview and the way in which the border question had been left pending during Hu Jintao's visit represented a very serious warning that the positive trend of the India-China relation hanged in the balance.

As the first warning appeared to have gone unheeded, in the following year Beijing reiterated its position in a more forceful way. In May 2007 it came the news that the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi had denied a visa to an Indian official from Arunachal Pradesh, as granting it would have been an implicit acceptance of Indian sovereignty on that area, which was contrary to China official position.<sup>28</sup> This was followed, on 6 June 2007, by Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi's statement, in the course of a meeting with his Indian counterpart, Pranab Mukherjee, in Hamburg. In that occasion, Yang not only officially claimed the whole of Arunachal Pradesh as part of China, but breached the guidelines contained in the above quoted April 2005 Agreement. Article VII of the Agreement unambiguously stated that: «In reaching a boundary settlement, the two sides shall safeguard due interests of their settled populations in the border areas». Yang, however, declared that the mere presence of populated areas (populated, that is, by non-Chinese inhabitants) in Arunachal Pradesh did

27. Rajshree Jetly, 'The Visit of Chinese President, Hu Jintao, to India (20 – 23 November 2006)', *ISAS Insights*, No. 16, 28 November 2006.

28. Nilova Roy Chaudhury, 'Arunachal officer denied China visa', *Hindustan Times*, 26 May 2007.



in no way invalidate the rights over this region that China had inherited from Tibet.<sup>29</sup>

To put the hardening of China's negotiating position into proper perspective, two elements must be highlighted. The first is that Beijing, in spite of raising the bar on the border issue, nevertheless appeared determined to continue negotiations with India. The second is that Beijing's hardening of its negotiating position occurred when the Indian government's strategic rapprochement with the US was facing powerful internal obstacles, being severely criticized both by the official parliamentary opposition and by the left parties. The left parties, without being part of the Manmohan Singh government, offered it their support, and, with their vote, assured the government's majority in parliament. Moreover, even some members of the Singh government, in particular the foreign minister, Natwar Singh, and the minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Mani Shankar Aiyar, opposed the new policy. They were in favour not only of the continuation of the policy of increasing closeness and cooperation with Iran and China, ongoing since the late 1980s, but of its radical speed-up. It is therefore possible that Beijing, by stiffening its negotiating position on the border dispute hoped to strengthen the hand of the Indian opponents of the new pro-American policy.<sup>30</sup>

If, however, China hoped to strengthen the hand of the domestic opponents to the civil-nuclear deal by stiffening its position on the border dispute, its attempt, came to nought. The Indian Prime Minister disposed of the opposition to the new US policy present inside his own government with the marginalization of Natwar Singh and Mani Shankar Aiyar in November 2005 and January 2006 respectively. Then he faced down both the official opposition and the left parties in parliament, defeating them, although, as suspected at the time and later revealed by WikiLeaks, not without a judicious recourse to corruption.<sup>31</sup>

Summing up, by 2008, India's closeness to the US, signalled by the finalization of the US-India nuclear agreement, had become the distinctive feature of New Delhi's foreign policy.

29. Pranab Dhal Samanta, 'China draws another hardline on Arunachal', *The Indian Express*, 7 June 2007. See also Jagannath P. Panda, 'China's Designs on Arunachal Pradesh,' *IDS Comment*, 12 March 2008, and Sujit Dutta, 'Revisiting China's Territorial Claims on Arunachal', *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 32, No. 4, July 2008.

30. The thesis that China tried to use the Left parties to prevent the finalization of the civil nuclear India-US deal has recently been repropounded in a memoir by Vijay Gokhale, a former high-ranking Indian diplomat. See 'China tried to use Left to scuttle n-deal: former foreign secretary Vijay Gokhale', *The Indian Express*, 3 August 2021.

31. 'Full text of WikiLeaks cable on trust vote controversy', *NDTV*, 17 March 2011.

### 3. *Successfully maintaining a difficult balance: India's relations with the US and China in 2008-2014*

#### 3.1. *India's relation with the US: getting much and giving little*

In India, the new Manmohan Singh-sponsored pro-US policy had been criticized and opposed mainly because it was considered dangerous for the preservation of India's strategic autonomy. In fact, the promoters themselves of the new policy were not unaware of the risks involved; they, nonetheless, bet on their capability to receive all the support they needed from the US, while minimizing its cost. In particular, India's policy-makers bet on the fact that they would preserve their country's strategic autonomy, namely the ability to implement a foreign policy in line with India's national interests, avoiding – fully or, at least, to a large extent – any possible conditioning from the USA.

Rather counterintuitively, the Manmohan Singh-headed and Congress-dominated government, then in power, was able to reach – at least to a large extent – its goal. The Singh government wanted the end of India's international isolation regarding supplies of nuclear fuel and dual-use nuclear technology and it got it. It wanted the surge of economic relations with the US and the increase of FDI to India and, again, it reached its goal. It wanted the freedom to buy American weapons in the measure in which it was convenient for India, and even here it was able to reach its objective. India did not want to break the important economic connection with Iran and, in this field, although somewhat giving in to US pressure, India did it in such a limited way and behaving so smartly to be able to square the circle. In other words, it succeeded in devising and implementing a policy that satisfied Washington without displeasing Tehran. The number of India-US joint military exercises steeply raised, but New Delhi marked time as far as the actual implementation of interoperability between the armed forces of the two countries was concerned.<sup>32</sup>

As above hinted, Washington ardently desired the Indian government's signatures of a series of bilateral pacts which would institutionalize military cooperation and give a concrete content to it. These pacts, nonetheless, not only in the evaluation of the critics of the Manmohan Singh government, but in that of some of its most influential members, in particular Defence Minister A. K. Antony, could result in the US's ability to manipulate India's defence capabilities. In this situation, Antony, acting on behalf of the Indian government, responded the pressing requests from Washington to sign the pacts by taking time. He never said openly no to signing the pacts, but continued to delay it, putting down the continuous postponements to

32. Michelguglielmo Torri, *India's US policy 1991-2014: the gradual loss of strategic autonomy*, in Silvio Beretta, Giuseppe Iannini & Axel Berkofsky (eds), *India's Foreign and Security Policies. Friends, Foes and Enemies*.

the intractable complication of Indian bureaucracy.<sup>33</sup> He was so successful in his stalling effort that, when the Manmohan Singh-headed government left power at the beginning of 2014, following that year defeat at the general election, no interoperability pact had been signed yet.

No doubt, in the long run India's stalling game was not without consequences. A feeling of uneasiness gradually crept into the US-India relation, and, eventually, it became evident in December 2013, following the outbreak of the Devyani Khobragade case.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, in the final analysis, not even the Khobragade incident succeeded in seriously damaging the relationship with the USA: the enhanced US connection remained the mainstay of India's foreign policy. On its part the US continued to consider India as a most important friendly nation in Asia.

### 3.2. *India's relation with China*

#### 3.2.1. *The worsening of India-China relations*

In the period under analysis (2008-2014), India-China relations did worsen. In May 2008, during a meeting of BRIC foreign ministers at Yekaterinburg (Russia), China refused to approve the Russia-sponsored proposal to endorse India's bid for a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council.<sup>35</sup> In taking that stance – which has kept ever since – China belied the possibilistic attitude it had taken on the issue only a year earlier.

Still in 2008, China began issuing stapled visas, namely visas on loose sheets of paper rather than visas printed on a passport page, to the residents of Jammu and Kashmir [hereafter quoted as J&K], citing the region's «disputed status».<sup>36</sup> In June 2009, Beijing openly opposed New Delhi's request

33. Siddharth Varadarajan, 'U.S. cables show grand calculations underlying 2005 defence framework'.

34. Devyani Khobragade, then India's Deputy Consul General in New York was arrested and strip searched by the New York police, which suspected her of visa fraud and false statements related to her domestic help, a woman of Indian nationality. Khobragade's arrest, which could not but have been green-lighted in advance by the State Department, and her subsequent treatment on the part of the police, caused a major diplomatic incident and the reaction of the Indian government. The American diplomatic personnel in New Delhi were subjected to a series of restrictive measures and, finally, in an absolutely unprecedented move, a New Delhi-based American diplomat was expelled. E.g., D. P. Satish, 'Devyani Khobragade incident: Both sides of the story', *News18 India*, 17 December 2013; Nissim Mannathukkaren, 'Nation, class and caste: the culture of servitude and the case of the Indian diplomat', *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 38, 2014.

35. See Sreeram Chaulia, 'UN Security Council Seat: China Outsmarts India', *Indo-Asian News Service*, 30 May 2008.

36. Both India and Pakistan claim as their own the whole of the formerly princely state of Kashmir, which they de facto partitioned in 1947-48. The partition

for a US\$ 2.9 billion loan from the Asian Development Bank. Highlighting for the first time its claims on Arunachal Pradesh in an international forum, Beijing objected to the fact that the requested loan included US\$ 60 million earmarked for «a flood management, water supply, and sanitation project in Arunachal Pradesh».<sup>37</sup> Some months later, in October 2009, Beijing censured Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Arunachal Pradesh during the electoral campaign for the local state assembly election, defining Arunachal Pradesh as a «disputed region». The following month, Beijing «openly protested the Dalai Lama's visit to Arunachal Pradesh».<sup>38</sup> In July 2010 China denied a visa to Lt. General B. S. Jaswal, who headed the Northern Area Command of the Indian Army, because its command comprised the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir, which, according to China, was a disputed territory.<sup>39</sup>

Eventually, during the 2011 BRICS Summit in Sanya (Hainan, China) an agreement was found as far as the J&K question was concerned, and China resumed issuing regular visas to the residents of J&K and Indian army officials posted there. China, however, did not retreat from its claims on «South Tibet».<sup>40</sup> It must be noted, however, that while Beijing continued to claim what it called South Tibet and to practice its highly irritating (for India) visa policy, it also continued to urge India to seek a solution to the disputes between the two countries, «including the boundary ones». This was a result that, according to Beijing, could be reached through «the working mechanism for consultation and coordination on boundary affairs» and «through peaceful negotiations». In Beijing's considered opinion, the goal that both India and China should try to reach was «to ensure that this kind of dispute will not affect the development of the bilateral relations».<sup>41</sup>

of the Kashmir princely state left Pakistan in possession of its westernmost 40 percent and India in possession of the remaining 60 percent. The problem was further complicated by the demarcation of the border between Pakistan and China, sanctioned by the Sino-Pakistan Border Agreement of 1963. The agreement led to an exchange of territory between the two countries that left parts of northern Kashmir and Ladakh under Chinese control, a decision which, of course, has never been accepted by India. See, e.g., Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, 'Significance of Pakistan - China Border Agreement Of 1963', *Pakistan Horizon*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 1986, pp. 41-52. On the problem of the stapled visa, see Sameer Patil, 'Decoding the stapled visa row', *Gateway House*, 1 May 2014.

37. Namrata Goswami, 'China's Territorial Claim on Arunachal Pradesh: Crafting an Indian Response', *IDSIA Issue Brief*, 25 October 2010, p. 2.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Sameer Patil, 'Decoding the stapled visa row'.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Manoj Joshi, 'Making sense of the Depsang incursion', *The Hindu*, 7 May 2013.

### 3.2.2. *The causes behind the worsening in India-China relations*

The thesis of this article is that, during the period under review, the bilateral India-China relationship worsened as a necessary consequence of India's new policy of military, nuclear and strategic closeness with the US. However, another explanation has been put forward and espoused by much of the literature. This is the theory that the 2008 global financial crisis convinced China's leadership that US world power was on the wane and the time had arrived for a much more assertive and aggressive foreign policy towards both its neighbours and the US. Therefore, the worsening of India-China relations in the post-2008 period was the necessary result of a more general change in Beijing's approach to international relations. In fact, India was only one of the countries put under pressure by China's new aggressive policy.<sup>42</sup>

No doubt, the above explanation has a sort of geometrical potency and is not devoid of its own merits. Nonetheless, the fact remains that, in the words of a Swedish scholar, «a dissenting smaller body of research has cast doubt on the accuracy of some of the narrative's central claims».<sup>43</sup>

Now, without delving in this rather complex debate,<sup>44</sup> this author's contention is that, as far as the central thesis of this article is concerned, it does not matter which school of thought one follows regarding the change or sub-

42. E.g., Andrew Scobell & Scott W. Harold, 'An "assertive" China? Insights from interviews', *Asian Security*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2013, pp. 111-131; Aaron L. Friedberg, 'The sources of Chinese conduct: Explaining Beijing's assertiveness', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2014, pp. 133-150; Oriana Skylar Mastro, 'Why Chinese assertiveness is here to stay', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2014, pp. 151-170; Andrew Chubb, 'PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Measuring Continuity and Change, 1970-2015', *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 2021, pp. 79-121; Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

43. Björn Jerdén, 'The Assertive China Narrative: Why It Is Wrong and How So Many Still Bought into It', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, Issue 1, Spring 2014, p. 48. For other examples of the minority school see: Yan Xuetong, 'The Instability of China-US Relations', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2010, pp. 263-92; Michael D. Swaine, 'China's Assertive Behaviour: Part One: On «Core Interests»', *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 34, 2010; Michael D. Swaine & M. Taylor Fravel, 'China's Assertive Behaviour: Part Two, The Maritime Periphery', *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 35, 2011; Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Stability and Instability in Sino-US Relations: A Response to Yan Xuetong's Superficial Friendship Theory', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2011, pp. 5-29; Alastair Iain Johnston, 'How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?', *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2013, pp. 35-45; Jonathan Dixon, 'From "Pearls" to "Arrows": Rethinking the "String of Pearls" Theory of China's Naval Ambitions', *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 2014, pp. 389-400; Joshua Shiffrin, 'The rise of China, balance of power theory and US national security: Reasons for optimism?', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 2020, pp. 175-216.

44. Which has been recalled, rather unnecessarily, solely in response to the objections of two anonymous referees.

stantial continuity of Chinese foreign policy before and after the 2008 global financial crisis. Rather, what is important to highlight is two other points: the first is that it is difficult to deny that, as argued in this article and overlooked in much of the literature, the change of India's foreign policy in the 2005-2008 period could not but worry China's policy-makers; the second point – a consequence of the first – is that, given the policy followed by New Delhi, it is equally difficult to deny that a reaction on the part of Beijing was only to be expected, it does not matter whether China maintained its pre-2008 approach to foreign relations or adopted a new, supposedly more aggressive, one.

Taking into account all the above, what is particularly relevant from the standpoint of this article is that, in a period in which – according to the mainstream interpretation – the relations between China and its neighbours were suddenly and conspicuously deteriorating as the necessary result of Beijing's new aggressiveness, Sino-Indian relations followed a visibly different path. They did worsen, but, up to 2013, they worsened in such a limited way that it is possible to claim that such a worsening was of little political significance. One of the contentions of this article is that this did not happen by chance, but was the end-result of both a proactive effort on the part of India and of China's willingness to keep diplomatic and economic channels of communication with India open.

### 3.2.3. *Managing and keeping under control a difficult situation*

In the year 2008-2013, India's policy-makers acted with determination to limit the possible deterioration of the India-China relations by implementing a complex set of strategies. These included keeping open the communication channels with Beijing, through a set of high-level contacts; upholding and expanding the India-China economic connection; trying to find a solution of the unresolved border differences; managing the border incidents which were bound to happen through diplomatic means.<sup>45</sup>

The efforts of India's policy-makers were on the whole successful. Frequent high-level meetings and the signing of a number of agreements did play a role in keeping the situation under control.<sup>46</sup> During the same pe-

45. Mihir Bhonsale, 'Understanding Sino-Indian Border Issues: An Analysis of Incidents Reported in the Indian Media', *ORF Occasional Paper*, No. 143, February 2018, pp. 24-26. See also Isabelle Saint-Mézard, 'The Border Incident of Spring 2013: Interpreting China-India Relations', *Hérodote*, Vol. 50, Issue 3, 2013, pp. 132-149.

46. In fact, during the 2008-2014 period, bilateral high-level meetings were no less than seven. The Indian Prime Minister visited China twice (2008 and 2013) and the Indian President once (2010). China's Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and his successor Li Keqiang reciprocated with two visits to India (2010 and 2013 respectively). Moreover, the Indian Premier met China's President Hu Jintao and his successor Xi Jinping on the side-lines of BRICS summits of 2012 and 2013 respectively, and China's Premier Wen Jiabao on the side-line of the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development.

riod, the confidence-building agreements of 1993, 1996 and 2005, aimed at preventing or managing border crises, were followed by the agreements of 17 January 2012 and 23 October 2013.<sup>47</sup>

While not much of concrete resulted from the high-level meetings, they at least conveyed the impression that the differences between the two countries were not insuperable and that an attempt was being made to find mutually acceptable solutions. Also, the confidence building measures – both those signed before 2008 and those signed afterwards – resulted in speedy and bloodless solutions of the frequent border incidents, most of which due to the undefined and un-demarcated nature of the LAC.<sup>48</sup> Finally, the positive trend in the economic interexchange between the two nations, head started by Indian Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee's visit to Beijing in 2003, did spectacularly improve in the period under review and, in 2009, India-China trade overtook India-US trade in value, which made China India's top trading partner.<sup>49</sup>

No doubt, India's policy-makers were able to manage and limit the deterioration of the relationship with China also because of the willingness, on the part of the Chinese leadership, to accept New Delhi's efforts, despite Beijing's asserted new aggressiveness of its foreign policy.

Once all this has been pointed out, it is also necessary to stress that Indian policy-makers, adhering to the Machiavellian principle that diplomacy must be backed by strength, coupled their diplomatic activism with the judicious strengthening of India's defensive apparatus south of the LAC. In doing this, they continued a policy which had been head-started in 2006, clearly in conjunction with China's rising the Arunachal Pradesh question. Between 2008 and 2013, in the eastern sector of the border, two air bases were restored, two new infantry division were raised, and an attack corps for high altitude combat was trained; in the western sector a series of pre-existing airstrips and surveillance posts were renovated, while important road building projects were completed or begun.<sup>50</sup>

India's activism in building up its defensive apparatus south of the undefined border was seen by some analysts as a move from a purely defen-

47. USIP Senior Study Group, *China's Influence on Conflict Dynamics in South Asia*, Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2020, pp. 36 and 48 (fn. 69).

48. Mihir Bhonsale, 'Understanding Sino-Indian Border Issues: An Analysis of Incidents Reported in the Indian Media'. On the nature of the LAC, see Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2020: Confronting China, aligning with the US', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 384-387.

49. David M. Malone & Rohan Mukherjee, 'India and China: Conflict and Cooperation', p. 144.

50. Isabelle Saint-Mézard, 'The Border Incident of Spring 2013: Interpreting China-India Relations', p. 155, and Manoj Joshi, 'Making sense of the Depsang incursion'.

sive position «to one which could also include offensive action».<sup>51</sup> Be that as it may, India's military strengthening appears to have mainly been aimed to remedy a situation of weakness which could have obstructed New Delhi's pursuit of a satisfactory diplomatic solution of the border dispute.

### 3.2.4. *Skating on very thin ice*

Summing up, in the 2008-2014 period, on the surface the India-China relation appeared to be in a situation of equilibrium. It was, however, a precarious equilibrium, as it was endangered by two basic problems that the diplomatic skills of Indian policy-makers could manage but not solve. In the final analysis, the fundamental cause of the border-related tensions was neither the undefined and un-demarcated nature of the LAC nor India's claim on China-controlled Aksai Chin and China's claim on Arunachal Pradesh, nor China's new assertiveness in foreign policy; rather it was India's increased strategic and military closeness with the US. This explains why India's diplomatic activism aimed at normalising the relation with China had limited and/or ephemeral results. In turn this fed the lingering anti-China bias in the Indian public opinion. It was a bias which had been created by misreading of the causes of the 1962 India-China war, which Indian public, politicians and opinion-makers persisted in seeing as the result of an unmotivated and treacherous attack by China on a country that had always been its friend.<sup>52</sup>

Together with the border problem, there was an additional problem, making a non-confrontational relationship between India and China difficult. It was the increasing India-China competition for the search and exploitation of new sources of energy and the related efforts by New Delhi and Beijing to protect the routes through which foreign-produced energy flowed to India and China respectively. The two countries were competing in much of the Global South, but above all, in Central Asia, in Africa and in the Indian Ocean, with Beijing being, on the whole, more successful than New Delhi.

Particularly worrying from New Delhi's viewpoint, were two aspects of Chinese activism abroad. One was the so-called policy of the «string of

51. As claimed by some Indian analysts. See, e.g., Manoj Joshi, 'Making sense of the Depsang incursion'.

52. Even a cursory examination of the numerous articles published on the subject in the Indian press on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the 1962 war is sufficient to prove the point. See also the articles listed in Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, *India and China: 50 years after 1962*, without date. As far as the causes of the 1962 Sino-Indian war are concerned, the reference work remains Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, Harmondsworth (Middlesex, England): Penguin Books, 1972 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. London: Jonathan Cape, 1970). Of the same author, see also 'Sino-Indian Border Dispute Reconsidered', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, No. 15, 10-16 April 1999, pp. 905-918.



pearls», that is the construction or strengthening of a series of ports in several Indian Ocean littoral or island countries, which, in perspective, could serve as bases for the Chinese fleet, more and more present in the Indian Ocean. The other worrying aspect, from New Delhi's viewpoint, was China's activism in South Asia and not only the tightening of its traditional friendly ties with Pakistan, but the creation of new ones with countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, which New Delhi considered as part of its own political backyard.

Although mainly motivated by the same economic causes which were behind New Delhi's activism in the Global South, in India the policy pursued by China particularly in the Indian Ocean and in South Asia was being read through the lenses of the anti-China bias prevailing in the Indian public opinion. Accordingly, China's activism in the Indian Ocean, and not only there, was read not as aimed at protecting China's crucially important energy and trade routes<sup>53</sup> but as an expression of a long-term and blatant aggressive *political* strategy aimed at encircling India. Also, most Indian commentators and Indian public opinion at large showed the tendency to see Indian activism in Asia and Africa as also or mainly aimed at *containing* Chinese presence in the countries with which Delhi had established or was establishing a strong relationship of political and economic cooperation.

By the end of the period under review, a third problem was taking shape and making India-China relations even more difficult. This was the emergence of Xi Jinping as the new Chinese leader, which strengthened the new assertiveness which had come to increasingly characterize China's foreign policy since 2008. Part of this increasing assertiveness was Beijing's «uncompromising [standing] on the issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity», which brought about a worsening of China's relations with Vietnam, the Philippines and Japan.<sup>54</sup>

As noted above, China's new assertiveness had been successfully managed by India's policy makers. But at the end of the period discussed here and coinciding with Xi Jinping's rise to power, China's new assertiveness was the most probable cause of the only major border incident in the period under review. This was the three-week standoff in Daulat Beg Oldi, in the Aksai Chin area in April-May 2013. The standoff was provoked by a

53. Still in 2020, some 80% of China's trade passes through the Malacca Straits into the Indian Ocean. See, e.g., Navya Mudunuri, 'The Malacca Dilemma and Chinese Ambitions: Two Sides of a Coin', *The Diplomatist*, 7 July 2020; Gravitas desk, 'China's Malacca dilemma: How India controls Indian Ocean chokepoints', *Wion*, 19 November 2020; Paweł Paszak, 'China and the «Malacca Dilemma»', *China Monitor (Warsaw Institute)*, 28 February 2021.

54. Jayadeva Ranada, 'Looking Beyond Border Incursions & Li Keqiang's Visit', *IPCS*, Issue Brief # 241, August 2013, p. 3. See also Vijay Gokhale, 'The Road from Galwan: The Future of India-China Relations', *Carnegie India, Working Paper*, March 2021, p. 6.

platoon-strength contingent of the PLA moving some 10 kilometres inside what, according to the Indian conception of the LAC, was Indian territory and setting up a tented post there. The PLA contingent, which was soon faced by the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, later strengthened by an Indian army detachment, only vacated the area after high level consultations involving representatives of the two governments.<sup>55</sup>

Although «provocative»,<sup>56</sup> the incident was not aimed at starting a military confrontation with India: as noted by an Indian analyst, «the equipment carried by the PLA troops involved in this act did not point to any military intent».<sup>57</sup> In fact, the border incident of April-May 2013, if analysed in conjunction with China President Xi Jinping's statement in Durban on 29 March 2013, pointing out that the China-India border issue was to be solved «as soon as possible»,<sup>58</sup> appeared to signal Beijing's new urge in head-starting a new round of negotiation with India. In fact, a few months later, namely at the end of October, India and China signed an agreement on border defence cooperation, aimed both at preventing incidents and at streamlining channels of communication between the two sides, to prevent possible incidents from going out of hand.<sup>59</sup> It is possible that Beijing was aiming at a much more comprehensive pact. This, however, did not come to pass: the Manmohan Singh-headed, Congress-dominated Indian government was on its last legs, with the electoral campaign for the general election already in full swing and the possibility for the Congress to emerge from it victorious very tenuous indeed.

Once all the above has been noted, it must be stressed that, up to the end of the period under review, namely as long as the Manmohan Singh-headed and Congress-dominated government was in power, neither the anti-China bias, so present in India's public opinion and in most Indian political commentators, nor China's new assertiveness towards its neighbours deterred India's policy-makers from pursuing a prudent engagement policy towards China. Things, nonetheless, drastically changed after the 2014 general election, which saw the ascent to power of a new government.

55. Mihir Bhonsale, 'Understanding Sino-Indian Border Issues: An Analysis of Incidents Reported in the Indian Media', pp. 19-20.

56. Manoj Joshi, 'Making sense of the Depsang incursion', *The Hindu*, 7 May 2013.

57. Jayadeva Ranada, 'Looking Beyond Border Incursions & Li Keqiang's Visit', p. 5.

58. Mihir Bhonsale, 'Understanding Sino-Indian Border Issues', p. 14.

59. Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, *Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Border Defence Cooperation*, 23 October 2013.

#### 4. *Willingly losing the balance: India's relations with the US and China since 2014*

The 2014 Indian general election saw the massive defeat of the parties previously in power and the victory of the rightist coalition dominated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and led by Narendra Modi. One of the reasons which made this election remarkable was that, for the first time after exactly 20 years, one party, the BJP, won the absolute majority of seats in parliament. To a large extent, this achievement was the work of its leader, Narendra Modi, who came to power surrounded by an aura of exceptionalism and invincibility. Since the first days of his premiership, Modi appeared bent to confirm this aura of exceptionalism and invincibility by rapidly implementing a set of policies aimed at showing that things in India had radically and qualitatively changed for the better. The activism of the new Indian leader was particularly pronounced in the economic field and, even more, in that of foreign relations.

While there are several, as a rule admiring, assessments related to a supposed «Modi Doctrine» in the field of international relations,<sup>60</sup> it is a fact that no «Modi Doctrine» has ever been systematically articulated either in any written document or in one or more public speeches. Of course, Modi's public speeches and statements related to India's foreign policy are several; nonetheless they do not amount to anything similar to a coherent and well-articulated doctrine of foreign relations. On the other hand, Modi's actions speak higher than any written document as far as his vision of the international relations is concerned.

No doubt, not differently from his predecessor, Modi's main political objective was to make India an internationally recognised major power. Again, not differently from his predecessor, and as clearly revealed by his actions from the very beginning of his term as prime minister, Modi thought that, in order to reach this goal, the support of the US was indispensable at both the economic and the strategic/military level. Here the main difference with Manmohan Singh – which is partly explainable by the US foreign policy under Trump (on which more later) – was that Modi progressively deemphasized the pursuit of the economic support from the US in favour of the quest for Washington's backing in the strategic/military field.

This is an aspect of the Modi foreign policy which is clear to everybody and has been continuously analysed and commented upon. But there is a second aspect of Modi's foreign policy, less emphasised but hardly less

60. E.g., Anirban Ganguly, Vijay Chauthaiwale & Uttam Kumar Sinha (eds.), *The Modi Doctrine: New Paradigms In India's Foreign Policy*, New Delhi: Wisdom Tree, in association with, Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation, 2016; Sreeram Chaulia, *Modi Doctrine: The Foreign Policy of India's Prime Minister*, New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2016. For a more critical evaluation, see Ian Hall, *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*, Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2019.

important. This second aspect is based on the idea that India's status as an internationally acknowledged major power could be conclusively validated only by India's ability to confront China on an equal footing. In fact, accepting, even implicitly, a subordinate position vis-à-vis China would mean acknowledging that India's position as a major power was devoid of any concrete content.

The China aspect of Modi's foreign policy has usually been seen as of secondary importance when compared to his US policy, and has often been explained as a series of ad hoc reactive moves to China aggressiveness. Nonetheless, it is possible to argue that it is the relationship with China that is central in Modi's foreign policy and that even his US policy is largely subordinate to the need to provide India with the economic and military resources necessary to counter China.

Two main ideas stem from the assumption that India is and must be acknowledged as on equal footing with China. The first is the idea that, while the economic connection with China may be useful (as shown by the Gujarat-China relations when Modi was chief minister of that state), it must take place inside a political frame based on the equality between the two nations. The second idea – in a way a consequence of the first – is that any Chinese move – economic, strategic, military or otherwise – which potentially translates into the growth of Chinese power world-wide must be resisted. In turn this assumption and its two corollaries are the basis for the China policy initially pursued by Narendra Modi. Such policy was articulated in the simultaneous implementation of two different strategies: one was China's (economic) engagement; the other her (strategic/military) containment. It is worth stressing, however, that the engagement element was structurally subordinate to the containment strategy.<sup>61</sup>

Modi's China policy nicely dovetailed with the China policy followed by the US since the Obama presidency. Nonetheless it is important to call attention to the fact that Modi's anti-China approach was not the result of any subordination to US policy. Rather it was an integral part of Modi's own Weltanschauung.

Before proceeding to analyse India's foreign policy under Modi two points must be made. The first is that one may or may not agree with the correctness in principle of India's objective to be recognised as an equal power by China. What cannot be denied, however, is the profoundly unrealistic nature of the idea. China's nominal GDP is 5.46 times higher than that of India;<sup>62</sup> the difference is somewhat reduced if the GDPs of the two countries are compared on the basis of purchasing power parity (PPP) data,

61. For a similar conclusion, reached by its author through a completely different methodological approach, see Rajesh Rajagopalan, 'Evasive balancing: India's unviable Indo-Pacific strategy', *International Affairs*, Vol. 96, Issue 1, January 2020, pp. 75–93.

62. 'Comparing China and India by Economy, *Statistics Times*, 16 May 2021.

yet China's GDP remains little less than three times of that of India;<sup>63</sup> China's economic growth has been faster than that of India;<sup>64</sup> China is more technologically advanced than India;<sup>65</sup> China's armed forces are qualitatively and quantitatively superior to those of India;<sup>66</sup> the level of literacy of China's population is massively superior to that of India (93,3% and 66% respectively);<sup>67</sup> finally, there are very few possibilities that this situation will change in the foreseeable future.<sup>68</sup> In the last analysis, the only sector in which India will best China in a foreseeable future is that of the demographic size of their populations. In fact, all statistical projections indicate that India's population will soon outnumber China's.<sup>69</sup> This solitary victory, nonetheless, will be a Pyrrhic one; in fact, the power given by superior numbers will be sapped by the ratio of wasted and stunted people which malnutrition causes in India,<sup>70</sup> together with India's persisting lower educational level vis-à-vis that of China.

63. The World Bank, *GDP PPP (constant 2017 international \$)*. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.PP.KD?locations=IN>.

64. Vasil Gechev, *China & India: A Comparison of Economic Growth Dynamics (1980-2018)* (April 17, 2020). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3578163> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3578163>.

65. Ji Xianbai & Ying Pei, 'Is India losing the tech race to China?', *Gateway House*, 16 January 2015.

66. This is the necessary result of the fact that China's defence budget is nearly four times that of India. See Srijan Shukla, 'How India and China stack up in terms of military capability', *The Print*, 18 June, 2020, and 'Military Spending in Southern Asia', SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, 2020. See also: 'Military power of India & China', *ArmedForces.eu* ([https://armedforces.eu/compare/country\\_india\\_vs\\_china](https://armedforces.eu/compare/country_india_vs_china)); 'Comparison of India and China Military Strengths (2021)', *Global Firepower* (<https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-comparison-detail.php?country1=india&country2=china>).

67. 'Education > Literacy Stats: compare key data on China & India', *NationMaster* (<https://www.nationmaster.com/country-info/compare/China/India/Education/Literacy>).

68. Even a recent and most optimistic forecast, which (unrealistically) assumes that while China's GDP will slow down at 5% a year, India's will speed up at 8%, cannot but conclude that in 2047 India's GDP will still be only three quarters of China's. See Gautam Bambawale *et al.*, 'Strategic patience and flexible policies: How India can rise to the China challenge', *xKDR Forum*, Working Papers, No. 2, p. 25. These rather dismal conclusions are read by the Indian press as indicating that «there are possibilities for India to achieve extremely rapid growth over the next 20 years or so that will allow it to compete directly with its giant northern neighbour». See, 'India capable of achieving growth and compete with China in 20 years: Report', *Livemint*, 23 March 2021.

69. E.g., Hannah Ritchie, 'India will soon overtake China to become the most populous country in the world', *Our World in Data*, 16 April 2019 (Updated on 30 April 2020).

70. Diego Maiorano & James Manor, 'Poverty reduction, inequalities and human development in the BRICS: policies and outcomes', *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, Vol. 55 No. 3, 2017, pp. 278-302; James Chiriyankandath *et al.*, *The Politics of Poverty Reduction in India: The UPA Government, 2004-14*, Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2020.

The second point that must be emphasised is that, in his pursuit of major power status for India, Modi willingly distanced himself from the cautious policy followed by his predecessors. As already noted, Modi's policy towards China, although not devoid of an engagement element, was coupled, since its beginning, by a confrontational aspect which Modi's predecessors had avoided. In the course of time, the containment aspect of India's China policy became dominant. In turn, the necessity to confront a hugely more powerful adversary pushed Modi to accept an ever-closer strategic embrace with the US. As noted above, it was that same close strategic embrace which his predecessors had avoided for fear of endangering India's strategic autonomy.

Before Modi, India had successfully performed a difficult balancing act, without losing her balance. Modi, on his part, decried this balancing act as a show of weakness and willingly discarded it.

#### 4.1. *India's relations with China from 2014 to August 2017*

##### 4.1.1. *Setting the guidelines*

Modi was a nationalist, although a Hindu nationalist rather than an Indian one.<sup>71</sup> As such, during the electoral campaign which opened his way to the prime ministership, when speaking in Arunachal Pradesh (on 22 February 2014), Modi attacked the Chinese claims on Arunachal Pradesh and asked China to «shed its expansionist mindset».<sup>72</sup> The Chinese government and newspapers, nonetheless, not only downplayed Modi's remarks,<sup>73</sup> but, once he became India's new prime minister, hailed him as a politician whose «functioning style is similar to that of the Chinese», and hoped that Modi, by playing a role analogous to that of another rightist politician, US President Richard Nixon, would radically improve India-China relations.<sup>74</sup> This hope was based on the fact that, during Modi's chief ministership of Gujarat (2001-2014), the economic relations between that Indian state and China had boomed. Also, during the same period, Modi, while unable to get visa permissions from the major Western countries because of his controversial

71. According to the Hindutva ideology espoused by Modi, the only true Indians are the Hindus, including those who profess a religion that Hindus consider as part of Hinduism (such as Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists, in spite of the fact that members of such religions do not generally consider themselves Hindus). All others – such as Muslims, Christians and atheists – are considered, at best, second class citizens.

72. 'China should shed expansionist mindset: Modi', *The Hindu*, 22 February 2014.

73. 'Chinese media downplays Modi's remark on Arunachal', *Hindustan Times*, 26 February 2014.

74. M.K. Bhadrakumar, 'Himalayan handshake for India's Modi', *Asia Times*, 5 June 2014.

role in the Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom of 2002, had been able to visit China several times, always receiving red carpet treatment from the Chinese authorities.

No doubt, the China leadership appeared eager to build a friendly relationship with the new Indian Prime Minister. His Chinese counterpart, Li Keqiang was the first head of government to phone Modi (within three days of his victory) to congratulate him on his victory. This was followed by a two-day visit in New Delhi (8–9 June 2014) of China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, aimed at preparing for the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping.<sup>75</sup> While, however, the Chinese appeared in a hurry to arrange a bilateral meeting, the Indians took their time. As a result, Xi Jinping's visit to India was planned for mid-September, namely later than desired by China.<sup>76</sup>

Meanwhile, and before Xi Jinping's visit took place, it became visible that China's hopes about Modi were misplaced. The signals from the new Indian Prime Minister that the relationship with China would be framed in a series of strict conditionalities multiplied. The first was the induction in the new government of two well-known anti-China hawks: former general V.K. Singh, who was put in charge of Arunachal Pradesh as minister of State (independent charge) for the North East Region, and former master spy Ajit Doval, who was chosen as National Security Advisor.<sup>77</sup> A second signal was the absolutely unprecedented invitation of Lobsang Sangay, prime minister of the Tibetan government-in-exile, to the new Indian government swearing-in ceremony. Soon after, the new Indian Premier visited Bhutan, Nepal and Japan and received in New Delhi Australia's Prime Minister Tony Abbot. All these diplomatic contacts, while aimed at strengthening India's economic relations with those countries, had an unmistakable anti-China dimension. In a way, since the beginning, Modi appeared to be bent on building India's own anti-China arc of containment. This was part of Modi's China policy, which, as argued above, was based on both engagement and containment. Modi intended to negotiate an expansion of the economic connection with China, but planned to do so from a position of strength. Hence his contacts with Bhutan, Nepal, Japan and Australia, which, after Xi's visit, were followed by the relaunch of India's connection with the US and by Modi's visits to Vietnam and Mongolia. The visit to Vietnam was aimed at strengthening the already existing relationship, particularly at the

75. Jayadeva Ranade, 'Fresh overtures – Chinese Foreign Minister's India visit', *Centre for China Analysis & Strategy*, 11 June 2014; 'China: Foreign Minister's India trip has «great significance»', *The Diplomat*, 11 June 2014.

76. R. Hariharan, 'Strategising India's foreign policy', *Chennai Centre for China Studies*, 2 December 2014.

77. M. K. Bhadrakumar, 'Himalayan handshake for India's Modi'.

military level, with an adversary of China;<sup>78</sup> the visit to Mongolia aimed at establishing some kind of connection with a country which was afraid of Chinese influence.

Xi's India maiden visit, which initiated in an atmosphere of cordiality, saw the signing of a set of potentially important economic pacts. Things, however, took a sudden turn for the worse when, on the evening of 18 September 2014, namely the second day of Xi's visit, the news came that a detachment of some 1000 Chinese military had intruded into the Indian side of the LAC. The atmosphere of Xi's visit turned icy, and, significantly, it was concluded by two separate final communiqués, rather than a joint one.<sup>79</sup>

#### 4.1.2. *From engagement to containment*

The September 2014 border incident, which marred Xi's supposed «landmark visit»<sup>80</sup> to India, perplexed many commentators at the time and has left a question mark about its causes.<sup>81</sup> In the final analysis, however, only two explanations are possible: the first is that the incident happened because of the initiative of some local commander, who acted without the knowledge of the Chinese government; the second is that the incident was Beijing's warning to New Delhi that any anti-China containment policy – either independently pursued or implemented in agreement with the US – would be countered by putting pressure on the India-China border.

If, however, the goal of the incident was to dissuade India from pursuing an anti-China containment policy, it did not reach any result. As already noted, after Xi's visit, Modi continued to implement his containment policy towards China, relaunching the connection with the US and trying to strengthen India's connections with Vietnam and Mongolia. Nevertheless, he also went on with his engagement policy, which took the shape of a series of further meetings with the Chinese President, either during official visits or on the side-lines of international meetings.<sup>82</sup> Beginning in 2016, nonethe-

78. The India-Vietnam relationship is often seen as analogous to the China-Pakistan one. See, e.g., Aditi Malhotra, 'Indo-Vietnam Relations: An Answer to Sino-Pak Partnership?', *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, Vol. 8, Part 1, pp. 71-92.

79. Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2014: the annihilation of the Congress Party and the beginning of the Modi era', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXV/2014, pp. 319-320.

80. Srinivas Mazumdaru, 'Xi Jinping's landmark visit to India', *Deutsche Welle*, 19 September 2014.

81. According to some commentators, the incident had been caused by members of the Chinese military apex, who opposed a rapprochement with India. See, e.g., Eric Meyer, 'Who sabotaged Chinese President Xi Jinping's India visit?', *Forbes*, 23 September 2014.

82. See, e.g., 'PM Modi's meetings with China's Xi Jinping: A timeline', *The Times of India*, 28 June 2018; 'Despite Modi's 5 China trips & 18 meetings with Xi, Sino-Indian border dispute escalates', *Manorama Online*, 17 June 2020



less, the containment aspect of Modi's China policy became dominant, relegating to a secondary role the engagement aspect. This turning point was determined by Modi's evaluation of Xi Jinping's global infrastructure development strategy abroad as a clear and present political danger for India.

China's global infrastructure development strategy abroad – originally dubbed, in English, OBOR («One Belt, One Road) and then BRI (Belt and Road Initiative)<sup>83</sup> – had been strongly advocated by Xi Jinping and had become the centrepiece of China's foreign policy since 2013. This policy responded to a series of economic and strategic needs. From an economic standpoint, the project allowed China to employ abroad massive reserves of capital which could not be absorbed by China's internal market. From a strategic viewpoint, the building of traditional and novel infrastructures connecting China to the remainder of Eurasia aimed at opening a series of communication routes which, differently from the sea routes through which China exported most of its goods and received most of its energy supplies, were, if not beyond the military reach of the US and its allies, much more difficult to sever.<sup>84</sup>

As already noted, India's public opinion and policy-makers had the tendency to view any activity abroad on the part of China – economic or otherwise – as politically motivated and, more often than not, aimed at damaging or containing India. In relation to the BRI, this kind of perception solidified in 2015 and 2016, when it became clear that a key part of it was the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Launched in April 2015, the CPEC consisted in a series of highways, railways and energy ventures connecting Western China to the Pakistani China-developed Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea. India justified its total opposition to CPEC by claiming that it was in violation of India's sovereignty as it passed through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), namely a territory that New Delhi claimed as its own, accusing Pakistan to have illegally occupied it (in 1947).<sup>85</sup> In fact, what irked India was the increase in power

83. On the reasons why the English denomination of the project was changed (in 2016) from OBOR to BRI, see, e.g., Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 'BRI Instead of OBOR – China Edits the English Name of its Most Ambitious International Project', *Latvian Institute of International Affairs*, 28 July 2016. In Chinese, the name of the initiative has not been changed.

84. Francesca Congiu, 'China 2015: Implementing the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Maritime Silk Road', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXVI/2015, pp. 19-52. The literature on the OBOR/BRI is simply too extensive to be quoted here with any exhaustiveness. For a recent and very perceptive contribution see Mark Beeson & Corey Crawford, 'Putting the BRI in Perspective: History, Hegemony and Geo-economics', *Chinese Political Science Review*, February 2022 (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-022-00210-y>).

85. The best treatment of the origin of the Kashmir issue remains Victoria Schofield, *Kashmir in Conflict. India, Pakistan and the Unfinished War*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2000, chapters 2 and 3.

that the project would grant to Pakistan, a nation which New Delhi regarded as its direct adversary in South Asia.<sup>86</sup>

At that point, India's opposition not only to the CEPC but to the whole BRI became unremitting. China's successive offers to India to join the BRI, which would have resulted in massive injections of Chinese capital in the Indian economy and allowed New Delhi to remedy India's dramatic shortcomings in its infrastructure sector were all turned down.

India's all-out opposition to the BRI was highlighted by its decision not to join the two-day BRI forum held in Beijing on 14-15 May 2017, India being one of the very few Asian countries which made this choice.<sup>87</sup> India's absence at the BRI forum was closely followed by the launching in Gandhinagar (Gujarat) of the Japan-India jointly sponsored Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). The AAGC was technically similar to the BRI and focused on geographical areas overlapping those involved in the Chinese initiative. Although, to a large extent, the AAGC did not generate any concrete results, India's will to challenge China at the economic level had become evident.<sup>88</sup>

#### 4.1.3. *Upping the ante: challenging China at Doklam*

The fact that India had now embarked in a proactive containment policy aimed at China was further highlighted on the occasion of the Doklam crisis in summer 2017. Doklam or Dong Lang is a territory disputed between Bhutan and China, clearly positioned north of the LAC, which, only in this sector – namely the central sector – has been clarified by the exchange of maps between China and India. India responded to the news that the Chinese People Liberation Army (PLA) had entered the area and was building a road by sending its own troops there, to prevent the PLA from continuing its work.

86. It is worth pointing out that the CPEC is supposed to go through Gilgit-Baltistan, namely an area that was only partly included in the principality of Kashmir, of which India is the heir. See, e.g., Adnan Aamir, 'India's opposition to CPEC on shaky ground', *Asia Times*, 1 April 2020. This, in itself, is an indication of the speciousness of India's official reason for opposing CPEC. On India's opposition to the CPEC, see: B.M. Jain, *South Asia Conundrum. The Great Power Gambit*, London: Lexington Books, 2019; Filippo Boni, 'India's responses to the Belt and Road Initiative: a case study of Indo-Pakistani relations', in Silvio Beretta, Giuseppe Iannini & Axel Berkofsky (eds), *India's Foreign and Security Policies. Friends, Foes and Enemies*.

87. 'Belt and Road Attendees List', *The Diplomat*, 12 May 2017. On the official reasons of India's absence, see 'Official Spokesperson's response to a query on participation of India in OBOR/BRI Forum', *Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs*, 13 May 2017.

88. Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2017: Narendra Modi's continuing hegemony and his challenge to China', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXVIII/2017, p. 285.

India stated that its move had been made in consultation with the Royal Government of Bhutan. It is a fact, nonetheless, that Thimphu exhibited very little enthusiasm for New Delhi's intervention.<sup>89</sup>

India's troops crossed the LAC and entered Doklam on 16 June 2017; a standoff followed, which ended only on 28 August 2017, when the troops of both countries left the area, bringing an end to China's attempt to build a road there.<sup>90</sup>

This was seen as a major victory for India by many observers. India's victory, however, was limited: Chinese troops remained present on the reverse slope of Doklam Plateau.<sup>91</sup> In the following months they went on building new infrastructures in that area, «slowly but steadily gaining advantage in the contested region».<sup>92</sup> At the beginning of 2019, reports based on satellite images pointed out that China was deploying additional forces near the plateau and constructing paved areas for parking heavy vehicles. One of these hard-standings could possibly be a heliport.<sup>93</sup>

If the military result of the Doklam standoff is disputed, its political significance is crystal-clear: the Doklam confrontation was the incontrovertible demonstration of India's willingness to oppose China also militarily.

#### 4.2. *India's relations with the US from 2014 to the end of the Trump presidency*

While setting in place his containment/engagement China policy, Narendra Modi launched his US policy. This was initially focussed on getting the support of the US, but most particularly that of the US business community, in enhancing and accelerating India's economic development. During the remainder of the Obama presidency, namely up to 20 January 2017, this strategy, although not devoid of some results, was far from meeting the rosy expectations initially held by both the Indian Premier and the US business community. On the top of it, once Donald Trump succeeded Obama, the India-US economic connection became decidedly more difficult, as a result of the new president's «America First» policy, which eventually

89. *Ibid.*, pp. 287; Jeremy Luedi, 'Doklam Standoff Highlights India and China's «Great Game» over Bhutan', *Foreign Policy Association*, 11 September 2017; Joel Wuthnow, Satu Limaye & Nilanthi Samaranyake, 'Doklam, One Year Later: China's Long Game in the Himalayas', *War on the Rocks*, 7 June 2018.

90. Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2017: Narendra Modi's continuing hegemony and his challenge to China', pp. 285-288.

91. Col. Vinayak Bhat (ret'd), 'China has quietly altered its boundary with Bhutan after Doklam stand-off with India', *The Print*, 8 October 2018.

92. Joel Wuthnow, Satu Limaye & Nilanthi Samaranyake, 'Doklam, One Year Later: China's Long Game in the Himalayas'.

93. Col. Vinayak Bhat (ret'd.), 'Near Doklam, China is again increasing forces, building roads & even a possible heliport', *The Print*, 2 April, 2019.

resulted in a «mini trade-war».<sup>94</sup> These economic difficulties, however, appeared to be compensated by the enhancement of the India-US strategic connection. The result was that, in the years of the Trump presidency, the mainstay of the India-US connection decidedly shifted from being based on the economy to being grounded on an increasingly close strategic-military dimension.<sup>95</sup>

#### 4.2.1. *India's relations with the US from 2014 to the end of the Obama presidency*

US President Barack Obama, while unambiguously interested in promoting the economic connection with India, was as unambiguously decided to induce India to align itself more closely to the US strategy aimed to contain China. This resulted not only in the renewal, in June 2015, of the 10-year US-India defence framework, originally signed in 2005, but in enhanced US pressure on India to sign a series of three bilateral military pacts. These pacts, which Washington described as «foundational», would concretely flesh out the military cooperation envisaged in the US-India defence framework. They were the same pacts which the Manmohan Singh's government had avoided to ink, because of fears that they would result in the US capability to influence the functioning of the Indian armed forces.

Eventually, US pressure resulted in the signing, in April 2016, of the first – and the least controversial – of the three pacts: the Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement or LEMOA.<sup>96</sup> Yet, still at the end of the Obama presidency, the other two «foundational» pacts remained unsigned.

#### 4.2.2. *India's relations with the US during the Trump presidency*

In essence, as long as Obama was the US president, India's US policy under Modi changed less in its substance than in the rhetorical hype with which it was presented. The real change occurred as soon as Trump succeeded Obama: while the economic connection was put under pressure by Trump's «America First» approach, the strategic one rapidly became dominant.

94. Chad P. Bown, 'Trump's Mini-Trade War with India', *Peterson Institute for International Economics*, 8 July 2019

95. Michelguglielmo Torri, *India's US policy 1991-2014: the gradual loss of strategic autonomy*, Silvio Beretta, Giuseppe Iannini & Axel Berkofsky (eds), *India's Foreign and Security Policies. Friends, Foes and Enemies*.

96. The LEMOA gave «access, to both countries, to designated military facilities on either side for the purpose of refuelling and replenishment». 'What is LEMOA?', *The Hindu*, 30 August 2016. The agreement was advantageous for the US, particularly its navy and air force, which could make use of Indian facilities to control the Indian Ocean. What were the possible advantages for India remained a question mark. On the signing of the LEMOA, see Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2016: Reforming the Economy and Tightening the Connection with the US', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXVII/2016, pp. 341, 344.

On 26 January 2017, namely a few days after Trump's entry into the White House, there was a telephone conversation between Modi and the US President. In it, the Indian Premier and the US President decided to strengthen the US-India military cooperation «across the Indo-Pacific region».<sup>97</sup> This found expression in India's role in the resurrection of the Quad, namely a de facto anti-China alliance in progress whose most important member was the US, in the launching of a «2+2» US-India ministerial dialogue involving the respective foreign and defence ministers and, last but not least, in India finally inking the remaining two «foundational pacts», fleshing out India-US military cooperation.

#### 4.2.2.1. *The resurrection of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue*

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or QSD, or Quad – officially an informal strategic forum including the US, India, Japan and Australia – had originally been launched in 2007. De facto, the Quad was an anti-China alliance in progress, whose military arm was represented by a greatly expanded Exercise Malabar. In 2007, in conjunction with the launching of the Quad, Exercise Malabar – which had been born in 1992 as an annual bilateral naval India-US exercise – was spectacularly expanded to include Australia, Japan and Singapore.<sup>98</sup>

Not surprisingly, the launching of the Quad greatly alarmed China, which issued formal diplomatic protests to the Quad member states. The result was the Quad's sudden demise in 2008 and the reduction of Exercise Malabar to its original bilateral format. This is not the place for an in-depth analysis of the reasons of this development; it suffices to point out that New Delhi's decision was coherent with its 2005-2008 policy, discussed above, aimed at expanding the relation with the US while striving to prevent the relation with China from becoming openly conflictual.

That was the situation in 2007. Ten years later, the circumstances had changed. As a result, India took part in the resurrection of the Quad on 11 November 2017. As had been the case in 2007, the rather undefined finalities of the new Quad could not conceal its status as an alliance in progress, aimed at containing China. Even before the Quad's revival,

97. Deepal Jayasekera & Keith Jones, 'Amid India-China war crisis, Washington boosts strategic ties with New Delhi', *World Socialist Web Site*, 19 August 2017.

98. On Exercise Malabar see, e.g.: Gurpreet S. Khurana, 'Joint Naval Exercises: A Post-Malabar-2007 Appraisal for India', *IPCS Issue Brief*, No. 52, September 2007; Waqar-un-Nisa, 'Indo-US Naval Cooperation: Geo-Strategic Ramifications for the Region', *Policy Perspectives*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2019, pp. 41-59; Sumit Ganguly & M. Chris Mason, *An Unnatural Partnership? The Future of U.S.-India Strategic Cooperation*, Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, May 2019. See also the two useful Exercise Malabar-related histograms included in Giulio Pugliese, 'Il Dialogo di Sicurezza Quadrilaterale nell'Indo-Pacifico (The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in the Indo-Pacific)', *Osservatorio di Politica internazionale*, No. XVII, 2021, pp. 42, 43.

in 2016, Exercise Malabar had been expanded to include Japan. In the following years, the yearly naval exercises involving the three countries became increasingly massive, although without ever getting to the size reached in 2007.<sup>99</sup>

#### 4.2.2.2. *The «2+2» India-US dialogue and the signing of the «foundational pacts»*

India's march towards an ever closer and more structured US-centred anti-China alliance was however slowed down by two developments. One was that, rather unexpectedly, in the closing months of 2017, immediately after the end of the Doklam confrontation, China made a series of de-escalating moves towards India, aimed at trying to overcome her opposition to the BRI. In 2018, these moves dovetailed with the increasing difficulties inflicted on the India-US connection by Donald Trump's «America First» policy and resulted in a distinctive thaw in the India-China relationship, which was highlighted by the Modi-Xi meeting at Wuhan (27-28 April 2018).

The US countered this thawing in the India-China relations by promoting the «2+2» US-India dialogue and by opening the possibility for India to accede to high-technology US products, especially in the defence and civil space sectors.

The launching of the «2+2» ministerial dialogue had been decided during that same Trump-Modi telephone conversation of 26 January 2017 above alluded to, and its maiden meeting had been scheduled in May 2018. However, just after the Wuhan Modi-Xi meeting the US decided to put on hold the first session of the 2+2 dialogue. Washington, in order to reschedule the meeting, demanded New Delhi's assurance that it would sign at least the second «foundational» agreement. It was only when this assurance was given that the first «2+2» ministerial meeting was rescheduled on 6 September 2018.<sup>100</sup>

The meeting, held in New Delhi, was accompanied by the signing of the second foundational agreement, the Communications Compatibility

99. On the history of the Quad, see Tanvi Madan, 'The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the «Quad»', *War on the Rocks*, 16 November 2017; Rahul Roy-Chaudhury & Kate Sullivan de Estrada, 'India, the Indo-Pacific and the Quad', *Survival*, Vol. 60, No. 3, June-July 2018, pp. 181-94; Kevin Rudd, 'The Convenient Rewriting of the History of the «Quad»', *Nikkei Asia*, 26 March 2019; Patrick Gerard Buchan & Benjamin Rimland, 'Defining the Diamond: The Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue', *CSIS Briefs*, March 2020; Giulio Pugliese & Sebastian Maslow, 'Japan 2018: Fleshing out the «Free and Open Indo-Pacific» strategic vision', *Asia Maior* Vol. 29, 2019, pp. 101-128; Giulio Pugliese, 'Japan 2015: Confronting East Asia's Geopolitical Game of Go', *Asia Maior* vol. 26, 2015, pp. 93-132.

100. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2018: The resetting of New Delhi's foreign policy?', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXIX/2018, pp. 295-319.

and Security Agreement (COMCASA)<sup>101</sup> and was preceded (on 3 August 2018) by the US granting Strategic Trade Authorization-1 (STA-1) status to India. This was a status that opened the possibility for India to buy previously forbidden high-technology, dual-use US products in the defence and civil space sectors. Significantly, only two other Asian countries, both close US allies, namely Japan and South Korea, had previously been admitted to enjoy the STA-1 status.

The granting of the STA-1 status, the signing of the second foundational pact and the start of the «2+2» dialogue were expected to result in a major increase in India's purchase of state-of-the-art high-technology weapons and weapon systems. More importantly, these three developments, which took place in the short span of time of some five weeks, brought the US-India strategic connection to a new, higher and closer level.

Up to the time in which these lines are written (November 2021), the first 2+2 dialogue has been followed by two further sessions: the first in Washington, on 18 December 2019, and the second in Delhi, on 27 October 2020. The 18 December 2019 session was preceded and accompanied by the signing of a set of agreements enhancing security and defence cooperation between the two countries; in particular, the 27 October 2020 session saw the signing of third and final foundational agreement, the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for geo-spatial co-ordination, or BECA.<sup>102</sup> Summing up, by the close of the Trump presidency there was little doubt that a de facto military alliance in all but name had been forged

101. COMCASA aimed at facilitating interoperability between US's and India's militaries by supplying the latter with transfer-specialised equipment for encrypted communications for US origin military platforms like the C-17, C-130 and P-8Is. See 'What is COMCASA?', *The Hindu*, 6 September 2018. The problem with COMCASA was that it opened the possibility that the US could illegitimately acquire highly confidential data on the working of India's defence and intelligence apparatuses both thanks to the possibility for the US, included in the COMCASA, to carry out intrusive inspections in India's apparatuses or by Trojan horses included in the US-supplied equipment. See Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2018: The resetting of New Delhi's foreign policy?', pp. 306-307. For a detailed analysis of the potential risks for India's defence apparatuses caused by joining COMCASA see Pravin Sawhney, 'Why India's Latest Defence Agreement with the United States May Prove a Costly Bargain', *The Wire*, 27 October 2020.

102. BECA allowed India to use US geospatial intelligence and enhance accuracy of automated systems and weapons like missiles and armed drones. It gave access to topographical and aeronautical data and advanced products aimed at aiding navigation and targeting. It also allowed sharing of high-end satellite images, telephone intercepts, and data exchange on Chinese troops and weapons deployment along the LAC. '2+2 dialogue: India, US sign crucial agreement on geo-spatial intelligence', *The Indian Express*, 27 October 2020. See also 'Explained: BECA, and the importance of 3 foundational pacts of India-US defence cooperation', *The Indian Express*, 3 November 2020. Of course, the problem with BECA was that it made the Indian military heavily dependent upon US-supplied information, whose trustworthiness could not be verified.

between India and the US. Likewise, there is little doubt that this alliance was aimed against China.

#### 4.3. *The India-China crisis of 2020*

Already at the time of the second session of the 2+2 dialogue, namely at the end of 2019, it became clear that a de facto anti-China military alliance between the US and India was taking shape.<sup>103</sup> Also, that same year, there was another development in India which, although apparently of domestic relevance only, could not fail to arouse concern in Beijing. This was the dismantling of the Jammu & Kashmir state, and the assumption of direct management of that area on the part of the Indian central government through the creation of two union territories: the union territory of Jammu & Kashmir and the union territory of Ladakh.

Even when an Indian union territory has an elected legislative assembly, the final power is not in the hands of the chief minister, expression of the majority in the legislative assembly, but of the lieutenant governor. The latter is an official formally chosen by the president of India, which means that the governor is an appointee of the central government, to which he or she is responsible and on behalf of which he or she acts. In the case of the newly created union territory of Ladakh, the governor's powers were not even affected by the presence of a legislative assembly elected by the local population, as Ladakh was a union territory without a legislative assembly.

By itself, the decision to dismantle the J&K state and to put in its place two union territories was seen in Beijing as a potentially threatening move. In fact, Beijing read New Delhi's decision less as aimed against India's Muslim minority – which indeed it was<sup>104</sup> – than as proof of the Modi government's decision to control more closely the border situation. In turn, this was read as prodromic to potentially confront China in the Aksai Chin region, as New Delhi had done at Doklam two years before. This was a pre-occupation which could not but be strengthened by two declarations made in the Indian Parliament by Home Minister Amit Shah, namely the number two in the Modi government. Shah stated (on 19 November and 3 December 2019) that the whole of previous princely state of Kashmir was «an inseparable part of India». Accordingly, both the so called POK (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir) and Aksai Chin, namely the Himalayan territory under

103. As argued by former Indian ambassador M. K. Bhadrakumar in an article written in December 2019: « The US-Indian military-to-military ties are deepening and the two countries are tiptoeing toward a veritable alliance in the Indo-Pacific region». M. K. Bhadrakumar, 'US-India: Why 2+2 may not always be 4', *Indian Punchline*, 22 December 2019.

104. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democracy; building a kingdom of cruelty and fear', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXX/2019, pp. 352-365.



Chinese control at least from the early 1960s, were Indian and, in Shah's words, worth dying for.<sup>105</sup>

In the final analysis, at the end of 2019, not only an India-US military alliance was taking shape, but India's second most powerful politician had openly claimed a territory including the whole of China-held Aksai Chin, and stated that, if necessary, it should be reclaimed by the use of force. Strangely enough, this being the situation, the only apparent adversarial reaction on the part of Beijing was challenging India's decision to dismantle the J&K state at the United Nations, which, however, could not but result in diplomatic failure for China.<sup>106</sup>

Still at the beginning of 2020, in spite of China's latest contestation of India's J&K policy at the UN (on 16 January), India-China relations seemed to continue on the positive trend started in 2018. In fact, no less than 70 events throughout the year had been announced to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of diplomatic relations between the two countries.<sup>107</sup>

According to Yun Sun, director of the China Program at the Stimson Center, the persistence of this situation of apparent bonhomie was the result of China's reassessment of India's weight, caused by the Doklam confrontation. Sun, however, noticed that China remained «profoundly suspicious of India's strategic ambitions and intentions» and described its attitude towards India as characterized by «formal rapprochement on the surface versus distrust and hedging in private».<sup>108</sup>

In fact, soon after the publication of Sun's analysis, China's underlying distrust towards India burst forth: the year that was supposed to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of diplomatic relations between the two countries saw the worst Sino-Indian border crisis since the 1987-88 confrontation.

The crisis took the form of a series of incidents and military moves along the LAC which started in May 2020 on the northern bank of the Pangong Lake (or Pangong Tso). In June 2020, a major incident took place in Ladakh's Galwan Valley: although no firearms were used, there was a «savagely fought» confrontation between Chinese and Indian militaries, which, for the first time since 1975, resulted in the loss of human lives.<sup>109</sup> The crisis

105. 'PoK, Aksai Chin part of J&K, we are ready to die for the region: Amit Shah', *Business Standard*, 22 November 2019; 'PoK, Aksai Chin part of J&K; will give life for it: Amit Shah in Lok Sabha', *Business Standard*, 5 December 2019.

106. 'UN Security Council discusses Kashmir, China urges India and Pakistan to ease tensions', *UN News*, 16 August 2019; 'China isolated on Kashmir issue at UNSC, 14 nations refuse discussion in big win for India', *India Today*, 16 January 2020.

107. Yun Sun, 'China's Strategic Assessment of India', *War on the Rocks*, 25 March 2020.

108. *Ibid.*

109. Sanjeev Miglani & Yew Lun Tian, 'India, China want peace but blame each other after deadly border clash', *Reuters*, 17 June 2020.

went on for months, led to the deployment of additional armed forces along the LAC, hedged on the brink of armed confrontation more than once, and finally uneasily winded down only in February 2021, with the mutual pull-back of troops from the area of major tension.

While no in-depth analysis will be offered here of this crisis,<sup>110</sup> two elements are relevant to the discussion carried out in this article: the first is that, even if the hypothesis is made that the crisis started by chance, due to the different views of India and China on the positioning of the LAC, the confrontation was so harsh and prolonged in time that there is no doubt that its continuation was consciously pursued; the second relevant point to be made here is that, in pursuing the border confrontation, Beijing's aim appears to have been less the pursuit of what Indian military analysts define as «salami slicing tactics», namely nibbling away Indian territory, than putting pressure on New Delhi. In other words, the longest and most dangerous Sino-Indian border confrontation since 1988 was China's reaction to both the coming into being of India's de facto military alliance with Washington and Amit Shah's threatening claims on the whole of the former princely state of Kashmir, Aksai Chin included.

## 5. Conclusion

According to senior Indian journalist Prem Shankar Jha: «Since India's defeat in the 1962 war, successive Indian governments have stoked distrust and fear of the Chinese so assiduously and for so long that to even think of that country as anything but a relentlessly ambitious hegemonic power determined to encircle and politically strangle its only rival in Asia, has become something close to treason».<sup>111</sup> This statement is correct, as far as it goes. In fact, it must be supplemented in the light of the fact that a much more important role in feeding «a diet of half truths» about India's relationship with China, which have become a «serious impediments to peace»,<sup>112</sup> has continuously and consistently been played by nationalist journalists, media persons, analysts and intellectuals. In turn, most Western journalists and analysts investigating India-China relations have usually based their inquiries mainly on Indian sources, often embracing and absorbing their biases.

The fact that, with the beginning of this century, the US has started to feel its position as world hegemon increasingly threatened by the rise

110. For a detailed analysis of the crisis up to the closing of 2020, see Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2020: Confronting China, aligning with the US', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 378-389.

111. Prem Shankar Jha, 'Don't Blame Modi for «No Intrusion» Claim, Blame Him for Dramatic Shift in China Policy', *The Wire*, 26 June 2020.

112. *Ibid.*

of China has powerfully contributed to the crafting, by US politicians and intellectuals, of a powerful and widespread negative discourse about China. China's iniquitous and authoritarian social system, its ethnocidal treatment of its Uighur and Tibetan minorities, its crackdown in Hong Kong, its aggressiveness towards weaker neighbours, its allegedly neo-colonial policies in sub-Saharan Africa, and, last but certainly not least, its supposed attempt at world domination have been highlighted and sternly criticized. Given the enormous weight of the «soft power» still exercised by the US, this negative discourse has gradually become the «common wisdom» about China in the West and not only there.

This author has no hesitation in stressing that the anti-China discourse contains much more than a grain of truth. Nonetheless, he is convinced that the real reason for constructing and promoting it has very little to do with the promotion of democracy world-wide and everything to do with the defence of the US-dominated world order. In fact, much of the same accusations levelled against China could and should be made against a number of other nations; this, however, does not happen – or happens in a very limited way – because those nations are supporters of the present US-dominated world order. Also, the anti-China discourse nimbly avoids considering the fact that any nation has some legitimate interests that its political leadership – irrespective of whether it is democratic or authoritarian – cannot but pursue. Particularly in the West, justifying the attack against the legitimate political interests of a given nation on the basis that its political regime is authoritarian or, anyway, not democratic enough has been a much-utilized ideological weapon. While much appreciated by the public opinions of Western democracies, this ideology, when translated into policy, has usually left a trail of death and ruin in its wake, without even being able to achieve its proclaimed objective of remedying the lack of democracy in the states against which it is used.

Without elaborating further on the issue of democratic ideology being used as an ideological mask for power politics, what is relevant to highlight here is the fact that the US-sponsored anti-China discourse has nicely dovetailed with the one on the same topic previously manufactured by Indian intellectuals and politicians. The two views, accordingly, have fed on one another, mutually reinforcing and legitimising. Hence, the view – so widespread in the Western media – that China, in its dealing with India, has constantly behaved treacherously and aggressively, in an unmotivated attempt not only «to encircle and politically strangle» India, but to deceitfully nibble away at Indian national territory has come to be accepted as axiomatic. China's repeated attempts to negotiate with India have been read as part of a Machiavellian strategy aimed at deceiving India's policy-makers – who, before Modi's saving and providential advent, are usually depicted as gullible and weak. In fact, according to India's prevailing view, the aim of China's negotiations has only been aimed at buying time, while

creating facts on the ground and unrelenting pushing back India along the Himalayan border.

This article, however, by analysing the India-China and India-US relations since the beginning of the present century, has argued that another explanation is possible. In fact, China's India policy can be read as Beijing's symmetric response to New Delhi's becoming an increasingly important component of the Washington-built anti-China arc of containment in the Indo-Pacific.

A second and hardly less important point made in this article is that India's foreign policy, while characterised by the increasing closeness to the US since 2005, was nevertheless marked by a series of corrective strategies aimed at blunting its negative impact on China. On the whole these corrective strategies limited China reactions, even in the post 2008 period, when it is claimed that China's foreign policy became increasingly assertive. Things, however, took a turn for the worse when Narendra Modi assumed the political leadership of India in 2014. He discarded the cautions which had characterised his predecessor's China policy, tried to impose a sort of unrealistic India-China parity, and emphasised the strategic/military aspect of the US connection. It was a policy which, while winning great acclaim for his author in the Indian nationalist milieu and on the part of the increasing number of nations disturbed by China's rise, triggered, not surprisingly, an enhanced adversarial reaction on the part of Beijing.



# THE US-CHINA RIVALRY IN SOUTH ASIA AND PAKISTAN'S HEDGING DILEMMA

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*China's re-emergence as a great power, and the ensuing competition with the United States over the norms, rules and values underpinning the international order, has signalled the return of great power rivalry in global politics. Asia is at the very heart of these dynamics, as testified by the competing Belt and Road Initiative and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategies, with significant implications for Asian states that are learning how to navigate the US-China rivalry. Situating the analysis in the literature on hedging, this article focuses on Pakistan's «hedging dilemma», centred around the country's bilateral relations with the US and China. Drawing on a range of archival material and interviews, the analysis shows that Pakistan's hedging options are limited, as a result of two intertwined trends, namely the implementation of the Beijing-backed China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the «flagship project» of the BRI, combined with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and Washington's recalibration towards competition with China.*

KEYWORDS – US-China rivalry; hedging; Pakistan-China relations; Pakistan-US relations; CPEC.

## 1. Introduction

The US-China strategic rivalry is playing out on an increasingly global scale, with competition extending in the political, economic, and technological domains, as well as encompassing several world regions. Nowhere is the new great power competition between Washington and Beijing more intense and evident than in Asia. The latter is home to two of the most important foreign policy initiatives – the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) – deployed by the Chinese and American administrations respectively in the past decade.

On the one hand, China's BRI is a set of infrastructure projects at the heart of President Xi Jinping's vision of a more muscular China, which is growing increasingly more conscious of its power and seeking to elevate its status on the global stage. With more than 139 countries subscribed to the initiative to varying extents and intensities, sixty-three percent of the

world's population now lives within the borders of BRI countries.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, FOIP was initially launched by the then Japanese Premier Shinzo Abe and subsequently embraced by the United States, most notably during former US President Donald J. Trump's visit to Vietnam in November 2017.<sup>2</sup> In that context, Mr Trump rolled out the US vision for «a free and open Indo-Pacific – a place where sovereign and independent nations, with diverse cultures and many different dreams, can all prosper side-by-side, and thrive in freedom and in peace».<sup>3</sup> Such an approach represented the evolution, and, in many ways, the continuation, of the «Pivot to Asia» that was initiated under the Obama Administration in 2011.<sup>4</sup>

Under the aegis of these competing policy initiatives, a myriad of states are learning how to navigate the new great power rivalry. The vast majority of Asian countries have therefore been trying to find a middle-ground between Washington and Beijing, in an attempt to avoid alienating either major power. In other words, countries are hedging between China and the US, in order to minimize risks and maximize benefits in an uncertain strategic environment.

Hedging is a concept that the discipline of international relations has borrowed from the financial realm, and is typically defined as a «third way» between balancing and band wagoning, a middle-ground that states pursue to «offset risks by pursuing multiple policy options that are intended to produce mutually counteracting effects under the situation of high-uncertainties and high-stakes».<sup>5</sup> Hedging is different from «balancing», as the latter usually involves an alliance aimed at confronting a threat, and it is also different from band wagoning, which delineates a situation of complete acceptance of a hierarchical relation with a stronger power. Hedging is therefore operationalized as a host of multi-layered alignments that involve pragmatic and flexible arrangements without rigid commitment. Its manifestations evolve according to a country's prevailing security and elite's domestic needs, as motivated and constrained by the big power ri-

1. David Sacks, 'Countries in China's Belt and Road Initiative: Who's in and Who's Out', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 24 March 2021.

2. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 'Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI)', 27 August 2016.

3. U.S. Mission to ASEAN, 'Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit | Da Nang, Vietnam', 11 November 2017.

4. Hillary Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century', *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2011. See also: Michelguglielmo Torri, Nicola Mocchi & Filippo Boni, 'Asia in 2019: The escalation of the US-China contraposition, and the authoritarian involution of Asian societies', *Asia Maior*, XXX/2020, pp. 9-23.

5. Kuik Cheng Chwee, 'The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 159-85, 2008.

valry of the moment.<sup>6</sup> While the vast majority of the academic and policy literature on hedging has focused on East and South-East Asia as the main regions where this occurs,<sup>7</sup> less attention has been devoted to how countries in South Asia have navigated their ties between Washington and Beijing.<sup>8</sup> This article therefore seeks to partly fill this gap and to extend the existing analyses on hedging by incorporating South Asia, and Pakistan in particular, into debates about how states deploy hedging strategies in their foreign policy in this new era of great power competition.

The importance of South Asia as a case study cannot be overstated. It is home to India, a key US partner in Asia and one of the staunchest opponents of the BRI, as well as to Pakistan, the country that historically enjoys strong political and military bonds with China, and that in the past 20 years has been a major non-NATO ally of the United States. Against such a backdrop, Islamabad represents an ideal case to assess the implications of the US-China rivalry and how states respond by hedging, as well as the limitations that such a hedging strategy might present. Pakistan is currently facing the policy conundrum of wanting to mend fences with the US and to revitalize ties with Washington after the difficult years of the Trump administration, while simultaneously being squarely in Beijing's camp, with USD 25 billion worth of Chinese-backed projects, either completed or under implementation.

This article therefore details the contours, limits and prospects of what I call Pakistan's «hedging dilemma», centred around Islamabad's ties with Washington and Beijing. The analysis argues that Pakistan's hedging options are growing slim, as the country finds itself in the difficult position of having progressively shifted towards China, while simultaneously realis-

6. Kuik Cheng Chwee, 'Hedging in Post-Pandemic Asia: What, How, and Why?', *The Asian Forum*, 6 June 2020.

7. Kei Koga, 'The Concept of «Hedging» Revisited: The Case of Japan's Foreign Policy Strategy in East Asia's Power Shift', *International Studies Review*, Vol. 20 No. 4, December 2018, pp. 633–660; Seng Tan, 'Consigned to hedge: south-east Asia and America's 'free and open Indo-Pacific' strategy', *International Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 1, January 2020, pp. 131–148; Cheng-Chwee Kuik, 'How do weaker states hedge? Unpacking ASEAN states' alignment behavior towards China', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 25, Issue 100, 2016, pp. 500–514; Evelyn Goh, 'South-east Asian strategies toward the Great Powers: still hedging after all these years?', *Asian Forum*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Jan.–Feb. 2016, pp. 18–37.

8. A notable exception, although focused on Sino-Indian, rather than Sino-US competition, is: Darren J Lim, Rohan Mukherjee, 'Hedging in South Asia: balancing economic and security interests amid Sino-Indian competition', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 19, Issue 3, September 2019, pp. 493–522. See also: Aurelio Insisa and Giulio Pugliese, 'The Free and Open Indo-Pacific vs. the Belt and Road Initiative: Spheres of Influence and Sino-Japanese Relations', *The Pacific Review*, doi: 10.1080/09512748.2020.1862899.



ing that it best not lose the support of the US completely.<sup>9</sup> To develop this point, the analysis draws on a range of primary sources, including interviews conducted by the author with Pakistani academics and policymakers and archival material from the «Cold War» and the «China in South Asia» collections from the Wilson Centre's digital archives, triangulated with secondary academic literature and relevant policy reports. The analysis proceeds by first contextualising hedging in Pakistan's foreign policy during the Cold War, before moving on to assess the current policy predicament that policymakers in Islamabad are facing.

## 2. *Pakistan's hedging during the Cold War*

One of the first examples of Pakistan's ability to navigate its relations with the US and China came in the years following the independence in 1947. On the one hand, Pakistan adhered to the US-led defence pacts, namely the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), also known as the Manila Pact, and the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), pacts that were aimed at containing the Soviet threat in South-East Asia and the Middle East respectively. On the other hand, Pakistan was keen to establish ties with China and to reassure its neighbour that its alignment with the West was not aimed against Beijing.

In a speech to the Political Committee of the Afro-Asian Conference in 1955, then Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai noted that during a meeting with the Pakistani prime minister at the time, Muhammad Ali Bogra, he was told that «Pakistan did not join the Manila Pact for the purpose of opposing China [...]». Bogra further guaranteed «that if the United States undertook aggressive actions or started a world war, then Pakistan would not participate.»<sup>10</sup> The Chinese premier welcomed such a reassurance «because it led to mutual understanding and allowed us to know that this treaty does not obstruct us from cooperating and reaching agreements for collective peace».<sup>11</sup> In the following year, Iskander Mirza, the Pakistani president, decided to visit China despite concerns expressed by the US administration. He reassured the US that Pakistan would «abide by all [our] obligations to the United States» and noted that the country had «faith in the South-east Asia Treaty and the Baghdad Pact., [and] we will abide by all the treaties [we've] signed [...]» but he felt that «there will be no danger in going

9. The United States is Pakistan's largest export destination country and Islamabad has entered a three-year \$6 billion IMF bailout programme in 2019.

10. 'Zhou Enlai's Speech at the Political Committee of the Afro-Asian Conference,' 23 April 1955, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 207-00006-04, 69-75. Translated by Jeffrey Wang. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114678>

11. *Ibid.*

to Beijing.»<sup>12</sup> Further evidence of Pakistan's desire to keep a door open to China while being tied to the US system of Cold War alliances, can be found in a 1956 cable from the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan, in which Chinese diplomats noted that Pakistan was «relatively enthusiastic about developing trade between the two nations. [...] The number of solo meetings that our ambassador and chargé d'affaires had with the Pakistani president and prime minister in May and June is unprecedented. The various leaders of landlord and capitalist political parties, and giants in industry and commerce, all emphasize when [we] meet that China's progress is amazing, that it is the strongest nation in Asia, and that Chinese and Pakistanis should be friendlier».<sup>13</sup>

The developments during the 1960s and early 1970s are also illustrative of Islamabad's ability to navigate its ties between Beijing and Washington. In a conversation between the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai with the Pakistani President and Foreign Minister in April 1965, the former noted that there were «complicated and major changes taking place in international relations. Pakistan allies with the United States; China allies with the Soviet Union. But those in charge of China and Pakistan can have a frank and heart-to-heart talk».<sup>14</sup> The response of the Pakistani Foreign Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was revealing as he noted: «our [Pakistan's] alliance with the United States is not what you think it is». This exchange reflects Pakistan's attempts to play down the US-Pakistan relationship, to which leaders in Islamabad were growing increasingly more disillusioned as a result of the US' decision to provide weapons to India during the Sino-Indian border war in 1962.<sup>15</sup> But the most visible display of Pakistan's positioning

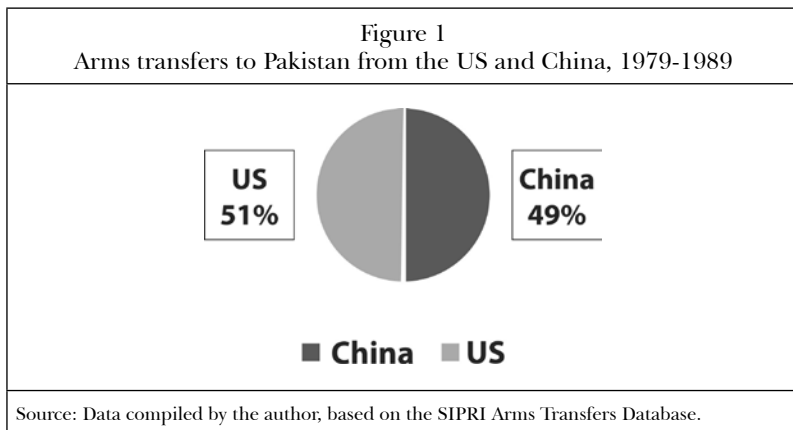
12. 'Cable from the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan, 'Pakistani President's Exclusive Conversation with American Reporters'', 17 May 1956, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 105-00779-04, 12-13. Obtained by Sulmaan Khan and translated by Anna Beth Keim <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114882>

13. 'Cable from the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan, 'The Main Themes of Pakistan's Diplomatic Activities'', 30 June 1956, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 105-0779-04, 14-17. Obtained by Sulmaan Khan and translated by Anna Beth Keim <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114883>

14. 'Record of Conversation between Premier Zhou Enlai and the President of Pakistan Ayub Khan,' April 02, 1965, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 106-01267-02, 37-50. Translated by Stephen Mercado. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/165485>

15. Against such a backdrop, it is also interesting to read a conversation between Zhou Enlai and Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, an East Pakistan politician, in which the latter was openly criticising the US' imperialism and support to India. See: 'Record of Conversation between Zhou Enlai, Chen Yi, and Head of Pakistan's Delegation Participating in the PRC's National Day Celebration, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani,' November 18, 1963, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 105-01188-03, 24-35. Obtained and translated by Christopher Tang. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121573>

between the US and China came with Henri Kissinger’s secret visit to China in July 1971, which was facilitated by Pakistan. At the time, President Yahya Khan acted as a bridge between China and US, communicating secretly with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and US President Richard Nixon, paving the way to Kissinger’s path-breaking visit (on a Pakistan International Airways plane), which prepared the 1972 visit by Richard Nixon to China, the first ever of a US President.



During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan was able to capitalize on its central position in the fight against the Soviet invasion. Pakistan’s close ties with the US during this period are very well documented, as it is the US reliance on the Pakistani military and intelligence agencies to fund and train the Afghan resistance against the Soviet occupiers.<sup>16</sup> Less known is the fact that, during the same period, Pakistan was able to receive significant military support from China too, as Figure 1 above shows.

As figure 1 highlights, Pakistan obtained roughly the same amount of arms transfers from both China and the US (US\$ 2.5 billion and US\$ 2.56 billion respectively) during the period under examination. Evidence of Pakistan’s successful hedging strategy in securing benefits of cooperation with these two major countries, the ones now shaping the international system, can also be found in the concerns expressed by US administration officials in the 1980s, regarding the delivery of military technology to Pakistan.<sup>17</sup> In a 1982 memo for the then Deputy Secretary of Defense,

16. Mohmmad Yousaf and Mark Adkin, ‘The Bear Trap: Afghanistan’s Untold Story’, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books Ltd; Yunas Samad, ‘The Pakistan-US Conundrum. Jihadist, the Military and the People: the struggle for control’, London: Hurst & Co.

17. In particular, the 1982 document refers to the AN-ALR-69 radar warning receiver, that was going to be supplied to Pakistan as part of the deal for 40 F16s.

concerns emerged that «Pakistan's close military relations with China suggest that Islamabad may at some point give Beijing access to new US weapons it receives, despite having signed a General Security of Military Information Agreement».<sup>18</sup> The memo then notes that «for the near term, however, we believe Pakistan probably will safeguard the new US arms it receives to protect its arms supply relationship with the US», and warned that «major strains in the relations with the United States – reinforcing Islamabad's doubts about United States' reliability – could cause the Pakistanis to give China access to US arms».<sup>19</sup>

As these historical examples demonstrate, the lesson that Pakistan has learned during the Cold War is that it could maintain relations with both Beijing and Washington, and also benefit from navigating its relations between the two. Overall, Pakistan's assessment of its ties with the US and China was best captured in an interview with a senior Pakistani official who highlighted that «the US are not reliable in times of crisis as their regulations do not allow them to transfer military equipment to Pakistan» while «China has always been willing to provide Pakistan with military hardware also when the country was under sanctions».<sup>20</sup>

In the current geopolitical scenario, it will be difficult for Pakistan to replicate the Cold War pattern outlined in this section for a number of reasons. First, the ongoing US-China competition has become strongly polarized and has escalated to an extent that is unprecedented. Second, Washington has limited appetite now to pay attention to Pakistan. The US is still willing to engage with Pakistan, but not as a strategic partner and with much more caution than in the past.<sup>21</sup> Third, since 2011, Pakistan has progressively set in motion a recalibration of its foreign policy that has moved it closer to China and away from the US<sup>22</sup>, a process that is epitomized by the implementation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a USD 25 billion investment in Pakistan under the aegis of the BRI, one of the most significant and visible set of infrastructural projects that Beijing has deployed abroad.

The next section discusses some of these points in greater detail, focusing in particular on how the development of CPEC, and the simultane-

18. 'Pakistan-US: Demarche on F-16 Equipment,' 11/8/82, with Memo from McMahon to Carlucci, 'Risk Assessment of the Sale of AN/ALR-69 Radar Warning Receiver to Pakistan,' 1 1/8/82, and Excerpt from Natl Intel Est on Pakistan,' 8 November 1982, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, CIA Records Search Tool [CREST]. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #6.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Interview with the author, Islamabad, January 2015.

21. Ayesha Siddiq, 'Team Bajwa now betting on UK to promote Taliban – to get to US indirectly', *The Print*, 26 July 2021.

22. Filippo Boni, 'Caught between the U.S. and China: Critical Junctures in Pakistan's Foreign Policy', in Apanda Parne (ed.), *Routledge Handbook on South Asian Foreign Policy*, New York: Routledge, 2021, pp. 311-323.

ous American disengagement from Afghanistan, have significantly limited Pakistan's hedging options.

### 3. CPEC meets the US-China rivalry

When Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Pakistan to officially launch CPEC in April 2015, the set of energy and infrastructure projects coming under the BRI were dubbed in Pakistan as game changers.<sup>23</sup> In the intentions of policymakers in both Islamabad and Beijing, CPEC was going to be one of the most consequential undertakings in the history of Sino-Pakistani relations, given the transformative potential of such a gigantic development package for Pakistan's economy, politics and overall security.

CPEC clearly delivered on energy projects and, six years on, has significantly reduced the country's electricity shortages, despite the complex web of interactions in Pakistan's domestic politics, including centre-provincial tensions, civil-military relations and a change of leadership following the 2018 elections<sup>24</sup>, have somewhat slowed down the evolution of CPEC into its second phase.

When CPEC was first launched, the Obama administration saw China's investments in Pakistan in a relatively positive light. According to the then USAID director in Pakistan, John P. Groarke, both China and the US shared an interest in promoting sustainable development in Pakistan. He noted that if successfully executed, CPEC could bring great benefits to Pakistan.<sup>25</sup> After all, China was stepping in to try to address some of the chronic issues affecting Pakistan's economy in order to stabilize the country, an aim that the US failed to achieve in the previous 14 years of development and military assistance. More generally, Beijing taking responsibility in the region was viewed favourably by the US.

But as the Trump administration was gearing up for a much tougher line on China than its predecessor, the US tone and approach to CPEC changed significantly. The most visible manifestation of this more assertive and openly critical stance were the remarks made in November 2019 by Ambassador Alice Wells, former Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs in the US State Department. Wells very vocally expressed US reservations regarding CPEC, which revolved around the

23. 'Kashgar-Gwadar project "a game changer" for whole region: Sharif', *Dawn*, 7 July 2013.

24. See: Filippo Boni & Katharine Adeney, 'The Impact of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor on Pakistan's Federal System: The Politics of the CPEC', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 60, Issue 3, 441–465, 1 June 2020; Katharine Adeney & Filippo Boni, 'How China and Pakistan Negotiate', Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2021.

25. 'CPEC to be of great benefit to Pakistan', *Dawn*, 16 October 2015.

debt-burden that the projects would place on Pakistan, the lack of transparency and the paucity of actual job opportunities that were expected to have materialized under CPEC for Pakistani workers.<sup>26</sup>

While these remarks were strongly rejected both by the Chinese embassy in Islamabad and by the Pakistani foreign office,<sup>27</sup> they epitomize how CPEC was caught in the US-China competition.<sup>28</sup> The US remarks and the country's wider approach to the initiative have, de facto, limited Pakistan's ability to hedge between the two great powers. Circling back to the definition of hedging provided in the introduction, Pakistan's «multiple policy options» that a hedging strategy would entail have significantly shrunk. Islamabad has tried to mend fences with the US and to rebuild the bilateral ties, yet to no success at the end of 2021.<sup>29</sup> Pakistani leaders have sent messages on multiple fronts directed at the US administration, in the hope that President Biden and his foreign policy team would mark some discontinuity from the difficult Trump years.

In March 2021, the Pakistani government formed a 14-member ministerial apex committee, whose aim was to discuss «a range of economic and commercial proposals to warm ties with the US», with the ultimate goal of reviving bilateral economic relations with Washington.<sup>30</sup> To this end, the Board of Investment (BoI) has proposed that Pakistan can offer certain areas of cooperation to the US under CPEC, but that the country needs to be mindful «of the sensitivities of both the US and China». One option that the Pakistani Ministry of Commerce has put forward has been that of an American-Pakistan Economic Zone in Karachi, the city that represents Pakistan's business centre and that hosts one of the largest ports in Asia.<sup>31</sup> During the same month, the Pakistani Chief of Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, said at the Islamabad Security Dialogue that «while CPEC remains central to our vision, only seeing Pakistan through [the] CPEC prism is also

26. US Department of State, *A Conversation with Ambassador Alice Wells on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor*, 21 November 2019. See also: Madiha Azal, 'At all costs': How Pakistan and China control the narrative on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor', *Brookings Institution*, June 2020.

27. 'FO defends CPEC after Alice Wells' criticism', *Dawn*, 23 May 2020; 'Alice Wells' remarks another doomed attempt to defame Sino-Pak relations: Chinese embassy', *Dawn*, 21 May 2020.

28. Similarly to the rebuttal of Ambassador Wells' remarks, in October 2021 the Special Adviser to the Prime Minister on CPEC Affairs noted that "[...] one thing is clear: the United States supported by India is inimical to CPEC. It will not let it succeed. That's where we have to take a position," also adding that Pakistan "has more than once burnt its fingers in (the Western) alliance in the past". 'Pakistan accuses US of trying to derail CPEC', *The Express Tribune*, 24 October 2021.

29. 'Back to America: Pakistan pitches China's Belt and Road to U.S.', *Nikkei Asia*, 27 October 2021.

30. Shahbaz Rana, 'Govt seeks economic re-engagement with US administration', *The Express Tribune*, 7 March 2021.

31. *Ibid.*

misleading», a message that a number of seasoned analysts interpreted as an overture to the US.<sup>32</sup> When asked about whether Chinese companies were receiving preferential treatment in Pakistan, a member of Parliament of the ruling party, Pakistan-Tehreek-e-Insaf, rejected such claim, noting that «the ground is open for both Chinese and Western companies».<sup>33</sup>

As mentioned above, Washington has not been receptive to the signals of rapprochement coming from Islamabad. The only high level engagements between the two countries occurred at National Security Advisor level,<sup>34</sup> and while U.S. Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin has visited Delhi, and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken has hosted India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar in Washington, when Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi visited New York in May 2021, publicly at least, there were no meetings with administration officials, though he was able to see members of the Senate and Congress.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps more importantly, as of December 2021, President Biden has yet to have a phone conversation with the Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan. Pakistan's frustration about this lack of high-level interactions was expressed during the visit of the National Security Adviser, Dr Moeed Yusuf, to the US in August 2021. He noted how President Biden did not have a phone call with the Pakistani Prime Minister, and that «if a phone call is a concession, if a security relationship is a concession, Pakistan has options».<sup>36</sup>

It is also important to briefly contextualize these dynamics within wider regional politics undercurrents that, in many ways, constrain Islamabad's room for manoeuvre. India's strengthening relationship with the US is a case in point, as it has progressively eroded the ties between Islamabad and Washington. Starting from the civil nuclear deal between New Delhi and Washington in 2005, there has been a progressive alignment of interest and visions between the two countries, whose policy agendas converged further from 2013 onwards, when China announced its plans for the BRI. Beyond its relevance in South Asia as a counterbalance to the growing Chinese presence in the region, the Indo-US partnership is also bolstered by the two countries participating in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. The latter,

32. 'Time to bury the past and move forward: COAS Bajwa on Indo-Pak ties', *Dawn*, 18 March 2021; Ayesha Siddiqi, 'Pakistan realises it can't abandon US for China yet. But how far will Bajwa & Co go?', *The Print*, 28 May 2021.

33. 'How Chinese investments are capturing Pakistan's economy', *Deutsche Welle*, 2 August 2021.

34. NSAs met twice, once in May and once in July. See: 'In first meeting, Pakistan and US NSAs discuss bilateral issues, ways to advance cooperation', *Dawn*, May 2021; 'Afghan situation: Pak, US NSAs agree to sustain bilateral cooperation', *The Express Tribune*, 30 July 2021.

35. Raffaello Pantucci, 'China is a habit that Pakistan cannot break', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 25 July 2021.

36. Katrina Manson, 'Pakistan's security adviser complains Joe Biden has not called Imran Khan', *Financial Times*, 3 August 2021.

more commonly known as Quad, is a group of four countries including Australia and Japan, in addition to the US and India. The Quad's agenda has progressively moved from maritime cooperation to a much broader platform, which is becoming increasingly oriented towards China's assertive behaviour in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). With the US seeking to strengthen its partnership with countries within the Quad, and against a backdrop of a solid US-India partnership, it will be difficult for Pakistan to regain ground in US foreign policy priorities.

Geography might however come in Pakistan's help to continue having some, albeit diminished, form of leverage with the United States. In the run up to the US's withdrawal from Afghanistan, there have been talks about the US using a base in Pakistan in order to continue monitoring the Afghan scenario. While it is unlikely that Pakistan will allow this in the short term,<sup>37</sup> there might be scope to find some form of accommodation that keeps Pakistan relevant for US's interests in the region. Similar to what happened during the Cold War, Pakistan is keen to retain a central role in the Afghan scenario, in order to be an indispensable interlocutor and to extract the benefits of this centrality, both in economic and military terms, from the US and from China. As a policy paper from a think tank in Islamabad advocated, Pakistan should «develop a carefully calibrated balance in its most important bilateral relationships» and «rather than being coerced into choosing either Beijing or Washington, Pakistan needs to set itself up as a mediator to allow the two great powers to pursue their shared interests».<sup>38</sup> Such a view is also representative of the vibrant debate within the Pakistani academic and policy-making communities, regarding Pakistan's foreign policy options. Scholars have opined that by choosing to align ever more closely with China, Pakistan is making «a grave strategic mistake» and that policy-makers in Islamabad should consider re-orienting the country's grand strategy «in order to bring it closer to Western democracies» as a way to «ensure greater security, economic development and sovereign independence for Pakistan».<sup>39</sup> As a seasoned observer of Pakistan politics noted, Pakistani policymaking elites have learned that the US-Pakistan relationship is «painfully enduring»,<sup>40</sup> and that Pakistan will want to maintain some form of cooperation with the US, even as Washington diverts its interests elsewhere. But, as this section demonstrates, such a course of action is proving increasingly difficult to pursue.

37. 'No US military or air base in Pakistan: FO', *Dawn*, 25 May 2021.

38. Syed Mohammad Ali, Muhammad Asad Rafi & Mosharraf Zaidi, 'Pakistan-Americana: Ushering in a New Era for Pakistan-US Relations', *Tabadlab Occasional Policy Paper Series*, February 2021, p. 21.

39. Wali Aslam & Bradley A. Thayer, 'Pakistan's grand strategy: the poverty of imagination', *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 28, Issue 3, 351-358, 2020.

40. Conversation with the author, September 2021.



#### 4. *Conclusions*

The aim of this article was to foreground how, in contrast to Cold War dynamics, Pakistan's options for hedging have become more limited. As the analysis noted, this is primarily due to a set of intertwined factors, including the implementation of the Beijing-backed CPEC, combined with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and Washington's recalibration towards competition with China, Pakistan's long-standing partner. Against such a backdrop, Pakistan's policy options vis-à-vis maintaining a balanced relationship with both the US and China have been significantly reduced. The change in the US approach to and interests in the region which began during the Trump administration and is continuing under President Biden, has put Pakistan in a difficult corner from which it will be difficult to emerge.

Beyond the specificities of the Pakistani case, this article has contributed to the burgeoning literature looking at how individual states are responding to, and navigating through, the new great power rivalry of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>41</sup> More research would be needed into how secondary states in South Asia are responding to the US-China competition, given how important the region is in Chinese foreign policy considerations, as testified not only by CPEC, but also by the investments in the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka as well as in Colombo in Bangladesh.

41. See for instance: Felix Heiduk, *Asian Geopolitics and the US–China Rivalry*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2021.

MIGRATION, BORDERS, AND SECURITY DISCOURSES  
IN THE TIME OF COVID-19:  
THE CASE OF MIGRATION FROM BANGLADESH TO INDIA

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*Migration has taken place throughout human history and continues to do so in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In many recent instances, states that are destination of migration flows framed migration as a security issue, i.e. a threat to their citizens' livelihood, safety, and cultural identity. Discourses that securitize migration, thus criminalising immigrants, are not unique to the US and the EU, nor to South-North migration: they pertain to South-South migration as well. This article draws attention to a case of migration and border securitisation from the global South: the one concerning India-bound informal migration originating from Bangladesh. This, incidentally, is also the country of origin of large numbers of migrants that have made their way to Europe during the last decade. This article asks what are the consequences of a securitized approach in the framing and managing of borders and migration, and whether such consequences are worth or at all affordable to the countries involved in the securitisation. The article assesses the potential impact that securitized discourses have on Indo-Bangladeshi relations, as well as on the domestic politics of India and Bangladesh. It reviews the processes of the securitisation of the India-Bangladesh border and the criminalisation of the Bangladeshi migrants in India's contemporary domestic politics with reference to recent (2019-2021) events and current affairs.*

KEYWORDS – Bangladesh; India; migration; securitisation; borders.

### 1. Introduction

Bangladesh makes international headlines in relation to selected critical issues: its remarkable economic performance and recent graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) status; the Rohingya repatriation crisis continuing against the backdrop of genocide in neighbouring Myanmar; climate change; and migration.

A young and densely populated nation, Bangladesh is a country of migration, including internal migration, immigration, and emigration.<sup>1</sup>

1. On the Bengal Muslim diaspora, see: Claire Alexander, Joya Chatterji & Annu Jalais, *The Bengal Diaspora: Rethinking Muslim Migration*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.

Emigration is both formal and informal, and directed towards various destinations in Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and beyond. When it comes to formal emigration, the Gulf states historically receive the largest numbers of Bangladeshi workers whose contract jobs support their families back home as well as the national economy, for which remittances remain of vital importance. Informal migratory flows, on the other hand, are directed towards multiple destinations, including Southeast Asian countries and Europe. For example, as frequently reported in the news from Europe in recent years, undocumented Bangladeshi migrants increasingly reach the European Union via various routes, including the notorious Italy- and Malta-bound ones that have migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean from North Africa, subject to the exploitation of human traffickers and at times to the cost of their lives.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, neighbouring India has been a traditional destination for Bangladesh-originated informal emigration. With a much larger landmass, a larger economy, and embracing Bangladesh on all sides (except to the South, where Bangladesh meets the Bay of Bengal and Myanmar), to date India remains a relevant destination for Bangladeshi migrants.

As much as migration is a common occurrence in human history, contemporary politics have seen the securitisation of migration and borders across the globe. Securitising discourses are not limited to South-North migration but are very much common to South-South migration as well. The India-Bangladesh border and Bangladesh-originated India-bound migration provide cases in point. In India, migration of different types – state-to-state migration internal to the Union; economic immigration originating from outside of India; immigration of asylum seekers – has been politicized for decades at the state, sub-regional, and national levels. At the moment, irregular migration from Bangladesh is a hot political issue in the states of the East and Northeast, and at the national level as well. Its politicisation is not new but decades old. However, the relevance of «migration» and «borders» and the securitized discourse surrounding them received new impetus following the introduction of divisive laws like India's National Register of Citizens (NRC) and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) since 2019 and inflammatory migration-centred electoral campaigning in the same years. These are but aspects of India's current Hindu nationalist turn that has

2. The pandemic has further increased the already critical vulnerability of undocumented migrants in their journey. However, in Europe arrivals have continued throughout the 2019-2021 period. Bangladesh features as the country of origin of large numbers of them, especially along the Central Mediterranean route whose first port of arrival is Italy. For example, on 8 May 2021, in the largest arrival of the year so far, some 1,400 migrants reached the Italian shores, most of them having reportedly started their journey in nearby Tunisia, in the Ivory Coast, or Bangladesh. See: 'Migrants from Bangladesh among Top Groups Arriving on Italian Island', *InfoMigrants*, 10 May 2021; 'Bangladesh Top Source Country for Migrants Making Unsafe Sea Voyages to Europe', *Anadolu Agency*, 18 August 2021.

transformed India's political landscape in an openly anti-secular and Islamophobic sense.<sup>3</sup>

Based on the case of irregular migration across the India-Bangladesh border – India-bound migration in particular – this paper asks: what are the humanitarian and political costs of framing and managing migration through a securitized lens? The paper argues that the pursuit of a securitized approach in the framing and management of migration carries important repercussions on the domestic politics of both countries as well as for their bilateral relations. The Indian government's demonisation of «the Bangladeshi immigrant», now supported by the CAA-NRC, is set to worsen fractures along religious and ethnic lines at a time when identity politics have turned dangerously dominant and divisive. Moreover, India's securitized discourses and policies are met with criticism in Bangladesh and work to the detriment of India's reputation as a friendly and reliable neighbour. The result has been the deterioration of a relationship that – although not without problems – has been praised by the two governments as exemplary for more than a decade. Last but not least, India's securitized discourses and policies have the potential to adversely impact politics in Bangladesh as well, casting a shadow on the government's perceived pro-India stance. This comes at a time when the government party, Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, faces strong criticism from both liberals and conservatives due to its growing authoritarianism. However, its main challengers are the increasingly assertive Islamists, who have been vocal (and violent) in expressing their dislike for an India now seen as openly Islamophobic.

The paper proceeds as follows. It first reviews the historical processes that produced the securitisation of the India-Bangladesh border as well as the criminalisation of the Bangladeshi migrant in the politics of contemporary India. In doing so, it considers relevant recent events – including bilateral ministerial meetings, state visits, elections, laws, instances of border violence – which have taken place in the years 2019-2021. These developments overlapped in time with the COVID-19 pandemic, and in some cases interacted with it. Lastly, the paper assesses the potential impact that such securitized discourse around immigration can have on Indo-Bangladeshi relations, as well as on the domestic politics of Bangladesh. In the first place, however, because of the paper's frequent reference to securitisation, a concise overview of the concept and the debate on its causes and consequences is in order.

3. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democracy: building a kingdom of cruelty and fear', *Asia Maior*, XXX/2019, pp. 345-395; Diego Maiorano, 'India 2019: The general election and the new Modi wave', *Asia Maior*, XXX/2019, pp. 327-344; Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2020: The deepening crisis of democracy', *Asia Maior*, XXXI/2020, pp. 331-375; Diego Maiorano, 'Democratic backsliding amid the COVID-19 pandemic in India', paper presented at the conference *US-China competition, COVID-19, and democratic backsliding in Asia*, EUI, Florence, 27 September 2021.

## 2. A theoretical framework on the benefits and costs of the securitisation of migration

«Securitisation of migration» indicates the application of the concept of «securitisation», which was firstly developed by the Copenhagen School, to the study of migration. Accordingly, security threats are not objective but socially constructed. The process of securitisation is undertaken by a political actor which constructs the threat as existential and exceptional, i.e. as endangering survival and requiring an intervention via extraordinary means. Hence, securitisation justifies the adoption of extraordinary measures by the actor that constructs the threat and commits to manage it.<sup>4</sup> While securitisation was originally conceived as a process driven by speech – i.e. defining a security threat by a speech act – other authors have highlighted that securitisation can also be driven by practices.<sup>5</sup>

Scholars of migration have shown that securitising migration can negatively affect various stakeholders, including the securitising state, which is supposedly its primary beneficiary. Securitisation presents the state with obvious advantages, i.e. increasing its legitimacy and justifying the undertaking of exceptional measures. However, it can also create new challenges for the state, i.e. having to manage conflicting demands; to deliver what promised; and losing credibility in light of human rights concerns.<sup>6</sup> According to Boswell, this explains why, in some cases, states have either rhetorically committed to securitisation but avoided translating their pledge into stringent policies, or outsourced migration control to other countries, like in the case of the EU.<sup>7</sup> Most recent scholarship on the EU case drew attention to the negative consequences that the securitisation of migration had on its relations with third countries. For instance, based on the case of the EU and Jordan, Seeberg and Zardo argue that securitisation led to the increasing informalisation of EU-third countries agreements.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Webb demonstrates that it enabled non-EU countries to alter power relations and extract significant political concessions from the EU.<sup>9</sup> Overall, this scholarship suggests that the securitising actor, in this case the state, does

4. Barry Buzan, Ole O. Wæver & Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998.

5. Sarah Léonard & Christian Kaunert, 'The securitisation of migration in the European Union: Frontex and its evolving security practices', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Online First, 2020.

6. Christina Boswell, 'The Securitisation of Migration: A Risky Strategy for European States', *Danish Institute of International Studies*, 2007.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Peter Seeberg & Federica Zardo, 'From Mobility Partnerships to Migration Compacts: Security Implications of EU-Jordan Relations and the Informalization of Migration Governance', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Online First, 2020.

9. Jonathan Webb, 'The 'Refugee Crisis' and Its Transformative Impact on EU-Western Balkans Relations', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Online First, 2020.

not necessarily gain from choosing a securitising approach in migration management; instead, it might incur disadvantages in terms of its domestic affairs and its international relations.

Obviously, the state is not the only actor whose interests are at stake when migration is securitized. Consequences at the humanitarian level, often neglected in the state's decision-making, are critical to securitized migration, weighting most heavily on irregular migrants. Scholars have documented the increased humanitarian risk attached to irregular migration and driven by border fatalities, detention, and other practices that have produced the securitisation of migration in various regions of the world.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that having borders «sealed» fails to reduce migratory flows but is likely to increase the leverage of human traffickers – as demonstrated by the case of the US-Mexican<sup>11</sup> and the EU<sup>12</sup> borders – suggests that securitisation is not just inefficient but also inhumane as a strategy. Furthermore, another effect of securitisation that caused serious humanitarian concerns has been the outsourcing of migration management to third countries pursued by the EU. Since the Union failed to formulate a migration policy due to disagreement among member states, it resorted to what Panebianco defined as «borders' control by proxy» – that is «delegating migration management to third actors with an open mandate»<sup>13</sup> – with no concern for the guarantee of human rights. The human cost of such a policy has been known for years, as demonstrated by the ghastly news emerging from Libyan detention centres and the testimonies of those who survived them. In all, this body of literature demonstrates that framing migration as a *security*

10. Jørgen Carling, 'Migration control and migrant fatalities at the Spanish-African borders', *International Migration Review*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2007; Raymond Michalowski, 'Border militarisation and migrant suffering: A case of transnational social injury', *Social Justice*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2007; Stefanie Grant, 'Recording and identifying European frontier deaths', *European Journal of Migration and Law*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2011; Leanne Weber & Sharon Pickering, *Globalization and borders: Death at the global frontier*, London: Palgrave, 2011; Melissa Bull *et al.*, 'Sickness in the system of long-term immigration detention', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2013; Alison Gerard & Sharon Pickering, 'Crimmigration: criminal justice, refugee protection and the securitisation of migration', in Bruce Arrigo & Heather Bersot (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of International Crime and Justice Studies*, London: Routledge, 2013.

11. Rob T. Guerette & Rob V. Clarke, 'Border enforcement: Organized crime and deaths of smuggled migrants on the United States–Mexico border', *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2005; Maria Jimenez, 'Humanitarian crisis: Migrant deaths at the US–Mexico border', *American Civil Liberties Council of San Diego and Imperial Counties, Mexico's National Commission of Human Rights*, 2009.

12. Valeria Bello, *International Migration and International Security. Why Prejudice is a Global Security Threat*, New York: Routledge, 2017.

13. Stefania Panebianco, 'The EU and Migration in the Mediterranean: EU Borders' Control by Proxy', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Online First, 2020, p. 14.

crisis has the likely effect of aggravating it as a *humanitarian* crisis, in which irregular migrants are the main victims.

Scholars tend to agree that the securitisation trend has gained momentum after 9/11 and other terrorist attacks of Islamist matrix that took place in the US and Europe. At the same time, securitisation is not exclusive to South-North migration, as proved by the case of India and Bangladesh. Indeed, securitisation seems to remain the main prism through which migration is currently framed; the EU, which in the mid-2010s was theatre to one of the worst migration «crises» of contemporary times, perhaps now offers a potential exception. Panebianco has argued that there has been an appreciable change in the EU's migration discourse stemming from the European Council, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic. The change consists in the programmatic promotion of a «human and humane approach» that emphasizes the EU's duty to ensure its citizens' interests but also extends solidarity to migrants. This new discourse substitutes the notion of «border control» with «border management» and stands in stark contrast with the securitized discourse filled with exceptionalism, urgency, and migrant criminalisation which had turned mainstream during the mentioned «migration crisis» of less than a decade ago.<sup>14</sup> The adoption of EU's *New Pact on Migration and Asylum* in September 2020 feeds such hopes, although it remains to be seen how proactive members states will be in its implementation. The EU's new human security-based paradigm, at least at the discursive level, appears in stark contrast with other enduring securitising approaches, such as the one emanating from the Indian state, which keeps revolving around notions of state and national security, and whose «costs» and «benefits» this paper attempts to assess in light of recent (2019-2021) developments.

### 3. *India as a destination of irregular migration*

Why should Bangladeshis search for better livelihoods elsewhere, particularly in neighbouring India, leaving a country that has successfully graduated from LDC status and is considered Asia's rising star?<sup>15</sup> This is what many

14. Stefania Panebianco, 'Towards a Human and Humane Approach? The EU Discourse on Migration amidst the Covid-19 Crisis', *International Spectator*, Vol. 56, No. 2, 2021.

15. Graduation from LDC (Least Developed Country) status marks an important milestone for Bangladesh's development trajectory, its image, and its political leadership. Having met all the prescribed requirements, in November 2021, Bangladesh was recommended by the United Nations' ECOSOC and endorsed by the General Assembly to officially graduate in 2026. See: United Nations General Assembly, 'Graduation of Bangladesh, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Nepal from the least developed country category', A/RES/76/8, 29 November 2021 (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3950012?ln=en>).

Indians ask, not without disdain for a smaller and younger neighbour that has recently outperformed India as the fastest growing economy in South Asia on some other development indicators as well.<sup>16</sup> Indian right-wing and anti-immigration politicians have voiced such concern strongly, thus branding illegal immigration from Bangladesh as a threat. Besides, while emphasising the size of immigration from Bangladesh, they cast a shadow on the country's economic trajectory, as emigration is seen as a sign of the inability of Bangladesh's much praised development to have a real positive impact on its people's lives.

On the other hand, the Bangladeshi government has repeatedly stated that the idea that its citizens emigrate to India illegally and in large numbers is a flawed one, and used the country's economic growth rates as evidence. Foreign Minister Abdul Momen has been particularly vocal in rebutting allegations: «The perception that a lot of Bangladeshis are moving to India is not true because Bangladesh is doing pretty well... It is the land of opportunity; it is a vibrant economy. When the economy is good, people will not move out of the country. So that perception is wrong».<sup>17</sup> Thus, while countering Indian accusations, the Bangladeshi government also defends the country's development success story, as central to the history of the Bangladeshi nation as to the legitimacy of the ruling party, the Awami League.

Reality is more nuanced and complex than either of the two official narratives. Undoubtedly, the country's development trajectory has been stunning, and it has managed to lift millions out of poverty. However, the wealth deriving from economic growth has not reached all in equal measure; instead, it has come to a high cost for many of those who have made it possible. Although Bangladesh's economy has experienced remarkably steady growth and maintained relatively high GDP growth rates (even during the pandemic), inequality remains an issue, as sections of the population become wealthier while many of those already in poverty become poorer.<sup>18</sup> In addition to this, climate change threatens already fragile livelihoods in rural Bangladesh and has emerged as an additional push factor for internal migration and emigration.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the country is among

16. 'India Struggles but Bangladesh's GDP Rides High on Manufacturing, Export Boom', *Business Today*, 30 October 2019.

17. «Bangladeshis Aren't Termites» — FM Abdul Momen Says Idea of Illegal Immigration to India Wrong', *The Print*, 27 March 2021.

18. Silvia Tieri, 'Bangladesh 2019-2020: Issues of Democracy, Disasters, Development', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 294, 302.

19. Migration has been also framed as an adaptation strategy to climate change. See Katha Kartiki, 'Climate Change and Migration: A Case Study from Rural Bangladesh', *Gender and Development*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2011. On the (re)emergence of climate change as a cause of migration see Etienne Piguet, 'From «Primitive Migration» to «Climate Refugees»: The Curious Fate of the Natural Environment in Migration Studies', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 103, No. 1, 2013.



the most densely populated (1,240 people per square km of land according to 2018 data), with a population among the youngest in the world (median age under 28 years).<sup>20</sup>

As a consequence, many struggle to find opportunities for sustainable income. For some daily wagers and ex-small farmers, seeking such opportunities in Dhaka and Chittagong (the country's major urban centres and key destinations of internal migrants from rural areas) is not a viable solution anymore: these cities are already swelling, and newly arrived workers find it hard to get employment. It is because of this reason that India continues to represent a relatively attractive destination for many. This is, for example, the case documented in Percot's ethnography of the landless peasants of Moralganj, in the Khulna Division in southwest Bangladesh, who, in order to escape debt trap and underemployment at home, prefer working as waste-pickers and domestic helpers in Delhi and Bangalore, even though this comes at the cost of vulnerability, marginalisation, and constant fear of deportation.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. *Crossing and violence at the «porous» India-Bangladesh border*

Most Bangladeshi migrants get into India from Bangladesh by illegally crossing the border that separates the two countries and runs more than 4,000 kilometres-long over land and water. The Indo-Bangladeshi border came into being in 1947 as a consequence of the partition of British India, which marked the beginning of the process of decolonisation and gave birth to independent India and Pakistan while partitioning Bengal.<sup>22</sup> In 1971, former East Bengal was reborn as the Bengali- and Muslim-majority People's Republic of Bangladesh. West Bengal instead – mostly Bengali-speaking

20. For the sake of comparison, the following data can be considered: India's population density is 455 people per square km of land (2018). Bangladesh's total population was 164.69 million (in 2020), and its total extension 147.6 thousand km (2018); by contrast, India's total population was 1,380 million (in 2020), and its total extension 3,287.3 thousand square km (2018). Source: 'Country Profile: Bangladesh', *World Bank Data*, 2021; 'Country Profile: India', *World Bank Data*, 2021.

21. Marie Percot, '«Picking up the Neighbours' Waste»: Migration of Bangladeshi Villagers to India Metropolises', *Migration and Development*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2020.

22. In eastern India, independence from the colonial yoke came along with the partition of Bengal, a vast and diverse region whose territorial boundaries had been reimagined and altered multiple times in the course of history, and that, in the political turmoil of 1947, ended up divided into West Bengal and East Bengal. East Bengal (then known as East Pakistan) became the eastern wing of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, from which it successfully seceded following the war of 1971, supported by Indian military intervention. See: Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010; Sayeed Ferdous, *Partition as border-making: East Bengal, East Pakistan and Bangladesh*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2022.

like Bangladesh, but with a Hindu-majority population – had «remained» in India since the partition of 1947. Today it is one of the states of the Indian Union and has the longest portion of the Indo-Bangladeshi border, whose other chunks fall within the Northeast Indian states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura. Thus, the Indo-Bangla border, like many in Asia and the post-colonial world, is relatively recent.

Those who can afford to travel via legal means and in relative security do so; most others cannot, so they cross the border illegally and remain vulnerable to poverty, violence, and exploitation. To make their passage across the border, they often rely on human traffickers – *dalal* («middlemen») – who count on a cross-border network of contacts, including corruptible border authorities.<sup>23</sup> Once on the other side, some migrants move to specific destinations and into employments that are already known to them because they have been prearranged relying on existing kinship networks;<sup>24</sup> others try to establish a new life on their own; yet others leave after the promise of contract jobs, often arranged by the *dalal* themselves. These agreements are not always genuine, and, as a result, migrants might find themselves working as bonded labour or sold as sex slaves in the case of women.<sup>25</sup> Many women are also trafficked as brides and destined to Indian sub-regions with highly skewed gender ratios where men resort to «buying women» in order to get married. Some enter these marriages willingly, while others are unaware of the destiny awaiting them.<sup>26</sup> In general, migrants' destinations are not limited to West Bengal and the Indian Northeast but might be elsewhere in India, well away from the border.

The relatively recent demarcation of this territory (where the border now lies) as an «international border» contrasts with the movement of goods and people that has been taking place for centuries and with the aspirations of those who are in search of better livelihoods on the other side.<sup>27</sup> To secure the border is a goal that both the Indian and the Bang-

23. Sharat G. Lin & Madan C. Paul, 'Bangladeshi Migrants in Delhi: Social Insecurity, State Power, and Captive Vote Banks', *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 1995.

24. *Ibid.* See also Swagato Sarkar, 'The Illicit Economy of Power : Smuggling, Trafficking and the Securitization of the Indo-Bangladesh Borderland', *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2017; Marie Percot, '«Picking up the Neighbours' Waste»: Migration of Bangladeshi Villagers to India Metropolises'.

25. Swagato Sarkar, 'The Illicit Economy of Power : Smuggling, Trafficking and the Securitization of the Indo-Bangladesh Borderland'.

26. Thérèse Blanchet, 'Bangladeshi Girls Sold as Wives in North India', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2005; Ravinder Kaur, 'Marriage and Migration: Citizenship and Marital Experience in Cross-Border Marriages between Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Bangladesh', *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 47, No. 43, 2012; Rimple Mehta, 'Barbed Affect: Bangladeshi Child Brides in India Negotiate Borders and Citizenship', *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2019.

27. For more details on the history of the Indo-Bangladeshi border, see: Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland. Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*, London:

ladeshi governments have repeatedly committed to, and in the case of India especially there is a complex set of interests in getting it sealed (as further detailed below). Despite this, the border has in practice remained «porous», as it continues to see the movement of goods (particularly debated in the Indian media is the case of cattle smuggled from India into Bangladesh); of people who frequently move in and out, even daily; and, of course, of migrants, especially Bangladeshis, who move to the other side of the border planning to stay there for some time before returning, or for good. The securitisation of the border on the one hand and the continuing trans-border mobility on the other are irreconcilable in the way they conceive and make use of the space of the border. Their clash produces violence, which marks the border – an everyday space for many borderland dwellers and a space of hope for migrants – also as a space of fear, vulnerability, and death.

Border violence takes many forms. While patrolling the border, Indian authorities have clashed with smugglers or come under attacks which in some cases have turned deadly.<sup>28</sup> For example, in 2019, an Indian soldier was reportedly shot dead from across the border by the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), the agency which controls the border on the Bangladeshi side.<sup>29</sup> In August 2021, two personnel of the Border Security Force (BSF), that is the Indian counterpart of the BGB, were killed along the border in the Northeastern state of Tripura, allegedly in an ambush by militants of the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), which is banned in India as a terrorist organisation.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, the «gaps» in the border sealing are not limited to land tracts still unfenced or hard-to-fence riverine portions. Some officials, both from the Indian and the Bangladeshi side, contribute to keeping the border porous as they are involved in the illegal traffic of goods and people, from which they reportedly benefit through bribes, cuts on «shipments» smuggled to the other side thanks to their connivance, or even sexual favours.<sup>31</sup> That the border authorities play such a role has been documented in ethnographic accounts of border crossing and border life;<sup>32</sup> in studies on informal cross-border trade; and in the occasional in-

Anthem Press, 2005.

28. 'Locking Horns at the Border', *The Indian Express*, 20 July 2020.

29. 'BSF Soldier Killed In Firing By Bangladesh Guards At Bengal Border', *NDTV*, 17 October 2020.

30. '2 Soldiers Killed In Ambush Along India- Bangladesh Border In Tripura', *NDTV*, 3 August 2021.

31. Swagato Sarkar, 'The Illicit Economy of Power: Smuggling, Trafficking and the Securitization of the Indo-Bangladesh Borderland'.

32. *Ibid.* See also: Marie Percot, '«Picking up the Neighbours' Waste»: Migration of Bangladeshi Villagers to India Metropolises'; Pallavi Banerjee & Xiangming Chen, 'Living in In-between Spaces: A Structure-Agency Analysis of the India-China and India-Bangladesh Borderlands', *Cities*, Vol. 34, 2013; and Rimple Mehta, 'Barbed Affect: Bangladeshi Child Brides in India Negotiate Borders and Citizenship'.

vestigations carried out against officers, local police, and politicians. The latest case emerged in India recently, in early 2021, against the backdrop of approaching elections in West Bengal.<sup>33</sup>

Conversely, border authorities reportedly harass people who inhabit border areas on either of the two sides. Also, they shoot to kill.<sup>34</sup> The victims of these border killings are not only people allegedly involved in illegal activities – like smugglers, traffickers, paper-less migrants – but also dwellers whose fields or grazing areas are located in the proximity of the border.<sup>35</sup> The cross-border movements are not unidirectional but go both ways: both Indians and Bangladeshis move across<sup>36</sup> and are the victim of border violence, including border killings. However, it is worth stressing that most of the victims are Bangladeshis.

### 5. *The securitisation of the Indo-Bangla border*

From an Indian perspective, the Indo-Bangladeshi border is critical for bilateral relations with Dhaka; for domestic politics concerning India's Northeast; as well as for Indian trade and connectivity with the broader eastern neighbourhood, that besides Bangladesh includes Myanmar and Southeast Asia.

The border does not just separate Indian and Bangladeshi territory: it also marks the delicate territorial connection between mainland India and its Northeast sub-region. West Bengal aside, the remaining part of the border on the Indian side falls within the territory of the aforementioned states of the Northeast: Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura. Geographically the Northeast area – which in addition to these states also includes Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland, and Sikkim – is linked to mainland India by the narrow Siliguri Corridor, also known as the «Chicken's neck», with China to its North and Bangladesh to its South. From a domestic point of view, the Northeast is considered one of India's borderlands because it features a high concentration of populations that are otherwise ethnic and religious *minorities* and because its integration into the Indian core has been late and turbulent. The area has been a theatre of armed separatist movements for decades. The central government's counterinsurgency led to hu-

33. 'Explained: CBI's Probe into Cross-Border Cow Smuggling Trade and Its Widening Net in Bengal', *The Indian Express*, 7 January 2021.

34. Saleh Shahriar, Lu Qian, & Sokvibol Kea, 'Anatomy of Human Rights Violations at the Indo-Bangladesh Borderlands', *Territory, Politics, Governance*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2020.

35. 'Trigger Happy. Excessive Use of Force by Indian Troops at the Bangladesh Border', *Human Rights Watch*, 9 December 2010.

36. Baniateilang Majaw, 'Indo-Bangladesh Borderland Issues in Meghalaya', *South Asia Research*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2021.

man rights violations which marred India's image and its legitimacy in the area. The protracted insurgency-counterinsurgency period also left a deep scar in people's memory and influenced the development of democratic institutions.<sup>37</sup>

Additionally, this sub-region of India is a reason for anxiety for New Delhi because it is one of China's gateways to the Indian subcontinent. As a consequence, China's proximity and proactivity are weighty factors in determining India's position vis-à-vis its Northeast. The recent clashes of June 2020 between the Chinese and Indian armies on the western Himalayan Line of Actual Control re-emphasized the volatility of the Northeast as a theatre of ongoing India-China rivalry.<sup>38</sup> Besides, China remains a crucial variable also in India's relations with Bangladesh. Beijing is a key development partner and investor for Dhaka, and recently it attempted to get involved in two matters that are close to Delhi's interests: the Rohingya crisis and, most importantly, the sharing of Teesta river water which is a long-standing Delhi-Dhaka bilateral issue.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, Delhi's *Look East Policy* – which, under Modi, became the *Act East Policy* – has among its strategic objectives enhancing the connectivity of India with Bangladesh and Southeast Asia through the development of India's land-locked Northeast.<sup>40</sup> Hence, although less volatile than the Indo-Pak border on the West or the nearby Indo-Chinese border lying to the North, also the Indo-Bangla border is of extreme geopolitical relevance for India.

37. Alex Waterman, 'Normalcy Restored? The Lingering Drivers of Insurgency in Northeast India', in M. Raymond Izarali & Dalbir Ahlawat (eds.), *Terrorism, Security and Development in South Asia*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2021, pp. 99–120; Dixita Deka, 'Living without Closure: Memories of Counter-Insurgency and Secret Killings in Assam', *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2021. Dilip Gogoi, *Making of India's Northeast: Geopolitics of Borderland and Transnational Interactions*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2020; Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation: India and its Northeast*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020; Vibha Arora, 'The Paradox of Democracy in the Northeast and the Eastern Himalayas', in Vibha Arora and N. Jayaram (eds.), *Routeing Democracy in the Himalayas*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2013, pp. 101–32;

38. Arzan Tarapore, 'The Crisis after the Crisis: How Ladakh will Shape India's Competition with China', *Lowy Institute*, 2021.

39. The Teesta is one of the many trans-border rivers shared between India and Bangladesh. It springs from the Himalayas in India's Sikkim, runs through India's West Bengal, and then enters Bangladesh. Dhaka and New Delhi sat at the negotiation table multiple times, but no agreement has been reached on the matter. In addition to the two national governments, also the Indian state of West Bengal is a key stakeholder in the dispute and opposes further water sharing. Recently, China offered Bangladesh an engineering scheme aimed at altering the riverbed for increased manageability. For further details see: Silvia Tieri, 'Bangladesh 2019-2020: Issues of Democracy, Disasters, Development'.

40. M. Amarjeet Singh (ed.), *Northeast India and India's Act East Policy: Identifying the Priorities*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2019.

The Indian state of Assam started fencing the Indo-Bangla border in the 1960s in phases. India's central government undertook fencing in the 1980s. Assamese politicians initially failed to engage the central government in the fencing endeavour but anti-Bengali violence in the following years prompted New Delhi to conclude the Indo-Bangladesh Border Road and Fence project in 1986.<sup>41</sup> The project recorded slow progress, until it was revived by the BJP when the party was at the lead of the National Democratic Alliance government (1999-2004).<sup>42</sup> The prevention of illegal immigration has represented a vital goal of the fencing endeavour since its inception. With the fence, India aims to keep its territory secure from a number of threats that are considered to be pouring in through the border; thereby securitising the border itself. McDuië-Ra identified three component narratives of the fence: controlling infiltration, national security, and monitoring trade. In all, the border fencing projects India as politically and economically developed vis-à-vis its backward neighbour. By contrast, Bangladesh is posed as a security threat: it is a source of India-bound migrants, ready to drain Indian economic resources; it is home to anti-India sentiment and Islamic terrorism; it is a shelter for anti-India Northeast militancy;<sup>43</sup> it is a base for illegal economic transactions.<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, the border, while working as a shield from the threat of supposed flood-like Bangladeshi immigration, also represents an essential component of India's own counter-insurgency in the Northeast on the one hand and of its participation in the global «War on Terror» on the other.<sup>45</sup> In any case, «the major issue driving border fencing in India is migration from Bangladesh».<sup>46</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic produced a subtle alteration of this narrative and its intrinsic power relations, although tacitly and temporarily. In late April 2021, Bangladesh shut down the border with India while the latter was undergoing its «second wave» and facing an unprecedented oxygen shortage. The border closure – which concerned people's crossing but exempted goods carriers – was initially declared for two weeks but subsequently extended in May and again in June.<sup>47</sup> The logic underlying the measure

41. Rizwana Shamshad, 'Politics and origin of the India-Bangladesh border fence', *17th biennial conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia, Melbourne*, 2008.

42. Rizwana Shamshad, 'Bengaliness, Hindu nationalism and Bangladeshi migrants in West Bengal, India', *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 18, No. 14, 2017.

43. Historically, Northeastern militant groups have sought sanctuary across the border.

44. Duncan McDuië-Ra, 'The India-Bangladesh Border Fence: Narratives and Political Possibilities', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2014.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Duncan McDuië-Ra, 'Tribals, Migrants and Insurgents: Security and Insecurity along the India-Bangladesh Border', *Global Change, Peace and Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2012.

47. 'Bangladesh extends border closure with India till June 30 due to Covid-19', *Business Standard*, 14 June 2021.

was obvious: containing the risk of virus spreading into Bangladesh through the border. Hence, the state of emergency caused by COVID-19 normalized a measure that would normally be diplomatically unviable, especially for a smaller neighbour like Bangladesh in its relation with India. Significantly, from the point of view of the securitisation of the border, it temporarily framed India – and not Bangladesh – as the source of unwelcome imports and as a security threat.

#### 6. *A long-standing humanitarian and political issue: border killings*

So far, the border has been fenced – but only partially – in a bid to keep a check on infiltrations. In early 2021, India and Bangladesh have renewed their pledge to secure its yet uncovered portions.<sup>48</sup> As mentioned, the border is guarded by the Indian BSF on one side and the Bangladeshi BGB on the other.<sup>49</sup> The two agencies hold semestral Director General-level meetings, where the commitment to bring border killings to zero have been reiterated multiple times but to no avail. In fact, killings of Bangladeshis at the hands of the BSF have continued throughout the last decade, decreasing in 2016 but then surging again and recording a decade high in 2020, with 51 Bangladeshi citizens shot dead in that year alone.<sup>50</sup> As for 2021, yet more cases have unfortunately been recorded. Based on the report of Bangladeshi human rights NGO Odhikar, by June 2021, four Bangladeshis were killed, six injured, and one tortured by the Indian BSF.<sup>51</sup> This brings the total number of (known) Bangladeshi victims since the year 2000 to 1240.<sup>52</sup>

As a result, while endangering the lives of those who live near the border or attempt to cross it, continuing border killings have also turned

48. 'India, Bangladesh Agree to Speed up Border Fencing', *The Hindu*, 27 February 2021; 'About 76 Pct of India-Bangladesh Border Covered by Fence: MHA', *ANI*, 3 August 2021.

49. For more details on the BSF and the BGB, see: Babu Joseph, *An Insight Into the Intricacies of BSF Law: An Anatomy of BSF Law by a GD Officer For GD Officers*, Chennai: Notion Press, 2019; Harsh V. Pant (ed.), *Handbook of Indian Defence Policy: Themes, Structures and Doctrines*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016; Lt. Col. M. D. Sharma, *Paramilitary Forces of India*, Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2009; Malini Sur, *Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility, and Citizenship at the Northeast India-Bangladesh Border*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021, p. 175.

50. 'Statistics of Human Rights Violation by Indian Border Security Force (BSF)', *Odhikar*, March 2021.

51. 'Three-Month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh: Human Rights Violations (January-March) 2021', *Odhikar*, March 2021; 'Three-Month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh: Human Rights Violations (April-June) 2021', *Odhikar*, June 2021.

52. The number of recorded border killings is in all likelihood an underestimate.

into a thorny issue that keeps marring Indo-Bangladeshi bilateral relations. While Indian authorities reiterate that they fire only when under attack and that the victims are criminals, in Bangladesh the killings are considered extrajudicial murders since criminals should be consigned to civilian authorities and not shot dead. Moreover, as mentioned, the people shot dead on the border are overwhelmingly identified as Bangladeshi citizens. Also, the delayed justice in cases concerning Bangladeshi victims of border killings – like the notorious murder of unarmed teenage girl Felani Khatun in 2011 – adds to Bangladeshi people’s indignation on the matter.<sup>53</sup> In addition to this, the killings endure in spite of the two governments’ commitment to bringing them to zero, Dhaka’s requests to Delhi to exercise restraint, and Delhi’s pledge to use non-lethal weapons.<sup>54</sup> Because of these reasons, border killings cause outcry among Bangladeshis and are perceived as a purposefully bullying behaviour inflicted on Bangladesh by India as a domineering neighbour.

While officially the border is presented as one of the many issues on which Dhaka and Delhi cooperate and promote ongoing dialogue, the problem’s endurance and the positions maintained by the two governments on the occasion of ad-hoc talks show a lack of common ground. For example, in 2020, the second biannual BSF-BGB meeting of the year took place in Guwahati, the capital of Assam, where the question of illegal Bangladeshi migration has been highly politicised for decades. As a result of the talks, the two parties agreed to conduct joint night patrols and construct single row fences in priority patches of the border. However, they kept differing on the extent of the infiltration; in fact, the BGB Director-General denied BSF’s reports of large numbers of Bangladeshis crossing into India.<sup>55</sup> A few months later, in March 2021, Indian Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar paid a visit to Dhaka ahead of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s trip to Bangladesh, scheduled later in the same month. Interacting with his Bangladeshi counterpart Momen on various aspects of bilateral ties, on border killings Jaishankar remarked that crime remains the outstanding problem.<sup>56</sup> His statement seemed to suggest that crime causes killings to endure; in other words, that as long as crime continues, the killings will not stop. The remarks seemed to im-

53. ‘Three-Month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh: Human Rights Violations (January-March) 2021’, p. 40; ‘Three-Month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh: Human Rights Violations (April-June) 2021’, p. 37; ‘10 years of Felani killing: family’s wait for justice continues’, *The Daily Star*, 7 January 2021.

54. ‘BSF Must Use Non-Lethal Weapons on Border, Bangladesh Tells India’, *The Hindu*, 21 July 2021; ‘Bangladesh Once Again Requests India to Use Non-Lethal Weapon at the Border’, *The Daily Star*, 27 February 2021.

55. ‘Reports of large-scale Bangladeshi ingress into India denied’, *The Hindu*, 25 December 2020.

56. ‘Killings along India-Bangladesh Border Because of Crime: Jaishankar’, *The Hindu*, 4 March 2021.



PLICITLY justify the killings and caused resentment among many in Bangladesh, more so because they were not followed by any rebuttal by the Dhaka government.<sup>57</sup>

At the basis of the problem is the fact that the two governments espouse very different versions of the reality of cross-border movements. While the Indian government and various politicians have pointed out for decades that a constant flow of illegal Bangladeshi migrants crosses the border to enter India, Bangladesh continues denying such allegations.<sup>58</sup> The general lack of comprehensive data on the phenomenon and, in particular, the lack of data acknowledged by both governments complicate efforts to analyse the issue and contribute to keeping it enmeshed in political narratives. A few years ago, upon publication of the long-awaited 2011 Census of India, some had argued, Census data in hand, that the issue of irregular Bangladeshi immigrants is over-politicised in India; that, in reality, they are far less numerous than what politicians declared and most people would imagine. Census data show that the number of Bangladesh-born people residing in India «fell substantially across almost all states of India and especially the major hosting states along the border—West Bengal, Assam and Tripura».<sup>59</sup> The demonisation of clandestine Bangladeshi immigrants, however, continues. For years Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)<sup>60</sup> politicians have quoted figures as high as 20 million, although they failed to back them with reliable sources.<sup>61</sup>

### 7. *The politicisation of immigration in India's East*

Indeed, the Bengali immigrant, and specifically the Bengali Muslim – hence «the Bangladeshi» – has been criminalized for decades. Immigration of people of Bengali ethnicity from the territory that is today Bangladesh has been framed as a threat to the cultural and economic wellbeing of local

57. 'Three-Month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh: Human Rights Violations (January-March) 2021', pp. 39-40; 'India's Message on Border Killings Is Loud and Clear: Like It or Lump It!', *The Daily Star*, 11 March 2021.

58. «Bangladeshis Aren't Termites» — FM Abdul Momen Says Idea of Illegal Immigration to India Wrong.

59. Chinmay Tumble, 'India Is Not Being Overrun by Immigrants', *LiveMint*, 28 July 2019. See also: R. B. Bhagat, *Population and the Political Imagination: Census, Register and Citizenship in India*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2022, pp. 77-78.

60. The BJP is a Hindu nationalist party. It is currently in power at the federal level as well as in various Indian states.

61. 'India and Bangladesh: Migration Claims Fact-Checked', *BBC News*, 21 February 2020.

populations in several Indian states at different points in time.<sup>62</sup> However, nowhere it has been more vehemently politicised than in the Northeastern state of Assam. There, the question of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants remains *the* key political issue to date.

Determining unequivocally who is who and where one belongs can prove a difficult task in the case of areas where migratory movements have taken place across centuries, along different routes, and under the aegis of different state powers. This is further complicated by the legacies of British colonialism, which, among other interventions, in the case of Assam-Bengal, gave impulse to migration and altered the borders of these sub-regions. In Assam and greater Bengal, large scale movements of Bengali people have taken place at least since East India came under colonial rule, thus making today's demarcation of identity categories such as «Bengali», «Bangladeshi», and «Assamese» not always straightforward. These identities, instead, have proved to change according to the politics of the time – a reminder of the unstable nature of minorities in South Asia.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, the borders of Assam (hence of Bengal) were altered more than once; their latest most important alteration was arguably the passage of Muslim-majority Sylhet from Assam to East Pakistan with the partition of 1947.<sup>64</sup>

Since the late 1980s, as it emerged as a rising force in Indian politics, the BJP drew attention to the issue of immigration originating from Bangladesh and constructed it as a security threat.<sup>65</sup> So doing, the party successfully reframed the Northeast's and West Bengal's «immigration issue» through a Hindu nationalist lens. The Bangladeshi Muslim – characterized in Hindu nationalist parlance by backwardness, violence, sexual prowess and abnormal fertility rates – is, for Ramachandran, one of the «others» in relation to which Hindu nationalism has articulated itself.<sup>66</sup> Thus, the politicisation of

62. Vanita Banjan, 'Illegal Bangladeshi Migrants in Mumbai', *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 70, No. 4, 2009; Sujata Ramachandran, «Operation Push-back»: Sangh Parivar, State, Slums and Surreptitious Bangladeshis in New Delhi', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2002; Rizwana Shamshad, *Bangladeshi Migrants in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017, Chapter Four: 'The «infiltrators» of Delhi».

63. For a detailed account, see Rizwana Shamshad, *Bangladeshi Migrants in India*, in particular Chapter Two: 'The Foreigners of Assam'. See also Sur's latest work documenting identities, survival, and violence around India's fence: Malini Sur, *Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility, and Citizenship at the Northeast India-Bangladesh Border*.

64. See footnote above. See also: Nabanipa Bhattacharjee, 'Unburdening Partition: The «arrival» of Sylhet», *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2009.

65. Sujata Ramachandran, 'Of Boundaries and Border Crossings: Undocumented Bangladeshi «Infiltrators» and the Hegemony of Hindu Nationalism in India', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1999; Rizwana Shamshad, 'Politics and origin of the India-Bangladesh border fence».

66. Sujata Ramachandran, 'Of Boundaries and Border Crossings: Undocumented Bangladeshi «Infiltrators» and the Hegemony of Hindu Nationalism in India.

irregular immigration from Bangladesh, while remaining a critical regional issue in the East and the Northeast, became also a national issue and an issue of «Indian» nationalism, and vice-versa. Promoting the securitisation of migration in border states such as Bengal and Assam served the party in its bid to carve a space for itself in states where it historically had a weak presence.<sup>67</sup>

In recent years too, the BJP has made its anti-immigration agenda the key point of electoral propaganda in border states. For example, in West Bengal, in 2019, during an election rally in Alipuduar (which together with Cooch Behar is home to a sizeable Bangladesh-born population), Home Minister Amit Shah said: «If the BJP comes to power, we will bring in the NRC here to throw out all infiltrators and illegal immigrants. We will also ensure that the Hindu refugees are not touched. They are very much a part of our country».<sup>68</sup> On another occasion, he declared: «Infiltrators are like termites in the soil of Bengal... A Bharatiya Janata Party government will pick up infiltrators one by one and throw them into the Bay of Bengal».<sup>69</sup> However, Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool party (TNM), the West Bengali regional party whose vote banks the BJP has been attempting to break into in West Bengal, condemned the NRC-CAA (that will be analysed below) through which Shah's party proposed to counter immigration.<sup>70</sup> Eventually, in the recent 2021 West Bengal Assembly election, the TNM defeated the BJP, and Banerjee won her third term as the state chief minister.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, the 2021 state elections in Assam saw the second consecutive victory of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance, in power since 2016.

Initially, in Assam, anti-Bengali xenophobia was targeted at Hindu Bengalis as well. However, it turned with particular vehemence against Bengali Muslims as the BJP gained power in the state. In her recent book on «Bangladeshi migrants in India», Shamshad convincingly argues that while earlier Assamese xenophobic discourse revolved around nativism – hence the opposition between the «local» Assamese and «foreigner» Bengali – the

67. Niraja Gopal Jayal, 'Reconfiguring Citizenship in Contemporary India', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2019, pp. 37-38; Rizwana Shamshad, 'Bengaliness, Hindu nationalism and Bangladeshi migrants in West Bengal, India'; Micheal Gillan, 'Refugees or infiltrators? The Bharatiya Janata Party and «illegal» migration from Bangladesh', *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2002.

68. 'Amit Shah Promises NRC in West Bengal, with Exemption for Hindu Refugees', *The Hindu Business Line*, 29 March 2019.

69. 'Amit Shah Vows to Throw Illegal Immigrants into Bay of Bengal', *Reuters*, 12 April 2019.

70. 'CAA Is a Means to Deceive People, Says Mamata', *The Hindu*, 9 December 2020.

71. Ronojoy Sen, 'Mamata Resists the BJP's Might, Wins Big in Bengal', *Institute of South Asian Studies*, 19 May 2021; Soumya Bhowmick, Ambar Kumar Ghosh, 'Battle for Bengal 2021: Political Themes and Electoral Dynamics', *Observer Research Foundation*, 2021.

entrance of Hindu nationalists into the political arena of the state successfully shifted the axis of the discourse from ethnicity (anti-Bengali) to religion (anti-Muslim).<sup>72</sup> In other words, the BJP has been able to communalise Assamese xenophobic identity politics to a large extent, framing them according to the Hindu nationalist discourse pursued on an all-India national scale. In practice, since a Hindu-Muslim binary got juxtaposed to the previous Assamese-Bengali one, Bengali Muslims in particular became the new targets; they became «infiltrators», threatening Assam and the nation with their «greed» and «alien» culture. On the other hand, the Hindu Bengali, earlier equally demonized in force of its *Bengaliness*, now became first and foremost a Hindu, hence welcomed as a «refugee».<sup>73</sup>

#### 8. NRC and CAA: the criminalisation of the Bangladeshi Muslim in the making

The politics of xenophobia in Assam are important also for another reason: the state is the leading-edge when it comes to the controversial NRC. Since 2019, the NRC and the CAA have emerged as some of the most divisive issues of contemporary Indian domestic politics. The two measures are considered discriminatory against Muslims and an attack on the country's secular character. In addition to this, they have in Bangladesh-originated migration an indirect target and, as a consequence, have the potential to impact India-Bangladesh relations as well.

The NRC is a register of all Indian citizens mandated by the 2003 amendment of the 1955 Citizenship Act. At the moment, the only state of the Indian federation with an NRC is Assam – other Indian states have in turn committed to implementing one, whereas states where political parties other than the BJP are in power have rejected it. In Assam, the NRC came into being as early as 1951 in order to curb illegal immigration from then East Pakistan, namely current Bangladesh. However, the final updated NRC for Assam was published recently, in August 2019.<sup>74</sup>

In order to be included in the NRC, people must possess certain documents that are deemed valid to prove their citizenship status in the first place. Hence, in theory, the NRC potentially identifies those who live in the country illegally and discourages illegal immigration. However, one of its main flaws is that, in practice, proving citizenship through documents can be unviable even to genuine citizens, as the status of many is *de facto*

72. Rizwana Shamshad, *Bangladeshi Migrants in India*.

73. On the differences between the BJP's and other Assamese parties' approach to irregular migrants, see also: Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democracy', pp. 372-373.

74. For a detailed analysis, see: Niraja Gopal Jayal, 'Reconfiguring Citizenship in Contemporary India'; see also: Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democracy'.

undocumented. This is because in India, like elsewhere in the global South, documenting births and deaths through bureaucratic acts is not necessarily a standard practice, especially among illiterate people who live in economic, political, or geographical marginalisation.

On the other hand, the CAA passed by the Indian Parliament in December 2019 amends the 1955 Citizenship Law. It offers Indian citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians who flee persecution from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, and have arrived in India by December 2014.<sup>75</sup> The bill is remarkable because it makes religious identity a criterion for Indian citizenship for the very first time. Indian secularism is not free from flaws, but it had remained the official credo of the state since independence.<sup>76</sup> It is undeniable that Indian nationalism has historically featured Hindu undertones, that Hindus' numerical majority in the country has been often exploited by political parties (not just the BJP) to the detriment of minorities. However, officially India has always projected itself as a secular polity. It is telling that, at the moment of post-colonial rebirth, India styled itself as a «Republic» (not a Hindu one), in contrast to «the Islamic Republic of Pakistan».<sup>77</sup> This explains why the CAA fast-tracking of non-Muslim refugees for citizenship has been widely received as «communal», Islamophobic, and as an attack on India's secular character enshrined in its Constitution.

As far as the politicisation of Bengali immigration in India is concerned, the CAA and NRC are of critical importance because they turn the mentioned binary discourse of the non-Muslim «refugee» versus the Muslim «infiltrator» into actual law. In practice, the synergy of CAA and NRC provides a pathway towards legalisation for undocumented people as long as they are not Muslim. Consider the following (not so) hypothetical scenario: once enforced, the NRC deprives of citizenship genuine citizens who are unable to prove their status; it also exposes undocumented migrants. However, Hindus and other non-Muslims (whether citizens or not) will have the option of applying for citizenship as refugees under the CAA, unlike Muslims. In other words, from the perspective of undocumented citizens of Bengali ethnicity and Bangladeshi migrants, the NRC-CAA allows non-

75. These are religious minorities in India, where Hindus comprise the majority of the population (80% approx.). Islam is the largest minority religion in the country (14% approx.); however, it is absent from CAA's list. For a detailed analysis, see: Niraja Gopal Jayal, 'Reconfiguring Citizenship in Contemporary India'.

76. C. S. Adcock, *The Limits of Tolerance: Indian Secularism and the Politics of Religious Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; Tejani, Shabnum, *Indian Secularism: A Social and Intellectual History, 1890-1950*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008; Anuradha Dingwaney Needham & Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *The Crisis of Secularism in India*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2007; Rochana Bajpai, 'The conceptual vocabularies of secularism and minority rights in India', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2002.

77. Ian Talbot, *India & Pakistan*, London: Arnold, 2000.

Muslims into the refugee category while excluding Muslims. Thus, it keeps criminalising Muslim Bengalis as «Bangladeshis» and «infiltrators» to exclude and eliminate.

### 9. *Potential reverberations in Bangladesh*

India's CAA-NRC has the potential to impact politics across the border as well. It is feared the CAA-NRC might contribute to exasperating identity politics in neighbouring Bangladesh and escalate illegal border-crossing from India, because in the Indian East and Northeast the measures have been advertised as aimed against illegal Bangladeshi migrants.

As far as border-crossing from India is concerned, recent declarations by India's BSF suggested that a re-migration movement back into Bangladesh had been recorded soon after the passing of the CAA, in early 2020, as more Bangladeshis were apprehended while crossing from India into Bangladesh than vice versa.<sup>78</sup> However, it remains unclear whether such data is sufficient to determine that the reported outflow is sustained; and if it is really or only motivated by CAA-induced fears among migrants rather than by other critical concurrent circumstances, namely COVID-19 and consequently increased unemployment, especially among daily wagers.<sup>79</sup>

Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government has refrained from openly commenting on the NRC-CAA. Its official stance is that the CAA, although unnecessary, is India's internal matter.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, by offering asylum to non-Muslims fleeing from Muslim-majority neighbours, including Bangladesh, the CAA implies that non-Islamic minorities are not safe in such countries, a claim that Dhaka has in turn denied. Although the Bangladeshi government has maintained a low profile on the matter, the CAA has been strongly criticised by Bangladeshi media and public opinion, further fueling anti-India sentiment in the country. For instance, in March 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was scheduled to travel to Dhaka on the occasion of Mujib Borsho, i.e. the celebration of Bangladeshi «father of the nation» Sheikh Mujib Rahman's 100<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary. The announcement of Modi's trip caused protests in Dhaka.<sup>81</sup> Its subsequent cancellation was then

78. 'Substantial Increase in Outflow of Bangladeshi Migrants Post CAA Enactment: BSF', *The Times of India*, 24 January 2020.

79. 'More Migrants Returning to Bangladesh, Shows BSF Data', *The Hindu*, 15 December 2020.

80. 'Citizenship Amendment Act Is India's Internal Matter, Sheikh Hasina Says', *Gulf News*, 18 January 2020.

81. 'People Protest Modi's Upcoming Bangladesh Visit', *Dhaka Tribune*, 2 March 2020.

officially justified with pandemic-related risks.<sup>82</sup> Around the same time, the visits of Bangladeshi Ministers to India were similarly cancelled, allegedly because of displeasure caused by the passing of the CAA in the Indian Parliament and the debate on the status of Bangladesh's religious minorities it had ensued at that time.<sup>83</sup>

In March 2021, Modi eventually made his way to Dhaka on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bangladesh's independence. His visit took place amidst large scale protests led by Islamist groups and madrassah students who clashed with Awami League supporters and the police. The protests resulted in at least twelve dead people after the police opened fire on the protesters, underscoring the government's hardline on dissent.<sup>84</sup> They also demonstrated the growing popularity and assertiveness of Islamists in the country. The protests were reportedly led by Hefazat-e-Islam (HeI),<sup>85</sup> a radical Islamist group that advances sectarian demands for the reform of Bangladeshi law and textbooks against atheists, apostates, and Muslim minority sects.<sup>86</sup> HeI had already been involved in violent protests, incurring in the government's heavy-handed repression and clashing multiple times with the police.<sup>87</sup> In all, besides casting a shadow on India-Bangladesh relations, the CAA and the enduring securitisation of the question of «Bangladeshi illegal immigration» in Indian politics weight heavy on Sheikh Hasina's perceived pro-India stance and cause her government and party to face harsher criticism at home, especially from the Islamist forces, who are now their primary challengers.

## 10. Conclusion

Even as the world is shaken by the enduring COVID-19 pandemic, migrants continue undertaking perilous journeys at great risk to their lives, pushed by multiple factors. Although it is a non-exceptional phenomenon, migration is often represented as a state of exception and a threat, thus securitized. Besides, the securitising trend concerns South-South migration as

82. 'PM Modi's Dhaka Trip Cancelled after Bangladesh Reports 3 Coronavirus Cases', *The Times of India*, 9 March 2020.

83. 'Bangladesh Foreign Minister Cancels Visit, India Brushes Away Speculation on CAB Link', *The Wire*, 12 December 2019; 'Bangladesh Cancels Foreign, Home Ministers' India Visits', *The Hindu*, 12 December 2019; 'Bangladesh Junior Foreign Minister Cancels India Visit', *The Wire*, 11 January 2020.

84. 'Violent Protests Spread in Bangladesh after Modi Visit', *Al Jazeera*, 28 March 2021.

85. «Hefazat-e-Islam» might be translated in English as «Safeguard of Islam».

86. Mubashar Hasan, *Islam and Politics in Bangladesh: The Followers of Ummah*, Singapore: Springer, 2020; Mubashar Hasan, 'Understanding Bangladesh's most potent religious opposition', *The Interpreter*, 31 March 2021.

87. *Ibid.*

much as South-North migration and remains strong although most scholars argue that, apart from propaganda advantages in electoral competition, securitisation does not necessarily pay off in practice.

This article has drawn attention to a case from the global South, namely the securitisation of Bangladesh-originated migration in contemporary India. Both old and new events concur to explain the phenomenon. On the one hand, it is rooted in the turbulent history of the subcontinent, in particular the 1947 partition, which forcefully embedded fluid territories into rigid boundaries and multiple identities into linear categories.<sup>88</sup> At the same time, it is also fuelled by several current geo-economic and political processes, such as the continuous threatening of fragile livelihoods caused by capitalist economies and climate change, and the mainstreaming of Hindu nationalism in contemporary India. The latter has caused migration to be further politicized in electoral competition and has produced new efforts aimed at policing it, of which the updated NRC-CAA are the latest incarnation.

Overall, the consequences of this case of securitized migration are far-reaching, including sustained human rights violation on the border and in its borderlands; damage to New Delhi-Dhaka bilateral relations; and, perhaps most importantly from a political point of view, the exasperation of identity politics in both the country of destination and the country of origin of the migratory flows. In conclusion, the case dealt with in this paper suggests that securitisation carries high humanitarian costs and political consequences that are neither desirable nor affordable for the countries involved.

Finally, beyond the political salience of the India-Bangladesh border and India-bound Bangladeshi migration, this case speaks of the issue of securitisation at large too. It invites a critical reflection on questions that are political, policy-relevant, and urgent beyond current South Asian affairs: who are the winners and the losers when migration is understood and managed through securitising discourses? Is securitisation worth its humanitarian and political costs?

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88. Joya Chatterji, 'From imperial subjects to national citizens: South Asians and the international migration regime since 1947', in Joya Chatterji & David Washbrook (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of the South Asian Diaspora*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2018, pp. 183-197.





THE YOUNG ABE KŌBŌ'S ENGAGEMENT IN POST-WAR JAPANESE LITERARY  
AND ARTISTIC SOCIETIES

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*Abe Kōbō represents a milestone in Japanese literature. He stands as the ideal link between modern and contemporary times, the best embodiment of so-called «advanced modernism», halfway between modernism and postmodernism, together with authors such as Endō Shūsaku, Nakagami Kenji and Ōe Kenzaburō. This article analyses his involvement in Yoru no kai (The Night Society) and Seiki no kai (The Century Society), two artistic-literary societies that played a very important role in the movement of cultural rebirth of Japan in post-war years.*

KEYWORDS – Abe Kōbō; Modern Japanese literature; Post-war Japan; Yoru no kai; Seiki no kai.

### 1. Introduction

Abe Kōbō (1924-1993), whose centenary will be celebrated in 2024, was one of the great figures of Japanese literature during the second half of the twentieth century. A candidate for the Nobel Prize several times, he was a cosmopolitan intellectual, a non-conformist prone to experimentation, a prominent figure recognized internationally yet never sufficiently appreciated, especially at home. Underpinning his difficult relationship with some Japanese critics and readers was his inclination towards an anti-realistic style, an iconoclastic and desecrating approach, and, moreover, some scathing attacks he levelled at the hyper-rationalism typical of Japanese society. Indeed, on several occasions, Abe affirmed his aversion to the most distinctly conservative aspects of Japanese ideology and culture, accusing his compatriots of «digitalising» their minds, leading to an ever-diminishing imaginative strength. Consequently, his work, which has influenced and continues to influence a large part of the Japanese experimental artistic-literary scene, is perhaps more appreciated abroad than at home.

Abe Kōbō also represents a milestone in Japanese literature; he stands as the ideal link between modern and contemporary times, the best embodiment of so-called «advanced modernism», halfway between modernism and postmodernism, together with authors such as Endō Shūsaku (1923-1996), Nakagami Kenji (1946-1992) and Ōe Kenzaburō (b. 1935). The latter, Nobel

Prize for Literature in 1994, highlighted Abe's exceptional artistic stature, recalling his own beginnings:

When I started writing, my greatest desire was to imitate Abe Kōbō. I did my best to reproduce his way of thinking, but I never managed to achieve that clarity on the world only he was able to create. I immediately began to emulate him when writing my first story, its publication in one of the university magazines I was involved with marked the beginning of my literary career. Soon afterwards, the same magazine asked me to write a review of *Kemonotachi wa kokyō o mezasu* (*Beasts Head for Home*, 1957). Abe Kōbō was, therefore, fundamental to the beginning of my writing career, and even today, I still feel that I can talk to him face-to-face.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. *In the beginning there were the «Night» and the «Century»*

In a country crushed by the aberrant image of the atomic mushroom, amidst the rubble of a bombed Tōkyō, two artistic-literary societies were born that heralded great novelties and testimonies of eternal truths: Yoru no kai (The Night Society) and Seiki no kai (The Century Society).

Among the founders of these groups and indeed of the entire Japanese cultural revival movement, we should mention, on the one hand, intellectuals of the calibre of Hanada Kiyoteru (1909-1974), Okamoto Tarō (1911-1996), Haniya Yutaka (1909-1997), Noma Hiroshi (1915-1991) and Shiina Rinzō (1911-1973), and on the other, promising young Japanese artists such as Abe Kōbō, Sekine Hiroshi (1920-1994), Segi Shin'ichi (1931-2011) and Teshigahara Hiroshi (1927-2001). Centred on a common desire for renewal, the union between the experience of the former and the youthful impetus of the latter lay the foundations of a movement that became the point of departure for a good part of post-war Japanese art and literature. It would later be a fundamental link between modernity and contemporaneity.

As evidence of their intense cultural activity, both Yoru no kai and Seiki no kai have left a series of magazines and publications. Of particular significance among these is a collection of essays with the programmatic title *Atarashii geijutsu no tankyū* (*In search of a new art*, 1949).<sup>2</sup> This volume, a

1. Ōe Kenzaburō 大江健三郎, '安部公房案内' (A Guide on Abe Kōbō), in *Warewa no bungaku*, Vol. 7, Tōkyō: Kōdansha, 1966, p. 480.

2. The collection includes the following texts: Okamoto Tarō, «Taikyokushugi» (Anti-Dialectical Principles); Abe Kōbō, «Sōzō no momento» (The Moment of Creation); Haniya Yutaka, «Hanjidai seishin» (An Anti-Epochal Spirit); Shiina Rinzō, «Ningen no jōken ni tsuite» (On the Human Condition); Hanada Kiyoteru, «Riarizumu josetsu» (Introduction to Realism); Noma Hiroshi, «Jikken shōsetsu ron» (On the Experimental Novel); Sekine Hiroshi, «Shakaishugi riarizumu ni tsuite» (On Socialist Realism); Sasaki Kiichi (1914-1993), «Fikushon ni tsuite» (On Narrative). A second volume was planned for the following year, 1950, but it never went beyond the design phase as the publishing house concerned closed down.

collection of lectures held by members of the two societies at various meetings and conferences, was published by Getsuyō shobō (in a certain sense heir of the historical Shinzenbisha), a reference point for progressive writers in those years and around which many of the aforementioned intellectuals gravitated. The headquarters of Getsuyō shobō and the newborn magazine *Kindai bungaku*, the classrooms of Tōkyō and Hōsei Universities, the homes of Okamoto Tarō, Haniya Yutaka and Abe Kōbō, and finally, the legendary Mon Ami café in Higashi Nakano, Tōkyō, became the changing setting for a story of avant-garde stories and revolutions: an interlocking script featuring writers, painters, literary critics, directors and poets who would chart a new course in the cultural history of Japan.

It all began in May 1947, when writer and literary critic Hanada Kiyoteru, having learnt of flattering comments made by Okamoto Tarō on a collection of his essays entitled *Sakuran no ronri* (*The Logic of Chaos*), decided to pay a visit on Okamoto to discuss the avant-garde. This legendary first meeting took place at Okamoto's home in Kaminogoe, in the Setagaya district of Tōkyō; it was the prologue to the founding of Yoru no kai, which occurred a few days later in Ginza, in the basement of a dilapidated building surrounded by ruins. Here is how Haniya Yutaka and Shiina Rinzō – the latter through the eyes of the protagonist of one of his novels – recall those first birth cries:

May 1947. There were piles of rubble as far as the eye could see; a single building stood alone in the midst of that sea of ruins. It had remained standing by some miracle, its walls blackened by the fire of bombs, like a surviving twin waking his dead brother. In its miserable basement, immersed in shadow, the inaugural meeting of Yoru no kai was held. Shiina Rinzō describes the memory of that first meeting in the pages of *Eien naru joshō* (*The Eternal Preface*): «The moment Anta set foot outside Yūrakuchō station, he thought that place could not be Ginza, perhaps he had made a mistake. [...] The wall of a building that had escaped destruction was as black as coal: perhaps, during the bombings, it had been repeatedly lashed by gigantic tongues of fire. There were many signs at the entrance, including one that read: 'Research Institute for International Socialism'. Anta tried to walk down a dark corridor, imagining that he would meet someone sooner or later. And instead, it was empty; there was not even the shadow of a human being. [...] Finally, he heard the cheerful and carefree voices of two or three young men, who seemed a little drunk. 'The Utopia Society? That sounds absolutely ridiculous! Ha-ha-ha! one of them sneered. Anta approached and saw the poster they were mocking hanging on the wall. It said, 'Today, debate on historical materialism at 3pm. Utopia Society, Shōwa Palace, fifth floor.»

Shiina mentions a «Utopia Society» on the fifth floor in his novel. In reality, our first meeting took place in a filthy and poorly lit basement; an

electric cable snaked across the floor, guaranteeing faint illumination. In the centre sat Okamoto Tarō, who never stopped speaking aloud, and Hanada Kiyoteru, his usual fearless expression printed on his face; scattered around them were the rest of us: yours truly, Nakano Hideto, Noma Hiroshi, Sasaki Kiichi, Shiina Rinzō, Umezaki Haruo, Abe Kōbō and Sekine Hiroshi.<sup>3</sup>

Yoru no kai was born in the presence of those listed by Haniya Yutaka (though the actual name was adopted later, at their third meeting). The first Japanese literary society to arise from the ashes of the Second World War had its two founders as spiritual guides. This was very much the case of the then very young Abe Kōbō and Sekine Hiroshi; they had been invited almost as if the masters, aware of their artistic potential, had wanted to elect them as privileged disciples. We will recount the evolution of the group and the almost contemporary foundation of Seiki no kai in the following pages, but let us now take a step back to analyse the historical circumstances that favoured the development of new cultural currents and the reasons that made two illustrious outsiders such as Hanada and Okamoto the heroes of the avant-garde movement.

The dark years of imperialist expansionism, the devastation of bombings and the dramatic atomic ordeal, had left Japan overwhelmed in an absolute sense of desperate emptiness as never before. It was, nonetheless, a blanket of despair under which lay hidden the fertile humus of hope and the will to recover. It was a desperation of multiple nuances: on the one hand, the painful and rational despair of the generations directly involved in that age of darkness; on the other, the unconscious and compelling despair of little more than twenty-year-old Abe and Sekine. The latter represented the first generation to become adults after the war. Like a good part of their peers, they were animated by a visceral urgency to affirm themselves and start from scratch in the hope of elaborating a new vision of the world. This was also thanks to a furious and sometimes reckless reaction against anything akin to tradition and, willing or not, part of a system imposed by the regime. These two generations were perfectly complementary: the young recognized the artists of the previous generation as authentic leaders, while the latter borrowed the enthusiasm of the former to exorcise the ghosts of the labour camps, censorship and an absurd and profane political vision. It is enough to think of the unhappy, dramatic situation of the young Abe Kōbō: he had returned to Tōkyō just over a year earlier on a ship quarantined due to a cholera epidemic after spending his adolescence in Manchuria, in Mukden (today's Shenyang), where his father worked as a doctor. His literary ambitions, seen in *Mumei shishū* (*An Anthology of Anonymous Poems*), published in cyclostyle print in May 1947, shortly before the meeting that

3. Haniya Yutaka 埴谷雄高, '埴谷雄高全集' (Haniya Yutaka Complete Works), Vol. 9, Tōkyō: Kōdansha, 1999, pp. 87-89.

founded Yoru no kai, were undoubtedly inspired by meeting those older intellectuals in that Ginza basement. Later, as we gradually complete the mosaic of this «interlocking script», we will see how and why Abe was there that evening. We should now highlight the importance of this encounter of two generations in the composition of that fertile substrate that gave life to a good part of the art and literature of the subsequent years, the movement that was later renamed Sengoha (the post-war School).

During a lecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Tōkyō (Tōkyō bi-jutsu gakkō; today Tōkyō geijutsu daigaku, Tōkyō University of the Arts), Okamoto Tārō urged his students to «destroy everything with great energy, in the manner of Picasso, so as to rebuild the world of Japanese art». <sup>4</sup> His unconventional cultural background, fuelled by his long experience in Paris (from 1929 to 1940), took a great hold on those, young and not so young, who wished to fill that devastating void evoked by the burnt out capital. Okamoto had studied ethnology at the Sorbonne and was highly active as an artist, especially within the two main movements: surrealism and Abstraction-Création. <sup>5</sup> In Paris, he had occasion to meet a large number of surrealist artists and other intellectuals who, in one way or another, had been involved with Dadaism, Futurism, Constructivism and so on. Thanks to this French experience, Okamoto was a beacon for those in post-war Japan who sensed the distant reverberations of those avant-garde movements the regime had obscured. He was also seen as a hero, especially by the young: it was rumoured that he had been a victim of the secret police during the war, that he had been branded as a «subverter» and had been thus ordered to the front. This is how he remembers the foundation of the «Society of the Night» in an interview dated 1976:

Shortly after the end of the war, Hanada Kiyoteru and I took on the role of instigators and lit the fuse, founding the Yoru no kai. Following defeat and the collapse of the old regime, many things needed to change immediately, yet a heavy paralysis persisted, especially in the world of art and culture. We intended to force through a turning point, so we decided to create an authentic artistic revolution. In other words, we realised that the country absolutely needed a new artistic movement. <sup>6</sup>

4. Cited in David Elliott, Kazu Kaido (eds.), *Reconstructions: Avant-Garde Art in Japan, 1945-1965*, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1985, p. 14.

5. It should be remembered that during the imperialist period it was not at all rare for Japanese artists to decide to move abroad (especially to France and the United States). Among others, the poet and art critic Takiguchi Shūzō (1903-1979) must be mentioned; he was actively involved in Breton's surrealist movement. When he returned home, he was among the founders of the artistic collective *Jikken kōbō* (Experimental Laboratory), which played the same role as Yoru no kai and Seiki no kai, but in the field of Japanese figurative arts.

6. Cited in Tani Shinsuke 谷真介, '安部公房レトリック事典' (Abe Kōbō Rhetorical Dictionary), Tōkyō: Shinchōsha, 1994, p. 368.

The cultural background of Hanada Kiyoteru is much less troubled. Though he could not boast of a period abroad, he too had extensive knowledge of the European avant-garde. During the imperialist regime, when the need arose he was quite able to stand up to the military authorities with a good dose of diplomacy, while remaining faithful to his Marxist political ideals.<sup>7</sup> The intellectual partnership between Okamoto and Hanada was an exceptional keystone in the history of post-war artistic revival, sealed once and for all by the activity of the «Society of the Night» which, from that famous evening in Ginza, began to meet regularly twice a month.<sup>8</sup>

At this point, before continuing chronologically, we need to go back a few months and capture the moment that informed the origin of the other important group of this story: the Seiki no kai. This time it was Abe Kōbō who lit the fuse, during the last period of his medical studies at the Imperial University of Tōkyō (Tōkyō Teikoku daigaku; today Tōkyō daigaku, University of Tōkyō). Abe, as mentioned above, returned definitively from Manchuria in January 1947 and resumed his university studies which had been interrupted. His literary interests, which he shared with some classmates who nurtured ambitions more literary than medical, were fuelled by the climate of cultural recovery that had been spreading since the previous year as can be seen in the foundation of magazines such as *Sekai*, *Kindai bungaku*, *Shisō no kagaku* and *Shin Nihon bungaku* in 1946. Taking Okamoto Tarō, Hanada Kiyoteru, Haniya Yutaka and similar writers as models, at a meeting held most likely in Kanda in the autumn of 1947, at one of their father's clinics (Akatsuka Tōru, then doctor and painter), Abe and his companions decided to found Nijūdai bungakusha no kai – Seiki (the Literary Society of Twenty-year-olds/Century. The following year, the name would be shortened to Seiki no kai following a split in the group). Unfortunately, no official documents exist of that first meeting, nor can we be sure about the number of participants or their identities. However, thanks to some of the key figures and subsequent membership, it has been possible to list the following names: Abe Kōbō, Iida Momo (1926-2011), Morimoto Tetsurō (1925-2014), Ogawa Tōru (1923-1991), Hidaka Hiroshi, Nakano Yasuo (1922-2009), Tsubaki Minoru (1925-2002), Endō Rintarō, Nakata Kōji (1927-2021), Nakamura Minoru (b. 1927), Tatsuno Takashi (1923-2012), Kiyo'oka Takayuki (1922-2006), Hariu Ichirō (1925-2010), Watanabe Tsuneo (b. 1926), Masaki Kyōsuke (1922-2004), Segi Shin'ichi, Akutagawa Hiroshi (1920-1981) and Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) (the latter only participated in the initial

7. Cf. Kusahara Katsuyoshi 草原克芳, '夜の会の怪人たち: 花田清輝「楕円幻想」と日本の戦後' (The Phantoms of Yoru no kai: Hanada Kiyoteru's *Elliptical Illusion* and Postwar Japan), *Gunkei*, No. 43, 2019, pp. 30-43.

8. The meetings were usually held on Monday in honour of the publishing house Getsuyō shobō, which in a sense acted as a «sponsor» to the group by publishing the members' essays and novels (the Chinese character for *getsu* can mean «Monday»).

meetings).<sup>9</sup> These future writers, poets, journalists and theatre directors were united by both their youth and their remarkable cultural depth. Here is how Nakata Kōji, a close friend of Abe and co-founder of the society, remembered those moments:

As we began to think about who to involve in the project, Mishima Yukio immediately came to mind. At the time he was already quite famous; nonetheless, he gladly accepted our invitation and introduced himself, saying that he preferred to join us rather than famous people. Mishima was number 26 on the list, Abe and I were numbers 1 and 2, respectively. [...] I remember that it was my job to print the provisional list with the names of all those present. Afterwards, we started to consider what name to give to the group and I suggested «Seiki no kai», inspired in some way by Dostoevsky's magazine. When we went to tell Haniya Yutaka, he immediately said to us (in Russian): «Ah, from *Epoch*, right?»<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Abe Kōbō a «connecting link» between two generations

In light of what has been said so far, it is clear that the first meetings were held before the summer of 1947, i.e. the first informal meetings of both societies, Yoru no kai and Seiki no kai. Their parallel but independent existence had Abe Kōbō as the only common member, at least initially, and in this sense, he was an intermediary between the two generations. This «double role» would later be shared with Sekine Hiroshi, a young poet Abe had had the opportunity to meet during the inaugural meeting of Yoru no kai.

Why was this privilege afforded to the author of *Suma no onna* (*The Woman in the Dunes*, 1962)? More or less during the same period as the two groups' unofficial births, Abe Rokurō (unrelated), Abe's secondary school German teacher and a member of the editorial board of *Kindai bungaku*, introduced him to Haniya Yutaka, the magazine's founder and one of its top editors. The aim was to propose a manuscript by Abe: *Owarishi michi no shirube ni* (*At the Guidepost at the End of the Road*, 1948).<sup>11</sup> Haniya accepted and

9. Cf. Segi Shin'ichi 瀬木慎一, '戦後空白期の美術' (Postwar Blank Period Art), Tōkyō: Shichōsha, 1996, p. 91.

Cf. Toba Kōji 鳥羽耕史, '<夜の会><世紀の会><綜合文化協会>活動年表' (Yoru no kai, Seiki no kai and Sōgō bunka kyōkai's Activity Chronology), *Tokushima daigaku kokugo kokubungaku*, No. 17, 2004, p. 16.

10. Nakata Kōji 中田耕治, '世紀' (The Century), in Abe Kōbō, *Abe Kōbō zenshū* 'Sabu nōto', Vol. 2, Tōkyō: Shinchōsha, 1997, pp. II-III.

11. The first part of the novel (*Dai'ichi no nōto*) was published in the magazine *Kosei* (February, 1948). In September of the same year, the full version was published by Shinzenbisha.



was impressed by the young aspiring writer's style and linguistic expertise - he took him under his wing and had him collaborate on several fronts. Already the main driving force of the newborn «the Literary Society of Twenty-year-olds/Century», Abe began to participate enthusiastically at «Night Society» meetings. He earned admiration all round, starting with Okamoto Tarō, who later, speaking of the group's first meetings, remembered him as «a young man with an extraordinary imagination, supported by impeccable logic and a rare persuasive force that could enthrall anyone».<sup>12</sup>

In May 1947, the second and third meetings of the «Night Society» were held respectively at the houses of Hanada in Komae and Okamoto in Kaminoge. The group's official name was finally chosen, inspired by a large painting by Okamoto entitled *Yoru (The Night)* that happened to be on display in his atelier. Subsequently, after a couple of meetings hosted by Haniya Yutaka in Kichijōji, the group moved to Mon Ami in Higashi Nakano, the society's historic headquarters. From the official foundation, on January 19, 1948, regular bi-monthly meetings at Mon Ami were held, thanks also to a small financial contribution from the Getsuyō shobō publishing house, initiated by Hanada. A few months later, probably on May 3, the two younger members of the group, Abe and Sekine, also decided to give official status to the «the Literary Society of Twenty-year-olds/Century», shortening its name to *Seiki no kai* and conferring a strong political imprint, in particular thanks to the growing influence of Hanada, a member of the Japanese Communist Party (*Nihon kyōsantō*). From that moment on, the classrooms of Hōsei University became the main venue for «*Seiki*» meetings, which were also bimonthly and almost always on Saturdays.

Both groups' main objectives can be summed up in the intention of establishing a culture without barriers of genre, in other words, an interdisciplinary movement aimed at promoting new models that amalgamated the various arts. Thus, a meeting on Kafka's writing might be followed by another on Mondrian's painting; a debate on the relationship between art and politics could give rise to another on cinema and philosophy; a writer could try his hand at painting and a painter at writing. This desire to proceed collectively is highlighted in the name of yet another group founded during the same period: *Sōgō bunka kyōkai* (the Association of Global Culture). The initiative was launched by Noma Hiroshi and saw the participation of many members of «*Yoru*» and «*Seiki*», including Hanada Kiyoteru, Sekine Hiroshi and the literary critic Katō Shūichi (1919-2008). Indeed, immediately after the end of the war, Katō Shūichi was among the first intellectuals to speak of the need to demolish the wall of silence and reserve that had been erected around conflict and defeat, he argued that it was necessary to speak openly and accept the answer so as to shake the people's conscience. Katō

12. Cited in Tani Shinsuke谷真介, '安部公房レトリック事典' (Abe Kōbō Rhetorical Dictionary), p. 369.

reiterated this concept in the pages of *Sōgō bunka* (Global Culture), the Association's magazine,<sup>13</sup> praising the essay *Darakuron* (*Discourse on Decadence*, 1946) by Sakaguchi Ango (1906-1955). This authentic libertarian manifesto harshly criticised the imperial system (*tenmōsei*) as an entity that devoured the individual's identity and viewed the end of the war as an opportunity for the Japanese people to regain their lost identity. This is how Noma Hiroshi addressed readers on the front page of the magazine's first issue:

The defeat has clarified, once and for all, the mistakes that our country made at the outset in 1868. The ruins that now extend before our eyes constitute the real shape of our past. Our lives, reduced to ashes by the horrors of conflict, finally meet the very source of life in this rubble. [...] Our starting point is the life that rises from the depths of these ruins. Our principal mission is to transform this source of life into a purely modern life.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, though held regularly, the meetings of Yoru no kai were a sort of *divertissement* for the «veterans» who, because of their numerous professional commitments, could not attend with the same continuity as the members of Seiki no kai. The atmosphere at the Mon Ami café was usually relaxed and convivial, and, as Haniya Yutaka recalled, «alongside discussing various issues, they hardly ever forwent the pleasures of alcohol, dance and cinema».<sup>15</sup> However, as has already been said, the highly formative role these meetings had for the younger members was fundamental. Again Haniya writes:

When I think how rapidly the young Abe Kōbō matured by attending the meetings of Yoru no kai, or recall Tanaka Hidemitsu's sighs of admiration, though a little from the sidelines, at our very friendly meetings, I can spontaneously affirm that Hanada Kiyoteru's avant-garde theories or Shiina Rinzō's amazing approach to realism, typical of those years, were an absolute novelty on the Japanese literary scene. It was an era that bore important fruits, an era of exceptional inflorescence.<sup>16</sup>

As the months went by, the meetings became less and less frequent, contrary to the progressive growth of Seiki no kai, to which Abe and his companions dedicated themselves with increasing zeal, based on Hanada Kiyoteru's coordinates: avant-garde, existentialism and communism. Hanada, the group's true mentor, blindly believed in the artist's political engage-

13. Nineteen issues were published in all, from July 1947 to January 1949.

14. Cited in Toba Kōji 鳥羽耕史, '安部公房の戦後—真善美社から<世紀の会>へ' (Abe Kōbō and Postwar: from Shinzenbisha to Seiki no kai), *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kyōzai no kenkyū*, Vol. 48, No. 5, 2003, pp. 34-35.

15. Haniya Yutaka 埴谷雄高, '埴谷雄高全集' (Haniya Yutaka Complete Works), Vol. 9, p. 89.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

ment and for this reason was highly sensitive to the events that continued to disrupt Japan during the American occupation. He insisted, for example, that men of culture should follow socio-political issues attentively and give their intellectual contribution to the first upheavals that arose due to the ban on general strikes imposed in 1947 by the McArthur regime. At the outbreak of the Korean War, when Japan became the headquarters for American troops, Hanada urged his young followers to realize, once and for all, that McArthur could not be seen as a potential source of democratic reform. Under such an ideological influence, Abe and his companions gave a certain practical strength to their considerations, distancing themselves from the fundamentally artistic matrix of *Yoru no kai*. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why the group decided to take to the cyclostyle copier and come out in the open, publishing and disseminating at its own expense, especially within the university, studies and observations based on new ideas. Moreover, after the immediate post-war period, the drive of these young people was at its zenith, as Segi Shin'ichi argued years later, recalling those days permeated by an elated revolutionary atmosphere:

Many, young and not so young, enthusiastically embraced extremism in both art and politics so as to forget or even loathe the past. This was the main reason why many young artists wanted to participate in the avant-garde or be communists.<sup>17</sup>

Western art exhibitions, novels, and films that reached Japan after years of prohibition and brutal censorship were often central to the debates in *Seiki no kai*. To give free rein to their desire to express themselves, Abe Kōbō and his companions founded two magazines: *Seiki nyūsu* (News of the Century) in March 1949 and *Seikigun* (The Company of the Century) in August of the following year. At first, starting from the official foundation of the club, during the two usual monthly meetings, the following conferences were held – their thematic variety demonstrates a «global» orientation in line with *Yoru no kai* and *Sōgō bunka kyōkai*: *Shūruvuarizumu* («Surrealism», speaker: Tsubaki Minoru), *Gijutsu to geijutsu* («Technology and Art», Sekine Hiroshi), *Tetsugaku no unmei ni tsuite* («On the Fate of Philosophy», Watanabe Tsuneo), *Minshū ni tsuite* («On the People», Miyamoto Osamu – pseudonym of Iida Momo), *Nijūdai no hōhō ni tsuite* («On the Method of the Twenty Year Olds», Abe Kōbō), *Interigencha ron* («Study on the Intellectuals», Nakano Yasuo). Meanwhile, the group's official manifesto was published in the December 1948 issue of *Sōgō bunka*. It was simply titled *Seiki ni tsuite* (*On the Century*), the beginning reads:

The Century is the culture of the generation of twenty-year-olds, made by twenty-year-olds and for twenty-year-olds. Our only aim is

17. Segi Shin'ichi 瀬木慎一, '戦後空白期の美術' (Postwar Blank Period Art), p. 95.

to create a new century from the divisions and confusion of the post-war period.<sup>18</sup>

Shortly before, a debate involving some members had been published in the August issue of the same magazine (entitled *Seiki no kadai ni tsuite*, «On the issues of the century»), it included, among other things, a discussion on the «war problem», seen as an obscure and fundamental discriminating factor when compared to the previous century. Miyamoto Osamu, in particular, claimed that, unfortunately, «the enlargement of the world» in the twentieth century was due to the war, which had assumed global dimensions for the first time. The planet, from Europe to Asia, had been united under the banner of war. The participants in the debate talked about existentialism, phenomenology, Heidegger and Jaspers, concluding that the foundations had to be laid through a total renewal of culture to regain the identity lost after the conflict and create something really new.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. Global art for the «New Century»

A «new century», reiterating an intention to start from scratch already in the choice of name and, moreover, a probable intention to reconnect ideally with the western avant-garde of the start of the century. The point of departure was to be the West of futurism, surrealism, cubism and other avant-garde movements of the first decades of the twentieth century.

The cultural crossover proposed by Abe and his group (the founding members were almost exclusively writers) soon attracted many exponents of the figurative arts, in particular, the painters Ikeda Tatsuo (1928-2020), Katsuragawa Hiroshi (1924-2011) and the multifaceted, rising star Teshigahara Hiroshi. As of May 1949, a painting section had been established in *Seiki no kai*, hosting regular meetings in addition to those of the mother group, and its members were both promoters and participants in the second edition of two important exhibitions held in Tōkyō: *Modān āto ten* (September 1949, at the headquarters of the Mitsukoshi department store) and *Nihon andepandan ten* (February 1950, sponsored by «Yomiuri shinbun»). This second event was fundamental, to say the least, in addition to proposing the first major retrospective of Matisse in Japan, over several editions it gave the Japanese public their first opportunity to admire the works of American artists such as Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko.

18. Cited in Toba Kōji 鳥羽耕史, ‘安部公房の戦後－真善美社から<世紀の会>へ’ (Abe Kōbō and Postwar: from Shinzenbisha to Seiki no kai), p. 37.

19. Cf. Abe Kōbō 安部公房, Nakata Kōji 中田耕治, Sekine Hiroshi 関根弘 *et al.*, ‘二十代座談会・世紀の課題について’ (Twenty-year-olds’ Roundtable – About the Century), in Abe Kōbō, *Abe Kōbō zenshū*, Vol. 2, pp. 59-75.

The third issue of *Seiki nyūsu*<sup>20</sup> published Abe Kōbō's reconfirmation speech as president and leader of the group (17 April 1949). In that speech, he clearly expressed his will to imbue a new militant impetus and detach himself definitively from Hanada Kiyoteru and Okamoto Tarō's Yoru no kai. Nonetheless, they were to remain involved until the end as «special members», alongside Haniya Yutaka, Sasaki Kiichi, Noma Hiroshi and Shiina Rinzō.

Though Yoru no kai was founded with great intentions as an active artistic movement, it has not yielded the desired fruits, so now it is up to our generation, that is to say to us young twenty-year-olds, to enact a change by ensuring everyone hears our voice. At the beginning of this year, in agreement with Sekine and the other founding members, I thought of giving new energy to our society, resuming full activity. For this reason, we have drafted a regular corporate statute and founded an official magazine. Now, having reaped the bureaucratic and financial legacy of Yoru no kai, we can benefit from a stable foundation.

As you all know, the literary establishment of our country is founded on very rigid patterns and it continues to be assumed that it is necessary to be part of it and abide by its rules to make progress. Personally, I do not believe this. It is up to us to overthrow this system and establish a new artistic movement. Avant-garde movements and phenomena are taking place everywhere and all the time, but I want to emphasise that the real avant-garde is very different from modernism. Clarifying this difference must be one of our priorities to best promote a movement of pure avant-garde.<sup>21</sup>

It was a revolutionary speech, an authentic act of defiance against the decadent authorities; it reflected the influence of Hanada Kiyoteru's work of political awareness, which could also be heard in a short poem entitled *Seiki no uta* (*The Poetry of the Century*), which Abe had composed just a month earlier, in conjunction with the first issue of *Seiki nyūsu* and the group's new orientation:

Drying our days  
 We distil the jar of tears  
 And we imitate mummies  
 When something will come to extinguish the fire  
 To become that fire ourselves!<sup>22</sup>

20. A total of eight issues were published from March 1949 to December 1950. The first five, numbered 1 to 5, were monthly from March to July 1949. The last three, numbered from 1 to 3, every second month from August to December 1950.

21. Abe Kōbō 安部公房, '真のアヴァンギャルドに' (In a pure Avant-garde), in Id., *Abe Kōbō zenshū*, Vol. 2, p. 231.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

These five lines sum up the essence of one of Japan's most intense seasons of cultural and literary protest. Abe Kōbō was among its most authoritative exponents, both in the form of the short story – think of the strong Marxist symbolism of *Akai mayu* (*The Red Cocoon*, 1950), *Kōzui* (*The Flood*, 1950) and *Suichū tōshi* (*The Underwater City*, 1952) – and many the essays he wrote at the time, some published in the group's magazine (the title of one that appears in number 5: *Kakumei no geijutsu wa geijutsu no kakumei denakereba naranu!* [*Revolutionary art must be an artistic revolution!*] is programmatic, to say the least).

Within a couple of years, from being a young and admired supporting actor, Abe Kōbō had become the leader of a group in which each member proved their own contribution. This can be seen in the pages of *Seiki nyūsu* and even more so in those of *Seikigun*,<sup>23</sup> a sort of appendix devoted to specific themes consisting of monographic volumes in the name of «global art». The first issue, with a surrealist-inspired cover by Teshigahara Hiroshi, was dedicated to Franz Kafka and included the first publication in Japanese of some stories translated by Hanada Kiyoteru.<sup>24</sup> It is no mystery that Kafka, along with Sartre and Gide, was the favourite writer of many group members. Nakata Kōji recalls, for example, having lent *The Trial* (in a rare translation by Hanada) to his friend Abe even before the foundation of the «the Literary Society of Twenty-year-olds».<sup>25</sup> In addition, *Kafuka to Sarutoru* («Kafka and Sartre») was the title of a lecture Abe gave at the Faculty of Literature of Tōkyō University on May 14, 1949, as part of a cycle of lectures on 20th century literature organized by Seiki no kai. The second issue contains a story by Suzuki Hidetarō titled *Kamikire* (*A Piece of Paper*, 1950). The third was a translation by Segi Shin'ichi of an essay by Piet Mondrian<sup>26</sup>, little known in Japan at the time, it included Mondrian's portrait of Teshigahara Hiroshi in «naturalist» style. The fourth and fifth issues contained two stories by Abe, *Mahō no chōku* (*The Magic Chalk*, 1950) and *Jigyō* (*Business*, 1950), once again with Surrealist-inspired covers, by Teshigahara and Katsuragawa, respectively. In the sixth issue, we find a collection of poems by Sekine Hiroshi entitled *Sabaku no ki* (*The Desert Tree*, 1950), with illustrations by Teshigahara and Katsuragawa under the evident influence of artists such as Ernst and Dalí. The seventh and final issue had a title page by Segi Shin'ichi. It included, not surprisingly, the translation of an essay by the Russian writer Aleksandr Fadeev (an important proponent of proletarian literature and general secretary of the Soviet Writers' Union from 1946 to 1956). It bears witness to a clear political U-turn for Abe, Teshigahara and

23. Seven special issues were printed between September and December 1950.

24. «The Bridge», «Prometheus», «The Silence of the Mermaids», «The Knight of the Bucket», «The City Coat of Arms» and a short fragment on fairy tales.

25. Cf. Nakata Kōji 中田耕治, '世紀' (The Century), p. II.

26. Dating back to 1943 and included in *American Abstract Artists*, New York: The Ram Press, 1946.

other members and, therefore, the beginning of the group's disintegration. Segi was among the first to leave, stating Abe Kōbō «is no longer the kind Rilke-loving man who once wrote romantic poems».<sup>27</sup>

About two hundred cyclostyle copies of *Seikigun* were printed and sold at fifty yen each for self-financing purposes, modelled on the publications of the Japanese Communist Party. Meanwhile, on the inside back cover of *Seiki nyūsu* in August (1950) – the first issue after the radical change – the official statute of the club was published, the first two articles read:

1. The name of this association is: *Seiki* [«The Century»].
2. The association aims to promote an artistic revolution carried forward by the new generations and establish a new artistic movement that affects the various disciplines.

Katsuragawa Hiroshi, among the last to join the group but among the most active members, recalls the feverish activity at the time of the change and his personal enthusiasm in following the revolution enacted by Abe, Hanada and comrades:

What charmed me most was the group's concept of a «global artistic movement», based on clear and direct theses such as *Breaking down the barriers between genres and creating a total art* or *An artistic revolution is a revolutionary art*. There was an atmosphere of great conviction and maximum adherence to those ideals; it constituted the true cornerstone of the movement. Participating in the group's activities, I became fully aware for the first time of belonging to a new era dedicated to an «artistic movement» and exceptional changes. [...] The experience of «Seiki», especially being close to people like Abe Kōbō and Hanada Kiyoteru, was a sort of «ideal university» for me. What is more, it was free! It allowed me to acquire ideological and cultural experience that was fundamental to the formation of my personality and my ideas.<sup>28</sup>

Following the departure of many artists who did not share the group's political change and a day after the dissolution of the figurative arts section, Katsuragawa was appointed as head of a new magazine *BEK* («century» in Russian); however, only one issue was published in May 1950. It was a special issue entitled *Geijutsu no unmei* (*The Fate of Art*), with articles by Abe, Katsuragawa, Segi and Hanada, the first part of Suzuki Hidetarō's story *Kamikire* (under his pseudonym Kinoshita Makoto). The cover consisted of an illustration by Katsuragawa and a poem by Sekine entitled *Senaka no me* (*The Eyes of the Back*). For the first time, the cyclostyle was abandoned in favour of

27. Cited in Dore Ashton, *The Delicate Thread – Teshigahara's Life in Art*, Tōkyō - New York - London: Kōdansha International, 1997, p. 54.

28. Katsuragawa Hiroshi 桂川寛, '廃墟の前衛 – 回想の戦後美術' (Ruins of the Avant-garde – Postwar Art Recollections), Tōkyō: Ichijōsha, 2004, pp. 39-42.

two-tone printing (green and black). In December of the same year, another special publication was issued, *Seiki gashū* (*the Century collection of paintings*). It was the group's swansong and summarized the movement's philosophy in the most straightforward manner: it presented five pictorial works by Teshigahara, Katsuragawa, Ōno Saiji (not an official member but a university companion of Teshigahara), Abe and Suzuki, in a true collaboration between painters and writers. Abe's work, entitled *Edipusu* (*Oedipus*), was an oil-coloured pencil drawing which gave an interpretation of the Oedipus complex. Suzuki's *Obuje bodesuku* (*Object bodesque*) was a pencil drawing depicting a highly surreal cross between a man and a tuber. Katsuragawa and Teshigahara, who were professional painters, were the authors of *Kita no hito to minami no hito* (*Northerners and Southerners*) – a woodcut on the dramatic situation in Korea –, *Haritsuke* (*Crucifixion*) and *Fushigina shima* (*The Island of Wonders*).

Meetings of «Seiki» suddenly became less frequent while the commitments of individual members intensified; Abe, in particular, was immersed in writing *Kabe* (*The Wall*, 1951), which would soon earn him the prestigious Akutagawa prize (July 1951); Teshigahara was developing a keen interest in documentary cinema, inspired by his passion for Italian neorealism. We should not forget that many members – Abe first and foremost – were actively involved in the Japanese Communist Party. The paths of the two most prominent figures in the group would cross again, about ten years later, when Abe Kōbō and Teshigahara Hiroshi collaborated together on an important chapter in the history of Japanese cinema. But that is another story, decidedly more thoughtful and less stormy than that of the avant-garde of the Night and the young revolutionaries of the Century. It seems legitimate to conclude once again with the words of Katsuragawa Hiroshi:

«Seiki» had now expressed its strength to the full, producing a series of works in total collaboration and in the name of a unitary spirit. We eventually realised that it was practically impossible to go any further, and so, at the beginning of 1951, activities ceased overnight. The words of Abe, who had previously said that «the essence of the Avant-garde lies in renouncing oneself in favour of the people», anticipated the group's epilogue, which concluded definitively in March of the same year. It lasted about two years (considering the official foundation), from the spring of 1949 to that of 1951. A Sturm und Drang that produced a storm of substantial change over a short period, comparable to at least ten years of other eras. In my opinion, a good part of what happened in the following decades originated precisely from that great storm.<sup>29</sup>

29. *Ibid.*, p. 84.





APPENDIX  
LIST OF THE ASIA MAIOR'S ANNUAL ISSUES

*With, in brackets, the recommended citation style*

Vol. I Giorgio Borsa e Paolo Beonio-Brocchieri (a cura di), *Asia Major. Un mondo che cambia*, Ispi/il Mulino, Bologna 1990 (*Asia Maior*, Vol. I/1990);

Vol. II Giorgio Borsa e Paolo Beonio-Brocchieri (a cura di), *L'Altra Asia ai margini della bufera. Asia Major 1991*, Ispi/il Mulino, Bologna 1991 (*Asia Maior*, Vol. II/1991);

Vol. III Giorgio Borsa (a cura di), *Le ultime trincee del comunismo nel mondo. Asia Major 1992*, Ispi/il Mulino, Bologna 1992 (*Asia Maior*, Vol. III/1992);

Vol. IV Giorgio Borsa (a cura di), *La fine dell'era coloniale in Asia Orientale. Asia Major 1993*, Ispi/il Mulino, Bologna 1993 (*Asia Maior*, Vol. IV/1993);

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Vol. VII Giorgio Borsa e Giovanna Mastrocchio (a cura di), *Integrazione regionale e ascesa internazionale. Asia Major 1996*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 1996 (*Asia Maior*, Vol. VII/1996);

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Vol. XIII Elisa Giunchi, Corrado Molteni e Michelguglielmo Torri (a cura di), *L'Asia prima e dopo l'11 settembre. Asia Major 2002*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 2003 (*Asia Maior*, Vol. XIII/2002);

Vol. XIV Corrado Molteni, Francesco Montessoro e Michelguglielmo Torri (a cura di), *Le risposte dell'Asia alla sfida americana. Asia Major 2003*, CSPEE/Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2004 (*Asia Maior*, Vol. XIV/2003);

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Vol. XVIII Michelguglielmo Torri (a cura di), *L'Asia nel «grande gioco». Il consolidamento dei protagonisti asiatici nello scacchiere globale*, Guerini e Associati, Milano 2008 (*Asia Maior*, Vol. XVIII/2007);

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Vol. XXIII Michelguglielmo Torri e Nicola Mocci (a cura di), *Rallentamento economico e debolezza della politica in Asia*, Emil di Odoya, Bologna 2013 (*Asia Maior*, Vol. XXIII/2012);

Vol. XXIV Michelguglielmo Torri e Nicola Mocci (a cura di), *Il dragocinese e l'aquila americana sullo scacchiere asiatico*, Emil di Odoya, Bologna 2014 (*Asia Maior*, Vol. XXIV/2013);

Vol. XXV Michelguglielmo Torri and Nicola Mocci (eds.), *Engaging China, Containing China*, Emil di Odoya, Bologna 2015 (*Asia Maior*, Vol. XXV/2014);

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Vol. XXVII Michelguglielmo Torri and Nicola Mocci (eds.), *The End of The Obama Era in Asia*, Viella, Roma 2017 (*Asia Maior*, Vol. XXVII/2016);

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Vol. XXX Michelguglielmo Torri, Nicola Mocci and Filippo Boni (eds.), *Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution*, Viella, Roma 2020 (*Asia Maior*, Vol. XXX/2019).

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Vol. XXXII Michelguglielmo Torri, Filippo Boni and Diego Maiorano (eds.), *Asia in 2021: In the grip of global and local crises*, Viella, Roma 2022, (*Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXII/2021).

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*With, in brackets, the recommended citation style*

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Special Issue No. 2 Giulio Pugliese, Andrea Fischetti and Michelguglielmo Torri (eds), *US-China Competition, COVID-19 and Democratic Backsliding in Asia*, Viella, Roma 2022 (*Asia Maior*, Special Issue No. 2/2022).

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