



ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXV / 2024

Asia in 2024: Fragile democracies amid global turmoil

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano
Elena Valdameri

viella

A large, intricate mandala design on the right side of the page. It features a complex, symmetrical pattern with multiple layers of geometric and organic shapes, including circles, triangles, and scalloped edges. The design is rendered in a dark brown color against the lighter background.

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

ASIA MAIOR

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

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ISBN 979-12-5469-681-1 (Paper) ISBN 979-12-5469-682-8 (Online)

ISSN 2385-2526 (Paper) ISSN 2612-6680 (Online)

Annual journal - Vol. XXXV, 2024

This journal is published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & the CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli Extra-europei «Cesare Bonacossa», University of Pavia

Asia Maior: The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989 is an open-access journal, whose issues and single articles can be freely downloaded from the think tank webpage: www.asiamaior.org.

The reference year is the one on which the analyses of the volume are focused. Each *Asia Maior* volume is always published in the year following the one indicated on the cover.

Paper version	Italy	€ 50.00	Abroad	€ 65.00
Subscription	abbonamenti@viella.it www.viella.it			

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CONTENTS

IX Foreword

MICHEL GUGLIELMO TORRI, *Asia Maior in 2024: Under the sign of a declining democracy*

Articles

- 1 FLORA SAPIO, *China 2024: Preparing for future challenges through self-reliance*
27 STEFANO PELAGGI, *China's Foreign Policy 2024: Strategic assertiveness and diplomatic adaptation*
53 MARCO MILANI & ANTONIO FIORI, *Korean peninsula 2024: A year of political and social upheaval*
83 RAYMOND YAMAMOTO & MARCO ZAPPA, *Japan 2024: Striving for security amidst political turmoil*
125 THAN KIÜ, *Hong Kong 2024: Adjusting to the National Security Law*
143 RIWANTO TIRTOSUDARMO & PETER B.R. CAREY, *Indonesia 2023-24: Jokowi's endgame and the politics of dynasty*
191 CHRISTINE CABASSET, *Timor-Leste 2024: In a changing geopolitical environment, reconciliation as a central pillar*
207 EMANUELA MANGIAROTTI & MARSHELAYANTI MOHAMAD RAZALI, *Malaysia 2024: Trials and trajectory of Anwar Ibrahim's political leadership*
223 RICHARD QUANG-ANH TRAN, *Vietnam 2024: Continued economic growth, change in leadership, and «Bamboo Diplomacy»*
235 EDOARDO SIANI, *Thailand 2023-2024: A general election and its contested aftermath*
251 MATTEO FUMAGALLI, *Myanmar 2024: Whose tide has turned?*
267 SILVIA TIERI & RAIAN HOSSAIN, *Bangladesh 2023-2024: From democratic backsliding to the Monsoon Revolution, towards democratic transition*
291 JAMES MANOR, *India 2024: Authoritarianism checked, then reasserted*
315 IAN HALL, *India 2024: Challenges and contention in foreign policy*
335 CHULANEE ATTANAYAKE & RAJNI GAMAGE, *Sri Lanka 2024: Political, economic, and geopolitical transformations*
355 MARCO CORSI, *Pakistan 2024: Political turmoil and economic instability*
377 SARA BERLOTO & NICOLÒ FASOLA, *Kyrgyzstan 2021-2024: Japarov's seizure of power amidst structural challenges*
399 CARLO FRAPPI, *Armenia 2024: Quo Vadis Yerevan? The difficult path out of the Russian trap*

Special articles

- 421 CLAUDIO CECCHI, *China and India: Cooperation and rivalry in the global landscape and within the BRICS*
441 DAVID SCOTT, *Maritime Asia: A «theatre of consequence»*
459 LORENZO KAMEL, *Gaza and the Demographic Question*

477 Reviews

509 Appendix

FOREWORD

ASIA MAIOR IN 2024: UNDER THE SIGN OF A DECLINING DEMOCRACY

In 2024, the main developments characterizing the situation in Asia Maior¹ were the same ones highlighted in the three previous issues of this journal, namely the growing tensions in the US-China relationship, the authoritarian involution ongoing in most Asian countries (as elsewhere in the world) and, finally, the fallout from the wars ongoing in Western Eurasia.

In 2024 no radically new happening has modified these trends, discussed at length in the previous three Asia Maior volumes. Or, more accurately, the only radically new development that did happen took place outside Asia, being represented by Donald J. Trump's election to the US Presidency on 5 November. This is an event bound to heavily impact on the situation in Asia (as, of course, the world at large), radically influencing, one way or another, all the three trends which this journal has single out as characterizing the evolution of Asia. But, of course, the impact of the November 2024 election in the US will take place and become visible only once Trump comes into office (on 20 January 2025); therefore, it is outside the scope of this essay.

If, however, it is true that no major change has characterised the evolution of the three major ongoing developments in Asia, something has happened which has cast much light on one of them, namely the process of authoritarian involution. The issue here is not so much that unexpected new developments or noteworthy changes have taken place in the ongoing contraction of freedom in Asia Maior – although a few minor ones did take place – but the fact that an unusually high number of elections has supplied a lot of information on the modalities of the current authoritarian process and the (rare) counter-tendency which are nevertheless at work to reverse it.

As this author has already noted in the past, the degree of freedom or lack of it in any given country varies even in autocracies, and, in the past years, in Asia, the existing (and more or less limited) degree of freedom has been undergoing a visible and conspicuous contraction even in openly

1. The Asia Maior think tank defines Asia Maior as that part of Asia whose eastern and southern borders are represented by the Pacific and Indian Oceans respectively, the western border abuts on the Arab countries and Türkiye and the northern border abuts on the Caucasus Mountain range and the Siberian border.

authoritarian countries.² Therefore, discussing the state of democracy in Asia by analyzing the modalities, results and consequences of the elections which took place there in 2024 gives us only a partial view of the general

TABLE 1 - ELECTIONS IN ASIA IN 2024			
	Country	Date	Kind of election
1	Bangladesh	7 January	Legislative
2	Bhutan	9 January	Legislative (2 nd round)
3	Taiwan	13 January	Presidential & legislative
4	Azerbaijan	7 February	Presidential
		1 st September	Legislative
5	Pakistan	8 February	Legislative
6	Indonesia	14 February	Presidential & legislative at the national, provincial and regency level
		27 November	election of regional heads
7	Cambodia	25 February	Senate
8	South Korea	10 April	Legislative
9	India	19 April – 1 st June	Legislative
10	Maldives	21 April	Legislative
11	Thailand	9-26 June	Senate
12	Mongolia	28 June	Legislative
13	Iran	1 March	Legislative (1 st round) and Assembly of Experts
		10 May	Legislative (2 nd round)
		28 June and 5 July	Presidential
14	Sri Lanka	21 September	Presidential
		14 November	Legislative
15	Uzbekistan	27 October	Legislative
16	Japan	27 October	Legislative

situation. However, although partial, the view offered by elections held in 16 countries, including some of the most populous in the world, represent a highly significant statistical sample to assess the health of democracy and freedom in Asia. Therefore, the remainder of this essay is focussed on this topic.

2. The case of China, examined at length in the past issues of this journal is paradigmatic.



As noted by Joshua Kurlantzick of the Council on Foreign Relations, «despite all the voting, 2024 was not exactly the year of democracy».³ As argued by Kurlantzick and explained at length in the articles collected in this volume, autocratic leaders made use of a variety of means – cheating, detention of political adversaries, intimidation of the media, draining the economic resources available to opposing parties – to assure their own permanence in power. This does not detract from the fact that some of the elections carried out in 2024 in Asia were effective democratic exercises, which changed the local political set up. Accordingly, the many elections which took place in Asia Maior in the year under review can be seen as an opportune Ariadne's thread that will enable us to find our way through the labyrinth of the domestic politics of the Asian states. We will follow this thread not according to the chronological order of the elections, but rather on the basis of the demographic relevance of the nations involved. Which, of course, brings us to start our examination with the most populous democracy not only in Asia but in the world, namely India.



This journal has been documenting the continuous democratic involution ongoing in India since Narendra Modi's ascent to the prime ministership. While India still boasts to be the largest democracy in the world, the ongoing democratic involution has gradually transformed the South Asian country into an electoral autocracy or – to make use of an Italian term which conflates «democrazia (democracy)» and «dittatura (dictatorship)» – into a «democratura», namely something in between a democracy and a dictatorship.

In 2024, on the eve of the Indian general elections, practically any forecaster was convinced that Narendra Modi and its BJP would effortlessly bag their third consecutive victory, winning an absolutely majority at the Lok Sabha (the Lower House, with predominant powers). In fact, Modi was openly aiming to win a two-thirds majority for the BJP, and appeared convinced he would be able to achieve it. This, in turn, would have made possible a change of the Constitution, formally transforming the theoretically still secular Indian republic into a *Hindu Rashtra*, that is, a Hindu state.

These forecasts were based on a plethora of factors, but, among them, perhaps the most realistic and, therefore, most convincing one was the fact that, as any intelligent independent observer could easily realize, the playing political field, far from being a level one, was heavily skewed

3. Joshua Kurlantzick, 'A Big Year for Asian Elections, but Not Necessarily for Democracy', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 12 December 2024.

TABLE 2 - ASIAN COUNTRIES WHERE ELECTIONS WERE HELD IN 2024 RANKED BY POPULATION		
1	India	1,463,865,525
2	Indonesia	285,721,236
3	Pakistan	255,219,554
4	Bangladesh	175,686,899
5	Japan	123,103,479
6	Iran	92,417,681
7	Thailand	71,619,863
8	South Korea	51,667,029
9	Uzbekistan	37,053,428
10	Sri Lanka	23,229,470
11	Taiwan	23,112,793
12	Cambodia	17,847,982
13	Azerbaijan	10,397,713
14	Mongolia	3,517,100
15	Bhutan	796,682
16	Maldives	529,676
Source: Worldometer (https://www.worldometers.info/population/countries-in-asia-by-population/)		

in favour of Narendra Modi and the BJP. As pointed out in this same volume by James Manor, the ruling BJP had a number of unfair advantages. Not only it had vastly more money to spend than all other parties put together, but, as if that was not enough, the bank accounts of the Congress Party, the BJP's main rival, were frozen on dubious legal grounds. Also, the leader of another prominent rival party was jailed, again on dubious legal charges. Equally important, Modi had gained full control of the Election Commission which, far from ensuring fairness, as it was supposed to do, helped him. On 110 occasions, the Election Commission took no action when Modi's speeches, during the electoral campaign, violated the existing model code of conduct. Modi also controlled most print, television and online news outlets.⁴

Quite unexpectedly, however, in spite of all the BJP's unfair advantages, the result of the elections was that, although Modi-led BJP remained the biggest party in the new Lok Sabha, not only it did not reach the two third majority to which Modi had openly aimed – and which would have

4. James Manor, 'India 2024: Authoritarianism checked, then reasserted', in this volume, pp. 291-314.

allowed to change the constitution – but lost the absolute majority which it had enjoyed in the previous two terms. This, in turn, forced Modi to form a coalition government with two other parties, whose support was necessary to have a majority. Apparently, therefore, Modi's victory at the 2024 general election had been a pyrrhic one, which prompted most observers to conjecture that Modi would be forced to reverse, or at least slow down, his unrelenting drive aimed at building an increasingly authoritarian *Hindu Rashtra*. Unfortunately, as again documented by James Manor in this same volume, this did not happen. Modi's relentless and systematic hollowing out of a whole array of political institutions, his government's harassment of non-governmental organisations, the smothering of independent voices, the demonization and brutalization of India's Muslim and Christian minorities continued unabated. While opposition forces in India, at both the political and grass roots levels, were still active, Modi continued to unwaveringly carrying out his authoritarian design. And the possibility that it could be stopped in a near foreseeable future appeared to be decidedly scanty.



In a way, the elections in Indonesia, the third most populous country in Asia were, technically speaking, even more impressive than the ones in India. On 14 February, in the world biggest single day election, Indonesian voters chose a new president and vice president, a new parliament and the members of regional legislatures at the province and regency/municipal level.⁵ Some months later, on 27 November, in the «simultaneous regional election», they chose 37 governors and vice governors (the heads of the provinces),⁶ 415 regents and vice-regents (the heads of the regencies, namely the mainly rural administrative divisions below the province and above the districts) and 93 mayors and vice-mayors (the heads of the cities, the urban administrative division that, in Indonesia, is on a par with the regency).⁷

Under the system in place, the president and vice president are elected in tandem by majority vote, whereas the lawmakers are elected according to a proportional representative system. Also, the president/vice president duo is elected at the first round if it wins at least 50% plus a fraction of the overall vote and at least 20% of the votes in more than half the country's provinces. On their part, in order to be represented in the National Assembly, the parties must pass a threshold of 4% of all valid votes. This threshold,

5. International Foundation for Electoral Systems, *Elections in Indonesia: 2024 General Elections* [hereafter GE 2024].

6. In Indonesia, there are 38 provinces, but Yogyakarta is headed by a hereditary governor/vice governor duo. The governor is the sultan of Yogyakarta, presently Hamengkubuwono X, and the vice governor is the prince of Pakualaman, presently Paku Alam X.

7. International Foundation for Electoral Systems, *Elections in Indonesia: 2024 Regional Head Elections* [hereafter RHE 2024].

however, does not apply for regional legislatures.⁸ In the case of the election of the regional heads, the electoral system is the first-past-the-post.⁹

The two waves of elections took place in the concluding months of the second and, according to the Constitution, final term of President Joko «Jokowi» Widodo. Although technically on the eve of political retirement, Jokowi played a key role in both waves of elections and, most particularly, in the election of the new president. As pointed out by Riwanto Tirtosudarmo and Peter Carey in this volume¹⁰ and by other analysts elsewhere, Joko Widodo's activism aimed to prefigure a political situation in which, even after the end of his presidential term, he would continue to retain considerable political power through his ability to influence the new president and the main parties represented in the legislative assemblies.

When first elected and at the start of his incumbency, Joko Widodo had been seen as a bright hope for Indonesian democracy. However, in the course of the years, his democratic credentials had dimmed, his government style had become increasingly authoritarian and, by the end of his ten-year incumbency, the former democratic champion had morphed into «a despot prepared to bend the political establishment to his will».¹¹ In particular, in the concluding two years of his 10-year presidency, Jokowi ruthlessly operated in order to maintain his political power. After vainly trying to be allowed to run for an unconstitutional third term or, at least, to have his second term extended, Joko Widodo entered into an alliance with another candidate to the presidency, Prabowo Subianto. It was an alliance predicated on Prabowo's acceptance as his running mate, namely as the candidate to the vice-presidency, of Jokowi's eldest son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka. Gibran's candidacy itself was made possible by a constitutional amendment which lowered the minimum age of a candidate in order to accommodate the 36-year-old Gibran. As noted by Tirtosudarmo and Carey, the fact that the serving Constitutional Court Chief Justice, Anwar Usman, was Jokowi's brother-in-law, «was not immaterial to this case».¹² Eventually, Usman's decision cost him his job, as he was voted out of office by his peers just a week after his controversial ruling. But, by then, the harm had been done and the path to the alliance between Jokowi and Prabowo had been paved.

In a way, that of Jokowi was an alliance with the devil, as Prabowo's past was a very controversial one. A former general who had headed the

8. Kanupriya Kapoor, 'Indonesia election 2024: How the electoral system works', *Reuters*, 12 February 2024; GE 2024.

9. Only in the case of the election of the governor/vice governor of Jakarta, absolute majority is needed to win in the first round. This applies even in any other election where a single pair only is candidate. RHE 2024.

10. Riwanto Tirtosudarmo and Peter B.R. Carey, 'Indonesia 2023-24: Jokowi's endgame and the politics of dynasty', in this volume, pp. 143-190.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

murderous Indonesian Special Forces (Kopassus) in 1995-1998, Prabowo had been an active participant in the genocidal repression in Timor Leste, had been suspected to be the responsible of the abduction, disappearance and murder of Indonesian democracy activists, and had allegedly attempted, although unsuccessfully, to force then President Habibie to appoint him army chief of Staff, by threatening to militarily take over the presidential palace and imprison Habibie (24 May 1998). After having been dismissed from the army and forced to go into voluntary exile, Prabowo had returned to Indonesia and undertaken a very successful business career, which, eventually, had opened his path to his entering politics. In 2008 Prabowo created his own political party, Gerindra, and in 2014 and 2019, entered the presidential elections, losing to Jokowi. However, Jokowi and Prabowo eventually formed an alliance, and the latter was appointed minister of Defence during Jokowi's second presidential term (2019-2024). In the course of time, the relationship between the President and his Minister of Defence became increasingly close and, once it became clear that Jokowi could not run for a third term, a pact between the two was made. It was predicated on Jokowi's support for Prabowo's candidacy as president and the latter's acceptance of Jokowi's son Gibran as his running mate.¹³

No doubt, Jokowi's support was a crucial element in strengthening Prabowo's possibility to win the Presidency. First, Jokowi still enjoyed a considerable popular appeal; second, and equally important, much of Jokowi appeal was based on a network of non-party political organizations and an army of «buzzers», namely influencers, who, as such, were skilful in the utilization of social media.

Identified by some analysts as «cyber troops», characterized by three crucial features, «being secretly funded, highly coordinated, and involving mostly anonymous accounts»,¹⁴ these cyber troops crafted a completely new image of Prabowo. Still in 2014 and 2019, when unsuccessfully campaigning for the Presidency, Prabowo had presented himself as a strongman and had «frequently donned his military uniform and rode his horse on stage like a victorious marshal». ¹⁵ Now, in 2024, particularly thanks to a massive and skilful use of the TikTok network, Prabowo image was transformed in that of «a sweet (*gemoy*) grandad, dancing (*joget*) his way across the stage». ¹⁶ It was an extremely successful campaign, which completely obscured Prabowo's

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 144, 145, 169, 183, 184.

14. Wijayanto, Ward Berenschot, Yatun Sastramidjaja, and Kris Ruijgrok, 'The Infrastructure of Domestic Influence Operations: Cyber Troops and Public Opinion Manipulation Through Social Media in Indonesia', *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 00(0) <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612241297832>, p. 2.

15. Yatun Sastramidjaja, 'Indonesia's election year: looking back', *Inside Indonesia*, 158, October-December 2024.

16. Riwanto Tirtosudarmo and Peter B.R. Carey, 'Indonesia 2023-24: Jokowi's endgame and the politics of dynasty', p. 170.

bleak past and convinced «a majority of voters from the Millennial and Gen Z generations, who made up more than half the electorate» to vote for the Prabowo/Gibran duo.¹⁷

Third, apart from his perduring popularity and the support of his cyber troops, Jokowi, whose presidential term was to expire on 19 October, was still in the position to mobilize state resources in support of his preferred candidates. In doing so, both seductions and threats were massively used. The former «took the form of direct free social welfare handouts or “bansos” (*bantuan sosial*) through the local village (*desa*) and urban ward (*kampung*) heads».¹⁸ The latter found expression in the discreet warning by police officers to village heads that corruption investigations would be launched, but would be dropped in the event of Prabowo’s victory.¹⁹

The result of all this was the victory of the Prabowo/Gibran duo at the first round of the presidential election, with 58% of the votes. While the Prabowo/Gibran victory – officially announce on 20 March – was far from being unexpected, what had been unforeseen was that it could take place in the first round. This could not but strengthen both the political position of Prabowo and Jokowi’s influence on him. A direct consequence of Prabowo’s triumph was that the alliance of parties which had supported his candidacy, the Advanced Indonesia Coalition (*Koalisi Indonesia Maju* or KIM), expanded, including some additional parties and becoming KIM plus.²⁰

Nonetheless, as noted by Tirtosudarmo and Carey, the results of the conterminous legislative elections «did not go all Jokowi’s way».²¹ Rather surprisingly, given the magnitude of the victory of the Prabowo/Gibran duo, it was a party which had not backed Prabowo at the presidential election, namely the centre-left secular-nationalist Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (*Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan* or PDI-P), led by Megawati Sukarnoputri, which «won the highest number of seats (110 out of 580), or 19% of the seats contested, in the Indonesian parliament». This had been

17. Yatun Sastramidjaja, ‘Indonesia’s election year: looking back’.

18. Riwanto Tirtosudarmo and Peter B.R. Carey, ‘Indonesia 2023-24: Jokowi’s endgame and the politics of dynasty’, p. 170.

19. Honna Jun, ‘2024 Indonesian Presidential Election: How Prabowo Won’, *Asia-Pacific Review*, 31 (2), 2024, p. 112.

20. The original KIM coalition included six parties, namely the Gerindra Party, the Golkar Party, the National Mandate Party (PAN), the Democratic Party, the Crescent Star Party, and the Indonesian People’s Wave Party (Gelora). After the 2024 election, other parties represented in the Parliament, such as the Nasdem Party, the Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, and the Indonesian Unity Party, plus some non-parliamentary parties, such as the Garuda Party and the Prima Party, joined the coalition, which morphed from KIM into KIM plus. See M. Toto Suryaningtyas, ‘Indonesian Democracy in KIM Plus Domination?’, *60Kompas*, 20 February 2024.

21. Riwanto Tirtosudarmo and Peter B.R. Carey, ‘Indonesia 2023-24: Jokowi’s endgame and the politics of dynasty’, p. 171.

made possible by the fact that the PDI-P had «garnered the largest percentage (15%) of the popular vote (25,000,000)».²²

The legislative results showed how politically powerful the PDI-P remained at the grass roots, particularly in its traditional stronghold in Central Java. Also, the emergence of the KIM plus, which de facto included all major political parties but the one headed by Megawati, revealed that the PDI-P was the only political force able and willing to play an effective opposition role. This explains why both Prabowo and Jokowi set to work to isolate the PDI-P and to consolidate their political power through a new victory in the forthcoming regional heads elections. Jokowi, still in power, on 22 July signed a Presidential Regulation permitting faith-based mass organisations to extract natural resources. This permit, rejected by Christian organisations but accepted by the two largest grassroots Muslim organisations, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and the Muhammadiyah, had the transparent goal to assure their political support for the candidates sponsored by Jokowi and Prabowo. Also, in the attempt to favour the major parties gathered in the KIM plus, Jokowi endeavoured to revoke the Constitutional Court's ruling of 20 August 2024, which «drastically reduced the percentage of popular vote required of political parties to propose their own candidates for governor and mayor in the upcoming local election».²³ It was a reduction which favoured the smaller parties, mainly outside the KIM plus coalition. It was an attempt, which, however, spectacularly failed, because of the wave of protest which engulfed the country, determining a visible decline in Jokowi's own popularity. On his part, Prabowo, in a speech on 28 August, openly theorized the coming together of the «Indonesian elites» and the fact that there was no need for «opposition, conflicts».²⁴ This «coming together» became visible when the names of the members of the new government were announced on 20 October, the day when Prabowo's presidential term officially started. They included not only members drawn from Prabowo's own party and many Jokowi's loyalists,²⁵ but representatives of all the major Indonesian parties, with the exception of the PDI-P.²⁶

These manoeuvring took place in a contest in which Jokowi's policies during his presidential terms had brought about an enhanced centralisation of power, «making regional governments more dependent on Jakarta for funding, licensing and regulatory approvals».²⁷ Not surprisingly, in this

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. M. Toto Suryaningtyas, 'Indonesian Democracy in KIM Plus Domination?.'

25. Riwanto Tirtosudarmo and Peter B.R. Carey, 'Indonesia 2023-24: Jokowi's endgame and the politics of dynasty', p. 172.

26. For the list of the members of Prabowo's cabinet, see 'Prabowo reveals names of ministers in «Red and White Cabinet»', *Antara*, 20 October 2024.

27. Ward Berenschot, 'The nationalisation of regional elections', *Inside Indonesia*, 158, October-December 2024.

situation both candidates and voters appeared aware of the advantage for local governments to have good political connections with Jakarta. This, of course, could not but advantage the candidates fielded by the KIM plus coalition in the forthcoming regional heads elections.

The end result of this configuration of factors was the success at the regional heads elections of 27 November of the candidates of the parties belonging to the coalition in power, and, in particular, of Prabowo's own party, Gerindra.²⁸ Megawati's PDI-P spectacularly lost even in areas formerly considered as its strongholds, such as West, Central and East Java. Its only consolation prize was its «wafer thin (50.07%) first round victory» in the contest for the Jakarta governorship.

Summing up, at the end of a year signed by two massive waves of elections in the third most populous country in Asia – which is also, after India and the US, the third largest country making use of regular elections – the outlook for democracy appeared decidedly negative. What had happened in 2024 could be assessed as representing the beginning of a most likely return to the earlier authoritarian regime, namely the New Order military-style administration of Prabowo's father-in-law, Suharto. As Professor Yatun Sastramidjaja pithily remarked: «Some 26 years after the end of the authoritarian New Order rule, this election year marked the triumphant consolidation of power of an oligarchic elite that is poised to pursue its interests by hijacking democratic institutions».²⁹ As documented by Tirtosudarmo and Carey in their articles in this journal, and as pointed out by Yatun Sastramidjaja in her article in 'Inside Indonesia', this is an illiberal turn that does not come as a surprise, as has been in the making since 2017, becoming increasingly strong since the 2019 elections, which saw the beginning of Joko Widodo's second presidential term.



In Pakistan, the general election took place in a situation in which the real political power – as during most of Pakistan history – was in the hands of the military. The most popular politician in the country, Imran Khan, who had been prime minister from August 2018 to April 2022, had eventually been removed from power through a no-confidence motion. As noted by Marco Corsi, although the ousting of the Khan government had been officially motivated by economic misrule, it was ultimately driven by friction over foreign and domestic policy decisions, which had resulted in Khan losing the support of the Army.³⁰

28. Ahmad Alfian, 'Strategi Gerindra Berbuah Manis di Pilkada 2024 (Gerindra's Strategy Bears Sweet Fruit in 2024 Regional Elections)', *Rmol.id*, 1 December 2024.

29. Yatun Sastramidjaja, 'Indonesia's election year: looking back'.

30. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2024: Political turmoil and economic instability', in this volume, pp. 355-375.

After his removal from power, Khan went through a veritable way of sorrows, becoming the target on an attempted assassination (November 2022) and being accused of a colourful, multiple and not very credible series of crimes. These crimes included corruption, buying and selling gifts in state possession, leaking state secrets, breaching Islamic marriage law. Always convicted with sentences which were often ultimately overturned, at the beginning of 2024, on the eve of the general election, Imran Khan was in jail. Also, his party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), was barred from competing in the election, while many party leaders were jailed, and their relatives, supporters and independent journalists were allegedly harassed by the military. This did not prevent the politicians affiliated with Khan's PTI to compete in the election as independent candidates, securing not less than 101 parliamentary seats for themselves. This made the officially non-existing PTI the strongest party in a National Assembly of 342 members. Nonetheless, this was not sufficient to open the way to power for the PTI members. As detailed by Marco Corsi, protracted negotiations culminated in the formation of a government coalition which excluded the PTI members and was purportedly endorsed by the military establishment.³¹

While Imran Khan's popularity remained paramount, the political playing field continued to be under the control of the military, which not only had marginalized Imran Khan but had played a dominant role in shaping the electoral outcome and the formation of the new government. A further demonstration of the military's willingness to permanently put Imran Khan and his party out of business through legal means came in December, when Imran Khan and no less than 142 other PTI members were indicted by the Rawalpindi Anti-Terrorism Court.³²



In Bangladesh, the general election was held in January 2024, after a year of increasing political tension, characterized by recurring clashes between the police and opposition political parties. The election was boycotted by the main opposition parties and took place amid widespread allegations - voiced not only by the opposition but also by international observers - of foul play on the part of Awami League, the ruling party. Not surprisingly, in an election which was neither free nor inclusive, the connivance of the bureaucracy and law enforcement agencies resulted in a smashing victory for the Awami League. This assured the continuation in power as prime minister of Sheik Hasina for the fourth consecutive time.³³

31. *Ibid.*

32. 'Court indicts Imran Khan in GHQ attack case', *The Nation*, 6 December 2024.

33. Silvia Tieri and Raian Hossain, 'Bangladesh 2023-2024: From democratic backsliding to the Monsoon Revolution, towards democratic transition', in this volume, pp. 267-290.

Sheikh Hasina's fraudulent victory, however, did not stop the ongoing political struggle against her rule, which was spearheaded by the students. At the beginning of August, the situation had become so tense that, while the police carried out night-time raids to arrest the students involved in the protests, the government gave the police a «shoot-on-sight» order, deployed the Army and shut down internet access for 10 days. However, on 3 August, while a new and bigger student demonstration was gathering in Dhaka, calling for the Government's resignation, the chief of Army Staff, General Waker-Uz-Zaman, announced that the Army would not take part in the ongoing police crackdown against protesters.

This was the turning point in the political struggle, as two days later, on 5 August, Hasina fled to India by helicopter. Bangladeshi President Mohammed Shahabuddin stepped in, dissolved the parliament and called Nobel prize Muhammad Yunus to head a provisional government with the title of chief adviser. While, as explained by Silvia Tieri and Raian Hossain, the situation remained difficult, what had come to be known as the Monsoon Revolution had opened the path – maybe one that was anything but wide and easy to walk – toward a new phase in the political history of the country. A democratic restoration, accompanied by the fight against rampant corruption, and the pursuit of a more equitable growth, now appeared to be a concrete possibility, even if, by no way, a foregone conclusion.



Summing up what has been written so far, elections in the four most populous Asian democracies had not brought about any improvement in the respective democratic spaces – although, in the case of Bangladesh, this result had later been rectified by the «Monsoon Revolution». The case of the fifth most populous Asian democracy, Japan, however, is different. In a country where, contrarily to what was the case in the Asian countries discussed so far, elections were not expected, they not only took place but, according to some analysts – including Raymond Yamamoto and Marco Zappa, the authors of the Japan article published in this volume ³⁴ – brought about a strengthening of the local democracy.

The process that led to the unexpected snap election for the lower chamber of Parliament or House of Representatives, the more important in the bicameral Diet, had been started by the crisis ongoing since 2023 in the majority party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Caused by scandals involving dozens of party members, including also the staff and close aides of the incumbent prime minister, Fumio Kishida, the crisis had weakened both the party and its leader. Kishida, after taking a series of initiatives aimed at overcoming the LDP internal crisis, eventually decided not to run

34. Raymond Yamamoto and Marco Zappa, 'Japan 2024: Striving for security amidst political turmoil', in this volume, pp. 83-123.

for re-election to the party presidency. This was a turning point, as the LDP presidency is a *sine qua non* to assuming the position of prime minister in LDP dominated governments. In the ensuing free-for-all internal battle for the presidency of the party – and, hence, the prime ministership – the winner was Ishiba Shigeru. A second-generation politician, who had been a member of the Lower House continuously since 1986, and served in ministerial posts and high-ranking party positions, Ishiba had previously tried his hand at becoming party president no less than four times, without ever being successful.³⁵

Once in charge as party president, Ishiba, on the eve of being confirmed prime minister by the Diet, made known his decision to dissolve the Lower House. He wanted his election as premier not to be the result of «obscure party processes»³⁶ and the Diet vote, but of the popular vote.

The ensuing election was only partially successful for the LDP; while emerging, once again, as the largest party in the House of Representatives, the LDP not only lost that absolute majority which it had enjoyed since 2012, but was not in the position to form a majority government even with the support of its junior ally, the Kōmeitō (NKP). In this situation, with no party and no coalition able to have the absolute majority, the Diet, in the special session convened on 11 November, confirmed Ishiba as prime minister, although this time at the head of a minority government.

According to well-known analyst Tobias Harris, quoted in this volume by Yamamoto and Zappa, Ishiba, differently from most Japanese politicians, had an «idealistic» approach to politics, aimed at building a «purer and most humane Japan».³⁷ It is therefore possible, as hypothesized by Yamamoto and Zappa, that the political set-up which had emerged following the 2024 election was not far from Ishiba's own preferences. A politician who was declaredly willing to «listen» to and «empathize» with his political opponents, Ishiba favoured a more democratic political style than the one traditionally followed by LDP.³⁸

This took shape in the *de facto* national unity administration which emerged following Ishiba's election as head of a minority government; it was an administration characterized by the allocation of the presidency of several Lower House Standing Committees and other positions of power to the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP). As pointed out by Yamamoto and Zappa, the political conjuncture that was taking shape after the 2024 elections makes it possible to assert that «after a decade of Prime Minister's Office-led decision-making under [former PM Shinzō] Abe and Kishida», a paradigm shift had finally materialized in Japanese politics, «making way for a more concerted style of rule». In this situation, the *de facto* govern-

35. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

38. *Ibid.*

ment of national unity «might actually enable, rather than hinder, progress in many fields, from tax system reforms to progress in gender equality and rights for sexual minorities».³⁹



In Iran three different elections took place in the year under review. Two were planned – the elections to the Islamic Consultative Assembly (the *majles-e-shura-ye-eslami*, usually shortened in Majles or Majlis)⁴⁰ and to the Assembly of Experts (*majles-e xobregân-e rahbari*).⁴¹ The third one, the election to the Presidency, was unexpectedly and suddenly made necessary – in line with the Constitution – by the death of the incumbent President, Ebrahim Raisi, in a helicopter crash on 19 May 2024.

The elections took place inside a political system which is possibly the most complex presently existing in the world. In fact, it is a kind of centaur, made up of two seemingly irreconcilable parts, namely a theocratic structure, made up of a series of non-elected bodies – the Expediency Council, the National Security Council, the Council of Guardians, the Judiciary, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and others – interconnected with a number of elected institutions – the presidency of the Republic, the Majles, the Assembly of Experts, and the Municipal Councils.

These two parts, in which, in essence, the theocratic and unelected one has broad powers of control over the elected one, are both ultimately controlled by the leader of Iran or *rahbar*, who is elected for life – in theory by the Assembly of Experts⁴² – and enjoys almost unlimited powers. The *rahbar* has the constitutional power to supervise the work of the government and the implementation of the government policies, is the effective head of the armed forces, selects the heads of the armed forces, including the

39. *Ibid.*

40. The Majles are the unicameral legislative body of Iran, elected every four years and presently consisting of 290 members. The Majles legislates within the limits set by Shia Islam and the Constitution and has some powers of control on the president and his government. Its powers are however constrained by the Guardian Council, a powerful unelected body, which verifies the compatibility of the laws passed by the Majles with Islamic criteria and the Constitution, and can return them to the Majles.

41. The Assembly of Experts is an 88-member body elected every eight years. It is tasked with choosing the supreme leader of Iran, namely the head of State (on whose almost boundless powers see below), and ensuring that he remains qualified to perform his role. However, the power of appointing the supreme leader remains untested, as the Assembly of Experts did not play any role in the ascendancy of the first leader, Ruhollah Khomeini, and was in abeyance when the second and current one, Ali Khamenei, was selected by Khomeini (in 1980). Also, the Assembly of Experts, since its reestablishment in 1983, has never publicly challenged any of the supreme leader's decisions.

42. See the previous footnote.

commander in chief of the elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), can call referenda, and, last but not least, controls the unelected institutions, whose members are appointed by him, either directly or through indirect influence.⁴³ As a result, the *rahbar* can make use of the unelected institutions as an additional means of control over the democratic section of the Iranian political system.

The political struggle in the Islamic Republic of Iran has been largely dominated by the confrontation between reformist factions and conservative ones, and has gone through different phases, which have sometimes seen the reformist factions to have the upper hand in the democratic section of the system.⁴⁴ However, the prevalence of the reformist factions has always been temporary and fragile for the simple reason that, in the final analysis, the ultimate power is in the hands of the *rahbar*, and neither the first, nor the second and incumbent leader have shown any inclination to allow a real democratization of the political system. On the contrary, an involution process has been apparent since 2020, characterized by the rapidly increasing grip of the conservative factions on the electoral institutions. Since that date, this process has indeed gone to the extent of foreshadowing the disappearance of the reformist factions from the electoral competition.⁴⁵

No doubt, the political decline of the reformist factions has been favoured by their inability to redress the state of the economy. In fact, when in power, they have been unable to implement effective economic reforms; also, the economic sanctions imposed on Iran by the international community, under the leadership of the US, have played a role. But, if the ongoing economic crisis has been the backdrop favouring the political decline of the reformist forces, it has been the will of the incumbent *Rahbar*, Ali Khamenei, which has started and given impetus to the process of authoritarian involution.

Khamenei's *longa manus* in doing this has been the Guardian Council, among whose powers there is that of approving or disqualifying candidates seeking to run in local, parliamentary, presidential, or Assembly of Experts elections.⁴⁶ By making use of its powers, the Guardian Council has severely limited the possibilities for the voters to choose non-conserva-

43. *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/4205c7/pdf>), Art. 10.

44. This has been carefully and extensively documented in the Iran-related essays published in this journal, authored by Riccardo Redaelli, Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi & Claudia Castiglioni, Luciano Zaccara, and Giorgia Perletta.

45. Luciano Zaccara, 'Iran's Domestic Politics in 2024' (unpublished manuscript, 2025).

46. The Guardian Council is also vested with the power to supervise elections and that of vetoing legislation passed by the Majles. Half of his 12 members is appointed by the *rahbar*, while the other half is appointed by the head of the Judiciary, who, however, is himself appointed by the *rahbar*. See *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, in particular art. 94, 96, 98, 99.

tive politicians, by massively disqualifying centrist and reformist candidates. This is a policy that had already become visible in 2002,⁴⁷ but which has been pursued in an increasingly aggressive way since the presidential election of 2021.⁴⁸

This, in turn, has had two main results, one expected and the other probably unforeseen. The former has been the handover of the electoral institutions into the hands of the conservative factions; the latter has been the drastic diminution of the voter turnout. As, in the Islamic Republic, electoral participation has always been considered a demonstration of popular support for the regime, the ongoing democratic involution means that the *Rahbar* has not hesitated to weaken the political legitimacy of the regime in order to tighten his hold on it. A possible explanation of this policy is that Ali Khamenei, being a man of advanced age (he was born on 9 April 1939), is preparing his succession, getting rid of any potential hurdles on the way of his son Mojtaba to become the next *rahbar*.

The three elections which took place in 2024 represented as many battlegrounds in which the confrontation between the conservative and reformist factions continued to take place. However, while the election to the Majles and the Assembly of Experts – which simultaneously started on 1 March⁴⁹ – appeared to confirm the above discussed trend, characterized by the increasingly tighter grip of the conservative forces on the democratic section of the Iranian political system, the presidential election saw an unexpected setback for them.

As in the previous cases, the elections to the Majles and the Assembly of Experts were preceded by the disqualification of most reformist and centrist candidates by the Guardian Council. This made both elections effectively uncompetitive. While the voter turnout plummeted to around 41%

47. Riccardo Redaelli, 'La crescente contrapposizione politica in Iran', *Asia Major*, XIII/2002, pp. 13 ff; Riccardo Redaelli, 'Iran: oltre Khatami, verso dove?', *Asia Major*, XIV/2003, pp. 19 ff.

48. Luciano Zaccara, 'Iran 2021: The year of transition', *Asia Maior* XXX-II/2021 (2022), pp. 393-416.

49. The elections to the Majles went through a second round on 10 May 2024. The 285 elected members of the Majles are selected in 207 single or multi-member constituencies. Presently, each candidate, to be elected in the first round, must obtain at least 20% of the vote cast in his/her constituency. In all constituencies where not all available seats are won in the first round due to not passing the electoral threshold, a second round is held. Only candidates in the lead during the first round, their number being restricted in any given constituency to twice the number of the seats to be filled, are allowed to run. See Inter-Parliamentary Union, *IRAN (ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF)/Majles Shoraye Eslami (Islamic Parliament of Iran)* (http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2149_B.htm). In this source, updated to 28 November 1999, the threshold is indicated as 25% of the votes cast in any given constituency. The 25% threshold was introduced soon before the 2000 elections, bringing it down from the original 33%. Later, it was further lowered to 20%.

– the lowest in the history of the Islamic Republic⁵⁰ – the conservatives easily won both in the Majles and the Assembly of Experts.⁵¹

The Majles and Assembly of Experts elections were supposed to exhaust the 2024 electoral rounds in Iran, but, as already noted, President Raisi's unexpected death on 19 May made a snap election to the Presidency necessary. Before his untimely death, Raisi «was widely anticipated to secure a second term with minimal resistance in the 2025 presidential election». Also, «he was considered by many the designated successor of Ali Khamenei, the leader of the Islamic republic». Therefore, «neither the conservative, nor the reformist factions had actively prepared or promoted potential successors».⁵² In this situation of uncertainty, enhanced by the persistence of an unresolved economic crisis, widespread social discontent and the gradual but conspicuous erosion of Iran's regional influence, and characterized by the fact that the reformist bloc was in disarray,⁵³ the conservative camp overplayed its hand.

As usual, the Guardian Council produced a final list of candidates heavily slanted in favour of the conservative camp, as four out of six approved candidates belonged to it, while the remaining two, Ayatollah Mostafa Pourmohammadi and Dr Masoud Pezeshkian, were considered moderate and reformist respectively.⁵⁴ Two of the conservative candidates withdrew before the election, leaving in the running, as representatives of the conservative camp, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, «a recurrent presidential candidate in 2005, 2013, and 2017»⁵⁵ and the incumbent speaker of the Majles, and Saeed Jalili, who had also contended for the Presidency in 2013 and 2021, had been the

50. 41% is the official figure. Nonetheless, given the difficulty of verifying the official figures supplied by Iran and the interest of Iranian ruling circles to convey the impression of a wide popular participation in the electoral process – considered as a legitimization of the regime – the actual figure could be decidedly lower. Mehrzad Boroujerdi, 'Iran's Faustian 2024 Elections: Statistics Tell the Story', *Stimson*, 4 March 2024.

51. Luciano Zaccara, 'Iran's Domestic Politics in 2024'; 'Islamic Parliament of Iran, Iran Elections', *IPU Parline* (<https://data.ipu.org/parliament/IR/IR-LC01/election/IR-LC01-E20240301/>); 'Voting ends in Iran's parliament, Assembly of Experts elections after 16 hours', *Xinhua*, 2 March 2024; Majid Mohammadi, 'Iran's Next Ruler: Assembly Of Experts Prepares For Succession', *Iran International*, 7 March 2024.

52. Luciano Zaccara, 'Iran's Domestic Politics in 2024'.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*; Syed Fraz Hussain Naqvi & Syed Qandil Abbas, 'Iran's presidential elections 2024: An analysis', *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 34(2-3), 2024, p. 193. It is worth stressing that Pourmohammadi's moderate credentials were less than impeccable. While he had entered the presidential election on moderate positions, his moderatism was called into question by his political past that. He had been implicated in the 1988 mass execution of political prisoners in Tehran, had been Home Minister under hardliner President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, and, later, distancing himself from Ahmadinejad, had become a close confidant of *Rahbar* Ali Khamenei. It is because of his past that, when he was selected as candidate by the Guardian Council, most journalists and analysts classified him as a conservative.

55. Luciano Zaccara, 'Iran's Domestic Politics in 2024'.

chief nuclear negotiator and the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council in the years 2007 to 2013, and was a confidant of the *Rahbar*.

Although, within the conservative camp itself, there are very clear fracture lines setting apart various groups, as a rule, on the occasion of the presidential elections, the conservative politicians act «as a singular entity and different presidential candidates from this group are only to provide cover to their main candidate».⁵⁶ On the contrary, in 2024, possibly taking for granted the inability of the reformists to organise an effective challenge to the overwhelming power of the conservatives, the two conservative candidates proved either unable or unwilling in reaching a pre-poll political settlement.⁵⁷ The result was that the pro-conservative vote split, while, on the contrary, the reformist vote went in its almost totality to Pezeshkian. Hence, surprisingly, on 28 June 2024 Pezeshkian emerged as the front runner (44.36% of the vote), followed by Jalili (40.35%), and Ghalibaf (14.41%), while Pourmohammadi won less than 1% of the vote [see Table 3].

As no candidate had reached the required 51% of the votes, the two top candidates went to a runoff on 5 July. Significantly there was a conspicuous surge in the voter turnout, the number going up from some 24,5 million to around 30,5 million, and Pezeshkian emerged as the clear winner, with 54.76% of the votes against Jalili's 45,24% [see Table 3].

This was a result that had been made possible not only by the fact that, clearly, the voters sympathising for the reformist camp had seen the possibility to allow a reformist candidate to win, but, according to some analysts, by the fact that many of the supporters of the other conservative candidate, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, chose to vote for Pezeshkian rather than for Jalili.⁵⁸ Basically, Jalili was seen as so far to the extreme right that he was not an acceptable candidate even for a part of the conservatives.⁵⁹

Pezeshkian's election brought to the presidency a politician of a quite different hue to that of his extremely conservative predecessor. The new President had been critical of the role of the morality police during the Mahsa Amini protests of 2022; had promised to improve the status of women's rights; had vowed to relax the compulsory hijab laws and abolish the morality police. He also announced the end of the ban on the internet, arts and culture.⁶⁰

56. Syed Fraz Hussain Naqvi & Syed Qandil Abbas, 'Iran's presidential elections 2024: An analysis', p. 194.

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 194-195.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

TABLE 3 – IRANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS RESULTS IN 2024				
Candidates	First round		Second round	
	Votes	%	Votes	%
Saeed Jalili	9,473,298	40.35	13,538,179	45.24
Mostafa Pourmohammadi	206,397	0.88		
Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf	3,383,340	14.41		
Masoud Pezeshkian	10,415,991	44.36	16,384,403	54.76
Total	23,479,026	100.00	29,922,582	100.00
Valid votes	23,479,026	95.70	29,922,582	98.01
Invalid/blank votes	1,056,159	4.30	607,575	1.99
Total votes	24,535,185	100.00	30,530,157	100.00
Registered voters/turnout	61,452,321	39.93	61,452,321	49.68
Source: Luciano Zaccara's elaboration based on several official sources.				

The cabinet that Pezeshkian assembled after his victory was «characterized by pragmatism and moderate reformist credentials».⁶¹ Among its most notable members there were Mohammad Javad Zarif and Abbas Araghchi, who had both played key roles in the negotiations leading to the signing of the JCPOA, the international agreement regulating Iran's use of nuclear energy.⁶² Their presence in the cabinet meant that the new President aimed not only to improve the situation of domestic civil liberties, but seriously intended to pursue renewed engagement with the West.

Summing up, the Iranian presidential elections represented an unexpected political swerve towards a potentially less repressive regime. However, the new reformist President was up against almost irresistible adverse forces. A thaw in relations with the West, already difficult during Joe Biden's presidency, appeared even more so with Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential elections. As for the domestic situation, the control exercised by conservative factions over all major institutions, including the Guardian Council and the Majles, was an almost insuperable obstacle to any progressive policy. But, in the final analysis, the main hurdle to any democratization of the Iranian political system remained the *Rahbar*, with his almost unlimited powers.

61. Luciano Zaccara, 'Iran's Domestic Politics in 2024'.

62. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was the agreement between Iran and the P5+1 together with the European Union, aimed to limit the Iranian nuclear programme in return for sanction relief. The JCPOA, finalized on 14 July 2015, was de facto sunk by Donald Trump, during his first presidency, when, on 8 May 2018, he announced the US withdrawal from the pact.

The 2024 Thailand Senate election has often been described as the provisional concluding phase of an incomplete, ambiguous and faltering transition from military rule to democracy. The premises to the Senate election were the election of the 500-member House of Representatives, which took place on 14 May 2023, and the following formation of a new government – expertly analyzed by Edoardo Siani in this same volume.⁶³

The vote cast by 75.22% of the adult population sealed the victory of the pro-democracy parties and gave the relative majority to the most progressive among them, the Move Forward Party. This resulted in the formation of a pro-democracy coalition which included the Move Forward Party (151 seats), the Pheu Thai Party (141 seats) and other smaller parties.

The leader of the Move Forward Party, Pita Limjaroenrat, was the coalition natural candidate to the prime ministership. However, the Parliament, with a decision in which the Senate played the crucial role, refused to endorse the Move Forward leader as prime minister. This caused the eventual dissolution of the pro-democracy coalition and paved the way for the creation of a new coalition which included the Pheu Thai Party and a number of pro-military parties, of which the strongest one was the Bhumjaithai. The prime ministership went to the leader of the Pheu Thai Party, Srettha Thavisin.⁶⁴

The crucial role played by the Senate in marginalizing the most progressive among the pro-democracy parties was the natural enough result of the fact that the 250 members of the Upper House had been «handpicked»⁶⁵ by the military, after the 2014 coup, and had steadily functioned as a prop to the political system created by them. However, the five-year term of the incumbent Senate was bound to end in 2024, when elections according to new rules – set in the 2018 Organic Act on the Acquisition of Senators⁶⁶ – were due.

In theory, the Senate was supposed to be made up by «good men», namely enlightened and impartial experts in the main professional and social sectors, without any connection with the existing political forces, and, therefore, in the position to exercise an unbiased control on the political parties represented in the Lower House. Of course, this declared objective, which was already there when the Senate was handpicked by the military in

63. Edoardo Siani, 'Thailand 2023-2024: A general election and its contested aftermath', in this volume, pp. 235-250.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 239. The Move Forward Party, relegated to the opposition, was dissolved on 7 August 2024 and its executive board banned from politics for 10 years, following a sentence of the Constitutional Court, which judged the Move Forward-sponsored proposal to amend the *lèse-majesté* law unconstitutional. *Ibid.*

65. '2024 Thai Senate Selection, Explained', *iLaw*, 3 March 2024.

66. 'Organic Act on the Acquisition of Senators, B.E. 2561 (2018), Tentative Translation by Associate Professor Dr. Pinai Nanakorn under contract for the Office of the Council of State of Thailand's Law for ASEAN project' (https://www.ect.go.th/web-upload/migrate/ect_en/download/article/article_20210806135906.pdf).

2020, and had remained unchanged with the introduction of the 2018 Organic Act, could not be reached.⁶⁷ Apart from technical reasons preventing the obtaining of this objective,⁶⁸ powerful political forces as the military and the monarchy had no intention that it would be reached. Therefore, the new rules set out in the 2018 Organic Act on the Acquisition of Senators, although allegedly aimed to guarantee the Senate's impartial role, were moulded in such a way to assure the prosecution of its role as a conservative brake vis-à-vis a more progressive Lower Chamber.

The would-be senators – whose number was brought down from 250 to 200 – were to be elected as representatives of one of the 20 professional or social groups in which the electorate was subdivided.⁶⁹ They could not belong to any political party, and people who had been in public office had to wait five years before being allowed to apply.⁷⁰ Candidates had to pay a 2,500-baht (some US\$ 68) application fee, amounting to seven times Thailand's minimum daily wage. Decidedly more restrictive was the fact that the candidates had to be at least 40 years old, an age which ruled out that large swathe of young Thais who had become politically vocal in previous years. But this was not all, because, as noted by iLaw, a pro-democracy civil society organization,⁷¹ «[a]s the serving government official is not eligible to run, seats in groups such as public administration or legal profession, most of whom are public servants, are essentially reserved for retirees».⁷² Also, the candidates were «expected to possess at least 10 years of knowledge, expertise and experience in the field they applied for», although, as noted by iLaw, how to prove such expertise remained unclear.⁷³

What, anyway, was really both puzzling and questionable was the new Senate's electoral system, which was not based on universal suffrage, but on the votes cast by the extremely limited constituency made up by the candidates themselves. As people below 40 years, members of political parties and public servants could not be candidates, this means that all these groups were disenfranchised. Eventually, the number of the self-appointed Senate candidates did not go beyond 46,000, namely less than 1% of the population.⁷⁴

67. Ian Hollinger, 'Thailand's Senate Election: The Definition of Insanity', *The Diplomat*, 10 May 2024.

68. *Ibid.*

69. The list of the 20 groups is available in '2024 Thai Senate Selection, Explained'.

70. *Ibid.* Also excluded were: «drug addicts, bankrupt, "mentally challenged", currently in prison or under political bans». 'What the Senate election means and why it's all different', *Bangkok Post*, 13 May 2024.

71. *Who is iLaw* (<https://www.ilaw.or.th/en/about-us>).

72. '2024 Thai Senate Selection, Explained', *iLaw*, 3 March 2024.

73. *Ibid.*

74. Patpicha Tanakasempipat, 'Thai Conservatives Retain Senate Control in Blow to Pro-Democracy Groups', *Bloomberg*, 11 July 2024.

The candidates were prohibited from talking about policies or their plans if elected. All that they were permitted to do (by the Election Commission) was the presentation of a short, two-page resume explaining their background. Also, the candidates were not allowed to use social media,⁷⁵ and were prohibited from «putting up posters in public places, giving media interviews, or mentioning the monarchy».⁷⁶

This opaque backdrop was the basis on which an extremely complex electoral system – articulated, as already noted, in 20 social or professional groups – would select the 200 new senators, during what has been defined «the most complicate election» in the world.⁷⁷ The electoral system – really too complex to be satisfactory synthesized here – was articulated in three levels (district, provincial, national) and implied both votes cast inside a single group and votes cast by members of a single group for candidates belonging to randomized sets made up by more groups.⁷⁸

Summing up, the Senate electoral system was characterized by lack of transparency and information, extremely complicate procedural rules and a radically restricted constituency. These were all elements that could not but offer an open field to «powerful political dynasties», which not only managed «to field their family members and allies in almost every category»,⁷⁹ but allegedly indulged in vote-buying. Not surprisingly, the election was marred by «thousands of electoral fraud complaints and an investigation into candidate qualifications», which delayed the official announcement of the names of the new senators from 3 to 10 July.⁸⁰ Significantly, nonetheless, the provisional results, released on 2 July, remained «largely unchanged»,⁸¹ which means that the Electoral Commission showed themselves to be incapable or unwilling to rectify a series of glaring abuses,⁸² modifying the political balance that had arisen as their result.

In spite of the lack of transparency concerning the political affiliations of the new senators, analysts had few doubts about the fact that more

75. Sunai Phasuk, 'Thailand's Upcoming Senate Election Fundamentally Flawed', *Human Right Watch*, 2 May 2024.

76. 'What the Senate election means and why it's all different'.

77. Koh Ewe, 'What the World's «Most Complicated Election» Means for Thailand's Democracy', *Time*, 28 June 2024.

78. For an introduction to the system see '2024 Thai Senate Selection, Explained', in particular the table 'Thai Senate Selection Process. Intra-group and inter-group Election'.

79. Koh Ewe, 'What the World's «Most Complicated Election» Means for Thailand's Democracy'.

80. Emma Kenny, 'Thailand's Senate Elections Results: What now?', *International IDEA*, 12 July 2024.

81. *Ibid.*

82. For a synthetic but appropriate description of these abuses, see, e.g., 'Senators to face scrutiny over alleged collusion in last year's Senate election', *Prachatai English*, 3 March 2025.

than half of them had links with the Bhumjaithai, namely, as already noted, the strongest among the pro-military parties.⁸³ This ensured that the new senate would continue to exercise the same conservative role as the previous one. And it is important to highlight that, while the new Senate did not have a role anymore in the election of the prime ministership, it still maintained a crucial role in approving bills from the Lower House and, more importantly, in any possible amendment to the existing military-backed Constitution. Hardly less important was the Senate authority to appoint heads of government commissions with function of control, such as the Election Commission and the Anti-Corruption commission, and judges to the Constitutional and Administrative Courts.⁸⁴

In this situation, any substantial progress towards a more democratic setup appeared doubtful at best.



South Korea is universally considered a mature democracy, performing «well above East Asia's overall average» and on a par with Japan and Taiwan.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, these optimistic evaluations do not take into account that South Korean democracy - a comparatively young democracy, as it was born in 1987 - has been unable to solve a series of major socio-economic problems, and is led by a political class which has been undergoing a process of gradual delegitimization, because of the general public's increasing doubts about the personal honesty and political ability of its members. As a result, particularly in the past 12 years, symptoms of democratic decline have become more and more visible, epitomized by the erosion of democratic norms, the whittling away of the courts' independence, the demonization of political opponents, the increasing use of prosecutorial legal proceedings against political opponents.⁸⁶ Also, press freedom, although still relatively high - South Korea was ranked 43rd out of 180 countries in 2023 by Reporters Without Borders - has been on a downward trend since 2019, when President Moon Jae-in (2017-2022) and then his successor, President Yoon Suk-yeol, started a war on the media, justified by the necessity to put an end to alleged «fake news».⁸⁷

83. Patpicha Tanakasempipat, 'Thai Conservatives Retain Senate Control in Blow to Pro-Democracy Groups'.

84. *Ibid.*; Japhet Quitzon, 'The Latest on Southeast Asia: Thai Senate Elections', *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 18 July 2024.

85. Lorena Gil Sanchez, 'South Korea General Election 2024 Pre-Election Report', *CAD Research Brief*, April 2024, p. 1.

86. Gi-Wook Shin and Ho-Ki Kim (eds.), *South Korea's Democracy in Crisis. The Threats of Illiberalism, Populism, and Polarization*, Stanford: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2022.

87. Lorena Gil Sanchez, 'South Korea General Election 2024 Pre-Election Report', pp. 1, 5.

An additional problem troubling South Korea's political situation is the contrast that has existed since 2022 between the President – endowed by the constitution with extremely broad powers but backed by a party, the People Power Party, which is not in control of the National Assembly – and the main opposition party, the Democratic Party, headed by Lee Jae-myung, which dominates the Parliament. This had brought about a situation in which the National Assembly has been passing bills that the President then vetoed and the President has seen his policies hindered by the National Assembly.

In this situation, as explained by Marco Milani and Antonio Fiori in this same volume, the April elections were seen as particularly important by both political fronts. Their results «marked a clear victory for the Democratic Party and its allies and a resounding defeat for [President] Yoon and for the conservatives of the People Power Party».⁸⁸ This transformed the President into a «lame duck», whose powers were bound to be severely constrained up to the end of his mandate in 2027.

In a «toxic political environment, where democratic norms such as mutual toleration, coexistence, and compromise [had] become increasingly rare»,⁸⁹ the Democratic Party-dominated National Assembly moved to finally clip the President's political wings. On 19 September it approved «three controversial laws, including one that was aimed at opening a special investigation on the first lady for charges related to corruption and abuse of power».⁹⁰ The three laws were promptly vetoed by the Yoon, but set in motion an escalation process of polarization between the President and the National Assembly which culminated in the latter's decision to vote against the 2025 national budget, presented by the Government.⁹¹

This triggered a «most extreme and unpredictable decision» on the part of President Yoon Suk-yeol, namely the imposition of martial law on 3 December. This was a decision justified by Yoon as necessary «to reestablish order against the political forces, labelled as “anti-State” and “pro-North Korea” that were blocking the South Korean democratic system».⁹²

In a perhaps unexpected reaction on the part of basically the whole spectrum of the political forces, including the People Power Party, namely the party of the President, plus the national institutions and large swathes of the population, the attempted coup rapidly failed.⁹³ Nonetheless, the unity

88. Marco Milani and Antonio Fiori, 'Korean peninsula 2024: A year of political and social upheaval', in this volume, p. 56.

89. Gi-Wook Shin, 'Korea's Bumpy Road Toward Democracy', *Stanford Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies*, 12 December 2024.

90. Marco Milani and Antonio Fiori, 'Korean peninsula 2024: A year of political and social upheaval', p. 58.

91. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

92. *Ibid.* for both quotations.

93. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

shown by the political forces in resisting it soon evaporated, revealing a political landscape which remained deeply divided and crisscrossed by glaring divisions between political forces, unable to find points of convergence except during absolutely existential crises.

In the final analysis, the coup and its failure cast a livid light on a political system and a nation which, although able to defend democracy from a dramatic frontal attack, were torn apart by a crisis so profound that, potentially, in the medium to long term the very democratic system that had been successfully defended in December 2024 ran the risk to be endangered.



Uzbekistan has synthetically but appropriately been described by Freedom House as «an authoritarian state with few signs of democratization».⁹⁴ As Freedom House points out: «No opposition parties operate legally. The legislature and judiciary effectively serve as instruments of the executive branch, which initiates reforms by decree, and the media are still tightly controlled by the authorities».⁹⁵ Also: «Reports of torture and other ill-treatment persist, although highly publicized cases of abuse have resulted in dismissals and prosecutions for some officials, and small-scale corruption has been meaningfully reduced».⁹⁶

It is against this backdrop that parliamentary elections took place on 27 October 2024. Their democratic dimension was assessed by OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). According to the ODIHR observers, the elections «took place amid ongoing reforms, including significant amendments to the Constitution, but the political environment remained constrained, not providing voters with a genuine choice».⁹⁷ As noted by the ODIHR observers, all five registered political parties «were able to campaign freely and with legally enforced equal conditions». Nevertheless, and far from surprisingly, «their campaigns were low-key and devoid of real challenges to the policies of the ruling party or to each other».⁹⁸ This was the natural enough consequence of the fact that the citizens' ability to exercise fundamental freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression remained «disproportionately constrained by legislation and in practice».⁹⁹ In fact, the only real opposition party, the Truth, Progress and

94. Freedom House, *Uzbekistan* (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/uzbekistan/freedom-world/2024>).

95. *Ibid.*

96. *Ibid.*

97. OSCE - Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Republic of Uzbekistan - Parliamentary Elections - 27 October 2024: ODIHR Election Observation Mission - Final Report*, Warsaw, 26 February 2025 [henceforth *ODIR Final Report*], p.1.

98. *Ibid.*

99. *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 5.

Unity Party, had been denied registration for the third time in 2023 «due to burdensome administrative requirements».¹⁰⁰

One of the few positive aspects of an election with obvious authoritarian traits – a positive aspect which it is opportune to highlight – was the improved standing of female candidates. In fact, legal amendments raised the gender quota for female candidates. As a result, in the 2024 elections, the number of women who held a seat in the 150 seat Legislative Chamber went up from 48 to 57. Even this positive development, however, was less substantial than cosmetic, as women remained underrepresented in decision making positions.¹⁰¹



There is little doubt that, in 2024, the presidential (21 September) and the ensuing legislative elections (14 November) in Sri Lanka, taken together, were a most impressive demonstration that the victory of authoritarianism is not a foregone conclusion. Reasserting democracy can be done, as it has been done in Sri Lanka.

The 2024 presidential election, as noted by Gulbin Sultana of the Manohar Parrikar Institute, was «the first election after the 2022 people's uprising, *Aragalaya*, which sought to change the existing political culture as well as traditional political leadership of the country».¹⁰² It was a political culture and a political leadership heavily conservative at the socio-economic level and deeply warped by that adherence to that ethnonationalism which had brought about one of the longest (1983 to 2009) and bloodiest civil wars in the past one hundred years. The *Aragalaya* («struggle»), a series of mass protests started in March 2022, had brought about the fall from power of the Rajapaksa family, who had dominated in an increasingly authoritarian way Sri Lankan policies most of the time since the final years of the civil war.¹⁰³

The occupation of the presidential palace by the protesters in July 2022 and the flight to the Maldives of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa put an end to the political hegemony of the Rajapaksa family, but basically left the political power in the hands of the same oligarchy of which the Rajapaksas were an integral part. Significantly, the person who was elected by the Parliament to succeed Gotabaya Rajapaksa as president, Ranil Wickremesinghe, was a long-time politician, several times a minister and prime minister,

100. Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2024 – Uzbekistan* (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/uzbekistan/nations-transit/2024>).

101. *ODIR Final Report*, pp. 2, 6.

102. Gulbin Sultana, '2024 Presidential Election in Sri Lanka: An Analysis', *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, 14 October 2024.

103. Gotabaya's eldest brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa, had been president for two consecutive terms from 2005 to 2015. Gotabaya had been elected president on 19 November 2019.

last elected to the latter position (on 12 May 2022) by Gotabaya Rajapaksa himself.¹⁰⁴

Wickremesinghe's election by the Parliament, rather than through a popular election, had been an exceptional measure, taken to deal with a situation which was extremely serious from both economic and public order perspectives. Accordingly, Wickremesinghe's election was thought as a stop-gap measure, which implied that his term extended not for five years, as was the constitutional rule, but only until the end of what should have been Gotabaya's presidential term. As Gotabaya had been elected president on 19 November 2019, this mandated a new presidential election by fall 2024.

The new presidential election took place on 21 September 2024, and was characterized by a high popular participation, with 79.46% of the registered voters (17,140,354) going to the polls.¹⁰⁵ As witnessed by the EU Election Observation Commission, the electoral contest «was pluralistic, with fundamental freedoms broadly respected». Also, the «campaign was peaceful and energetic» and «[r]espect for the democratic process from across the political and civil society spectrum outweighed the minor deficiencies in law and practice». The EU Commission positively commented on the «calm election day, followed by an efficient tabulation of results and candidates' swift acceptance of the outcome», which, in their opinion «attested to the resilience of Sri Lanka's democracy».¹⁰⁶

What was the «unique feature of the 2024 Presidential Election», and an extremely positive one, was that «the election campaign was free of ethnic and religious chauvinistic rhetoric».¹⁰⁷ Rather than the devastating ethno-religious communal slogans and agendas which had characterized previous presidential elections, the 2024 presidential electoral campaign was focused on the economic situation, the problem of corruption and governance issues. By itself this represented a dramatic positive evolution in the political culture of the island.¹⁰⁸

The EU Commission, while passing an amply positive judgement on the management of the elections and the work of the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL), the body in charge of it, pointed out some minor problems. Prominent among them was the fact that «the advantage of incumbency tilted the playing field»; it was an advantage, however, which did not prevent the convincing defeat of the incumbent president, Ranil

104. Diego Abenante, 'Sri Lanka 2022: The *aragalaya* protest movement and the Rajapaksas' fall from power', *Asia Maior*, XXXIII/2022 (2023), pp. 371 ff; Id., 'Sri Lanka 2023: Wickremesinghe's first six months between economic recovery and political uncertainty', *Asia Maior*, XXXIV/2023 (2024), pp. 339 ff.

105. Gulbin Sultana, '2024 Presidential Election in Sri Lanka: An Analysis'.

106. European Union Election Observation Mission, *SRI LANKA 2024. Final Report*, p. 6.

107. Gulbin Sultana, '2024 Presidential Election in Sri Lanka: An Analysis'.

108. *Ibid.*

Wickremesinghe, and the final triumph of a newcomer, Anura Kumara Disanayake.

Disanayake – often indicated by the Lankan media as AKD – was a long-time member and, since 2014, had been the leader of a small revolutionary party, which adhered to a Marxist ideology, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).¹⁰⁹ The JVP, after vainly attempting the road of armed insurrection in two different occasions, finally gave it up in the late 1980s, espousing the constitutional struggle as the only way to power. While continuing to firmly adhere to a leftist ideology, the party gradually abandoned the more radical Marxist ideas. In 2019 the JVP and Disanayake were in the forefront in the creation of a coalition of progressive small parties, positioned from the centre to the far left of the political chessboard, which took the name of National People's Power (NPP) or Jathika Jana Balawegaya (JJB).¹¹⁰

At the moment of the presidential election, the NPP, which supported Disanayake's candidacy, had three representatives only in the Parliament. Also, Disanayake's run for the presidency seemed to be hindered by his historical connection with the JVP. Not only the JVP Marxist ideology and its violent past appeared difficult to accept for significant sections of the voters, but its earlier adherence to Sinhala nationalism and anti-Tamil policies seemed to prevent the support from the minorities. These negative factors were nonetheless counterbalanced by the prestige acquired by Disanayake's role in the *Aragalaya*, and by the NPP detailed and pragmatic electoral programme focussed on the necessity to lift the heavy economic burden which the IMF agreement, signed by the incumbent President, had put on the shoulders of the common people. In fact, the manifesto emphasized the need to enhance public investment on health, education, transportation and food security.

Astutely, Disanayake preceded his election campaign with a series of meetings with representatives of foreign nations and the IMF, aimed at explaining his intention, in case of victory, to carry out policies within the limits of pragmatism. In particular, Disanayake had made clear to the IMF his intention to continue pursuing the goals set in the IMF agreement accepted by Wickremesinghe, but through the implementation of alternative strategies aimed at easing the burden on ordinary people.

This complex and well-articulated strategy not only opened the path to Disanayake's victory at the presidential polls, but, contrarily to the expectations of many analysts, created a favourable attitude on the part of foreign powers and major international investors. Since the presidential election, foreign direct investment commitments increased and Japan announced the prompt resumption of 11 stalled projects.¹¹¹

109. On the early history of the JVP, see Gamini Samaranyake, *Political Violence in Sri Lanka*, Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2008.

110. Gulbin Sultana, '2024 Presidential Election in Sri Lanka: An Analysis'.

111. *Ibid.*

Dissanayake's victory to the presidential poll had been impressive, but, by itself, was far from opening the way to the implementation of the policies which had been promised during his electoral campaign. A Sri Lanka president can pass executive orders, but laws can be passed only by the Parliament. And, at the moment of the presidential election, the majority party in Parliament, the right-wing Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), the de facto political front of the Rajapaksa family, had 145 out of 225 seats.¹¹² Hence the new President's decision (24 September 2024) to dissolve the Parliament and call new legislative elections.

The result was an «unprecedented, record-breaking electoral victory»,¹¹³ which gave to the NPP a massive two-third electoral majority, namely 159 out of 225 seats, opening the possibility for the victorious party to change the Constitution. It was a unique result, considering that it was achieved without any electoral alliance and under a proportional electoral system. This outcome had been made possible by a vote share increase from 42.3% (during the presidential election) to 61.56% and the growth of the NPP voters from 5.7 million during the presidential election to 6.9 million during the legislative election.¹¹⁴ It was a rise that had been made possible, among other factors, by the decision of the Tamil minority, which had not supported Dissanayake's bid to the presidency, to reverse their political position, voting for the NPP.¹¹⁵

Of course, many and very serious were the difficulties in front of Dissanayake and his government, and no certainty existed that the new President would be up to solve if not all of them, at least a sizeable part. The fact remains, nonetheless, that the two Sri Lanka elections had been an impressive testimony that, at least in the island state, the struggle for a fair and democratic society could still be won.



Although a dictatorship up to the first half of the 1980s, Taiwan – or, according to the official diction, the Republic of China (ROC) - successfully transitioned to democracy in the decade 1986-1996.¹¹⁶ Since then, democ-

112. Sarah Shamin, 'Sri Lanka parliamentary elections 2024: what's at stake?', *Al Jazeera*, 14 November 2024.

113. Anali Wedagedara & Pasan Jayasinghe, 'Sri Lanka: Reading the General Election 2024', *CADTM*, 22 November 2024.

114. *Ibid.*

115. *Ibid.*

116. The transition to democracy was decided by then President Chiang Ching-kuo, of the ruling Kuomintang. In 1986 the first legal opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party was founded; the following year martial law was lifted; on 23 March 1996 the first free and direct presidential election was held together with the first free election of the members of the National assembly. See Thomas J. Bellows, 'The March 1996 Elections in the Republic of China on Taiwan', *American Journal of Chinese Studies*, 3 (2), October 1996, pp. 235-249.

racy has continuously strengthened and, in fact, the democratic backsliding that has affected Asia, as the remainder of the world, since the mid-2010s, has not taken place in the island, where, on the contrary, a continuous positive democratic trend has been ongoing.¹¹⁷ Accordingly, the elections which took place on 13 January 2024, at the culmination of a year-long electoral campaign, were not a stage representation, aimed at legitimizing an authoritarian configuration of power, but a real democratic competition, intended to choose the president and the vice president – who, in Taiwan, are elected together – and, at the same time, the members of the unicameral parliament, the Legislative Yuan. The competition was a trilateral duel, pitting against one another the centre-left Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), then in power, the Kuomintang (KMT), the conservative party which, nevertheless, had the historic merit to have made Taiwan's peaceful transition to democracy possible, and the recently created (2019) Taiwan People's Party, generally considered a populist political formation.

As expertly analysed by Aurelio Insisa in the previous *Asia Maior* issue, the electoral campaign was focussed on two main themes: an economic situation that, after «an ebullient 2021», had «entered troubled waters in 2022»; and the problem of the relationship with the mainland, namely the People's Republic of China (PRC).¹¹⁸ As the party in power when the economic backsliding had begun, the DPP could not but lend itself to easy – and perhaps facile – criticism from the other two parties. Conversely, as far as the problem of the relationship with mainland China was concerned, the DPP appeared to be on a firmer ground than the two other parties. Since his choice as the DPP's new chairperson (15 January 2023) and, therefore, de facto presidential candidate,¹¹⁹ Lai Ching-te (aka William Lai), had announced his official policy as the continuation of the one followed by the incumbent president, Tsai Ing-wen. As such, Lai's approach to the problem of the relationship between Taiwan and Mainland China was based on a twofold refusal; that of initiating any negotiations aimed at subordinating the island-state to the PRC and that of avoiding any movement toward the declaration of Taiwan's formal independence. Conversely the KMT and its presidential candidate, Hou Yu-ih proposed, as their key message, the necessity to adhere to the «1992 Consensus» (see below), reiterating a political choice which had already showed to be a losing one during the 2016 and 2020 elections.

Originally endorsed by both the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party, the 1992 Consensus was based on the idea that there is only one Chi-

117. David Sacks, 'Taiwan's Democracy Is Thriving in China's Shadow', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 13 May 2024. Sacks highlights the positive evaluation on the part of Freedom House, V-Dem and the *Economist Intelligence Unit*.

118. Aurelio Insisa, 'Taiwan 2023 and the 2024 elections: A DPP partial victory after a contested electoral campaign', *Asia Maior*, XXXIV/2023 (2024), pp. 145-167.

119. The formal announcement that Lai would run as a presidential candidate was only made on 12 April 2023.

na, including both the Mainland and Taiwan.¹²⁰ This was a position which implicitly acknowledged the desirability and necessity of a reunification between the PRC and the ROC, which, however, was to be based on the «One Country, Two Systems» principle. Formulated by Deng Xiaoping (the PRC's paramount leader in the years 1980-1989), the «One Country, Two Systems» principle stipulated that, inside a unified China, each region would retain its own economic and administrative system.¹²¹ Originally a credible – even enticing – policy, which had been the basis for the reunification with the PRC of Hong Kong and Macau, its concrete application under Xi Jinping had demonstrated its illusory nature.

As documented in this and the previous *Asia Maior* issue by Than Kiū, following the reunification with the PRC Hong Kong had gradually been deprived of any autonomy in a process which basically reached its conclusion in coincidence with the 2023 electoral campaign in Taiwan.¹²² In this context, as noted by Insisa, the KMT's attempt to frame the election as a choice between «war and peace», with the DPP as the main culprit for the growing ongoing tensions with Mainland China failed.¹²³ The interview released on the eve of the election by KMT's heavy weight Ma Ying-jeou, which basically stated that any resistance to unification with China was useless and that it was necessary to trust Xi Jinping, went straight against the conviction of the huge majority of the Taiwanese voters, who were in favour of the maintenance of the status quo.¹²⁴

120. On the 1992 Consensus see, e.g., Chi-hung Wei, 'China–Taiwan relations and the 1992 consensus, 2000–2008', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 16 (1), 2016, pp. 67-95; Yu-Jie Chen and Jerome A. Cohen, 'China-Taiwan Relations Re-Examined: The "1992 Consensus" and cross-strait agreements', *University of Pennsylvania Asian Law Review*, XIV, 2019, pp. 1-40.

121. E.g., Guiguo Wang & Priscilla M F Leung, 'One Country, Two Systems: Theory into Practice', *Washington International Law Journal*, 7 (2), 1998, pp. 279-321.

122. Than Kiū, 'Hong Kong 2023: The new Chinese province', *Asia Maior*, XXXIV/2023 (2024), pp. 125-143; and *id.*, 'Hong Kong 2024: Adjusting to the National Security Law. In this same volume. See also, Claudia Astarita, 'Hong Kong 2021-2022: A new life in the shadow of China', *Asia Maior*, XXXIII/2022 (2023), pp. 157-175.

123. Aurelio Insisa, 'Taiwan 2023 and the 2024 elections: A DPP partial victory after a contested electoral campaign', pp. 145. 148

124. In 2023, 33.2% of the Taiwanese were in favour of the choice «maintain the status quo indefinitely», 27.9% were in favour of the choice «maintain the status quo, decide at a later date», and 21.5% were in favour of the choice «maintain the status quo, move toward independence». Of course, because the status quo implied the de facto independence from the Mainland, the choices in its favour, which amounted to the 82.6% of the total, implied a stance in favour of independence, although a disguised one. Interestingly the choice «unification as soon as possible», was the least preferred option. It had never exceeded 5% since the survey had been conducted and stood at only 1.2% in 2023. See Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, 'Taiwan Independence vs. Unification with the Mainland (1994/12~2024/12)', 13 January 2025.

Together with the KMT's shuttle diplomacy to China in the months before the formal beginning of the electoral campaign, Ma's interview positioned the KMT as too weak and possibly untrustworthy in defending the status quo against an increasingly authoritarian and aggressive PRC.

This was decisive, as, ultimately, the key discriminator in the electoral duel between DPP and KMT was the position of the two parties on the key issue «reunification vs independence». Whereas both parties had avoided clear-cut positions, preferring to disguise them behind the necessity and inevitability to trust Xi Jinping's benevolence, in the case of the KMT, or maintaining the status quo, in the case of the DPP, the actual standing of the two parties on this question was unequivocal.

Apparently opaquer was, conversely, the standing on the question of the third competitor, the TPP, headed by Ko Wen-je. A key element of the TPP's populist ideology was the refusal to make a clear choice on the «reunification vs independence» question, preferring to focus – as highlighted by Insisa - «on the economy and on the plight of low-wage workers and especially urban youth, “betrayed” by the DPP technocratic rule».¹²⁵ The problem, however, was that the reunification-vs-independence question was a too important one to be permanently side-lined during the long-drawn electoral campaign. In fact, during most of it, Ko appeared to take a position on the reunification-vs-independence question virtually indistinguishable from that of the KMT. Nonetheless, a month before the election, Ko suddenly – and belatedly - changed of camp, declaring himself determined to continue that same approach to national defence that had been initiated by Tsai Ing-wen and was then the key part of William Lai's official programme.¹²⁶

The end result of the electoral campaign was the victory of William Lai with 40,05% of vote, followed by the KMT candidate, Hou Yu-ih, with 33.49% of the vote and the TPP candidate, Ko Wen-je, with 26% of the vote. However, interestingly enough, the results in the Legislative Yuan differed. There, it was the KMT to emerge as the biggest party, with 52 out of 113 seats, followed by the DPP, with 51 seats (against the 61 elected in 2020). The TPP, with 8 seats, was potentially the controller of the balance of power, as the KMT was short of the majority, even if it was supported also by two independent legislators.¹²⁷

Clearly, while the presidential competition had been dominated by the problem of the relationship with the PRC, the legislative election had been conditioned by the difficulty shown by the DPP in facing the adverse economic situation and in successfully dealing with «the long-unsolved structural issues of the Taiwanese economy».¹²⁸

125. Aurelio Insisa, 'Taiwan 2023 and the 2024 elections: A DPP partial victory after a contested electoral campaign', p. 149.

126. *Ibid.*, pp. 147-157.

127. *Ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

128. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

There is little doubt that if the 2024 Thailand Senate election can be seen as the provisional concluding phase of an incomplete, ambiguous and faltering transition from military rule to democracy, Cambodia's analogous election, taking place the same year, can be seen as the concluding phase of a complete, unambiguous and decisive transition from democracy to dynastic autocracy. As in the case of Thailand, in the case of Cambodia the prelude to the Senate election, and what gave it its final meaning, was the election to the Lower House which took place the previous year. As shown by Caroline Bennet, in an election «widely deemed not to be fair and free»,¹²⁹ the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), namely the party in power since the fall of the Khmer Rouge, headed by Prime Minister Hun Sen, won 120 out of the 125 seats in the National Assembly. The only other party represented in the Lower House was the FUNCINPEC, headed by Prince Norodom Chakravuth, a member of the Cambodian royal family, which won the five remaining seats.¹³⁰

The CPP's massive victory was obtained thanks to «a plethora of actions taken to restrict democratic freedoms».¹³¹ The most important among them was the banning from elections of the most important opposition party, the Candlelight Party, «for allegedly not having the correct paperwork».¹³² Also, the elections themselves were marred by stories of «coercion, electoral fraud, intimidation, and corruption».¹³³

The CPP victory was prodromic to the passage of the prime ministership from Hun Sen to his eldest son, Hun Manet. This was a move that, as noted by Bennet, «completed the transformation of Cambodia to a dynastic autocracy».¹³⁴ Although leaving the prime ministership to his son, Hun Sen continued to maintain a central decision-making and control role as the president of the CPP. Also, soon after relinquishing the prime ministership, a royal decree nominated Hun Sen head, with equal rank to the prime minister, of the Supreme Privy Council, an advisory political body to the king.¹³⁵

These two political positions, although conferring wide powers to Hun Sen together with the possibility to have the ear of the King, did not justify the performance of those roles in international politics to which Hun Sen had not only always aspired but which he had also often performed with considerable skill. This explains Hun Sen's strategy aimed at assuming the

129. Caroline Bennett, 'Cambodia 2022-2023: Securing dynastic autocracy', *Asia Maior*, XXXIV/2023 (2024), p. 217.

130. *Ibid.*, pp. 218-220.

131. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

132. *Ibid.*

133. *Ibid.*

134. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

135. Torn Chanritheara, 'Ex-PM Hun Sen Appointed as Head of Supreme Privy Council', *Cambodianess*, 22 August 2023.

presidency of the Senate. While the Senate's duties are largely ceremonial in the Cambodian system, the president of the Senate is the de facto head of State as well as its de jure head when the king is out of the country. Which, in the period under review, happened regularly and frequently because of 70-year-old King Norodom Sihamoni's need to undergo health check-ups in China.¹³⁶

The results of the election of the new Senate, due on 25 February 2024, were never in doubt, and «not just for the usual factors to do with the suppression of the political opposition».¹³⁷ The Cambodian Senate is elected indirectly, and, out of 62 senators, 58 are selected by an electorate totaling just 11,747 people, made up by the 125 members of the National Assembly and the members of the country's 1,652 commune councils.¹³⁸ These are all institutions which, in the period under review, were largely controlled by the CPP. Accordingly, and far from surprisingly, the CPP won 55 out of the 58 elected seats, the remaining three going to the Khmer Will Party, an avatar of the banned Candlelight Party. As two of the four non-elective members were selected by the CPP-dominated Lower House, this means that the CPP senators were 57 in a 62-member-strong Senate. Hun Sen's ensuing foregone election as president of the Senate, together with the absolute dominance of the CPP in both Houses, were the unambiguous demonstration that the transformation of the Cambodian political system into an autocratic dynastic one was by then a *fait accompli*.¹³⁹



In the year under review, in Azerbaijan the presidential election and then the election of the National Assembly were held on 7 February and 1 September respectively. The presidential election, originally scheduled for April 2025, was anticipated by a presidential decree of 7 December 2023, very possibly to allow the incumbent president, Ilham Aliyev, the opportunity to make full use of the popularity he derived from the conquest of Nagorno Karabakh.¹⁴⁰ By itself, the advantage enjoyed by Aliyev opened the possibility that

136. 'Cambodia's ruling party wins Senate election, paving the way for Hun Sen to act as its president', *AP*, 27 February 2024.

137. Sebastian Strangio, 'Cambodia's CPP Claims Lopsided Victory in Senate Elections', *The Diplomat*, 26 February 2024.

138. 'Two of the remaining four senators are elected by the Lower House and two by the King.'

139. Ananth Baliga and Meng Kroypunlok, 'Cambodia election sweep cements Hun Sen family's grip on power', *Nikkei Asia*, 26 February 2024.

140. In the final analysis, this was the explanation given, although making use of a more diplomatic language, by Ilham Aliyev himself. However, analysts proposed a series of other possible explanations. See, e.g., Lidiya Parkhomchik, 'What are the Reasons for Early Presidential Election in Azerbaijan?', *Akhmet Yassawi University - Eurasian Research Institute*, without date; Murad Muradov and Rusif Huseynov, 'Azer-

his government, differently from what had been the habit since Azerbaijan had become independent, would allow free and fair elections. But, as «old habits die hard»,¹⁴¹ this opportunity was not seized. Instead, «it was business as usual, with manipulation and violations, including carousel voting, ballot stuffing, and aggressive behaviour towards independent observers and journalists».¹⁴² In this context, and to the surprise of no one, Aliyev trounced the other six candidates¹⁴³ – none of whom had taken a critical stance towards Aliyev's policies. He was re-elected for the fourth time, bagging over 90% of the general vote.¹⁴⁴ While Aliyev's previous presidential mandates were of five years each, the one starting in 2024 had been extended to seven years, thanks to «a controversial referendum held in 2016».¹⁴⁵

Again not surprisingly, the parliamentary election had analogous results, which were obtained with the same methods that had characterized the presidential election. Aliyev's party, the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (*Yeni Azərbaycan Partiyası* or YAP), officially won 68 of the 125 seats in the National Assembly. This apparently slim absolute majority masked the fact that dozens of other seats went to nominally independent candidates who, however, backed either Aliyev or minor pro-government parties. Hence, in the final analysis, the pro-Aliyev majority was an extremely wide one.¹⁴⁶

According to the OCSE observers: «The September 1 early parliamentary elections took place in a restrictive political and legal environment that does not enable genuine pluralism and resulted in a contest devoid of competition».¹⁴⁷ In turn, this «restrictive political and legal environment was the necessary end-result of a series of policies implemented by Aliyev

bajani presidential elections: reasons and possible implications', *New Eastern Europe*, 26 March 2024. On the conquest of the Armenian enclave of Nagorno Karabakh and its consequences, see Carlo Frappi, 'Azerbaijan 2021: Towards a new beginning?', *Asia Major*, XXXII/2021 (2022), pp. 417 ff.

141. Arzu Geybullayeva, 'Presidential election in Azerbaijan show [sic] old habits die hard', *Global Voices*, 8 February 2024.

142. *Ibid.* Carousel voting is a method of vote rigging in which voters cast their ballots at more than one polling station.

143. The second most voted candidate, Zahid Oruj, got just below 2% of the votes. Murad Muradov & Rusif Huseynov, 'Azerbaijani presidential elections: reasons and possible implications', *New Eastern Europe*, 26 March 2024.

144. Arzu Geybullayeva, 'Presidential election in Azerbaijan show [sic] old habits die hard'; 'Azerbaijan election: President Ilham Aliyev wins vote criticized by monitors', *BBC News*, 8 February 2024.

145. Arzu Geybullayeva, 'Presidential election in Azerbaijan show [sic] old habits die hard'.

146. Mərkəzi Seçki Komissiyası, İnformasiya Mərkəzi [Central Election Commission, Information Center] (<https://www.infocenter.gov.az/archive/MilliMeclis2024.aspx?i=5&dsk=1>). See also Naila Bagirova, 'Azerbaijan's ruling party retains parliamentary majority after snap vote', *Reuters*, 2 September 2024.

147. Naila Bagirova, 'Azerbaijan's ruling party retains parliamentary majority after snap vote'.

and his government. A law which had become effective in January 2023 had imposed such stringent qualifications for any existing party that scores of them had ceased to exist in the following months. This law had come on the top of «arrests, detentions, financial hurdles, or persecution»¹⁴⁸ which had targeted the opposition parties, and was accompanied by a crackdown on journalists and activists.

Unfortunately, both the presidential and legislative elections in Azerbaijan had shown beyond any possible doubt that the denunciation made by Ali Karimli, the chairman of one of the two major opposition parties, the Popular Front of Azerbaijan, on 16 December 2023, according to which elections in Azerbaijan were a «fakery» and «an imitation of democracy»,¹⁴⁹ was nothing but the truth.



Another general election which, on the whole, signalled a widening of the democratic space took place in Mongolia. Mongolia had been the first country in Asia to effectively transition from communist dictatorship into democracy, as a result of the peaceful Democratic Revolution of 1990. Since 1990, Mongolia has held 10 parliamentary elections, including the one in 2024. The result has been that, for over three decades since the transition to democracy, «there has been a consistent and peaceful transfer of power from one incumbent to another».¹⁵⁰ In the assessment of Daniel Worrall and Charlie Humphreys of Asia House, Mongolia is «a robust democracy that has demonstrated significant resilience during the COVID pandemic and post-pandemic economic challenge».¹⁵¹ Also, it is the only Asian formerly communist country classified as «free» by Freedom House.¹⁵² Although sandwiched between two authoritarian countries, Russia and China, and heavily dependent on the economic connections with both, but in particular China, Mongolia has become «an oasis of democracy», as claimed, not without justification, by a top Mongolian politician.¹⁵³

148. Arzu Geybullayeva, 'In Azerbaijan it isn't just the president for life, but the parliament too', *Global Voices*, 26 July 2024 .

149. 'Azerbaijan's top opposition parties to continue election boycott streak', *Eurasianet*, 20 December 2023.

150. Gabat Damba & Byambakhand Luguusharav, 'Mongolia's Electoral Reform and the State Great Khural (Parliamentary) Elections', *Asia Democracy Research Network*, 19 July 2024.

151. Daniel Worrall and Charlie Humphreys, '2024 Mongolia Election Analysis', *Asia House*, 7 May 2024.

152. Freedom House, *Mongolia*.

153. Dashzeveg Amarbayasgalan, four-time secretary of the Mongolian People's Party, past chairman of the unicameral parliament, presently chief cabinet secretary. The quotations is in Daniel Worrall and Charlie Humphreys, '2024 Mongolia Election Analysis'.

The 2024 election represented a further political shift towards a wider form of democracy. The election was preceded by the enactment, on 31 May 2023, of two constitutional amendments which expanded the size of the unicameral parliament, the State Great Khural, from 76 to 126 seats and introduced a mixed electoral system. According to it, 78 out of the 126 members of parliament were elected according to the plurality vote system from 13 electoral districts, while the remaining 48 members were elected via proportional representation from a nation-wide single electoral constituency. These constitutional amendments modified the previous electoral system, based on a majoritarian system which allowed little chance of securing parliamentary seats to the smaller parties.¹⁵⁴ Interestingly the constitutional revision was a decision of the then ruling party, the Mongolian People's Party, which enjoyed a 62-member supermajority in a 76-member parliament.

Also, a parliamentary resolution of 21 December 2023 reduced the majority voting electoral districts from 29 to 13.¹⁵⁵ This was a controversial decision, which was criticized because the widening of the districts made it difficult to carry an electoral campaign for the smaller parties. Also, the fact that the extension of the districts varied greatly was disapproved. Finally, the new constituency structure – six urban and seven provincial electoral districts – did not redress the unbalance in favour of the latter. Although almost half of the Mongolian population lived in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, and its outlining communities (Nalaikh, also spelled Nalajh, Bagakhangai and Baganuur), the six urban constituencies in which it was subdivided elected only 30% of the representatives. This gave to the voter residing in the Ulaanbaatar area only roughly half of the electoral weight of other voters.¹⁵⁶

A remarkable aspect of the 2024 election was the enhanced presence of women and youth candidates. The presence of women candidates was regulated by a 2024 law which mandated that candidates in the majoritarian constituencies be selected according to a 70/30 gender ratio.¹⁵⁷ In other

154. The electoral systems employed since the 1990 democratic revolution has been frequently changed and has ranged from majoritarian voting systems with single or multiple mandates to mixed systems which combined majoritarian and proportional representation. See Gabat Damba & Byambakhand Luguusharav, 'Mongolia's Electoral Reform and the State Great Khural (Parliamentary) Elections'.

155. Marissa J. Smith, Julian Dierkes, and Enkhsetseg Dagva, 'Parliamentary Elections 2024: Yet Another New Election System', *Mongolia Focus*, 12 March 2024.

156. Ganbat Damba & Byambakhand Luguusharav, 'Mongolia's Electoral Reform and the State Great Khural (Parliamentary) Elections'; Marissa J. Smith, Julian Dierkes, and Enkhsetseg Dagva, 'Parliamentary Elections 2024: Yet Another New Election System'.

157. This ratio is set to change to 60/40 in the 2028 election. See Maria A. Blackwood, 'Parliamentary Elections in Mongolia', [US] *Congressional Research Service Insight*, 9 July 2024.

words, no gender could be represented by less than 30% of the candidates, which concretely meant that female candidates could not be less than 30%. Also, candidates in the party lists for proportional representation had to be selected according to a «zipper» structure, namely alternating between male and female candidates.¹⁵⁸ The enhanced presence of young candidates was not mandated by any state norm, but the result of autonomous decisions of the political parties involved, in particular the two major ones: the centre-left Mongolian Peoples's Party (MPP), enjoying a parliamentary supermajority in the legislative term that ended with the 2024 election, and the main opposition party, the conservative Democratic Party (DP).¹⁵⁹

It was against this backdrop that the parliamentary election of 28 June 2024 took place. In the judgement of the OSCE observers, it was «well run and candidates could campaign freely», while the «work of the national election administration was professional and transparent, enjoying stakeholder trust». Also, according to the same source, the election administration had «carried out a comprehensive voter information campaign ahead of the elections».¹⁶⁰

The OSCE observers also pointed out a series of negative aspects. The most important among them was «an uneven playing field caused by campaign restrictions and biased media coverage favouring the ruling party». Also, according to the same source: «The short campaign period, combined with government-promoted salary and benefit increases, provided the ruling party with an undue advantage, blurring the line between party and state».¹⁶¹

The OSCE observers also decried «a law requiring candidates to align their election programmes with specific government policies» as limiting freedom of expression and opinion.¹⁶² But it was a law with little practical consequences, as ideological and policy differences between the competing parties on the main political issues in front of the country – in particular, mining, health and environmental strategies – were minimal.¹⁶³ According-

158. Julian Dierkes, 'Mongolia's MPP maintains power with strategic gains', *East Asia Forum*, 23 July 2024.

159. Bolor Lkhaajav, 'Mongolia's Election Brings Diverse Multiparty Representation and Corruption Concerns', *The Diplomat*, 4 July 2024. Rather paradoxically, in spite of the presence of many young candidates, the younger generation was laggard in voting.

160. OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 'Mongolia's parliamentary elections well run but marked by ruling party advantage and several fundamental rights limitations: international observers', *OSCE*, 29 June 2024.

161. *Ibid.* Also criticized were the layout of polling stations, which led to overcrowding, «compromising the secrecy of the vote in some cases» and the presence of a legislation against dissemination of false information which was «currently being used to prosecute several journalists, leading to widespread self-censorship».

162. *Ibid.*

163. Julian Dierkes, 'Mongolia's MPP maintains power with strategic gains'.

ly, the main themes discussed during the electoral campaign were corruption (a perennial problem in Mongolia), and unemployment and inflation (although against an economic backdrop characterized by a comfortable GDP growth rate).¹⁶⁴ What, therefore, possibly played a major role in the electoral results was the personality of the candidates.¹⁶⁵

In the final analysis, in spite of the shortcomings highlighted by the OSCE observers, there is little doubt that the election was free. As noted by Martin Duffy – who, under the aegis of a wide range of international organizations, is an old hand as observer of elections world-wide – the «acid test» about the perceived probity of polling is usually the level of complaints from party observers, which, in the case of the 2024 Mongolian elections, were «pretty muted». In fact, «the entire proceedings were open to local and international observation and appeared transparent at each stage of the process».¹⁶⁶

Nineteen political parties and two coalitions fielded a total of more than 1,300 candidates.¹⁶⁷ The parties that crossed the bar threshold to enter parliament¹⁶⁸ were four plus one coalition (see table 4).

The results were also characterized by a sizeable presence of women among the elected representatives. Only 13 out of 76 members in the 2020-24 parliament, namely the 17.1% of the MPs, in 2024 women representatives numbered 32, namely 25.4% of the MPs.¹⁶⁹ Also, one of the new female MPs, belonging to the Civil Will Green Party, was a Kazakh, which signified «a pivotal advancement in the political representation of ethnic minorities in the country».¹⁷⁰

164. See Ken Moritsugu and Aniruddha Ghosal, 'Mongolia's governing party wins only a slim majority in parliamentary election, early results show', *AP*, 29 June 2024. The GDP growth rate in 2023 had been 7%. In 2024 a contraction was expected, particularly because of the negative impact of adverse weather conditions on agriculture. The inflation was on a downward trend, but remained high. See, e.g., Asia Development Bank, *Asia Development Outlook (ADO) April 2024: Mongolia* (<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/957856/mon-ado-april-2024.pdf>).

165. Martin Duffy, 'Reflections on Mongolia's 2024 Elections', *E-International Relations*, 7 July 2024.

166. *Ibid.*

167. 1336 according to the US Congressional Research Service Insight; 1341 according to the Asia Democracy Research Network.

168. The threshold was 4% of the vote for single parties; 5% for two-party coalitions; 7% for coalitions with three or more parties. See, e.g., Marissa J. Smith, Julian Dierkes, and Enkhsetseg Dagva, 'Parliamentary Elections 2024: Yet Another New Election System'.

169. Ganbat Damba & Byambakhand Luguusharav, 'Mongolia's Electoral Reform and the State Great Khural (Parliamentary) Elections'.

170. *Ibid.*

TABLE 4 - MONGOLIAN ELECTIONS 2024: RESULTS			
Parties & coalitions	Majoritarian	Proportional	Total
Mongolian People's Party (MPP)	50	18	68
Democratic Party (DP)	26	16	42
HUN party	2	6	8
National Coalition	0	4	4
Civil Will Green Party	0	4	4
Source: Maria A. Blackwood, 'Parliamentary Elections in Mongolia', <i>[US] Congressional Research Service Insight</i> , 9 July 2024.			

The MPP had emerged from the electoral contest as still endowed of a majority that, although reduced when compared to the one it had enjoyed in the previous parliament, was nevertheless absolute. In spite of that, the MPP’s acknowledged leader, Luvsannamsrain Oyun-Erdene, made the choice of forming a «grand coalition», including both the MPP’s historic adversary, the DP, and the rising HUN party. This was a choice justified by the objectives «to foster stability and cooperative governance by incorporating diverse perspectives to tackle Mongolia’s socioeconomic challenges».¹⁷¹ However, as argued by critics, «particularly from local civil society and urbanite Mongolians», it was a choice that perpetuated the MPP’s grip on power and reduced to insignificance the opposition (8 MPs out of 126), opening the possibility of an unchecked involution on the part of the government towards authoritarianism.¹⁷²

Of course, only the future can reveal whether the fears of critics of the grand coalition government are well-founded or not. Nonetheless Mongolia’s recent political past is such that there is hope that the path to ever-increasing democracy will continue to be successfully treaded.



The Kingdom of Bhutan transitioned to democracy in the years 2006-2008. In 2006 King Jigme Singye Wangchuck abdicated in favour of his Oxford-educated son, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck; two years later, after a royal edict (22 April 2007) had lifted the previous ban on political parties¹⁷³ and a liberal constitution establishing a constitutional monarchy

171. Anand Tumurtogoo, ‘A Gran Coalition and a New Era in Mongolia’, *The Diplomat*, 1 August 2024.

172. *Ibid.*

173. Somini Sengupta, ‘Line Up and Pick a Dragon: Bhutan Learns to Vote’, *New York Times*, 24 April 2007.

and a bicameral parliament had been adopted (18 July 2008),¹⁷⁴ the first democratic elections were held. According to Freedom House, during the post-2008 period Bhutan «has made significant strides toward becoming a consolidated democracy», particularly in the years 2014-2024, as it has held «credible elections and undergone transfers of power to opposition parties».¹⁷⁵

Of course, the Bhutanese democracy is not without blemishes, epitomized by «discrimination against Nepali-speaking and non-Buddhist minorities, media self-censorship, and, increasingly, the use of libel and defamation cases to silence journalists».¹⁷⁶ However, the progress towards a full-blown democracy is unmistakable, as shown by the fact that Freedom House moved Bhutan's status up from «Partly Free» to «Free» in the report covering the year 2024. This upgrading was motivated by the steady improvement of «physical security and the environment for civil liberties», which had taken place «in recent years», and, possibly more important,¹⁷⁷ by «free and fair legislative elections and the formation of a new government» which «further consolidated a long democratic reform process in the kingdom».¹⁷⁸

According to the Bhutanese system, elections to the National Assembly – which has wider powers than the Upper House or National Council – are held in two rounds, according to the first-past-the-post system. The first round selects the two most voted parties, which are admitted to the second round. The second round determines how the 47 seats of the National Assembly are distributed among the two parties left in the running.¹⁷⁹

The latest election to Bhutan's Lower House – the fourth since the introduction of democracy in 2008 – took place on 30 November 2023 and 9 January 2024. The main themes of the electoral campaign were the state of the economy, which had been badly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, the consequent high unemployment and record numbers of young people who had left the country, searching for better financial and educational opportunities abroad, particularly in Australia.¹⁸⁰

174. *The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan* (<https://www.dlgdm.gov.bt/storage/upload-documents/2021/9/20/Constitution-of-bhutan-2008.pdf>).

175. Freedom House, *Bhutan: Country Profile* (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/bhutan>).

176. *Ibid.*

177. «Possibly more important» in that they are quoted by Freedom House before the improvement in physical security and the environment for civil liberties.

178. Freedom House, *Bhutan: Freedom in the World 2025 Country Report* (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/bhutan/freedom-world/2025>).

179. Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Bhutan: Tshogdu (National Assembly)* (http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2035_B.htm).

180. 'Bhutan holds general election as economic crisis hits «national happiness»', *Al Jazeera*, 7 January 2024.

The November 2023 round of voting saw the confrontation among five parties and the victory of the People Democratic Party (PDP) and the Bhutan Tendrel Party (BTP). In the ensuing January 2024 round, 65.74% of the eligible voters went to the polls, many of them undertaking «arduous journey, trekking for days to exercise their right to vote».¹⁸¹

Basically, all parties involved in the 2023-2024 elections had pledged to uphold the constitutional principle of governing for the «happiness and wellbeing of the people»¹⁸² and had emphasized their commitment both to the revitalization of the economy, and the solution of the problems of unemployment and emigration.¹⁸³ As the programmes of the competing parties did not vary in a significant way, it makes sense to think that the voters decided on the basis of their trust for the politicians they elected. This is a hypothesis strengthened by the fact that the centre-left Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa Party (Bhutan United Party), in power before the election, and, therefore, considered responsible of the ongoing crisis, was not admitted to the second round. This resulted in the victory of the PDP, which bagged 30 of the National Assembly seats, while the remainder 17 went to the BTP. Also in line with the hypothesis that the voters chose on the basis of their trust in the politicians they voted is the fact that the head of the victorious PDP, therefore designated to become the new prime minister, Tshering Tobgay, had already served in that position in 2023-2018, before the ongoing crisis had developed.¹⁸⁴ It is worth noting that it was the first time in the democratic history of the Himalayan Kingdom, that the same politician had been returned to the prime ministership.



The Maldives is the least populous among the Asian countries which went to the poll in 2024, and the smallest among the South Asian nations. However, its crucial geo-strategic position in the Indian Ocean – which has aroused the interest of major world powers with a stake in the Indo-Pacific, in particular China and India - gives it a far greater importance than would result from its small population and limited size.

181. 'PDP Wins 2024 National General Elections with 30 Seats', *Daily Bhutan*, 10 January 2024.

182. It is a well-known fact that in Bhutan, in alternative to the GDP, the main national index of progress is the Gross National Happiness (GNH). The concept of GNH was formulated by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck in the early 1970s and incorporated into Article 9 of the 2008 constitution. GNH Centre Bhutan, *History of GNH* (<https://www.gnhcentrebhutan.org/history-of-gnh/>). For a discussion of the concept see OECD, *Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index*, 23 August 2024.

183. 'Bhutan holds general election as economic crisis hits «national happiness»'; 'PDP Wins 2024 National General Elections with 30 Seats'.

184. 'Tshering Tobgay set to return as Bhutan PM after liberal PDP wins elections', *Al Jazeera*, 10 January 2024.

The Maldives too is a recent democracy, which, in fact was born, as in the case of Bhutan, in 2008. Also, as in the case of Sri Lanka, the legislative elections in the Maldives were the concluding phase of a political process started with a presidential election the year before. Differently however from the cases of Bhutan and Sri Lanka, the Maldivian democracy appears decidedly more fragile than that of the two other South Asian countries.

Since the peaceful revolution of 2008, which forced Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, the strongman who had been in power for three decades (1978-2008),¹⁸⁵ to allow the first multiparty presidential vote, which he lost, the country has held regular multiparty presidential and parliamentary elections. Unfortunately, with the exception of the first democratically elected Maldivian President, Mohamed Nasheed (president 2008-2012),¹⁸⁶ all the Presidents who have governed the archipelago from 2012 up to 2023 have shown the tendency to make use of authoritarian measures. These have ranged from attacks on the judiciary to detention, torture and disappearance or murder of political opponents.¹⁸⁷ Rather surprisingly, nonetheless, none of the post-2008 Presidents has hitherto succeeded in solidifying his grip on power, and all of them have been unable to outlast a single mandate, being succeeded by politicians of a completely different political hue. The latest example of this trend was the 2023 presidential election which saw incumbent President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) defeated by then Mayor of Malé Mohamed Muizzu, of the People's National Congress (PNC). Muizzu, who went to the polls supported by a coalition between his own MPD and the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM), won with 54% of the vote.¹⁸⁸

The new President had to cope with a Parliament which was still firmly controlled by Solih's MDP, which blocked both several of the new President's initiatives and the appointment of three of the cabinet members whom he had selected.¹⁸⁹ The possible way out from the resulting impasse was the fact

185. Gayoom had been preceded by another strongman, Ibrahim Nasir, in power from the year of independence (1965).

186. Mohamed Nasheed, the «Maldivian Mandela», was removed from power by a military coup. His Vice-President, who was possibly involved in the coup, took Nasheed's place up to the official expiry of Nasheed's mandate. Then new elections were held.

187. Azim Zahir, 'The Maldives: The rise and fall of a Muslim democracy', *Al Jazeera*, 23 September 2018; Mimrah Abdul Ghafoor, 'The Past, Present, and Future of Maldivian Democracy', *The Diplomat*, 25 October 2023; International IDEA, 'Maldives', July 2024 (<https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/country/maldives>).

188. Ece Goksedef, 'Maldives election: Pro-China candidate Muizzu wins presidency', *BBC News*, 30 September 2023; 'Mohamed Muizzu wins Maldives election in victory for pro-China camp', *Al Jazeera*, 30 September 2023.

189. 'Maldives parliament rejects 3 cabinet members after dramatic brawl', *The Daily Star*, 29 January 2024; Mohamed Junayd, 'Pro-China party wins Maldives election in landslide – reports', *Reuters*, 22 April 2024.

that elections for the unicameral Parliament (or People's Majlis) were due at the beginning of 2024.¹⁹⁰ When they were held, on 21 April 2024, Muizzu's PNC achieved an overwhelming victory, jumping from three to 70 seats in a 93-seat-Parliament. Also, three independent legislators decided to ally with the PNC. On its part, Solih's MDP crashed from 65 to 12 seats.¹⁹¹ It is worth stressing that, as in the case of the previous presidential elections, the parliamentary election was not marred by «major issues or irregularities», which means that its result was «indicative of the will of the people».¹⁹²

In the final analysis, while it is too early to evaluate if the presidential and legislative elections of 2023 and 2024 in the Maldives have opened the path towards a more authentic democracy, there is at least hope that this is the case.¹⁹³



What are the conclusions that can be drawn by the preceding rather long and tortuous reconnaissance of the elections which took place in 16 Asian countries, inhabited by more than 2 billion people? In order to arrive at some kind of evaluation, some preliminary methodological considerations are in order. Whereas, in the everyday language, the binary classification democracy/autocracy is hegemonic in characterizing the political system of any given country, by itself it is incapable to satisfactorily assess the existing reality. In fact, both the concept of democracy and that of autocracy are ideal types; as such they do not exist in reality, but are mental constructs

190. Maldivian parliamentary elections are held according to the first-past-the-post system.

191. ECM, *Parliamentary Elections 2024 - Results* (<https://results.elections.gov.mv/index.html>).

192. This was the judgement of a spokesperson for the US State Department. See Mohamed Junayd, 'Pro-China party wins Maldives election in landslide – reports', *Reuters*, 22 April 2024. Very significantly, no accusation of irregularities or dishonest practices during the elections appeared in the Indian press, despite concerns about the pro-Chinese positions of Muizzu and his party. See, e.g., 'Maldives' Prez Muizzu secures «supermajority» in parliamentary elections', *Business Standard*, 22 April 2024.

193. As one can gather also from the titles of the newspapers quoted so far, international observers had the tendency to see the political struggle in the Maldives as one fought between pro-India and pro-China political forces. Of course, foreign policy is not totally devoid of influence in the Maldivian voters' choices, if not for any other reason, because of the economic advantages which can accrue to the archipelago by favouring the geopolitical ambitions of either India or China. Nonetheless, as pointed out by Indian Ambassador Rajeev Bhatia, the main concerns of the Maldivian voters – «especially young voters», who, in the Maldives, are the majority – relate to «their economic well-being: employment, housing and improvements needed for the tourism industry, education, and healthcare». Therefore, «to portray the election as a football match between China and India [...] is to betray ignorance of how this nation of 1,192 islands functions». Rajiv Bhatia, 'Maldives: a democracy evolves', *The Hindu*, 12 October 2023.

which help to give a rational order to the apparent chaos of reality. Also, by themselves, these two ideal types are insufficient to reach their purported explanatory goal; reality is too complex to be explained only by them. Any analysis on the existing political systems – included the one performed in the previous pages – cannot but reveal that each of them falls in an intermediate space between a perfect democracy and a perfect autocracy. In turn, this intermediate space, is not, to paraphrase Hegel's quip in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a night «in which all cows are black». In fact, the regimes occupying this intermediate space are characterized by even radically different mixtures of democratic and authoritarian elements. They are all hybrid regimes, but all hybrid regimes are not the same.

Once the above has been clarified, in order to make sense of the situation of liberty/lack-of-it, as revealed by the 2024 elections in Asia, a rule-of-the-thumb classification, without any claim to scientificity but perhaps sufficient to give some order to the apparent chaos of reality, is proposed. It is based on the following categories: (a) full democracy; (b) full but endangered democracy; (c) full democracy in the making; (d) electoral autocracy in the making; (e) electoral autocracy; (f) sham democracy. A last possible category – full autocracy – is not included, as any system allowing elections, it does not matter how constrained – is not a full autocracy.¹⁹⁴

In our classification, the two extremes of the proposed range – «full democracy» and «sham democracy» – are the nearest to the ideal types of democracy and autocracy. However, as there is no perfect correspondence between an ideal type and reality, it ought to be clear that those regimes here classified as full democracies have their own democratic blemishes – as explained in the preceding analysis. Conversely, sham democracies – which are regimes where elections and other democratic institutions have, basically, only a cosmetic function – still include some effective, although rare and scarcely relevant, democratic elements – which, once again, have been highlighted in

194. In the literature, there is a series of categorisations which attempt to give order to the democracy-autocracy continuum. If this author were a political scientist, at this point he would have to make a critical assessment of this literature. Given, however, that he is a historian, he feels dispensed from this, since, after all, the historian's task is simply to identify the data he considers relevant, and then unfold them, i.e., put them in an order he considers sensible. However, his readers interested in the literature in question can usefully consult the following sources, hereafter quoted in chronological order: Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, 'The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism', *Journal of Democracy*, 13 (2), April 2002, pp. 51-65; Andreas Schedler (ed.), *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition*, Boulder (Colorado): Lynne Rienner, 2006; Andreas Schedler, 'Electoral Authoritarianism', in Robert Scott and Kosslyn (eds.), *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Hoboken (New Jersey): John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2015; Bastian Herre, 'The «Regimes of the World» data: how do researchers measure democracy?', originally published on December 2, 2021, last updated in April 2025 (<https://ourworldindata.org/regimes-of-the-world-data>).

the previous pages. Finally, an electoral autocracy is a system in which democratic institutions still exist and, to a more or less limited extent, still function, but are severely constrained through legal and illegal means by the party and/or leader in power. Also, it is worth stressing that, in the final analysis, even the just suggested categorization is unable to fully reorder the chaos of reality; in it, in fact, it is difficult to include the special case represented by Iran.

Having explained all this, it is possible to have a synthetic view of the results of the preceding analysis on the 2024 Asian elections by looking at table 5.

The first, and rather depressing, impression that one gathers from the examination of table 4 is that none of the four most populous Asian countries – India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh, with a number of inhabitants exceeding 2.180 billion – is a full democracy. It is possible that Bangladesh is on the path towards a more democratic future – but even this is doubtful, considering the key role played by the military in the Monsoon Revolution. Conversely, Indonesia appears to be on the reverse path, possibly heading towards a perfect electoral autocracy. Accordingly, the first full democracy is the fifth most populous Asian country, Japan. In turn, Japan heads the patrol formed by the other five Asian countries classified as full democracies – South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Mongolia

TABLE 5 – WHAT THE 2024 ELECTIONS IN ASIA REVEAL ON THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY			
	Country	Population	State of democracy
1	India	1,463,865,525	Electoral autocracy
2	Indonesia	285,721,236	Electoral autocracy in the making
3	Pakistan	255,219,554	Sham democracy
4	Bangladesh	175,686,899	Electoral autocracy (perhaps evolving towards democracy as a result of the Monsoon Revolution)
5	Japan	123,103,479	Full democracy
6	Iran	92,417,681	Theocratic system which, nonetheless, allows a reduced democratic space
7	Thailand	71,619,863	Sham democracy
8	South Korea	51,667,029	Full but endangered democracy
9	Uzbekistan	37,053,428	Sham democracy
10	Sri Lanka	23,229,470	Full democracy
11	Taiwan	23,112,793	Full democracy
12	Cambodia	17,847,982	Sham democracy
13	Azerbaijan	10,397,713	Sham democracy
14	Mongolia	3,517,100	Full democracy
15	Bhutan	796,682	Full democracy
16	The Maldives	529,676	Full democracy in the making?

and Bhutan. However, the demographic strongest among them, South Korea – which alone has around one million inhabitants more than the other four taken together ¹⁹⁵ – is a full democracy under stress. The situation does not change if, optimistically, we include in the democratic patrol the Maldives, with its half million inhabitants.

The list of sham democracies is decidedly more consistent. Apart from Pakistan, it includes Thailand, Uzbekistan, Cambodia and Azerbaijan. While Pakistan has something more than 255 million inhabitants, the inhabitants of Thailand, Uzbekistan, Cambodia and Azerbaijan total some 137 million people.

Finally, Iran is a case apart, which this author finds difficult to categorise. Its political system appears as made up by a chrysalis of democracy inside a cocoon of theocracy. The problem is that the possibility of the chrysalis breaking through the cocoon and transforming into a butterfly, namely a democracy, seems remote, at best. For the time being, unfortunately, under no circumstances Iran can be considered a democracy in the making.

Thus, at the end of this journey, the rather depressing result is that only a minority of the Asian countries which went to the polls in 2024 – and, far more importantly, only a fraction of a total population of more than 2 billion people – live in a political environment of substantive democracy. Substantive democracy seems to take root and maintain itself more easily in countries with a small population than in large countries with a numerous population. Among large countries with a numerous population, only Japan stands out as a full democracy. The countertendencies in act – particularly in Sri Lanka, but also in Taiwan, Mongolia, Bhutan and, perhaps, tiny Maldives – are encouraging but involve only a much lower population than countries going towards or being inside authoritarian systems. According to this perspective, the cases of the two most populous countries examined – India and Indonesia – appear particularly worrying.

Even more alarming is the fact that the decline of democracy and the contraction of liberties revealed by our analysis are far from representing a peculiarly Asian case. Very disturbingly, democracies are declining and liberties are contracting world-wide. And yet ...

And yet it would be unfair to dismiss the cause for democracy as lost in Asia (as in the rest of the world). The counter-tendencies are limited, they are less strong and less widespread than any democratic person would like, and yet they are there. The Maldives, Bhutan, Sri Lanka have all gone through a transition to more democratic forms. In India, Modi's Pyrrhic victory has been a signal of partial discontinuity given by the Indian electorate. In Bangladesh, in spite of fraudulent elections, the continuing electoral protests convinced the military to disassociate themselves from the Sheik

195. South Korea has some 51,700 million inhabitants, compared to the roughly 50,600 million inhabitants of Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Bhutan and the Maldives taken together.

Hasina's regime, which led to its downfall. In a way, even more extraordinary, as pointed out by Filippo Boni,¹⁹⁶ is what has happened in Pakistan. As we have seen, notwithstanding a deeply unfair playing field, politicians related to Imran Khan's Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), in spite of the fact that they had to run as independents, were able to win the relative majority of the parliamentary seats. This happened as result of elections where the turnout – 48% of the eligible voters – was unexpectedly high, given the prevailing political conditions.

So, in spite of all, the pro-democracy forces, although battered and defeated on many battlefields, are still fighting and, in some cases, even winning. And as long as they will continue to fight, there is still hope.

Michelguglielmo Torri

My heartfelt thanks to Filippo Boni and Giorgia Perletta for their criticism and suggestions. It goes without saying that any mistakes and inaccuracies still included in this essay are my sole responsibility.

196. In a personal communication to me, dated 20 May 2025.

CHINA 2024: PREPARING FOR FUTURE CHALLENGES THROUGH SELF-RELIANCE

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Developments in China’s domestic politics in 2024 confirmed the country’s recent shift towards a political paradigm premised on self-reliance. Economic recovery remained a priority for Beijing, which continued to be the strongest advocate for the removal of trade barriers. However, the Party-state placed a much greater weight on the country’s long-term future. That future may be clouded by sudden, hardly foreseeable challenges, such as those that emerged during the first presidency of Donald Trump, as well as by the neglect of long-standing domestic issues. The response to such potential challenges was articulated at the third plenum of the 20th Party Congress through the Decision on Further Comprehensively Deepening Reform to Advance Chinese-Style Modernisation. This programmatic document addressed all aspects of domestic politics relevant to minimising the risk of systemic crises. To mitigate such risks, the People’s Republic of China intended to achieve a greater self-sufficiency in food, minerals, energy and cutting-edge technologies. The choice to create fully indigenous supply, production and value chains is unprecedented since 1978. Also novel was the decision to relax the country’s monetary policy to cushion the impact of the real-estate slump and sustain domestic demand. Foreign investments and markets remained important for China. However, the rationale of the third plenum suggests that the country was seeking to strengthen its capacity to withstand a potential, sudden unplugging of global production and value chains while maintaining a leading role in cutting-edge technologies.

KEYWORDS – China; economic recovery; food safety; real-estate market; Chinese-style modernisation; Xi Jinping; Chinese Communist Party; third plenum.

1. Introduction

The main trends in the internal politics of the People’s Republic of China in 2024 largely followed a pattern similar to that of the previous year. The party-state sought to accelerate economic recovery and further expand China’s international political, economic and cultural clout. These objectives were pursued alongside efforts to enhance the country’s ability to withstand potential domestic and international crises through self-sufficiency in advanced technology, manufacturing and food production. These broader goals were announced by the third plenary session of the Central Commit-

tee of the Chinese Communist Party. Central Committee plenary sessions are second in importance only to the congresses of the Chinese Communist Party. The annual sessions of Central Committee serve as critical fora for announcing major policy priorities, and approving documents that will set the tone for China's governance in the medium term. In 2024 there was considerable speculation regarding the timing of the third plenary session.

As explained in the second section of this essay, such speculation was largely unwarranted, since the third plenary session was held in compliance with the rules on high level political meetings set by intra-party regulations. On 18 July 2024, the Central Committee approved the *Decision on Further Comprehensively Deepening Reform to Advance Chinese-Style Modernisation* [*Xinhua* 2024, 21 July]. The Decision is a programmatic document (*ganglingxing wenjian* – 纲领性文件) that addresses the challenges posed by shifting geopolitical equilibria, the on-going Fourth Industrial Revolution and popular dissatisfaction with the slow pace of economic recovery. In commenting on the *Decision*, Xi Jinping stated that the document «does not include general reform measures, developmental measures and reform measures already decided by the Central Committee and that are being implemented» [*Xinhua* 2024, 22 July]. The *Decision* indeed reinstated the objectives of completing the transition to an innovation-driven economy and modernizing the governance system by 2035. The *Decision*, however, also set 2029, the year of the People's Republic of China's 80th anniversary, as the deadline for concluding the overhaul of sectors and areas that are strategic for the country's further rise. More importantly, the third plenum enshrined Xi Jinping's notion of Chinese-style modernisation in the complex web of the party's ideological formulations.

Self-reliance over dependence on global markets and risk prevention over risk acceptance thus emerged as the main drivers of China's economic policy in 2024. Yet, the government still promoted openness, as China's economic stability still depends on external markets, both as recipients of exports and as producers of key raw materials. Self-reliance reconciles with interconnectedness in global value chains, because integration into the global economy is essential for sustaining domestic technological innovation. This nuanced approach allows China to reduce external risks while still benefitting from international trade and investments [Gereffi, Bamber and Fernandez-Stark 2022; Gao, Zhang and Peng 2024]. Challenges in economic policy however still exist. They are outlined in the third section of the essay. Foremost among them was stimulating economic recovery to achieve a GDP growth rate of approximately 5% [McCarthy 2024, 5 March]. The year began with relatively conventional measures aimed at expanding internal demand while reducing overcapacity in certain industrial sectors. In the first quarter, GDP growth achieved the set target, reaching 5,3%. Economic growth, however, slowed significantly in the second and third quarters, prompting the party-state to introduce a robust stimulus package.

The central bank injected 1-trillion-yuan into the financial system and reduced interest rates. Mortgage rates were also lowered, and a 10-trillion-yuan package was launched to repair local governments' finances. The limited effectiveness of these measures led the Politburo to relax China's monetary policy for the first time in fifteen years. The Politburo called for unconventional counter-cyclical measures and initiatives to stabilise the housing and stock markets [*Renminwang* 2024, 10 December]. China's economic recovery outlook was further complicated by weak internal demand and by youth unemployment. Of concern was also the risk of systemic crises in the real estate and agricultural sectors.

The fourth section describes how, alongside economic policy, legislation played a role in the attempt to stabilise both the real estate and agricultural sectors by curbing malpractice. However, well-intentioned efforts to shield investors and lenders from the negative consequences of businesses failing to repay their debt led to unintended consequences. The implementation of the *Company Law*, which introduced stronger mechanisms to protect creditors, sparked protests in several major cities. Also noteworthy was the continuing emphasis on perceived challenges to state security. The *Law on the Protection of State Secrets* was the latest in a series of legislative documents on state security to undergo amendments. These amendments aligned with China's prioritisation of security but introduced new and largely unforeseeable risks for enterprises availing themselves of foreign investments.

The concluding section provides insights into the longer-term dynamics signalled by developments in politics, the economy and the legal system.

2. Party and Politics in 2024

The third plenum of the 20th Central Committee was held in Beijing on 15 to 18 July 2024. The timing of this meeting elicited a flurry of speculations, and its agenda did not fully meet Western expectations. Observers had anticipated the third plenum to take place in the autumn of 2023 or in the early months of 2024 [Minzner 2023, 27 November]. Consequently, the decision to convene the meeting in the summer was interpreted as a potential sign of divisions within the Politburo [Li 2024, 3 September]. The notion that the third plenum was «delayed» warrants an extensive and in-depth discussion because it somehow became part and parcel of European and American observers' consensus on Chinese politics. The notion of a «delay» was used to support the argument that divisions may have existed within the Politburo, which in turn disrupted China's political calendar. No analysis supported this idea with the type of evidence that becomes normally available when elite divisions emerge. Such evidence includes but it is not limited to sudden promotions or demotions, arrests, allusive speeches, direct verbal attacks, articles written under the pseudonyms scholars of

contemporary China should be familiar with, as part of their training. The argument instead relied only on the choice of timing of the Central Committee meeting. After the third plenum was held in July, the theory of the «delay» continued to circulate [Nouvens and Green 2024; Arcesati, Zenglein and Drinhausen 2024]. Since its very onset, however, the theory of a «delay» was confuted by intra-party regulations and historical data about third plenums. This is not a moot point. Any disruption in China's decision-making process could send shockwaves throughout the economic systems of China's partners. Any statement to the effect that élite divisions are slowing down top-level policy processes should be supported by a careful study of available evidence. Analyses published before the third plenum also relied on the customary view whereby third plenums of the Central Committee focus almost exclusively on economic reform. In the Xi Jinping era, many of the political conventions followed prior to 2012 have, however, changed. Hence, the reform package announced at the third plenum did not target the economy alone but extended across all sectors of domestic and transnational governance. Its broader rationale was to further strengthen China's global influence, while shielding its population from potential international and domestic crises. Reforms announced in July aimed to have the potential to mitigate the impact of a slowdown or even a sudden, unforeseeable severance of global supply chains, providing the country with a reasonable degree of autonomy from its economic partners.

2.1. *Was the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee delayed?*

The argument whereby the third plenum was «delayed» is confuted by intra-party regulations and historical data about third plenums. Plenary sessions of the Central Committee must be convened by the Politburo at least once a year. While it is possible for the Politburo to convene the Central Committee more frequently, meeting more than once in a calendar year is not mandatory. The rule regarding the timing of Central Committee plenums was established in 2020 by article 24 of the *Regulations on the Work of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party* [Xinhua 2020, 12 October]. This rule is likely based on either an existing and unpublished party document, or on a practice adopted since 1978. Since then, the practice has been to hold Central Committee plenums at least once a year. In fact, the first plenum of the 20th Party Congress was convened in October 2022, and the second plenum took place in February 2023. Thus, the third plenum was supposed to take place by the end of 2024. Nonetheless, it may be argued that the third plenum was «delayed», because earlier third plenary sessions were convened less than twelve months after second plenary sessions. Intra-party regulations, nonetheless, merely require the Central Committee to meet once every calendar year. There are no specific requirements about the number of months that must elapse between such meetings, or about the time of the year when these meetings must occur.

Historical data about the timing of third plenums do not reveal any regularity in the number of months elapsed between the second and third plenums. Since 1978, the third plenum has generally been held in the second half of the year.¹ This custom changed in 2018, when the Central Committee convened in February, only one month after the second plenum, to announce sweeping institutional reforms. The convening of the third plenum in July 2024 rather than in the autumn of 2023 or in February 2024 does not appear to signal political instability. Similarly, the timing of this crucial meeting does not suggest a stalemate in the decision-making process. Several of the items on the agenda of the third plenary session, though not all, were anticipated by the Central Conference on Economic Work, held on 11-12 December 2023 [Xinhua 2023, 12 December]. In February 2024 the Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform set goals and priorities that were reaffirmed by the third plenary session [Renminwang 2024, 20 February]. Around the same time, the Politburo participated in two study sessions on high quality development [Renminwang 2024, 2 March].

The timing and agenda of these meetings suggest that a consensus on the policy agenda for the next five years had been reached around February 2024 at least. The annual meetings of the National People's Congress and of the Political Consultative Conference were, however, scheduled for March 2024. Holding the third plenum immediately before or after the «two sessions» would have meant delaying the «two sessions»,² disrupting the political calendar for the first time since 1978, and provoking significant concerns. Accordingly, the date of the third plenum was announced at the April 30 Politburo meeting [Renminwang 2024, 1 May]. In June, the Politburo finalized the draft of the *Decision to be approved by the Central Committee* [Xinhua 2024, 27 June].

2.2. Chinese-Style Modernisation

The consensus reached by the Politburo and announced at the third plenum defied the expectations of those who still see third plenums as harbingers

1. Historical data about the timing and content of third plenums of the Chinese Communist Party have been collected and compiled by this author using the *Zhongguo Gongchandang licheng quanguo daibiaodahui shujuku* – 中国共产党历次全国代表大会数据库 (Database on National Congresses of the Chinese Communist Party).

2. Meetings of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party cannot be held simultaneously with meetings of the National People's Congress and the Political Consultative Conference. Central Committee members hold key positions in both of these organs, precluding concurrent sessions. Most importantly, the Central Committee has the prerogative to establish general policy orientations which are subsequently received and implemented by legislative and united-front organs. If the National People's Congress or the Political Consultative Conference were to meet before the Central Committee, China's decision-making hierarchy would be overturned, which is equally inconceivable.

of quick, pro-foreign markets economic reforms. The *Decision of the Central Committee on Further Comprehensively Deepening Reform to Advance Chinese-Style Modernisation* presented an ambitious reform programme that departed from the logic and methods of the Deng Xiaoping Era. While Deng Xiaoping's approach to reform encouraged foreign investment, Xi Jinping advocates for greater self-reliance, to reduce dependence on foreign technologies and stimulate domestic innovation. Besides, Xi Jinping's vision of reform emphasizes a greater centralization and places a greater weight on ideology. The rationale behind the *Decision* was encapsulated in the ideological formulation of «Chinese-style modernisation» (*Zhongghuoshi xiandaihua* – 中国式现代化). Official commentaries define Chinese-style modernisation as a type of modernisation that has been created independently of any so-called «western» theories, values or approaches. This model of modernisation rests upon certain key concepts inherent to China's governance system: a Sinified version of Marxism-Leninism; the leading role of a single party and united-front organizations, which ensure appropriate levels of popular compliance with existing political and social norms. This governance model is portrayed as superior and alternative to the governance systems in Europe and in the United States, because it is deeply rooted in China's political tradition, and, therefore, authentically Chinese. As a creation of the Chinese people, this form of modernisation is also described as being more efficient than the processes of modernisation that occurred in Europe and in America. Governance by a single party is believed to accelerate policymaking and implementation. The role of the state – rather than the market – as the main driver of economic development is believed to allow a rapid economic growth. The purported proof of the superiority of this political model lies in China's achievement of sustained high levels of GDP growth over four decades. This model has been proposed as an alternative to existing political frameworks, particularly for developing countries. It is important to observe that, under this vision of reform, modernization is not limited to economic development but also involves China's cultural identity. China's history and cultural traditions are seen as a source of national pride, and as means to consolidate a national identity centred around the cultural value of the country's largest ethnic group, the Han [Qu 2023; Xi 2025; Liu Jianhui 2024; Liu Yubiao 2024]. Chinese-style modernisation is not just an empty political slogan, but an approach that will presumably guide Chinese politics throughout the Xi Jinping Era.

The endorsement of this formulation by the Central Committee was important, because it signalled acceptance, or at least acquiescence to, the form of ethnonationalism that has become prevalent during the Xi Jinping era. Beyond the rhetoric commonly employed in diplomatic language, the Central Committee's adoption of a political slogan that promotes ethnonationalism and elevates it to official ideology does not signal a will to defuse existing geopolitical tensions. Instead, it points to an intention to leverage such tensions to one's own advantage.

Having established consensus around these notions, the Central Committee Decision outlined a reform programme encompassing fourteen areas of domestic governance. This programme is inward-looking and prioritises the needs and goals of the Chinese nation. Rather than disengaging from the global economy, as seen in some aspects of United States policy, Chinese-style modernisation adopts an approach grounded in crisis-prevention.

In 2024, economic policy saw a substantial continuity with the beginning of Xi Jinping era. The role of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) was emphasised, mandating a concentration of state-owned capital in industries and areas related to national security and the lifelines of the national economy. Enhancing China's resilience and emergency response capabilities has now become a responsibility of the state-owned sector, which still accounts for a significant share of national wealth [Zhang 2019]. National private enterprises are expected to focus on major state-sponsored infrastructure projects and the development of new technologies. To this end, the reform programme aims to facilitate the transition to an economy driven by new technologies, emerging industries and disruptive innovations. New technologies will also play a critical role in ensuring the resilience and security of industrial and supply chains. The *Decision* explicitly calls for the creation of independent supply chains encompassing but not limited to integrated circuits, rare earth elements, software, and industrial machinery. This is not a new development, given that self-sufficiency in advanced technology and manufacturing is the goal of the strategic development plan "Made in China 2025". The transition to a high-tech economic system will however require significant investments in education, science, technology, and human capital. The *Decision* identifies several reform objectives for these areas, including cooperation with international polytechnic universities and the establishment of China-based multilateral organizations for the global governance of high-tech. To achieve this vision, the *Decision* envisages a comprehensive macroeconomic reform package. Key aspects include the centralization of government budget and a more assertive fiscal policy aimed at supporting the transition to a high-tech exemplary growth model. Noteworthy measures also include efforts to streamline the notoriously tangled centre-province financial relationship and reduce volatility in the banking system. China allowed local governments to restructure their debts by issuing new bonds and reallocating existing bonds over a longer period. Major state-owned banks were recapitalised by injecting 1 trillion yuan. Additional liquidity was provided by a new lending tool introduced by the People's Bank of China to ensure the stability of credit flows.

China's economic relations with other countries are discussed in the *Decision*, but their role is at best ancillary to systemic transition. Foreign investments are seen as a tool to counteract the on-going fragmentation of the global economic system. The *Decision* lists manufacturing, telecommunica-

tion and healthcare as sectors where foreign investment will be encouraged. However, «opening-up» measures are not the primary focus. More attention is devoted to legal reform, the regulation of strategic and emerging sectors, ideological education and improvements of international propaganda networks, rural reforms and united-front work. Greater emphasis has been placed on domestic demand, which has been weakened by income inequalities, rising unemployment, and negative population growth. The income and employment support measures approved at the Third Plenum evidently will require robust government intervention. Analysts often draw a sharp distinction between Xi Jinping and his predecessor Hu Jintao. It should however be noticed how the goal to develop a strong and stable domestic demand was a key objective of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao's welfare policies. In reality, Xi Jinping has embraced and further developed policies and trends that emerged between 2002 and 2012.

Military reform and state security, themes which no plenary sessions before the Xi Jinping era had ever addressed, were discussed in the *Decision*. The third plenary session announced as its goals the enhancement of joint operational capabilities and combat readiness, and the increase of military human resources; it also placed a strong emphasis on several dimensions of state security.

2.3. *The Mixed Messages of the Two Sessions*

Next in importance, after Central Committee plenary sessions, are the annual meetings of the National People's Congress and of the Political Consultative Conference. In the year under review, both meetings were overshadowed by expectations regarding the third plenum. Held from 5 to 11 March 2024, the National People's Congress meeting saw Premier Li Qiang merely relay decisions taken at Central Economic Work Conference, held in December 2023. The setting of a GDP growth target of around 5% [*Zhongguo Zhengfuwang* 2024, 5 March] baffled many international observers. The announcement of the lowest-ever growth target since 1978 not only signals that China is a mature economy but also aligns with the transition towards growth driven by domestic technological innovation and consumption. More important were three signals launched during the «two sessions», underscoring how the state apparatus should no longer be regarded as enjoying a limited degree of autonomy from the Party. First, the Premier's press conference was cancelled, thus ending a practice introduced in 1993 [*Reuters* 2024, 4 March]. The conference was replaced by a series of briefings by government ministers. Unlike Premier Li Qiang, ministers do not hold a seat in the Politburo Standing Committee, thus enjoying lesser political power. Second, article 18 of the *Organic Law of the State Council* [*Renminwang* 2024, 12 March] was amended to include rules on maintaining the prestige and unity of the Party, as well as an obligation to implement the «work deployments» (*gongzuo bushu* – 工作部署) decided by the Party. Given that the

Premier is the second-ranked member of the Politburo Standing Committee, the inclusion of these norms in the Organic Law may seem superfluous. However, in the past the State Council enjoyed a certain, limited measure of autonomy from the Party. The amendment signals a definitive set-back of the functional separation introduced during the Deng Xiaoping-era version of the Organic Law. Finally, the trend towards increased centralization was further confirmed by the visits Xi Jinping paid to delegates at the Political Consultative Conference. From 5 to 7 March 2024 Xi met delegates from Jiangsu Province, the science and technology, environmental and resources sectors, the Revolutionary Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang, the People's Liberation Army and the People's Armed Police. During the meetings Xi discussed the notion of Chinese-style modernisation, that the third plenum would endorse only in July [*Xinhua* 2024a, 7 March; *Xinhua* 2024b, 7 March; *Xinhua* 2024c, 7 March; *Xinhua* 2024, 11 March]. Visits to those delegations had symbolic meaning, signalling the areas Xi deems of utmost importance in realizing his political vision. With its high-tech enterprises and industrial parks, Jiangsu has been the poster child of Xi Jinping's Chinese-style modernization at a time when consensus on this notion was still being formed. The visit to the Revolutionary Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang testified to the continuity of China's policy towards the Republic of China in Taiwan. The meeting with delegates from the armed forces underscored the importance of military modernization but was also meant to convey how the Party ought to remain in firm control of the army.

2.4. Anti-Corruption in 2024: Continuing the Purge within the Army

Xi Jinping's visit to armed forces delegates came as defence spending increased by 7.2% compared to 2023 [Tan 2024, 4 March], and the country's nuclear stockpile was being replenished [U.S. Department of Defense 2024, p. 107]. At the same time, China's civil-military-industrial complex was still being targeted by an anti-corruption drive launched in 2023. Anti-corruption drives have become one of the defining features of Xi Jinping's leadership. In 2024, party discipline and state supervision organs filed 596,000 cases for internal investigation. A total of 15,000 officials, 58 of whom ranked at the ministerial or provincial level, were prosecuted [*Xinhua* 2024, 25 December]. Anti-corruption, however, brought its most noticeable changes to China's armed forces. International media reported the downfall of National Defence Minister Li Shangfu, its predecessor Wei Fenghe, PLA Rocket Force commander Li Yuchao [Chen and Pang 2024, 18 July], Deputy Commander of the PLA Ground Force Deng Zhiping [Jun 2024, 13 September], Lieutenant General You Haitao, Vice-Admiral Li Pengcheng [*The Strait Times* 2024, 26 December] and Admiral Miao Hua [Chen 2024, 28 November]. Unlike former foreign minister Qing Gang, who resigned from the Politburo but was allowed to keep his party membership [Xiao and Wilkins 2024, 18 July], these leaders were or will presumably be expelled

from the Party. The anti-corruption campaign most immediate result was the removal of two of the four members of the Central Military Commission, leaving in place its two Vice-Chairmen and its Chair Xi Jinping. Control over the armed forces has been centralized at the expenses of those branches that until recently were directed by Li Shangfu, Li Yuchao and Miao Hua, namely the Strategic Support Force, the Rocket Force, and the Political Work Department. Among them, the branch to undergo the greatest changes was the Strategic Support Force.

This branch of the military was created in 2015 to manage satellite operations, cyber and electronic warfare and psychological operations. In April 2024 it was dissolved and replaced by the Information Support Force (*xinxi zhiyuan budui* – 信息支援部队), which will be responsible for the same operations [Xinhua 2024, 19 April; Lianhe Zaobao 2024, 19 April]. The Information Support Force was placed under the direct command of the Central Military Commission, which will lead any future potential cyberwarfare and psychological operation.

3. *The Economy*

The 2024 goals for China's economy were set by the Central Economic Work Conference (CEWC), convened in December 2023. The CEWC focused on economic recovery, setting a GDP growth rate of around 5% [Xinhua 2023, 12 December]. The recipe of choice was based on expanding internal demand, reducing the overcapacity of some industrial sectors, minimising the risk of systemic crises and avoiding a rollback of globalization. To achieve these goals, the CEWC adopted a multifaceted programme premised on the notions of Chinese-style modernisation and high-quality development. A proactive fiscal policy, the issuance of ultra-long term special treasury bonds, the expansion of local government bonds and tax reductions were adopted to support scientific and technological innovation, and the development of advanced manufacturing. Likewise, a prudent monetary policy was seen as necessary to reach the targets set for economic growth. Next on the agenda were the agricultural sector, and the integrated development of urban and rural areas. Discussion of those reform measures was on the agenda of the April, July and September 2024 Politburo meetings [Renminwang 2024, 1 May; Renminwang 2024, 31 July; Renminwang 2024, 27 September]. The September meeting implied that the goals set for 2024 were not completely achieved. If the GDP grew by 5.3% in the first quarter, growth decelerated to 4.7% in the second quarter to 4.6% in the third quarter, achieving 5% only in the fourth quarter [National Bureau of Statistics of China 2024, 17 April; National Bureau of Statistics of China 2024, 16 July; National Bureau of Statistics of China 2024, 19 October; National Bureau of Statistics of China 2025, 18 January]. While the government reported a

5% growth rate for 2024, the World Bank estimated a slightly lower figure of 4.9% [World Bank 2024]. While difficult to assess, a possible discrepancy between official statistics and the real growth rate should be kept in mind. To address the perceived causes of the economic slowdown, the government launched a stimulus package. To improve liquidity, the central bank injected 1 trillion yuan into the financial system, cutting interest rates. To sustain the real estate market and stimulate spending, mortgage rates were lowered. Finally, a 10 trillion yuan debt package was launched to repair local governments' finances, also through the issuance of ultra-long-term government bonds. In the short term, the stimulus package allowed the avoidance of a contraction in economic activity.

The year closed with the Politburo relaxing China's monetary policy for the first time since 2010, calling for unconventional countercyclical measures, and for stabilizing the housing and stock markets [*Renminwang* 2024, 10 December]. Following the December Politburo meeting, Xi Jinping made critical remarks regarding the performance of the economy at the annual CEWC [*Xinhua* 2024, 12 December]. The December 2024 CEWC reaffirmed the Politburo's decision to adopt a moderately loose monetary policy, raise the fiscal deficit threshold to 4%, and stabilise economic growth by boosting domestic demand and improving investment efficiency. Most major investment banks published their forecasts for 2025 before the Politburo meeting and the CEWC. Goldman Sachs predicted a 4.5% real GDP growth ['China's economic stimulus' 2024, 4 December]. UBS forecasted a 4% growth [UBS 2024], and Citi a 4.2% ['The global economy remains resilient' 2024, 29 October]. In light of Donald Trump's avowed imposition of further tariffs on China, JPMorgan's forecast was more nuanced ['China outlook' 2024, 25 November].

Liquidity improvements, fiscal expansion and initiatives to support the real estate market should perhaps not be seen as piecemeal measures, but as necessary steps in a longer-term overall strategy to address structural issues. Rather than adopting the aggressive measures many international observers wished for, the leadership focused on preventing and managing risks. Most international discussions of China's economy in 2024 have focused on such structural issues as deflationary pressures and a stagnant consumption. Relatively less attention has been devoted to two of the main risks hanging over China's economy: the ongoing real estate crisis, and food security.

3.1. *The real estate market*

Until Evergrande's default in 2021, China's property market accounted for 25% of GDP and contributed a significant share of government revenue. Today, real estate still accounts for a large share of China's household wealth. In 2024 the sector continued to experience a contraction, with a 20% drop in the sales of residential housing, and a 23% decrease in the development

of new residential housing. The value of housing has fallen by 30% in a few years, and rents are now 15% cheaper than they were prior to COVID-19 [Sina 2024, 28 May; National Bureau of Statistics of China 2024, 16 December]. If such a simmering crisis suddenly exploded, the consequences would be felt by all of China's trading partners. A further slump in the real estate sector would impact the nation's GDP growth. A decline in GDP would affect global demand, harming major commodity-exporting countries. An economic slowdown could potentially impact manufacturing too, with consequences also on those countries that heavily depend on products made in China. To ease these negative impacts, countries that have built a strong interdependence with China would, in turn, have to adopt expansionary policies. Key developments in the real estate sectors have made this and similar scenarios more plausible than they were only a few years ago.

The year 2024 started with the placing of the Evergrande Group into liquidation by a Hong Kong Court, as the company was unable to present a restructuring plan for its liabilities of 325 US\$ billion [Godfrey 2024, 29 January]. Liquidators were appointed to sell the company's assets to pay for its liabilities, but most losses were apportioned to foreign creditors. Domestic creditors, such as prospective homebuyers, suppliers, and subcontractors, were shielded from losses, thanks to a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the enforcement of civil rulings signed by Beijing and the Hong Kong SAR. The MoU allowed the refusal of enforcement of the Hong Kong ruling in China, on grounds that the legal proceedings were initiated before a mainland Chinese court could hear the case. The liquidation hearing of Country Garden, the second conglomerate involved in the real estate crisis, was adjourned twice and will presumably be held in 2025 [Ao 2024, 29 July; *Asia Financial* 2024, 29 July]. Vanke, a real estate company with a 25% stake held by the city of Shenzhen, managed to avoid a default at least during the year under review. The company, however, posted a loss of 9.85 billion yuan, the first in twenty years [Bloomberg 2024, 1 September].

To prop up the real estate sector, in May the central government adopted a two-pronged strategy. The first measure aimed to boost house-buying by lowering the minimum down payment for first- and second-time home buyers to 15%, and lowering mortgage rates by 0.5 percentage points. A second measure, aimed at local governments, saw the creation of a 300 billion renminbi special facility by the People's Bank of China [Zhongguo Zhengfuwang 2024, 30 May]. The facility should enable governments to purchase finished housing, thus easing the burden on debt-laden real estate companies. Housing purchased in this way will be resold as affordable housing.

These measures don't aim to stabilise – not to mention increase – housing demand over the short term. Given the expectation of a further decrease in real estate prices, it is unlikely that a lowering of the minimum down payment threshold will make home-buyers flock to the market. Like-

wise, the special facility is too small to fill the massive overt and covert losses of real estate developers. The property stimulus has rather a different logic. Its most urgent goal is to keep the real estate sector afloat, thus avoid the proverbial «grey elephant» in the room – something Xi Jinping referred to one year before setting the «three red lines» on the real estate market [Xi 2019, 22 January]. Next comes the need to support local governments' revenue and ease their debt burden, thus avoiding a potential impact of the housing market slump on the social welfare system. It is therefore unsurprising that by December 2024 the downward trend in the real estate market had not been reversed. It remains to be seen whether these measures will produce the intended effects in 2025, and for how many years they will be extended.

3.2. *Food Security*

Compared to his predecessors, Xi Jinping has paid much closer attention to food security. It was therefore to be expected that food security would be a major item on the Party-state agenda in 2024 as well. The People's Republic of China has only 7% of the world's arable land but must feed nearly 20% of the global population. Despite being the world's leading producer of cereals, vegetables, meat and other foodstuffs, China has had to rely on grain imports to feed its population since 2004 [World Trade Organization 2024, 19 November, p. 106; World Trade Organization 2010, 26 April, p. 71]. In 2023, for instance, imports accounted for 23.3% of the grain available for human consumption. Imports have been driven by dietary changes, but also by farmland degradation, unsustainable farming practices, pollution, extreme weather events and the conversion of arable land for commercial development. Only four years ago, the country's food self-sufficiency ratio declined to 65,8% [Liu 2024]. Notwithstanding the country's ample food reserves, disruptions in global supply chains could cause a spike in food prices or even temporary shortages, such as those China experienced during COVID-19. Two years into the pandemic and a few months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the country pledged to achieve a food self-sufficiency ratio of 88% by 2031 [*Guangming Ribao* 2022, 21 April], while pursuing the longer-term goal of self-sufficiency. In 2024, there was thus a decrease in the import of agricultural products [Zhongguo shipin tuchan jinchukou shanghui 2024, 10 December]. In January the State Council Information Office – also known as the Foreign Propaganda Bureau of the CCP – held a press conference on the agricultural and rural economy [SCIO 2024, 23 January]. The press conference paved the way for an Opinion the Central Committee and the State Council issued in February, which reinstated the minimum threshold of cultivated farmland at 1,243 million hectares [*Renminwang* 2024, 25 September]. Farmland protection became part of the political tasks to be achieved by provincial party committees and was linked to chances of career advancement. In April, the State Development and

Reform Commission issued the *New Round of Action Plan to Increase Grains Production Capability by 50 billion kilos (2024-2030)*. At the closing of this article, the full text of the Action Plan had not been publicly released. Its rationale and key provisions have, however, been widely publicised, and available sources suggest that the Plan contains detailed measures to implement the February Opinion. The Plan indeed recalls the broader goal of the 2020 national food security strategy, the minimum threshold of cultivated farmland set in February, and stresses the role of innovative agricultural technologies. To increase grain production, the Plan has identified six major regions, defining the tasks each one of them must fulfil to raise the yield of grain crops. Those tasks may range from water conservancy to disaster prevention, involving research on seeds and improvements in storage and logistics. Of note was also the policy to restore agricultural land in the southern provinces, and to lessen coastal areas' reliance on grains produced in the north of China [Xinhua 2024, 9 April].

Xi Jinping further stressed the importance of food security and self-sufficiency during an inspection trip to Hunan [CCP Members' Network 2024, 21 March], which took place only weeks before the May meeting of the Politburo. In a move vaguely reminiscent of the Third Front Movement,³ the Politburo discussed the role of central provinces as China's main grain producers. The central region was also designated as an energy, raw materials, advanced manufacturing and high-tech industrial base [Renmin Ribao 2024, 28 May, p. 1].

Two days after the Politburo meeting the *Law on Ensuring Food Security*, which was enacted at the end of December 2023, came into effect [Xinhua 2023, 30 December]. The Law conceives food security as an essential aspect of national security and has the broader rationale to minimise the risk of a food crisis. The Law adopted various measures to stabilise and increase the self-sufficiency rate of the provinces where staple grains, edible oils and potatoes are produced, processed and marketed. Worth mentioning are also the revamping of the national food reserve system, the creation of a food risk fund, and of a security review mechanism targeting foreign agri-business.

The summer months saw the adoption of further farmers' income support measures [Xinhua 2024, 11 June], justified also by narratives about farmers harvesting unripe wheat to sell it as silage, which has a higher market price than staple grains. Evidence on farmers harvesting unripe wheat is anecdotal at best. The Action Plan, however, contains measures to subsidise grains production, stabilise farmers' income and facilitate their access to credit, suggesting how a real concern exists about these and other similar farming practices.

3. The Third Front Movement was a campaign aimed at building infrastructures and factories in the interior of the country, to prepare for a potential armed conflict with the United States or the Soviet Union. The campaign was launched in 1964 and lasted for ten years.

4. *Key Developments in Law and the Legal System*

2024 marked the first year of the 14th NPC Standing Committee Legislative Plan. The Plan includes 79 legislative items to be enacted or amended by 2028, 51 draft laws to be adopted with lesser urgency, and indications on future legislative projects [Xinhua 2023, 7 September; Wei 2024, 25 December]. Of the 79 laws given the highest priority, thirty-one – nearly half – were passed by the end of 2024. These 31 legislative texts focused, among others, on the agricultural sector and food security, on the economic system, and on national security and China's external relations. The broader logic behind the Legislative Plan aligns with the third plenum decision and the economic policies for 2024. Legislation on the agricultural sector, environmental protection, mineral resources and food security reflected an intent to avert future crises. Provisions on taxation, companies, state security and external relations served the broader goal of increasing China's multi-faceted influence. The speed with which the Legislative Plan was implemented in 2024 further underscored the importance the Party-state places on realizing Xi Jinping's reform agenda by China's 80th anniversary. As for the objectives set by the 14th Legislative Plans, legislative work proceeded smoothly.

The *Company Law* and the *Law on the Protection of State Secrets*, however, provoked strong reactions among domestic investors and foreign businesses, respectively. On a more positive note, limited reforms of legislative organs strengthened their oversight powers.

4.1. *The Company Law*

The *Company Law of the People's Republic of China* came into effect on 1 July 2024 after a lengthy amendment process [Renmin Ribao 2024, 2 January]. The comprehensive revision, initiated at the end of 2021, sought to improve various aspects of corporate governance, including the registration and liquidation of corporations, corporate disclosure and, most importantly, capital contribution and shareholder rights. The amended Company Law strengthened the separation between ownership and management rights. Previously, the board of shareholders held power to decide on companies' business directions and investment strategies. The new law transferred these powers to the board of directors instead. Legal commentators have observed that these provisions bring China's corporate legislation closer to norms followed in civil-law and common-law jurisdictions [Chen 2024; 'China releases new Company Law' 2024, 10 January]. However, the revision should not be interpreted solely in comparison with other jurisdictions.

In recent years, the Chinese Communist Party has intensified efforts to establish party committees and party groups in private corporations. While the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce works to further expand the party's presence in private corporations [Sha 2024, 27 March], recent data show that party organizations already exist in more than 70%

of private listed companies [Cheng and Zheng 2023]. Party secretaries and members of party organizations often also serve on the board of directors. In this context, strengthening the board of directors effectively bolsters the party's influence over a significant share of China's private economy. Reactions to the Company Law primarily centred on the new rules regarding shareholders' liability for capital contribution. Notably, article 88 of the new Company Law made shareholders who had already sold their shares accountable for a company's losses. In case of bankruptcy, original shareholders would therefore be liable for unpaid sums. This provision, like several other mechanisms in the new law, aims to protect creditors and curb fraudulent practices.

Previously, loopholes allowed companies to begin operations – borrowing included – by merely declaring their equity. In practice, this meant that shareholders could subscribe their shares and contribute their capital over several years. This made it possible for shareholders to avoid their payment obligations. As a company faced financial difficulties shareholders could and often would transfer their stock to persons who didn't have the means to contribute the unpaid sums. Given the impact of Evergrande and Country Garden's cases on China's economic system, the rationale for article 88 is understandable. Similarly, the introduction of a five-year deadline to fully contribute the initial registered capital aligned with a will to prevent future similar crises. However, article 88 sparked significant concern among domestic investors. In November and December no fewer than 17 protests erupted in major cities, where citizens demonstrated outside people's courts [Pomfret and Tham 2024, 23 December]. In response, in December the Legislative Affairs Commission of the National People's Congress Standing Committee clarified that article 88 would not apply retroactively [Guo 2024, 23 December].

4.2. *The Law on the Protection of State Secrets*

The *Law on the Protection of State Secrets* was revised in February 2024 as part of a broader overhaul of China's national security legislation [Xinhua 2024, 27 February]. Changes incorporated Xi Jinping's holistic national security concept, which underscores the relevance of national security in the activities of state organs and enterprises, but also of private corporations and ordinary citizens. For example, article 9 of the new law introduced education on secrecy into the national education system. Additionally, 15 July was designated National Security Education Day nine years ago [Tianjin Ribao 2016, 14 April]. The amendments also broaden the notion of state security, notably through article 64, which addresses the protection of «work secrets» (*gongzuo mimi* – 工作秘密). Work secrets refer to information produced or collected by departments in the performance of their duties that do not fall within the scope of state secrets but could have adverse effects if leaked.

The notion of work secrets is not new. This concept already existed in the *Counter-espionage Law* and in the *Civil Servants Law*. Work secrets include information on personnel of state organs, documents on internal procedures and practices. Protecting this information is indeed necessary. However, the revised version of the law provided only a general definition of work secrets, referring to a separate document, yet to be enacted at the closing of this essay, the *Measures on Managing Work Secrets*.

The Secrecy Committee of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (*Zhonggong Zhongyang Baomi Weiuyuanhui* – 中共中央保密委员会) in 2019 issued the *Temporary Measures on Managing Work Secrets*, a document that has not yet been amended. While the full text of the *Temporary Measures on Managing Work Secrets* is difficult to obtain, official commentaries prove how this document provides a very broad definition of work secrets. A work secret, for instance, is any information that could provoke public protests if released to the public. Furthermore, state organs and state-owned firms have discretion in determining whether information not already included in the five categories set by the *Temporary Measures* should be considered a work secret (Fujian Province Ecology and Environment Bureau 2023, 11 November).

Coming in the wake of the 2023 revisions to the *Anti-Espionage Law*, the *Law on the Protection of State Secrets* raised significant concerns among global businesses. Businesses' greatest concern lies in the potential use of the law to bar access to information collected through routine due diligence. If state secrets legislation were used in such a way, operation of international law, consultancies and due diligence firms in China would be impaired. The planning of new investments in a foreign country always requires an understanding of its business environment. If conducting due diligence becomes more difficult due to uncertainty about types of information which can be obtained, the Chinese market may become less attractive. Similar concerns were raised by the EU Chamber of Commerce in China. According to its position paper for 2024/2025 «the concern among foreign-invested enterprises is that China's prioritisation of security could lead to policies that (...) create insurmountable business risks» [European Union Chamber of Commerce in China 2024, p. 5, 15].

4.3. Strengthening People's Congresses oversight powers

In July 2024 the Third Plenum *Decision* called for, among others, reforms of the National People's Congress apparatus, China's legislative system. Reforms outlined in the *Decision* involved the powers of the National People's Congress and local legislative organs, as well as the National People's Congress' legislative tasks. The national and local people's congresses have the power to oversee the enforcement of laws and administrative regulations and monitor the work of local governments and judicial organs. Oversight procedures were codified in 2006 by the *Law on Oversight by the Standing*

Committee of People's Congresses, which introduced seven methods to monitor law enforcement and the executive. Over the past 17 years, however, the National People's Congress Standing Committee has gradually adopted additional oversight procedures that went beyond those provided for by the *Law on Oversight*. These procedures included inspection of government budgets and government debt, economic policymaking, and state-owned assets. Furthermore, the National People's Congress tried to introduce a system of hearings. Similar measures have been adopted by local people's congresses.

Oversight methods introduced after 2006 were governed by distinct laws. In November 2024, the *Law on Oversight* was amended to consolidate these developments [NPC 2024, 19 December]. While the amendments did not extend beyond consolidating existing provisions, they signalled the Party-state's intention to enhance supervision of key areas of public administration.

5. Conclusion

In January 2019, Xi Jinping pronounced words that deserve to be remembered. He said: «We must remain highly vigilant against a volatile international situation, a complex and sensitive surrounding environment (...). We must be highly vigilant against «black swan» events and guard against «grey rhinos» events. We must take the initiative to prevent risks and make wise moves to respond to and resolve risks and challenges. We must fight well the battle to prepare to prevent and defuse risks, and the strategic battle of initiative to turn danger into safety and crises into opportunities» [Xi 2019, 22 January].⁴ These words were addressed to an audience of provincial- and ministerial-level cadres gathered at the Central Party School for a high-level seminar on risk-prevention. At the time, few paid attention to Xi's remarks. In the People's Republic of China, the slogans «black swans» and «grey rhinos» attracted only two official commentaries, both published in December 2019 [Liu 2019, 9 December; Zheng 2019, 24 December]. The only two international observers who noted Xi's warning in 2019 interpreted the metaphor in relation to the trade war, dissident intellectuals, food safety, the housing bubble and Hong Kong [Lam 2019; Sudworth 2019, 15 Decem-

4. «Black swans» are very rare and unpredictable events that may produce extreme consequences. «Grey rhinos» refer to well-known risks that could lead to a crisis if ignored. The «black swan» metaphor was employed by David Hume, John Stuart Mill and Karl Popper, before being popularised by Nassim Nicholas Taleb. The «grey rhino» metaphor was introduced in Michele Wucker's *The gray rhino: how to recognize and act on the obvious dangers we ignore*. The book was translated in Chinese in 2017 and soon became a bestseller.

ber].⁵ Eleven months after the high-level seminar, the first COVID-19 cases were officially acknowledged. China's economy slowed to a near halt. Soon after came the downfall of Evergrande. Four years on, Xi Jinping's words resonate differently. If in January 2019 the Party-controlled press gave little weight to his warnings, by 2024 crisis-prevention – albeit expressed through a more benevolent vocabulary of «Chinese style modernization» – had been confirmed as the core policy goal for the foreseeable future.

The notion of Chinese-style modernization has produced a narrative underpinned by ideas of exceptionalism. If the Party and the Chinese people have created the only truly successful form of modernisation, and if that form of modernisation is successful because it arises from Chinese tradition, – allegedly without any «Western» philosophical, technical or practical contribution – then China may well do without «the West». Always conveyed in optimistic, sometimes even triumphalist tones this narrative perhaps it not solely aimed at stocking the flames of ethnonationalism. It also seeks to foster acceptance among officials and citizens of a greater measure of autonomy from the global market – a market that once favoured China's rise but has now become increasingly fragmented. Major policy measures adopted in 2024 converged towards this objective. Framing this trend through the concept of autarky would be anachronistic and would hardly reflect the Party's predilection for an official narrative rooted in indigenous concepts. The notion of self-reliance (*zili gengsheng* – 自力更生) is part and parcel of China's political culture, and it has already become a cornerstone of a political paradigm centred on ideas about risk-prevention and crisis-management. This may remain China's dominant political paradigm in the near future.

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5. Most international commentaries on the metaphor were published after the COVID-19 pandemic had already erupted.

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CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY 2024: STRATEGIC ASSERTIVENESS AND DIPLOMATIC ADAPTATION

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This article examines the evolution of China's foreign policy in 2024, highlighting a shift toward a more calculated and assertive approach, reflecting a refinement in Beijing's strategic direction. Building upon developments in recent years, during which China emphasized a proactive role in global security governance while cultivating its image as a responsible international actor, 2024 witnessed an evolution toward a more assertive posture. This transition included a recalibration of its diplomatic approach, marked by a departure from sharply polemical tones in favour of a more measured and strategically calculated posture aimed at defending national sovereignty, security, and development interests while expanding its influence in global affairs. This recalibrated approach was evident across key geopolitical theatres, including the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, and the Middle East. In the Taiwan Strait, Beijing focused on normalizing coercive practices through intensified military activities and sustained diplomatic pressure, eroding Taiwan's autonomy while institutionalizing new operational norms. In the South China Sea, China's coercive actions against Philippine naval and aerial assets reshaped regional security dynamics, reflecting a strategic push to consolidate its dominance and recalibrate the balance of power. In the Middle East, China's expanding economic footprint and deepening partnerships with Gulf states have enhanced its influence over regional dynamics. However, the Gaza crisis underscored the challenges Beijing faces in balancing its growing role with the need to maintain constructive relations in a polarized environment. Meanwhile, escalating U.S.-China competition in technology, trade, and global influence further highlighted their rivalry, with Beijing leveraging economic resilience and strengthened ties with the Global South to counterbalance U.S. dominance. These developments collectively underscore China's recalibrated foreign policy, blending strategic assertiveness with refined diplomacy to navigate an increasingly fragmented global order.

KEYWORDS – Chinese Foreign Policy; China-US competition; Taiwan; South China Sea, Philippines.

1. Introduction

China's foreign policy in 2024 continued its trajectory under Xi Jinping's leadership, focusing on consolidating global influence through strategic competition and selective engagement. Beijing's interactions with the United States provide a critical framework for understanding its external strat-

egy, reflecting both structural tensions in great power competition and the strategic imperatives shaping its actions on the global stage. This dynamic is particularly evident in key geopolitical theatres, including Taiwan, the South China Sea, and crises such as those in Gaza. China has recently emphasized the critical importance of «responsibly managing» U.S.-China competition to maintaining global stability. As a matter of fact, during the meeting with President Joe Biden in Lima [17 November 2024], Xi Jinping stressed the importance of not challenging red lines and treating each other as equals; notably, he asserted that the so-called «Thucydides's Trap» does not represent an inescapable historical determinism and that containing China is an unwise move doomed to fail [RMW 2024a]. This narrative marks an evolution in bilateral relations, introducing a distinct ideological dimension.

At the same time, U.S.-China relations in 2024 were marked by escalating trade restrictions. The Biden administration's enforcement of semiconductor export controls and investment limitations, justified as safeguarding national security, were perceived by Beijing as containment strategies. This perception was further exacerbated by developments at the level of Western-led international organizations; in the 2024 Washington Summit Declaration, NATO leaders labelled China a «decisive enabler» of Russia's war against Ukraine, expressing «deep concern» over the strengthening of Sino-Russian ties and the PRC's ongoing attempts to reshape the rules-based international order through coercive policies. This unprecedented statement signalled a growing convergence among Allies — driven above all by the United States — towards viewing Beijing not only as a systemic rival, but as a direct strategic challenge within the Euro-Atlantic security framework [Cottey 2025]. The year then ended in uncertainty, both in Beijing and elsewhere, following Donald Trump's election to a second presidential term — an uncertainty further intensified by his inaugural address on January 20, 2025, in which he referred to the Panama Canal and signalled his administration's intent to reassert American control over it, in terms that suggested an unorthodox diplomatic posture likely to require a dedicated and carefully calibrated response.

China's retaliatory measures reinforced the competitive undercurrent of their bilateral interactions, emphasizing the persistent duality of rivalry and selective engagement in their relationship. Beyond its competition with the United States, Beijing has sought to assert its influence in the South China Sea and expand its role in global governance. Key initiatives included strengthening ties with the Global South and advancing multipolar frameworks like BRICS+ and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This article aims to provide an understanding of China's 2024 foreign policy trajectory, highlighting efforts to navigate tensions with established powers while advancing ties with the Global South. Building upon the trajectory observed in 2023 [Sciorati 2024, p. 34], when China's foreign policy underscored its commitment to assuming a more proactive role in global security

governance while preserving its carefully cultivated image as a responsible international actor, 2024 witnessed a further evolution toward an increasingly assertive posture. Although Beijing adopted a rhetorically more measured approach, its actions on critical issues such as Taiwan and the South China Sea demonstrated a sustained and deliberate effort to advance its strategic agenda.

The National People's Congress (NPC – *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo quanguorenmin dahui* 中华人民共和国全国人民代表大会) and China's Political People's Consultative Conference (CPPCC – *Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi* 中国人民政治协商会议) annual plenary meetings — also called the «Two Sessions», held in early 2024, and the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference (CFAWC – *Zhongyang waishi gongzuo huiyi* 中央外事工作会议), in December 2023, were pivotal in articulating key conceptual frameworks that defined China's foreign policy and defence agenda for the coming years. Although China's overarching foreign policy goals have remained relatively static over time [Duggan 2024, 10 October], the year 2024 marked a notable evolution in its methods of implementation. This gradual shift, characterized by refined strategies, can be examined through the lens of the strategic documents and programmatic decisions mentioned above. This article will analyse numerous Chinese sources to account for the public discourse on foreign policy topics and to understand variations in the programmatic speeches of the Chinese leadership.

Diplomacy will be analysed as a central element of China's foreign projection, an aspect often underestimated. Chinese assertiveness has increasingly come to be represented by Chinese diplomats and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA – *Waijiao bu* 外交部), as highlighted by Dylan M.H. Loh [2024]. This gradual reconfiguration has placed Xi and key Politburo members at the core of foreign policymaking, ensuring strategies align closely with his vision for China's global role. In this context MFA's representational role – acting and speaking on behalf of the state and Party while expressing its interests, values, and ideologies – has gained increasing significance [Mingze *et al.* 2023]. In 2018, Xi declared that China's diplomacy «represents the will of the state», encapsulating a broader process of centralisation that had already been underway for years [Xinhua, 2018]. This highlights the growing importance of MFA's diplomatic practices and its alignment with the centralized foreign policy objectives under Xi Jinping, clearly reflecting the ongoing process of centralizing foreign policy decision-making to grant the CCP greater control [Onnis 2023, p.177].

The first section, titled «Strategic Guidelines for Party-Led Foreign Policy» examines the programmatic directives articulated during the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference held in late December 2023 and the outcomes related to foreign policy of the Two Sessions meetings in March 2024. Both events have become critical moments for the strategic planning of Chinese foreign policy, reflecting the increasing involvement of party-led

institutions in shaping its direction. The Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference, convened for the sixth time since its inception in 1971, has gained prominence as a platform for defining China's foreign policy. Notably, three of these meetings have been held under Xi Jinping's leadership, in 2014, 2018, and 2023. Similarly, the Two Sessions meetings provide an opportunity to solidify strategic objectives. These events underscore how party-led institutions have assumed a central role not only in implementing foreign policy decisions but also in shaping their strategic direction. Agencies directly managed by the CPC Central Committee, such as the International Liaison Department of the CPC and the Central Foreign Affairs Commission, are increasingly influential in setting the tone and terms of China-US relations. Rather than merely executing decisions, these bodies are actively guiding the highest-level policymaking processes in Beijing, reflecting the Party's growing dominance in foreign policy formulation [Jie 2024, 25 July]. The second section, titled 'Economic and Strategic Rivalry in U.S.-China Relations in 2024', delves into Chinese foreign policy with a particular focus on its relations with the United States. It explores the intensifying competition between the two powers, particularly in areas such as economic security, military capabilities, and global influence. This section highlights the increasingly confrontational nature of the U.S.-China relationship, emphasizing how the dynamics of rivalry are reshaping regional and global strategies. The third section, titled «Regional Flashpoints in 2024: China's Strategic Calculations», focuses on pivotal regional tensions, particularly the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, and examines how these two areas are becoming increasingly interconnected within Chinese public discourse. It aims to explore how these regional challenges are deeply entwined with broader issues of sovereignty and geopolitical strategy, underscoring their critical importance within China's foreign policy framework.

2. *Strategic guidelines for Party-led foreign policy.*

2.1. *The 2023 Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference.*

The Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference represents one of the rare instances where Xi Jinping directly addresses foreign policy for a domestic audience, alongside Politburo Collective Study Sessions focused on international issues. This contrasts with his communications at multilateral forums like BRICS or G20 summits, which are primarily directed toward external audiences. Held on December 27-28, 2023, for the third time during Xi's tenure following sessions in 2014 and 2018, the CFAWC highlighted a clear shift toward a more assertive global posture and confirmed the trend observed in the previous meetings: the concentration of power in the hands of the Chinese president [Onnis 2020, p. 46]. While in previous sessions the new power dynamics had sparked some tensions [Congiu 2019], the 2023

meeting marked a definitive shift, with centralization firmly consolidating control over institutions and diminishing the influence of alternative party factions. Xi articulated a vision of an international order aligned with China's strategic objectives, emphasizing the conference's critical role in shaping an increasingly proactive foreign policy agenda. Historically, the Central Work Conference has marked pivotal moments in Beijing's diplomatic strategy. Under Hu Jintao, the 2006 iteration focused on consolidating state oversight and maintaining an economic orientation that prioritized domestic stability and development over global ambitions. This state-centred approach, which can be described as national rather than central, diverged sharply from Xi Jinping's strategy, which began with the 2014 conference. That year, Xi pointed out «China must exhibit a major-country diplomacy with its own characteristics» (*Zhongguo bixu you ziji tese de daguo waijiao* 中国必须有自己特色的大国外交) [XHW 2014], marking a decisive departure from Deng Xiaoping's «hide-and-bide» strategy, focusing on national security, sovereignty, and regional influence. By 2018, amidst global disruptions like Brexit and the Trump administration, the conference identified these geopolitical shifts as opportunities for China to expand its global influence.

The 2023 conference built upon these foundations, emphasizing three core dimensions. First, Xi provided a confident evaluation of China's diplomatic successes over the past decade, juxtaposing them against challenges such as strained relations with the West, the COVID-19 pandemic, and contentious diplomacy. This perspective reflects Beijing's self-perception as resilient and capable of sustaining assertive diplomacy without reverting to reactive strategies. Second, the conference addressed the evolving international environment, characterized as a «new period of turbulence and transformation» (*Xin de dongdang biange qi* 新的动荡变革期) [WJB 2023]. In response, Xi urged cadres to maintain China's long-term global objectives while adapting to emerging complexities. Third, the conference laid out specific guidelines to counter U.S. influence by strengthening alliances with the Global South. This strategy aligns China with developing nations on issues like climate change, trade, and regional conflicts, including Palestine and Gaza. Importantly, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reiterated, in December 2024, the importance of «always holding the high ground of international morality and justice» (*Shizhong zhanju guoji daoyi de zhigaodian* 始终占据国际道义的制高点) [WJB 2024]; this is in continuity with bolstering China's appeal and, therefore, functional the principle of a «Community of Shared Future for Mankind» (*Renlei mingyun gongtongti* 人类命运共同体), envisioning an international order rooted in Chinese values.

The concept of a «Community of Shared Future for Mankind» remains central to Xi's diplomatic vision, advocating an international system aligned with Chinese Communist Party values. Rather than directly exporting ideology, this approach seeks influence through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (*BRI – Yi dai Yi lu* 一带一路), which has been recalibrated

to prioritize smaller, sustainable projects¹. Complementary frameworks like the Global Development Initiative (GDI – *Quanqiu fazhan changyi* 全球发展倡议) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI – *Quanqiu anquan changyi* 全球安全倡议)² further underscore China's effort to create alternative cooperation models that resonate with developing nations. A thematic evolution in the 2023 conference was the strategic pivot away from the confrontational tone of «wolf warrior» (*Lang zhan* 狼站) diplomacy, marking a transition toward a more calculated yet assertive diplomatic approach; on the contrary, it is judged necessary to «constantly strengthen the scientific nature, the foresight, proactiveness and creativity of the foreign affairs work» (*Buduan zengqiang duiwai gongzuo de kexuexing, yujianxing, zhudongxing, chuangzaoxing* 不断增强对外工作的科学性、预见性、主动性、创造性) [WJB 2023]. This shift aligns with Xi Jinping's call for diplomats to «dare to struggle» [Thomas 2024, 12 April] while resolutely defending national sovereignty, security, and development interests, signalling a sustained effort to expand Beijing's influence in global affairs. While retaining assertiveness, the conference advocated a calibrated approach aimed at shaping global narratives and strengthening ties with the Global South. This strategy involves fostering divisions within Western alliances on contentious issues and building coalitions through multilateral platforms such as the UN, BRICS, and the SCO. Moreover, in January 2025 Foreign Minister Wang Yi reinforced Xi Jinping's pivotal role in defining China's foreign policy trajectory. He emphasized «major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics» (*Zhongguo tese daguo waijiao* 中国特色大国外交) [Wang Yi 2025], which navigates global complexities through a multipolar framework. Wang underscored the importance of partnerships with the Global South to counter restrictive economic practices and foster inclusive globalization. Flagship initiatives like the BRI, GDI, and GSI are central to China's strategy to cultivate a favourable international environment aligned with its strategic priorities. Such objectives highlight China's attempt to align its global aspirations with the

1. The Belt and Road Initiative has evolved significantly since its inception, both in its conceptual framework and its role in global economic governance. Its guiding principles and mechanisms have been continuously refined, with key shifts in narrative and strategic focus evident in major forums such as those held in 2017 and 2019. This evolution underscores China's broader attempt to redefine its international economic role, presenting the BRI as both an alternative model and a vehicle for shaping global economic governance. For a detailed examination of these aspects, see, among others: Duggan, Gottwald & Bersick 2024; Torri 2024, pp. XVI-XX.

2. The Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative became key pillars of China's vision for reshaping global governance. The GDI, introduced at the UN in 2021, seeks to position Beijing as a leader in international development, while the GSI promotes a security framework centered on state sovereignty and non-interference. Together, they reflect China's broader strategy to challenge Western-led governance models. For further analysis, see: Schuman *et al.* 2023, 21 June; Torri 2024, pp. XX-XXIII.

complexities of navigating an increasingly fragmented international order. [Thomas 2024, 12 April].

2.2. *The two sessions: policy directions and diplomatic priorities.*

During the Two Sessions, Chinese leadership emphasized resilience and strategic focus to navigate an increasingly volatile international environment. Premier Li Qiang presented the 2024 Government Work Report, and Foreign Minister Wang Yi addressed foreign policy questions in a news conference. Together, these events offered a comprehensive perspective on the trajectory of China's foreign policy for near future, emphasizing the balance between continuity and stability in diplomatic principles while adapting to the complexities of an evolving global landscape. The 2024 Government Work Report (*Zhengfu gongzuo baogao* 政府工作报告), identified challenges posed by an «unusually complex international environment» (*Yichang fuza de guoji huanjing* 异常复杂的国际环境), reflecting the adverse effects on China's developmental trajectory [RMW 2024b]. Drawing on themes from the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference, it recognized global transformations reshaping immediate and historical dynamics. While acknowledging difficulties, it stressed stability in overarching trends, including human development progress and global interconnectedness, presenting these challenges not merely as constraints but also as opportunities to align domestic progress with international strategies. In foreign policy, Premier Li reaffirmed China's commitment to «adhere to the path of peaceful development» (*Ji-anchi zou heping fazhan daolu* 坚持走和平发展道路) [RMW 2024b] strategic autonomy, and mutually beneficial collaboration. Central to this vision is the construction of the aforementioned «Community of Shared Future for Mankind», integrating diplomatic initiatives with domestic modernization. This approach underscores the continuity of China's diplomatic principles, reaffirming its role as a contributor to global peace and a defender of the international order. The Government Work Report also emphasized innovative dimensions in foreign policy, aligning with propositions from the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference. It prioritized fostering an «equal and orderly multipolar world» and promoting «inclusive and universally beneficial economic globalization» [Zhu 2024, 25 March]. Additionally, progress in implementing GDI, GSI and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI – *Quanqiu wenming changyi* 全球文明倡议)³ was highlighted, reflecting their incorporation into bilateral and multilateral frameworks. These initiatives

3. The Global Civilization Initiative, introduced by Xi Jinping in 2023, complements China's Global Security and Development Initiatives, promoting a multipolar world order. It emphasizes mutual learning, inclusiveness, and national sovereignty in modernization, rejecting imposed social models. Grounded in «common values of humanity» – peace, development, equity, justice, democracy, and freedom – the GCI seeks to reshape global governance through cultural dialogue. See Buzan & Zhang 2024; Torri 2024, pp. XXIV-XXV.

underscore China's aim to offer alternative governance models that resonate with developing nations and enhance its role in shaping global norms.

On the domestic front, military modernization emerged as a key focus. Premier Li emphasized achievements aligned with Xi Jinping's strategic vision for the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Xi, addressing PLA representatives, stressed that «strategic capabilities in emerging domains are major components of the national strategic system and capabilities» (*Xinxing lingyu zhanlie nengli shi guojia tixi he zhongyao zucheng bufen* 新兴领域战略能力是国家战略体系和能力重要组成部分) and innovative approaches to new challenges [RMW 2024c]. *This aligns with broader efforts to accelerate technological innovation, particularly amid external constraints such as U.S. restrictions on high-tech exports. These developments hold evident significance for China's foreign policy projection, emphasizing the urgency of advancing domestic defence capabilities while reinforcing its global standing. The report also commemorated the 75th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, emphasizing its historical significance and reaffirming commitments to modernization and global engagement. Strategic priorities such as BRI cooperation, fostering international partnerships, and contributing to global peace and development illustrate China's intention to integrate its domestic modernization agenda with broader diplomatic aspirations. Additionally, the report announced a 7.2% increase in the 2024 defence budget, reflecting growing demands for military modernization. This is consistent with the developmental map to which the PLA strengthening process is bound. More specifically, the nearest armed forces modernization objective is set for the year 2027, which coincides with what is defined as the «Centenary Goal of the People's Liberation Army» (*Jianjun yibainian fendou mubiao* 建军一百年奋斗目标). This measured increase emphasizes China's focus on safeguarding national sovereignty while aligning defence goals with broader foreign policy initiatives. By doing so, Beijing aims to present itself as a stabilizing force in global affairs. As highlighted during the Two Sessions, these diplomatic and defence initiatives reflect China's effort to balance progress with stability. Premier Li's reiteration of strategic autonomy, coupled with Foreign Minister Wang Yi's focus on resilience in global governance, demonstrates the leadership's nuanced approach to foreign policy. These developments align with the broader ambition to advance China's role in building an inclusive, multipolar world order while addressing the challenges of an increasingly complex international environment, reflecting Beijing's ongoing efforts to reshape global governance structures⁴ in line with its strategic interests and ideological framework [Johnston 2019].

4. For an analysis of Chinese revisionism, both from the perspective of International Relations theory and through historical comparisons within the region, see: Natalizia & Termine 2021; Termine 2021. These works explore China's evolving strategic posture, its challenge to existing global governance structures, and its his-

3. *Economic and strategic rivalry in U.S.-China relations in 2024.*

In 2024, U.S.-China relations unfolded as a dynamic interplay of escalating tensions and cautious engagement. The year began under the auspices of the November 2023 San Francisco summit, where President Xi and President Biden signalled a willingness to stabilize relations through cooperation in selected areas such as climate action and counter-narcotics [‘China’s cooperation on fentanyl’ 2024, 17 July]. The latter, a particularly pressing issue for U.S. public opinion, highlighted concerns over China’s role as the primary source of fentanyl⁵ and its precursor chemicals trafficked into the United States. Despite this promising start, efforts to stabilize bilateral ties were persistently undermined by escalating tensions, particularly in areas such as trade, technological competition, and regional security. These dynamics underscored the duality of cooperation and conflict shaping this critical relationship.

A defining feature of U.S.-China relations in 2024 was the near-constant imposition of sanctions and trade restrictions on companies from both nations. These measures, often tied to concerns over national security and technological superiority, extended far beyond strictly strategic sectors [‘US-China Relations in the Biden Era’ 2024, 9 December]. For example, the United States expanded its export controls on advanced semiconductors and related technologies, adding 140 entities to its Entity List⁶ in December [Allen 2024, 11 December]. Beijing responded with retaliatory export controls on key materials such as gallium, germanium, and antimony, crucial for semiconductor production and other high-tech industries [SWB 2024]. These reciprocal measures reflected the intensifying economic and technological rivalry between the two powers. The notion of the U.S. adopting a «hardening China policy» is increasingly perceived in Beijing as a strategy to contain China’s rise. This sentiment resonates with influential academic and strategic discourses, which frame U.S. actions – such as export controls, alliance-building in the Indo-Pacific, and economic decoupling – as a

torical parallels with other revisionist powers, offering insights into the theoretical and empirical dimensions of Beijing’s approach to reshaping the international order.

5. On the critical importance of the fentanyl issue for the U.S. administration, particularly in the domestic narrative of U.S.-China relations, see, among others: Krishnamoorthi 2024, 12 December; US Department of State 2023.

6. The Entity List, maintained by the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) under the U.S. Department of Commerce, designates foreign entities—such as companies, research institutions, and government or private organizations—subject to strict restrictions on the export, reexport, or transfer of certain U.S. goods and technologies. These entities face additional licensing requirements that severely limit, if not effectively block, access to U.S.-origin components and raw materials. For industries with complex supply chains firmly interconnected with U.S. materials and technology, inclusion on the Entity List can pose significant operational and commercial challenges.

concerted effort to counter China's growing global influence. These topics had already been stressed by Xi Jinping during the 2023 Two Sessions [Ng 2023, 7 March].

High-profile meetings throughout the year illustrated the complexities of this bilateral relationship. In January, senior U.S. and Chinese defence officials met for the 17th Defense Policy Coordination Talks, marking a cautious step toward restoring military-to-military communication after a prolonged suspension [GFB 2024a]. These discussions were part of broader efforts to prevent miscalculations and manage competition responsibly. However, such dialogues often highlighted more than resolved the persistent gaps in mutual trust. In February, a high-level economic dialogue hosting some of China's top entrepreneurs was held in Beijing, addressing pressing trade imbalances and the enforcement of intellectual property rights [*South China Morning Post* 2025, 14 February]. This meeting underscored mutual recognition of the economic stakes involved, yet it failed to produce significant breakthroughs, particularly as the U.S. maintained its stance on tariffs imposed during the Trump administration.

Chinese strategic discourse reveals diverse perspectives on the evolving U.S.-China dynamic. The perception of being «under siege» [Jie 2024, 25 July] reinforces triumphalist and moderately optimistic perspectives in Chinese policy circles, shaping Beijing's strategies toward asserting its global ascendancy. These perspectives interpret the U.S.'s «hardening China policy» - manifested through measures such as export controls, Indo-Pacific alliances, and economic decoupling - as deliberate strategies of containment. This perception was pivotal in defining concepts such as the so called «holistic approach to national security»⁷ (*Zongli guojia anquan guan* 总体国家安全观).

The Taiwan question remained a central flashpoint throughout the year. Chinese officials repeatedly framed U.S. support for Taiwan as a direct challenge to Beijing's sovereignty, prompting more assertive deterrent measures such as multiple training exercises conducted by the PLA around the main island [GFB 2024b]. The continuation of U.S. arms sales to Taipei, combined with Taiwan's more inclined to independence administration, further strained relations. Meanwhile, Washington maintained its commitments under the Taiwan Relations Act, framing its support for the island as consistent with its broader strategy of ensuring a «free and open Indo-Pacific». These regional flashpoints, including Taiwan and the South China Sea, will be analysed in detail in the next section. Efforts to maintain dialogue continued amid these tensions. In April, a phone call between President Xi and President Biden sought to build on the progress made during their San

7. The so-called «holistic approach to national security» is a concept first introduced by Xi Jinping in 2014. It encompasses several distinct, yet interconnected, domains, including political, territorial, military, economic, cultural, social, scientific and technological, informational, ecological, resource, and nuclear security.

Francisco meeting [RMW 2024d]. Discussions included counter-narcotics cooperation, military-to-military communication, and climate change-areas identified as potential avenues for cooperation. Yet even these dialogues were often overshadowed by concurrent actions exacerbating tensions, such as the US Department of Commerce's expanded export controls and China's countermeasures against American defence firms involved in arms sales to Taiwan. The Shangri-La Dialogue in June provided another opportunity for high-level engagement, with U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Chinese Minister of National Defense Dong Jun meeting face-to-face [Yew 2024, 2 June]. While these discussions underscored the importance of dialogue, they also revealed significant limitations. As noted by observers, the two sides often «talk past each other», failing to address core concerns effectively [Kine 2024, 30 May]. U.S. officials emphasized the importance of «freedom of navigation» and «respect for international law» while Beijing reiterated its red lines on Taiwan and its position in the South China Sea [RMW 2024e]. The dialogue highlighted the challenges in aligning policy priorities, particularly concerning third-party actors in the Indo-Pacific region [Scobell 2024, 12 June]. In July, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen visited Beijing to discuss macroeconomic stability and the implications of ongoing sanctions [*The Straits Times* 2024, 18 November]. The meetings aimed to mitigate financial risks associated with decoupling but ended with limited agreements, reflecting the entrenched nature of economic competition. By September, the Biden administration's unveiling of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework further underscored the U.S. strategy of countering China's influence in the region [US Department of Commerce 2024, 23 September]. This move prompted Beijing to strengthen its ties with the Global South, leveraging initiatives like the BRI and advancing alternative trade agreements to diminish reliance on U.S.-led economic frameworks. In November, the APEC summit in Lima served as another platform for engagement. Despite formalities, the summit showcased deepening divides, particularly on issues like digital trade and data security. While both sides affirmed the need for cooperation on climate change and public health, these areas of agreement were overshadowed by broader geopolitical tensions [Pak 2024, 13 November]. As the year drew to a close, December saw a flurry of diplomatic activity, including an expanded meeting of the U.S.-China Comprehensive Economic Dialogue. This marked an effort to address systemic issues in trade and investment relations, though progress remained minimal amid mutual accusations of unfair practices and protectionism [Jia 2024, 8 December]. Simultaneously, the U.S. added new Chinese firms to its Entity List, while Beijing announced further restrictions on rare earth exports, underscoring the tit-for-tat nature of their economic policies [SWB 2024]. Throughout the year, these interactions reflected broader trends in U.S.-China relations: a reactive cycle of competition exacerbated by mutual distrust and conflicting strategic objectives. As both nations navigate this

intricate and often contentious relationship, the balance between competition and cooperation will continue to shape the global order in the years to come.

4. *Regional flashpoints in 2024: China's strategic calculations.*

4.1. *Normalizing coercion: Beijing's strategic recalibration in the Taiwan Strait.*

The trajectory of cross-Strait relations in 2024 illustrated a year of heightened complexity and strategic recalibration, as Beijing continued its efforts to establish a new normal [Lin & Wuthnow 2022, 16 August] in the Taiwan Strait.⁸ This evolving paradigm was characterized by the intensification of military activities, sustained diplomatic pressures, and a concerted focus on normalizing coercive practices. As in previous years, military exercises by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) exhibited a steady increase in scale and sophistication, reflecting a deliberate strategy to operationalize territorial claims and project influence over the Strait. The year began with notable political developments. On January 1, Chinese President Xi Jinping reiterated in his New Year Address the necessity of Taiwan's unification with China [Mahadzir 2024, 1 January], reaffirming Beijing's uncompromising stance. Shortly thereafter, on January 13, William Lai Ching-te of the Democratic Progressive Party⁹ (DPP) was elected as Taiwan's new president, marking an unprecedented third consecutive term for the DPP [Insisa 2024, pp. 147-153]. While this electoral success solidified the party's dominance, the absence of a legislative majority presented new challenges for governance and political stability. Lai's administration thus inherited a fragile domestic context, further exacerbated by external pressures from Beijing, which interpreted the election as a direct challenge to its «One-China principle» (*Yige Zhongguo yuanze* 一个中

8. From the perspective of Taipei and Washington, China's ongoing military activities in the Taiwan Strait reflect a concerted effort to establish a «new normality» progressively eroding Taiwan's de facto territorial control while recalibrating the parameters of cross-Strait interactions. A process that involves an incremental expansion of military operations, effectively redefining the implicit understandings that have shaped Taiwan–PRC–U.S. relations since the 1970s.

9. In Chinese official discourse, the Democratic Progressive Party is consistently framed as a pro-independence force, with its policies and rhetoric perceived in Beijing as a direct challenge to the One-China Principle. Conversely, the Kuomintang (KMT) has traditionally been regarded as a potential interlocutor for cross-Strait engagement. Despite increasing skepticism among Chinese institutions regarding the KMT's long-term reliability, Beijing continues to view the party as a possible vehicle for fostering economic cooperation and, in the longer term, exploring avenues for political dialogue. On the political evolution in Taiwan see the essays by Aurelio Insisa, published in 'Asia Maior', XXVIII/2017 to XXXIV/2023.

国原则。) In apparent retaliation, Beijing persuaded Nauru to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China on January 14, marking the tenth diplomatic partner lost by Taiwan since the DPP assumed power in 2016. While Nauru had already changed sides in the past¹⁰, this latest shift—almost certainly arranged well in advance—stood out for its timing, signalling a renewed assertiveness in the diplomatic tug-of-war over Taiwan. This development highlighted Beijing's continued reliance on «checkbook diplomacy»¹¹ to isolate Taipei, reinforcing the perception of Taiwan's diminishing formal international presence [*Associated Press* 2024, 24 January].

February witnessed a series of maritime incidents that further underscored the precarious state of cross-Strait relations. On 14 February, a Chinese fishing vessel capsized near Kinmen following a confrontation with Taiwanese authorities, resulting in the deaths of two fishermen. Beijing condemned the incident, framing Taiwan as the aggressor. Days later, on 19 February, Chinese Coast Guard vessels boarded a Taiwanese tourist boat near Kinmen, inspecting passengers' documents and asserting jurisdiction over contested waters. These actions illustrated Beijing's incremental strategy to erode Taiwan's de facto sovereignty over its offshore territories while testing the limits of Taipei's responses. March marked a pivotal shift in Beijing's narrative. At the NPC, Premier Li, despite pointing out the necessity to promote peaceful cross-Strait development, reaffirmed the «One-China principle» and the imperative to counter «Taiwan independence» (Taidu 台独), omitting references to «peaceful unification» [RMW 2024b]. This shift was reinforced during the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference on 7 March, where Xi Jinping called for the mobilization of patriotic forces to advance unification. These developments, consistent with the framework articulated in the 20th Party Congress, reflected an erosion of space for dialogue with Taiwan's citizens and institutions [Pelaggi 2022]. The increasingly assertive tone suggested that political rapprochement across the Strait had become increasingly unattainable, even with factions in Taiwan that had previously advocated for cooperative frameworks.

In April, Beijing escalated its military manoeuvres, with Taiwan's Ministry of National Defence reporting over 30 PLA aircraft and nine naval vessels entering its airspace and surrounding waters [Chung 2025, 17 April]. These incursions exemplified Beijing's efforts to institutionalize military

10. For an in-depth analysis of Nauru's recent diplomatic switch, as well as a comprehensive overview of the country's complex history of shifting recognition between Taipei and Beijing, see: Shattuck 2024.

11. «Checkbook diplomacy» refers to the strategic use of discretionary funds, development cooperation projects, and, more broadly, the transfer of substantial financial resources by both Taiwan and the People's Republic of China. This practice aims to secure or maintain diplomatic recognition from developing countries, reflecting the ongoing competition between the two entities to bolster their respective international legitimacy. For further insight, see, within the extensive bibliography available on the subject: Wu 2024.

presence around Taiwan, leveraging sustained operations to exert psychological and strategic pressure.

May represented a significant juncture in cross-Strait relations, coinciding with William Lai's inauguration as president on May 20. In his inaugural address, Lai drew parallels between China's military actions and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, framing Beijing's coercion as a threat to global peace and stability. Beijing's response was swift, with the «Joint Sword-2024A» military exercises on 23-24 May showcasing unprecedented PLA-CCG coordination. These drills simulated scenarios required for a blockade, signalling Beijing's intent to establish a routine of high-intensity military operations to assert dominance in the Strait [Hung 2024, 27 July].

The summer months were marked by a continued escalation of Beijing's activities. On 2 July, the Chinese Coast Guard intercepted and detained a Taiwanese fishing vessel near Kinmen [VOA News 2024, 3 July]. By 11 July, Taiwan recorded 66 PLA aircraft incursions into its air defence identification zone (ADIZ) in a single day, setting a new record for 2024 [DW 2024, 11 July]. These events underscored Beijing's strategy of normalizing incursions as part of a broader campaign to desensitize Taiwan and the international community to its military presence. The dynamics reached a critical inflection point in October, following President Lai's National Day address on 10 October. Beijing responded with the «Joint Sword-2024B» exercises on 14 October, which, while shorter in duration, showcased a higher degree of operational intensity and coordination. These drills, featuring the deployment of advanced naval assets, including the aircraft carrier Liaoning, and record-breaking incursions by over 150 PLA aircraft, demonstrated Beijing's reinforced capacity to enforce a blockade. The integration of CCG vessels in these operations further blurred the distinction between military and law enforcement activities, highlighting Beijing's intent to normalize its assertive actions in the Strait [Lin & Hart 2024, 29 October].

December culminated in the most extensive maritime operations in decades. Between 9-11 December, nearly 90 Chinese naval and Coast Guard vessels conducted unannounced drills in waters surrounding Taiwan, extending from Japan's southern islands to the South China Sea [Yang 2024, 10 December]. Taiwan's Ministry of National Defence characterized these exercises as the largest since the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, underscoring their unprecedented scale and geopolitical significance [Pierson & Chang Chien 2024, 10 December]. These drills represented a decisive escalation in Beijing's strategy, explicitly demonstrating its capability to isolate Taiwan while deterring external intervention. The unannounced nature of the operations, coupled with their geographic reach and the deployment of advanced assets, including Type 055 destroyers and large amphibious assault ships, highlighted Beijing's intent to simulate scenarios required for a full-scale blockade or even an amphibious assault. Observers noted that the inclusion of nearly 20 Coast Guard vessels blurred the line between military

and paramilitary activities, reflecting a deliberate effort to normalize coercive practices and expand Beijing's operational toolkit in the Taiwan Strait [Dotson 2025, 8 January]. The exercises served not only as a demonstration of military strength but also as a stark warning to Taipei and its international partners, reinforcing the strategic recalibration pursued by Beijing throughout the year.

The developments of 2024 illustrate Beijing's deliberate recalibration of its strategies in the Taiwan Strait, characterized by a persistent effort to rewrite the operational norms governing cross-Strait interactions. By employing military intimidation, economic leverage, and diplomatic marginalization, China sought to normalize its assertive posture while incrementally eroding Taiwan's capacity for resistance. However, this strategy was fraught with significant obstacles: the immense financial and military costs of a potential conflict, coupled with the risks of international backlash and regional destabilization, continued to act as strong deterrents. At the same time, the evolving dynamics in the Taiwan Strait and Beijing's increasingly assertive rhetoric suggested that a mutually agreed resolution was increasingly remote. In Chinese public discourse, Taiwan is no longer seen as a partner for dialogue but as a strategic issue to be resolved, reflecting a growing departure from any prospects of a negotiated settlement. This shift underscores the deepening complexities and the long-term challenges inherent in the cross-Strait relationship.

4.2. China's foreign policy in the South China Sea: strategic manoeuvres and regional reactions.

In 2024, the South China Sea continued to serve as a critical focal point of China's foreign policy, encapsulating Beijing's aspirations to assert its influence within the Indo-Pacific while navigating a complex matrix of regional and global pressures. The region's strategic significance¹², underscored by its economic and territorial value, remained intertwined with China's broader objectives to redefine regional order and consolidate its maritime dominance. International media coverage increasingly highlighted the area as a geopolitical flashpoint, with reports underscoring mounting concerns over escalating tensions and their potential implications for regional stability. The year began with heightened tensions. On 12 January, Chinese Coast Guard forces drove away Philippine fishing boats near Scarborough Shoal, reaffirming Beijing's territorial claims [*Tracking Tensions at Second*

12. For a reconstruction of the positions regarding sovereignty and maritime routes in the South China Sea, see, among others, Shen 2002 for the Chinese perspective and Pedrozo 2014 for the Western perspective. The disputes in the South China Sea, and the resulting positions of individual actors, are obviously not limited to these but involve virtually all regional players, including the Philippines, Indonesia, Taiwan, Japan, and Vietnam, among others.

Thomas Shoal' 2024, 30 January]. Just days later, the 8th Bilateral Consultation Mechanism meeting held in Shanghai on 17 January sought to establish protocols for managing maritime emergencies. Despite these diplomatic overtures, incidents like these highlighted the persistent divergence between China's assertive posture and regional aspirations for stability. Adding to the contentious atmosphere, Chinese officials, on 25 January, criticized NATO's growing presence in Asia, viewing it as an extension of Western encroachment, even as they expressed conditional optimism for Sino-Philippine dialogue. By February, tensions escalated further, particularly with joint air patrols conducted by U.S. and Philippine forces on 19 February [*Reuters* 2024, 20 February], which Beijing decried as a deliberate provocation [Liu & Guo 2024, 20 February].

These developments exemplified China's broader opposition to what it frames as external interference in matters it considers under its sovereignty. They set the stage for more confrontational incidents in the months ahead. In March, the volatility of the South China Sea reached new heights with the widely publicized use of water cannons by Chinese Coast Guard vessels on 5 March to block Philippine resupply missions to Second Thomas Shoal. This action drew sharp international criticism, highlighting the increasing risks associated with Beijing's assertive strategies. Notably, China's rhetoric that such measures adhered to bilateral agreements was firmly rejected by Manila, which viewed these actions as clear violations of international norms. The Chinese Coast Guard and its maritime militias played an essential role in these operations, reflecting Beijing's reliance on a layered strategy that included the employment of state-sponsored paramilitary forces. These actors have systematically sought to obstruct Philippine resupply efforts, further complicating the already fraught dynamics of the region.

April brought a cascade of diplomatic and military engagements. On 3 April, Beijing accused the Marcos administration of reneging on supposed agreements over Second Thomas Shoal, further straining bilateral relations. Days later, on 7 April, joint military exercises involving the Philippines, the U.S., Japan, and Australia were conducted, drawing sharp rebukes from Beijing, which framed these actions as destabilizing. On April 14, tensions deepened when a Chinese Coast Guard vessel obstructed a Philippine research ship for eight hours. This series of events was punctuated by the arrival of Indian BrahMos missiles in the Philippines on 19 April, signalling the expanding regional defence partnerships aimed at countering Chinese influence.

The elevation of Admiral Dong Jun to minister of Defence earlier in the year underscored Beijing's strategic shift in integrating maritime priorities into its broader foreign policy framework. Admiral Dong, with his extensive expertise in maritime security and territorial disputes, was seen as a pivotal figure in consolidating China's South China Sea strategy. His appointment highlighted China's intent to enhance its military and dip-

lomatic capabilities to address the region's complex dynamics [Wushuang Yi 2024, 30 September]. As the year progressed, the escalation of incidents in the South China Sea became increasingly intertwined with broader regional dynamics. By mid-year, the Shangri-La Dialogue in June provided a platform for U.S. Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin and Chinese Defence Minister Dong Jun to engage directly. The dialogue, however, underlined entrenched divisions. While Austin emphasized adherence to international law and freedom of navigation, Dong reiterated Beijing's stance on Taiwan and the South China Sea, blaming external actors for fomenting instability. This meeting highlighted the limitations of such engagements in bridging the strategic divide.

August 2024 marked a pivotal moment in the South China Sea disputes, with a series of high-stakes confrontations [Lariosa 2024, 9 September] that significantly altered the regional equilibrium and captured the attention of global media. On 8 August, Chinese aircraft deployed flares dangerously close to Philippine patrols, escalating tensions in contested airspace. This incident raised serious concerns about the militarization of disputed zones, drawing widespread attention from international observers. On 19 August, another dramatic escalation unfolded when Chinese Coast Guard vessels collided with Philippine ships near Sabina Shoal during a resupply mission. The collision caused damage to Philippine vessels, sparking condemnation and prompting Manila to lodge formal protests. Only days later, on 22 August, Chinese forces once again deployed flares, this time near Philippine fisheries patrol aircraft, further heightening tensions. The peak of confrontations occurred on 25 August, when Chinese Coast Guard vessels reportedly rammed a Philippine ship engaged in resupply operations for local fishermen. This marked the most aggressive action in a month fraught with hostilities.

Beijing defended its actions as measures necessary to uphold its sovereignty, while Manila and its international partners viewed them as deliberate provocations aimed at consolidating Chinese dominance. The Chinese maritime militias also played a visible role during these confrontations, acting in coordination with official Coast Guard operations to exert pressure on Philippine assets and normalize Beijing's claims in contested areas. These events echo strategies previously observed in the Taiwan Strait, where Beijing has systematically employed incremental actions to establish a «new normal» in contested areas [Yūsuke 2024, 4 December]. Much like its Taiwan Strait strategy, China's South China Sea maneuvers involved normalizing its presence and operations through persistent, if provocative, actions by the PLA Navy, Coast Guard, and maritime militias.

On 2 December 2024, Beijing formally deposited a statement with the United Nations regarding the baselines of its territorial sea around the disputed Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea [Chen 2024, 4 December]. This move, described by Chinese officials as a legitimate measure to

defend the country's territorial sovereignty [*Global Times* 2024, 3 December], was part of an effort to strengthen Beijing's claim over the shoal. China's submission, delivered by Ambassador Geng Shuang, deputy permanent representative of China to the U.N., included relevant charts of the baselines. The Chinese mission framed the action as being consistent with international law and its obligations under the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), emphasizing that the shoal – referred to as Huangyan Dao – is an «inherent part of China's territory». This development represented a significant shift in China's foreign policy, marking a transition from a reliance on military and diplomatic pressure to a more formalized legal strategy. By embedding its claim within the framework of UNCLOS, China aimed to present its assertion of sovereignty as a fait accompli, reinforcing its position in an increasingly contested maritime domain.

The latter half of the year saw the Philippines intensify its efforts to strengthen regional alliances. Expanded military cooperation with nations such as Vietnam, Australia, Japan, and France underscored Manila's strategic pivot towards multilateralism [De Castro 2024] as a counterbalance to Beijing's maritime assertiveness¹³. Despite periodic attempts at dialogue, the absence of robust conflict management mechanisms perpetuated a cycle of heightened volatility and stand-offs. While the United States reaffirmed its 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty obligations [*Associated Press* 2024, 18 June], its refusal to label China's actions as acts of war reflected a calculated caution in avoiding military escalation. This strategic restraint underscored the limitations of U.S. commitments in addressing the complexities of South China Sea disputes.

These developments illuminated the South China Sea's enduring role as both a strategic asset and a geopolitical flashpoint in China's foreign policy. Beijing's blend of assertiveness and selective engagement reflected its broader ambitions to redefine power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. Yet, the persistent lack of clear de-escalation frameworks raised critical questions about the sustainability of its approach [Laksmana 2024, 18 October]. The events of 2024 highlighted the South China Sea as a focal point of regional security tensions, marked by intensified Chinese coercion, the Philippines' strengthened maritime defence strategy, and growing regional resistance

13. A trend that is further reinforced by Europe's deepening engagement in the Indo-Pacific, which reflects a broader recalibration of its strategic outlook. An evolving approach that has increasingly converged with that of regional counterparts, particularly under the leadership of the United States. The EU-Japan Strategic Partnership serves as a salient example of this alignment, as stressed by Pugliese, 2024. This evolving framework not only underscores Europe's recognition of the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical centrality but also situates the Philippines' strategic posture within a broader regional trend. For the first time, the South China Sea emerges as a theater of value-based contestation, where strategic alignments are increasingly framed through the lens of competing normative and governance models, further intensifying geopolitical rivalries in the region.

to China led by Vietnam, Japan, and Australia [Boruta 2024, 16 July]. As Beijing was refining its assertive tactics, the region remained a critical test of its ambitions, exposing the challenges and risks inherent in its pursuit of dominance in an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific.

4.3. China's strategic engagement in the Middle East: balancing influence and restraint.

China's engagement in the Middle East in 2024 highlighted its attempt to balance ambition with caution in a region marked by deep-seated rivalries and instability. Beijing's adherence to the principle of non-interference [Fardella & She 2024] remained a defining feature of its strategy, reflecting its effort to safeguard economic and strategic interests without becoming embroiled in volatile regional politics [Fardella & Ghiselli 2024]. However, the limits of this approach were evident, particularly during the Gaza crisis, which underscored the challenges of navigating the region's intricate dynamics. The 10th Ministerial Meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in May 2024 exemplified Beijing's institutionalized approach to strengthening ties with Arab states. The «Beijing Declaration» emphasized regional stability and political-economic collaboration, aligning with China's broader BRI. Yet, scepticisms lingered about whether Beijing's initiatives could yield tangible results. Critics argued that China often capitalized on Western efforts to maintain stability while avoiding significant commitments of its own, reinforcing perceptions of a «do-nothing» strategy [Barney & Glasserman 2024, 13 June] - a pattern that was put to the test during the Gaza crisis, challenging Beijing's regional engagement approach.

China condemned Israeli airstrikes, including the assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, framing these actions as destabilizing and urging de-escalation. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held diplomatic talks with Jordanian and Egyptian counterparts, advocating for a ceasefire and proposing collective international responses. Yet, Beijing's rhetoric often stopped short of actionable proposals, reflecting its cautious diplomacy and limited leverage in resolving protracted conflicts.

While Beijing's neutrality allowed it to engage with a wide array of actors, the crisis revealed the difficulty of maintaining balanced relations in such a polarized region. [Yuan & Tártir 2024, 18 November]. China's engagement with key regional actors further underscores the multifaceted nature of its Middle East policy. The deepening of ties with Saudi Arabia, highlighted by multibillion-dollar agreements and Premier Li Qiang's meetings with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, reflected the increasing strategic importance of the Gulf in Beijing's geopolitical calculus. Concurrently, China's strengthened partnerships with Qatar and the UAE, emphasizing energy security and infrastructure development, illustrated its broader commitment to integrating economic cooperation with long-term regional influence. This dual approach highlighted Beijing's efforts to position itself

as a pivotal actor in the region's evolving dynamics [Gadzala Tirziu 2024, 4 July]. However, China's alignment with Iran - evident in its strong condemnation of Israeli actions and support for Iranian initiatives at the UN - emphasized the inherent challenges of maintaining credibility with all regional stakeholders. By October, Beijing's diplomatic rhetoric intensified. At the UN General Assembly, China described the Palestinian conflict as «the greatest wound to human conscience» [Lewis & Nichols 2024, 28 September], marking a significant escalation in its criticism of Israel. This shift, however, challenged China's long-standing ambition to maintain balanced relations with all regional actors, potentially complicating its efforts to position itself as a neutral power in the Middle East. The move also reflected a broader recalibration of Beijing's diplomatic strategy, as it sought to leverage moral and political narratives to expand its influence in the Global South, even at the cost of straining ties with key regional players. Yet, this heightened rhetoric was accompanied by a consistent emphasis on dialogue and de-escalation, reflecting Beijing's reluctance to overextend its involvement. While China's mediation efforts between Iran and Saudi Arabia and its facilitation of dialogue between Palestinian factions signalled a cautious shift toward proactive diplomacy, these initiatives largely prioritized safeguarding economic interests rather than pursuing transformative conflict resolution strategies. Throughout 2024, Beijing navigated the Middle East's volatile geopolitics by balancing its growing economic stakes with its preference for strategic restraint. Its approach reflected a broader attempt to integrate the region into its multipolar vision of global governance while avoiding the risks of overcommitment. However, the sustainability of this strategy remained uncertain.

As Beijing increasingly positions itself as a mediator, its capacity to influence the region will depend on whether it can transition from its traditionally risk-averse posture to a more decisive role in shaping stability. The Middle East remains a crucial test of China's capacity to align its strategic ambitions with the region's intricate dynamics, providing valuable insights into the broader trajectory of its global ascent [Aluf 2024].

4. *Conclusions*

China's foreign policy in 2024 reflected an evolving blend of strategic assertiveness and diplomatic recalibration, aimed at consolidating its global position while managing external pressures. Beijing intensified efforts to shape international norms through deeper engagement with the Global South and multilateral institutions, presenting itself as an alternative to the U.S.-led order. At the same time, its actions in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea signalled a systematic push to normalize coercion as a tool of statecraft, reinforcing its regional dominance. The growing U.S.-China

rivalry, particularly in the technological and economic domains, further defined Beijing's external posture, prompting measures to counter what it perceives as containment strategies. Yet, China's approach was not purely confrontational—while military and economic pressure remained central to its strategy, Beijing also sought to project an image of stability and pragmatism, particularly in managing high-level diplomatic engagements and crisis diplomacy. By positioning itself as a counterbalance to U.S. influence, Beijing seeks not only to mitigate tensions but also to elevate the rivalry to a framework essential for international equilibrium, while simultaneously advocating alternative governance norms that align with its broader global ambitions. This approach underscores the growing strategic depth of China's external engagements.

At the core of this strategic recalibration lies a concerted effort to centralize and institutionalize foreign policymaking under Party leadership, ensuring a direct alignment between diplomatic actions and national objectives. The CFAWC, convened in December 2023, served as a pivotal platform for articulating Beijing's evolving foreign policy doctrine and outlining the strategic imperatives that will shape its future diplomatic trajectory. Beyond its function as a forum for assessing China's external posture, the conference reaffirmed the consolidation of decision-making authority under Xi Jinping, marking a definitive shift toward a more assertive and ideologically coherent global strategy. Beijing's diplomatic framework continues to be characterized by a dual approach: expanding influence through multilateral engagement and normative contestation, while simultaneously intensifying coercive mechanisms in key regional flashpoints. The CFAWC thus represents not only a moment of reflection on China's foreign policy evolution but also a crucial juncture for programmatic decisions that will guide Beijing's external strategy in the coming years.

As China continues to navigate an increasingly fragmented international order, its foreign policy trajectory suggests a deliberate and methodical institutionalization of influence, one that blends coercive diplomacy with selective engagement. The coming years will test Beijing's ability to sustain this balance, as its ambitions encounter both structural constraints and the evolving responses of global and regional actors. The increasing centralization of Party-led foreign policy will remain a defining feature of this trajectory, reinforcing the integration of domestic political imperatives with Beijing's broader strategic objectives on the global stage.

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KOREAN PENINSULA 2024: A YEAR OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL UPHEAVAL*

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The year 2024 has been a defining year for the Korean peninsula, characterized by severe political crises, escalating inter-Korean hostilities, and shifting international alignments. In South Korea, the attempted imposition of martial law by President Yoon Suk-yeol and his subsequent impeachment exposed the weaknesses of its institutional system and deepened political polarization, but it also demonstrated the vitality of civil society in swiftly responding to the threat to democracy. Meanwhile, North Korea formally abandoned the idea of reunification, declaring South Korea a «hostile state» while continuing military provocations, including missile tests and non-conventional tactics, such as the launch of trash-filled balloons. Pyongyang's growing strategic alignment with Russia, highlighted by the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership signed during Vladimir Putin's visit to North Korea, raised concerns about regional security and arms proliferation. Amid these developments, South Korea sought to reinforce its trilateral alliance with the United States and Japan while navigating complex diplomatic relations with China and Southeast Asia. As political uncertainty persists in Seoul and inter-Korean tensions reach new heights, the trajectory of the Korean peninsula remains uncertain. The coming months will be critical in determining whether stability can be restored or whether the Korean peninsula will continue on its trajectory of deepening division and conflict.

KEYWORDS – South Korea; North Korea; Yoon Suk-yeol; Lee Jae-myung; martial law; Kim Jong Un; Russia-North Korea relations; North Korea missile tests; inter-Korean relations; Japan-South Korea relations; US-Japan-South Korea.

1. Introduction

The events that took place on the Korean peninsula in 2024, characterized by profound political crises, escalating inter-Korean hostilities, and significant shifts in regional and global alliances, marked an important turning point in the political and social development of the two Koreas

* This article is the outcome of a joint research effort of the two authors. More specifically, however, Marco Milani wrote sections 1; 2.1; 2.2; 2.3 and 3.1, Antonio Fiori wrote sections 2.4; 4.1; 4.2 and 5.

and represented the completion of processes that had been in the making for several years.

South Korea faced an unprecedented constitutional crisis that tested the resilience of its political system. Strong political polarization has been a key feature of the domestic political development since the democratic transition in 1987, due mainly to the legacy of four decades of authoritarian rule and of continuous struggle by the political and social opposition. This polarization reached extremely high level after the 2022 presidential elections, in which Yoon Suk-yeol won with the slightest margin in the country's history, and in the following years characterized by tension and confrontation between the two main parties, that was reflected in the recurring conflicts between the two main political institutions – the presidency and the National Assembly – controlled by the opposing parties. This tension reached its peak with the imposition of a 6-hour martial law by President Yoon Suk-yeol, on 3 December, repealed by a unanimous vote of the National Assembly, and the subsequent impeachment process. These events left the country in a state of deep crisis and instability, and underscored the weaknesses of the country's institutions, but they also led to an immediate mobilization of the opposition and the civil society, as a testimony of the vitality of political participation. Despite the attempted coup by the president being immediately repelled, the deep social divisions within the country remained as represented by the protests, party realignments, and mass demonstrations that took place before and after the declaration of martial law.

While South Korea struggled with domestic political crises, North Korea undertook a process of transformation under the leadership of Kim Jong Un. Specifically, the regime decided to amend its Constitution to formally designate South Korea as a «hostile state», marking a historic departure from previous rhetoric on Korean reunification – also supported by the previous leaders – and effectively consolidating the two Koreas as adversaries in political, military, and ideological dimensions. This shift was accompanied by the usual military provocations, including missile tests and artillery exchanges with the South along the Northern Limit Line, but also by new propaganda campaigns, such as the launch of balloons filled with trash into South Korean territory.

North Korea's hard-line stance was not limited to inter-Korean relations, but it materialized also in the active pursuit of a policy aimed at strengthening its strategic partnership with Russia. Particularly, the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Moscow and Pyongyang, signed during Vladimir Putin's visit to North Korea in June, signalled a deepening military and economic collaboration between the two countries, raising concerns among the international community about potential arms transfers and geopolitical realignments in Northeast Asia.

In this context, South Korea's foreign policy continued to move along the lines of the previous two years. The Yoon administration continued its

efforts to reinforce the trilateral partnership with the United States and Japan. This included expanded military cooperation, intelligence-sharing agreements, and joint statements condemning North Korea's arms shipments to Russia. South Korea's diplomatic outreach extended to ASEAN and NATO, emphasizing its role as a «global pivotal state» amid growing regional tensions.

2. *Domestic politics*

2.1. *The road towards the legislative elections*

Political polarization in South Korea has significantly deepened since Yoon Suk-yeol assumed the presidency in 2022, driven by a combination of structural, ideological, and institutional factors that have intensified confrontations across the political spectrum. At the heart of this polarization lies the entrenched ideological division between conservatives and progressives, a divide that has long shaped South Korean politics but has become particularly acrimonious in recent years. Under Yoon, the framing of political conflict has often been zero-sum, with opponents portrayed not as adversaries within a democratic system, but as threats to the nation itself. This dynamic has contributed to an increasingly hostile political culture, where compromise is rare and mutual distrust prevails.

The political polarization that had been brewing in South Korea since the 2022 presidential campaign [Shin *et al.* 2024], reached a tragic new high point on 2 January 2024, when the leader of the opposition Democratic Party (DP) and former presidential candidate Lee Jae-myung was attacked with a knife and stabbed on the neck by an extremist, during a news conference in Busan [Kang *et al.* 2024, 3 January]. After having been immediately hospitalized, Lee's conditions appeared to be serious but not life-threatening, despite the wounds suffered, and on 10 January he was released from the hospital [Borowiec 2024, 10 January]. As quickly emerged from the police investigation, that arrested the aggressor almost immediately, and from the note left by him, the attack had been planned for months with the specific goal of killing Lee Jae-myung to prevent him from becoming president in the future and to punish him for his corruption allegation [Kim 2024, 10 January]. As expected, the entire South Korean political spectrum immediately expressed solidarity to Lee and strongly condemned the attack. Lee himself expressed hope that the extreme gesture would lead to the end of the politics of hatred and confrontation and a return to mutual respect and co-existence among the different political parties.

Unfortunately, soon after the attack the bipartisan condemnation of the extreme political climate gave way to a return to polarization and tension within the country. This was clearly shown by a second violent assault that involved a politician from the conservative People Power Party (PPP)

and former spokesperson of President Yoon Suk-yeol, Bae Hyun-jin, who was attacked and hit on the head with a rock on 25 January [Yoon and Kim 2024, 25 January]. This was the troubled situation that the country was facing while preparing for the legislative elections for the National Assembly scheduled for 10 April. The elections were considered particularly important, by both political fronts: on one hand, President Yoon and the conservatives needed to change the progressive parliamentary majority, that had been in place since the 2020 elections, in order to implement a series of key reforms, such as education, labour and pensions, and to boost the consensus of the president that had been decreasing during the term; on the other hand, the progressives wanted to keep, and possibly increase, their majority in the National Assembly to continue blocking the conservative plan for domestic reforms and also to give a further blow to Yoon's already precarious image.

The reorganization process of both political parties had already started towards the end of 2023, with the PPP electing a new leader supposedly close to the president, former Minister of Justice Han Dong-hoon, and the Democratic Party still dominated by Lee Jae-myung. Prominent former members of the two main parties created new parties: Lee Jun-seok, former leader of the PPP, established the centrist New Reform Party on 20 January and Lee Nak-yeon, former prime minister from the DP, created the New Future Party on 4 February, after the failing attempt to join forces with Lee Jun-seok [Jung 2024, 20 February]; Cho Kuk, former Minister of Justice under Moon Jae-in, created the left-wing Rebuilding Korea Party on 3 March [Han 2024, 3 March].

The already polarized and tense situation was further complicated by a widespread protest among doctors against the government's decision to increase the number of admissions to Medical Schools from 3.000 to 5.000, starting from 2025. The protest began with a massive resignation of young resident and intern doctors from the main university hospitals in Seoul on 20 February. The government responded by keeping its plan in place, refusing to negotiate and threatening to suspend the medical licenses of the striking doctors [Park and Park 2024, 26 February]. This led to an increase in the support for the protest among doctors, in early March, and a stalemate destined to last for a long time. With the election fast approaching, the president decided to stick to his position and portray the protesting doctors as a self-serving group that wanted to keep their privileges, betting on the public outrage towards the disservice in the health care system.

2.2. *The progressive success at the legislative elections and its consequences*

When the elections finally arrived, on Wednesday 10 April, the results marked a clear victory for the Democratic Party and its allies and a resounding defeat for Yoon and for the conservatives of the People Power Party. Out of the 300 total seats, the DP won 161 seats from the majority constituencies

and 14 from the proportional representation; in addition, Cho Kuk's left-wing party obtained 12 proportional seats. This left the conservatives with 108 seats (90 from majority constituencies and 18 from proportional representation), the worst defeat for a ruling party in the country's history. The remaining five seats went to smaller parties: 3 to the New Reform and one each to the New Future and the Progressive Party [NEC 2024a; NEC 2024b].

The result strongly reinvigorated the progressive opposition, particularly the Democratic Party and its leader Lee Jae-myung. With a new and stronger majority, the party increased its ability to block the executive's reforms and to advance their own political agenda in the Parliament, in preparation for the forthcoming presidential elections. Despite the veto power being a prerogative of the president in the Korean political system, the progressive forces could still use their majority as a powerful political instrument, approving laws and submitting them to the president for promulgation so that he then had to take responsibility and explain why he refused to approve them.

At the same time, the outcome of the elections was a clear defeat for the PPP and for the president. The leader of the party, Han Dong-hoon, in charge only since the previous December and unable to get elected himself, decided to immediately resign the day after the elections, taking responsibility for the defeat [Jeong and Lee 2024, 11 April]. The approval rate of Yoon Suk-yeol plummeted to its lowest level at 23% the week after the election [Yoon 2024, 19 April]. The prospect of the president was that of remaining a «lame duck», with an opposing National Assembly throughout his entire term until 2027. While it was Han who paid the political price for the defeat, the elections were interpreted as a referendum on Yoon's first two years in office and were negatively affected also by the scandals that involved people very close to the president, including the first lady.

In addition to political polarization, the situation continued to deteriorate at the social level. In mid-June, a massive strike and demonstration of doctors, in support of the protest that started in February, hit the health system in the country, undermining the hard-line stance maintained by the government [Young 2024, 18 June]. On 7 June, workers of Samsung Electronics went on strike for the first time in the history of the company, demanding an improvement in their working conditions and salary [Young and Tobin 2024, 7 June]. The protest continued in July, when unionized workers at Samsung proclaimed an indefinite strike after a first three-day strike had started on 8 July. The workers' protest ended after one month with approximately 6.500 participants – a small percentage of the total – without achieving any practical results [Yoo and Lee 2024, 2 August].

During the summer, both main parties held internal elections for the leadership: within the PPP, the former leader Han Dong-hoon, who had resigned immediately after the legislative elections, was re-elected on 23 July to lead the party with the 62,8% of the votes, after defeating the three other

candidates [Yi 2024, 23 July]; in the Democratic Party the leadership of Lee Jae-myung was reconfirmed on 18 August with the 85,4% of the votes [Kim and Lee 2024, 19 August].

In September, the government started to take practical measures to strengthen its position and recover some of the lost approval in the eyes of the public opinion. On 29 August, Yoon presented his plan to reform the pension system [Park 2024, 29 August] and soon after the government announced that it was open to revise the quota for the admissions at Medical Schools for 2026 and it was willing to start a negotiation with doctors and other political parties to resolve the deadlock that was lasting since the protest began in February [Jung 2024, 8 September]. In early September, Yoon also reshuffled some key ministries in the government, including the Minister of Defence for which he nominated Kim Yong-hyun, former chief of the Presidential Security Service and close acquaintance of the president [King 2024, 10 September].

During the same weeks, the opposition started taking advantage of the political success of the legislative elections and put its parliamentary majority to use. On 19 September, the National Assembly approved three controversial laws, including one that was aimed at opening a special investigation on the first lady for charges related to corruption and abuse of power. Predictably, the president vetoed the three laws, starting a tense back and forth between the executive and legislative powers on these issues. In mid-October, the National Assembly voted again in favour of the creation of a special investigation on the first lady and on 2 November the Democratic Party organized a massive demonstration in Seoul to support the investigation [Kwak 2024, 3 November]. The president responded with a public apology for the tension and discomfort that the issue was creating for the public opinion, under pressure from his own party, but rejecting again the request for a special investigation [Lee 2024, 8 November]; the law was vetoed by the president for the third time on 26 November.

Yoon Suk-yeol's extensive and unprecedented use of the presidential veto power was one key factor in the country's political polarization, considering that the opposition had a majority in the National Assembly. The President used this prerogative 25 times in two and a half years, overcoming the total number of all his predecessors combined and vetoing also five bills concerning himself or the first lady [Lee *et al.* 2024, 27 November]. Conversely, the Democratic Party has made widespread use of impeachment – or the threat of it – targeting members of the government and high officials, including prosecutors investigating Lee Jae-myung or refusing to charge the first lady [Davies and Song 2024, 18 December]. Although both veto power and impeachment are constitutional prerogatives respectively of the president and of the National Assembly, this behaviour not only exacerbated hostility between conservatives and progressives but also represented a source of tension between the legislative and executive powers in the country's political system.

The escalation of the polarization between the two main parties, which had been brewing during the previous two years and significantly increased after the legislative elections, reached its highest point between November and December, when the National Assembly, in which the Democratic Party held a majority, decided to vote against the national budget for 2025 presented by the government. A reduced version, presented by the Democratic Party, was then approved in the dedicated committee, despite the boycott of the conservative legislators [Son and Kim 2024, 1 December]. This decision was the last straw in the conflict between the two main parties and triggered a series of events that would lead to the worst political crisis in the country since democratic transition.

2.3. Yoon's attempted coup: the declaration of martial law, the impeachment process and the aftermath

After the National Assembly decided not to pass the government proposal for the 2025 budget, Yoon Suk-yeol responded with the most extreme and unpredictable decision: the declaration of martial law in the country. On the evening of 3 December, around 10 PM, a televised speech by the president announced that martial law had been declared in order to re-establish order against the political forces, labelled as «anti-State» and «pro-North Korea», that were blocking the South Korean democratic system [Kim 2024, 3 December]. General Park An-soo was nominated commander of the martial law and soldiers were deployed to key sites, particularly to the National Assembly. The measures implemented under the martial law included the prohibition of all political activities, the control of all media and the prohibition of strikes or other actions that could lead to social disruption [Lee 2024, 3 December]. The president claimed to have acted according to the Constitution, which allows the president to declare martial law in case of national emergency; however, the political opposition immediately mobilized in order to reach the National Assembly to vote for rejecting the martial law and hopefully force the president to retract it. The opposition also called on civil society and the population at large to gather and take to the streets to defend democracy. Even Yoon's own conservative party, the PPP, publicly declared its opposition to the extreme decision of the president. The response of the political forces and even more that of the civil society and of the population was immediate and played a key role in opposing the attempt to overthrow the constitutional order by Yoon Suk-yeol.

After hours of high tension, especially around and inside the building of the National Assembly, where the army had deployed troops to prevent members of parliament to enter and vote, around 1 AM the martial law was rejected by the Parliament with a unanimous vote of the 190 members who managed to enter the building [Yang and Park 2024, 4 December]. After the vote, tension started to defuse and the military retreated from the streets. During the night, six hours after the proclamation of martial law, Yoon Suk-

yeol revoked it, accepting the vote of the Parliament and deciding to abide by the Constitutional procedure. The immediate response to this existential threat to the country's democracy of almost the entire political spectrum, national institutions and the public opinion represented a clear example of the strength and resilience of the South Korean democratic system.

If the possibility of a coup by the President had been avoided, the consequences of Yoon's actions had just begun to manifest themselves. The day after the declaration of martial law, the opposition parties immediately filed a motion to impeach the president in the National Assembly, while the PPP, which had opposed Yoon's move from the beginning, did not endorse it. Concurrently, the Democratic Party also filed a motion of impeachment against the Minister of Defence Kim Yong-hyun, who was considered one of the key allies of the president in organizing the attempted coup [Kim and Kim 2024, 4 December]. As expected, the days following the martial law declaration were extremely hectic for what concerned the political and social life of the country; for some days, it seemed that South Korea did not have a proper functioning government: the president was still fully in charge, but his reckless actions and the opposition of his own party had completely delegitimized him; at the same time, without a proper process of impeachment, he could not be legally replaced. On 6 December, the leader of the PPP, Han Dong-hoon, after having spoken to Yoon, declared that a swift suspension of the powers of the president was necessary. Yoon himself reappeared for the first time after the martial law on 7 December with a speech in which he took responsibility for his actions, apologized to the people and left the decision about his political future in the hands of the party [Park 2024a, 7 December]. This development pointed in the direction of bipartisan support of the motion of impeachment that was up for a vote the same day. Surprisingly, the conservatives in the National Assembly decided to leave before the vote, thus preventing reaching the necessary quorum [Park 2024b, 7 December]. This decision was strongly criticized by all the other parties and enraged the hundreds of thousands of people demonstrating outside of the building against the president. The decision was probably motivated by the fact that the party needed more time to organize a strategy after Yoon's exit. The following day the leader of the party announced that Yoon had been excluded from all the matters regarding state affairs and that the Prime Minister Han Duck-soo and a specific task force created within the party were managing the situation [Cho 2024, 8 December]. This move clearly had no legal foundation and was strongly criticized by the opposition and civil society.

During the following week the situation continued to be extremely chaotic: the opposition parties presented a second motion of impeachment, to be put to a vote on 14 December, while two days before the second vote Yoon Suk-yeol reappeared in a second speech, with a completely different tone, in which he defended his decision to declare martial law in order to

defend the country [Choe 2024, 11 December]. The speech pushed the leadership of the PPP to support the impeachment motion, but it also created a division within the party with a substantial faction of it that was moving towards supporting Yoon. When the vote in the National Assembly took place, only twelve members from the conservative party joined the 192 from the opposition in approving impeachment, still enough for the required 2/3 majority. However, 85 members from the PPP voted against it, signalling that the moment of almost national unity in the aftermath of the martial law was already over. Immediately after the vote, Prime Minister Han Duck-soo became acting-president and some sort of constitutional order was re-established in the country [Lee 2024, 14 December]. The final decision on Yoon's fate was then passed to the Constitutional Court, which had 180 days to decide whether to confirm the impeachment, with a new presidential election to be held in the following 60 days, or to reinstate him as president.

The vote for the impeachment, however, did not completely restore an orderly political situation within the country. In the conservative camp, Yoon Suk-yeol decided to respond to the vote of the National Assembly with another speech in which he emphasized the results obtained during his first two years in office and vowed to fight the impeachment procedure at the Constitutional Court until the end [*The Korea Herald* 2024, 14 December]. Within the party the situation became even more chaotic after the vote that split it: the leader Han Dong-hoon resigned and the lawmaker Kwon Young-se was nominated as the chair of a new emergency committee [Yi 2024, 16 December]. On the other side of the political spectrum, the progressives tried to take advantage of the situation, which had turned in their favour after the martial law, advancing again a law to create a special investigation on the first lady and a new one for investigating Yoon, and pushing for filling the three vacancies in the Constitutional Court. This last issue was of paramount importance because the Court had only six judges out of nine in place, with the majority requesting for a decision on the impeachment of five judges. Filling the vacancies was thus crucial for the Democratic Party to have more chances of having the motion confirmed. This situation created strong tension between the progressive majority in the National Assembly and the acting president Han Duck-soo. On 24 December, the DP threatened to present an impeachment motion also against Han, after he refused to promulgate the laws on the special investigations [Shin 2024, 23 December]. Three days later, the vote for the impeachment took place when the acting president refused to nominate three constitutional judges designated by the National Assembly, with 192 votes in favour and all the lawmakers of the PPP not participating in protest against the decision. On the same day, the Minister of Finance and Vice Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok was nominated as acting president, the third president in the country in less than three weeks. On 31 December, Choi decided to nominate two new judges for the Constitutional Court, one designated by the progressives

and one by the conservatives, while he decided to wait for a compromise between the two main parties before nominating the third one [Lee 2024, 31 December]. With this decision the number of judges who had to decide on the impeachment was increased to eight.

A further aspect that became increasingly crucial was the opening of an investigation by prosecutors against Yoon and other key political and military figures with the very serious charge of insurrection. On 8 December, five days after the martial law, the former Minister of Defence Kim Young-hyun was arrested for his role in the attempted coup [Lee 2024, 8 December]. On 11 December, the police tried to search the president office, but the presidential security service did not collaborate and very few documents were seized [Yim and Kim 2024, 11 December]. In the following days the police arrested both the national and Seoul's chiefs of police and General Park An-Soo. The investigators, first from the police and then from the Corruption Investigation Office that took over the case on 18 December, also summoned Yoon several times to interrogate him, but the president ignored the requests. On 31 December, a Seoul court issued a warrant against Yoon to arrest him and interrogate him, the first time for a sitting president [McCurry 2025, 1 January]. When the police tried to execute the warrant and arrest Yoon in his residence three days later, the presidential security service and conservative demonstrators blocked the agents, who, after a few hours of stalemate, decided to withdraw without taking the president in custody [Kwak 2025, 3 January].

One month after the declaration of the martial law and the attempted coup the situation in South Korea was far from resolved. The president had been impeached and temporarily removed, waiting for the verdict of the Constitutional Court, but the political situation remained extremely chaotic, especially within the conservative party. In the meantime, popular pressure against Yoon, that was very widespread in the society in the immediate aftermath, started to be confronted by sectors of the conservatives that supported the president, despite his reckless actions. Lastly, the necessary investigation for insurrection by the prosecutors added a further level of intricacy to the situation. These developments negatively affected the state of South Korea's democracy, as demonstrated by the categorization of the country as «electoral democracy» down from the previous «liberal democracy», according to the V-Dem Democracy Report, and as «flawed democracy» from the previous «full democracy», according to the Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit [Son 2025, 17 March]. The declaration of martial law, the first time since 1980 during the authoritarian era, certainly represented an existential shock for South Koreans, and it demonstrated their commitment to defend the democratic system with their powerful and immediate response. However, the fallout of the crisis was far from over and remains as the key variable for future developments in the country.

2.4. North Korea's hard-line turn: Kim Jong Un's break with reunification and the South

At the end of 2023, in a speech at the plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the Party, Kim Jong Un stated that his country's Constitution would be amended to educate citizens to identify South Korea as the «main enemy» [Milani and Fiori 2023; KCNA 2023, 31 December]. This declaration merely confirmed the perception that North Korea's doctrine of «Our State First» – first introduced in November 2017 and later reiterated in Kim's New Year's speech in 2019 – had now replaced any sense of ethnic kinship with the South.

In the early days of 2024, the North Korean leader reaffirmed this position at the Supreme People's Assembly meeting in January and on Army Foundation Day, on 8 February. On both occasions, he emphasized not only that Pyongyang no longer had any interest in the peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula but also that the Constitution should be amended to designate South Korea as the «number one enemy», formally ending the regime's commitment to unification [KCNA 2024a, 16 January]. Additionally, the three organizations responsible for handling inter-Korean reconciliation – the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country, the National Economic Cooperation Bureau, and the (Mount Kungang) International Tourism Administration – were to be dismantled [KCNA 2024b, 16 January].

Reaffirming the centrality of relations with socialist countries while adopting a hardline stance against the United States, Kim underscored the need to respond strategically to shifts in the international landscape to create favourable conditions for revolution. Furthermore, in his Army Foundation Day speech, he elaborated on the logic behind the «Two Hostile States» doctrine (also known as the «Two Koreas Theory»), justifying the regime's hard-line responses toward South Korea and linking them to a proactive and assertive foreign policy. He argued that breaking away from «dialogue and cooperation with the South Korean puppets» had allowed North Korea to build a strong military and maintain independence, thereby strengthening its national interests on the global stage [KCNA 2024, 9 February]. Kim's strategy was presumably based on two key assumptions. First, by framing inter-Korean relations as those between hostile states, he asserts that it has become advantageous for North Korea to affirm its dignity as a sovereign state. This stance, in turn, calls for intensified international propaganda efforts, portraying South Korea's antagonistic behaviour as a justification for the continued expansion of North Korea's nuclear and missile arsenal. Second, by labelling South Korea as a hostile state – and thus abandoning traditional notions of ethnic unity – Kim aims to exclude Seoul's interference in international affairs, allowing North Korea to manage its external relations more favourably. Moreover, Kim's renunciation of peaceful reunification and the designation of South Korea as a «hostile foreign enemy»

confirmed that his primary objective to maintain control over the country was to isolate the North Korean people from the outside world, seeking to convince them that any information coming from abroad, particularly from the South, was enemy propaganda that must be avoided.

Toward the end of January, satellite images confirmed the demolition of the Arch of Reunification [Zwirko 2024, 23 January], a historic monument erected after the first inter-Korean summit in 2000, depicting two women holding an emblem shaped like the Korean peninsula. Despite the monument's purely symbolic nature – Kim Jong Un referred to it as an «eye-sore» [KCNA 2024a, 16 January] – its destruction signalled a significantly more aggressive course decided by the leadership toward the South.

Between late July and early August, heavy rains hit the north-western part of North Korea, causing the banks of the Amnok River along the Chinese border to collapse. This led to extensive damage and forced the authorities to evacuate more than 5.000 people from the affected areas – Jagang, Ryanggang and North Pyongan provinces, particularly the city of Sinuiju and Uiju County – using military helicopters [KCNA 2024, 29 July]. North Korean state media quickly reported Kim Jong Un's presence in the area [KCNA 2024, 29 July]. He visited the displaced residents, who were housed in temporary tents, to console them and check on their wellbeing. In state television footage, Kim was portrayed as the father of the nation, showing empathy toward those in need, a carefully crafted image reminiscent of his grandfather. These images were likely produced to depict Kim as a leader capable of managing such crises and genuinely concerned about his citizens, as the disaster could have posed a threat to his leadership. To mitigate this risk, Kim not only praised the rescue workers during his visit but also ordered the distribution of essential goods to the victims. This message was directed not only at the domestic audience but also at the international community, which could have used the crisis to question Kim's ability to govern, especially given persistent rumours about his health, or to portray the regime as incapable of handling a humanitarian crisis. Furthermore, the response to this disaster marked a shift in Kim's approach compared to previous similar events. In the past, he had only visited affected areas after the extreme weather events and had little direct interaction with the population. This time, however, he was depicted kneeling in the mud, sitting inside tents with evacuees, and driving through flooded areas in a nearly submerged vehicle – indicating a significant change in the leadership's narrative on the management of natural disasters.

During an emergency Politburo meeting in Sinuiju, Kim reportedly ordered severe punishment for local officials who failed to prevent such a situation [KCNA 2024, 31 July]. Propaganda played a key role in this narrative, juxtaposing Kim's image as a benevolent leader risking his own safety for his people with criticism of negligent bureaucrats. This strategy

reinforced Kim's image as a caring leader while shifting the blame onto lower-level officials.

During his visits to the affected areas on 8 and 9 August, Kim Jong Un announced that children, the elderly, and the sick would be relocated to Pyongyang and housed at the state's expense while rehabilitation work was underway [KCNA 2024a, 10 August; KCNA 2024b, 10 August]. A week later, 13,000 people arrived in the capital, where they were personally welcomed by Kim [KCNA 2024, 16 August]. The day after their arrival, the leader sent large quantities of gifts, including uniforms, backpacks, and shoes, to schoolchildren.

The devastating floods – exacerbating the ongoing humanitarian crisis – could have provided Kim with an opportunity to approach the South for humanitarian aid, food supplies, and medical assistance [Lee 2024, 30 August]. However, he deliberately chose not to pursue this option, instead receiving food aid from Russia [Shin 2024, 4 August]. This decision underscored the growing closeness between Moscow and Pyongyang. Accepting aid from Seoul – or worse, seeking assistance from South Korea – would have risked portraying the North Korean regime as weak, especially after months of threats from Kim Jong Un and his sister, Kim Yo Jong, against the South. As a result, any offers of support from South Korea were firmly rejected. What drew particular attention was Kim Jong Un's direct use of aggressive rhetoric rather than delegating such statements to his sister, as is usually the case. He accused Seoul of fabricating baseless stories [KCNA 2024, 3 August] after South Korean media reported that at least 1,500 people died or went missing due to the floods [Yim 2024, 1 August]. Kim's harsh criticism likely reflected his concern over the increasing access of North Koreans to external information. By accusing South Korean media of spreading disinformation, Kim aims to control the narrative and prevent foreign influences from weakening his regime's authority. This approach also seeks to exploit the natural disaster as a means to curb South Korea's influence among North Koreans, redirecting criticism outward. Kim Jong Un's response to the floods reflects a dual strategy: portraying himself as a compassionate and hands-on leader while aggressively countering perceived external threats, particularly from South Korea. This approach highlights the regime's ongoing efforts to maintain control over its population amid growing internal and external challenges.

By mid-September, after a Russian delegation led by Sergei Shoigu, Moscow's Security Council Secretary, visited North Korea [Yang 2024, 14 September], an unexpected event alarmed the international community. For the first time ever, North Korean media released photographs taken inside a uranium enrichment facility visited by Kim Jong Un, which some analysts identified as the Kangson site [Jeong 2024, 26 September]. During his inspection, Kim reportedly «emphasized the need to further increase the number of centrifuges to exponentially expand nuclear weap-

ons for self-defence purposes» [KCNA 2024, 13 September]. These images may serve as a clear message to the incoming US administration that North Korea had no intention of denuclearizing. Additionally, they could be an implicit demand to the international community to recognize North Korea as a nuclear state.

In early October, the Supreme People's Assembly convened once again to proceed with the announced constitutional revision, which was intended to reflect the new stance toward the South, as declared by Kim Jong Un in the early days of the new year. North Korean media confirmed that the Constitution had been amended, formally designating South Korea as a «hostile state», though without providing further details [KCNA 2024, 17 October]. One of the immediate consequences of the Assembly's decision was the demolition of sections of roads along the Gyeongui Line and Donghae Line, as well as the railway in Gangwon Province, which had connected the North and South. This destruction was carried out by North Korean soldiers using dynamite just days after Pyongyang's armed forces vowed to «permanently» seal the border between the two countries [KCNA 2024, 17 October]. These connections, largely funded by South Korea, had traditionally been seen as significant symbols of reconciliation efforts and were considered projects dear to both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. The destruction of these links, which had long fallen into disuse, symbolically signals North Korea's intent to convey – both domestically and internationally – that inter-Korean relations have now definitively come to an end.

3. *Inter-Korean relations*

3.1. *Tensions rise between missile tests and trash balloons*

Yoon Suk-yeol's approach to North Korea in 2024 was marked by a hard-line posture that emphasized deterrence, alliance reinforcement, and conditional engagement, continuing the trajectory he had set since taking office in 2022. Unlike his progressive predecessors – particularly Moon Jae-in, who prioritized inter-Korean dialogue and reconciliation – Yoon placed security and military preparedness at the centre of his North Korea policy, arguing that peace could only be achieved through strength. In 2024, this approach became more confrontational in tone and practice. Yoon also increased military cooperation with the United States and Japan: joint military exercises resumed at full scale, including trilateral missile defence drills and anti-submarine warfare operations. This increased security coordination was perceived by the North as a threatening signal, further deepening Pyongyang's sense of isolation and menace. In response, North Korea accused the South of preparing for war, prompting a surge in reciprocal military provocations that mirrored the confrontational rhetoric of both leaders, especially Kim Jong Un's increasingly hostile stance toward South Korea.

The year opened with this typical exchange in early January, when South Korea performed the first joint military drills with the United States in early January. North Korea reacted by shooting over 200 artillery shells in the waters close to the *de facto* maritime border of the Northern Limit Line (NLL), and Seoul responded with firing multiple shots in the area from its side [Foster-Carter 2024]. In the following days, the pattern remained the same, with North Korea claiming to have tested a new Intermediate Ballistic Missile (IRBM) with a hypersonic nuclear warhead and later a new submarine nuclear weapon, and South Korea continuing joint naval drills, also including Japan and the aircraft carrier USS Vinson [Foster-Carter 2024]. In early March, the biggest joint military exercises of the year, *Freedom Shield*, took place for eleven days with a strong condemnation from North Korea that, in turn, launched a medium-range missile into the East Sea, the *Hwasong-16B*, that was described as a solid-fuel hypersonic missile [Foster-Carter 2024]. The same pattern took place again in May when, between 16 and 17, the joint aerial military exercises in the South were met with a launch of various short-range missiles by the North [Chae 2024, 18 May], and, a few days later, Pyongyang tried to put a satellite into orbit, but the missile exploded soon after taking off [Borowiec and Nitta 2024, 27 May].

The cycle of mutual provocations continued also during the summer, albeit with a significant difference in terms of the instruments used. On 29 May, from the North Korean side of the border, more than 260 aerial balloons were launched toward the South, reaching many areas close to the border, including Seoul [Bremer *et al.* 2024, 29 May]. The balloons contained mostly trash and no dangerous materials; however, in the first moments, they were considered as a possible threat to the population and to the country's security. The decision, as would be later explained by the regime, was taken in order to respond to the launch of balloons containing anti-North Korea materials by a group of defectors from the South Korean side; since these materials were considered as trash by the regime, the leadership decided to respond in the same way. The launches continued in the following weeks, exceeding 3.000 in total by the end of July, with one of them landing in Seoul inside the compound of the presidential office [Kim and Park 2024, 24 July]. To this non-traditional provocations, South Korea responded by announcing the suspension of the 2018 military agreement, the resumption of all military activities along the border and the reactivation of the propaganda loudspeaker along the border.

While this new tactic was certainly disturbing but not harmful, it contributed to the deterioration of inter-Korean relations over the summer. The pattern of military confrontation continued with the aeronaval joint exercise, *Freedom Edge*, between 27 and 29 June which involved again the Japanese forces and the carrier USS Roosevelt, to which North Korea responded with new missile launches immediately before and after [Kim 2024, 2 July].

The same was repeated in late August on the occasion of the joint drills *Ulchi Freedom Shield*.

In mid-September, North Korea restarted the launch of trash balloons that continued in October and November, totalling more than 30 different events since the beginning in late May. But the most significant event in the second half of the year took place on 31 October, when North Korea launched an Intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) with solid fuel, the *Hwasong-19*, that flew for 86 minutes at a maximum altitude of 7.000 kilometres [Kim *et al.* 2024, 31 October]. This was the longest and highest flight of any ICBM ever launched by North Korea, demonstrating a significant advance in the country's missile capabilities. Despite the condemnation of many countries at the international level, the test did not lead to any consequence for the regime because of the continuing stalemate in the UN Security Council.

The events of 2024 did not significantly alter what had already been clear in the previous two years: not only that inter-Korean relations were in a dire situation, but also that both governments did not consider them as a particularly relevant issue any longer, but mostly as a source of potential tension, threat and destabilization. If this position had been taken before by South Korea, the new stance established by Kim Jong Un, in both words and deeds, demonstrated that also North Korea was moving in a different direction, looking more to the north—and to Russia and China—rather than to the South. This situation certainly marked a new low in the management of inter-Korean relations; however, the disrupting events that took place in South Korea at the end of the year will most likely lead to a change of government in Seoul and a new presidency, especially in case of a progressive victory might lead to a further reshaping of Seoul's inter-Korean strategy. Lastly, the election of Donald Trump in the United States—although he did not give any specifics about his position towards North Korea—could also represent a new factor to take into consideration for the future development of relations on the peninsula.

4. *International relations*

4.1. *Forging an alliance: North Korea's deepening ties with Russia and its role in the Ukraine War*

North Korea's partnerships – particularly with Russia and China – remained as central pillars of its foreign and security policy, reflecting a strategic recalibration amid intensifying global rivalries and regional instability. Kim framed these alliances as vital strategic partnerships aimed at counterbalancing US influence and mitigating international isolation. This alignment deepened notably between 2022 and 2024, as Pyongyang supported Russia

during the Ukraine conflict and received diplomatic cover from both Moscow and Beijing at the United Nations.

The relationship between North Korea and Russia and Pyongyang's role in supporting the Russian military invasion of Ukraine continued to dominate the international agenda regarding North Korea. The year began with accusations – consistently and firmly denied by the parties involved – made by the United States against Pyongyang, alleging that North Korea had supplied ballistic missiles to Russia to support its military efforts against Kyiv. Washington had previously accused Pyongyang of providing weapons to Russia, but this was the first time that US intelligence shared details about the supply of ballistic missiles – self-guided rockets capable of striking targets up to 900 km away – in violation of multiple resolutions adopted by the United Nations Security Council [Borger and Roth 2024, 5 January]. A unanimous condemnation swiftly followed, materializing in a joint statement signed by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs of the European Union, Josep Borrell, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and the foreign ministers of about fifty countries [EEAS 2024, 9 January].

Meanwhile, satellite images of the port of Najin, near the Russian border – taken between October and December of the previous year – showed a steady flow of ships, including Russian cargo vessels, at the facility [Milani and Fiori 2023]. The images also suggested the presence of hundreds of containers being loaded and unloaded, as well as railcars ready to transport goods, which, according to South Korea, included weapons destined for Russia. Ignoring the accusations from the international community, a North Korean delegation led by Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui travelled to Moscow at the invitation of her counterpart Sergei Lavrov, with the goal of further consolidating political, economic and military ties between the two countries and possibly preparing for Putin's visit to Pyongyang. On the second day of the visit, Choe had the opportunity to meet Putin and discuss bilateral relations and the situation on the Korean peninsula [KCNA 2024, 17 January].

The growing alignment between Moscow and Pyongyang became even more evident toward the end of March when Russia vetoed a United Nations resolution that sought to renew an independent panel of experts tasked with investigating violations of sanctions imposed by the Security Council on North Korea. According to Russia's UN Ambassador, Vassily Nebenzia, the sanctions regime – designed to prevent North Korea from conducting nuclear tests or launching ballistic missiles – had lost all relevance and had become completely «detached from reality» [UN 2024, 28 March].

The most significant event in North Korea's foreign policy in 2024 was undoubtedly Putin's visit to Pyongyang in mid-June, his first in 24 years. The key outcome of the meeting between Putin and Kim was the ratification of an agreement called the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which, among other things, included a commitment to mutual defence in the event

of an external attack to either country [KCNA 2024a, 20 June]. During the press conference following the summit, Putin described the agreement as a «breakthrough document» that reflects the shared desire of both nations to elevate their relationship to a new level, covering security, trade, investments and cultural and humanitarian ties [Kremlin 2024, 19 June]. Kim, for his part, called the agreement a peaceful pact that raised bilateral relations to the level of an alliance. This global strategic partnership between the two countries – both isolated by international sanctions – could facilitate the transfer of military technology to Pyongyang, particularly in the fields of nuclear submarines and ballistic missiles, in exchange for ammunition supplies that Moscow's military appeared to desperately need for its war in Ukraine. Such transfers could significantly bolster North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, threatening stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Notably, Kim pledged his «full support» for Russia's «special military operation» in Ukraine [KCNA 2024b, 20 June], earning appreciation from the Kremlin. Considering the outcome of the summit, it was plausible that North Korea's support could also include the deployment of troops to bolster Russian forces engaged in Ukraine.

On 23 October, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin publicly stated that American intelligence had confirmed the transfer of at least 3.000 North Korean soldiers to eastern Russia between early and mid-October, where they were believed to be undergoing «basic military training» at various sites [Lamothe *et al.* 2024, 23 October]. Additionally, South Korean intelligence reported that a significant contingent of troops was preparing to leave North Korea to join the conflict [Oh 2024, 23 October]. The active involvement of North Korea in the Russia-Ukraine war was, as expected, not officially confirmed by either country's authorities. However, Pyongyang stated that any deployment of its forces would be in accordance with international law, while Putin, when pressed by a journalist during the BRICS summit in Kazan, gave a vague response without outright denying the claim [Wintour 2024, 24 October].

In the following days, despite continued assertions by the US administration regarding an increasing North Korean troop presence near the Ukrainian border [Garamone 2024, 31 October], Choe Son Hui travelled once again to Moscow. During meetings with Lavrov and later with Putin, she reaffirmed Pyongyang's support for «the just struggle of the Russian army and people in defending their sovereign rights and national security interests» in Ukraine [Antonov 2024, 1 November].

In early November, reports about the active participation of North Korean troops in Ukraine became more frequent and were confirmed by Ukrainian President Zelensky, who claimed that Pyongyang's soldiers had engaged Ukrainian forces in the Russian Kursk region [Regan and Vlasova 2024, 8 November]. In mid-November, Kim Jong Un signed a decree ratifying the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership – negotiated during Putin's

visit to Pyongyang in June – with Russia. The agreement will take effect once both parties exchange ratification instruments [KCNA 2024, 13 November]. Before the end of the month, both Russia's Minister of Resources and Minister of Defence visited Pyongyang, likely to further solidify bilateral cooperation in various areas. By mid-December, growing reports indicated a significant number of wounded and even dead among North Korean soldiers fighting in Russia's Kursk border region, likely due to their relative inexperience in combat [Kang 2024, 24 December].

4.2. South Korea's diplomatic strategy: strengthening alliances amid regional tensions

Under Yoon Suk-yeol, alliances – particularly with the United States and Japan – became central pillars of South Korea's foreign and security policy, reflecting a strategic recalibration in response to rising regional tensions and global geopolitical shifts. Yoon framed the US-ROK alliance not only as a military necessity in the face of the North Korean threat, but also as a broader strategic partnership anchored in shared democratic values and mutual deterrence. This emphasis was especially pronounced in 2024, as Yoon sought to align more closely with Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy, signalling South Korea's commitment to the liberal international order amid intensifying US-China rivalry. Seoul's foreign policy priorities in 2024 largely mirrored those already expressed by the Yoon administration in the previous year, focusing on security, regional stability, economic cooperation, and multilateral engagement.

On 27 May, South Korea hosted the ninth Trilateral Summit, during which the leaders of South Korea, China, and Japan reaffirmed a shared commitment to «peace, stability, and prosperity» on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia [ROK MOFA 2024, 27 May]. In the Joint Declaration, the three countries pledged to enhance trilateral cooperation in several key sectors, with particular emphasis on restoring trade relations, increasing technological collaboration and promoting cultural exchanges [ROK MOFA 2024, 27 May]. After years of strained relations due to the growing US-China rivalry, the resumption of this trilateral forum represented a first step toward establishing a new mechanism for regional cooperation, preventing the emergence of alignments reminiscent of the Cold War era. The South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs hailed the summit as a great success, yielding concrete and tangible results, including a Joint Summit Declaration, a Joint Declaration on Prevention, Preparedness, and Response to Future Pandemics, and a Joint Declaration on a Decade-Long Vision for Trilateral Cooperation on Intellectual Property (IP) [TSC 2024a; TSC 2024b]. These documents address a range of sensitive and contentious issues among the three parties, setting ambitious goals that, in some cases, clash with South Korea and Japan's cooperation with the United States. This is particularly evident in the economic sector, where China seeks to slow Seoul and

Tokyo's efforts to mitigate economic risks through decoupling and redirecting supply chains and trade flows away from China and toward the United States. The feasibility of implementing many of the commitments outlined in the Joint Declaration remains uncertain and, despite high praise for the documents, expectations for their effective implementation are low.

Immediately before the summit, South Korea and China held bilateral talks, during which they outlined a series of initiatives to bring bilateral relations – both in security and economic matters – in a more positive trajectory. During this meeting, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and Chinese Premier Li Qiang agreed on a «2+2 Korea-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue» and the restoration of other diplomatic and security communication channels, such as the Vice Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue [Yang *et al.* 2024, 27 May]. While these initiatives create avenues for increased security cooperation, they remain far from achieving consensus on regional security dynamics or how to address them. Nonetheless, the restoration of channels and mechanisms for dialogue on these tensions is a positive signal. The two leaders also agreed to discuss progress toward a second phase of the Korea-China Free Trade Agreement (in force since 2015), expanding beyond trade in goods to include services such as culture, tourism and law [Kim 2024, 26 May]. This represents a significant step toward overcoming the animosities stemming from China's sanctions on South Korea in 2016 over the deployment of the THAAD missile defense system, which resulted in substantial revenue losses in the tourism and cultural content sectors.

In mid-June, the deepening military cooperation between North Korea and Russia – highlighted by the treaty signed during Putin's visit to Pyongyang on 19 June – was firmly condemned by South Korea, the United States and Japan in a joint statement [ROK MOFA 2024, 24 June]. In criticizing this alliance, the South Korean government stated that it could lead Seoul, which was already providing humanitarian aid and other forms of support to Ukraine, to directly supply weapons [Jang and Lee 2024, 20 June]. This would mark a significant policy shift, as South Korea has traditionally refrained from supplying arms to countries engaged in conflict. A few days later, the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that it had summoned Russian Ambassador Georgy Zinoviev to protest against the pact signed between Pyongyang and Moscow and to clarify that this would inevitably have a «negative impact» on South Korea-Russia relations [Lee and Kim 2024, 21 June].

For the third consecutive year, Yoon attended the annual NATO summit held in Washington in July. Before arriving in the US capital, Yoon visited the United States Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii, where he emphasized the importance of combined defence capabilities between South Korea and the United States in countering North Korean threats [Kim 2024, 9 July]. In Washington, Yoon expressed concern over the «new and challenging forces» rejecting an «international order based on universal values and norms»,

harshly criticizing the growing cooperation between Russia and North Korea and calling it a «collusion of convenience» [ROK MOFA 2024, 12 July]. On the side-lines of the summit, Yoon held bilateral meetings with several world leaders, including US President Joe Biden, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, discussing the threat posed by the Pyongyang-Moscow alliance and the need to strengthen security cooperation with NATO [NATO 2024, 11 July].

In early September, Yoon met with outgoing Japanese Prime Minister Kishida, with whom he had built a strong relationship, aimed at revitalizing bilateral ties through the restoration of «shuttle diplomacy» where the two leaders alternated visits to each other's countries for bilateral talks. The summit reaffirmed the two governments' strong commitment to deepening cooperation and exchanges ahead of the 60th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations in December 2025. During the meeting, the two leaders ratified an agreement to enhance cooperation in protecting and evacuating their nationals abroad in emergency situations [ROK MOFA 2024, 9 September].

In October, Yoon travelled to Southeast Asia for a state visit to the Philippines and Singapore, followed by a trip to Vientiane, Laos, to participate in the 25th ASEAN-Republic of Korea Summit, during which the Joint Statement on the Establishment of the ASEAN-ROK Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) was adopted, the highest level of diplomatic relations ASEAN ratifies with its dialogue partners [ASEAN 2024, 10 October]. Through this elevated partnership, South Korea and ASEAN strengthened their defence ties through regular ministerial meetings and coordination on issues related to North Korea's nuclear program. Cooperation would also extend to fields such as digital technology, electric vehicles, smart cities and battery development, as well as broader topics like climate change and environmental sustainability. Additionally, South Korea will double the annual funds allocated to ASEAN cooperation, reaching \$ 48 million by 2027, to support key projects across the region [ASEAN 2024, 10 October]. ASEAN's significance for South Korea is evident, as it is Seoul's second-largest trading partner, with over 5.500 Korean companies operating in ASEAN countries, contributing to job creation and regional economic development [Park 2024, 10 October].

During the East Asia Summit (EAS), held in Laos around the same time, Yoon strongly condemned the military cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow, calling it «illegal» and a blatant violation of UN Security Council resolutions [Kim 2024, 11 October]. In line with his administration's ambition to position South Korea as a «global pivotal state», Yoon made clear Seoul's stance on key global issues, including tensions in the South China Sea, the Myanmar crisis, and the war in Ukraine [Kim 2024, 25 October]. On the side-lines of the summit, Yoon also met for the first time with the new Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba, with whom he discussed ways to strengthen bilateral relations and security cooperation with the

United States to counter recurring threats from North Korea [Lee 2024, 10 October]. In November, Yoon and Ishiba met with President Biden on the side-lines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Lima, to further cement their relations amid growing concerns over North Korea's military ties with Russia and its continued missile tests. Following the meeting, the three leaders announced the creation of a Trilateral Secretariat, formalizing the partnership established the previous year at the Camp David summit, to fully align actions and objectives, optimize coordination, and share information to enhance Indo-Pacific stability and counter regional security threats [Biden 2024, 15 November]. One likely reason for the institutionalization of trilateral cooperation was the election victory of Donald Trump, who, during his first term, had shown little enthusiasm for multilateral cooperation. The Trilateral Secretariat was officially launched a few days later, with an inaugural meeting in Seoul to discuss its operational plans and structure [Shin 2024, 20 November].

5. *Conclusions*

The year 2024 has been a period of extraordinary political and social upheaval for the Korean peninsula, marked by an unprecedented crisis in South Korean democracy, escalating inter-Korean tensions, and shifting international alliances. The events of the year have reshaped the political landscape of both North and South Korea, raising fundamental questions about stability, governance, and the future trajectory of the region.

The crisis in South Korea, triggered by President Yoon Suk-yeol's extreme and unprecedented decision to declare martial law in response to a political standoff, has highlighted the fragility of democratic institutions in the face of executive overreach. While the swift and unified reaction of political actors, civil society, and the judiciary ultimately prevented the country from descending into authoritarian rule, the episode has left deep scars on South Korean democracy. The impeachment of Yoon and the ongoing legal battles surrounding his administration have created a highly volatile political environment. The country now faces a period of uncertainty as it awaits the Constitutional Court's ruling on the impeachment and the potential ramifications of new presidential elections. The deep polarization of South Korean society, exacerbated by this crisis, will likely persist, influencing domestic politics and governance for years to come.

The political turmoil in South Korea has taken place against the backdrop of a dramatically deteriorating inter-Korean relationship. North Korea's formal designation of South Korea as a «hostile state» and the dismantling of inter-Korean institutions have cemented the shift from past efforts at reconciliation to open hostility. Kim Jong Un's doctrine of «Two Hostile States» has effectively nullified decades of rhetoric on reunification, replac-

ing it with an aggressive stance that seeks to exclude Seoul from the broader international discourse on North Korea. Pyongyang's provocative actions, including missile tests, artillery shelling, and the symbolic destruction of reunification monuments, have underscored its new confrontational approach. The resumption of trash balloon launches, combined with sustained military provocations, has further heightened tensions. In response, South Korea has reinforced its defence posture, strengthening its trilateral military cooperation with the United States and Japan. However, given South Korea's internal political crisis, its ability to formulate a long-term strategic response to North Korea remains uncertain.

Internationally, the geopolitical dynamics surrounding the Korean peninsula have undergone significant transformations. The deepening military and political alliance between North Korea and Russia has raised serious concerns among South Korea, the United States, and Japan. North Korea's reported supply of ballistic missiles and other military assistance to Russia for its war in Ukraine has further isolated Pyongyang from the broader international community while solidifying its ties with Moscow. In return, Russia's defense commitments to North Korea, as outlined in the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, have signalled a potential shift in the balance of power in Northeast Asia.

China's role in this evolving dynamic remains complex. While Beijing has maintained its official stance of supporting stability and denuclearization on the peninsula, its growing competition with the United States and its strategic interests in the region make it unlikely to take any decisive action against North Korea. Meanwhile, the revitalization of the South Korea-Japan-US trilateral partnership has reinforced Seoul's alignment with Western security frameworks, though the effectiveness of this alliance in countering North Korea remains uncertain, particularly in light of South Korea's ongoing domestic instability.

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States introduces an additional layer of uncertainty for South Korea. During his previous administration, Trump repeatedly questioned the value of longstanding US alliances, demanding greater financial contributions from Seoul for the upkeep of American troops and suggesting the potential downsizing of the US military presence on the peninsula. In addition, South Korea's trade surplus represented in the past a further point of tension between the two allies and has been repeatedly raised by Trump during the electoral campaign and his first weeks in office. A return to such positions could weaken the credibility of extended deterrence and raise concerns about the reliability of the US security commitment. Moreover, the prospect of renewed direct engagement between Washington and Pyongyang, conducted without close coordination with Seoul, and a possible recognition, also implicit, of North Korea's nuclear status risks side-lining South Korea in regional strategic decision-making and further complicating efforts to present a unified front in dealing with Pyongyang.

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JAPAN 2024: STRIVING FOR SECURITY AMIDST POLITICAL TURMOIL*

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While drastic changes have occurred in Japan's domestic politics, its foreign policy has been characterised by continuity. In a year defined by domestic political turmoil, financial volatility and environmental catastrophes, the ever dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) witnessed a dramatic leadership change and lost the absolute majority in a snap election while indirectly maintaining political control over Tokyo. Nonetheless, with the return of Donald J. Trump looming on the horizon of Japan's foreign policy and security, the two administrations of Prime Ministers Kishida Fumio and Ishiba Shigeru in effect persistently followed Abe's goal of strengthening the country's economic security and defence posture. Japan's defence autonomy has been increased by engaging the United States in the region, deepening security partnerships, and improving relations with China. However, questions have recently emerged regarding the future of the foreign policy direction established by Abe, as the LDP, led by Ishiba, has been compelled to make numerous concessions to opposition parties due to its minority status.

KEYWORDS – Constitutional Democratic Party; Democratic Party for the People; Ishiba Shigeru; Kishida Fumio; Japan 2024 general election; Japan-NATO relations; Japan-US relations; Japan-China relations; Liberal Democratic Party; Official Security Assistance; social media populism; 2024 Tokyo gubernatorial election.

1. Introduction

Japan's year in review was characterised by internal political strife and turmoil, producing leadership changes in several major parties and resulting

* This article is the end product of a coordinated research effort between the two authors. Nonetheless, during the writing process, each of the two has focused on specific sections of the paper. Sections 2 and 3 (Domestic politics and economic and financial policies) were written by Marco Zappa; section 4 (International Affairs) by Raymond Yamamoto. The authors wish to thank the anonymous reviewers, and Giulio Pugliese for their helpful comments on a preliminary draft of this paper and support.

in a significant paradigm shift at the policymaking level due to the LDP's loss of the absolute majority in the Lower House of Japan's National Diet. The scandal-ridden LDP underwent several transformations in the year in review, though it remains to be seen how effective these would be in the mid- and long term. Certainly, the emergence of a figure such as Ishiba Shigeru as leader of the party of relative majority and prime minister, starkly contrasted with both the ruling style of his predecessor Kishida Fumio and the legacy of Abe Shinzō. Described as an «idealist» and a conservative democrat, Ishiba has in fact been a political outsider for years in the Abe-dominated LDP and rose only recently in 2024 as the man who could reform his party's image and rebuild the Japanese public's trust in political processes. Despite his efforts, disillusionment and political disaffection were once again major factors in the 2024 general election, which saw the third-lowest voter turnout since 1946.

Ahead of the general election in October, the Tokyo gubernatorial elections took place, confirming incumbent governor Koike Yuriko for a third term at the helm of a global city of 14 million people contributing to a fifth of Japan's total GDP. At the same time, the vote in Tokyo demonstrated how the political landscape was changing in favour of those politicians, even social media populists such as Ishimaru Shinji, seeking to capitalise on popular disaffection with mainstream politics, without, however, offering alternatives based on specific programmes.

As far as the economy is concerned, Japan recorded moderate growth rates amidst preoccupations with a burgeoning public debt, which was predicted to continue expanding due to a rapidly ageing population, and the government's intention to increase its defence spending. In addition, the economic costs of Japan's structural vulnerabilities to large-scale seismic events and climate change and the limitations of government action in this area were clearly apparent, with the Japanese government struggling to accelerate the reconstruction of quake and flood-hit Ishikawa Prefecture throughout the year in review.

In contrast, Japan's foreign policy was characterised by continuity. China has dominated threat perception. Kishida continuously invested great effort in strengthening national security, as announced in 2022 in the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS), and the Defense Buildup Program. These security documents enable Japan to be autonomous and proactive in security matters – a clear continuation of a trajectory that was set by Abe.

The Kishida and Ishiba administrations have also aimed to enhance Japan's defence autonomy, engage the United States in the region, and strengthen security partnerships. At the same time, the prospect of Donald J. Trump returning to office has prompted initiatives to improve relations with China and reduce the tense geopolitical situation.

2. Domestic affairs

2.1. Factional turmoil and political reform: the LDP's struggle for public trust under Kishida

Amidst crucial elections being held in several large democracies around the globe, Japan was supposed to be an exception, with no major vote foreseen in 2024. However, this forecast proved incorrect against the backdrop of changes in the domestic political landscape following Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's announcement in mid-August that he would not run for a second term as president of the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDP, hereafter).

As recounted in detail by Pugliese and Zappa [2024], since late 2023, the administration led by the former Foreign Minister had been severely embattled due to scandals involving the PM's own staff and close aides, as well as dozens of LDP politicians embroiled in a slush fund scandal. By July 2024, Kishida's popularity had fallen below 30%, with some surveys indicating a meagre 15.5% approval rate [Kishida 2024, 22 August; *Jiji Press* 2024, 11 July]. Two major factors contributed to this downward trend. First, the perceived inability of his administration to decisively and structurally tackle problems affecting the Japanese economy, such as rising inflation and stagnating wages, largely overshadowed the administration's achievements, including the possible long-term effects of reviving the national semiconductor industry and enhancing the country's energy security [Takenaka 2024c]. Second, the wave of public discontent towards the LDP after the kickback scandal of late 2023 and Kishida's inability to take serious steps toward a thorough reform of the LDP structure led him to avoid seeking reelection, as was widely predicted [Pugliese and Zappa 2024]. Hence, Kishida's resolve to make way for a new leader who could «firmly present a newly born LDP to the people» [Sasagawa 2024, 14 August] was made public during a pause in the PM's diplomatic agenda in mid-August.

Apart from Japan's overall economic situation, which will be discussed in detail later, responding to the Japanese public's dissatisfaction with how the kickback scandal had been handled became a top priority for the incumbent PM and LDP President. Faced with the indictment of three party factions (including his own) whose accounting chiefs failed to report income and expenses amounting to around ¥1.7 billion (€10.3 million) over five years through 2022 [Takenaka 2024b; Tomisaki 2024], Kishida resorted to the strategy of «faction dissolution» (*habatsu kaishō*). The decision to dissolve the party factions, beginning with his own dovish *Kōchikai* in mid-January, became the cornerstone of Kishida's strategy to restore public trust in the LDP (*kokumin no shinrai o kaifukusuru*). However, it failed to halt the cabinet's plummeting popularity. Such a measure had been proposed by LDP leaders on several occasions since 1963. Still, it was only temporarily implemented in the aftermath of the asset-price bubble in the mid-to-late 1990s, when the

LDP had to share power with its long-time opponent, the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), in subsequent non-LDP-led coalition and, later, minority governments [Shiota 2024, 10 February].

The effects of Kishida's announcement were immediately visible. Other embattled faction leaders, such as Nikai Toshihiro, an 85-year-old party veteran and leader of the fifth-largest faction in the party, followed Kishida by announcing the end of his group as a prelude to his political retirement in March [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2024, 25 March]. Later in January, the Abe faction – the group at the center of the kickback scandal of late 2023 – was also disbanded as its leaders, including the chair of the executive board Shionoya Ryū, former ministers Hagiuda Kōichi, Takagi Tsuyoshi, Sekō Hiroshige, and Nishimura Yasutoshi faced increasing pressure over their alleged accounting irregularities and unreported donations and were urged to testify before the Diet's Deliberative Council on Political Ethics [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2024, 21 February].

Meanwhile, the LDP Ethics Committee announced disciplinary measures for 39 lawmakers who were found guilty of misappropriating and misreporting donations. As a result of the party's internal investigations and deliberations, former members and leaders of the Abe faction were either suspended (Nishimura), temporarily barred from public office (Hagiuda), or, in the most extreme case, expelled from the party (Shionoya and Sekō) [Konno 2024, 4 April].

Following these developments, in mid-April, after months of hesitation, LDP Secretary-General Motegi Toshimitsu finally declared that he would disband his faction [Takenaka 2024b].

Upon disbanding the Kōchikai, Kishida also announced the creation of a «task force» aimed at reviewing funding procedures and promoting internal party reform. The PM entrusted the group, known as «The Headquarters for Political Renovation» (*Seiji sasshin honbu*), with drafting a series of recommendations by the end of January 2024, appointing former PMs and party heavyweights Asō Tarō and Suga Yoshihide as chief advisors.

The group's final report once again called for the dissolution of all factions and a ban on autonomous fundraising events while backing stricter sanctions against LDP members and administrators accused of political corruption, introducing the «guilt by association» principle. According to the document, LDP members should transfer the sums collected through fundraisers to the party's bank account and fill in online income and expenditure reports to increase transparency. The new Party Discipline Code was approved in early March [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2024, 8 March]. Nonetheless, the LDP task force acknowledged the possibility of replacing factions with «policy groups» (*seisaku shūdan*), which appeared to be a compromise between Asō, a staunch supporter of factions, and Suga, who had been critical of the faction system since his term as PM in 2020 [Nakada 2024, 22 January; *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* 2024, 11 January].

Interestingly, Asō, who served as LDP vice-president during Kishida's term and presided over the party's second-largest faction at the time, expressed reluctance to disband it. He quickly announced the continuation of his group, the Shikōkai, as a policy group [*Yomiuri Shinbun* 2024, 6 January; *Kyodo News* 2024, 27 January]. Critics of this move argued that the reform of the faction system was nothing more than a smokescreen, diverting public attention from the party's inability to address concerns over political funding transparency [Morimoto and Andō 2024, 25 January]. Other observers, however, noted that by mid-May 2024, despite being unpopular among voters, Kishida was more empowered than ever since his ascent to the PM's office in 2021 [Takenaka 2024b].

This position of relative power enabled Kishida to push a series of amendments to the political funds control law through the Diet in June. The amendments established harsher penalties for violators while reducing opportunities for lawmakers to collect anonymous donations and setting stricter limits on their annual political expenditures [French 2024, 19 June]. The amended law was a notable result of Kishida's willingness to engage in multiple rounds of negotiations with the opposition and reach a consensus-based proposal [Harris 2024a].

In effect, however, the new rules may have shifted the balance of power within the LDP in favour of unaffiliated party members [Johnston 2024, 16 August] and strengthened not only Kishida but also prospective party leaders and PMs, while weakening faction leaders. It is evident, though, that in his attempt to rebuild the LDP's public image, Kishida had alienated some of his former backers among senior LDP figures, particularly vice-president Asō [French 2024, 19 June; Harris 2024a].

2.2. *From «underdog» to leader: Ishiba's propitious moment*

Against this backdrop, nearly a month ahead of the decisive LDP Presidential elections, Kishida declared that he would not seek reelection, thus opening a race for the nomination of his successor as LDP President and PM [Sasagawa 2024, 14 August]. Speculations mounted that Kishida worried about not being able to win a general election and sensed a lack of support from senior party leaders [Harris 2024c]. This notwithstanding, it might be worth stressing that Kishida's post became even more unstable after the April 2024 by-elections concluded with an all-out win by the opposition Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) in the three single-member districts of Shimane, Nagasaki and Tokyo N. 15 (Kōtō District) that were scheduled to elect their representatives to the Lower House of the Diet [*Asahi Shinbun* 2024, 28 April]. Though the relationship between the slush-fund scandal and the LDP's demise at the by-elections in April is undeniable, Kishida's shortcomings contributed to the negative performance. Particularly, one might highlight the PM's inability to pursue a convincing public communication strategy that could clearly illustrate to the public his administration's

policy achievements [Takenaka 2024c]. The aforementioned developments provided the backdrop for Ishiba Shigeru's rise to the LDP presidency in September and for the general elections later in October.

Often described by the media as a «railway *otaku*»¹ and a «security policy wonk» [Nakajima 2024, 21 October; McCurry 2024, 17 September], the 67-year-old Ishiba had already run for the LDP top post four times, in 2008, 2012, 2018 and 2020. He is often characterised as an antithetical figure to the late PM Abe Shinzō, assassinated in July 2022, and as an «underdog» within the LDP. In 2008, he ran against Asō, was defeated, and subsequently aligned with Asō's successor as LDP President and opposition leader during the DPJ rule between 2009 and 2012, Tanigaki Sadakazu² [Ishiba 2022]. In 2012 and 2018, he ran against Abe, being defeated twice. Particularly, Ishiba's second attempt in 2018 annoyed Abe. In his posthumous memoir, Abe described Ishiba's decision as opportunistic – Ishiba had been appointed LDP Secretary-General in 2012 and minister in Abe's reshuffled cabinet in 2014 – and a «repudiation of the Abe cabinet». In fact, Ishiba's decision had been taken in a moment of political «weakness», due to a double scandal, caused by the sale of lots of formerly state-owned land to private educational companies with ties with Abe and his family, the so-called «Mori-Kake affair» (*Morikake mondai*) [Abe *et al.* 2023, 306-307]. Frictions between the two remained high afterwards.

After Abe decided to step down as PM and LDP President in 2020, Ishiba competed again but was defeated by Abe's longtime supporter and former Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide. The following year, Ishiba decided to take a step back and not run against his predecessor, Kishida Fumio. Instead, as he admits in one of his recent books, he chose to study and wait until his chance would finally come. He goes on to equate himself to Ōishi Kuranosuke, a popular figure in Japanese folklore known for being the leader of the Forty-seven rōnin [Ishiba 2022, 77-78]³. As Ōishi, Ishiba

1. The term *otaku* refers to enthusiastic fans and collectors of goods, generally but not necessarily related to Japanese popular culture (e.g., comic books and cartoons). The term has been used since the 1970s to identify a specific subculture centered on the consumption of said goods which has become widespread in Japan and subsequently in parts of Europe and the United States. See Azuma 2009.

2. Tanigaki was only the second LDP leader; after Kōno Yohei in the 1990s, that did not double down as Prime Minister. In his political memoirs, however, Ishiba celebrates Tanigaki as «the right man» to lead the LDP while in opposition [Ishiba 2022].

3. Instead of immediately vindicating his lord, Asano Nagatomo, who had been ordered by the shōgun, the highest military and political authority in the 18th century, to commit ritual suicide (*seppuku*) after the failed assassination attempt of a court nobleman, Kira Yoshinaka, with whom Asano had clashed, Ōishi set to carefully craft his vendetta. Meanwhile, he gave the impression that he was wasting his time in the pleasure quarters of Kyoto. After two years plotting in the shadows, he finally recruited 46 other unmastered samurai (*rōnin*), attacked Kira in his residence in Edo (now Tokyo) and took his own life, finally vindicating his late master.

waited for the propitious moment to attack and engage in his «final battle» [Harris 2024b].

The son of a former Tottori prefectural governor who also had a brief stint as minister of Home Affairs and president of the National Public Security Commission in the early 1980s, just prior to his passing, Ishiba is a second-generation hereditary politician like several of his predecessors. He has continuously been a member of the House of Representatives (the Japanese Diet's Lower House) for 12 terms since 1986. Ishiba's political career is bound to one of Japan's postwar most popular and revered figures, Tanaka Kakuei, PM between 1972 and 1974 and a friend to Ishiba's father, Jirō. After Ishiba senior's demise, Tanaka reportedly encouraged the young Shigeru to run for a seat in the National Diet for his constituency in Tottori.

Tottori, on the Sea of Japan coast of Honshū, is the least populated Prefecture in Japan, with just under 530,000 residents as of January 2025.⁴ The prefecture is largely rural, with more than half of its population concentrated in the two larger cities of Tottori, the prefectural capital (nearly 182,000 residents), and Yonago (143,000).

From a Tokyo-centric point of view, the Prefecture appears backwards, remote, a drowsy *buen retiro* for the holidays of urbanites. Tottori has, in fact, one of Japan's lowest population density rates, and, like most other rural prefectures in the archipelago, struggles with a rapidly ageing population and low fertility rate. And yet, after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, this area has registered more annual births, albeit below the substitution rate, than other regions in Japan. Affordable daycare and healthcare services have been cited as factors making life easier for families with children in Tottori [Yoshida 2023, 14 October]. Since 2014, facilitated by the relatively small scale of the Prefecture, the local government, led by Hirai Shinji during the last two decades, has been waiving daycare fees for children living in communities in the low uplands and for families with more than two children in urban areas. Also, the local government has made healthcare free of charge for the youth until high school age, regardless of their family's annual income. More recently, the prefectural government has started offering subsidies and support for infertility treatment and preliminary medical examinations for embryo implantation, which are currently excluded from the national insurance system [Care News 2024, 15 November].

4. The area is popular among the Japanese for the desert-like landscape of the sand dunes which cover a 16-km wide area on the coast near Tottori city and for being the birthplace of two celebrated manga artists, the late Mizuki Shigeru (GeGeGe no Kitarō) and Aoyama Gōshō (Case Closed/Detective Conan) to whom landmarks, and even infrastructure (such as the major prefectural airport) are named after. In 2015, the Prefecture made headlines following the decision by the Japanese branch of the coffee giant Starbucks to open its first outlet in Tottori city, after becoming virtually ubiquitous in any large Japanese city in nearly 20 years of operations in the country [ITMedia Bijinesu Online 2015, 22 April].

These services, combined with other government subsidies aimed at attracting the so-called «I-turners» (people who decide to relocate their residence or business from cities to rural areas), have certainly enhanced Tottori's attractiveness. Concomitantly, they have turned this small prefecture into a policy laboratory for several of Japan's current challenges, starting from rural revitalization. This is hardly coincidental; rather, it is the fruit of Ishiba's continuous support and patronage.

In nearly forty years of political activity, he has served in various ministerial posts (director general of the Defense Agency, minister of Defense, minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, minister for Rural Revitalization) and high-ranking party positions (LDP secretary-general). Particularly since the early 2010s, by leveraging his political influence, Ishiba has served as a transmission chain between Tokyo and his constituency. His efforts have guaranteed an inflow of public money even to remote areas in his electoral district in Tottori for public works such as the renovation of schools and public libraries, thus buttressing the relationship with his own voters [Rich *et al.* 2021, 28 October].

Against this backdrop, Kishida's surprise decision to step down provided the opportunity that Ishiba had sought since 2008.

2.3. *Ishiba's «five protects» and the «security-oriented» cabinet*

The dissolution of party factions, combined with the new party regulations, reduced the capacities of faction leaders to streamline support toward specific candidates. This factor led to a record number of candidates, nine, that had obtained the necessary twenty endorsements from fellow lawmakers [Maslow 2024, 27 September]. These included party veterans, such as foreign minister Kamikawa Yoko, former Chief Cabinet Secretary (CCS) Katō Katsunobu, then LDP Secretary-General Motegi Toshimitsu and Ishiba himself; emerging leaders such as Minister of Economic Security Takaichi Sanae, Minister for Digital Transformation Kōno Tarō, and CCS Hayashi Yoshimasa; and rising stars in their 40s, such as Takaichi's predecessor Kobayashi Takayuki and former Minister of the Environment Koizumi Shinjirō [*Kyodo News* 2024, 26 August]. Against this backdrop, Ishiba moved to officially announce his candidacy as LDP president and PM in late August, a few days after Kobayashi. As per LDP regulations, the successful candidate must obtain 51% of 734 votes (367 as the number of LDP Diet members at the time of the vote and 367 more representing the total of 1.1 million party members across the country). In the absence of a clear majority, a runoff vote (367 Diet members' votes plus 47 as the number of Japan's Prefectures representing LDP local branches) is held between the two most voted candidates [*NHK News Web* 2024, 12 September].

The keyword for Ishiba's campaign was *mamoru* («to defend/protect/keep»). Specifically, Ishiba's campaign headquarters devised «five protects» (*itsutsu no mamoru*): rules and regulations (*rūru o mamoru*), the country (*Nip-*

pon o mamoru), the Japanese people (*kokumin o mamoru*), the rural areas (*chi-hō o mamoru*), and opportunities for women and the youth (*wakamono-josei no kikai o mamoru*). By contrast, Takaichi insisted on making Japan «stronger and richer», echoing her mentor Abe's intent to turn Japan into a world power. After the first round, Ishiba came in second after Takaichi with 154 votes against 181. Takaichi could count on the support of the party's right wing, including LDP Vice-President Asō Tārō and former Abe faction members; meanwhile, moderate reformists converged on Ishiba. In the second decisive round, the situation was reversed in favour of Ishiba, who secured 215 votes, against 194 for Takaichi, thus being elected LDP president. According to insiders, Koizumi, who ranked third in the first round, along with Hayashi and Kamikawa, both of whom belonged to the now dissolved Kishida faction, are likely to have coalesced their respective support bases behind the former LDP secretary-general [ANN News 2024]. Ishiba may as well have received the support of the 79-year-old Moriyama Hiroshi, a long-time LDP official, described as a self-made politician and skilful negotiator, who had been the leader of a faction dissolved early in January 2024 [Kyodo News 2024, 30 September; Jiji Press 2025, 19 January].

Soon after taking charge, Ishiba appointed the new party leadership. Moriyama was awarded the party's second-in-command in his appointment as secretary-general, while Kishida's Minister of Finance Suzuki Shunichi was appointed chair of the General Council, the party's organ in charge of personnel affairs and drafting of legislation; on his part, former Minister of Defense Onodera Itsunori took over as chair of the Policy Research Council. Koizumi Shinjirō, son of former PM Jun'ichirō and popular figure among younger LDP supporters and MPs, was appointed chief of the election strategy in an attempt to reverse the course of the LDP's fading popularity caused by the slush-fund scandal [Fujiwara 2024, 29 September]. Former PM Suga, one of the kingmakers of the 2024 LDP Presidential elections, was appointed vice-president, succeeding the 84-year-old Asō, who was nominated senior advisor (*saikō komon*). This position was revamped after thirty years in an attempt to appease the influential former PM and FM [Nihon Keizai Shinbun 2024, 10 October]. In fact, in the runoff vote between Ishiba and Takaichi, Asō had supported the latter, mobilising the more conservative fringes of the LDP behind the then Economic Security Minister of the Kishida cabinet. Furthermore, despite Ishiba's historic rivalry with Abe, the new LDP President appointed Fukuda Tatsuo, a former member of the Abe faction and third generation hereditary politician, to executive acting secretary-general and reportedly offered the position of General Council chairperson to his rival in the LDP presidential election Takaichi Sanae, who in turn rejected the offer. In light of these facts, when it comes to party appointments, it is possible to agree that Ishiba showed a pragmatic approach for the sake of party unity [Kim 2025].

However, as far as cabinet appointments are concerned, Ishiba adopted a more nuanced approach reflecting his major policy foci, namely defence and regional revitalization. In fact, with four figures – Hayashi Yoshimasa, Iwaya Takeshi, Nakatani Gen, and Ishiba himself – with a Defense Ministry background in key posts – chief cabinet secretary, foreign minister, defense minister and prime minister, respectively – the current administration seemed to be oriented toward prioritising national security. In this regard, in his first policy speech on 4 October, Ishiba pledged to work for everyone's serenity (*anshin*) and security (*anzen*), by, among other things, «drastically strengthening» the country's defence capabilities in the face of the «most serious security environment» since the end of World War 2 [*Tōkyō Shinbun* 2024, 4 October]⁵. As illustrated in more detail below, this posture is largely consistent with that of the Kishida administration [see Wallace and Pugliese 2023; Pugliese and Zappa 2024].

Also, Ishiba appointed several of his supporters and proteges to key cabinet positions concerned with regional revitalization, a longtime policy priority for Ishiba. For instance, he appointed a fellow MP from Tottori, Akazawa Ryōsei, as Minister for Economic Revitalization. The new Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications Murakami Seiichirō, a loyal Ishiba ally since his third presidential bid in 2018, also pledged to make special efforts in this area [*Jiji Press* 2024, 7 October; PMO 2024]. This latter appointment in particular hit the headlines and signalled Ishiba's intent to distance himself from Abe Shinzō's legacy. An outspoken critic of Abe and his policies, Murakami had gone as far as to define the former PM a «traitor» (*kokuzoku*), thus receiving a yearlong suspension from any official appointments in the LDP organs in 2022 [*Tōkyō Shinbun* 2024, 1 October].

Reinforcing the impression of an anti-Abe connotation of Ishiba's cabinet appointments, Takaichi was excluded from any post. On top of the above-mentioned frictions over party posts, it had emerged ahead of the general election that Takaichi, in her LDP presidential bid, had reportedly been endorsed by six LDP figures involved in the slush-money scandal [*Asahi Shinbun* 2024, 18 September; Yawata 2024, 25 November].

In light of the above, Ishiba's aspiration to restore public confidence in the political process inevitably conflated with the strategy, already initiated under Kishida, to abandon Abe's political course by excluding Abe's acolytes from influential posts in the government and the LDP [Pugliese and Zappa 2024; Takenaka 2024a].

5. However, it might be worth noting that he did not follow up on the intent to proceed with a thorough revision of the Japan-US Status of Force Agreement (SOFA) regulating Washington's military presence in the archipelago, nor on creating an Asian NATO that would eventually help to strike a new balance in the Japan-US alliance.

2.4. *Leadership transitions in the opposition camp: the «Tokyo effect»*

Meanwhile, the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), the main opposition party, changed its leadership three years after the election of its president, Izumi Kenta. After a tight race between four candidates, former Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) PM (2011-2012) Noda Yoshihiko won the nomination. Similarly to Ishiba, since even before the revelations on the slush-fund scandal, Noda had established a media presence criticising the LDP's money politics and stressing his own political integrity [e.g. *Abema News* 2023, 1 February]. In September, he campaigned on a political platform focused on the provision of «basic services» through fresh government spending in healthcare and children's daycare, and in support of the country's impoverished middle class. Edano Yukio, a former minister of the Economy, Trade and Industry in the DPJ administration and leader of the CDP between 2017 and 2021, also ran on a similar platform centred on the concept of «human economics» (that is, more investment and government spending in welfare and education, to reduce the financial burden on consumers). Nonetheless, Noda could count on the backing of Ozawa Ichirō, a former LDP secretary-general who has been a back-door influencer in the opposition camp since he left the LDP in 1993. Against this backdrop, the former DPJ PM (2011-2012) was reportedly better positioned than his contenders in the leadership race due to his perceived political proximity to centre-right opposition parties and the LDP [Marcantuoni 2024].

Noda's surprise comeback needs to be viewed in the context of the CDP's crushing defeat at the Tokyo gubernatorial elections earlier in July.

With a population of nearly 14.2 million people, Tokyo is Japan's political and economic centre. The city's aggregate domestic product amounts to around €1 trillion, i.e., one-fifth of Japan's total GDP [Tokyo Metropolitan Government 2025]. Naturally, given the LDP's debacle at the April by-elections, the Tokyo gubernatorial election was predicted to be a close race between the LDP-backed incumbent governor, Yuriko Koike, seeking re-election for the third time, and Renhō, an independent candidate and former minister in the DPJ administrations, supported by the CDP and the Japan Communist Party (JCP).

Fearing a dramatic setback amidst an electoral chaos, with 56 candidates running for the post or just for personal publicity [Hall 2025, 30 January], the LDP decided to rally behind Koike [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2024, 13 June]. This strategy eventually paid off as Koike secured the reelection with 2.9 million votes, particularly from LDP supporters and voters with no specific party preference [Matsumoto 2024, 8 July]. Surprisingly, the CDP-backed candidate fared very poorly. Renhō was surpassed by an outsider candidate, Ishimaru Shinji, the 42-year-old mayor of a small town in Hiroshima Prefecture, Akitakata. A former Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group (MUFG) employee and social media personality famous for his criticism of old habits in local politics (vote-buying, use of obscure language, laziness),

Ishimaru emerged as an anti-establishment independent candidate who was able to translate part of his millions of viewers and followers into an actual support base.

Eventually, Ishimaru was able to surpass Renhō by nearly 400,000 votes, securing a 24.3% share of votes, against the CDP-backed candidate's 18.5%. In particular, the social media personality turned politician was able to mobilise young and unaffiliated voters [Matsumoto 2024, 8 July]. As illustrated by his election strategist, the so-called «elections god» (*senkyo no kamisama*), Fujiwara Shinnosuke, a former aide to Ozawa and LDP PM Fukuda Yasuo, and, more recently, advisor to LDP's Takaichi, Ishimaru's major strength was, in fact, his programme's lack of focus on actual policies. In his rallies, he instead opted for a communication strategy centred on himself and his personal story, hence avoiding the risk of being perceived by the public as the «same old liar politician» [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2024, 17 July]. His strategy to appeal to disillusioned and distrusting voters won him a conspicuous following and renown as a social media populist [Hall 2025, 28 January; *The Economist* 2024, 11 July], putting him in the condition to launch his own party, the Path to Rebirth (*Saisei no michi*) whose mission was fostering regional revitalisation [Ninivaggi 2025, 15 January].

The CDP's failure to advance in Tokyo jeopardised incumbent CDP President Izumi Kenta and sent a warning message to prospective leader Noda, who had supported Renhō in her gubernatorial campaign.

2.5. Japan's 2024 general election: back to a 1993 scenario?

On October 9th, Ishiba followed up on his intention to dissolve the Lower House and call a snap election, officially announcing that it would be held on October 27th, just 26 days after taking office. Ishiba's ideas had already become clear on September 30th, one day before being confirmed PM by the Diet. The move was considered «anomalous» by the opposition, which blocked the beginning of the joint Diet session scheduled on that day to confirm the PM's appointment. The official justification for Ishiba's decision was that his selection had resulted from perceivably obscure party processes and a Diet vote, and that he wanted to face «the voter's judgement as soon as possible» to rebuild public confidence in the LDP [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2024, 2 October]. Thus, by announcing the dissolution of the Lower House of the Diet, Ishiba placed a bet on his credibility as a political underdog and «unsullied» politician presenting himself as a sort of «reanimator» of the scandal-ridden LDP.

Nonetheless, Ishiba's decision was severely criticised by the opposition parties, which submitted a symbolic no-confidence vote against the PM, accused of prioritising the interest of his party over the country. In fact, the opposition demanded that the new government addressed several urgent issues, including the allocation of emergency funds for the reconstruction of the Noto Peninsula, the hearings of LDP MPs involved in the kickback

scandal on the part of Diet committees, and a new investigation into the ties between the LDP and the Unification Church [see Pugliese and Wallace 2023; *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2024, 1 October].

As illustrated above, the two major political parties headed to the polls in October with renewed leadership. In September, LDP's junior coalition partner Kōmeitō (NKP) also elected a new chief representative after Yamaguchi Natsuo, the party's longest-serving leader (from 2009 to 2024), announced his resignation. Ishii Keiichi, a former minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism under Abe, took over as leader of the Buddhist movement Sōka Gakkai's political arm.

Interestingly, Ishii shared a common political experience with both Ishiba and Noda, having been a member of the New Frontier Party (Shinshintō, NFP), a short-lived conservative party born from a split within the LDP orchestrated by Ozawa in the mid-1990s. That political experience followed the LDP's historic defeat at the 1993 general election. Marred by corruption scandals and internal divisions, the LDP was sent to the Opposition benches for the first time since 1955 paving the way for the formation of two short-lived grand coalition administrations (1993-1994) led first by Hosokawa Morihiro and then, between April and June 1994, by NFP co-founder Hata Tsutomu [Jain 2024, 3 November; Jain 1993]⁶.

Despite the new PM's attempts at restoring the LDP's public image and the NKP leadership change, uncertainty over the election result loomed. In October, the unlikelihood of an LDP-NKP majority in the Diet became the subject of much press speculation [e.g., *Shūkan Bunshun* 2024, 18 October; Azumi 2024, 22 October]. Upon the closing of the polls, what was a possibility became reality. The LDP lost the absolute majority in the Lower House for the first time since 2012. While still the largest party nationally, the LDP won «just» 191 seats – 42 short of the absolute majority threshold of 233 out of 465 total seats in the House of Representatives and down 68 seats from the 2021 election. The NKP could only secure 24 seats, insufficient to ensure Ishiba's reappointment. Conversely, the CDP advanced, winning 148 seats and strengthening its position vis-à-vis the LDP and other opposition forces as Japan's No. 1 opposition party, becoming the pivot of a possible anti-LDP coalition government [Fahey 2024, 28 October]. Under these circumstances, the PM publicly admitted defeat during a TV interview and added that the election had led to a «very severe state of affairs» for his party and coalition. He acknowledged that voters had not «absolved» the LDP from the slush-fund scandal [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2024, 27 October].

However, Ishiba's presiding over a minority government still remains the most likely scenario, thus avoiding the reiteration of the aforementioned «1993 scenario». On November 11th, the Diet finally convened a special ses-

6. The LDP would return to power soon after the demise of the Hata cabinet though in coalition with the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) in a government led by JSP Chairman Murayama Tomiichi.

sion for the PM election. Ishiba was confirmed PM with 221 votes, officially beginning his second term as PM, although this time as the leader of a minority government. Soon after, he reshuffled his cabinet. Most notably, NKP's Saitō Tetsuo, minister of Land, Infrastructure and Transport in the first Ishiba cabinet, poised to become NKP's new chief representative, was succeeded by fellow lawmaker Nakano Hiromasa [*NHK News Web* 2024, 5 November].

On the part of the CDP, the two-week hiatus between the elections and Ishiba's appointment was a period of intense negotiations with other opposition parties to explore the possibilities of forming an anti-LDP coalition government. However, soon after the polls closed, it emerged clearly that Noda would not gather the necessary support to be elected PM. A key factor barring Noda from becoming the prospective new PM was the resistance from other opposition forces, particularly, the Democratic Party For the People (DPFP), a moderate-conservative formation formed in 2018 after the disbandment of the then Democratic Party (DP, Minshintō, 2016-2018) and its merger with Tokyo Governor Koike's former national platform, the Kibo no Tō (Party of Hope).

The party quadrupled its seats from 7 in 2021 to 28 in the 2024 elections, emerging as Japan's fourth largest political force. Briefly after the vote, its leader, Tamaki Yūichirō, confirmed that he would not support Noda's bid as PM in the coming joint session of the Diet, but rather would cooperate on individual policies only if they were considered coherent with the DPFP's agenda. Tamaki used this newly acquired political leverage, pledging to cooperate on specific issues regardless of the party, but, concomitantly refusing any strings attached with both the CDP and LDP [*NHK News Web* 2024, 30 October]. The DPFP leader had previously being described as «waverer» and «inconsistent» in his political stances [*Yomiuri Shinbun* 2024, 15 March]. However, his top priority seemed now to prove to party supporters his resolve to disenfranchise the DPFP from political constraints that would forcibly dilute the party agenda. Having stressed during the 20-day-long campaign the need to increase the income tax exemption threshold for households from ¥1.03 million to ¥1.78 million per year, to reduce energy and gas bills for consumers and to abolish political activity funds for lawmakers, the DPFP had gathered considerable support particularly from younger Japanese voters, and especially those who went to the polls for the first time. This explains how the DPFP had captured seats in key districts such as North Kantō from other, more established parties, such as the NKP. In one case, in Saitama District No. 14, DPFP's Suzuki Yoshihiro won the proportional seat against NKP chief Ishii, de facto triggering the resignation of the latter from his position [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2024, 28 October].

Baba Nobuyuki, the leader of the other major opposition party, the Japan Innovation Party (*Nippon Ishin no Kai*), which obtained 38 seats, three fewer than the previous general elections, also refused to vote for either Ishiba or Noda [*NHK News Web* 2024, 30 October].

Tamaki and Baba's refusal to support Ishiba's re-election as PM reflected a continuing and structural popular disaffection with national politics and distrust of mainstream political figures [see Pugliese and Zappa 2024]. In particular, voter turnout at the October 2024 general election was the third lowest since 1946 (53.8%) [*NHK News Web* 2024, 28 October]. In addition, the government's approval rate, which was at a record-low 20% in the last weeks of Kishida's term, rebounded at 44% upon the appointment of the new PM and his cabinet, but soon began to drop falling below 40% in December [*NHK News Web* 2025, 14 January]. Generally, figures on the cabinet popularity have been moderately negative with major media surveys indicating an increase of the disapproval rate in the three-month period between Ishiba's first appointment through January 2025, despite relative increases of the approval rate in selected surveys in December 2024 (e.g. Asahi and Sankei) [*Nippon.com* 2024, 28 December].

Cabinet popularity according to selected media surveys (October 2024-January 2025)		
Media	Approval (%)	Disapproval (%)
NHK	38	38
Jiji	26.8	41.3
Yomiuri	39	48
Mainichi	30	53
Kyodo	36,5	43.1
Asahi	36	43
Sankei	45.9	47.7
Nikkei	41	51
Elaborated by the authors based on the data available at Nippon.com on 28 th December, 2024		

These data starkly contrast with a generalized perception of Ishiba's popularity among voters before taking office. An NHK January 2025 survey indicated that among the most cited reasons for the disapproval of the Ishiba cabinet were: (a) no expectations from the government's action; (b) lack of effectiveness of the policies; (c) distrust in the personal characters of the PM and his cabinet [*NHK News Web* 2025, 14 January]. The reported lack of institutional and diplomatic manners on the part of Ishiba, caught by the cameras sleeping during the special Diet session voting on his confirmation as PM, or greeting other government leaders at the APEC summit in Peru in late November while seated, have attracted public criticism [*Mainichi Shinbun* 2024, 21 November].

Despite losing his bet, the political scenario resulting from the October 27th elections might be considered in line with Ishiba's preferences.

In his recent publications, the Japanese PM described himself as a genuinely conservative politician, inclined to «listen» and «empathize» with his opponents, rather than treating them as «enemies» [Ishiba 2024, 38-40]. On top of this, he often lamented the weakness of the opposition and its leaders, who avoided engaging in «serious discussions», preferring to pile up «TV appearances», with the result of not being convincing enough for disappointed voters [Ishiba 2022, pp. 39-40]. Tobias Harris poignantly described Ishiba's approach to politics as «idealistic». Harris went on to compare the Japanese PM to a tragic figure struggling to create a «purer and more humane» Japan, but ending up being isolated in a party which continued to be profoundly influenced by Abe's ideological approach even years after Abe's violent demise [Harris 2024b]. The LDP's poor electoral performance and declining approval rates were likely to fuel opposition from within the LDP and undermine the PM's position soon as the 2025 Upper House election looms. Ishiba's idealism might make him a popular figure among voters, but it will deepen extant fractures within the ruling conservative camp.

On a practical level, other observers pointed to the fact that a de facto national unity administration resulted from the elections. Several Lower House standing committee chairs were assigned to the CDP, including the influential Budget Committee, chaired by CDP's Azuma Jun. Former CDP chief Edano Yukio was appointed chair of the Constitution Committee. In contrast, former DPJ and CDP heavyweight Gemba Kōichirō was nominated vice-speaker of the House of Representatives [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2024, 8 November]. As Professor Cucek [2024] of Temple University pointed out, a major outcome of the 2024 election was the restoration, at least in principle, of a more democratic style of policymaking on the part of the LDP. In fact, «Every piece of legislation making its way through the Diet has to be the result of true compromise – with the ruling parties and the opposition parties willing to sacrifice their positions in order to find a common ground» [Cucek 2024].

In light of these facts, it is possible to argue that after a decade of Prime Minister's Office-led decision-making under Abe and Kishida, a paradigm shift has finally occurred in Japanese politics, making way for a more concerted style of rule. This is seemingly characterised by a «government of national unity», which might enable, rather than hinder, progress in many fields, from tax system reforms to progress in gender equality and rights for sexual minorities [Cucek 2024].

Under said circumstances, the passing in December of a ¥13.9 trillion-worth supplementary budget (nearly €89 billion) is a notable achievement. The spending package resumed energy subsidies discontinued by the Kishida administration and introduced payouts to low-income families and families with children amidst rising inflation. On top of this, the government allocated fresh financial resources to reconstruct the Noto peninsula

la, which was hit by a powerful earthquake in January and unprecedented heavy rains and floods in September (see below). In formulating the budget draft, the ruling coalition accepted changes proposed by the CDP, which, as illustrated above, controls the House of Representatives Budget Committee, including a ¥100 billion increase of the sum allocated to the recovery of the Noto Peninsula. It was the first time since 1996 that a budget draft submitted to the Diet by the cabinet was amended and revised by the Diet [Jiji Press 2024, 17 December]. Nonetheless, the CDP finally voted against the government's initiative, contrasting with the DPFP and Ishin. Ahead of the vote, the two minor opposition parties received reassurances from the ruling bloc that the government would raise the threshold for income tax exemption to ¥ 1.78 million and work toward making education free for all students, a key Ishin pledge [Kyodo News 2024, 17 December].

3. *Economic and financial policies*

Setting Ishiba's political troubles aside, the new government inherited a moderately growing economy pushed by wage increases and higher consumer spending amid easing inflation. Another major factor contributing to these trends in the Japanese economy in 2024 was the Bank of Japan (BoJ)'s policy shift on interest rates after months of indecisiveness.

3.1. *Ending the BoJ's unconventional monetary policy*

The BoJ decided in March to end the negative interest rates and the yield curve control policies that had since 2012 enabled the Bank to tackle deflation by pumping money into Japan's economy through the purchase of Japanese government bonds (JGB). Across 11 years of continued expansionary policy, the BoJ accumulated over ¥550 trillion in JGB [BoJ 2024, p. 65]. Having achieved the goal of stable inflation at 2%, the BoJ would, in Governor Ueda Kazuo's words, «set monetary policy like other normal central banks», and thus announced the rise of lending rates to 0%-0.1% from minus 0.1%-0% [Obe 2024, 19 March].

Ueda's decisions did not immediately impact the enduring depreciation of the Japanese currency against the US dollar, which, in recent years, has favoured Japanese exports of goods and services, including inbound tourism. In addition, a weaker yen has meant higher returns for Japanese investments abroad and the reduction of the country's trade deficit in 2024 [Kyodo News 2025, 10 February].

Nevertheless, the year in review was characterised by stock market turbulences, with the Nikkei 225 index rising to an all-time high of 42.4 thousand points for the first time in July and subsequently falling 4,000 points in August as a result of fears surrounding the US economy and

uncertainties regarding BoJ policies [Lam 2024, 11 August; *Nikkei Asia* 2024, 30 December]. Among other factors leading to the «global mini-crash» of summer 2024, the announced interest rate hike caused the yen carry trade to unwind [Sposato 2024]. With the BoJ starting to implement unconventional monetary policies in the early 2000s, the yen had been in high demand among investors and traders looking to borrow a low-return currency to invest it in a high-return one, thus making a profit at almost no cost. In the last two decades, low interest rates in Japan (around 0%) have contributed to the outflow of yen-denominated capital, helping to keep down the yen price on the international currency market [Chuffart and Dell'Eva 2020]. The situation, however, precipitated in early August when the yen rapidly appreciated against the dollar to ¥142 from ¥161 in mid-July, causing investors to hectically exit their carry trade positions [Sposato 2024].

Furthermore, Japan's overall fiscal health worsened in 2024. Japan's accelerated demographic decline caused social security spending to rise to ¥37,7 trillion, or 33.5% of the state's total expenditure [MoF 2024]. Combined with this, increased defence spending was poised to contribute to the broadening of Japan's ¥1,3 quadrillion (around €8.3 trillion)-worth debt, the largest among advanced economies globally [*The Mainichi* 2025, 10 February].

Besides structural factors such as the above, environmental contingencies, namely earthquakes and extreme weather and climate events, characterised the year and required government intervention for disaster relief in the afflicted areas.

3.2. *The economic impact of the Ishikawa earthquake and floods*

On the 1st of January 2024, at around 4 pm Japan time, the Noto peninsula, Ishikawa Prefecture, on the Sea of Japan coast of Central Japan, was hit by an earthquake of moment magnitude scale (Mw) 7.5 or Japan Meteorological Agency (JMA) Seismic Intensity Scale of *shindo* 7. The event caused widespread damage to buildings and infrastructures and the death of nearly 250 people in three prefectures (mainly Ishikawa, Toyama and Niigata). Following the earthquake, a great fire, probably caused by damaged electrical wiring, reduced the Asaichi market in the town of Wajima to ashes [Oyama 2024]. Nearly 1,900 residents were injured while 13,000 others were forced to move to emergency shelters set up in the aftermath of the earthquake by the local authorities [Cabinet Office 2024]. At the time of writing, the total death toll of the event, considering the quake-related deaths, was 505 people [*NHK News Web* 2025, 9 January]. Minor damage was also reported in locations as far as Gifu, Aichi, Ōsaka, and Hyōgo in Western Japan [FDMA 2024].

Though powerful earthquakes are not exceptional in Japan, this new event led experts to urge the national and local governments to revise existing disaster response strategies stressing the need to: (a) enhance hous-

ing and public buildings earthquake resistance; (b) prepare road restoration plans to facilitate rescue and recovery operations; (c) adapt the response to current demographic trends in disaster-hit areas and, by and large, at the national level, prioritising elderly care; and (d) reconciling tourism development with the urgency of accommodating evacuees who may have lost their houses [Suppasri *et al.* 2024].

Against this backdrop, the Kishida administration swiftly reacted, pledging a 150 billion yen-worth aid and relief package for the quake-hit areas in late January and a tourism subsidy later in July, in an attempt to revitalise the industry in the area [*Kyodo News* 2024, 1 July].

Yet another powerful earthquake hit the coast of Japan's major southwestern island, Kyūshū, off Miyazaki Prefecture, in August. The event triggered an immediate response by Japanese authorities. The Japan Meteorological Agency (JMA) issued a week-long «megaquake advisory», the first since the warning system was introduced in 2019, urging communities across the country to prepare for an Mw 8 or 9 quake originating in the Nankai Trough.⁷

The announcement caused fears of an imminent catastrophic event. In several locations in Southwestern Japan, shortages of water bottles, food and emergency goods were reported [Sakakibara 2024, 14 August; *Hirotere News NNN* 2024, 12 August]. In these circumstances, during the month of August, the demand for rice also kept growing due to emergency stockpiling by families, leading to a nationwide tightening of the cereal supply and an increase in food prices [Honma 2024, 18 October; Climate Central 2024, 9 October]. Unseasonal heatwaves – 2024 was the hottest year on record in the country since 1898 – also contributed to upset food production, thus causing food price increases [Ryall 2025, 8 January].

In September, heavy rainfalls hit central Japan. Particularly affected by the phenomenon were quake-hit areas in Ishikawa Prefecture, where recovery operations were further hindered by the floods, resulting in a «double disaster» (*nijū hisai*) scenario still affecting local residents' livelihood at the time of writing. In several communities across the Prefecture, tap water remained unavailable while the signs of the destruction caused by the 1 January 2024 earthquake were still visible after almost one year [TBS News Dig 2024, 24 December]. As a result, as illustrated above, the recovery of these areas became a source of political contention between major political parties in the run-up to the October general election and the extra Diet session ensuing Ishiba's appointment as PM.

7. The Nankai Trough is an undersea trench running parallel to the Japanese Pacific coast, from Kyūshū to central Honshū. It is a subduction zone where the Philippine Sea plate subducts northwestward beneath the Amur continental plate, historically causing large-scale earthquakes, the last of which hit Japan in 1946. A new Nankai Trough megaquake is deemed imminent by experts [Hirose *et al.* 2022].

3.3. *A declining Japan? The semiconductor strategy and trade tensions with the US*

Lastly, despite predictions of moderate economic growth through 2025 (averaging 1% GDP growth), once the world's number-two economy was in February 2024 surpassed by Germany as the world's third largest economy after the US and China [Kumagai 2024, 13 May]. Furthermore, Japan has been predicted to lose ground in the face of emerging Asian actors, such as India. Based on the IMF's October 2024 World Economic Outlook report, by 2026 the Indian economy would overtake Japan as the world's fourth-largest economy [Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting 2024; IMF 2024].

Under such circumstances, PM Kishida's decision to coordinate with Japan's largest trade union (Rengō) to persuade Japanese firms to raise their employees' wages after decades of stagnation between late 2023 and early 2024 seemed to produce positive effects on the Japanese economy. In the summer of 2024, wages grew more than the inflation rate, with large companies offering their employees raises of up to 5.3 % on the previous year [Lee 2024, 10 September].

The year in review also saw significant developments concerning Japan's position in global supply chains in key sectors such as steelmaking and chip manufacturing. First, Nippon Steel Company, the world's third-largest steelmaker, attempted to consolidate its global position in an industry dominated by Chinese actors by proposing a takeover of US Steel for nearly US\$ 15 billion. The deal was opposed by the largest workers' union (United Steelworkers), and the administrative review by the Biden Administration put the deal on hold until after the November elections. Interestingly, in an apparent move to win over blue-collar voters, then-United States President Joe Biden came out in opposition to the deal arguing that «steel production and steel workers (...) are the backbone of our nation», a position that was echoed by both Kamala Harris and Donald J. Trump, the two competing presidential candidates [Isidore *et al.* 2025, 4 January]. The Biden administration finally blocked the deal by executive order on national security grounds in early January 2025. However, the order enforcement was later further postponed until June [Reuters 2025, 13 January].

Despite the surprise of many officials and observers arguing that, in principle, a Japanese company investing in the United States should not be considered a security threat, given the two countries alliance [Sorkin *et al.* 2024, 10 April], the Japanese government downplayed the issue, describing it as an individual case involving the management of private companies [Nihon Keizai Shinbun 2024, 4 April].

Regardless of the US Steel debacle, the Kishida administration was able to follow up on its strategy to strengthen Japan's global role in the semiconductor industry. In compliance with the country's 2022 economic security legislation aimed at re-positioning the country at the centre of in-

ternational technology chains and enhancing its technological self-reliance [Wallace & Pugliese 2023], the Kishida administration successfully negotiated a US\$ 40 billion-worth investment deal with Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation (TSMC) in early 2024. Tokyo offered an aggregate of € 12.5 billion in subsidies to TSMC for constructing two manufacturing plants in Kumamoto, Southwestern Japan, paving the way for the revival of the semiconductor industry in the archipelago. TSMC would operate in Japan through a joint venture, Japan Advanced Semiconductor Manufacturing (JSMC), and started mass production – more than 100,000 wafers a month using a wide range of technologies from the the 40- to the 6-nanometer by early 2025. Involved in JSMC along with TSMC is a consortium of Japanese firms, including tech and carmaking giants Sony and Toyota Motor Corp [CNA 2024, 17 October]. The Taiwanese semiconductor giant is also predicted to benefit from the deal as it expands its resource-intensive foundry business beyond Taiwan, where more than 60% of the world's semiconductors are manufactured [Schneider & Ottinger 2024, 11 April; Tung 2024, 4]. Beside Japan, in 2024 TSMC invested an additional \$65 billion in a manufacturing plant located in Phoenix, Arizona, United States [TSMC 2025, 4 March].

Alongside the Kumamoto JSMC project, the Japanese government and other private investors have pledged to support Rapidus, a domestic chipmaker whose operations were scheduled to start in 2026, based in Chitose, Hokkaidō, in northern Japan. Rapidus aimed to become a leader in the global semiconductor industry by introducing 2-nanometer technology, which will be key to the development of AI technologies. According to estimates, the start-up needed ¥5 trillion to start the mass production of next-generation semiconductors by 2027 [*Kyodo News* 2024, 21 August]. In 2024, Rapidus was at the centre of a concerted diplomatic effort between the national and Hokkaido local governments to strengthen United States-Japan technological cooperation (US tech-giant IBM was in fact providing technical assistance to the project). Against this backdrop, in August, the Ministry of the Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) pledged nearly ¥ 1 trillion (€ 6 billion) in financial support, while other private actors, including communications giants Softbank and NTT, and carmaker Toyota, have mobilised funds for an aggregate ¥7.3 billion (around €47 million) [*ibidem*]. Later in December, the Ishiba administration moved to secure a nearly €640 million-worth financial assistance package for the fiscal year 2025 budget, once again stressing the project's significance for Japan's national interest [*Jiji Press* 2024, 26 December]. Nevertheless, in its ambitious plan to revive its domestic semiconductor industry, the Japanese government will likely have to cope with relative shortages of specialised workforce and other logistics hindrances [Thorbecke 2024, 30 August].

4. *International affairs*

Compared to domestic politics, Japan's foreign policy in 2024 was characterised by continuity rather than change. However, this does not mean Japan's foreign policy was static. Japan's postwar foreign and security policy has been undergoing tectonic shifts. Former PM Abe Shinzō was particularly active in challenging Japan's postwar Yoshida Doctrine, prioritising the economy while heavily relying on the alliance with the United States for its security. The changes in Japan's foreign policy have been characterised mainly by the gradual abandonment of the country's past voluntary strict adherence to anti-militarism and passivity in security matters, which many politicians and scholars characterised as «abnormal». In that sense, Abe sought to make Japan more «normal» by adopting a realpolitik approach, defined as the willingness to proactively address international issues within the boundaries of what is politically possible [Pugliese & Patalano 2020, pp. 619-620].

Regarding Japan's foreign and security policy, Kishida and Ishiba continued «walking in Abe's footsteps», as meticulously described in the previous issue of *Asia Maior* [Pugliese & Zappa, 2024]. Particularly, Kishida's advancement of Japan's security policy came as a surprise as he was initially perceived as a «dove» who stood in the opposite ideological camp from «hawkish» Abe. Following geopolitical challenges, mainly defined by China's growing military and economic power, Kishida and Ishiba actively contributed to Abe's goal of «normalising» Japan in 2024. This was mainly based on the deteriorating security environment, which was felt not only by the government but also by opposition parties and the public. A public opinion conducted in April 2024 by the Yomiuri Shimbun revealed that 84% of the surveyed sample felt that Japan's National Security was under threat. China was named a leading threat source, followed by Russia (88%) and North Korea (87%) [*The Japan News* 2024, 8 April]. The Japanese politicians' and the public's hope that China would develop into a law-abiding, peaceful regional power has continuously declined, especially in the face of Beijing's increasingly risk-prone behaviour in the East and South China Seas. Further, Russian aggression against Ukraine served as a reminder for Japan that a military attack by adversaries to overtake the disputed Senaku islands or Taiwan was no longer unthinkable.

This led Kishida to adopt key security documents published in 2022: the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS), and the Defense Buildup Program. These documents have been judged as unprecedentedly realistic in tone and, according to some analysts, of historical significance [Tsumo, 2023]. The documents aimed not only to defend Japanese territory and waters directly but also the rule-based liberal world order, on which the trading nation of Japan is very much dependent.

It can be said that the Kishida and Ishiba Shigeru, who assumed office on 1 October 2024, invested great efforts in four areas: (a) strengthening

Japan's own autonomy and defence posture; (b) keeping US engagement in the region; (c) deepening and extending security partnerships in the region; and (d) improving relations with China.

While Japanese foreign policy focused strongly on security in 2024, it is important to note that economic engagement was equally important. The main difference from the past was that economic considerations had become highly politicised and securitised—something Japan had previously avoided. As a result, economic policies in 2024 focused not only on boosting profits but also on enhancing national security.

4.1. Strengthening its own autonomy and defence posture

For Japan, strengthening its defence posture has been the highest priority, resulting from the increased regional tensions and the ever-increasing demand of the US to take more responsibility for its security within the US-Japan Alliance framework. Undoubtedly, the unpredictability of the US as Japan's security guarantor has also played an important role. It was not only the shock in Japan when President Donald Trump accused Japan of freeriding and threatened to end the longstanding treaty openly at the beginning of his first term that started in 2016 [O'Shea and Maslow 2021, p. 198-199]. Also, President Joe Biden's 2024 veto of Nippon Steel's acquisition of US steel, citing national security concerns, raised some questions about the genuineness of this partnership. This does not imply that Japan was developing a fully autonomous defence strategy independent of the US. However, past developments suggested that Japan must be prepared to defend itself without assistance.

As mentioned above, the threat perception increased dramatically with Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022. As Kishida stated at the Shangri-La Dialogue, «Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow» [MoFA 2022], a sentence that Ishiba also used in his first policy speech [The Government of Japan 2024]. It is hard to overstate the threat perception. For the first time in postwar history, a plan was laid out to build fallout shelters as a precaution against armed attacks in 2024, highlighting the level of threat perception [Kobayashi 2024]. Two years earlier, Kishida had already decided to move the command centres of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) underground [Nagatomi 2025, 4 January].

As in previous years, Kishida continued to invest in arms to strengthen Japan's defence capability. According to a report by SIPRI, Japan's arms imports increased by 155% in 2019-2023 compared to 2014-2018 [Wezeman *et al.* 2024, p. 9]. The primary focus of Japan's security strategy has been to protect the maritime domain in the southwest of Japan. Following increased Chinese coercions and a possible Taiwan crisis, Japan's forces have been moved closer to the military hotspots [Matsuda 2023, pp. 92-93]. In 2024, Kishida deployed an amphibious rapid deployment brigade and an electronic warfare surface-missile unit to the region. Generally, financial re-

sources have been shifted from the Ground Self-Defense Forces to the Maritime and Air Defense Forces [Mahadzir 2024, 1 April].

Particularly contested in 2024 was the purchase of 400 land-based Tomahawk cruise missiles from the US with a strike range of about 1,600 kilometres, introducing counterstrike capabilities into Japan's defence repertoire [*Kyodo News* 2024, 18 January]. The acquisition of standoff weapons aimed to protect the SDF, US bases in Japan, and potentially US assets engaged in a Taiwan contingency. The controversial 2015 peace legislation introduced by Abe provided the legal ground to justify the acquisition of offensive arms [MoF, 2022, p. 14].

Kishida also amended the Self-Defense Forces Law in February 2024 to establish a permanent «Japan Self-Defense Forces Joint Operations Command» headquartered within the Defense Ministry in spring 2025. Until recently, the three forces of the SDF operated largely on their own, lacking coordination. This fragmentation has limited the SDF's ability to effectively engage in warfare and generate forces, whether independently or as a part of US-led operations. The joint command was created to address this issue by enhancing coordination among the three forces, thus making optimal use of their varied capabilities. Essentially, this command serves as Japan's equivalent to the United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) based in Hawaii, which oversees all military operations in the region.

The Japan Self-Defense Forces Joint Operations Command is also important to strengthening coordinated command and control between the SDF and allied forces, which has become an imperative following the acquisition and integration of stand-off strike capabilities. As Japanese forces have been enhancing their power projection capabilities and extending their range, they assume greater responsibility to comprehend the actions of all parties, including regional allies, and their positions. This necessitates close coordination and information sharing, including improved and integrated Command, Control, Communications, Computers (C4) capabilities among SDF services as well as with American forces and other units that are becoming more active near Japan.

A four-star flag officer will lead Japan's Joint Operations Command with a staff of 250 people. The United States and Australia announced they would have a Joint Staff Liaison Officer attached to Japan's Joint Operations Command, which is expected to be established in March 2025 [Hornung and Cooper 2024, 2 August]. Some concerns surfaced after Trump won the election that he would put a hold on the efforts to integrate the military capabilities of the US forces and the SDF.

Kishida has continued to explore the development and procurement of new weapons. For that purpose, Japan's Acquisition, Technology & Logistics Agency (ATLA), which is subordinated to the Ministry of Defense, was upgraded in 2024. A new innovative research institute was created to promote the development of dual-use technologies. From 2023 to 2028,

¥3.5 trillion was allocated to defence-related research and development. A special focus has been on the technological advancements of drones and artificial intelligence [*The Japan News* 2024, 20 February].

Japan has also invested in major efforts to strengthen its cyber defence, as outlined by the NSS. In line with the overall security changes, Kishida submitted a proposal in 2024 to establish a system of «active cyber defense» (*Nōdō-teki saibā bōgyō*). Active Cyber Defense can be described as an offensive approach in the digital domain. It envisages the SDF or Ministry of Defense pre-emptively neutralising serious cyber-attacks in peacetime [Mochinaga, n.d.]. This development is remarkable considering that Japan has traditionally followed the «exclusively defense-oriented policy» (*senshu bōei*) principle. The role of the Cyber Defense Command at the MoD, with a staff number of 2,410, is expected to be substantially elevated with the proposal's adoption in 2025.

In addition to the more traditional domain, Kishida has also expanded measures to increase Japan's economic security. Under Kishida, Japan has developed into a frontrunner in economic security policy. In 2022, Japan adopted the Economic Security Promotion Act, based on key pillars of supply chain resilience including (a) securing essential infrastructure, (b) developing cutting-edge critical technologies, and (c) non-disclosure of patents [Wallace & Pugliese 2023]. The Economic Security Promotion Act was further extended by introducing a «security clearance» system law in May 2024, protecting critical security information held by the government. The Act increases Japan's security and allows better intelligence sharing and joint threat assessment within the government bodies and allied partners [Shiraishi 2024, 26 July, p. 3].

Generally, in 2024, Kishida successfully implemented measures envisaged by key security documents published in 2022. Japan has become much more autonomous and proactive in defending itself. The possibility of counterstriking remains very restricted and no pre-emptive action is allowed; nevertheless, the fact that counterstrikes and «active cyber defense» have been taken into consideration indicates a paradigm shift from Japan's exclusively defence-oriented principle of the past.

Under Kishida and Ishiba, Japan is nearing its full potential for achieving security autonomy. The next step is evident yet extremely controversial: acquiring nuclear weapons. While Kishida has categorically rejected the idea, Ishiba openly stated that the sharing of nuclear weapons and introducing atomic weapons need to be considered [Ishiba, 2025].

4.2. *Keeping US engagement in the region*

While Japan has certainly increased its autonomy to defend itself, the United States remains an indispensable partner for its security. At the same time, it is undeniable that there is an increasing fear of abandonment, particularly after Trump claimed his second election victory at the end of 2024. So far

the overarching goal is to secure and extend the partnership with the United States. It is important to understand that increasing Japan's defence autonomy, as described in the previous section, does not contradict the United States-Japan Alliance. Japan's larger defence autonomy demonstrates a greater burden sharing within the alliance to keep Washington engaged in the region. From an alliance perspective, Kishida has adopted security policies showing the United States that Japan is a partner that is no longer standing behind but next to it in addressing regional security issues. In his US state visit in April 2024, the first official visit to Washington by a Japanese leader since 2015, Kishida affirmed that the goal was to «work together, across all domains and at all levels, to build a global partnership that is fit for purpose to address the complex, interconnected challenges of today and tomorrow for the benefit of our two countries and the world» [MoFA 2024]. To maintain the Washington's support, Kishida has shown that Japan assists US interests in the region while creating interdependencies to institutionalise the security partnership in a way that can outlive changing administrations.

The increase in financial investment has played a significant role in alliance management. In 2022, Kishida announced a 5% increase in Host Nation Support to cover the costs of American troops stationed in Japan [CBS News 2022, 25 March]. In 2024, Kishida also agreed to purchase 400 land-based Tomahawk cruise missiles, which cost 254 billion yen (US\$1.7 billion) and 1,200 US air-to-air missiles worth US\$ 3.6 billion [Kyodo News 2024, 27 January; Moriyasu 2025, 4 January].

Japan's purchase of expensive defence equipment highlighted its financial commitment to the partnership with the United States. This investment also enhanced the integration of weapon systems and interdependencies between the two nations. PM Kishida's desire to further integrate technologies was exemplified by establishing the United States-Japan Defense Industrial Cooperation, Acquisition, and Sustainment Forum (DICAS) in June. This forum was aimed at exploring possibilities for the co-development and co-production of arms. In addition to joint arms development and production, DICAS aimed to address questions related to the co-sustainment of forward-deployed US Navy ships and US Air Force aircrafts, including fourth-generation fighters, at Japanese commercial facilities. This collaborative effort involved coordination with relevant ministries, demonstrating strong support for US missions in Asia [Rubinstein 2025].

Most recently, Japan has begun openly planning with the United States for a Taiwan crisis scenario. In November, it was announced that Japan and the United States aimed to compile a joint military plan for a possible Taiwan emergency that includes deploying missiles. The plan envisages the deployment of US missile units to the Nansei Islands of Japan's Nansei island chain and the Philippines. The SDF is expected to provide logistical support in this plan, including fuel and ammunition [Kyodo News 2024,

25 November]. The abovementioned creation of Japan's Joint Operations Command played an important role in this new scenario. For improved interoperability and planning between forces, Washington announced that it would dispatch a three-star general to the command to report to the Indo-Pacific Command [U.S. Department of Defense n.d.].

With Kishida, Japan also engaged more independently in regional security initiatives that align with US interests. Prime Minister Kishida has continued to enhance the capabilities of Southeast Asian countries to counter China's extensive maritime claims in the South China Sea [Yamamoto 2024, pp. 45-49]. While the initial focus was primarily on strengthening coast guards, since 2024, Kishida has also begun providing military assistance through Japan's Official Security Assistance, aimed at increasing the deterrence capabilities of Japan's regional partners. Additionally, Japan has shown increased support for the US approach of freedom of navigation operations in contested international waters. Although not officially as part of a joint military operation or exercise, Japan, for the first time in 2024, sailed through the Taiwan Strait alongside vessels from Australia and New Zealand. Through these various measures, Kishida has sent a clear signal to the United States that Japan is proactively addressing regional issues.

4.3. Deepening and extending security partnerships in the region

In the past, the United States was Japan's exclusive security partner. However, shifting power dynamics have increased the importance of new partnerships. In contrast to Japan's preference for multilateral organisations, Kishida has strongly focused on smaller groupings. These so-called mini-laterals have the advantage of being more flexible due to their informality and nonbinding character. Ishiba's initial proposal to establish a larger formal security organisation, an «Asian NATO», has so far not been met with any regional support.

The Quad has been one of Japan's most prominent multilateral engagements. Its members are Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. At the Quad Summit 2024, there was a broad agreement to continue their cooperation [US Embassy in India 2024, 23 September]. Washington initiated steps to institutionalise and elevate the role of the Quad due to its importance as a regional collaboration platform in Asia. However, some problems with the Quad have surfaced as Australia, Japan, and the United States seek to push the partnership towards more robust security cooperation, which India continues to oppose due to its dislike of formal alliances and unsettled border issues with China. In addition to India's insistence on nonalignment, its good relationship with Russia brings some questions to the fore regarding the ideological coherence of the Quad.

The existing issues can be interpreted as a motivation leading Australia, India, Japan, and the United States to form a new minilateral agreement with the Philippines, which, after the end of Rodrigo Duterte's pres-

identship, has moved away from «a soft and accommodating stance toward China» [Ayson and Reyes 2024, p. 181], with indications suggesting that this an attempt to increase its commitment to the security efforts against China's assertiveness in the South China Sea [*Ibidem*, pp. 175-176, 181]. The group called «Squad» originated in the Shangri-La Dialogue on June 3, 2023, where the defence ministers of all member states discussed regional security issues. Following the meeting, the Squad conducted its first military patrols in the South China Sea in April 2024. The four members have affirmed their agreement to increase their security cooperation in a later meeting held in Washington [Corrales 2024, 11 April].

The relationship with Korea has also improved dramatically under Kishida. This is not only because Kishida was less nationalistic but also because of the conservative administration of Yoon Suk-Yeol, who was very engaged in restoring the relationship with Japan [Milani and Fiori 2024, pp. 55-58; Tamaki 2024]. This led to the formalisation and expansion of the trilateral security cooperation between Japan, South Korea, and the United States in November 2024, following the successful trilateral meeting held in 2023 [US Embassy in the Republic of Korea 2024, 14 November]. In June, the three countries held a large-scale military multi-domain exercise called «Freedom Edge» [U.S. Indo-Pacific Command 2024]. However, Yoon Suk Yeol's impeachment in the December leadership crisis in 2024 raised questions about the future of the recent positive development in the relationship between the two countries.

The new partnership with the EU and NATO further deepened in 2024. In November of the same year, Japan and the European Union announced a new security and defence partnership with regular joint exercises and security dialogues. An intelligence-sharing pact and exchanges of defence industry information were considered. This was ground-breaking as this was the first security partnership the EU concluded with an Indo-Pacific country [AP News 2024, 1 November]. A similar development was observable in the relationship with NATO. Japan hosted and also attended major NATO gatherings in 2024. Most notably, Kishida participated in the NATO Summit in Washington, D.C., for the third time, stating that the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific are inseparable and advocating a stronger partnership, particularly in cyber defence, disinformation, and technology. Kishida not only attended events but also announced a Japan-NATO Conference on Strategic Communications to be held in Tokyo [MoFA 2025b]. Kishida also established an independent Japanese mission to further consolidate cooperation with NATO [MoFA 2025a].

In 2024, Japan continued to cooperate closely with AUKUS, a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In October 2024, Japan participated as an observer in a military exercise, Autonomous Warrior, in which a range of autonomous technologies were tested [U.S. Department of Defense 2024].

There have also been more independent initiatives from the Japanese government outside the circles of traditional security partners. The most notable development of bilateral security relationships involved the Philippines. The Philippines has been at the centre of Japan's security capacity-building efforts, which were provided by the Official Development and Security Assistance. In July 2024, both countries concluded a Reciprocal Access Agreement, facilitating military cooperation, joint training, disaster relief, and logistical support, thereby improving the interoperability of the two armed forces. A similar agreement had previously been reached between Australia and the United Kingdom. However, this kind of agreement was the first to be concluded between Japan and a Southeast Asian country [Tana 2024, 9 September].

Generally, Kishida continued to expand the multilayered partnership in the region. US ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel aptly described Japan's Indo-Pacific security partnerships as a latticework [Manning 2024, 3 April]. The arc of numerous overlapping alliances helped keep countries engaged in the region, thus reducing the risk of Japan's dependence on one partner.

4.4. Improving relations with China

As previously mentioned, Tokyo fears that the United States might reduce its commitment to defending Japan. Consequently, Kishida and Ishiba's strategy has focused not only on increasing Japan's defence autonomy but also on decreasing tensions with China. Considering the previously described security policies, this aspect is rarely discussed as it seems counterintuitive.

The relationship between China and Japan worsened drastically after a series of escalating incidents over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in 2010. The result was that Japan became less hesitant to openly address China as an adversary or adopt security measures and partnerships, which was perceived as hostile by Beijing. Nevertheless, no Japanese administration has completely given up on engaging China due to its economic centrality and geographic proximity, a fact that is often overlooked in Washington. Even Abe, considered a nationalist «hawk», actively attempted to improve Japan's relationship with China.

Being less nationalistic, the circumstances were better for Kishida to improve its relationship with China. This is quite ironic, as Kishida was also very ambitious in building up Japan's military capability, with the primary goal of deterring China. Clear signs of improvement in the relationship were observable during Kishida's term, particularly in his last year in office. In November 2023, at a Japan-China Summit Meeting in the United States, Kishida and Xi agreed to return to a «Mutually Beneficial Relationship Based on Common Strategic Interests» and have «constructive and stable Japan-China relations» [MoFA 2023]. This served as a basis for further concrete steps to improve relations in 2024. In May, Liu Jianchao, minister

of the International Department of the Chinese Communist Party, visited Japan to discuss opportunities for possible cooperation. A further point of discussion was the lifting of the ban on imports of Japanese fishery products, imposed in August 2023, following the release of treated wastewater from the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant. During the visit, it was also agreed that the ruling parties' regular meetings, which had been put on hold since 2018, should resume [*Reuters* 2024, 29 May; *The Japan News* 2024, 29 May].

The relationship also experienced a hard setback in 2024 following two violent incidents against Japanese citizens in China, which included a school bus attack incident in Suzhou as well as the murder of a Japanese schoolboy near a Japanese school in Shenzhen. The incidents revealed the extent of the anti-Japanese sentiments tolerated and promoted by the Chinese state [*The New York Times* 2024]. Despite the gravity of the incidents, the relationship continued on a positive trajectory. In September, China accepted Kishida's request to remove the ban on Japanese seafood imports.

The positive development in Sino-Japanese relations continued with the new administration led by Ishiba. Among the Chinese leaders, Ishiba generally enjoyed a positive image, as Tanaka Kakuei, responsible for normalising diplomatic relations between both countries, was his political mentor. The prospect of Trump returning to office and restarting a politically unpredictable period gave both countries the incentive to improve the relationship.

Despite strong internal criticism, Ishiba was receptive to this positive atmosphere and actively sought to improve the relationship with China when he assumed office in October 2024. The general expectation was that Ishiba should have prioritised a meeting with Trump before engaging with China. However, he postponed the meeting with Trump as he did not expect much of an outcome, fearing unpredictable demands from the president-elect. Ishiba and Xi affirmed in a November meeting at the sidelines of the APEC summit in Peru (15-16 November). Both state leaders agreed to continue expanding the «strategic mutually beneficial relationship» [*The Government of Japan* 2025, 17 January]. Aiming to continue improving bilateral ties, Foreign Minister Iwata Takeshi announced the easing of visa requirements for Chinese nationals in December during the ninth meeting of the Japan-China Ruling Party Exchange Conference in Beijing in January 2025 [Zhao and Sheng 2025]. It was also agreed that China would welcome a cross-party delegation of politicians headed by LDP Secretary-General Moriyama Hiroshi in January 2025. The last time the Japan-China Ruling Party Exchange Conference had been held was in October 2018 [*Kyodo News* 2024, 25 December].

The bilateral exchange also improved military communication. Twenty senior field officers of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) visited Tokyo on 14 May for the first time in five years. Conversely, from 26

November to 4 December, a 13-member SDF delegation visited China [Nippon Foundation 2024].

There is no question that the Sino-Japanese relationship continued to be primarily characterized by distrust. However, a planned trilateral meeting of the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean foreign ministers in 2025 and Ishiba's official state visit to China might indicate that both countries show openness to improving the relationship [Kawashima 2025].

5. Conclusion

The year in review was characterized by disruption in domestic politics and continuity in foreign and security policies. If on the one hand, the LDP dominance in national politics declined due to political scandals, on the other, the perception of an increasingly insecure external environment led political forces toward convergences on foreign and security policies that were laid out in the early 2010s. As illustrated above, crises in the LDP hegemony usually followed waves of public outcries over economic crises, such as in the 1990s, as well as money politics scandals. Consistent with the situation in the previous year, the disaffection toward mainstream politics was also apparent in 2024. A consequence of this phenomenon was the rise of social media populist politicians. Whether figures such as Ishimaru Shinji would build a long-term political legacy, fizzle out, or even become absorbed in mainstream politics remained unclear.

Nonetheless, the rise of Ishiba Shigeru at the helm of the Japanese government indicated that parts of the LDP were willing to revitalise the party and rebuild its image against more conservative forces. The new PM's policy priorities seemed to be consistent with his predecessors' emphasis on tackling the country's demographic crisis and strengthening its defence posture. Given his attention to rural areas, which appeared clearly in his consolidated relation to his local constituency in Tottori, Ishiba's rise meant a step forward toward the formulation of policies aimed at reducing development gaps across the archipelago. However, the Ishiba administration was inaugurated in the context of an enduring Tokyo-centrism, which models decision-making processes and the economic and social structures in the country.

Clearly, the economy continued to be the focus of the new administration. If anything, the Kishida administration was successful in laying the groundwork for the revitalisation of Japan's semiconductor industry by attracting key foreign investments and offering support to local start-ups such as the Hokkaidō-based Rapidus. This effort has possibly laid the foundation for reducing the dependence on regional supply chains centred on China on the part of several of the country's largest manufacturers (e.g., Toyota). Moreover, it may have been a first step for the local industry to reduce technological gaps against other regional competitors (e.g., China and South Korea). On top of this, the economic security rationale of the renewed emphasis on the semiconductor industry was evident in view of Tokyo's nu-

merous strategic partnerships with the United States and commitments with other major players in the global military procurement industry (for example, the Global Combat Air Programme with the UK and Italy).

This notwithstanding, the Ishiba administration has swiftly moved on to consider how to manage future «shocks» related to Japan's relative decline against other emerging global and regional actors. Predictions about India overtaking Japan as the world's fourth-largest economy were an ominous reminder of the structural hurdles (e.g., a super-ageing population and the lack of a skilled workforce that might enable suitable responses to pressing issues) that the new administration will face.

On Japan's foreign policy front, 2024 saw the continuation of the previous years' efforts to implement Kishida's 2022 security documents, firmly rooted in Abe's security thinking. Kishida increased its defence autonomy, particularly by introducing counterstrike capabilities. The decision to create a joint command was aimed at improving cooperation between Japan's military forces and those of Japan's security partners, most notably the United States. With its proactive security engagement, Japan was signalling to Washington that it was willing to stand next to it, sharing its security burden. This included capacity-building efforts through Official Development and Security Assistance as well as the Freedom of Navigation Operation with Australia and New Zealand. Japan has successfully expanded the multilayered partnership in the region.

Some issues remained unanswered regarding the financing of Japan's growing security ambitions. The budget was more restricted than anticipated, despite the alleged intention of doubling defence expenditures between 2022 and 2027. Because of the collapse of the yen value, the actual budget shrank by 30%. In this situation, lifting the country's corporate and tobacco taxes alone has not been sufficient to fund the growing defence spending. While the public supported strengthening the country's defences, it was unwilling to accept increasing income tax to finance it.

Two major variables may lead to a recalibration of the described developments. The first is the minority government that followed Ishiba's election in November 2024. Due to the weak standing of the LDP, the opposition parties now have greater influence in decision-making than in the previous decade. This, in turn, might result in reorienting the LDP agenda. For instance, Ishiba was expected to make great concessions regarding domestic issues in the fields of education and welfare. Consequently, this might further limit the government's capacity to increase security-related expenditures, which the yen's devaluation has constrained. It was unclear whether a possible double election in 2025 would return stability. The second variable that could greatly affect Japan's foreign policy was Trump's return to office, and his potentially unrealistic expectations towards Japan's security engagement. Furthermore, Trump's dislike of China could affect the recent positive development of Sino-Japanese relations.

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HONG KONG 2024: ADJUSTING TO THE NATIONAL SECURITY LAW

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2024 is probably the first year in which it is possible to openly discuss the consequences of the implementation of the National Security Law (NSL) in Hong Kong (2020). Multiple developments seem proving that Beijing has eventually started considering the Hong Kong Special Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China (HKSAR) as fully integrated into the Chinese political and economic system. This is allowing Beijing to start fully integrating Hong Kong in its global economic strategy, transforming the city into a stronghold to reinforce its position abroad, particularly towards Europe, the United States, and the Middle East. After discussing the nuances of this evolution, the article explains to what extent former Hong Kong partners, mainly Taiwan, the United States, as well as the European Union, are also adjusting their positioning vis-à-vis HKSAR to limit the indirect influence China might exert on them through the city.

Keywords – Hong Kong; China; National Security Law; Censorship; Jimmy Lai; Patriotic Education; Dissidents.

1. Introduction

The essay examines the key developments in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China in 2024, focusing on politics, media, the domestic economy, and international relations. The first section explores the consequences of the National Security Law (NSL) on both the political and media landscape, carrying forward the analysis from last year's issue of Asia Maior [Kiū 2024], focusing in particular on both dissidents' hearings and the evolution of the national schools' curriculum. The second section evaluates the current economic situation, exploring the new role China is playing in coordinating local economic and financial strategies, including the increase deepening of relations with the Middle East. The final section places these developments in the context of Hong Kong's international standing, offering a realistic outlook for its near future.

2. *The progressive integration between Hong Kong and China*

The year of 2024 was marked by the further consolidation of Beijing's political dominance over the HKSAR, particularly with a zero-tolerance interpretation and applicability of the National Security Law. Starting with the Jimmy Lai case, passing through the biggest dissident trial in Hong Kong's history, and, finally, the efforts to implement patriotic education in the schools' curriculum, it is possible to see a clear change in the political landscape in the city.

2.1. *A media mogul on the spot*

The year of 2024 marked another turning point in the process of the media tycoon Jimmy Lai. There were two major hearings on his process during 2024. The first one happened on 2nd January, when the prosecution presented its case and Lai pleaded «not guilty» when being accused of collaborating with external forces and using his newspaper, Apple Daily, to spread «seditious materials». As for the second one, on November 20th – possibly the most awaited hearing –, he took the stand for the first time to testify on the national security case after having the trial adjourned in July due to the judges' availability.

Back in January, Lai, 77 years old, was called a «radical political figure» by the lead prosecutor Anthony Chau Tin-hang for taking advantage of the protests in 2019 for freedom and democracy to pursue his «illegal agenda» – that being engaging in hostile activities with foreign countries against the Hong Kong government. Chau listed the names of the countries with which Lai supposedly conspired, such as the US, Australia, Japan, and Ireland, and of the people (deemed as «collaborators») who allegedly helped him realize his goals, like several senior Washington officials. Clips from interviews given by Lai to foreign media outlets and events' speeches made between 2019 and 2020, before the imposition of the national security law, were also played in court to prove his conspiratorial plot. Six interviews were played. According to prosecutors, they are proof of Lai's request for support for foreign interference in local affairs.

In one of the clips, an interview from July 2019 with the American research institute Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Lai described tensions between Beijing and Washington as a modern-day Cold War: «Hong Kong is fighting a war of the same values as yours. It means we are fighting your war in your enemy's camp.» [Wong and Lin 2024, 2 January]. In other clips, Lai points out how the national security legislation, yet about to pass at that moment, would destroy Hong Kong's autonomy; that the US president back in 2020, Donald Trump, was the «only salvation» for the region; and that Hongkongers would welcome support from overseas entities.

Prosecutors used as their main argument publications made either by Lai or his «collaborators» on social media platforms or private messages. In

January's hearing, they presented a report made by a computer forensics expert [Leung 2024, 9 January]. The specialist, Chow Kam-pui, an associate professor at the University of Hong Kong's computer science department, was asked by the National Security Department (NSD) to prepare a full report on the following platforms: Telegram, WhatsApp, Signal, Facebook, Twitter (now, known as X), and YouTube.

While in court, Lai, a businessman who would not typically be considered a high-security threat, was accompanied by three prison officers, linked by an escort belt. The hearing took place in the West Kowloon Law Courts Building under heavy police presence, with a significant number of officers deployed to secure the Court. According to the news outlet South China Morning Post, about 50 people queued for seats in the public gallery for more than one hour before the hearing began. The veteran activist Alexandra Wong Fung-yiu stood in front of the court building with a British Union flag voicing support for the accused. Part of Lai's family attended, including his wife Teresa Li Wan-kam, his sons Timothy Lai Kin-yan and Augustin Lai Zhun-yan, and his daughter Claire Lai Choi. A delegation from Reporter Without Borders was present as well as foreign diplomats and other civilian supporters.

In November, Lai had the chance to take the stand at the Court and testify. He explained his relations with Western politicians, Taiwanese figures, and both the creation and involvement of Next Magazine and Apple Daily in the case, both owned by him and discontinued in 2021. He denied trying to influence Hong Kong and China's affairs and donating to political parties overseas. He admitted donating to US think tanks and religious organizations only. Lai pledged to have banned Apple Daily staff due to mentioning independence for Taiwan and Hong Kong, which he explained to be «a conspiracy» and a «crazy» idea [Wong *et al.* 2024, 20 November].

The Jimmy Lai case represents much more than just a regular judicial matter and correct application of the law. It acts as a crucial indicator for the trajectory of Hong Kong's freedoms is going to be under the National Security Law (NSL). His role as a media mogul, alongside his connections with internationally relevant figures, especially from the West, and his outspoken criticism towards Beijing make him a strong symbol for both sides of this chess board. For the pro-democracy movement, Lai represents a defiant voice for press freedom and civil liberties. While for Beijing and its allies, his case will act as an example to deter dissent at the same time it sets clear limits of international interference in Chinese affairs with a «zero tolerance» attitude, as stated by Chris Tang [DW 2024, 20 November], Hong Kong Secretary for Security, when speaking with journalists after the hearing of the 45 activists that took place the day before Lai's one in November.

If convicted, the businessman will face a life sentence, ensuring that he spends his final years behind bars. The harsh stand taken by prosecutors (likely acting on instructions from Beijing) reflects China's aim to consolidate

control over Hong Kong and sent a clear message to other media outlets, activists, and businesses: any attitude that could be interpreted as alignment with foreign forces or advocating for political reforms will have consequences. Since the implementation of the NSL, Hong Kong's media landscape has changed (or adapted) by applying self-censorship or closing entirely in fear – for example, in March 2024, the Radio Free Asia (RFA) announced the withdrawal of its staff in Hong Kong [*Reporter Without Borders* 2024].

In addition, the heavy police presence during the hearings, the participation of diplomats and foreign supporters, and the detailed presentation of Lai's interviews and social media activity as their main proof underscore how the case has been politicized to serve Beijing's narrative and is being used as a high-profile example of the consequences for opposing the regime. Unlike many other dissidents, who were mainly involved in organizing or participating in political activism, Lai's influence has an international reach, posing a threat to Beijing's international relations. It is likely that this circumstance played an important role in how aggressively the prosecutors have pursued his case. Its outcome will shape how dissent is managed in the city and whether international pressure has any sway over the government's actions.

Looking at the Chinese government's websites and state-affiliated media, we can find either complete silence or strong affirmations. While Xinhua News Agency has refrained from writing any articles on the story, the China Daily has published pieces emphasizing Lai's conspiratorial activities and portraying him as a disruptor of the social order, or the «mastermind and participant of the anti-China riots in Hong Kong as well as the 'agent' and 'pawn' of the anti-China forces» [*China Daily* 2024, 21 November]. The relative scarcity of official journalistic coverage seems to suggest an intent to downplay the case within mainland China, possibly to confirm that, thanks to the implementation of the national security law, *peace and harmony* have been successfully restored in the region. Indeed, the selective reporting in English, like the ones found at China Daily, which is a vehicle of the Chinese external propaganda system specifically designed to engage foreign audience appears calibrated to create a match with the government's position on the matter.

2.2. *The endless hunt for dissidents*

In 2024, Hong Kong continued to intensify its crackdown on pro-democracy activists under the National Security Law (NSL) that came into effect in June 2020. Of 47 activists and lawmakers, 45 were sentenced to prison terms that range from four to ten years for their roles in what was considered an unofficial primary election in July 2020, two weeks after the national security law was imposed over the territory. At that time, organizers estimated nearly 600,000 people voted at polling booths set up across the city. By planning and participating in this illegal election, according to Bei-

jing, they have conspired to subvert State power with acts that were aimed at disrupting the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government's duties.

The hearing for the activists happened on 19th November 2024, one day before Jimmy Lai's hearing. People started queuing to guarantee seats inside the West Kowloon Law Courts gallery the weekend before, staying overnight with boxes of food and personal items to endure the hours of waiting – on the morning before, they were at least 26 in line [Wong and Chow 2024, 18 November]. Police had cordon lines to monitor the perimeter and did body searches on activists on the site.

The former legal scholar labelled by Chinese government and media as the «mastermind» behind the plot, Benny Tai Yiu-ting, 60 years, was handed the heaviest sentence: ten years in prison [Lam *et al.* 2024, 20 November]. His prison term was previously set at 15 years for being considered a «principal offender», but the judges downgraded it to 10 years after he pleaded guilty. The activist Joshua Wong Chi-fung, a 28-year-old former student leader, was sentenced to four years and eight months. However, more than half of the convicted have been held in detention since March 2021, which will count toward their time left in prison.

This was Hong Kong's biggest national security trial and marked the first instance in which the HKSAR has addressed a case concerning the subversion of State power. Before it, China appeared in the global headlines related to the same subject when the Chinese coast guard arrested 12 activists at sea as they tried to escape to Taiwan by speedboat [BBC 2020, 30 December]. This case happened in August 2020, about 70 km south-east of Hong Kong. Most of them were linked to the protests that took place in 2019 and, therefore, not legally allowed to leave the country. By the end of 2020, the authorities charged eight of them for illegally crossing the border (leading up to two years in jail) and two for organizing the crossing (up to seven years in prison). The hearing happened in December that year and it was closed to foreign reporters and diplomats. Between the group, two minors (the whole group had ages between 17-33) confessed to their actions and did not face prosecution.

It is possible to interpret these cases as a strong message to all those who attempt to challenge the NSL. As stated by a South China Morning Post (SCMP) editorial [South China Morning Post 2024, 21 November], the Hong Kong judges established with the sentences that a subversion plot does not need to succeed or to be violent in order to breach the law. At the November hearing, the judges pointed out that the participants were determined to ensure a successful primary, back in July 2020. Therefore, this should be treated to be as a serious attempt to overthrow the government by force.

Chris Tan, Hong Kong Secretary for Security, read a statement for journalists after the hearing on November 19th. «We believe these sentences reflect the severity of the crime and show that crimes endangering national

security must be heavily punished. The sentences have sent a clear message to the public that we have zero tolerance for any acts endangering national security, including subverting state power», he affirmed [DW 2024, 20 November].

In December 2024, Hong Kong placed six people on a wanted list. Now living abroad, they are considered fugitives and a danger for national security. In addition to that, the HKSAR intensified its efforts to capture them by offering rewards of HK\$ 1 million (US 128,760) for any information that may lead to their arrest [Kunling 2024, 24 December]. On their website, the Hong Kong Police Force has a list of all the wanted activists with their names, photos, date of birth, and a paragraph explaining what they are wanted for. Among the six on the wanted list accused of committing national security offences (including inciting secession and collusion with foreign forces), there were a former district councilor, activists, a political commentator, a YouTuber, and a former actor. On the same day, the authorities also canceled the passports of seven people wanted under the security law, two lawmakers and five activists.

The pursuit of dissidents abroad shows the ongoing escalation nature of the crackdown under the National Security Law in Hong Kong by extending the strategy to those who have sought asylum. It sends a clear message that Beijing is determined to target those it considers as a threat to its authority regardless of their current location.

International reactions in the West have been largely condemnatory [European Parliament, 2024]. Governments and human rights organizations have criticized the sentences, viewing them as punitive measures against individuals engaging in lawful political activities. Despite these concerns, the Chinese government has shown no intention of loosening its grip and their spokespeople continue to reiterate the same «zero tolerance» alongside a demand of non-interference in local affairs. Beijing continues to assert its authority over Hong Kong, signaling a steadfast commitment to integrating the region more closely with mainland China's governance model. The fact that the crackdown on dissidents has reached beyond the country's borders is a strong indication that Beijing's efforts to end dissent will persist and likely intensify in the future.

2.3. Reframing local mentalities to build a dissent-free society

The educational landscape in Hong Kong has become, through 2024, a way of spreading even more the political views of the Chinese party. Starting on 1st January, the Patriotic Education Law came into effect in the region. The law sets out the main content regarding patriotic education. Some measures included intensified efforts to embed patriotic courses into the curriculum and a close attention to the implementation process.

In another push to strengthen Hongkongers' national identity and patriotic awareness, the government established a Working Group on Patri-

otic Education in April 2024 [Shao 2024, 29 April]. With students as their main focus, the group dedicated their efforts to outlining strategies to make the patriotic education more impactful. Exhibitions, commemorative ceremonies, and artistic performances were a part of the «soft tactics» the government decided to use to evoke and nourish the patriotic spirit.

However, in a regular visit to assess the implementation of the curriculum at The Hong Kong and Macau Lutheran Church Primary School in Hang Hau and the Yan Chai Hospital Lim Por Yen Secondary School in Tsuen Wan, something caught the attention of the inspector in a negative way: how the students were singing the national anthem [Leung 2024, 26 June]. In a detailed report, it was stated that during the traditional flag-raising ceremony in these two schools the singing of the anthem by the students was weak [教育局质素保证分部 2024, January]. The document instructed teachers to «give reminders and help students develop a habit of singing the national anthem loudly». Other schools were praised for the students' attitude during the same ceremony.

The document is not something new. Reports have been prepared since the school year of 2003-2004. Nevertheless, it was only last year that the Education Bureau decided to upload parts of the school reports for the general public to see. For the schools, this can mean an even bigger scrutiny, as they are being rated on how far they were able to integrate the national security curriculum into their practices for the public to witness. While transparency can promote accountability, the emphasis on publicizing compliance with patriotic standards risks creating a competitive or punitive environment, especially for schools struggling to meet these expectations.

The new school year of 2024-2025 started not only with new demands, but also a new addition to the curriculum: «*Xi Jinping Thoughts on Socialism*». The teachings of the Chinese leader were encased in the course Citizenship, Economics, and Society, a mandatory one for all 512 secondary schools. With classes like this one, students are learning about, for example, the country's political structure, challenges about the Belt and Road initiative, national security, and the opium war. The dedication totals 12 lessons of 40 minutes each [Sharma 2024, 3 September]. All students are regularly tested on new knowledge. Their answers are carefully monitored by both school directors and CCP fonctionnaires inside the schools, most likely to achieve two results. First, assessing students' capacity to interiorize the official Chinese narrative. Second, to verify if the latter is somehow challenged at home by parents that are less inclined to formally endorse it.

The 2023-2024 academic year also witnessed an unprecedented rise in applications from mainland Chinese students seeking to enroll in Hong Kong schools. Institutions in border districts, such as the North District, have declared a «full house» turning away many applicants due to a lack of capacity or inadequate academic qualifications. Driven by policies like the Top Talent Pass Scheme, the influx has led to significant integration

challenges. Mainland students often face difficulties adapting to the English-medium curriculum, with language barriers being a common obstacle. In some cases, schools have organized intensive English classes to support these students.

The integration of patriotic themes into English-language education exemplifies the disconnect between policy ambitions and classroom realities. New government-issued teaching kits incorporate national security topics into grammar lessons and reading materials. For example, passages on food security and nuclear development are used to teach sentence structures. While the intention is to combine language learning with patriotic themes, many educators argue that such materials are too dry and complex for students with limited proficiency, potentially disengaging them further.

Language policies also reinforced the cultural integration process. The increased use of Mandarin (Putonghua) in public life, including in the education system, further diminished the prominence of Cantonese, Hong Kong's traditional language, which had been a key marker of the city's distinct identity [You 2024, 20 March].

3. The slow transformation of Hong Kong into a pawn of China's economic strategy

Throughout 2024, Hong Kong underwent several notable economic and financial shifts. These changes were shaped by post-pandemic recovery, ongoing geopolitical tensions, and HKSAR evolving role as a global financial hub.

3.1. Untangling China's contribution to Hong Kong economic recovery

After a couple of difficult years marked by COVID-19 restrictions and geopolitical instability, Hong Kong's economy began to stabilize and show several signs of growth in 2024.

The end of strict pandemic-related measures in the city, combined with global improvements in public health, created a foundation for economic growth. Mainland China, Hong Kong's largest trading partner, also opened up more broadly in 2023 [Menegazzi 2024], boosting business and consumer confidence in 2024. This evolution helped the city to stabilize and recover by focusing on key sectors like tourism, retail, and finance, as well as leveraging its role as a global trading hub.

The Hong Kong Tourism Board and government worked on various promotional campaigns to attract tourists back to the city, and in particular tourists from mainland China [Weilan 2024, 12 May]. This recovery benefited sectors like retail, hospitality, and entertainment, especially during holidays and festivals. As a consequence, the unemployment rate started

declining and the progressive increase in consumer confidence further supported domestic consumption and contributed to more sustainable growth.

Global trade also started showing some signs of recovery. The reopening in China proved to be crucial in boosting Hong Kong's key industries – such as electronics, machinery, and high-end consumer goods – whose exports registered an encouraging increase. In this context, the Hong Kong Monetary Authority (HKMA) and local trade associations have also been particularly reactive in supporting businesses with initiatives to facilitate smoother trade relations, including adjusting customs processes and enhancing digital trade infrastructure.

In this context, the Hong Kong government also confirmed its commitment to boost both trade and logistics connectivity as well as talent and labor mobility. Infrastructure projects in the Greater Bay Area (GBA), such as the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge, the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link, and the Qianhai Free Trade Zone, continued to expand, confirming Hong Kong as an essential shipping and logistics hub, with cross-border infrastructure seen as essentials in supporting e-commerce, import-export businesses, and manufacturing supply chains.

The year of 2024 also marked a significant acceleration of talent flows between Hong Kong and mainland China, with not only more workers, executives, and entrepreneurs traveling between the two regions, but also with an apparent new strategy implemented by Hong Kong to boost its own ability to attract highly skilled workforce from mainland China [Li and Xue 2024, 18 October], particularly in fields like technology, finance, engineering, and digital transformation. Hong Kong situation remains very solid, thanks to its 2.5% economic growth, marking a moderate slow down compared to 2023 (+3.2%), but expected to maintain a similar one in 2025.

3.2. *Hong Kong as a renewed (Chinese) financial hub?*

Hong Kong has long been one of the world's leading financial centers, acting as a gateway between China and the rest of the world. However, since the 2019 protests and the imposition of the National Security Law in 2020, combined with the global COVID-19 pandemic, Hong Kong faced significant challenges to its status. During this period, the competition from other financial hubs like Singapore emerged as a new challenge to the city.

Although throughout 2024 several financial firms continued to relocate to more politically stable environments such as Singapore, 2024 marked a turning point in Hong Kong strategy to recover and reposition itself within the global financial landscape. This recovery was supported by several important initiatives, including economic stimulus measures, the continued influx of mainland Chinese capital, and efforts to diversify its financial sector, especially in emerging fields like fintech, green finance, and digital assets [HK Gov 2024, 24 September].

Generally speaking, the strengthening of Hong Kong's financial sector in 2024 largely stemmed from rebuilding investor confidence in the face of political uncertainty, as well as from the efforts made to modernize the financial infrastructure, especially in areas like digital finance and sustainable investment, and the renewed perception of Hong Kong as a privileged financial hub for mainland China. In this context, data confirm that the strengthening of both commercial and financial relationship with Mainland China was the key drive of Hong Kong recovery. The evolution of the Hong Kong stock market is an effective example of that.

The Hong Kong stock market succeeded at displaying stability and resilience in 2024, despite ongoing global uncertainties such as inflation and trade tensions. If IPOs surged due to a recovery in global investor sentiment and the return of international capital, it is also true that the Hong Kong Stock Exchange (HKEX) remained a leading venue for initial public offerings (IPOs) thanks to a number of Chinese tech giants and emerging companies that chose to list in Hong Kong attracted by its proximity to mainland China's market and its more flexible listing rules compared to Western exchanges [KPMG 2024, 3 October]. Additionally, Hong Kong strengthened its position as a platform for Chinese companies seeking to attract global capital, to be collected from both international and local investors.

Indeed, thanks to both Shanghai-Hong Kong Stock Connect and Shenzhen-Hong Kong Stock Connect platforms, the direct access to Hong Kong's capital markets for mainland Chinese investors and vice versa was further simplified. Beyond facilitating China-Hong Kong financial cooperation and ensure that the latter remains one of Asia's leading financial centers, the consolidation of Hong Kong financial position was also meant to prove to international investors that Hong Kong remains a privileged entry point to mainland Chinese markets, regaining some of the attractiveness lost during the previous years, especially vis-à-vis Singapore. For example, the expanding of the Bond Connect platform further facilitated international investors' acquisition of Chinese bonds, strengthening the role of Hong Kong as the most valuable intermediary.

Another trend that was confirmed in 2024 is Hong Kong determination to continue to diversify its financial services beyond traditional banking and real estate, to embrace fintech, digital banking, and green finance, as a consequence of the new emphasis placed by global financial markets on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) investments. The city saw increasing investment in cryptocurrencies and digital currencies with the adoption of initiatives such as the Hong Kong Digital Asset Exchange and regulations around ESG investments were enhanced to confirm Hong Kong as a key player in the sustainable finance movement in Asia. Indeed, the city's alignment with global efforts to promote green bonds, carbon markets, and sustainable investments helped attract both impact investors and

companies looking to meet international sustainability standards [HK Gov 2024, 24 September].

Hong Kong's role as a testing ground for China's central bank digital currency (CBDC) – the digital yuan (e-CNY) – also became more pronounced in 2024, as the city increasingly supported digital payment platforms that could bridge mainland China's domestic digital currency systems with international markets [*China Daily* 2024, 15 March]. The previous work made at boosting the development of digital currencies and cross-border payment systems to allow Hong Kong to integrate more deeply into China's digital economy proved to be essential in facilitating this transition.

4. *Hong Kong progressive distancing from historical partners*

Since the implementation of the National Security Law in 2020, Hong Kong's relations with several Western countries, particularly the United States and European Union member states, had deteriorated significantly. Western governments criticized Hong Kong's decreasing political freedoms, erosion of autonomy, and the diminishing space for democratic opposition.

Throughout 2024, Western diplomatic sanctions were maintained or expanded. The U.S. continued its policy of imposing sanctions on individuals and entities in Hong Kong deemed responsible for undermining the city's freedoms and autonomy, including asset freezes, travel bans, and restriction of business dealings [Magnier 2024, 25 December]. If Washington has been more vocal in imposing restrictions on sectors like financial services, technology, and media, with President Joe Biden going as far as emphasizing that Hong Kong was no longer autonomous under the Hong Kong Autonomy Act and that, as a consequence, the region lost its status as a special administrative region, the European Union has been keener to issue diplomatic protests and condemnations of Hong Kong's political repression, raising concerns over the city's press freedoms, civil rights, and rule of law. Also, it has become more and more frequent to see political and mediatic debates in Western countries questioning the status of Hong Kong as an autonomous entity, emphasizing its deeper and deeper alignment with mainland China in matters of foreign policy and trade.

Increasing reluctance to issue visas for Hong Kong pro-democracy activists emerging in countries such as the U.S., U.K., and Canada, which had welcomed them immediately after 2019 protests also became visible. Today, several Western nations providing asylum or protection for those fleeing Hong Kong experience an increasing pressure from China offering generous bounties to have the refugees back [*Al Jazeera* 2024, 24 December].

This situation progressively fueled the rise of a local alarm in terms of talent and investment losses. Indeed, continued sanctions and diplomatic isolation had the potential to impact Hong Kong's job market, with many

young professionals, journalists, and pro-democracy activists leaving the region to seek opportunities abroad – primarily in countries offering political asylum, such as the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. – and being potentially replaced by newcomers from mainland China.

Another major change in Hong Kong's international relations is linked to the fact that its foreign relations started to become increasingly framed through the lens of its role as part of China's global strategy, thanks to a slow but progressive alignment among Hong Kong's foreign policy and Beijing's broader diplomatic goals. Hong Kong is now perceived as a region that is progressively giving up its historically more neutral and autonomous role in international organizations such as the United Nations or the World Trade Organization (WTO), with Beijing taking a more direct role in managing the city's diplomatic affairs.

The sudden reorientation of Hong Kong diplomatic and economic relations further confirms the ongoing transition. As a global financial hub and trade center, Hong Kong had traditionally maintained strong ties with Asia-Pacific nations, the European Union, and North America. Today, its role in international trade is increasingly tied to mainland China's foreign policy priorities. A trend that might potentially affect its relations with former core economic partners [HK Gov 2024, 24 September].

Throughout 2024, Hong Kong has consolidated its image as a financial hub for investments in infrastructure projects tied to China's Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia, the Middle East (energy, finance, and technology), Africa, and Latin America (resource extraction).

The Middle East in particular is emerging as the new priority for Hong Kong economic strategy. In October last year, an important step was taken towards strengthening Hong Kong ties with the whole region. The Saudi Arabia Stock Exchange started to trade the first exchange-traded funds (ETFs¹) that track 30 Hong Kong-listed companies (those being mainly Chinese firms, including the holdings Meituan, Techtronic Industries, and Anta Sports). HKSAR Financial Secretary Paul Chan did an in-person visit to Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, along with a business delegation to take part in the ETF listing ceremony. While there, they attended an investment conference with bilateral meetings and round-table discussions with the presence of institutions and representatives from the region.

The step came one year after Hong Kong launched Asia's first ETF on Saudi Arabia equities market (including Saudi Aramco and Al Rajhi Banking & Investment) [Au and Sedgwick 2023, 6 December], which had Saudi's sovereign wealth fund, The Public Investment Fund, as an anchor investor. Both movements had a strong government support on their backs, with

1. ETFs are a "basket" of equities that trade like a regular singular stock in the stocks market system. It is seen as an option to diversify investments by limiting the risk of investing in one single stock. It usually tracks a selection of stocks in a specific index, industry or any other given category of equities.

Hong Kong officials yearning for investments from wealthy Middle Eastern investors and family offices, as well as establishing closer ties with the region. The *quid-pro-quo* was the first step of what the government explained to be the beginning of a series of «more diversified products» to connect investors from both regions [‘FS continues to explore’ 2024, 31 October].

This was not, however, the only preferential bridge created between the two regions. The CEO of the Hong Kong Monetary Authority (HKMA), Eddie Yue Wai-man, and the governor of the Saudi Central Bank (SAMA), Ayman Al-Sayari, met in December 2024 to discuss topics such as financial infrastructure development and investment outlooks. This was a follow-up meeting after another reunion that happened in July 2023, when they agreed to promote financial innovation projects and develop the fintech sector to diminish the reliance on oil and property sectors.

Hong Kong rapprochement to the Middle East is not a local-framed strategy, rather another confirmation of the role the former colony is now playing in facilitating China’s broader economic agenda. Aimed at securing the precious resources of the region and consolidating new partnership in a region traditionally closer to the United States than China. From the perspective of Middle Eastern countries, engaging with Hong Kong is an opportunity to expand beyond an energy-focused investment portfolio and take part into technological development in Asia. More importantly, Hong Kong’s active outreach to other countries reflects its ambition to sustain relevance as a global financial hub. Whether these efforts will yield long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships remains to be seen, but they show the region’s capacity to adapt to global shifts in power and economic influence [HK Gov 2024, 24 September].

As far as the European Union and the United States are concerned, instead, in 2024 their relationship begun to stabilize at a lower level of engagement. On a general note, the continued U.S. sanctions, combined with increased political control from Beijing, led to concerns about Hong Kong’s legal environment, which was once one of the city’s key strengths. Therefore, despite having been able to maintain (so far) a relevant role in global finance, Hong Kong reputation and status are regularly challenged by political developments, particularly the risk of political interference in business operations. For these reasons, as it started happening in 2022, several multinational companies opted to reassess their presence in the city, as geopolitical risks associated with Hong Kong’s future began to manifest.

A particular attention should be given to the case of the United Kingdom, where the Labour Party’s victory in the July general election has injected a fresh breeze into the country bilateral relations with China. If the fourteen years of Conservative rule were marked by instability and contradictions in the UK’s approach to Beijing, the Labour Party, through their Foreign Secretary David Lammy, immediately emphasized its commitment to adopt a more «consistent» strategy. This was made public by an article

two months before the election in which Lammy described his vision for the post – an approach he calls «progressive realism» [Lammy 2024, 17 April].

In the beginning of 2024, ahead of the implementation of Article 23 in Hong Kong, the British government loosened requirements for holders of its British National Overseas (BNO) passport wanting to emigrate [Tung 2024, 18 March]. With the document, Hong Kongers became able to apply for a visa and eventual citizenship after six years. The rule became valid for both married and unmarried couples that did not live in the same address as long as you can prove you have an ongoing relationship. Previously, partners had to at least prove two years of cohabitation before being eligible.

After the general election, the new British Foreign Secretary visited China in what was interpreted by the Chinese as a new starting point [*Xinhua* 2024, 19 October]. However, the status of Hong Kongers living abroad – in particular those in the UK under their BNO passport – may be where the waters of bilateral diplomacy will continue to churn, sending mixed signals of what would be this «new starting point». In December, the UK government indeed reaffirmed its commitment to defending Hong Kong's freedoms and those seeking refuge on its soil. Yet, Lammy himself seems to be treading a delicate line, uncertain of how far to push back while maintaining diplomatic engagement with Beijing and pushing a new agenda.

Later that year, the British Minister for the Indo-Pacific Catherine West visited Hong Kong to meet government officials, in what was understood as a pact to the revitalization of bilateral relations. During the visit, the British consulate announced the UK government was «committed to a long-term, strategic and pragmatic relationship with China». This could be a restarting point for their relation after years of tension under the rule of the British Conservative Party regarding human rights and security concerns in the city. However, it is also possible that the rapprochement with Hong Kong has been made to confirm a sort of endorsement of the new role China has attributed to the city. Indeed, the year ended with a promise of another visit to China in January 2025, this time from the British Finance Minister, the Chancellor Rachel Reeves, in what was seen by the Chinese media as a sign to seek stronger economic ties and continue to focus on a new and promising pragmatic relationship.

The relationship between Hong Kong and Taiwan also experienced significant strains throughout 2024. Because of a narrative increasingly shaped by the broader context of China's policies, with Hong Kong being pulled closer into Beijing's orbit and Taiwan current leadership remaining resistant to any overtures from China, bilateral interactions also started deteriorating.

In fact, the evolution observed in recent years is progressing in two different directions. On one hand, the number of Hong Kong residents working on issues deemed sensitive under the National Security Law choosing to move to Taiwan – often without making it known – continues to rise

(not revealing the move is considered essential to maintain a low profile and feel safe). On the other hand, after serving as a bridge between the United States and Hong Kong during the 2019 protests, Taiwan has gradually reassessed its stance regarding any potential implicit or explicit support for Hong Kong's cause. By early 2024, this has led to the adoption of a form of self-censorship, aimed at avoiding overt concern about Hong Kong's situation and, consequently, attracting Beijing's scrutiny [*Intelligence Online* 2025, 21 January]. For this reason, several think tanks are discretely backing away from bilateral programs of collaboration, research, and reflection – once again, to avoid drawing attention. That said, bilateral trade remains stable, maintaining the volumes seen over the past three years.

5. Conclusion

In 2024, Hong Kong found itself in an increasingly precarious position, balancing its historical role as a global financial hub with the rising tensions between China and the West. The city's future as a neutral economic player continued to be undermined by its integration with mainland China, which limited its ability to act independently in the international arena. Hong Kong's standing in the global community became increasingly tied to Beijing's interests over the last year, complicating its diplomatic relations with the West.

As the legal and political landscape keeps shifting under the National Security Law, the city risks becoming more and more isolated from its former allies, raising questions about whether it can sustain its reputation as an open and competitive global center. With businesses and investors increasingly weighing the risks of engagement in such a landscape, Hong Kong's future may no longer be determined by its own ambitions, but by the strategic imperatives of Beijing.

The establishment of cash rewards for activists living abroad and passports cancelations sends a signal that Beijing is far from done demonstrating its power. These measures extend the reach of the National Security Law beyond Hong Kong's borders. They not only heighten fears among dissidents overseas, but also risk triggering diplomatic tensions with the countries offering them refuge. It is still to be seen how the zero-tolerance policy will be used by China. However, if Beijing is to use the argument of internal affairs, as it does with Taiwan every time other countries try to contest its acts, this can mean the beginning of further legal accusations and international disputes.

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On 20 October 2024, former Indonesian President, Joko Widodo, popularly known as Jokowi, came to the end of his second and final five-year term (2019-24) when he handed over the presidency to his preferred successor, Prabowo Subianto. Since the start of Jokowi's second term a strong authoritarian or illiberal turn had been evident, which became particularly pronounced during his final two years in power, analyzed in this article. Jokowi's authoritarian turn was functional to the implementation of grand infrastructure development projects, which needed substantial foreign investments. In order to realize them, Jokowi did not hesitate to create unfavourable conditions for local communities, in particular by the implementation of «National Strategic Projects», giving access to community and privately-owned land. One mega project above all others defined Jokowi's final two years. This was his attempt to build a new national capital – the Ibu Kota Nusantara (IKN) – in the jungles of East Kalimantan (Borneo), a project still far from completion at his term's end. Also, the increasing illiberal turn characterizing Jokowi's actions during his last two years as president became evident when, after vainly attempting to have his term extended, he not only chose to back Prabowo, namely a politician with dubious democratic credentials, as his successor, but also manipulated the Constitutional Court to ensure that his eldest son, the 37-year-old Gibran Rakabuming Raka, could put his name forward as Prabowo's running mate. Nonetheless, the alliance with Prabowo was no guarantee that the fate of Jokowi's signature project, the building of the new capital, would be realized. The new President had his own priorities, the main one being his ambition to unite all political parties under his big tent «red-and-white» coalition. Fortunately for the future of Indonesian democracy, when the period under review was coming to its close Prabowo was far from achieving his goal, especially after Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan, PDI-P) triumphed at the polls in the 27 November 2024 contest for the Jakarta Governorship. This opened the possibility that the PDI-P might fulfil the role of an effective opposition and thwart Prabowo's desire to return to an authoritarian military style government along the lines of Suharto's «New Order» (1966-98).

KEYWORDS – Indonesia; Jokowi; Joko Widodo; dynasty; democratic decline; developmentalism; 2024 elections; authoritarianism.

Yes, I'm desperate now. There's no hope anymore. The [moral] level [of the government] is already hurting democracy. I was an activist in 1998 fighting with other friends to build Indonesian democracy. Successfully building up until now, having a Constitutional Court, an Ombudsman, being able to control the police, that's the struggle of [us] 98 activist friends. [But now] continuously being betrayed, being tricked, who wouldn't be angry?

*Indonesian artist-activist, Butet Kartaredjasa,
30 January 2024¹*

1. Introduction

In the present essay, which covers the period January 2023 to December 2024, we focus on Jokowi's track record in government during his last two years in office. This saw him complete his ten-year incumbency (2014-2024) and prepare for his legacy by manoeuvring to ensure a desired outcome for the 2024 presidential election. Key here was Jokowi's success in securing his long-term political interests by arranging for his eldest son, Gibran Rakabuming Rakabumi, to become the running mate of Jokowi's own successor, former general Prabowo Subianto (born 1951) (Section 4.3).

We start with an overall view of the Indonesian economy in Jokowi's closing years before moving on to consider his track record in foreign policy, including the much-vexed issue of West Papua. Here we cover some of the ground already charted in the review essays by Kimura and Anugrah (2023) and Michael Buehler (2024) in *Asian Survey*. We then come to the core of this analysis, namely a consideration of the 2024 presidential and legislative elections and Jokowi's constitution-defying footwork around these key events. Our essay closes with a consideration of the first three months (October-December 2024) of Prabowo's presidency and his administration's prospects going forward, a theme which is further elaborated in our succinct conclusion.

During Jokowi's decade in office (2014-2024), infrastructure development was the prime mover of his economic policy. This required an all-out effort to attract foreign investment. One vehicle for attracting this investment was the so-called «National Strategic Projects (*Proyek Strategis Nasional*)» (henceforth: NSPs). These formed the heart of Jokowi's infrastructure development programme by designating specific areas as core economic resource points to attract domestic or foreign direct investment. They were designed

1. «Iya, putus asa saya sekarang. Sudah nggak ada harapan. Levelnya sudah melukai demokrasi. Saya termasuk aktivis 1998 berjuang bersama kawan lain untuk membangun demokrasi Indonesia. Berhasil membangun sampai sekarang punya MK, Ombudsman, bisa mengontrol kepolisian, itu perjuangan teman-teman aktivis 98. Terus dikhianati, diajak-akalin siapa yang gak marah?» [Huda 2024].

to enable foreign and domestic investors to secure development access to community and privately-owned land. As these NSPs were implemented in a crude and haphazard fashion across the country, it became clear that people and communities were being sacrificed in the name economic growth.

As Jokowi's term ended, one mega project above all others became his principal concern. This was Indonesia's new national capital, the IKN (*Ibu Kota Nusantara*/Archipelago Capital City). Hacked out of the Bornean jungles in distant East Kalimantan, this had long been planned as Jokowi's signature project. In his ambitious imaginings, he saw this as guaranteeing him lasting renown as the President who had finally exorcised the ghosts of the Dutch colonial past by abandoning the fast-sinking flood-prone Jakarta, former seat of Indonesia's Dutch rulers, for a new Indonesian capital built by Indonesian architects to traditional Indonesian norms and entirely shorn of the faded glories of the former Netherlands East Indies state with its pillared portico villas and tropical *ambtswoning* (government residences).

Although Jokowi's plan to start using the presidential palace of the new national capital to celebrate Independence Day on 17 August 2024 was not realised, he was determined that the project be continued under his successor, with his eldest son strategically placed to guarantee its longevity. Indeed, as we will see shortly, the new national capital rapidly became a fetish and an obsession, and its construction began to have an impact on the domestic economy, which had still not fully recovered from the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic.

Pragmatic diplomacy was the hallmark of Jokowi's years in office with the development of the country's infrastructure taking pride of place. There was also a large overlay of image building. One thinks here of Jokowi's attempts to show Indonesia punching above its weight by acting as host to the November 2022 G-20 in Bali and engaging in bridge-building diplomacy between Kyiv and Moscow in late June 2022. Unfortunately, when it came to a dispute much closer to home, Papua, such bridge building was notably absent. Despite Jokowi's 2014 campaign promise to achieve a political resolution of the long-running Papuan problem during his first incumbency (2014-2019), human rights abuses in the troubled half-island continued. These ongoing abuses ensured Papua's continuing international prominence as a human rights hot spot. This in turn led to increasing international concern and awareness of the Papua problem, resulting in successive defeats for Indonesia at the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC). Here major powers like the United States became involved, unlike in the past when only the much smaller Pacific Island states showed any concern for the Papuan cause.

We then proceed to the core of this essay which analyses the 2024 presidential election, the electoral appeal of Prabowo and his youthful running mate, and the former general's family background, career and resilience. In particular, we look at his post-May 1998 comeback and the ways in which he rebuilt his political career after the disasters which befell him at the time

of Suharto's resignation. At the same time, we also look at Jokowi's pragmatism in navigating treacherous waters of Indonesian politics, a theme already addressed in our previous essay [Tirtosudarmo and Carey 2022, pp. 179, 183, 194]. But here the story takes a more dramatic turn with Jokowi's willingness to violate the Indonesian constitution on full display. We see how he worked to achieve his desired outcomes in the 14 February 2024 presidential, legislative and local elections, thus ensuring the smooth transfer of power to Prabowo Subianto as president and Jokowi's son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, as vice president on 20 October 2022. Far from shunting Jokowi to the side-lines and relegating him to an obscure provincial retirement in his native city of Surakarta, the presidential election contributed to secure his political future. Relinquishing his «king maker» role was not on Jokowi's agenda. A President, once seen as a bright hope for Indonesian democracy, had metamorphosed at the end of his ten-year incumbency into a despot prepared to bend the political establishment to his will [Aspinall and Berenschot 2019; Davidson 2018; Power and Warburton 2020].

2. *The concluding phase of Joko Widodo second term as president*

2.1. *The «New Order» legacy*

Indonesia is a child of the Pacific War and came of age after suffering crippling damages during the Cold War. Like its ASEAN partners Vietnam and Burma (post-1992 Myanmar), the Republic is a product of a decolonisation process rooted in an early 20th century nationalist movement. Indonesia's achievement of physical *merdeka* (independence) coincided with the end of World War II in Asia. Like Vietnam, which brought the French to defeat at Dien Bien Phu (7 May 1954), Indonesia had to fight for its freedom against the former colonial power. Although it waged an eventually successful guerilla war against the Netherlands, its independence owed as much to diplomacy as prowess on the battlefield. Always outgunned by the 102,000-strong Dutch army in Java [Van Reybrouck 2024, p. 466], Indonesia relied on the support of foreign countries to secure its eventual independence. Here the post-war superpower, the United States, played a critical role. Faced with Dutch intransigence and mindful of the need to present a united NATO front against the USSR, Washington pressurised The Hague to reach a diplomatic agreement (2 November 1949) on pain of suspension of Marshall Aid [Soelias 2015]. This fact should always be borne in mind. Indonesia is a country whose destiny has been determined and shaped by global events.²

2. As Indonesia's first prime minister, Sutan Sjahrir (1909-1966; in office 1945-1947), put it in his September 1945 pamphlet *Perjuangan Kita* [Our Struggle], «the fate of Indonesia, more than any other country, depend[s] on the international situation and [global] developments», Sjahrir 1946, p. 19.

Just a decade after its independence, Indonesia was again remade by global conflict. This time it was the Cold War (1947-1991), which pitted the socialist and capitalist blocs against each other. Deep political cleavages, in the making since the late colonial era, had already fissured the Indonesian body politic. The forces of the Left, socialism and communism, the nationalist Centre, and Islam and the military on the right were all radicalised by the experience of the independence struggle (1945-49). In the last decade of Sukarno's presidency (1945-1966), these forces collided with fatal consequences as Indonesia became a proxy in the Cold War [Kahin 1963]. With the malign intervention of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the forces of the Right prevailed over the Left in Indonesia in what became known as «Operation Jakarta» [Bevins 2020, 18 May]. Sukarno's government, his nationalist supporters and the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) were all destroyed in what the CIA later acknowledged as a massacre which «ranks as one of the worst mass murders of the 20th century» [Aarons 2007, p. 81]. Conservative estimates put those killed at between 500,000 and a million, others suggest two to three million. Many thousands more were detained and imprisoned without trial. This political tsunami produced General Suharto's «New Order». A post-independence Indonesia, which had previously leaned toward the socialist and communist bloc — as witnessed by the April 1955 Bandung Conference and the subsequent Jakarta-Peking axis³ — was now squarely in the Western capitalist camp.

While Indonesia continued to be presented as «free and active (*bebas aktif*)», to all intents and purposes it had become a prisoner of the economic policies imposed by the IMF and the World Bank. In Indonesia's case, this was brokered through the Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia (IGGI, post-1992 Consultative Group on Indonesia, CGI), the international consortium of donor countries which financed Indonesia's development until the consortium's formal dissolution in 2003.

Under Suharto, the management of the Indonesian economy was taken over by a group of economist-technocrats led by Professor Widjojo Nitisastro, the New Order's long serving head (1967-83) of the National Planning Agency (Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Nasional, BAPPENAS) and coordinating minister for Economics, Finance and Industry (1973-83). Widjojo and his fellow technocrats had been trained at the University of California at Berkeley in the early 1960s; this explains the «Berkeley mafia» sobriquet by which they became known. Their watchwords were pragmatism, economic growth and trickle-down economics. To them is due the elaboration of a national development plan focussed on the promotion of economic growth, which aimed at restructuring the Indonesian economy through centrally controlled five-year

3. Also known as the Djakarta-Peking-Pyongyang-Hanoi-Phnom Penh Axis inaugurated in January 1965 as part of President Sukarno's foreign policy during the last phase of Indonesia's «Guided Democracy» era (1959-66).

development plans. Starting from the early 1970s and ending with Suharto's fall on 21 May 1998, these development plans were sequentially implemented. Under Suharto's dispensation, three principles of development were adopted – known in Indonesia as the «*Trilogi Pembangunan*» (*Development Trilogy*) – namely stability, growth and equity, which became the lodestars for the state economy and for Indonesia's progress.

Widjojo and his fellow technocrats believed, like free marketeers the world over, that tax-cuts and other benefits for the rich would eventually benefit the impoverished masses through a supposed «trickle down» effect. While they may have succeeded in reducing the number of people living below the poverty line in Indonesia to the current 9% (in reality, as noted below, 30%), statistics showed the gap between the few rich and the economically challenged mass becoming ever wider. What was happening under Suharto was a trickle up rather than a trickle down.

The pursuit of the *Trilogi Pembangunan* was predicated on the New Order's guarantee of political stability enforced by the military. This was seen by Suharto as the sine qua non for the achievement of growth and equity. Hence, from the early 1970s political development was tightly controlled. At the same time, a basic restructuring of Indonesian politics was undertaken. From 5 January 1973, only three parties were allowed to exist – the state party, Golkar, the Islamic United Development Party (*Partai Persatuan Pembangunan*, PPP), and the Partai Demokrasi Indonesia (PDI). The last two represented a merger of four earlier Islamic parties and five non-Islamic parties respectively. It was assumed these three parties, established to appeal to Muslim (PPP) and non-Muslim/*abangan* (nominally Muslim Javanese) voters, adequately represented the political aspirations of the Indonesian people. The government ensured that these parties never developed into an effective opposition by controlling their leadership and «recalling» (dismissing) outspoken legislators.

For three decades, general elections were conducted every five years (1977, 1982, 1987, 1992 and 1997), with Golkar, the ruling party, always winning by massive landslides. The elected Peoples' Consultative Assembly (MPR) then unanimously re-elected Suharto as president for no less than five consecutive terms of which he served out four complete five-year periods. In this fashion, the second Indonesian President ruled Indonesia «constitutionally» for 32 years (1966-1998) in what Herbert Feith described as a «repressive developmentalist regime» [Feith 1982b]. In May 1998, Suharto was toppled by a combination of factors, the most important of which were the impact of the Asian financial crisis (June 1997-July 1998) and massive public protest.

2.2. *How the post-Suharto era betrayed the hopes of an escape from the legacy of Suharto's New Order*

Following the fall of Suharto in May 1998, various changes occurred in Indonesia's political landscape. They included the adoption of a multi-party

system, decentralisation, direct elections and the creation of a Constitutional Court (Mahkamah Konstitusi) (Ellis 2005); yet the structure of the country's political economy remained largely intact. As Robison and Hadiz [2004] noted succinctly, there was only a «reorganisation» of power. Joko Widodo (aka Jokowi) was the fifth president after the fall of Suharto, succeeding Habibie (1998-1999), Abdurrahman Wahid (1999-2001), Megawati (2001-2004) and Yudhoyono (SBY, 2004-2014). Perceived initially as the bright hope for Indonesia, Jokowi claimed to have no connection whatsoever with Suharto or the 1965-66 events, having been born in 1961 and thus only four years old when the Indonesian Second President's «creeping coup» against his predecessor began. There were thus high expectations that Jokowi would make Indonesia a new country, democratic, just and prosperous. But these expectations were severely disabused.

As the only president with a business background, Jokowi knew well how a national economy works. But he was also acutely aware that his hands were tied politically by the need to protect the interests of the Indonesian oligarchs. This means that, despite his popular mandate, Jokowi was unable to make any fundamental changes to macroeconomic structures or shift the economic policy towards a more people-friendly economic agenda. Differently put, Jokowi could not but continue the enhanced growth model bequeathed by his predecessors. This was made abundantly clear when, in July 2016, Jokowi summoned former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's Finance Minister Sri Mulyani (in post 2005-2010) to take on the same role. Sri Mulyani – managing director of the World Bank in the years 2010-2016, the first Indonesian to hold that prestigious office – was widely considered as an ideological «granddaughter» of Professor Widjojo. The economic and fiscal policies she implemented were straight from the playbook of the Berkeley mafia.

By the end of Jokowi's second term in office in October 2024, the Indonesian public had become aware that their hope for a new Indonesia was just an illusion. Indeed, with the election of Prabowo as Jokowi's successor, they began to fear that the return of Suharto's repressive New Order regime was just around the corner.

2.3. *Symptoms of democratic decline*

The implementation and eventual failure of Joko Widodo's socio-economic policies is discussed below. Here we want to highlight the symptoms of democratic decline which became apparent under his dispensation. A first one is represented by the growing number of agrarian conflicts – namely contestations over land and local resources. According to the Agrarian Reform Consortium (*Konsorsium Pembaharuan Agraria*) and other expert observers, agrarian conflict increased due to the sharp rise in the economic activities of a growing number of industries requiring more land. Most of these agrarian conflicts occurred in plantation industries and in forestry, pitting local peo-

ple against foreign and domestic companies. Conflict also occurred because of plain bad management. This was especially the case in palm oil plantations and mining, where land and economic resources in various locations, particularly in Sumatra, Kalimantan and Papua, but also in Java, became increasingly contended. Some observers argued that the acceleration of conflict was directly related to the implementation of the new Job Creation Laws (on which, more later), whose enactment caused widespread popular protest in September 2019. The two Ministers most directly involved with these agrarian issues – Minister of Agriculture Syahrul Yasin Limpo (2019-2023) and Minister of the Environment and Forestry Siti Nurbaya Bakar (2014-2024) – were both from the Nasdem (National Democrat) Party.

Another symptom of democratic decline – which, once again involved a member of the Nasdem Party – was the corruption scandal involving Johnny Gerard Plate, the minister of Communication and Information Technology in office in 2019 to 2023. Plate was accused, along with six senior officials in his ministry and local businessmen of defrauding the state to the tune of Indonesian rupiahs (IDR) 8 trillion (US\$ 510,000,000). The speculation was reported to have occurred in a government project to develop internet infrastructure in remote regions like Plate's native Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT) [*Jakarta Globe* 2023, 8 November]. Given that the Nasdem founder and leader, Surya Paloh, was at the time in a situation of open conflict with President Joko Widodo (on this more later), rumours began to circulate that the President had had a hand in accelerating the prosecution of both Yasin Limpo and Johnny Plate by the Corruption Eradication Commission.⁴

2.4. *An economic policy in line with Suharto's «New Order»*

During his last two years (2022-2024) in power, Jokowi began implementing economic policies which had been made possible by the creation of the so-called Omnibus Law. Named, in Orwellian fashion, «Job Creation Laws (Undang-Undang [UU] Cipta Kerja)», but widely criticized as inimical to labour and indigenous land rights, Jokowi's legal reforms facilitated the increase of deforestation and defanged the powers of the Corruption Eradication Commission. The creation of the Job Creation Laws was claimed to be driven by a desire to simplify the bureaucratic processes, which so frequently stymied the realisation of development projects in Indonesia. The revision of the laws governing the working of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) had a similar goal. They originated from the need to make bu-

4. Plate was given a 15-year custodial sentence on 8 November 2023 by Jakarta's Anti-Corruption Criminal Court for personally embezzling US\$ 1,000,000 [*Jakarta Globe* 2023, 8 November]. Meanwhile, Limpo was handed a 10-year sentence for blackmailing and extorting bribes from his subordinates in the Agriculture Ministry amounting to IDR 44.5 billion (US\$ 2,700,000) [*Antara News* 2023, 11 July].

reacrats feel more secure in implementing government projects given that a very large number of bureaucrats had earlier been prosecuted by the KPK for alleged corruption. These two regulations, the Undang-Undang Cipta Kerja (Job Creation Laws) and KPK reforms, elicited strong public protests when they were enacted in September 2019. Yet Jokowi was able to push them through, given his control of Parliament and the Constitutional Court.

While Jokowi could brush off the criticism and public protest at that time, he could not hide the negative impact of his government's development projects on local communities. Indeed, the Indonesian public eventually realised that Jokowi's legislation was essentially a continuation of the economic policy of Suharto's New Order, only now with new euphemistic names, such as the «Job Creation Laws». In the final analysis, the results were the same: the extraction of natural resources and the privileging of foreign investors to the detriment of local stakeholders. These twin policies amounted to a continuation of the «repressive developmentalist regime» of the not-so-distant past.

2.5. *The waste of natural and human resources*

A decade on from the high hopes which accompanied Jokowi's successful presidential bid in 2014, the majority of Indonesians continued to live in very poor economic conditions. They also had low educational opportunities. According to the 2022 PISA score, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment, which measures the levels of educational attainment in reading, maths and science amongst fifteen-year-olds, Indonesia was ranked 69 out of 81 in maths, 67 in science and 71 in reading. Only the Philippines and Cambodia, among the ASEAN countries surveyed by OECD, ranked lower. Indonesia also had the lowest number of teachers with the requisite certifications from teacher training colleges of any of the countries surveyed [PISA 2023, 5 December]. This was all very far from the just and prosperous country promised in the 1945 constitution, where, following the four Amendments of 1999-2002, Article 28H stipulates that «every person shall have the right to live in physical and spiritual prosperity, to have a home and enjoy a good and healthy environment and shall have the right to obtain medical care» [Constitution 1945].

As a country blessed by rich natural resources and biodiversity, it is perhaps easy to blame Indonesia's current predicament on a «resource curse», the result of an *embarrass de richesses* making indigenous populations lazy – shades of Montesquieu's social and moral theory, articulated in his *De l'esprit des lois* (1748), of the influence of climate on the virtues and vices of a particular people [Shackleton 1955, pp. 321-322].

Maybe there is some truth here, but it is still no excuse for a state leader to fail to pursue the transformation of his country's human resources through effective educational policies. Yet this is what seems to have

happened under Jokowi as infrastructural spending soared; in the penultimate two years of Jokowi's incumbency (2021-2022) the budget for his core policy, infrastructure development, increased by 22.2% to US\$ 30 billion [Febrianto 2024, 16 August], while spending on education fell 4% from 17.94 to 13.93% ['Indonesia Education Spending']. In this self-same period, as spending on infrastructural projects intensified, the construction of Ibu Kota Nusantara (IKN), the future new capital, got under way in earnest in East Kalimantan.

Again, in the last two years of the Jokowi administration (2022-2024), following the banning of all exports of unprocessed minerals in 2014, the expansion of extractive industries continued apace with new commodities such as nickel pellets coming into full production from the new PT Gumbuster Nickel Industry smelter in North Morowali, Central Sulawesi. Established in 2019 and inaugurated by Jokowi in December 2021, its activities run parallel with Morowali Industrial Park (IMIP), operated by a Chinese company, Tsingshan. Here lateritic nickel resources were extracted for the manufacture of batteries for electric vehicles (EVs), Indonesia having now become the world's largest lateritic nickel producer with 15% of the world's proven resources of this crucial commodity in 2024 [Lotulung 2024, 21 March].

Another development policy involving high environmental costs involved the case of sand exports. On 17 September 2024, apparently in a desperate attempt to boost the government's income, Jokowi amended Government Regulation No.23 of 2023, which had banned sea sand exports, thus reopening them. It was a decision which involved potential damage to the environment and provoked much public criticism [*Tempo* 2024, 17 September].

2.6. *The human and ecological cost of Jokowi's developmental policies*

Unfortunately, the human and ecological cost for these extractive industry developments has been very high. The new top-down policy, the so-called *Proyek Strategis Nasional* (National Strategic Project) programme, allows minimum consideration for the participation of local communities. At the same time as giving legal sanction to such extractive projects, it permits them to ride roughshod over local communities. The IMIP project in Morowali, for example, created a furore given China's notorious policy of bringing in their own workers. This sparked protests from several local organizations. In some cases, projects have been implemented in a heavy-handed manner.

Two recent cases have highlighted how National Strategic Projects damage local interests. The first involved the inhabitants of Wadas village in Purworejo regency in Central Java. Since 2021, attempts have been made to move them off their land to allow the extraction of andesite stone for the construction of a nearby dam. These attempts have been met with widespread public resistance involving law students from several of the top universities in Java. But as a National Strategic Project there was little the law-

yers and the courts could do to overturn the original government decision [*Amicus Curiae* 2021].

The second case involved Rempang Island in Indonesia's Riau Province, just an hour's ferry ride from Singapore. The local inhabitants have been ordered to move off 7,000 hectares of non-forested land to make way for a Chinese-built US\$ 11.5 billion Eco-City project. Signed off as recently as late July 2024 in a meeting between Jokowi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing, the project – which created a new special industrial zone and was labelled as a National Strategic Project – was obviously being implemented with minimal popular consultation and impact surveys [Arshad 2024, 13 November]. The way Jokowi handled these two cases shows how little real respect he has for communities who stand in the way of his ambitious development goals.

2.7. *The failure of education reform*

Under Jokowi, education policies were designed to produce a labour force capable of meeting the demands of industry, trade and finance. His choice of Nadiem Makarim, founder CEO of the successful online Gojek taxi-hiring firm, as minister of Education (in office 2021-2024), reflected the President's dream about Indonesia's future as a global player in digital industries. What happened, however, was very far from the realization of these dreams. Far from liberating Indonesian schoolchildren to embrace a digital future in the workplace, education became increasingly commercialized and bureaucratized. Under Jokowi the long-standing problem of the mismatch between school curricula and the demands of the digitalised world of work was not resolved. In fact, it got steadily worse as demographically Indonesia entered the so-called «bonus era» in which a nation's population in the productive age is substantially more numerous than its non-productive cohort. But this demographic bonus can only be realised if the younger generation, reaching the age of employment, has obtained the right education and intellectual skills. Such skills are imparted by creative teaching where pupils are encouraged to question everything they are taught. This leads over time to a facility with what the Ancient Greeks knew as «Socratic dialogue». Unfortunately, Indonesian schoolchildren, at least in government schools, are never introduced to such a dialogue. Instead, rote learning and mindless memorisation are the order of the day. This does not create critical minds. It is no surprise then that Indonesia, nearly alone of all the top ten most populous countries in the world (Brazil is a partial exception here), has never won a Nobel Prize in any field [Carey 2023]. The rider here is that both capitalists and political regimes are averse to populations made up of individuals with critical minds, needing only a small minority of critically empowered individuals to support the intellectual life of the nation. The bulk of these critical thinkers will be co-opted, while the remainder will be marginalized or repressed.

2.8. *The persistence of a deeply unequal society*

In the past decades, the income gap between the few rich and the poor in Indonesia has been increasing. In the years under review, Indonesia remains a deeply unequal society, where 1% of the 280-million population owns over 50% of the wealth – making Indonesia the fourth most unequal society after Russia, India and Thailand. Also, social classes remain segregated, and an invidious class system based on an unequal access to education, wealth and resources prevails [World Bank 2016]. This interestingly follows the trend at the global level, charted by the World Bank [World Bank 2022].

By the end of the Jokowi presidency, gross national income per-capita continued to be stuck below US\$ 4,000 (US\$ 3,953 in 2023). This was just a third of neighbouring Malaysia (US\$ 12,500), and in a different league to developed countries like Singapore (US\$ 62,364). According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (Badan Pusat Statistik, BPS), the percentage of the 280 million Indonesian population living below the International Poverty Line (henceforth: IPL) of US\$ 1.90 per day, as of September 2024, was just under 9% (8.56) [*Kompas* 2025, 17 January]. Yet these statistics have recently been questioned. The US\$ 1.90 IPL is deemed to be unrealistic as a cut-off point. Many more Indonesian families struggle to survive just over that per diem figure. If the more realistic cut-off point of US\$ 2.15 per day is used, as in neighbouring Timor-Leste,⁵ then the figure for Indonesia population below IPL would be more like 30% [*Kompas* 2025, 17 January]. This indicates a failure at the national level to reduce the number of people living on less than 1,400 calories (Kcal)⁶ per day, an intake regarded as the minimum to sustain healthy life [BPS 2024, 28 November].

The percentage of people living below the IPL is higher in rural areas, 12.22%, compared to urban communities, 7.29%. At the same time, the gap between the richest 10% of the population and the majority 90% has increased. This was mirrored in Indonesia's Gini-coefficient ratio⁷ which deteriorated from 0.341 in 2000 to 0.388 in March 2023 [BPS 2023, 17 July]. Again, there was a marked difference between urban and rural areas, only this time the income gap was markedly higher in the cities than in the countryside.

5. In 2023, nearly 50% of Timor-Leste's 1,36 million population were deemed to be living in poverty on the basis of the US\$ 2.15 PPP (Purchasing Power Parity) figure, see *Kompas* 2025, 17 January.

6. Abbreviation for kilocalorie, the unit used to measure the amount of energy in food, also frequently given as kJ (kilojoules). As a rough guide an average man needs 2,500 Kcal per day and an average woman 2,000 Kcal, see NHS 2023, 17 April.

7. The Gini coefficient - developed by Italian statistician Corrado Gini in 1912 – ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 represent absolute income equality and 1 absolute income inequality. Differently put, the higher is the value indicated by the Gini coefficient, the higher is income inequality.

Since the fall of Suharto in May 1998, annual GDP growth in Indonesia has averaged 4.89%. This is far below the 7% needed to keep the domestic economy growing fast enough to provide jobs for the estimated two million school leavers coming into the job market each year. In the past decade of Jokowi's administration (2014-2024), GDP growth has hovered around 5% (2022-5.31%; and 2023-5.05%) with the economic fundamentals – capital investment and domestic consumption – continuing to weaken. This situation is reflected in the US\$-IDR exchange rate which averaged IDR 11,882 to the US dollar in the year when Jokowi took office (2014) but declined by a full third to IDR 15,866 in the final ten months of his presidency (January-October 2024).

During the last five years of the Jokowi era, some 9.5 million Indonesians are estimated to have fallen out of the Indonesian middle class (defined as families with a monthly expenditure of between US\$ 150 to US\$ 650) because of the weakening domestic economy. In this period, this class shrunk from 57.33 million to 47.85 million, a decline from 21.45% to 17.13% of Indonesia's total population [BPS 2024, 25 October]. In terms of Indonesia's political stability, such a steadily shrinking middle class is not a good omen as far as the future of the country is concerned.

The volatile international situation – with the ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and the residual effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022) – slowed domestic growth in the Indonesian economy. This created negative stimulus to its laggard manufacturing sector. A comparative study conducted by the Center of Economic and Law Studies (CELIOS), a private Jakarta-based economic think tank, showed that the performance of the Indonesian manufacturing sector was substantially lower than in three other major ASEAN economies: Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam. This situation has resulted in a poor level of foreign direct investment in Indonesia by comparison with the three other major ASEAN economies [CELIOS 2024, 10 September]. The CELIOS study also showed that Indonesia's ranking in the economic efficiency index (ICOR)⁸ had worsened during the second Jokowi administration (2010-2024). By mid-2024, Indonesia occupied the lowest position (3.4) in ASEAN behind the Philippines (3.7), Thailand (4.5), Malaysia (4.6) and Vietnam (5.2). One of the problems identified by the CELIOS study is Indonesia's strikingly low Logistic Performance Index (LPI), which measures how well a country performs in trade logistics, considering the speed and efficiency of customs clearance, infrastructure, international shipments, logistics services, tracking/tracing and timeliness [CELIOS 2024, 10 September].

Another major issue impeding Indonesia's comparative advantage internationally is its rampant corruption. Indonesian corruption specialists

8. ICOR = Incremental Capital Output Ratio. This measures the relationship between the level of capital investment made in any given economy, and the output in terms of GDP.

like Mochtar [2024, 4 August] note that the phenomenon is closely linked with politics. In fact, political corruption has been the crucial problem in Indonesia since independence. It cannot be isolated from the issues which have bedevilled Jokowi's last two years in power. The adage «bad politics make for a bad economy» is nowhere truer than in Indonesia.

2.9. *Human capital and higher education*

As we have seen, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) score [PISA 2023, 5 December] has charted a steady decline in the capacity and quality of Indonesia's human resources during Jokowi's second administration.⁹ The low level of education contributes to deficient human resources. These in turn compromise Indonesia's future.

This weakness is also reflected in Indonesia's Human Capital Index ranking, which has been stagnant during the past five years. Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and China are all ahead of Indonesia.

Apart from the low quality of its human resources, Indonesia also suffers from high unemployment amongst its university graduates, one of the reasons for the steady decline in the size of the country's middle class. This underscores the mismatch between supply and demand in the finance and trade sectors. Unsurprisingly, Indonesia ranks low on the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), a situation highlighted by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), whose latest report shows that Indonesia's GCI score is still the lowest in the ASEAN-6.¹⁰ Vietnam, a socialist state and far less developed than Indonesia 50 years ago, posted a higher rate of innovation and industrial patent registration than Indonesia, where the number of patents showed no significant increase during Jokowi's second term [CELIOS 2024, 10 September].

The bleak outlook for the quality of human resources in Indonesia reflects the failure of government education policies under Jokowi. Nowhere was this more evident than in the Indonesian university and tertiary education sectors, which were rocked by several scandals in the last years of Jokowi's presidency, underscoring Gojek CEO Nadiem Makarim's lack of capacity as minister of Education (in office 2021-2024). Jokowi's assumption that a successful young business entrepreneur could transform Indonesian higher education and ensure that the country's university graduates could compete in the global market was gravely misplaced. On 11 February 2023, Indonesia's *Kompas Daily* reported its investigation into professional mal-

9. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is managed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an intergovernmental organization founded in 1961 and headquartered in Paris to advise governments on how to implement policies which improve the lives of their citizens.

10. The ASEAN-6 represent the six largest economies within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations grouping, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, The Philippines and Vietnam.

practice in Indonesia's leading government universities. Focusing on the way in which academic articles were placed by university professors in international Scopus accredited journals, its report described numerous manipulative practices [Kompas 2023, 11 February]. These usually involved an agent, known as a «jockey» (*joki* in Indonesian), who brokered arrangements between academicians and international journal editors, some of whom ran «predatory journals».¹¹ An estimated 17% of all articles published by Indonesian academics in 2016-17 were placed in such journals. This makes Indonesia the worst offender, after Kazakhstan, of any country in the world in terms of publications in such dubious academic outlets [Machaček and Srholec 2022].

Such behaviour among Indonesian academics at leading government universities underscores a widespread lack of scientific principles and integrity in the country's *civitas academica*. Many university professors, however, feel compelled to engage in these unethical academic practices because of recent changes in higher education policy which require professors and lecturers to publish in international journals to maintain or upgrade their professional status. In Indonesia such status is determined by bureaucratic rank; all Indonesian academics are government employees or PNS (*Pegawai Negeri Sipil* = Civil Servants), and as is the case the world over, higher status means higher financial remuneration.

Related to these scandals involving university professors is the ever more ubiquitous habit of giving top bureaucrats and politicians, particularly those of ministerial rank, honorary doctorates (*doctor honoris causa*). Although such practices are common in global academia worldwide, what has recently happened in several leading Indonesian universities is the sale of such degrees for political favours. This was recently highlighted by *Tempo* magazine in a special number entitled *Obral Guru Besar* («Flogging off Professorships») [Tempo 2024, 4 August]. Such scandals reflect the further erosion of academic principles. The debasing of the coinage of honorary doctorates indicates just how far universities as learning institutions must go to secure support and political patronage at the highest levels of the Indonesian state bureaucracy to guarantee their future.

Another symptom of Jokowi's failure to create a conducive research environment has been his creation of a single national institution for research and development, already discussed in our 2022 article [Tirtosudar-

11. Predatory journals are publications that claim to be legitimate scholarly journals but misrepresent their publishing practices. They often: (1) charge publication fees without providing standard peer-review or editing services; (2) solicit and easily accept manuscripts; (3) offer rapid publication; (4) use journal names and branding which mimic well-established journals; (5) fabricate indexing and citation metrics; (6) hide information about Article Processing Charges (APCs); (7) misrepresent members of the journal's editorial board; and (9) violate copyright and scholarly ethics.

mo and Carey 2022, p. 201]. This is BRIN (*Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional*), the National Research and Innovation Agency. Planned since the beginning of Jokowi's second term in 2019, it was formally established by presidential decree on 28 April 2021, superseding the previous Indonesian Institute of Sciences (*Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia*, LIPI, established 1967) and its associated research bodies. The establishment of one super institution as the sole government research body smacks of politics. It also flies in the face of the experience of research institutes and innovation bodies in developed countries the world over, where «small is beautiful» is the order of the day. Time and again, decentralised research teams and flexible working methods have proven more effective in cutting-edge research than government research agendas. So, it has proven with BRIN. After three years in existence, this heavily centralised national scientific body continued to be plagued by bureaucracy and had been unable to produce even one significant research finding or innovation [Noer 2024, 20 September]. Meanwhile, Jokowi himself also seemed to have lost interest in the institution. With his own development project agendas, especially regarding infrastructure development and the new national capital, he appeared to have placed more trust in private consultants. As a businessman, he set little store by BRIN's modest research findings.

2.10. *Papua's looming ecological disaster*

One area where BRIN has taken over from its predecessor, LIPI, in continuing important field research on the economic impact of development projects is Papua [BRIN 2024]. Here the expansion of food estates in Merauke (an administrative district of South Papua) triggered public protests involving local communities with claims to customary lands. The food estate developments were one of Jokowi's major economic projects. Unfortunately, all too often they were situated in ecologically vulnerable areas. In the case of Merauke, the development involved two million hectares of wetlands, savannah and pockets of tropical rainforest which the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has called a «global treasure» on account of its biodiversity [Wright 2024, 2 September]. Merauke is home to half the bird species found in Papua and neighbouring PNG (Papua New Guinea), including 80 that exist nowhere else. Among these endemic species, some, like the pig-nose turtle and cat-like carnivorous marsupials, are classified as endangered species. This unique habitat is slated to be turned into sugarcane plantations and rice fields. As of early September 2024, work had already begun with heavy diggers moving onto the site. The fear was that once the trees were removed from these wetlands, the salt would rise so that in a decade what was once an ecological jewel would be turned into a wasteland.

Civil society organisations and informed observers have consistently warned about the ecologically destructive impact of this project. They have pointed to land-use maps which show areas designated for rice cultivation

overlapping with protected conservation areas, indigenous sacred places, and ancestral trails and hunting grounds [Wright 2024, 2 September]. The fact that the Indonesian army is taking a leading role in this controversial development has also raised alarm bells. If the creation of a food estate in Merauke was aimed at food production only, one would have expected the Ministry of Agriculture to be in charge. Instead, it is the Ministry of Defence. Some have even suggested that there is a hidden agenda behind this «food security» project, namely the construction of a huge military base close the Fly River border with Papua New Guinea.¹² The stakes are high. Hitherto this easternmost part of Indonesia's most easterly province had largely avoided violence during the decades-long armed conflict between Indonesia and indigenous Papuans seeking their own state. Maybe this was about to change.

2.11. *Jokowi's enduring popularity*

Despite the human cost involved in the pursuit of the above remembered bungled developmental policies, Joko Widodo's popularity remained high. How the President was able to do that has been explained by Siti Maimunah, a senior researcher at the Sajogyo Institute, Indonesia's leading agrarian studies research centre [*Tempo* 2024, 24 August, p. 141]. In her view, Jokowi's «neo-extractionism», a shorthand term she coined to describe Jokowi's «plunder» of natural resources, was coupled with the implementation of a carefully crafted campaign of political messaging, emphasising the Jokowi administration's supposed «generosity» to the poor. This generosity found expression in the implementation of development projects under the umbrella of the NSP. These development projects pursued such worth-while objectives as the creation of social safety nets, cash transfers, healthcare packages, and education and pro-labour policies. Their only problem, however, was that they only partially materialised.

Such substantial failure in reaching the proclaimed objectives in favour of the poor was largely hidden by Jokowi's political messaging campaign. The effectiveness of this campaign can be seen in the public approval rating of Jokowi's government, which, according to surveys in *Kompas's* Research Department, published in May 2023, was always above 70% [Ramadhan and Setuningsih 2023, 22 May].

This was in part due to the legacy of the New Order with its so-called «floating mass» politics in which voters were treated merely as objects of political mobilisation. In turn, these voters remained disconnected politically from weak and marginalised civil society organisations. They continued to be largely disinterested in the reformist agenda of progressive civil society advocates. The era of political reform from May 1998 failed to change this

12. Personal communication to Peter Carey from Dr Greg Poulgrain, University of the Sunshine Coast, Brisbane, 23 December 2024.

elitist political landscape. Political parties continued to be the vehicle for powerful patrons with deep pockets and access to political influence. This enabled Jokowi to increase his popularity through his various populist programmes, strongly supported by his so-called «cyber troops», who portrayed him as truly a president of the ordinary people.

3. *Foreign policy and the Papua problem*

3.1. *Jokowi's «pragmatic» diplomacy: grand-standing, infrastructure and investment*

Pragmatic diplomacy has been the watchword of Jokowi's foreign policy. After his inauguration as president on 20 October 2014, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were the first two countries he visited. Since then, almost without fail, Jokowi has visited the UAE every year to seek investment. Jokowi's foreign policy was strongly driven by his ambition to develop the country's infrastructure. During his first presidential campaign in early 2014, he promised to revive the glories of Indonesia's maritime past by creating a sea toll road (*tol laut*) to connect the archipelago's different islands through the construction and renovation of seaports. This promise remained largely unfulfilled mainly because foreign investors were reluctant to put up the massive investment needed given the less than promising returns [Tirtosudarmo and Carey 2022, p. 181].

Jokowi, nonetheless, had more success in his land-based projects. He constructed new airports and greatly extended the network of toll roads, particularly in Java and Sumatra. After many failed promises by previous presidents, Jokowi was the first head of state since Marshal Herman Willem Daendels (in office as governor-general 1808-1811), famous for his post road (*postweg*) linking Merak (Sunda Strait) to Panarukan in Java's eastern salient, to join Jakarta and Surabaya by a fast land corridor. The 784 kilometres of Jokowi's Trans-Java Toll Road, with its 13 separate sections, will likely stand as his legacy as long as the new national capital in the distant jungles of East Kalimantan remains unbuilt [Tirtosudarmo and Carey 2022, pp. 181-182].

Jokowi's strong commitment to boost Indonesia's infrastructure during his decade in power brought him ever closer to China. This was especially the case after his long negotiations with Japan failed to result in the construction of the long-planned Jakarta-Bandung bullet train [Harding *et al.* 2015, 1 October]. With its 142 kilometres of special track and its 350-kph «Whoosh» locomotive making 24 return journeys to Bandung every day, the project was eventually completed in May 2023, after a lengthy seven-year construction process (2016-2023). This was largely thanks to investments from the China Development Bank and a 40% stake taken in the KCIC (Kereta Api Cepat Indonesia China / Indonesia China Bullet Train) company by the China Railway International Company.

Another characteristic of Jokowi's foreign policy is his effort at image building. One thinks here of his carefully choreographed showcasing of Indonesia as an important player in global politics when he hosted the G-20 Summit Meeting on 15-16 November 2022 in Bali. A grand event, which brought world leaders to the exclusive Apurva Kempinski Bali resort in Nusa Dua, this was a no-expense-spared spectacular event. But what lay behind all this grandstanding and hobnobbing with the great and the good is moot [Tirtosudarmo and Carey 2022, pp.179, 197, 204].

It was the same two years earlier, when, following the 24 February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Jokowi was one of the first leaders from the Global South to make the long train journey from Przemyśl (Poland) to Kyiv, on 28-29 June 2022, before flying on to Moscow [Susilo 2022, 29 June]. With headlines in the Indonesian press speaking of Indonesia «contributing to Russia-Ukraine peace efforts» and «showing solidarity with humanity», Jokowi made himself look brave and important. He even had photographs taken of himself meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the latter's underground bunker and of his cosy tête-à-tête with President Putin in the Kremlin (just two well upholstered chairs side by side, no long table here) [Tempo 2024a, 28 July]. Yet, as Dian Wirengjurit, a retired senior diplomat of the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and former Indonesian ambassador to Tehran (2011-2016), put it, to be an effective mediator in international conflicts, one not only needs courage but also a plausible proposal to put forward to end ongoing hostilities [Tempo 2024b, 28 July]. And this Jokowi palpably did not have.

In fact, Jokowi's foreign policy has been seen by the Indonesian public as more show than substance. Compared to his predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY), Jokowi could boast few successes to match SBY's mediation of internal communal conflicts in Cambodia (border dispute with Thailand) [Seruni 2013] and Southern Mindanao [CAB 2014], both embarked on initially during Indonesia's 2011 ASEAN chairmanship. By contrast, Jokowi's interventions in Myanmar, targeted at finding a resolution to the political turmoil following the 1 February 2021 military *coup* and subsequent civil war (5 May 2021-present), proved fruitless [Bland 2021, 26 April; Strangio 2023, 2 February].

3.2. *The Papua problem and the challenge of separatism*

Although not a foreign policy issue *per se*, the stubbornly unresolved conflict in West Papua became increasingly internationalised in the two years under review. During this time, the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (Free Papua Movement, OPM) stepped up its armed struggle for their territory's independence from Indonesia, which dates back to the 1969 through the UN's Act of Free Choice. Dubbed by critics the «Act of No Choice» [Saltford 2003], Papua, remains to this day a deeply troubled region with violent conflict occurring on an almost daily basis [Tirtosudarmo and Carey 2022, pp. 199, 206-8].

Jokowi's election in 2014, with his promise of prioritizing a solution for the Papua problem, raised hopes amongst Papuans. The new President's former hallmark strategy as governor of Jakarta (2012-2014) of *blusukan* (literally: going into small and narrow streets and appearing incognito in the most unexpected places) had made him extremely popular [Tirtosudarmo and Carey 2022, p. 180]. But, in his last two years in office, Jokowi's story seemed to go in a completely different direction. His initial promise of approaching the Papuan problem in a more humane manner was replaced by a more security-based approach with the police and army given the green light to intensify their military operations. Tight controls were also placed on news of gross violation of human rights and reports of the number of civilian deaths from the clashes between the OPM and the Indonesian security forces.

Despite this clampdown, Papua's dire situation could not be kept entirely hidden from the world. Human Rights Watch continued to release its Human Rights Monitor Newsletter reporting the repression of Papuans by the state security apparatus. The report released in September 2024 revealed the constant discrimination against Papuans and deep-seated racism by the Indonesian civil and military authorities towards the local indigenous population [Human Rights Watch 2024, 18 September].

Another report along similar lines and focussed on forced displacement, was released in Sydney by the DTP (Diplomacy Training Program), founded by current Timor-Leste President, José Ramos-Horta (2008-12, 2022-present), and based on research by a group of independent researchers supported by the Bishops' Conference of Indonesia (Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia), the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (Persekutuan Gereja Indonesia) and the West Papuan Council of Churches (Dewan Gereja Papua Barat). The report showed the critical conditions of indigenous Papuans caught in the ongoing armed conflict between the Indonesian security apparatus and the OPM [DTP 2024, 1 September]. Between July and August 2024, the research group interviewed some 70 displaced persons in Papua as well as collecting data from affected communities through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).¹³ Based on these interviews and FGDs, the internal displacement of the indigenous population in Papua had been gathering pace during Jokowi's second administration (2019-2024). An estimated 45,000 to 100,000 people had been forced to move from their homes to temporary shelters during these the years of Jokowi's second administration. On average these displaced persons had been living in these shelters for around three years. Nearly all (99%) of the displaced persons were indigenous Papuans. Most suffered from a scarcity of food (97%), minimum health services (87%), lack of economic resources (81%) and zero education-

13. The DTP research team visited major concentrations of refugees in the towns of Nabire, Sorong, Maybrat and Wamena, in Central, West and Mountain Papua provinces respectively.

al opportunities for their children (90%). Their day-to-day support comes mainly from donations from various non-government/Church organisations and their own close relatives, with the Indonesian local and central governments providing very little. The high number of forcibly displaced Papuans in the last five years reflects the dire living conditions of the local population who must survive in unsafe areas riven by conflict with the constant feeling of insecurity and daily threats to themselves and their families.

The rapidly growing number of migrants coming from other Indonesian islands, particularly Java, to settle in Papua meant that indigenous Papuans would soon become a minority in their own rich half island. The food estate in Merauke, mentioned in the previous section, is just one example of how Papua has become the location for foreign and domestic investment focussed on extractive agribusiness industries. The Papuan population was thus facing multiple threats – economic, demographic and political. If these are not addressed, Papuans will be looking at a future where they are a marginalised minority in their own homeland. Now divided into four separate provinces, with governors and deputy governors of ethnic Papuan origin as a gesture to local sensitivities, the politics of these new provinces are nonetheless run by local parliaments dominated by an increasing number of non-Papuan politicians. This needs to change. One way of addressing this issue would be to allow Papuans to form their own political party based on ethnicity, religion and culture. This was one of the ways forward in Aceh after the signing of the 15 August 2005 Helsinki Peace Agreement. Indeed, with Acehnese now in charge of their own political destiny, peace has been preserved in the fiercely independent province until the present day. So, one must ask the question to the Indonesian authorities, if Aceh is allowed such a local political party, the Partai Aceh, why not Papua? Given current levels of violence, such a party might be one of the best ways of ensuring a non-violent solution to mounting calls for Papuan independence.

That said, it is worth remembering that West Papua was the theatre of one of Jokowi's few «success» stories, namely his patient one-and-a-half-year-long negotiation for the release of a New Zealand pilot, Philip Mark Mehrtens. Mehrtens had been kidnapped on 7 February 2023 by one the armed groups included in the OPM. This group, active in the Nduga District (Papua Mountain Province), was under the leadership of the 24-year-old Egianus Kogoya. Mehrtens, a pilot of the private Indonesian airline Susi Air, was held by the OPM for a total of 19 months before painstaking negotiations between the Indonesian government and the OPM, carried out through church organizations and local government representatives, secured his safe release. On 21 September 2024, Mehrtens was brought to Jakarta and handed over to a representative of the New Zealand government amidst much positive coverage in the Indonesian press [e.g., *Tempo* 2024, 22 September]. Given that most Papuans are Christian, it was perhaps no coincidence that the release occurred just a fortnight after the historic visit

of the late Pope Francis to Indonesia (3-6 September 2024), which began his 12-day tour of Southeast Asia, including Timor Leste, Papua New Guinea and Singapore.¹⁴

4. *Domestic politics*

4.1. *The General Election Commission and the political parties*

In January 2023, after several false starts occasioned by cases arising from the data submitted by prospective political parties, Indonesia's General Election Commission (*Komisi Pemilihan Umum*, KPU) announced its verification results: 23 political parties had met the minimum requirements. They could thus participate in the 2024 general election. According to a well-known weekly magazine [*Tempo* 2023, 1 January, pp. 32-37], there were strong suspicions that corruption and political pressure had influenced the KPU decision. According to *Tempo's* special report, there was evidence of data manipulation related to the new political parties and inappropriate interventions by KPU Commissioners at the national level.¹⁵

In the end, there were just eight major political parties participating in the presidential election, with three official pairs of presidential and vice-presidential candidates. The first pair, backed by the PDI-P and the United Development Party (PPP, *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan*), the

14. The way the Jokowi administration handled this negotiation by playing the long game and working through trusted Church bodies rather than involving the Indonesian army (TNI) stands in sharp contrast to an earlier kidnapping of foreign citizens by the OPM. This occurred in January 1996 when six foreigners (four of them British biology students from Cambridge University), conducting biodiversity research at Lorenz National Park, were kidnapped in Mapenduma, also in Nduga District. It took five months to free the hostages, who were only released as the result of a military operation (15 May 1996) following the breakdown of negotiations through the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross). Two of the eleven hostages (both Indonesians) were killed [Start 1997]. The fact that current President Prabowo, then Special Forces (Kopassus) head, commanded the Indonesian military operation, is significant. Given the privileged role of the military in Prabowo's administration, there were fears that the 1996 example may well become the norm rather than the Church brokered long-game preferred by Jokowi.

15. The validation of four new political parties was singled out as being distinctly dubious. They were: 1) *Partai Gelora* (Indonesian People's Wave Party), a splinter of the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (*Partai Keadilan Sosial*, PKS); 2) *Partai Kebangkitan Nusantara* (Nusantara Awakening Party, PKN), a splinter of former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (in office, 2004-2014)'s *Partai Demokrat* (Democratic Party, PD, founded 2001); 3) *Partai Garuda* (Garda Perubahan Indonesia, Indonesian Guard for Change Party), indicated as close to former President Jokowi; and, 4) *Partai Ummat* (Ummat Party, literally Islamic Community Party), an Islamic party lead by Amin Rais, an aging octogenarian Islamic politician, who was instrumental in Suharto's ouster on 21 May 1998.

umbrella party for Muslims, was represented by Central Java Governor Ganjar Pranowo (2013-2023), and former Coordinating Minister for Law, Politics and Security Mahmud MD (2019 – 1 February 2024). The second pair, supported by Gerindra, Golkar and SBY's Partai Demokrat included the Prabowo-Gibran duo. The third pair included Anies Baswedan and Muhaimin Iskandar (Cak Imin). The former was a Muslim intellectual, academic, and activist, previously a Jokowi ally, who had served as Governor of Jakarta from 2017 to 2022; the latter was the head of the National Awakening Party (PKB, Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa). The Anies-Cak Imin duo was supported not only by Cak Imin's PKB, but also by the conservative Muslim Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sosial, PKS), and by the Nasdem Party, headed by Achenese media mogul Surya Paloh. However, neither the first nor the third duo had any chance against the «Jokowi factor», which mobilized voters so effectively at the ballot box to back the Prabowo-Gibran winning combination. Why was this the case?

4.2. *Prabowo's lineage, career and relationship with Jokowi*

In our 2022 article we identified retired general Prabowo Subianto, as the most likely candidate to take over from Jokowi and carry on his unfinished projects [Tirtosudarmo and Carey 2022, p.210]. So, who exactly is this man? Prabowo Subianto (born Jakarta 1951) hails from a prominent political family of Javanese *ningrat* (nobility) in Banyumas. Both his grandfather, Raden Mas Margono (1894-1978), founder of the Bank Negara Indonesia (BNI, 1946), and father, Professor Sumitro (1917-2001), a Rotterdam-trained economist, known as the «Begawan Pejuang» (Sage of the Struggle), were at the heart of Indonesia's fight for independence helping to ensure its financial survival. Brought up and educated largely abroad in the period 1957-68,¹⁶ when his family were in exile,¹⁷ Prabowo graduated from the Indonesian military academy in Magelang in 1974 and later underwent special forces training at Fort Benning (now Fort Moore) in Georgia in 1985 [Volle 2025, 5 March] where he was a classmate and close friend of Prince

16. Prabowo was educated at five successive schools outside Indonesia: (1) Dean's Primary School in Singapore, 1957-60; (2) an international Junior High School in Hong Kong, 1961-1962; (3) Victoria Institute, Kuala Lumpur, 1962-64; (4) the American International School, Zurich, 1964-66; and (5) the American School, London, 1966-68, AFP Indonesia 2019; Djojohadikusumo 2021, pp. xlv-xlvi.

17. Prabowo's father, Sumitro, facing trumped-up corruption charges, joined the ill-fated PRRI (Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia, Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia) in West Sumatra in May 1957 during the regional rebellion against Sukarno known as the PRRI-Permesta (1957-1963). He took his wife and four young children with him. After six months of the family being hidden in a secret location in Padang (West Sumatra), Sumitro brought them to Singapore by cargo boat (late October/early November 1957), where Margono, who had exiled himself earlier to the same city, was waiting for them [Djojohadikusumo 2021, pp. xxxviii-xlv].

Abdullah bin Al-Hussein Al-Hashemi, whom, in 1999, would ascend the throne of Jordan as King Abdullah II.

Prabowo made a stellar career as a special forces officer under Suharto's «New Order», ending up marrying the Indonesian strongman's second daughter (and fourth child), Siti Hediati Hariyadi (born 1959), popularly known as Titiek, in 1983, and commanding the Indonesian Special Forces (Kopassus, 1995-1998) and, briefly, the Strategic Army Reserve (KOSTRAD, March-May 1998). But like Icarus, Prabowo flew too close to the sun, and during the turbulent months of Suharto's fall from power (in March-May 1998), his career fell apart – he was accused of abducting and torturing 23 democracy activists, one of whom died and 13 remained missing [Volle 2025, 5 March]. This, along with allegations of insubordination – he was reported to have brought two truckloads of special force soldiers to the presidential palace on 24 May 1998, three days after President Habibie's installation, to try to force the newly installed head of state to appoint him army chief of Staff replacing General Wiranto [Colmey 1998, 31 May] – resulted in his dismissal from the army. In 1999-2004, already divorced from his wife (1998), he went into exile in Jordan where he stayed with his friend King Abdullah.

Since returning to Indonesia in early 2004 and still intensely ambitious, Prabowo made a fortune¹⁸ with the help of his banker younger brother, Hashim Djojohadikusumo (born 1954), but he struggled to make headway politically. His first attempt (in 2004) to become the presidential candidate of Golkar, the former New Order state party, failed. Four years later, he created his own political party, Gerindra (2008). A right-wing nationalist populist party, Gerindra started in 2009 with a modest 4.5% of the popular vote in that year's legislative election. However, its support more than doubled to 11.8% in 2014, making it the third most popular party after PDI-P and Golkar. In the 2014 presidential election, Prabowo lost to Jokowi, and again in 2019, but he was given an opportunity to have another shot at the presidency when he reconciled with Jokowi and was appointed minister of Defence during Jokowi's second presidential term (2019-2024). It became clear during Jokowi's second term that Prabowo had become the incumbent President's candidate of choice for the 2024 contest. With Jokowi's full support, Prabowo and Jokowi's eldest son, Gi-

18. In 2009, at the time he contended the presidential election as Megawati Sukarnoputri's running mate, Prabowo's net worth was reported to be US\$ 150,000,000 with assets in palm-oil plantations (Tidar Kerinci Agung), pulp-&-paper in East Kalimantan (Kiani Kertas, later Kertas Nusantara), mining (oil, natural gas and coal, Nusantara Energy) and fisheries (Jaladri Nusantara), as well as US\$ 7,500,000 in cash, time deposits and current accounts [Jakarta Post 2014, 1 July] a sum which had declined to US\$ 121,914,00 when Prabowo ran as a presidential candidate in 2024 because of the sharp fall in the Rupiah-US\$ exchange rate since 2009 [Statista 2024, 21 October].

bran Rakabuming Raka, became the favoured candidates in the 2024 presidential election.

So just how did Jokowi prepare the ground so astutely to secure this desired transition and what does this tell us about his skill as a king maker?

4.3. *Jokowi as king maker*

Up to the 13 November 2023 deadline for names of proposed presidential and vice-presidential candidates to be registered, Jokowi had already been acting the king maker. With Surya Paloh and his Nasdem (National Democrats) Party having already nominated former Jakarta Governor (2017-2022) Anis Baswedan¹⁹ and, after some wheeling and dealing, Muhaimin Iskandar (colloquially known as Cak Imin or Gus Imin), the long-time head of the conservative Islamic National Awakening Party (PKB, 2005-present), as his running mate, it was still not clear who would be Prabowo's vice presidential running mate. Former President (2001-2004) and head of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan, PDI-P), Megawati Sukarnoputri had her own views – she was backing Ganjar Pranowo as the PDI-P candidate.

In Indonesian elite politics, money talks. Major political donors, many of them from the wealthy *peranakan* (mixed race) Indonesian Chinese community, play a crucial role here. But this political horse trading is usually screened from public view.

As a wheeler-and-dealer himself, Jokowi feels at home in the deeply transactional world of Indonesian politics. By early 2023, it was already clear to the Indonesian public that Jokowi was establishing his own family dynasty; he had groomed his eldest son, Gibran, to become mayor (2021-2024) of Jokowi's home town of Surakarta (also known as Solo) in Central Java, and his son-in-law, Bobby Nasution, as mayor of Indonesia's fourth largest city, Medan, in North Sumatra. Meanwhile, the relationship between Jokowi and Megawati had soured following Megawati's refusal to grant Jokowi's request to extend his presidential tenure for an unprecedented and unconstitutional third term. Thwarted in this initiative Jokowi then further undermined his relationship with the PDI-P leader by securing a Constitutional Court (MK) amendment changing the rules on the age threshold (40 years) for vice-presidential candidates. This was

19. It is unclear why Surya Paloh and his Nasdem party made this decision to back Baswedan rather than Prabowo. They must have known full well that it would sour their relationship with Jokowi, which had hitherto been cordial: witness Nasdem's support for Jokowi in January 2023 when they helped him pass both the National Job Creation Law [*Tempo* 2023, 8 January], and the revision of the laws governing the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK). A bare nine months later (October 2023), however, following Nasdem's decision to back Baswedan, this relationship between Jokowi and Nasdem's founder, Surya Paloh, had not only soured but was reported to be close to collapse.

done to allow his son (then aged 36) to put his name forward. The fact that the serving Constitutional Court Chief Justice, Anwar Usman (in office, 2018-2023), was Jokowi's brother-in-law (he was married to Jokowi's younger sister) was not immaterial to this case. In fact, it cost Usman his job [Vasudewa dan Melania 2023].

Megawati was also said to be unhappy with Jokowi's tendency to give government contracts and business opportunities to non-PDI-P figures, such as former general, Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, with whom Jokowi had enjoyed a long business relationship dating back to 2008 when Jokowi was Mayor of Solo (2005-2012) [Mulholland 2024, 4 April]. According to Mulholland, Luhut had acted as one Jokowi's political fixers and had successfully coordinated support for Jokowi against his political opponents like former Vice-President Jusuf Kalla (born 1942, in office 2004-2009, 2014-19), Megawati and Surya Paloh.

In its 'Ten Years of Jokowi' investigative report No. 4, *Tempo* revealed some of the behind-the-scenes work of Luhut and Andi Widjajanto [Tempo 2024, 29 July]. The latter, then serving as head of the National Defence Agency (Lembaga Pertahanan Nasional, Lemhanas, had been tasked, along with Luhut, with exploring the possibility of creating a political scenario whereby the February 2024 election might be postponed. This would ensure a de facto extension of Jokowi's presidential term. As Jokowi's political fixer, Luhut had apparently persuaded Airlangga Hartarto, head of the still highly influential Suharto-era «New Order» (1966-1998) government party, Golkar (Golongan Karya, Functional Group), and his fellow Golkar member and rising political star, Bahlil Lahadalia, then minister of Investment, to support Jokowi's attempt at extending his term. Luhut also recruited the National Awakening Party (PKB) Head, Muhaimin Iskandar, to join the caucus. Among the suggested reasons for extending the presidential term were the recent severe impact of the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic on the economy and the subsequent slowdown in the implementation of various key development projects, the most important being the new IKN (Ibu Kota Nusantara) national capital in East Kalimantan, although Jokowi's personal political ambition was the main driving force here.

4.4. *The «Jokowi» factor and the February 2024 presidential election*

By August 2023, when it was evident that Jokowi had moved his support to Prabowo, Megawati finally announced that she had chosen Ganjar Pranowo and Professor Mahfud MD (born 1957), Jokowi's former coordinating minister for Law, Politics and Security, as PDI-P presidential and vice-presidential candidates. She understood that the public steadfastly opposed any suggestion that Jokowi might be allowed to extend his term in office, especially now that his political dynasty agenda had become

clear. However, once Jokowi's son, Gibran, came on board as Prabowo's running mate, as predicted by pollsters the pair went on to triumph at the first round of the polls with nearly 60% of the popular vote. So how did this happen?

As a former general with powerful family and business connections stemming back to the very birth of the Republic, Prabowo wields political clout both in military and business circles. His stellar military career and marriage into Indonesia's first family during Suharto's New Order, albeit both later aborted, links him in the mind of many older-generation Indonesian voters to a more stable age. With the strong backing of his younger brother, Hashim Djojohadikusumo, a banker by training, once one of Indonesia's richest businessmen with a reported net worth of US\$ 685 million in 2020 [Okezone 2024, 27 August], Prabowo's Gerindra has been able to draw on generous funding to gather popular mass support. Since 2014, it has been amongst the three top political parties in Indonesia in terms of votes. However, the most crucial element in Prabowo's landslide 2024 victory was the so-called «Jokowi factor».

Since his tenure as mayor of the Central Java court city of Surakarta (also known as «Solo», 2005-2012), Jokowi has been very successful in crafting a mass political following. He has done this through a handful of loyalists who have created a broad non-party political base. Known as «*kelompok relawan*», voluntary mass organisations, these owe loyalty primarily to Jokowi in person rather than to any particular party (which Jokowi, unlike his two predecessors – Megawati and SBY – and successor, Prabowo, does not have). Jokowi is also very aware of the importance of social media and online apps as critical tools in honing his image as a leader of the people. Jokowi employs so-called «buzzers» (cyber troops, a name derived from their skilful use of electronic communications) and paid election pollsters to boost his popular ratings.

As a businessman Jokowi is extremely shrewd in calculating the cost-benefit of every political decision he makes. This means that during his decade in office, Jokowi ensured that trusted political loyalists were appointed to strategic cabinet posts. Central here were Pratikno (State Secretary, *Sekretaris Negara*), Sri Mulyani (Finance), Tito Karnavian (Interior), and Hadimulyo (Public Works). Jokowi also exercised effective control over the top ranks of the army and the police where again key allies like Tito Karnavian (in post as police chief, 2016-2019), General Moeldoko and Air Chief Marshal Hadi Tjahjanto (in post as Army Heads, 2013-2015, 2017-2021) were tasked with ensuring the loyalty of the police and armed forces before joining Jokowi's government as ministers (Karnavian, 2019-2024; Tjahjanto, 2022-2024) or chief of staff (Moeldoko, 2018-2024). One example of Jokowi's success was his ability to cut the ground from under the feet of hardline Muslim mass organisations such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI, The Party of Liberation Indonesia) and the Front Pembela

Islam (FPI, Islamic Defenders Front, founded 1998), both of which ended up being banned in 2017 and 2019 respectively.²⁰

It was through these networks of buzzers and voluntary mass organisations (*relawan*) that Jokowi was able to deploy maximum pressure on Indonesian voters to back the Prabowo-Gibran ticket. Such influence manifested in multiple ways: through official and non-official channels, open and clandestine suasion, as well as outright manipulation and intimidation of voters at the grassroots. This last took the form of direct free social welfare handouts or «bansos» (*bantuan sosial*) through the local village (*desa*) and urban ward (*kampung*) heads. Even more effective, however, was the constant bombardment of social media and public pollsters. Voters from the Millennial and Gen Z cohorts, born between 1980-94 and 1995-2010 respectively, many casting their ballots for the first time, were persuaded to back Prabowo, who was presented by the buzzers as a sweet (*gemoy*) grandad, dancing (*joget*) his way across the stage. With over half the 202,807,222 (fn.22) registered voters below the age of 40, these cohorts knew next to nothing about the four-star general's dark past in East Timor (1975-1999) and Suharto's Indonesia (1966-98) and the buzzers ensured it remained that way. Meanwhile, in Gibran, a young thirty something who boasted of his disinterest in reading and busied himself with his «collections» of toys and cartoons, they found a kindred spirit who resonated their own rootless *anomie*. With many of the older generation remembering Suharto's New Order in roseate hindsight and the 30% of the population living on or below the poverty line beguiled by promises of free school meals and other benefits in kind, securing a clear-cut first-round victory for Prabowo and Gibran at the ballot box proved a synch. They were sworn in nine months later, on 20 October 2024, as president and vice president respectively. The curse of Prabowo's New Order shadow seemed to have been exorcised, and Jokowi's heir and his spare identified. Indonesia had now entered a new dynastic age.

4.5. *The legislative elections of February 2024 and Jokowi's manoeuvres*

The presidential elections, decisive though they were for Jokowi's long-term position, were not the only show in town in that political month of February 2024. Running parallel were the legislative elections. These were held for the 580-seat Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR, Dewan Permusy-

20. These groups had organised huge mass protests in late 2016 against the Christian Chinese Jakarta Governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok, in office 2014-2017). Known as the «*Aksi Damai Bela Islam* [Peaceful Action in Defence of Islam]», this had brought over a million people onto the streets of the national capital on 2 December 2016 to demand the governor's resignation on alleged blasphemy charges related to a speech he had made on 27 September 2016 quoting an *ayat* from the Qur'an (Al-Maidah verse 51, «Oh you who have believed, do not take the Jews and the Christians as allies [...].») see Carey and Suhardiyoto Haryadi 2017, p.163.

awaratan Rakyat) or Parliament, and the Regional Consultative Assemblies (DPRD, Dewan Permusyawaratan Rakyat Daerah).²¹

The dynamics of local politics in Indonesia depend on several local factors. These include the dominance or strategic influence of a local political party, the presence of a charismatic local leader, such as the current Governor of West Java, Dedi Mulyadi (term of office, 2025-30), or, during Jokowi's first administration, the Christian Chinese Governor of Jakarta (DKI), Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) (in office 2014-2017), and the role of mass organisations like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) or Muhammadiyah (fn.24). As we have just seen, Jokowi, through his access to national and local bureaucratic apparatuses, military and police institutions, as well as his «bansos» populist programmes, could ensure the large-scale mobilisation of voters across Indonesia during such legislative elections.

Despite these substantial advantages, however, the results did not go all Jokowi's way: while PDI-P failed in the presidential election (the Ganjar-Mahfud ticket came in a poor third with just 16% of the popular vote after Prabowo-Gibran and Baswedan-Iskandar), the party led by Megawati won the highest number of seats (110 out of 580), or 19% of the seats contested, in the Indonesian parliament (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, DPR). It also garnered the largest percentage (15%) of the popular vote (25,000,000)²² with the lion's share coming from its traditional voter heartlands of Central Java and Bali. Golkar, well represented in Jakarta, West Java and the Outer Islands, and Gerindra (Partai Gerakan Indonesia Raya), Prabowo's political party, with strong showings in West Java and East Java, came in second and third place with 102 and 86 seats respectively.

The results of the 2024 general election were a wakeup call for Jokowi. They showed just how politically powerful PDI-P remained at the grass roots, particularly in its traditional stronghold—known as the *kandang banteng* (bull pen)—of Central Java. This spelt bad news for Jokowi's political future given the sharp deterioration in his relationship with the PDI-P leader, Megawati. This would become even worse if the upcoming local elections on 27 November 2024²³ proved beyond Jokowi's control. To prevent any

21. Technically the legislative elections were for the People's Consultative Assembly (Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat). This consists of the DPR, and the much smaller Regional Representative Council (Dewan Perwakilan Daerah), which functions as Indonesia's upper house or Senate. However, while the DPR legislates nationally, the DPD's authority is limited to areas related to regional governments and can only propose and give advice on bills under consideration in the DPR. It thus has no independent law-making powers.

22. Out of 204,807,222 registered voters, 162,227,475 actually voted in the 14 February 2024 elections, a remarkably high 80.2% voter turn-out, see IPU Parline 2024.

23. These local elections took place across 548 regions, 37 provinces, 415 regencies (*kabupaten*) and 93 cities (*kota*), including the Jakarta Special Capital Territory (Daerah Khusus Ibukota), with the exception of the Yogyakarta Special Region (Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta, DIY), where the current Sultan (Hamengku Buwono X, r.

further decline in his political influence, Jokowi signed Presidential Regulation (*Peraturan Presiden*) No 76/2024 on 22 July 2024, instructing Investment Minister, Bahlil, to provide permits to faith-based mass organisations allowing them to extract natural resources. Several Christian faith groups, such as the Protestant PGI (Persekutuan Gereja-Gereja di Indonesia, The Communion of Churches in Indonesia), and the Catholic KWI (Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia, Bishops' Conference of Indonesia) rejected this offer, but the two largest grassroots Muslim organisations Nahdlatul Ulama (NU, The Renaissance of the Ulama) and the Modernist Muslim, Muhammadiyah, after lengthy internal discussions, accepted.

What was Jokowi up to? Jokowi's principal aim was to exercise some control over faith-based mass organisations, particularly NU and Muhammadiyah. This was both because of their sheer size²⁴ and local clout in their regional heartlands: East Java for NU and Yogyakarta and other urban areas for Muhammadiyah. This was an intrinsic part of his strategy for securing his political future when he ceased to be president. Jokowi's next move (11 August 2024), which he executed through his political fixer, Bahlil,²⁵ was to launch a takeover of the Golkar leadership. Golkar's long-serving head, Airlangga Hartarto, then Coordinating Minister for Economic Development (2019-2024), suddenly announced his resignation allegedly after pressure from Jokowi, who threatened the Golkar head with a court case on corruption charges. This political skulduggery ended with Golkar organising an extraordinary meeting to elect the new head, which, as the public had long predicted, was none other than Jokowi's trusted hatchet man, Bahlil. When the news broke, public criticism of Jokowi in the media, particularly the social media, reached a crescendo. But he shrugged it off.

It was not long after the Golkar takeover that another political drama occurred. This involved Jokowi's attempt to revoke the Constitutional Court's 20 August 2024 ruling on regional elections. This ruling drastically reduced the percentage of the popular vote required of political parties to propose their own candidates for governor and mayor in the upcoming local election from 25% of the popular vote to 7.5% in constituencies of 6-12 million voters and just 6% in those over 12 million. At the same time, the 20% requirement for the number of seats in the local parliament (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah*, DPRD) was waived entirely. This meant that smaller parties like the People's Wave Party (*Partai Gelora*, fn. 15) and the

1988-present) and Pakualam ruler (Paku Alam IX, r. 2016-present) are automatically reappointed as Governor and Deputy Governor respectively.

24. Muhammadiyah is reported to have between 20-30 million members (22 million is often cited) as of 2023 [Arifianto 2023, 30 May], and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) claims up to 40 million, making it the largest Muslim grassroots organisation in the world [NU Online 2023, 11 July].

25. *Jakarta Post*, 19 August 2024, reported that Bahlil had been appointed Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources seemingly as a reward for his services.

Labor Party, which had brought the original petition to the Constitutional Court, could put up their own candidates.

Pro-democracy activists hailed this ruling as a victory for democracy as it would stymie efforts by Jokowi's parliamentary «Onward Indonesia Coalition (*Koalisi Indonesia Maju*, KIM)» to create an even broader coalition to quash opposition candidates in the upcoming election. Hopes were thus raised that the upcoming local elections would be substantially more democratic, with independents and candidates from smaller parties having a chance to get elected for the first time.²⁶

Concerned by this turn of events, Jokowi tasked his new minister of Law and Human Rights, Supratman Andi Agtas (appointed 19 August 2024), to approach the leader of the Indonesian parliament (DPR), Puan Maharani, Megawati's daughter, to change the Constitutional Court's decision. But, in taking this step, Jokowi fatally misjudged the mood of the country. Within two days of the public becoming aware of what was happening (22 August), a wave of protest swept across the country. This took the most spectacular visual form in the «Emergency Warning» on Indonesian social media. First uploaded by Indonesian journalist and TV personality Najwa Shihab on her *Mata Najwa* [«Najwa's Eye»] and Narasi TV accounts, it showed the Indonesian national symbol – the Garuda bird (avian vehicle of the Hindu god Vishnu) – coloured in dark navy blue with the words «Peringatan Darurat [Emergency Warning!]» in white letters across the top of the page [Fahmi 2024, 22 August]. It was a vivid rallying cry, designed to increase public awareness and safeguard justice and democracy in Indonesia. It sparked widespread popular demonstrations, involving large numbers of citizens, particularly students and younger Millennial and Gen-Z cohorts.

4.6. *Turn of the tide on Jokowi's dynastic politics?*

The waves of protest which engulfed Indonesia in late August 2024 reflected a root and branch rejection of Jokowi's political manoeuvrings and dynasty building. It reached as far as his eldest son, Gibran, who had been able to run as vice-president by a constitutional sleight of hand but was now seen as hopelessly unsuited for his role. From this point onwards, public perceptions of the Joko Widodo became overwhelmingly negative, a development reflected by political commentators who now began to refer to him by his distinctly common Javanese family name – «Mulyono» (equivalent of «Mr Smith») – rather than the more intimate «Jokowi».

26. *Jakarta Post*, 20 August 2024, quoted Titi Anggraini of the Perludem election monitoring NGO as saying, with reference to the work of the Constitutional Court (Mahkamah Konstitusi or MK): «Bravo MK! Now the requirement to nominate a candidate in local election[s] is the same with that of independent candidates. MK is great!».

This negative perception was also vividly on display when Jokowi's youngest son, Kaesang Pangarep (born 1994), a yuppy businessman-cum-YouTuber politician, took a much publicised all-expenses paid jaunt to the United States in late August 2024 [*Jakarta Post* 2024, 23 August]. Travelling on a private jet costing a reported US\$ 650,000 with his heavily pregnant wife,²⁷ former model Erina Gudono, just as the «Emergency Warning» signs began to appear on Indonesian netizens' phones, the couple posted photographs of themselves eating lavish burgers worth over half an Indonesian day labourer's monthly wage (US\$ 50) and buying a baby stroller which cost nearly the triple of an Indonesian worker's yearly income (US\$ 600). Not surprisingly, viral images of Erin as a latter-day Marie Antoinette soon became a trending meme in Indonesia [*Tempo* 2024, 22 August; Priyanti 2024, 23 August].

These events, coupled with the fact that Kaesang's party, Partai Solidaritas Indonesia (Indonesian Solidarity Party, PSI), into whose leadership he had been shoe-horned only three days earlier (22 September 2023), performed abysmally in the local elections, brought the curtain down on the political hopes of Jokowi's youngest son.

The humiliating defeat of Kaesang, who had once been cited as a potential Jakarta gubernatorial candidate, together with the debacle of his party at the polls, represented a net political loss for Jokowi. Unlike his immediate predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, or his successor, Prabowo, Jokowi had not founded his own political party. Instead, he had long existed in a semi-detached political limbo maintaining an uneasy relationship with Megawati's PDI-P. The weakness caused by this lack of a personal political constituency became evident when Jokowi failed in his tactic of reversing the Constitutional Court's pro-democratic local election regulation favouring smaller parties. This failure contributed to the triumph of Megawati and her PDI-P party, enabling them to secure their wafer-thin win in the Jakarta gubernatorial election on 27 November 2024.

4.7. *Civil society and «democratic decay» – real or imagined?*

In the last five years of Jokowi's incumbency, there were two nationwide waves of public protest his policies. The first was in September 2019 with the tagline «Reformation is Corrupted (*Reformasi Dikorupsi*)». This widespread protest was a response to Jokowi's policy of imposing the new Job Creation Laws (RUU Cipta Kerja) and the Draft Bill (*Rencana Undang-Undang*, RUU) regulating the workings of the Corruption Eradication Commission (RUU KPK), including the use of wiretaps. The second wave, as we have just seen

27. Erina gave birth to her first child, a daughter named Bebingah Sang Tansahayu, on 15 October 2024, so she was over seven months pregnant when she flew to the US in late August 2024, hence the need to travel by private jet as no commercial airline would have allowed her passage.

(Section 4.5), occurred in late August 2024 with the tagline «Democracy in Emergency (*Darurat Demokrasi*)». It was sparked by Jokowi's attempt to revoke the Constitutional Court's decision on the regulation of Regional Elections. These two mass demonstrations involving students, workers and civil society organisations, reflected the depth of public anger at Jokowi's authoritarian policies.

Yet, as Zainal Arifin Mochtar (born 1978), a scholar activist from the University of Gajah Mada (UGM) in Yogyakarta in Central Java, has recently pointed out, it is absurd to blame democratic decay on Jokowi alone. The process of upholding and maintaining a democracy is always a collective project [Mochtar 2024, 4 August, p. 75]. This holds as much for Indonesia as for any other country with democratic aspirations. If Indonesia is a collective project which has failed, we need to ask ourselves the question: why? Here we must enter the realm of political sociology and consider whether Indonesia even has a middle class or a civil society capable of sustaining democratic institutions. Indeed, even if there is an Indonesian middle class and civil society committed to upholding democratic values, why were they so singularly ineffective in resisting Jokowi's authoritarian policies during his second term in office?

In a recent article, the Australian Indonesianist and political economy researcher, Jeremy Mulholland, wrote the following:

In an ideal world where the rule of law is fully applied, a far-reaching parliamentary inquiry into the 2024 election or 'independent' corruption eradication investigations, could build upon existing revelations about the flows of political slush funds pooling around Jokowi and Luhut's business empires. Such investigations could provide an invaluable lesson for future political leaders that abuse of power should not be condoned. In reality, the interests of the Jokowi-Luhut alliance now appear to be increasingly safeguarded with most 'political opposition' fragmented, the KPK reined in and Indonesia's incoming president, Prabowo, apparently determined to maintain the status quo. Overall, the discreet Jokowi-Luhut alliance has been the axis of Indonesia's political-economy over the past decade. Alas, for Indonesia, this populist, deal-making presidency has produced a decade of democratic decay. For Prabowo, as the next president, reversing that trend will not be a political priority in Indonesia's intra-elite contestation [Mulholland 2024, 4 April].

The absence of organized opposition groups and the reality of weak civil society institutions allowed Jokowi to engineer national laws and regulations to suit his needs. In today's Indonesia, this is an important issue that deserves a thorough analysis [Ford and Pepinsky 2014]. Only thus can we understand the state of democracy in Indonesia. Significantly, critiques of democratic decline are often most effectively articulated in Indonesia

by artist-activists like Butet Kartaredjasa (born 1961), the son of Indonesia's leading postwar cultural icon (dancer-choreographer, painter, actor) Bagong Kussudiardja (1928-2004). Butet's quatrain (*pantun*), *Hajatan Rakyat* («The Celebration of the People»), read aloud at a presidential rally in Wates, Kulon Progo, Yogyakarta Special Region (DIY), on 28 January 2024, created a sensation and got him reported to the police for libelling the President. It contained lines like 'I'm angry because I didn't throw my sandals / Jokowi wanted a mental revolution / but failed and fell over / [...] / Manipulate the surveys to win / It's clear that you won because you cheated / [...] / Millions of Jokowi supporters / feel betrayed / His innocent appearance is enough / to be cunning to / outsmart the [constitutional] court / [...] / But sorry we're sick of him taking sides' [*Tempo* 2024, 30 January].

In the print media, polemical debates on this matter are particularly carried forward by an urban-based younger generation of academics and social activists. These include figures like the University of Gajah Mada intellectual, Zainal Arifin Mochtar. Such polemics on Indonesian democracy remind us of the late 1950s debate between Herbert Feith and Harry Benda concerning whether or not democracy existed in Indonesia following President Sukarno's dissolution of parliament and return to the 1945 Constitution [Feith 1982a; Benda 1982]. This launched what became known as «Guided Democracy (*Demokrasi Terpimpin*)». In the early 21st century, history seems to be repeating itself.

Informed discussions in the media relating to the current state of democracy in Indonesia are mostly restricted to non-mainstream media outlets. These include the website of the *Jurnal IndoPROGRESS* (IndoPROGRESS Journal of the eponymous IndoPROGRESS Institute for Social Research and Education, IISRE) and Project Multatuli, established by Evi Mariani, a former *Jakarta Post* journalist. The latter focuses on the publication of investigative articles. These two online media sources are the most engaged and progressive in their views. They directly address the issues of declining or decaying democracy in Indonesia, first raised by Feith and Benda, and revisited by a number of contemporary political scientists, including Michele Ford and Thomas Pepinsky (*Beyond Oligarchy*, 2014), Edward Aspinall and Ward Berenschot (*Democracy for Sale* (2019) and Thomas Power and Eve Warburton (*Democracy in Indonesia*, 2020).

Among the most prolific contributors to this debate on the state of democracy in Indonesia is the sociologist Abdil Mughis Mudhoffir. An Honorary Fellow at the Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne and formerly Assistant Professor of Sociology, State University of Jakarta (Universitas Negeri Jakarta, UNJ), Mudhoffir wrote a provocative article on 21 December 2021, entitled 'No decline in democracy, Indonesian politics was already rotten for a long time (*Tidak Ada Kemunduran Demokrasi, Politik Indonesia Sejak Dulu Memang Busuk*)' [Mudhoffir 2021, 21 December]. In this

essay, he strongly opposed the popular discourse about the «backsliding» of Indonesian democracy, arguing instead that democracy has either been completely absent or practically non-existent in Indonesia since the early years of Sukarno's Old Order (1945-66). In Mudhoffir's view, it is pointless talking about a «decline» in democracy because there was no such thing in the first place. Prominent amongst the many responses, was one by veteran political scientist Coen Husain Pontoh, the editor of the *Jurnal Indo-PROGRESS*, who wrote 'Investigating the middle class: A response to Abdil Mughis Mudhoffir (*Menginvestigasi Kelas Menengah: Tanggapan untuk Abdil Mughis Mudhoffir*)' [Pontoh 2021, 16 June].

For more recent polemics, particularly in relation to the mass demonstrations sparked by Jokowi's attempt to change the Constitutional Court's decision on local elections on 22 August 2024, Mudhoffir was again in the forefront with his Project Multatuli op-ed, entitled 'Bourgeois Democratic Emergency (*Darurat Aktivisme Borjuis*)' [Mudhoffir 2024, 23 August]. Among the most thoughtful responses were opinion pieces by Muhamad Isyroqi Basil [Basil 2024, 23 August]; Dodi Faedlulloh [Faedlulloh 2024, 13 September]; Zulfadhli Nasution [Nasution 2024, 19 September]; and Fathimah Fildzah Izzat [Izzat 2024, 25 September]. Such passionate debates amongst the younger generation of Indonesian academics and activists are a healthy sign for the future. The stakes of democracy in Indonesia are in good hands with such engaged intellectuals.

However, the already mentioned Omnibus Law and Corruption Eradication Commission Law cases, which provoked such extensive popular demonstrations in September 2019, illustrate the limits of public protest in Indonesia. They did not change realities on the ground. Neither of these two important pieces of legislation, initiated by Jokowi's administration, were rescinded or revised, even though both were deeply inimical to the democratic health of the nation. Instead, Jokowi prioritised the interests of domestic oligarchs and foreign investors, both of whom preferred an unempowered work force and a weakened National Corruption Eradication Commission. In this process of revision, Indonesian workers and reformers were side-lined. Given that Jokowi found it so easy to ignore such massive protests and ram through his legislation, we return here to our initial question: does a civil society actually exist in Indonesia? This has now become a hot-button issue among scholars and activists alike as practically no significant opposition group has emerged in Indonesian politics in the quarter century since the fall of Suharto in May 1998.

This absence has been particularly evident during Jokowi's second administration (2019-2024) when an increasingly authoritarian government came to power [Tirtosudarmo and Carey 2022, pp.193-195]. If no «loyal» opposition has crystallised in this past quarter century, just what role has the so-called politically conscious middle class played in Indonesia? Does such a class even exist? Looking beyond Indonesia, it is relevant to read the

view of an Indian political scientist, Partha Chatterjee (born 1947), in his assessment of what constitutes civil society

Faced with similar problems, some analysts have favoured expanding the idea of civil society to include virtually all existing social institutions that lie outside the strict domain of the state. This practice has become rampant in the recent rhetoric of international financial institutions, aid agencies and nongovernmental organizations among whom the spread of a neoliberal ideology has authorized the consecration of every non-state organization as the precious flower of the associative endeavours of free members of civil society. I have preferred to resist these unscrupulously charitable theoretical gestures, principally because I feel it important not to lose sight of the vital and continually active project that still informs many of the state institutions in countries like India to transform traditional social authorities and practices into the modular forms of bourgeois civil society. Civil society as an ideal continues to energize an interventionist political project, but as an actually existing form it is demographically limited. Both of these facts must be borne in mind when considering the relation between modernity and democracy in countries such as India [Chatterjee 2000, p. 39].

A bare month before Jokowi's handover to Prabowo (20 October 2024), another dramatic event occurred in Indonesian domestic politics. Bambang Soesatyo (born 1962), Speaker of the People's Consultative Assembly (Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat, MPR) and one of the chairpersons of Golkar, initiated a debate in the Assembly aimed at revoking a number of previous government decisions. One of the most politically significant was the rehabilitation of the name of Indonesia's founder President, Sukarno (in office 1945-1967). Soesatyo proposed that the earlier accusation of Sukarno's involvement in the still murky events of 1 October 1965 (Gestok), when the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) was supposedly involved in a coup attempt, should be erased from the record. The decision on Sukarno was perceived by the Indonesian public as a gesture of rapprochement between Golkar and Megawati's PDI-P, given that Indonesia's founder President is Megawati's father. It was generally welcomed.

What was much less acceptable was another decision implying a comprehensive pardon for General Suharto for his personal involvement in the system of KKN (*Korupsi, Kolusi dan Nepotisme*, «Corruption, Collusion and Nepotism») during his 32 years in power (1966-1998) when he was reported to have amassed a fortune of between US\$ 15-35 billion (Transparency International 2004, p.13). Even worse, was a rumoured attempt by the Assembly (MPR) to rehabilitate General Suharto's name and instal him as a national hero (*pahlawan nasional*). As of the time of writing (December 2024) this debate was ongoing.

Is impunity becoming a culture? This is something that is currently much debated among foreign scholars such as Elizabeth Drexler who has recently argued that impunity is more structural than cultural [Drexler 2023].²⁸ Linked with this debate about whether Indonesia's Second President deserves elevation as a national hero is his alleged involvement in the post-1965 killings, when, as have seen (Section 2.1.), between 500,000 and a million people accused of links with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) are thought to have been murdered [Robinson 2018]. This is a subject on which there is now a growing body of literature, mostly by foreign researchers such as Geoffrey Robinson, Katharine McGregor, Annie Pohlman, Jess Melvin, John Roosa and Robert Cribb [Melvin 2024, 26 June].

5. The post-2024 presidential election: Implications for the future

5.1. Inauguration and selecting the new administration

Shortly before his inauguration on Sunday, 20 October 2024, the newly elected Indonesian president, Prabowo Subianto, invited around a hundred candidates, whom he was considering for ministerial positions, to come for two whole days to his Kertanegara residence in Kebayoran Baru, South Jakarta. One by one the invited candidates were interviewed alone by the President elect [Aditya and Prabowo 2024, 15 October]. Among the familiar faces was Sri Mulyani, Jokowi's Finance Minister (2016-2024), now slated to hold the same portfolio in Prabowo's new cabinet. Others included Airlangga Hartanto, the coordinating minister for the economy under Jokowi; Basuki Hadimulyo (born 1954), the former minister of Public Works; and Tito Karnavian (born 1964), the erstwhile police chief, who had been appointed minister of Home Affairs (in office, 2019-2024) by Jokowi, and who would now continue in post (see Section 4.4).

It was no secret that, in picking these ministers, Prabowo was influenced by Jokowi. The interest of the latter in the make-up of the new government underscored his concern to preserve his legacy, a concern already signalled when Jokowi engineered the installation of his son, Gibran, as Prabowo's vice president. Shortly after this ministerial selection process, the President elect organized what he called a «retreat» at his Hambalang (Sentul) estate, where his ministerial and vice-ministerial picks were lectured to by several international professors and experts on crucial issues such as geopolitics, AI and global economics. As if all this was not enough, the former

28. Drexler explains the complexities of what is known in Indonesia as the «culture of impunity», namely the lack of personal and professional shame involved in corrupt acts. Drexler shows that there are underlying drivers here. These involve not only «culture» broadly conceived but also bureaucratic, military and educational norms which make impunity and crimes against the state acceptable in Indonesia.

four-star general brought all his selected cabinet team to attend another two days of military training at his former military academy in Magelang, complete with the army uniforms, camp-beds and tents in an airconditioned camping ground [Guritno and Ihsanuddin 2024, 24 October]!

On the day of his presidential inauguration (20 October 2024), Prabowo Subianto gave an inaugural address which laid out his future policies [*Tempo* 2024, 20 October]. Delivered at the plenary meeting of The People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) of the Republic of Indonesia and attended by two former presidents – Yudhoyono and Jokowi – and representatives of foreign countries, the speech was replete with high-flown rhetoric. This reflected the new President's strong nationalism and his alleged determination to uplift the still economically challenged masses of the Indonesian people. After the inauguration, the celebration was followed by lengthy festivities where people enjoyed food and music on the nine-kilometre route from the parliament building to the state palace (Istana Negara). There, outgoing President Jokowi and his vice-president, Ma'ruf Amin, greeted Prabowo and Gibran. The whole inauguration was choreographed in a grand manner, aimed to highlight Indonesia's vast size and the smoothness of the democratic transfer of power [*Kompas* 2024, 20 October].

The day after the presidential inauguration, Prabowo officially installed his line-up of cabinet ministers and deputy ministers. In all there were incumbents for 54 ministries and state institutions. This was ten more in number than in Jokowi's previous cabinets. Except for the PDI-P, the largest party by number of seats in the Indonesian parliament (DPR), almost all political parties were represented in the new cabinet [*Tempo* 2024, 21 October]. While rumours circulated that the PDI-P leader, Megawati Sukarnoputri, might meet with Prabowo prior to his inauguration to come to an agreement allowing PDI-P members to participate in the new government, these never materialised. Was this an indication of Megawati's true political position as the leader of what was now a de facto opposition? The public were left with no clear statement from either Megawati or her high-ranking party officials. Yet, with the poll to elect the regional heads approaching on 27 November, it became clear that the PDI-P would be the only political party to contest Prabowo's governing coalition on election day.

5.2. *The November 2024 local elections and Megawati's PDI-P as Indonesia's «loyal opposition»*

As we have seen, on 20 August 2024 (Section 4.5.) a decision was made by the Constitutional Court to reduce the percentage of the popular vote required of political parties which wished to propose their own candidates for governor and mayor in the upcoming local elections. This allowed smaller parties to endorse their candidates regardless of whether they had over 20% of seats in their local parliaments (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah, DPRD). As already noted, although Jokowi and his allies attempted to re-

voke this decision, they failed. The successful mobilisation of civil society organisations ensured the new rule remained on the statute book. This opened an opportunity for PDI-P to endorse its local candidates, both for governors and district heads.

The fierce contestation between Megawati's PDI-P and Prabowo's Jokowi-supported coalition now found a new battle ground. The National Election Commission confirmed that the regional heads' election on 27 November would take place in 37 provinces, 415 districts, and 93 cities. The real battlegrounds, however, were in Java, namely Jakarta, West, Central and East Java provinces, home to 55% of the Indonesian population. In Jakarta, PDI-P's candidates, Pramono Anung and Rano Karno, won a wafer thin (50.07%) first-round victory against former West Java governor, Ridwan Kamil (in office 2019-2024) and his running mate, conservative Islamic politician, Suswono. But this was one of PDI-P's few successes. In West Java, former district heads Dedi Mulyadi and his running mate, Erwan Setiawan, both backed by Prabowo, won a landslide victory. In Central and East Java, it was the same story. Here the PDI-P candidates lost heavily against Prabowo's coalition. The traces of Jokowi's hand were everywhere. Taking a page out of his previous presidential election playbook, sub-district (*camat*), village heads (*lurah*) and the police were all mobilised to support Prabowo's coalition candidates [CNN Indonesia 2024, 15 November]. Jokowi also played a significant role in securing the crushing first-round victory (62%) of his son-in-law, Bobby Nasution (born 1991), as Governor of North Sumatra [The Conversation 2024, 25 December].

The decision made by Prabowo to accept the result of Jakarta's gubernatorial election is interesting. It can be interpreted as a sympathetic political gesture towards the PDI-P head, Megawati. Indeed, in the triangular relationship which now exists between these three central political figures – Megawati, Jokowi and Prabowo – the weakest link in terms of party politics is clearly Jokowi. He has no formal position as head of any political party as Megawati and Prabowo have with PDI-P and Gerindra respectively.

5.3. *Prabowo's key cabinet appointments*

Looking at Prabowo's key ministerial appointments, several analyses can be offered. First, in terms of fiscal policy, Prabowo's continuation of Sri Mulyani as Finance Minister showed a more cautious and nationalistic stance. Prabowo could be seen to be acting conservatively to reduce the risk of uncontrolled spending. He appears to understand all too well the volatility and unpredictability of the global economy at the present time. Second, his continuation of Tito Karnavian in the Home Affairs portfolio sent a signal to local governments, particularly Papua. As a former Papua Police Chief (in post, 2012-2014), Karnavian, has a deep knowledge of the troublesome

province. His decisive role in dividing Papua into four separate provinces when he was Jokowi's minister of Home Affairs in 2022 indicates a shrewd strategic understanding of how to weaken Papuan independence demands by undermining the unity of the Papuan people [*BBC News Indonesia* 2022, 30 June]. Third, a new approach to Islamic politics seems to have emerged with the appointment of Nasaruddin Umar (born 1959), as minister of Religious Affairs. A non-affiliated open-minded modern cleric and formerly the head (*Imam Besar*) of Istiqlal Mosque, the national mosque in central Jakarta, Umar brought a fresh wind to this politically important ministry, hitherto the fief of the conservative Nahdlatul Ulama (Renaissance of the Ulama, NU) Islamic organisation [Erianto 2024, 12 November].

Finally, given Prabowo's previous track record as head of Indonesia's elite special forces (Kopassus) in the closing months of Suharto's New Order regime, there was a strong fear, especially amongst civil society activists, that Prabowo would act more toughly and repressively towards them. The 15 December 2024 *Tempo* edition, for example, reported that Prabowo had rotated 300 top military officers, heightening public concerns about the possible return of the military to domestic politics in Indonesia [*Tempo* 2024, 15 December].

6. Conclusions

In his last two years in office, Jokowi's navigated his extraordinary political career in a style more like a latter-day Javanese ruler than the democratically elected president of the world's fourth most populous country.²⁹ The unprecedented «Black Swan» event of COVID-19 had a significant impact on the Indonesian economy and social life. The pandemic revealed the vulnerability of Indonesia's poorer 30% and exposed the ever-widening class divide as the financial security of the Indonesian middle class was eroded. It put the brakes on Jokowi's ambitions of achieving a revolution in his country's infrastructure and a geographical recentring of political power to East Kalimantan with the completion of the new national capital. Yet, even with the passing of COVID-19, Jokowi's passion for pushing forward his ambitious development programmes remained undimmed. These projects became conflated in his mind with what he imagined as «modernity».

Jokowi attempted, but failed, to extend his presidency to an unprecedented third term. He then took a wrecking ball to the Indonesian constitution by manipulating the Constitutional Court's ruling on the age requirement for vice-presidential candidates. This deeply corrupt act allowed

29. The current (2023) Indonesian population stands at 277.5 million (with 282+ million estimated in December 2024), compared to India's 1.429 billion, China (PRC's) 1.411 billion, and the USA's 334.9 million.

his son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, to become Prabowo Subianto's running mate. Once this had been achieved, Jokowi pulled out all the stops to influence the result of presidential election, which he saw as a way of securing his political future. Now with Prabowo and Gibran safely installed as the new president and vice president respectively, Jokowi's hopes for the realisation of his development dreams continue to burn bright. The biggest and most challenging of these is clearly the completion of the new Ibu Kota Nusantara national capital in East Kalimantan. Here the jury is out. Much will depend on how the Indonesian economy fares in what looks like some very turbulent times ahead with Rupiah-US dollar exchange rate at the lowest point since the Asian Financial Crisis of July 1997.

In its special issue to commemorate Jokowi's decade in power (2014-24), *Tempo*, wrote «[during] his two terms leading Indonesia, Jokowi destroyed democracy and the hopes of reformation, *nawacita* has turn into unprecedented disaster» [*Tempo* 2024, 29 July]. *Nawacita* (also spelled *Nawa Cita*) is the vision document including Jokowi's nine promises to improve the country,³⁰ which he made at the start of his presidency in October 2014.

Instead of celebrating Jokowi's achievements, *Tempo* exposed 20 instances of Jokowi's «sins». In fact, Jokowi's life and political career is a study in the Indonesian psyche, recalling Clifford Geertz's classic essay in *Old Societies and New States* in which he reflects on Indonesia as a country grappling with its imagined modernity [Geertz 1965, pp.105-157]. In a more recent analysis, political scientist, Partha Chatterjee, basing himself on the modern Indian historical experience, questioned the relevance to India and the world outside Europe of the generally accepted Western political science concept of «civil society» as a sign of modernity [Chatterjee 2000, pp. 35-48].

Jokowi represents a modern-day Javanese ruler. During his decade in office, he accumulated substantial power. With control over the main chan-

30. The nine promises were: (1) ensuring the state protects the nation and its citizens through an active foreign policy, an integrated defense system guaranteeing national security, and the promotion of Indonesia's identity as a maritime nation; (2) establishing clean, effective and democratic government thus restoring public trust in democratic institutions while consolidating democracy through reforms to the party system, elections and representative institutions; (3) building Indonesia from the periphery by strengthening regions and villages within the unitary state; (4) reforming the government system and enforcing the law to eradicate corruption and ensure dignified and trustworthy governance; (5) improving the quality of life of Indonesian citizens through better education, community empowerment, land reform, subsidized home ownership and universal state social welfare by 2019; (6) increasing the productivity and international competitiveness of Indonesian workers thus enabling the country to advance with other Asian nations; (7) achieving economic independence by mobilizing strategic sectors of the domestic economy; (8) carrying out a «mental revolution» through civic education and the teaching of the history of Indonesia's national struggle, thereby deepening patriotism and character building; (9) strengthening diversity through policies that encourage diversity education and dialogue between citizens.

nels of authority (government, parliament and the judiciary), he felt confident that he could achieve his goal of perpetuating his influence beyond his formal presidency. Political engineering and manipulation were his two favourite tactics. Since late 2022, as the General Election Commission commenced its work, the contest for Indonesia's future began. As we have seen, the Commission became the target for Jokowi's manipulation. His principal goal was to make Prabowo his successor, and his son, Gibran, Prabowo's running mate, despite an election which was widely seen as fraudulent. But with the former four-star general now in power the question is whether he will follow Jokowi's orders. Is it possible that Gibran as Prabowo's stripling vice president can act as the extension of his father's hand in the new administration? This may be fanciful. But Gibran will certainly keep the seat warm for his father's potential return to the top table.

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TIMOR-LESTE 2024: IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL ENVIRONMENT, RECONCILIATION AS A CENTRAL PILLAR*

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Like 2023, 2024 was a year of intense diplomatic activity, with two old hands in politics and international relations, José Ramos-Horta and Xanana Gusmão, returning to top government posts. A large part of foreign relations was focused on the prospect of ASEAN membership, following acceptance in principle by the member states in November 2022. Another pinnacle of diplomatic life was the election to the Indonesian presidency of Prabowo Subianto, a general whose 20-year career is inextricably linked to the Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste (1975-1999). In the year under review, the political leaders of the two countries chose to manage this major change with a high dose of pragmatism, emphasising the ongoing peaceful normalisation of bilateral relations and further promoting the notion of Reconciliation. Admittedly, there were still some issues waiting for resolution between the two countries, such as the final settlement of land borders. The country's heightened profile was also due to a series of major international events, such as Pope Francis' visit to Dili. Rejecting the logic of blocs, Timor-Leste raised its relations with China to the level of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In the economic sphere, the blue economy promoted by the government, and the formation of a maritime sector, was the government's new mantra in its quest for economic diversification. Hydrocarbons were set to remain the main source of revenue, at least in the short and medium term, since the Greater Sunrise gas field should be developed with Australia and Japan according to the options long defended by Timor-Leste, with a gas pipeline and LNG refinery on the country's south coast.

KEYWORDS – Timor-Leste; Indonesia; ASEAN; Australia; Gas & Petroleum; International Relation.

1. Introduction

Since the return to the highest offices of the state of two veterans in politics and international relations – José Ramos-Horta as president of the republic

* The author's field trip in April-May 2024 was made possible in collaboration with the National University of Timor-Leste (UNTL) and by the support of the Centre Asie du Sud-Est (CASE), the Institut Français en Indonésie et au Timor oriental (IFI) and the Institut de recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-Est contemporaine (IRASEC), as well as the Direction générale des relations internationales et de la stratégie (DGRIS). This article is based on: Cabasset 2025.

in 2022 and Xanana Gusmão as prime minister following the legislative elections in May 2023 – a marked resurgence of activity has been observed, particularly in the fields of economy and international relations. A significant portion of the latter is focused on preparation and progress towards Timor-Leste's entry into ASEAN, following the in-principle agreement announced by the regional organization's Secretariat in November 2022. The relationship with Indonesia warrants particular attention, especially as General Prabowo Subianto¹, aged 73, whose military past is inseparable from the Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste (1975–1999), took office as president of Indonesia in October 2024. Meanwhile, Dili hosted a large number of major international events that contributed to raising the country's profile, such as the visit of Pope Francis to Dili, the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of the popular consultation on self-determination and the 25th anniversary of the arrival of the International Force for East Timor - Interfet. Additionally, the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China, announced in a joint declaration in 2023 and reaffirmed in a new joint statement in late July 2024, demonstrated the country's rejection of bloc-based logic and Beijing's increasing presence in the region. This development forms part of broader regional dynamics driven notably by China, the United States, Australia, and Japan. Also, in a country striving for economic diversification, the blue economy promoted by the government, and its practical application in maritime activities, represented an emerging sector worth closely monitoring.

2. The return to power of the political duo José Ramos-Horta and Xanana Gusmão

Following the 2022 presidential elections, in which José Ramos-Horta once again became president of the Republic [Gunn 2023], the legislative election held on 21 May 2023 resulted in a clear victory for the Congresso Nacional de Reconstrução de Timor (National Congress for Timorese Recon-

1. From 1976 to 1998, Prabowo Subianto's military career was inextricably linked with East Timor as commander of a commando unit which was part of the Kopassus (Komando Pasukan Khusus), namely the special force of the Indonesian army in charge of the invasion of the territory in 1975. Kopassus was regularly accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity and of training violent local militias, not only in Timor but also in West Papua, Java, etc. In March 1998 Prabowo was promoted head of Kostrad, the elite Army Strategic Reserve Command. A few months later, at the end of 1998, he was dismissed from his post and from the army, officially for kidnapping and torturing activists during the riots that led to Suharto's resignation. At the end of February 2024, he was elevated by President Joko Widodo to the rank of four-star honorary general. It is estimated that 180,000 people died from the conflict in East Timor between 1975 and 1999, a quarter to a third of the total population at the time.

struction, CNRT), a party founded in 2007 by Xanana Gusmão, a former leader of the East Timorese resistance and the country's first president in 2002. Despite the participation of 17 political parties to the poll, electoral dynamics crystallised around the main parties, notably the two largest, which together garnered over 67% of the vote. These were the CNRT, and its political rival, the Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente (Revolutionary Front of Independent Timor-Leste, FRETILIN), a historic party established in 1975 that Gusmão and Ramos-Horta had left in the 1980s in order to forge a cross-party resistance movement.

According to the final results [*Notícias de Coimbra* 2023, 28 May], the CNRT secured the largest number of suffrages, although without an absolute majority, with 41.63% of the votes and 31 of the 65 seats in parliament, while FRETILIN obtained 25.75% of the votes and 19 seats. A key uncertainty lay in the influence of intermediary parties, which had become «kingmakers» in previous elections. One such party, the Democratic Party (PD), which received 9.32% of the vote, regained its position as the country's third-largest political force – a rank it held until 2017 – and agreed to join the new governing coalition after having been part of the previous coalition led by FRETILIN. The Kmanek Haburas Unidade Nacional Timor Oan (Enrich the National Unity of the Sons of Timor, KHUNTO), which has significant support among young people and is known for its connections with martial arts groups, maintained its position since 2018, winning 7.51% of the vote and securing five seats. As for the People's Liberation Party (PLP), founded in 2017 by former Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak and part of the previous coalition alongside FRETILIN, it experienced a decline in popularity, earning 5.88% of the votes and four seats.

The stakes of this election were particularly high, primarily due to the widespread sense of political fatigue that characterised much of the East Timorese population at the dawn of this new democratic exercise. Interviews conducted on-site by the author in 2022 highlighted the growth of clientelism as a declared source of discontent, while the stagnation of social indicators such as poverty rates (about 40%), malnutrition, and undernutrition (stunting concerns about half of the children aged below 5) was lamented. Like the rates above or access to water, most social indicators are even more negative in rural areas. Human development is a crucial issue also in a context where according to the 2022 census, over 64% of the population is aged below 30 and where emigration is increasingly becoming a job option. Against this backdrop, at the beginning of 2023, José Ramos-Horta delivered an extensive political analysis [Ramos-Horta 2023] addressing the crucial issues for the country's future which were to be solved during the new term. On his part, Gusmão focused the government programme particularly on the economy (see below), aiming to restore the momentum the country had experienced until 2017–2018. This progress had then been disrupted by the political deadlock caused by rival political

parties in 2017–2018, followed by the socio-economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic [Cabasset & Feijó 2021].

3. *The relationship with ASEAN and Indonesia at a special moment*

3.1. *The prospect of ASEAN membership*

The ASEAN member states' acceptance in principle of Timor-Leste's accession to the regional organization has been a process spanning over a dozen years since the submission of Timor's official application in 2011. This lengthy timeline has prompted numerous academic and press articles, most of which question ASEAN's alleged resistance to Timor-Leste joining the regional bloc. Seixas *et al.* [2019: 150] observed that much of these analyses presented a narrative centred on Timor-Leste's «readiness» for accession, without critically examining the concept, and tended to show a bias in favour of integration. However, it has to be said that Timor-Leste was the only Southeast Asian country to go through this lengthy procedure and that, as in any regional organization, membership is *de facto* and above all politically and geopolitically motivated [Cabasset 2021].

Since November 2022, Timor-Leste has been actively preparing for the prospect of membership. The roadmap (unpublished) submitted in June 2023 by the ASEAN Secretariat to Adaljiza Magno, the Timorese Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, outlined numerous requirements Timor-Leste must meet, including adherence to the ASEAN Charter, treaties, conventions, and agreements. Additionally, it emphasised the need for adequate numbers of English-speaking personnel and security staff, as well as the development of physical infrastructure such as hotels, convention centres, airports, and healthcare facilities. These amenities are crucial for hosting ASEAN's many meetings and accommodating visitors while contributing to the expansion of commercial services and urban infrastructure, particularly in the hospitality sector. These advancements were deemed essential as the country sought to diversify its economy, which had been heavily reliant on hydrocarbons since independence, and to prove to ASEAN member states its capability to attract investors.

Realistically, Timor-Leste was expected to take several years to align with these standards. One of the most challenging aspects was the development of a sufficiently trained workforce. The government's launching and funding in 2024 of a 12-month programme, Future Leaders for ASEAN (Futuru Líder Ba ASEAN), for 100 young people aged 23 to 37, was a commendable initiative in this regard [Government of Timor-Leste 2024, 13 November].

However, some administrative officials and diplomats quietly lamented the imposition of a roadmap's exclusively to Timor-Leste, noting that no other Southeast Asian nation had been subjected to such a document.

They further argued that certain political areas where Timor-Leste stands out – such as freedom of expression, religious freedom, political pluralism, and the conduct of free elections – could have set a positive example for other member states but, unfortunately, were not part of the regional requirements.

Beyond investments and projects managed by Indonesian contractors (see below) and Singaporean firms (such as the major tourism-real estate project Pelican Paradise and a Singaporean university), the investments from other ASEAN countries remain limited in Timor-Leste. In this context, 2024 saw intensified relations with ASEAN member states through official visits by José Ramos-Horta, Xanana Gusmão, Bendito Freitas (Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation), and Agio Pereira (Minister of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers) to countries such as Brunei, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam. During this period, Dili also hosted visits by counterparts belonging to ASEAN nations. Numerous cooperation agreements were signed, and various sectors in need of development through investments were highlighted and identified.

3.2. Prabowo Subianto as president of Indonesia, and the accentuation of the East Timorese policy of reconciliation

In light of the humiliation that the results of the 30 August 1999 popular consultation – overwhelmingly in favour of East Timor's independence – represented for Indonesia, and the sensitivity the East Timorese question has long held for the Archipelago [Dover 2014], the progress achieved by both countries to restore and normalise relations after 1999 is truly remarkable. The speed of this process is a testament to the political leadership in both nations, even though some issues inevitably will take time to resolve [Cabasset 2021]. Beyond numerous meetings in Jakarta and Dili, and the presence of around 40 Indonesian companies in Dili, a wide range of cooperative efforts – spanning health, education, and defence - connect the two countries. These collaborations have been further strengthened by Timor-Leste's ongoing ASEAN accession process, with active Indonesian support. For instance, alongside Chinese companies working on large infrastructure projects, Indonesian firms have increasingly been awarded contracts by the Timorese government [Government of Timor-Leste 2024, 27 September]. One notable example was the expansion and renovation of Dili Airport, a public-private partnership project entrusted in August to the Indonesian state-owned company Waskita Karya, which also constructed or expanded the airports of Oecussi (international) and Suai. Additionally, both nations frequently highlight their joint achievements in peacebuilding. In late May 2024, during the 4th International Conference on Small Island Developing States in Antigua and Barbuda, Xanana Gusmão proposed appointing former Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014) as head of a Peace Commission to address the crisis in Myanmar.

Myanmar is a real concern for Timor-Leste, where the political leaders have regularly spoken out on these issues. In June, Gusmão hosted former Indonesian ambassador Dino Patti Djalal, now president of the Jakarta-based think tank Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI), as the producer of a documentary commissioned by Yudhoyono. The film would focus on the successful reconciliation between Indonesia and Timor-Leste, highlighting the roles of Yudhoyono, Gusmão, and Ramos-Horta.

In this context of rapid normalisation and strengthening of relations, the accession of Prabowo Subianto to Indonesia's presidency has raised concerns among many East Timorese [Special Correspondent, 2024, 18 October]. Nonetheless, they often adopt a pragmatic stance, respecting the sovereign choice of the Indonesian people. This perspective aligns with Gusmao and Ramos-Horta's decision, taken in 1999, to reject the creation of an international tribunal to judge crimes committed during the period 1975-1999, with the aim to favour reconciliation both in East-Timor and between Indonesia and Timor-Leste. As the idea of a tribunal would regularly come back in the international community in the years 2000s, Ramos-Horta highlighted the reason why he opposed the creation of an international tribunal once again in a long speech of 30 August 2009 – the 10th anniversary of the popular consultation. He insisted that progress in addressing human rights abuses could only come from within Indonesia itself.

However, members of Timor-Leste's civil society and NGOs feel the need to revisit the painful history embodied by Prabowo, expressing their expectations for justice regarding atrocities committed during the Indonesian occupation [Leong Pereira and Chen 2024, 28 May]. Conversely, political figure and former Minister of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (2020–2023) Fidelis Magalhães [Magalhães 2024] has suggested that Prabowo's presidency could benefit Timor-Leste by clarifying lingering questions about his role during the occupation. This could include the hoped-for declassification of military archives, as well as the identification and repatriation of the remains of Timorese resistance leaders killed by the Indonesian army, such as Nicolau Lobato. Timor-Leste's first prime minister who declared independence on 28 November 1975, Lobato was killed in late December 1978 during a military operation led by Prabowo.

In fact, Prabowo's new position as president-elect, combined with his close relationship with Joko Widodo and the presence of his vice-president, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, Joko Widodo's eldest son, suggest that Prabowo's term in office should be broadly in line with that of his predecessors in relation to Timor-Leste. Certainly, Prabowo's international reputation, acquired during the occupation of East Timor by Indonesia, which, before his appointment by Joko Widodo as Defence Minister in 2019, resulted then in his ban from visiting the United States and Australia, explains the doubts still entertained about him. But beyond that, his ministerial functions and his role in the modernisation of Indonesian defence, as well as his penchant

for international relations, have clearly enabled him to make his persona acceptable, if not appreciated, in the eyes of the international community.

As part of the reconciliation process initiated by Timor-Leste since its independence in 2002, very specifically by the main historical leaders and the United Nations, several very strong gestures were made to set the tone for the bilateral relations desired by Ramos-Horta and Gusmão. As witnessed by their warm embrace immortalised in a photo [*The Jakarta Globe* 2024, 20 October], Gusmão and Prabowo met at the presidential Palace in Jakarta on the very day of the inauguration on 20 October 2024. Prabowo was subsequently invited to attend the commemoration of the 49th anniversary of the unilateral proclamation of independence on 28 November; the main ceremony of which took place in the year under review in Oecussi, an East Timorese enclave in West Timor (Indonesia). Although the Indonesian president did not accept the invitation, he was represented by three very senior figures, including two (retired) generals who were emblematic of the Indonesian occupation of East Timor²: General Wiranto (77), special adviser to President Prabowo on political and security affairs, and General Kiki Syahnakri (77), as well as Budi Gunawan (65), coordinating minister for Political and Security Affairs (and former head of the national intelligence agency BIN) in the Prabowo government. In the same spirit, José Ramos-Horta had also invited Eurico Guterres (although he didn't come), former leader of the pro-Indonesian Aitarak militia responsible in 1999 for a campaign of terror, murder and destruction against the independence fighters in Dili and Liquiça. While these events illustrate to the utmost the ability of Indonesians, and even more so of the East Timorese, to move forward and do everything possible to foster peace, the notion of «reconciliation» as a State policy has generated debates in the country in light of the notion of «justice» [Moniz 2024, 27 November; *Lusa* 2024, 2 December].

3.3. *Borders under negotiation*

The borders deserve particular attention, firstly because they were once troubled margins, and secondly because the determination of the maritime limits between the two countries remains conditional on the final settlement of the land borders. The bilateral meeting in Jakarta on 21 October provided an opportunity for the Indonesian and East Timorese delegations to discuss the land border and the latter's desire to see the negotiations suc-

2. An Indonesian general, Wiranto was minister of Defence and commander of the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) during the 1999 popular consultation on self-determination in East Timor. The pro-Indonesian militias, trained and equipped by the Indonesian army, were accused of massive human rights violations before, during and after the consultation, including massacres and forced displacements. Wiranto, like General Kiki Syahnakri, then Commander of Martial Law Operations Command in East Timor, and five other high-ranking Indonesian officers, were charged with crimes against humanity and never tried.

ceed [Tatoli 2024, 21 October]. The demarcation of the land border between the two countries, which has been underway since East Timorese independence in 2002, still shows little progress in the period before the closing of this essay. Admittedly, such a length of time is far from exceptional in the settlement of border disputes on a global and even Southeast Asian regional scale. And the dispute only concerns narrow border segments between the enclave of Oecussi (Timor-Leste) and West Timor (Indonesia); more specifically those of Noel Besi-Citrana and Bijael Sunan-Oben. While the Noel Besi-Citrana segment was expected to be resolved by the end of 2023, opposition to the proposed delimitation from the local East Timorese population brought the planned agreement to a halt and negotiations had to resume at the beginning of 2024 [Lusa 2024, 26 January]. The planned bilateral agreement was based on the return to Indonesian sovereignty of 270 ha of the more than 1,000 ha in total of this fertile deltaic region known as Naktuka. The previous 2019 agreement between the two governments on territorial boundaries also ended in failure due to opposition from local Indonesian populations in the same area. The border dispute has its roots in colonial history and the imprecise and unfinished demarcation of borders in the 18th and early 20th centuries [Durand 2006; Durand 2020], as well as in geography and geopolitics. This dispute led to various episodes of tension and border incidents between independence and the turn of the 2010s, albeit of lesser intensity since then.

In the face of disagreements on the part of the local population, the leaders of the two countries have long promoted cooperation and peace initiatives, such as local markets, an economic zone and a protected area. In the same spirit of reconciliation, a cross-border festival is regularly organized – called the ‘Cross-Border Festival’, supplemented by the ‘Festival Fronteira’ in Tetum or the ‘Festival Lintas Batas’ in Indonesian – featuring cultural, sporting and academic events. The October 2024 edition [Government of Timor-Leste 2024, 16 October; *Zona Nusantara* 2024, 28 October] was held jointly in the municipality of Pante Macassar in Oecussi (Timor-Leste) and in Kefamenanu in West Timor (Indonesia). More broadly, the East Timorese side is propagating the idea of «a border of peace» over the whole island, and even, for some, over all the islands adjacent to the island of Timor.

4. *Timor-Leste on the international stage outside ASEAN*

4.1. *Pope Francis in Dili: a moment of paroxysm*

In a country where, according to the 2022 census, 97.5% of the population declared themselves to be Catholics (and 2% Protestants), Pope Francis’ visit from 9 to 11 September 2024 represented a paroxysmal event. The previous papal visit to Dili, by John Paul II following a stopover in Jakarta, had taken place 35 years earlier, in October 1989, in a territory then occupied

by the Indonesian armed forces since its invasion in December 1975 and the annexation of Timor-Leste as the 27th province of Indonesia in 1976. The 1989 papal visit was particularly significant in that it broke, at least for a while, the wall of silence that had fallen over the former Portuguese Timor, now called *Timtim* (short for Timor Timur, East Timor in Indonesian), and put Dili back on the world map. Although the context of the 2024 papal visit was very different from that of 1989, the images from the extensive media coverage speak for themselves. From the moment the Pope arrived, thousands of people of all ages massed along the route of the papal cortege from Dili airport to the city centre, and a human tide attended the mass and homily on 10 September. Delivered in front of more than 600,000 people (compared to 80,000 in Jakarta, 50,000 in Singapore and 35,000 in Port Moresby during the same Asian trip), the mass was by far the largest given by Pope Francis during his Asian tour. The security provided for this gigantic gathering of around half the country's total population was a tour de force, whose success was widely acclaimed.

Arriving in a strongly Catholic territory, the Pope took advantage of the programmed meetings to deliver a number of messages adapted to the East Timorese context. He hailed peace and reconciliation, both within the country and with Indonesia, and stressed the importance of preserving one's culture and looking after the well-being of all, including the most humble [Moore and Melki 2024, 10 September]. In addition, at a time when the country, as elsewhere, was faced with cases of paedophilia perpetrated by members of the clergy – including heroes in the fight against the Indonesian occupation such as the former bishop of Dili and co-Nobel Peace Prize winner Carlos Belo, who was implicated in 2022 – Pope Francis called for «the prevention of all forms of abuse». Critics, however, targeted the ban on West Papua-related protests and the arrest of two activists for a few hours. More critics targeted the government's operation, related to the papal visit, launched in April and still ongoing at the end of the year under review. This operation aimed to evict hundreds of families who had settled «illegally» in several districts of the national capital in order to improve the urban landscape for the Pope's visit. The eviction had also the longer-term objective to clear the strategic areas (in particular coastal areas) allegedly to limit the risks in areas prone to natural disasters and for further urban development.

4.2. *The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between China and Timor-Leste*

As in the ASEAN countries, the perception of China in Timor-Leste differs considerably from that in the West. China is an important partner and Timor-Leste refuses to adopt a campist approach in the rivalry between China and the United States. Specifically in the area of security, the idea that the United States and China are both belligerents and are trying to advance their respective pawns is widespread in Timor-Leste. Along the same

lines, on the side-lines of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore at the end of May/beginning of June 2024 (and at subsequent meetings and declarations), José Ramos-Horta reiterated East Timor's position on the one-China principle and called for «an end to the arming of Taiwan», which is «part of China» [*Cgtn* 2024, 2 June]. Furthermore, support for China stems from the long-standing relations between the two states: the Middle Kingdom was the first country to recognise not only Timor-Leste's official independence on 20 May 2002, but also its first independence, proclaimed unilaterally on 28 November 1975, some ten days before the invasion of the territory. As elsewhere, China is an important partner for Timor-Leste in the construction of infrastructure, and was generous in building between 2009 and 2013, and all of them free of charge, the new presidential Palace, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Diplomatic Training Centre, as well as the building jointly housing the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces Headquarters. Also, China takes part in various partnerships with Timor-Leste in the educational, health and agricultural fields [Gunn 2021, pp. 329-332; Horta 2009].

Nevertheless, contrary to what is often conveyed or feared by the Australian media, for example, China's role in Timor-Leste, which is often considered to be prominent, needs to be qualified. While it is true that China is stepping up its presence, as it is doing elsewhere in the region and beyond, it is nowhere nearly as significant as in other Southeast Asian countries, in terms of development aid, investment or even imports. This remains true even though imports grew at 14.2% in 2022 (compared with the share of the goods in value coming from ASEAN that, while decreasing, is still over 56%) [Instituto Nacional de Estatística Timor-Leste 2024]. Also, China is very well placed to win construction contracts from the East Timorese government, as was the case for the first section of the motorway in the south of the country, for power stations, etc. Very possibly, China will continue to benefit from future projects, linked among other things to the Tasi Mane petrochemical development project (continuation of the motorway, Suai port and airport, potential LNG refinery in Beça, new urban districts in Beça, Betano, Suai, etc.).

In a context marked by regional activism - including that of Australia and the United States - China is strengthening its diplomatic relations with Timor-Leste in the form of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, announced in 2023 and reiterated at the end of July 2024 [Presidência da República de Timor-Leste 2024, 29 July]. This lists the various avenues for cooperation, from agriculture to health and industry, and sets out the contours of security cooperation, including exchanges at all levels between the two countries' military and police forces. However, this sequence is undeniably part of a more global rapprochement between China and the countries of the region, as illustrated in 2024 by the ASEAN-China and China-Indonesia relations.

5. The blue economy and the promise of an Australia-Timor-Leste partnership to develop the Greater Sunrise gas field

As of 30 September, the Petroleum Fund (created in 2005) stood at nearly US\$ 19 billion, an amount that has been stable for several years. On 20 November, parliament approved a total state budget of US\$ 2.617 billion for 2025 [*Independente* 2024, 20 November], which was signed into law by the President a few days later. For the Gusmão government, revitalising the economy involved drawing up major development projects, notably linked to the exploitation of hydrocarbons in the Timor Sea and the development of the Tasi Mane petrochemical and urban cluster. These two major linked projects are expected to create tens of thousands of direct and indirect jobs, generate economic momentum with the provision of infrastructure in the region (power station, roads, airport, etc.) and the deployment of urban, medical and educational activities and services in the local private sector (catering, engineering, security, fuel supply, management or technical services, etc.).

5.1. The blue economy and the rise of maritime activities

In 2024, the ‘blue economy’ became the new government mantra, announced and stimulated by Xanana Gusmão at the 9th Our Ocean conference in Greece in April 2024, then in May at the 4th International Conference on Small Island Developing States in Antigua and Barbuda. This is a highly relevant area for Timor-Leste and for the region as a whole, which has a recognised high level of marine biodiversity. It remains to be hoped that the marine environment, already affected by high levels of pollution and overfishing (including illegal fishing), will be the focus of protection measures. Indeed, an economic vision of the sea is taking shape, one that is strongly inspired by the ASEAN Blue Economy Framework recently published in 2023, which sets out the objective of «exploiting the wealth of natural resources to maximise the region’s growth potential» and in which the notion of protection is virtually absent [ASEAN Indonesia 2023 & ERIA, September].

A number of maritime-related projects have been emerging in Dili, which are crucial to the country’s economic diversification. Japan, for example, via its development agency, JICA, has been concentrating part of its efforts - most often via official development assistance, donations - on port activities, in Dili (refurbishment of the passenger port in the city centre in 2019) and possibly (under study) around the country, in order to boost maritime transport. In 2024, the private Japanese group Tsuneishi, which already employed more than 10,000 workers at its shipyards in China and the Philippines, was looking into the possibility of building a shipyard in Timor-Leste, a project that was well under way, with construction due to start in early 2025. According to the company, Timor Leste offers a number of advantages, such as being in the same time zone as Japan, benefiting

from a large number of young people, many of whom are unemployed or underemployed, and an official minimum wage (US\$ 115/month) that is believed to be the lowest in Southeast Asia (with the exception of Myanmar). At the same time, Japan has energy interests in the two major Timorese hydrocarbon deposits (see below), Bayu Undan and Greater Sunrise.

On the French side, the largest investment and one of the largest foreign investments made in the country (US\$ 500 million in total), is the deep-water container port at Tibar, some ten kilometres west of Dili, for which the project was awarded in 2016 by the State of Timor-Leste to Bolloré for the design, construction, maintenance and management. With a 30-year concession and conducted as a Public Private Partnership (PPP), the port began operations at the end of September 2022 under the name and authority of Timor Port SA. Still in 2022, in order to strengthen its maritime activities, Boluda Towage, the towing division of the Spanish consortium Boluda Corporación Marítima, through its subsidiary Boluda France, extended its activities to Timor-Leste. They involved not only towing, but also acting as a pilot for commercial vessels manoeuvring in and out of port.

Since taking back 80% control at the end of 2024 of the major submarine cable company Alcatel Submarine Networks, owned since 2016 by Finland's Nokia [Arpagian 2024, 10 November], France is also involved in providing fibre optic services to Timor-Leste. Under a contract signed at the end of May 2022 between the East Timorese government and Alcatel Submarine Networks (ASN), the first submarine telecommunications cable arrived in Dili at the end of June 2024. This was a long-awaited step forward, given the poor quality and speed of the Internet network, which was hampering the development of a wide range of activities. ASN and the French shipowner Louis Dreyfus transported and laid the cable, while the cable arrival station on land and data centre were built by the Australian company DXN Limited. The purpose of the 'TLSSC' cable, which is over 600 km long on the Timor-Leste section, is to link up with the Australian North-West Cable System (NWCS) between Port Hedland and Darwin, which was laid in 2016 and is owned by Vocus (Australia). Tested in the last quarter of 2024, the new equipment is scheduled to come on stream in early 2025.

5.2. Greater Sunrise gas field on track to be developed

Petroleum activities are one of the major subjects of partnership (and sometimes stormy relations) between Australia and Timor-Leste [Cabasset 2018; Cabasset 2024]. Since the early 2000s, the main sticking point between the two countries over the development of the Greater Sunrise gas field, estimated to be worth US\$ 50 billion, has been the route of the pipeline and the location of the liquefaction plant to produce liquefied natural gas (LNG). Australia has always defended Darwin in order to benefit from the equipment built in 2006 as part of the exploitation of the Bayu Undan field; while in search of structuring equipment and economic stimuli, the East Timorese

side is sticking to the principle of setting up the liquefaction plant in Beacu or another location on the country's south coast. In 2018, in a bid to gain greater access to oil resources, Timor-Leste made a major investment to acquire a majority stake for the development of Greater Sunrise, the Sunrise consortium consisting since then of: Timor Gap (Timor-Leste, 56.56%), Woodside Petroleum (Australia, 33.4%), and Osaka Gas (Japan, 10%).

The various studies carried out by Australia have consistently favoured the Darwin option. Timor-Leste was presented as economically unviable because of the costs inherent to the deep water (3,000 m) technical solutions required for the gas pipeline to reach the East Timorese coast. Intense bilateral negotiations including all stakeholders, namely oil operators and companies, took place. Australia, a major world producer and exporter of fossil fuels, has many alternatives to Greater Sunrise, but could not break with Timor-Leste for geopolitical and geo-economic reasons. In the face of Australia's reluctance, Timor-Leste regularly made the point that it would be in its interests to join forces with China to develop this project if Australia were to block the Greater Sunrise project – a powerful argument in the context of the tense relations between Australia and China. The good news that Timor-Leste had been hoping for came at the end of December 2024 [Government of Timor-Leste 2024, 23 December]. The study carried out from April to November by Wood (Scotland, UK) had concluded that of the four development options evaluated, «the Timor-Leste option was viable and the most advantageous for the country, guaranteeing significant economic and social benefits».

Timor-Leste was all the more hopeful about the start-up of the project because the Bayu Undan field, which has provided the bulk of Timor-Leste's oil windfall since 2004, was by then being depleted. Initially expected to be depleted by 2020, it was transferred that year from ConocoPhillips (USA, 68.4%) to Santos (Australia, 68.4%). For Santos, the aim of the purchase was to accompany the depletion of the field while preparing for its future use in the form of a CO₂ capture and storage (CCS) project. In September 2024, Timor Gap E.P., the national oil company of Timor-Leste, acquired a 16% stake in the Bayu Undan Joint Venture, in exchange for an extension of the Production and Sharing Contract (PSC) until 30 June 2026. The new shares distribution within the Bayu Undan Joint Venture is now made of: Santos (36.5%), SK E&S (Korean energy company, South Korea, 21%), INPEX (Japan, 9.6%), ENI (Italy, 9.2%) and Tokyo Timor Sea Resources (Japan, 7.6%) [Offshore Technology 2024, 17 September].

6. Conclusion

Following on from 2023, 2024 was another busy year, particularly in the field of international relations. The most notable dynamics were due to the

political personalities at the top of the State, in particular the political couple Ramos-Horta and Gusmão, both old hands at diplomacy. These dynamics were also linked to a series of major events (the visit of Pope Francis, for example) and high socio-economic stakes. The prospect of ASEAN membership as well as peace-related initiatives and communication were a powerful driving force behind the country's over-activity. Indeed, having lived through a quarter of a century of war and knowing their country's weak military capabilities, the East Timorese leaders kept a close eye on current world geopolitics, which were a source of concern. The East Timorese as a whole are deeply attached to peace and all efforts to promote it. In this, they are close to the official ASEAN position.

At the end of December 2024, the option long advocated by Timor-Leste concerning the operating arrangements for Greater Sunrise – with a gas pipeline and LNG refinery on the country's south coast – was validated by a recent study and approved by Australia. This development allowed the East Timorese leaders to look to the future with greater confidence. For Australia, this decision was a move towards even closer ties with Timor-Leste, with the objective of keeping China at a distance. The ascension to the presidency of Indonesia of Prabowo Subianto, whose 20-year military career is inextricably linked to the Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste and its tragic human toll, represented a major change for the small Southeast Asian State. Nonetheless, at the end of November, the historic East Timorese leaders seized the opportunity provided by the ceremony marking the 49th anniversary of the unilateral proclamation of independence to prepare for future bilateral cooperation under the banner of reconciliation by bringing together some of the main protagonists of the painful past shared by the two countries. It was a pragmatic approach, which was met with criticism at home, but which, in these troubled global times could be presented, both locally and on the international stage, as a model in peacefully solving protracted and bloody conflicts.

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MALAYSIA 2024: TRIALS AND TRAJECTORY OF ANWAR IBRAHIM'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

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This paper presents an analysis of how debates around reform in Malaysia unfolded in 2024, focusing on Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's efforts to align the government's trajectory with his political vision, grounded on Islamic values. Domestically, the unity government faced mounting pressure to implement a reform agenda that had underpinned its rise to power in 2022. At the same time, it navigated a polarized public debate, seeking to balance Malay dominance with the multiple demands coming from the different sections of society. In this context, Anwar's emphasis on positive diversity, aiming to quell the periodic emergence of social disparity as a key issue in public discourse, both obscured and reinforced frictions over the dynamics of marginalization and racialization in the country. On the international stage, the Anwar administration continued to rely on the Prime Minister's identity as a Muslim democrat to pursue a foreign policy that balances regional and global strategic priorities. This approach aimed to secure Malaysia's diplomatic and economic interests within an increasingly unstable international environment.

KEYWORDS – Reform; Islam; Anwar Ibrahim; political leadership; public debate.

1. Introduction

Reforms and accountability have been long-standing themes in Malaysia's public debate, particularly in light of calls for fairer and more transparent governance systems that have shaped political crises and transitions over the past few decades [Weiss 2024].

The push for inclusive political representation, socio-economic welfare, and equal opportunities – alongside the principle of Malay dominance – has shaped political discourse and influenced electoral processes. Central to these debates are various interpretations of the role of Islam as the core of the state's foundations and the principles guiding political action. This trend has become more pronounced over the last three decades, mirroring the global rise of Islamist movements in Muslim polities [Mohiuddin 2023].

In Malaysia, groups such as Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) have played a significant role in shaping the political landscape, particularly as Malaysia's Muslim identity has been increasingly emphasized as a defining element of national politics [Mangiarotti 2024].

These developments have set the stage for Malaysia's recent political shifts, most notably the 2018 General Election, which saw the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition suffer a major electoral defeat. The ensuing short-lived Pakatan Harapan (PH) government came into power on a platform focused on governance, anti-corruption, and accountability. However, internal divisions plagued the coalition, culminating in the «Sheraton Move» of February 2020, when multiple defections led to the government's collapse [Saleem 2021].

The subsequent political crisis ushered in the Perikatan Nasional (PN) government under Muhyiddin Yassin, which included the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), a Malay nationalist party that had previously governed Malaysia for 61 years under the BN coalition. The PN government was widely seen as a setback for reform, raising concerns that Malaysia was reverting to opaque governance [Talib 2023].

With the general election of November 2022, Malaysia underwent another political shift with the formation of the unity government under Anwar Ibrahim. The new cabinet, comprising a broad coalition of parties from both PH and BN, was seen as a potential but fragile move toward stabilizing Malaysia's political landscape [Mangiarotti 2024]. Anwar has positioned himself as a champion of reforms and good governance, having been at the forefront of the «Reformasi» movement in the early stages of his political career. Today, commitment to those principles is seen as central to his administration's legitimacy. He has pledged to tackle institutional weaknesses and rebuild Malaysia's international standing, emphasizing the need for transparency and efficiency in government institutions. Yet, navigating the balance between Malay interests – particularly in relation to Bumiputera¹ policies – and the broader calls for reform has proved delicate, especially in light of demands for greater inclusion and fairness coming from non-Malay communities.

Anwar has positioned himself as a moderate Muslim leader who upholds democratic principles while integrating Islamic values into political action. This vision is reflected in «Malaysia Madani», a framework he introduced to align the government's agenda with the moral authority of Islam, appealing to Malay Muslim voters and maintaining a commitment to reform [Mangiarotti 2024]. Seeking to frame his discourse as a credible yet less divisive alternative to PN's religious-nationalist rhetoric, Anwar's Madani highlights Islam's central and evolving role in debates on reform

1. Bumiputera is a term generally translated as «sons of the soil», describing the Malay majority and other indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia.

and governance. In his first two years in office, he has sought to position Malaysia as a Muslim democracy, carefully articulating a vision of Islam as both the foundation of national identity and a source of political legitimacy.

This paper analyzes key moments in Malaysia's domestic and international politics in 2024, focusing on reform, socio-economic fairness, and the role of Islam as central themes in Malaysia's public debate. It explores how the government navigated the tension between affirming the state's Malay religious-nationalist foundation, addressing specific policy imperatives, and upholding its commitment to pluralism. These issues have become increasingly contentious as minority demands for greater social and political representation highlight a growing dissatisfaction with a political and economic establishment that has long protected the privileges of the more powerful segments of society. While political elites have often endorsed the fight against social disparities rhetorically, their promises have focused more on promoting cultural diversity rather than advancing redistributive policies or concrete measures to address minority grievances, such as limited access to education and employment. This approach has further distanced marginalized social groups from mainstream politics. In 2024, these frictions emerged in the public debate surrounding the government's reformist efforts and in relation to Anwar Ibrahim's self-representation as a Muslim democrat, both domestically and internationally.

2. Reformism and Muslim leadership in Anwar Ibrahim's political trajectory

After dedicating his first year in power to stabilizing the heterogeneous coalition, Anwar Ibrahim shifted his focus in 2024 to the reformist rhetoric that had underpinned the government's formation. In this context, Anwar framed himself as a moderate yet firm (Malay) Muslim leader, committed to promoting equality and transparency through Islamic values and principles. Anwar's career, in fact, exemplifies the deep-rooted connection between Islam and political reformism in Malaysia's political tradition.

Anwar Ibrahim rose to prominence in the 1970s, as a young leader of the emerging Islamist student movement. He contributed forming the Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM, Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement),² an organization influenced by the rise of Islamic renewal movements in post-colonial societies. Deeply inspired by scholars and thinkers like Muslim Brotherhood's founder, Hassan al-Banna, and South Asian philosopher, Abu al-Ala al-Mawdudi – both of whom emphasized Islam's role as a comprehensive system encompassing politics, society, and morality – Anwar's worldview centred on the belief that Islam provided the moral framework for a political agenda focused on social justice. In Malaysia, Anwar interact-

2. Anwar served as ABIM's President from 1974 to 1982.

ed closely with figures such as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, one of the country's most renowned Islamic scholars, and recipient of a Royal Professorship in October 2024 [Musa 2024, 11 November].³

In the 1970s and early 1980s, ABIM was involved in several agitations and demonstrations, gradually shifting its focus from international issues to internal matters related to economic justice and corruption. Through this lens, Anwar helped reframe discussions on Malay rights in explicitly Islamic terms, bridging ethnic-based political activism and Islamic renewal [Esposito and O. Voll 2001, p. 179]. The government's violent response to the movement unintentionally increased its visibility and expanded its support base.⁴ As ABIM's leader, Anwar drew attention from mainstream political figures and, in 1982, UMNO president and Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad recruited him to join the party and take up government positions [Lemière 2022].

Now part of the political establishment, Anwar crafted a vision blending Islamic principles with pluralist democracy [Abdul Hamid 2014, p. 768]. His political career saw a rapid ascent and a sudden downfall. During the 1997-1998 Asian economic crises, his opposition to Mahathir's anti-market stance led to his ousting from government and party positions, followed by arrest on charges including corruption and sodomy. During this time, he sparked the Reformasi movement, a defining force that channelled widespread dissatisfaction into a collective call for change and crystallized political and institutional reform as a key fixture in Malaysia's public discourse. The crisis exposed the vulnerabilities in Malaysia's political and economic models, which had been heavily reliant on state-based crony capitalism. Anwar's calls for reforms resonated with those affected by the economic fallout, linking economic transparency with the demand for political change.

While in prison, public support for Reformasi coalesced around the Parti Keadilan Nasional (PKN-National Justice Party), founded by Wan Azizah Ismail, Anwar's wife and a key reform movement leader. The party embodied widespread desire for change, centred around a doctrine of democratic pluralism that blended Islamic principles with «Asian values»

3. A Royal Professorship is the most prestigious recognition for academics «who have made significant contributions to Malaysia's development». The title was conferred by the King or Yang Di-Pertuan Agong (YDPA) Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar following a recommendation by PM Anwar Ibrahim. According to some, given the significance of the award and the relevance of Al-Attas's ideas to ABIM, the title «could suggest that the Madani administration has chosen to rely on the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia for support» [Musa 2024, 11 November].

4. As noted by Esposito and O Voll, «in the early 1970s, Anwar's importance and visibility increased as student's activism became an important part of the Malaysian political context» [Esposito and O Voll 2001, p. 179]. In 1975, amendments introduced in the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 included specific provisions to curb university students' political activism, by giving full government control over the institutions.

[Esposito and O. Voll 2001, p. 194]. This vision shaped ongoing debates on political reform, focusing on anti-corruption, socio-economic justice, and citizenship rights. Released after six years in prison, Anwar took on the leadership of the opposition to the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional government until 2015, when he was arrested once again on sodomy charges, serving time until 2020.

After his release from prison in 2020, Anwar Ibrahim worked to reclaim a leading position within the opposition, but his efforts were complicated by the repercussions of the «Sheraton Move» in February 2020 and the subsequent formation of Muhyiddin Yassin's Perikatan Nasional government. Anwar's longstanding political ambitions were ultimately realized with his appointment as the prime minister of a broad unity government following the 2022 general election. In this role, he has faced the challenge of aligning his long-held vision of a pluralist society based on Islamic principles with the realities of leading a disparate coalition in a polarized political landscape.

2.1. *Citizenship reform and its discontents*

In 2024, a key reform championed by the Anwar government was the Constitution (Amendment) Bill, which addresses citizenship rights in Malaysia. First tabled in the Dewan Rakyat (the Parliament's Lower House) on 25 March, the bill was passed on 17 October. Remarkably, it received support from 206 Members of Parliament, including some MPs from the opposition, surpassing the required two-thirds majority for constitutional changes.

Upon approval, the new law was presented as a bipartisan, uncontroversial initiative to address gender-discriminatory provisions within Malaysia's constitutional framework.⁵ Before its passage, Malaysian men had the automatic right to confer citizenship to their children born abroad, regardless of the mother's nationality. In contrast, Malaysian women in the same situation faced a lengthy and often cumbersome process to secure citizenship for their children. The government framed the bill as a crucial step towards aligning Malaysia's legal system with international human rights standards [*Free Malaysia Today* 2024, 17 October].⁶

5. Introducing the Budget 2025 on 18 October, one day after the Bill's approval, PM Anwar Ibrahim said: «I wish to take this opportunity to extend my utmost appreciation to all Honourable Members of Parliament who, just yesterday, pledged their unwavering support for an unprecedented decision to amend the Constitution, granting greater clarity and fairness on the matter of citizenship. First, it proves that when the most pressing matters of the rakyat are at stake, unity can be forged across partisan lines. Second, it marks the recognition of the rights of mothers and children, breaking through parochial mindsets». [Ministry of Finance 2024, 18 October, p. 18].

6. Although concerns have been raised about the provision's lack of retroactive application, potentially leaving children born overseas to Malaysian mothers before the reform in legal uncertainty [Welsh 2024, 25 October].

Despite the celebratory rhetoric, however, the legislation's path was not without controversy, facing significant opposition during its initial tabling in March 2024. Key contentious elements underscored the complex nature of the debate over access to citizenship, particularly for some of Malaysia's most vulnerable groups.

Many condemned the removal of automatic citizenship for children born to permanent residents and the restrictions placed on abandoned children, those born out of wedlock, and stateless children. Detractors argued that these provisions would disproportionately impact natives of Sabah, Sarawak, and Peninsular Malaysia who hold permanent resident cards but remain officially stateless [Malaysian Citizenship Rights Alliance 2024, 21 March]. Concerns were also raised over two other proposals: one regarding the revocation of citizenship from foreign spouses of Malaysian men if their marriage ended within two years of acquiring it, and the other concerning the reduction of the age limit for stateless children to apply for citizenship from 21 to 18. Even within the ruling coalition, some lawmakers objected to the amendments, claiming they further marginalized already vulnerable communities. The government justified the controversial provisions as necessary to safeguard national security and to prevent alleged widespread misuse of the citizenship process.⁷ However, objections were accompanied by broader accusations that the Anwar administration was failing to uphold its commitments to equality and fairness.

During the debate on the inaugural royal address by the newly crowned Yang Di-Pertuan Agong (YDPA) [the Malaysian King] Sultan Ibrahim on 26 February, PH MP Ramkarpal Singh argued that, if approved, the bill would represent «a backward step that contradicts the government's aim to improve or reform the laws, and the government's promise to reduce the rate of statelessness in the country» [Azmi and Mahari 2024, 5 March].

Amid growing public backlash, the government withdrew the controversial amendment affecting abandoned and stateless children before presenting the bill for parliamentary discussion. This decision drew strong criticism from the PN opposition, which had largely supported the reform, accusing the government of acting without proper consultation [Tan *et. al* 2024, 25 March]. Fearing the lack of the required two-third parliamentary majority and a potential breakdown of the fragile coalition, the government deferred voting on the reform until the bill was further amended and finally passed in October, with a strong emphasis on addressing discrimination against women. Nevertheless, concerns over new restrictions on citizenship

7. While presenting the reform in March 2024, Minister of Home Affairs Saifuddin Nasution Ismail said «there is a need for a more cautious approach, as the challenges and national security situation must be a top priority in the national agenda – to protect the people and the country from external security threats which, if not strictly managed, could cripple the nation's administrative system» [Abd Mutalib 2024, 27 March].

access persisted, particularly regarding their impact on children from vulnerable and marginalized communities [Welsh 2024, 25 October].

The debate over the citizenship bill added to a series of political challenges for Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who faced accusations of backtracking on his accountability and transparency agenda. His administration came under fire for the handling of high-profile corruption cases, including the reduction of the sentence for UMNO leader and former Prime Minister Najib Razak, granted through a royal pardon board headed by the resigning YDPA Sultan Abdullah. Najib, imprisoned for graft and money laundering related to the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal,⁸ had his 12-year sentence commuted, a decision Anwar defended as a «matter of compassion». This raised concerns over selective justice and the potential political compromise [Reuters 2024, 5 February].⁹

Overall, the Anwar administration faced the challenge of translating its leader's vision into policy. Moreover, the government had to navigate the tension between promoting Islamic institutions and values and the need to accommodate the concerns of part of the coalition's electorate regarding Muslim-Malay dominance. This dynamic was exemplified by debates around the Mufti (Federal Territories) Bill 2024 and the Prime Minister's cautious response to the public outcry over the sale of socks printed with the word «Allah». Both issues (analysed below) underscored the centrality of Islam and reform as key, contentious themes in Malaysia's public debate.

2.2. *Striking a balance?*

On 2 July, Religious Affairs Minister Mohd Na'im Mokhtar introduced the Mufti (Federal Territories) Bill. Among other provisions, the bill seeks to enhance the legal value of «fatwas» (religious edicts issued by muftis¹⁰), broadening the circumstances under which they could become law without parliamentary approval. Concurrently, the bill also limits Islamic legal interpretations to the Shafi'i, Hanbali, Maliki, and Hanafi schools. While the proposal applies only to the federal territories,¹¹ critics warn the provisions

8. The scandal involved the misappropriation of approximately \$ 4.5 billion from 1MDB. Of this, around \$1 billion was illicitly transferred into Najib's personal accounts, as reported by investigators from both Malaysia and the United States.

9. Anwar had already faced criticism after state prosecutors announced on 4 September 2023, that they would drop corruption charges against Deputy Prime Minister and UMNO leader Ahmad Zahid Hamidi. While Anwar denied any interference with the judiciary, the fact that state prosecutors are directly appointed by the prime minister raised doubts about his impartiality [Latiff and Ananthalakshmi 2023, 4 September].

10. As explained by Intisar Rabb, «Muftis are scholars of Islamic law who are appointed to government agencies for the administration of Islamic law in both the federal territories and the states» [Rabb 2025].

11. Federal Territories are geographical-administrative units governed by the central government. They include Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya.

could later extend to the states [Welsh 2024, 4 November]. The bill sparked intense debate among civil society groups, with some arguing that it would empower religious authoritarianism, undermine personal freedoms, and marginalize both religious minorities and non-Muslims [Sisters in Islam 2024, 10 October].

According to lawyer and human rights activist Latheefa Koya, «this Mufti Bill poses a clear and present danger to the right of Muslims in Malaysia to practice their religion and carry on daily life without interference from the government or unelected officials» [Koya 2024, 10 October].

Voices from the Muslim political and academic spheres urged the government to open a space for discussion about the controversial bill. For instance, Mufti of Perlis, Dr. Asri Zainul Abidin¹² wrote on a Facebook post that «the religious affairs minister should be promoting an agenda of inclusiveness and moderation, in line with the concept of Madani. Unfortunately, he seems to be leading the country into a situation where (fellow Muslims would accuse each other) of disbelief and heresy» [Mat Arif 2024, 20 October].

Similarly, PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang demanded a revaluation of the bill in light of it promoting a singular view of Islamic jurisprudence [Abdul Rahim 2024, 10 July].

In response to the public outcry, Anwar rejected accusations of yielding to radical forces within the Malaysian Islamic world and called on critics to avoid conflating Islam with religious fanaticism. In an interview with a national news portal, he said: «Anything we mention about Islam we will see some level of Islamophobia. They are not able to differentiate between extremist, fanatical views and the need to promote Islam in a moderate sense. The vast majority of Muslims in Malaysia are reasonable and moderate people. So this reaction is sometimes unwise. I think the answer to this is a healthy discourse, a reasoned discourse between all groups» [Raja Reza 2024, 6 November].

The government found support among several state muftis and Islamic scholars, who argued that the bill aimed to curb religious extremism [Musa 2024, 17 July] by more clearly defining and regulating the reach of *shari'a* [Rabb 2025]. The legislation was then advanced through a second parliamentary reading in February 2025.

The public debate surrounding the Mufti bill highlights the growing polarization in discussions on Islam and governance. In this case, the government faced criticism for allegedly enabling excessive involvement of Islamic institutions in the state apparatus. However, at other times, the Anwar administration has been accused of failing to adequately protect and uphold the country's Islamic foundations.

12. Asri is a popular Wahabi-leaning Islamic scholar, known for his social media activism and his anti-Shi'a views [Satt Norshahril *et. al* 2021, 16 June].

The so-called «Allah socks» controversy is a notable example, sparking heated debate over the place of Islam in inter-community relations in Malaysia. On 13 March, news spread online about a Chinese Malaysian retailer selling socks featuring the Arabic script for «Allah», with images of the controversial item sparking outrage, particularly among Malay Muslims. Religious groups, politicians, and members of the general public called for boycotts and the removal of the product, inducing the shop owner and the convenience store chain to offer multiple public apologies [Annuar 2024, 20 March].

Immediately, the matter took on national significance, with YDPA Sultan Ibrahim calling for «stern action» against those responsible for offending Muslims' religious beliefs and threatening national harmony during the month of Ramadan [*The Straits Times* 2024, 19 March]. Similarly, Na'im Mokhtar, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Religious Affairs), affirmed that «the word 'Allah' is highly esteemed in the eyes of Muslims. Allah is our creator and the act of putting Allah at our feet is an insult». [*Channel News Asia* 2024, 18 March]. UMNO Youth Chief, Akmal Salleh became particularly vocal on the issue, inciting boycotts in interviews and on social media. Akmal was also blamed on three incidents in which stores in different parts of the country were attacked with petrol bombs [*The Straits Times* 2024, 19 March].

As the issue became increasingly polarizing, the YDPA urged political leaders to avoid amplifying the matter and fuelling communal tensions. Calls for moderation were also raised by leaders in the ruling coalition. Politicians of the Chinese-led Democratic Action Party (DAP) condemned the divisive stances of their UMNO counterparts. DAP Secretary General Loke Siew Fook said: «we as political leaders must try to build bridges to resolve the issue and lower down the temperature. That's the approach we adopt as both a party and government, ensuring we do not blow issues out of proportion» [*Malay Mail* 2024, 19 March].

In this escalating context, PM Anwar came under public scrutiny for his cautious stance. While emphasizing the need to «maintain harmony and respect religious sensitivities», he refrained from aligning with either side. This reluctance drew criticism from militant Malay nationalists, who condemned his refusal to support calls for drastic punishment of the Chinese store chain and the Malaysian shop owner. At the same time, minority voices lamented his mild reprimand of those fueling anti-Chinese sentiment and inter-racial hostility. As Khairy Jamaluddin frames it, «for some Muslim-Malays, relative silence does not say anything about Anwar's leadership in defending the sanctity of Islam. For non-Muslims, the progressive Anwar whom they have supported all this while is nowhere to be seen» [Jamaluddin 2024, 28 March]¹³.

13. Khairy Jamaluddin is a former cabinet minister and prominent member of UMNO. He was expelled from the party in 2023 for allegedly violating party discipline in accordance with the UMNO Constitution.

While the PN opposition called for due punishment of similar «acts of disrespect to Islam» [*Harakah Daily* 2024, 19 March], opinions appeared particularly polarized within the ruling coalition and the public. This situation highlights how the ramifications of a politics of religious-racial identity extends beyond the PAS-Bersatu alliance, touching also the PH's effort to balance Malay-centric religious-nationalist positions with multi-culturalist rhetoric. Anwar's attempt to navigate competing demands may invertedly deepen polarization along religious-racial lines, by failing to offer a convincing alternative discursive platform to address underlying social issues.

This conundrum also underpinned Anwar's presentation of his administration's 2024 economic reform package, which sought to combine redistributive policies, financial prudence, and social harmony.

3. *Budget 2025: caught in the binary of need vs. race*

On 18 October, Prime Minister and Finance Minister Anwar Ibrahim presented Malaysia's third «Madani» Budget», with a total allocation of RM421 billion. He characterized the measure as need-based rather than race-based, thereby reaffirming his commitment to reforms aimed at reducing inequality and strengthening pluralist governance. Drawing on a range of inspirational figures – from prominent Islamic scholars to Aristotle and internationally renowned economists – Anwar grounded his discourse in a religious and moral imperative to ensure an equitable and sustainable resource distribution: «Interwoven with the command to express gratitude for the sustenance bestowed by Allah SWT, the Quran underscores the imperative of cultivating a robust and sustainable ecosystem, along with efficient governance, to manage the wealth of natural resources equitably and justly» [Ministry of Finance 2024, 18 October, p. 17].

In his speech, Anwar outlined two interconnected measures for reform. The first one focuses on restructuring state support to better assist those in need, while ensuring higher contributions from the wealthy.¹⁴ The second one prioritizes a «prudent fiscal management» to strengthen the state's financial stability and ensure long-term sustainability. Within this framework, two key packages – Public Service Reform and Subsidies Reform – exemplify Anwar's vision of combining redistributive policy with a cost-cutting approach to public finance, aiming to address both long-standing efficiency issues and demands for greater socio-economic fairness.

14. Anwar said: «While the rich swim in their ever-growing fortunes, the poor continue to sink deeper into the abyss of poverty» [Ministry of Finance 2024, 18 October, p. 23].

3.1. *A polarized public debate*

In Malaysia, the civil service system has been subject of ongoing debate and reform, with Malay dominance being a key point of contention [Hwok-Aun 2023]. The issue is rooted in the colonial political economy, which compartmentalized employment and economic activities based on supposed racial specialization [Hirschman 1986]. Post-colonial policies and nation-building efforts have continued to favour labour segregation,¹⁵ culminating in the 1971 New Economic Policy (NEP). The NEP institutionalized pro-Bumiputera affirmative action across multiple sectors, including public employment, reinforcing the perception of civil service as a de facto Malay domain. Over time, this issue has intersected with concerns over low productivity, fiscal sustainability, and equitable remuneration for public servants, fuelling debates on the need for structural reforms to enhance efficiency, ensure meritocracy, and balance economic equity.

In response to these concerns, the Anwar administration introduced a series of measures in 2024, addressing remuneration and productivity. A key component of this package is the reform of the pension system. First announced in January by Deputy Prime Minister Zahid Hamidi and introduced on 1 April, the measure seeks to address the financial strain on the system by removing the pension scheme for public officials and replacing it with the Employees Provident Fund (EPF).¹⁶ The new framework is based on a savings accumulation scheme, with 11 per cent deducted monthly from the salary and 12 per cent matched from the government. Alongside these changes, the reform introduces a merit-based recruitment process, under which employees are initially hired on a fixed-term contract and then transitioned to a permanent status after a performance review. Additionally, Anwar announced the restructuring of the salary scheme under the Sistem Saraan Perkhidmatan Awam (SSPA), based on an incentive system «to encourage civil servants to provide the best service to the ‘rakyat’»¹⁷ [Ministry of Finance 2024, 18 October, p. 152].

While the government presented the new provisions as part of an effort to promote meritocracy and improve the overall quality of the civil service, the reform sparked concerns. Critical voices within the multi-coalition

15. According to Christopher Choong Weng Wai, Malaysia’s «has navigated the contested racial logic of British colonialism and Japanese imperialism» by pursuing a form of «anti-colonial raced capitalism» as a developmental state project which reproduces «new forms of racial/gender domination with counter-hegemonic frames» [Choong Weng Wai 2024, p.1].

16. The measure will only apply to new recruits, while existing public servants will be able to retain their pension scheme. Employees could already choose between the pension scheme, which provides a portion of the last drawn salary for life and the EPF. However, the large majority opted for the former which ensured a fixed monthly entry for life [Hwok-Aun 2024, 7 March].

17. Rakyat is a Malay term meaning «the people of Malaysia».

government argued that the new contract system could discourage people from entering the civil service, as it prioritizes alleviating the state's financial burden over ensuring job and economic security for employees [Singh *et. al* 2024, 26 January]. In general, the reform did not specifically address the longstanding issue of Malay dominance in public service, which reflects multilayered dynamics of privilege and marginality among different groups in Malaysia. According to Hwok Aun, the failure to meaningfully engage with the issue may run counter to the government's stated aim to strengthen national unity and promote social harmony [Hwok Aun 2023].

This issue also became evident in relation to the subsidies reform. Anwar and his administration have emphasized that broad-based subsidies – covering fuel, electricity, water, education, healthcare, and staple goods – place an unsustainable burden on government finances. During the Budget 2025 speech, Anwar said: « Subsidies, in principle, are akin to charity – and ipso facto, should not be exploited by the upper crust of the society. Historically, we have allocated subsidies broadly across various sectors, including fuel, electricity, water, education, healthcare services, and even essential items like chicken. However, we must acknowledge that this approach is imprudent, particularly as our nation grapples with a substantial debt burden and a limited revenue base» [Ministry of Finance 2024, 18 October, p. 33].

When presenting Budget 2025, Anwar announced that certain spending cuts – particularly for petrol, residential schools, higher education, and health services – would only affect the ultra-rich. Thus, the government attempted to garner public support by framing the initiative as a means of ensuring fairness in group-targeted policies. Notably, the Prime Minister seized on a controversy over wealthy Malaysian families benefiting from residential school subsidies intended for low-income Bumiputera students [Kasinathan 2024, 3 January].

While Anwar's assertions aligned with his need-based approach to poverty alleviation, they did little to ease minorities' perceptions of exclusion. In August, the administration launched the Bumiputera Economic Transformation Plan 2035 (PuTERA35), outlining 132 initiatives that appeared in continuity with the majority-favouring policies embedded in national development plans since the 1971 NEP. By catering to a polarized public sentiment locked in a pro- vs. anti-Bumiputera binary, the government sidestepped a deeper discussion on the rationale and implications of its group-targeted actions. Notably, Anwar's discourse around PuTERA35 has emphasized poverty reduction but, in the name of social harmony, it has largely neglected concerns about limited opportunities for minority groups – especially in higher education, where access and advancement remain significant barriers [Hwok-Aun 2025].

In so doing, the Anwar government's narrative has, in fact, further divided political sentiments and hindered an open conversation about the need for targeted action to achieve greater fairness and social justice objec-

tives. Creating space to address both minority demands for greater opportunities and calls for redressing the structural socio-economic marginalization of vulnerable Bumiputera groups remains a significant challenge in Malaysia's public debate.

4. Positioning Malaysia within an uncertain international scenario

Anwar's 2024 foreign policy remained aligned with his Islamic perspectives and his image as a Muslim statesman [Mangiarotti 2024]. The Prime Minister's actions reflect an effort to position himself as a leader capable of advocating for Muslim interests on the global stage. This was particularly evident in his ongoing condemnation of Israel's genocide in Gaza. During a three-day visit to Qatar in May, Anwar met with a Hamas delegation led by Ismail Haniyeh, the party's political chief, who was later assassinated in Tehran on 31 July [Strangio 2024, 15 May]. Anwar's willingness to engage openly with Hamas, coupled with his cabinet's refusal to recognize U.S.-imposed sanctions on Iran, garnered public support in Malaysia, especially among the Muslim population [Hassan 2024, 11 November]. In November, Anwar participated in a major rally in Kuala Lumpur in solidarity with Palestinians, reaffirming his rejection of international pressure to condemn Hamas [*The Straits Times* 2024, 13 November].

Anwar's approach to international politics as a Muslim democratic leader has also been complemented by a civilizational perspective, grounded on a vision of dialogue and harmonious coexistence between different religious and philosophical traditions [Chang 2025]. Particularly in relation to Malaysia's relations with China, he has emphasized a convergence between Confucianism and Islam as providing the guiding principles for a morally enlightened international politics [Wai 2024, 30 May]. In 2024, the two countries celebrated the 50th anniversary of their diplomatic ties with reciprocal official visits, reiterating their mutual commitment to enhancing cooperation in areas such as education, trade, investment, transport, and connectivity [Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024].

In July, Malaysia took up the position of country coordinator for relations with China within ASEAN, a role that could increase the country's visibility as a facilitator of the region's ties with Beijing.¹⁸ On a global political scale, in July Malaysia submitted its application to join the BRICS alliance, which includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Malaysia officially became a BRICS's partner country in October, alongside other 13 new applicants.

18. Malaysia will also lead ASEAN in 2025.

Anwar's actions on the international stage in 2024 suggest a growing effort to secure Malaysia's key positions and economic reach, recognizing the need to adapt to the rapidly changing international landscape. In this context, the Prime Minister appears to be leveraging his reputation as a Muslim leader to balance regional priorities with broader global developments.

5. Conclusion

In 2024, the Anwar administration pursued both institutional and economic reforms, presenting a leadership grounded in Islamic values. Domestically, Anwar framed his government's policies as efforts to promote equity and financial sustainability. However, his administration struggled to meaningfully address deep-rooted grievances related to the principle of Malay dominance, resulting in a lack of engagement with critical minority voices. As a result, the public debate increasingly reproduced the binary logic juxtaposing progressive reformism with religious-racial conservatism.

On the international stage, Anwar proposed a civilizational approach to foreign policy. He reaffirmed his stance on Palestinian rights and condemnation of Israel's violence in Gaza, presenting himself as an advocate for Muslim interests. He sought to balance this with Malaysia's strategic interests, strengthening diplomatic ties with China and expanding the country's presence in global institutions like BRICS.

Ultimately, in 2024 Anwar has faced the challenges of adhering to a long-held vision of morally-guided political action, without substantially interrogating a public discourse that has historically sidelined an open discussion on multiple socio-economic lines of disenfranchisement in Malaysian society.

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VIETNAM 2024: CONTINUED ECONOMIC GROWTH, CHANGE IN LEADERSHIP, AND «BAMBOO DIPLOMACY»

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The year 2024 in Vietnam witnessed three overarching trends. First, Vietnam continued to demonstrate economic growth and resilience. Second, the year saw changes in top leadership. The country shed more leaders in government and the private sector due to the «blazing furnace» anti-corruption campaign. Mid-way through the year, the country also saw the death due to ill-health of its leader, general secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng. He is succeeded by Tô Lâm, the former head of the Public Security Ministry. The country also imposed further restrictions on civil society in passing Decree 126, which grants the government increased powers to monitor and dissolve associations. Finally, Vietnam stayed the course on its foreign policy in adhering to the doctrine of «bamboo diplomacy», according to which Vietnam would forge ties even with countries that opposed each other.

KEYWORDS – Economic resilience, Leadership Turnover, Anti-Corruption Campaign, Civil Society Restrictions, Bamboo Diplomacy

1. Introduction

For the year 2024, Vietnam saw three overarching trends. On the economic front, the country continued to demonstrate growth and resilience, despite facing looming protectionist measures abroad and disruptions caused by Typhoon Yagi. On the domestic front, the year saw changes in top leadership. The country shed more leaders in government and the private sector due to the «blazing furnace» anti-corruption campaign. Mid-way through the year, the country also saw the death of its leader, Nguyễn Phú Trọng. Re-elected for an unprecedented three terms as General Secretary (2011-2024), the country's highest position, Trọng died due to ill-health before completing the third term. During his tenure, he was renowned for spearheading his signature anti-corruption campaign and doctrine of «bamboo diplomacy», according to which Vietnam would forge ties even with countries that opposed each other. He is succeeded by Tô Lâm, the former head of the Public Security Ministry. The country also imposed further restrictions on civil society in passing Decree 126, which grants the government increased powers to monitor and dissolve associations. Finally, Vietnam stayed the course on its foreign policy in adhering to the doctrine of «bamboo diplomacy» that Trọng had bequeathed to the country.

2. *Economics*

2.1. *Continued economic resilience*

Vietnam displayed in 2024 overall net growth of 7.09%. Each quarter showed incremental expansion. The first quarter saw growth of 5.98%, the second, 7.25%, and the third, 7.43%. Inflation also grew at a steady rate. The Consumer Price Index rose by 3.63%, consistent with the Vietnam National Assembly's target [General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2024, 6 October; Nguyen 2025, 8 January].

The primary engines driving Vietnam's economic growth include foreign direct investment (FDI), manufacturing and exports, and tourism. Since the country's liberalization over the past three and a half decades, the country has sought socioeconomic development by strengthening trade, especially through exports, and increasing FDI. Both, in turn, would infuse capital, spur job growth, and compel increasing investments in infrastructure and capacity building. In 2024, Vietnam continued to attract record foreign investment and has become an emerging manufacturing powerhouse. For the year 2024, Vietnam's FDI increased by 9.4% year-on-year to € 23 billion (US\$ 25.35 billion) for the full year. Exports amounted to a total of € 385.70 (US \$ 405.53 billion), an increase of 14.3% from the prior year. [Vietnam Ministry of Planning and Investment 2025, 6 January; Nguyen 2025, 8 January]. This upward trend in FDI and exports is consistent with historical and projected patterns.

Vietnam has also benefitted from the increasing trade tensions between the United States and China. In the midst of this conflict, global companies have turned away from China and towards Vietnam as a destination for manufacturing and supply chains. Its strategic location, open market policy, relatively youthful working age population, and membership in regional and global trade agreements combine to make Vietnam an attractive destination [Wu 2024, 26 June; Ha 2024].

Nevertheless, as global demand for manufacturing and supply chains increases, Vietnam remains hampered by certain structural limitations. These include a not-yet-fully developed infrastructure such as transportation and logistics and a dearth of human capacity such as the talent pool for high-end technical jobs. [Le 2020, p. 4-5]. Furthermore, the overreliance on FDI and exports exposes the country to the risk of global volatility. While Vietnam has been well-positioned to benefit from the U.S.-China conflict, economic and political headwinds suggest this may not continue indefinitely.

As Vietnam's second largest export destination with an estimated trade value in 2024 alone of € 190.5 billion (US \$200 billion), China has been facing distinct challenges with a slowing economy ['Vietnam-China trade' 2024, 11 August; *The Economist* 2024, 17 December]. By contrast, the U.S. economy, unlike China's, remained robust in 2024 and has served as Vietnam's top export destination [Dung 2024, 7 January]. The United

States, however, witnessed the reemergence of Trump as president. Threatening to increase tariffs, Trump has raised the spectre of a global trade war. Hence, while Vietnam's economy remained resilient in 2024, the global conditions elsewhere that impinge on the country suggests it stands at the cusp of a potential turning point whose effects remain yet to be seen.¹

Finally, towards the last quarter of 2024, Vietnam also witnessed disruptions caused by natural disasters. In early September Vietnam, along with the Southeast Asian region, was struck by super Typhoon Yagi, a category 4 typhoon with estimated maximum wind speeds of 240km/h, Asia's strongest typhoon of the year. Starting as a tropical storm in the western Philippines, the storm moved westward towards the South China Seas to pick up speed to turn into a category 4 before impacting Vietnam's northern region. The typhoon killed 299 people and left 34 missing, causing estimated economic damages of € 3.15 billion (US\$ 3.31 billion).

Overall, according to the planning ministry, the natural disaster reduced economic growth by .15 percentage points from a forecast of over 7% for the year, demonstrating overall continued economic resilience despite the challenges [Reuters 2024, 27 September].

3. Domestic affairs

3.1. Change in top leadership

The single most consequential political event in Vietnam in 2024 was arguably the death of Nguyễn Phú Trọng, the general secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party. As one of the «four pillars» (*tứ trụ*), the general secretary is the country's top leader, followed by the prime minister, president, and chair of the national assembly. Previously serving as party secretary of the city of Hanoi and chairman of the National Assembly, Trọng rose to prominence when he was elevated to the role of general secretary at the 2011 National Congress. He remained in this role for three subsequent terms. In 2021, at the 13th National Congress, when his chosen successor, Trần Quốc Vương, failed to receive sufficient support, Trọng was able to engineer an unprecedented third term beyond the two term limits. His third term would have concluded in 2026 at the 14th National Congress.

In his prior roles, Trọng was known as an ideological party stalwart. He was a committed believer in Marxist-Leninism and served as the chief editor of the *Communist Journal* (*Tạp chí Cộng sản*). In his leadership capacity, he brought this ideological orientation with him. This was most evident in his signature «blazing furnace» anti-corruption campaign. Through this campaign, whose ostensible goal was to maintain the legitimacy of the Party,

1. The analysis is based on the World Bank's standard premises of development. For an alternative view, see Adam Fforde 2016.

Trọng sought to cleanse it of ideological and moral ill-discipline. To help implement the campaign was Tô Lâm, the head of the Ministry of Public Security. The campaign swept through the government and Party apparatus. Between 2021 and 2023, the government investigated over 7,500 individuals and indicted more than 4,400 for graft [Polling 2024].

One notorious case in 2024 that fell under the government's anti-corruption dragnet involved Vietnam's richest businesswoman, Trương Mỹ Lan. A real estate developer, Lan was the chairwoman of the prominent firm *Vạn Thịnh Phát* Group, which owns a large portfolio of the country's hotels, restaurants, land, and property. Mrs. Lan was accused of embezzling billions of dollars leading to bank loan losses worth about € 25 billion (US\$ 27 billion), approximately 3% of the country's 2022 GDP. In April 2024, Lan was handed down the death penalty, a rare punishment for white collar crimes. While she lost her case even upon appeal, the Vietnamese court stipulated that it would spare her life in exchange for indefinite imprisonment if she could return about € 8.5 (US\$ 9 billion) of the amount lost [Head and Bui 2024, 2 December; Ghosal 2024].

The «blazing furnace» anti-corruption campaign even felled prominent leaders at the highest levels. Among the «four pillars», the president plays primarily a ceremonial but still important symbolic role as the head of state, representing Vietnam in meetings with foreign dignitaries. Yet, the year 2024 witnessed the downfall in March of President Võ Văn Thưởng, who had held the position for only several months after the resignation of President Nguyễn Xuân Phúc the year before. The latter stepped down after accepting responsibility for a scandal among his subordinates involving overpriced pandemic testing kits. Thus, in a series of events without precedent since the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's founding, two presidents were ousted in back-to-back years, underscoring the profound extent of Nguyễn Phú Trọng's signature anti-corruption crusade [*The Economist* 2024, 27 March; Kurtenbach 2024, 21 March].

As a result of the aforementioned events, significant changes in leadership were inevitable. After the death of Nguyễn Phú Trọng and resignation of Võ Văn Thưởng, Tô Lâm, the head of the public security ministry, filled both the position of president and general secretary. Despite questions as to whether he would wield both positions indefinitely, he in fact held the former role only till October 2024 when Mr. Lương Cường, the secretariat of the Party, the fifth highest-ranking position after the «four pillars», was elected president. By relinquishing the role of president, Tô Lâm restored to Vietnam its quandrumvirate schema of power, calming the political turbulence that had shaken the country the past year. Mr. Lâm would continue as general secretary, an interim position until the next election at the National Congress in 2026 [Paddock 2024, 20 July].

The new slate of Vietnam's leaders in 2024 is notable for several reasons. First, the new general secretary, Tô Lâm, is markedly different in char-

acter and personality from his more reserved, ideologically oriented predecessor. Whereas Mr. Nguyễn Phú Trọng was known for detesting excess, having lived a modest life in state-appointed housing [Pearson 2021, 31 January; Phong 2024], his successor seems, by contrast, more worldly. After attending the 2021 United Nations COP26 climate summit in Glasgow, Scotland, Mr. Lâm enjoyed a London steak dinner wrapped in gold-leaf made by the celebrity chef Nusret Gokce, also known as Salt Bae [*The Economist* 2024, 21 August]. In his capacity as president and head of state, Mr. Lâm also appeared to enjoy the public limelight. On 25 September 2024, while on a trip to attend the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, Mr. Lâm delivered a speech and fielded questions before students, faculty, and staff at Columbia University. These facts demonstrate the markedly different character of the new general secretary Tô Lâm relative to his predecessor. It remains to be seen the extent to which this difference will play out, if any, in Vietnam's overall policies and outlook [Bernstein and Davis 2024, 25 September].

Second, another reason the new slate of leaders is notable is that, along with Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính, both Lâm and Cường hail from the security forces. Mr. Lâm served as head of the ministry of public security from 2016-2024. Likewise, Mr. Cường was an army general, having served in the military for over four decades. ['Brief biography' 2024, 21 October; 'Đồng chí' 2024, 3 August]. Together, they would bring the number of persons hailing from the security forces in the fifteen-member Politburo, the country's highest decision-making body, to eight. The significant presence of security force leaders in the Politburo seems to be a harbinger of the security lens through which Hanoi leaders have and will likely continue to frame domestic policies and international relations. This pattern coincides with the process of «securitization» happening elsewhere in Asia [Ghiselli 2021], whereby issues become framed as an existential question of national survival, thereby moving it out of the realm of normal politics to Schmittian exceptionalism, the sphere of «emergency politics» [Trình 2024].

3.2. *Continued narrowing of civil society*

The year 2024 in Vietnam saw the continued narrowing of civil society that has been already underway. For the past few years, despite Vietnam's growing integration in the global economy, the state has tightened its grip on associational life by shutting down prominent non-profit organizations and jailing human rights activists and environmental reformers [Head 2023, 28 September; Sidel 2023; Tran 2024]. Several events in 2024 evince this ongoing trend of increased restrictions on civic life.

Passed by the National Assembly, Decree 126 was implemented on 26 November 2024, titled 'Regulations on the Organization, Activities, and Administration of Associations' (Nghị Định 126: Quy Định về tổ chức, hoạt động và quản lý hội) [Government of Vietnam 2024]. The Decree imposes

new limits on civic associations in the country. In particular, the Decree creates an onerous burden to establish civic associations in Vietnam, raising legal and bureaucratic requirements, and grants the government increased powers to monitor and suspend, even dissolve, any association. The impetus driving the Decree is the premise that so-called foreign influence poses a threat to national security, especially through international cooperation that supports the development of civil society [Altman-Lupu and Swanton 2024, 16 December]. The ratification of Decree 126, along with a series of other ones in recent years, supports the proposition that Vietnam, like its northern neighbour, has undergone a process of «securitization», the framing of issues through a national security lens [Sidel 2019; Trinh 2024].

This national security framing was vividly illustrated when Fulbright University Vietnam became the target of public vitriol. While the idea of its founding predated its formal inauguration in 2016, Fulbright University Vietnam was formed through a prime ministerial decision, representing a U.S.-Vietnam partnership to create the country's first liberal arts college. The Vietnamese government, in fact, provided land for the university's campus in Ho Chi Minh City. Such an enterprise could help nurture Vietnam's talented youths, bolster its human capacity, and contribute to its ambitious goal to be a high-income country by 2045

[The World Bank Group 2024, 8 October; *Vietnam News Agency* 2024, 12 December]. Yet, the university's presence has not been without controversy. In August of 2024, pro-government factions, most likely state-sponsored cybertroops, took to social media to launch vicious attacks against Fulbright University Vietnam, accusing it of fostering a «colour revolution» [Nguyen 2024, 13 September]. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, issued a public statement in support of the university in helping to enrich the educational opportunities for Vietnamese students [Tho and Linh 2024, 28 August; 'Vietnam welcomes Fulbright,' 2024].

Some analysts believe the anxious reaction by certain factions in the Vietnamese government might have been a response to events transpiring elsewhere in Bangladesh, where student-led protests in July of the same year succeeded in toppling the government and forcing out the country's leader [Nguyen 2024, 13 September]. The social media uproar in Vietnam reached such a point that Fulbright University Vietnam's president, Scott Andrew Fritzen, was compelled to intervene, publishing an open letter refuting the baseless accusations [Fritzen 2024].

The «security» framework driving the conflict over Fulbright University Vietnam appears to have been a key reason that some Vietnamese activists have been locked up. On 1 June 2024 security guards appeared at the home of the prominent journalist and historian Trương Huy San, also known by his penname as Huy Đức. Mr. Huy Đức is the recipient of many international accolades, including a Nieman Fellowship in 2012 at Harvard University. He is the author of the book *The Winning Side (Bên Thắng Cuộc)*,

a frank historical account of the domestic crises during the years 1975-1986 that led to Vietnam's transition to Renovation or the Open Door's policy [Walker 2024, 16 December; Zinoman 2018]. On social media such as Facebook, which is monitored by the Vietnamese government ['Vietnam: Let us breathe' 2020, 1 December], Mr. Huy Đức has been known for his vocal criticism of the country's leadership. On the day of his arrest, when he failed to appear at a meeting with colleagues as anticipated, there was speculation that the security forces must have detained him. On 7 June 2024, the Vietnamese authorities publicly confirmed the journalist's arrest for allegedly violating national security law. Mr. Huy Đức was accused of allegedly violating Article 331 of the penal code, which governs criminal acts that 'abuse the rights to democracy and freedom to infringe upon the interests of the state.' [Đức 2024; Peck 2024, 7 June]. This article of Vietnam's penal code has been criticized by international rights groups as overly broad in allowing for the arbitrary arrests of critics of the government. As of this essay's writing, Mr. Huy Đức has since been detained indefinitely, despite calls for his immediate release by international groups and rights organizations [Holcomb 2024, 13 June; Zinoman 2024; *Reporters Without Borders* 2024, 7 June; 'Vietnamese Government Must Release', 2024, 11 June].

In 2024, however, some Vietnamese prisoners were granted release, albeit for apparently strategic geopolitical ends. Prior to Mr. Tô Lâm's visit to the United States on the 21 September, the Hanoi government released Ms. Hoàng Thị Minh Hồng and Mr. Trần Huỳnh Duy Thức. Ms. Hồng is an internationally recognized environmental activist, hailed by Climate Heroes as an environmental champion and a member of Columbia University's 2018 inaugural cohort of Obama Foundation Scholars. She was arrested in 2023 on charges of alleged tax evasion, the same charge levied at a handful of other Vietnamese climate activists after they had helped the government secure billions of dollars in energy transition. On or about 20 September 2024, Ms. Hồng was granted a pardon and released from prison [Head 2023, 28 September; Wee 2023, 28 November; 'Three-year sentence' 2023, 28 September; *South China Morning Post* 2024, 21 September].

As for Mr. Trần Huỳnh Duy Thức, he is one of Amnesty International's designated 'prisoners of conscience' ['Three-year sentence' 2023, 28 September]. After five years of house arrest, he was sentenced to 16 years in prison by the Vietnamese government for blogging about political and economic issues in Vietnam. On 19 September 2024, security guards arrived at his prison cell announcing that he had been granted a 'pardon'. But Mr. Duy Thức objected. He insisted he was already innocent and that a 'pardon' was being forced upon him. He refused to leave. Nevertheless, he was hauled out of his prison cell and placed on a flight to Ho Chi Minh City to return to regular life [Thức 2024, 21 September].

Apart from the strategic release of the said prisoners, the overall space for civil society in Vietnam for 2024 appears to be trending towards

increased restrictions. Some international groups, in fact, have filed a complaint to the European Commission alleging that the restrictions on Vietnamese civil society violate the terms of the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA) [FIDH 2025, 4 February].

4. *Foreign policy*

4.1. *Vietnam adheres to its «Bamboo Diplomacy»*

The death of Nguyễn Phú Trọng and his interim replacement by Tô Lâm invariably raises the question as to whether the change in leadership will impact Vietnam's approach to international relations. One of Trọng's legacies, apart from the blazing furnace anti-corruption campaign, is the idea of «bamboo diplomacy». Trọng briefly alluded to this notion of diplomacy in 2016 and elaborated on it again in 2021, to imply that Vietnam, like the bamboo figure, must display resilience and balancing of competing forces. This diplomatic notion was hence embraced by Vietnamese political organs and media outlets [Nguyễn 2024, 6 June].

This «bamboo diplomacy» means that Vietnam will promote diplomatic ties that serve its varied interests, even when the key partners in question may be politically opposed to each other. According to the bamboo diplomacy doctrine, Vietnam will delicately straddle the line in the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia, Vietnam's long-term partner; between the United States and China, the former an emerging ally in the conflict over the South China Sea and the latter, a geographical hegemon in the same conflict and neighbouring trade partner.

Indeed, it was Trọng who strengthened bilateral relations with Washington. Under his tenure, Trọng facilitated the passage of catapulting the United States to the status of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, Vietnam's highest diplomatic level. Trọng's reaching out to Washington, a former enemy, is part of his so-called «bamboo» doctrine to balance the power competition between the United States and China. [Ha 2023; *Vietnam Plus* 2024, 23 July].

The rise of Tô Lâm as interim general secretary midway through 2024 did not, and likely will not in the foreseeable future, alter Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy. This proposition is bolstered by the fact that on 18 August 2024, as head of state, Mr. Lâm first paid a visit to China and then, in the following month, made another one to the United States. During his visit to Beijing, Mr. Lâm met with Xi Jinping who hailed the visit as a strengthening of the two nations' «shared community of destiny» [Vietnam's new leader', 19 August 2024]. The next month, at the sidelines of the 79th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, Mr. Lâm met with Joe Biden. Both sides discussed ways to accelerate the two countries' strategic partnership. The consecutive meetings with the two

leaders of the competitor nations suggests Vietnam's continued adherence to the doctrine of «bamboo diplomacy» that Nguyễn Phú Trọng had bequeathed to the country.

5. Conclusion

In sum, the year 2024 in Vietnam saw overall economic growth, change in leadership, and continued adherence to its doctrine of «bamboo diplomacy». On the economic front, the country witnessed overall growth of over 7%, buoyed by a strong manufacturing and exports sector and increasing Foreign Direct Investment. On the domestic front, the country witnessed the death of its leader due to ill-health, General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng, and his succession by Mr. Tô Lâm, former head of the Ministry of Public Security. The country also saw further restrictions on associational life through Decree 126, which raises the legal burden in forming civic associations and, by the same token, increases the government's power to monitor, suspend, and dissolve them.

Finally, despite the death of Trọng, the country still adhered to the doctrine of «bamboo diplomacy».

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THAILAND 2023-2024: A GENERAL ELECTION AND ITS CONTESTED AFTERMATH

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The Thai biennium 2023-2024 opened with the prospect of democratic change, as in 2023 citizens were able to vote in a general election. While the outcome spelled the end of military rule after the two consecutive premierships of retired General Prayuth Chan-ocha, the Army-drafted constitution of 2017 inhibited the smooth functioning of participatory politics. Move Forward, a recently established party with a progressive outlook and a defiant stance toward military and élite groups, won, but was prevented from forming a government. Lengthy negotiations relegated it to the opposition, favouring instead the Pheu Thai Party, which represented the legacy of the charismatic ex-PM Thaksin Shinawatra. Less ideologically committed, the Pheu Thai Government proved willing to compromise with the status quo – a strategy deemed pragmatic by supporters, and self-serving by critics. The new administration additionally took a controversial approach with regard to foreign policy, showing openness to the governments of Myanmar and Russia, in continuity with previous military administrations. Economic recovery under the Pheu Thai Government remained slow, also hindered by an alarming rise in household debt and massive floods in 2024.

KEYWORDS – Thailand General Election of 2023; Pheu Thai; Thaksin Shinawatra; Paetongtarn Shinawatra; Srettha Thavisin; Vacharaesorn Vivacharawongse; Thailand-Myanmar relations; Thailand-Russia relations; Thailand-U.S. relations; Thailand-China relations; Thailand economy.

1. Introduction

This essay offers a critical overview of the Thai biennium 2023-2024 with reference to domestic politics, foreign policy, and economy. The first five sections examine the defining event of this period: the general election of 2023. They focus respectively on: the background to the election, showing how different parties positioned themselves with regards to the Military and broader processes of democratization (2.1); the electoral outcome, also exploring how changing political sensitivities possibly affected the results (2.2); the aftermaths, which saw the marginalization of the winning party, Move Forward, relegated to the opposition, and the formation of two consecutive Governments under Pheu Thai (2.3); and, finally, the Pheu Thai Administrations' ambiguous engagement with civil and political rights (2.4). Concluding the focus on domestic politics, section 2.5. looks at the

unexpected return of Vacharaesorn Vivacharawongse, an estranged son of King Maha Vajiralongkorn (r. 2016), to the Kingdom after a long exile.

Moving on to foreign relations, the next two sections explore the two Pheu Thai Governments' unexpectedly cordial approach to the illiberal Governments of Myanmar and Russia (3.1.), and their refusal to commit to either the USA or China in the face of the two superpowers' competition in the region, which was in line with previous administrations (3.2.). The final part of the essay considers the economic situation, characterised by a slow recovery after the COVID-19 crisis, and further penalized by a severe household debt problem and major floods that affected several provincial areas in 2024 (4.1.).

2. *Domestic politics*

2.1. *Preparing for the election*

The general election of 2023 represented a pivotal moment in Thailand's process of democratization, pitting progressive forces that sought to curb the powers of the military and the nobility against conservative elements intent on preserving more traditional power structures. Held on 14 May 2023, it determined the numeric victory of Move Forward, a recently established party deemed progressive within the local political context. The Move Forward Party had campaigned with a platform aimed at limiting the influence of the Military and the Monarchy – traditional powerholders in the Kingdom – also via the abolishment of military conscription and amendments of Thailand's notoriously draconian law on *lèse-majesté* [PPTV HD 36 2023, 12 July]. Move Forward was the *de-facto* successor of Future Forward, a liberal party, especially popular among the youth, which was disbanded in a divisive court ruling in 2020 [Siani 2021, p. 242].

Significantly, the electoral result came after two consecutive governments led by the royalist retired Army General Prayuth Chan-ocha (2014-2019 and 2019-2023), indicating widespread frustration with the Military's interference in politics, and increasingly dominant democratic sensitivities. This outcome notwithstanding, convoluted electoral rules prevented Move Forward from forming a government, enabling Pheu Thai Party to do so in their place. The latter Party represented the legacy of the charismatic Thaksin Shinawatra, an ex-premier famously ousted by a military coup d'état in 2006, and in self-imposed exile to escape a set of legal charges.

Previous military administrations had created an electoral system deliberately designed to maintain influence even after democratic elections. Understanding how Pheu Thai ultimately formed a government requires an excursus into the electoral rules as established by the Military-drafted Constitution of 2017. These enable voters to elect the 500 members of the House of Representatives (which comprises 400 open-constituency seats and 100

party-list seats), but not the 250 members of the Senate, who were appointed by the military government of the time. Crucially, in this system, a democratically chosen prime minister would need to secure the endorsement of at least 376 members of Parliament in order to be able to form a government. Some scholars have argued that this caveat was likely devised for the Military to retain a degree of control over the electoral process via complacent senators [Khemthong and Aua-aree 2023; Nethipo *et al.* 2023, 274-5].

An extraordinary 67 Parties ran for the 2023 election [Thairath 2023, 12 May]. The most prominent had a reputation for either supporting democratization [BBC Thai 2020, 21 February] or advocating military rule [Work Point Today 2019, 7 June]. Among the former was Move Forward as well as the above-mentioned Pheu Thai. On the pro-military side was the Palang Pracharath Party, led by Army General Prawit Wongsuwon, a historic associate of Prayuth Chan-ocha who held important positions in the Prayuth Governments, and Bhujjai Thai Party, led by Anutin Charnvirakul, a former of Minister of Public Health.

As per the 2017 Constitution, parties were also required to propose up to three candidate premiers to the Office of the Election Commission in order for them to be eligible [iLaw 2019, 5 February]. The Pheu Thai Party put forward three candidates: Srettha Thavisin, a real estate developer; Paetongtarn Shinawatra, the youngest daughter of Thaksin Shinawatra; and Chaikasem Nitisiri a former attorney general and minister of Justice. Move Forward, however, proposed only one: Pita Limjaroenrat, a businessman.

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-O-cha dissolved the House of Representatives on 20 March 2023 [iLaw 2023, 20 March], three days before the regular end of its term [iLaw 2023, 9 May]. Analysts have suggested that the early dissolution might have represented a strategic measure, necessary for the premier to quit the Phalang Pracharat Party, of which he was a member, and join the United Thai Nation Party (UTN) within a window of time prescribed by the law [iLaw 2023, 9 May]. Some further speculated that Prayuth's need to leave the Phalang Pracharat Party was motivated by internal conflicts.

2.2. Electoral results and changing political sensitivities

The general election marked a turning point in Thai politics, with unprecedented voter turnout and a clear shift toward progressive parties, especially among young voters. According to the Office of the Election Commission of Thailand, 39,293,867 voters, or 75.22% of the adult population, cast a ballot in the election, recording the highest voter turnout in history [Siamrath 2023, 15 May]. The result sealed a victory of the main pro-democracy Parties, with Move Forward winning 151 seats (112 open-constituency seats, 39 party-list seats), and Pheu Thai 141 seats (112 constituency and 29 party-list). Pro-military parties followed, with Bhujjai Thai winning 71 seats (68 constituency and 3 party-list); Palang Pracharat, 40 seats (39 consti-

cy and 1 party-list); and United Thai Nation, 36 seats (23 constituency and 13 party-list) [*BBC Thai* 2023, 19 June].

The success of Move Forward was especially striking given the low profile of its leader, Pita Limjaroenrat; the progressiveness – if not the perceived taboo quality – of its agenda; as well as the fierce competition of Pheu Thai, a Party with a long history of landslide electoral victories. A widespread narrative stressed the role played by younger voters – assumed to be exceptionally liberal [*Insight Era* 2023, 17 April] – in determining the victory of Move Forward. BBC Thai highlighted the prominence of young constituencies in the overall breakdown of the eligible voters, pointing out that individuals belonging to the so-called Generation Z (those, that is, born between 1997 and 2005), and Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1996), amounted respectively to a solid 12.78 % and 28.87 % of the electorate [Watchiranon 2023, 24 March].

Ethnographic data collected by the author in the Northeastern city of Udon Thani, traditionally a Phue Thai stronghold, before, during and after the election, suggests that the very discourse of generational change may have influenced the preferences of some urban voters. Middle-aged individuals (aged 40 to 65) who in this election had switched from Pheu Thai to Move Forward explained their choice in terms of having to align with the presumed preference of the youth, assumed to be best equipped to sense the best future of Thailand. Some among the interviewees even claimed neither to fully «understand» (*khaojai*), nor to «agree» (*hen duay*) with Move Forward's more radical agenda. They added that they «trusted» (*wai jai*) the youth, depicting the advent of liberalism as inevitable. Some also described the Move Forward Party leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, as young, inexperienced, and therefore «pure» (*borisut*) within an political arena that they perceived to be otherwise corrupted.

If an aura of idealism therefore connoted the image of Move Forward, that of Pheu Thai may have suffered from the impression of political ambiguity. Contributing to the latter was the rumour that the Party was prepared to form a coalition with the Military-backed Palang Pracharat in exchange for favours. Controversially, only few days before the election, ex-PM Thaksin Shinawatra used social media to announce, out of the blue, that his return from exile was imminent [*Thai Post* 2023, 9 May]. Given that the former Premier had been overthrown by the Army in 2006, and had next been targeted by legal charges including corruption and contempt of royalty [*BBC Thai* 2023, 10 August; *Prachatai* 2023, 22 August], many understood the announcement to imply that he had secured a deal with once-unamiable powerful actors in exchange for the ability to come back to the Kingdom on favourable conditions [*AEC 10 News* 2023, 21 May]. To voters with a genuine hope for democratic change, this suggested Pheu Thai's readiness to sacrifice the will of the people on the altar of Thaksin's personal interests.

2.3. *Forming the government(s)*

Despite Move Forward's electoral success, conservative forces effectively restrained the rise of the progressive party through judicial interventions and constitutional mechanisms, ultimately enabling Pheu Thai to form a government through compromises with military-aligned parties.

Shortly after its surprise victory, the Move Forward Party formed a coalition with Pheu Thai and other smaller, pro-democracy Parties. On 13 July 2023, the Parliament nevertheless refused to endorse Move Forward's candidate prime minister, Pita Limjaroenrat, who secured only 324 votes [*BBC Thai* 2023, 13 July]. In July 2023, before his second attempt to gain support, the Constitutional Court suspended him from the House of Parliament, questioning his eligibility as premier [*Thai PBS* 2023, 19 July]. According to an allegation, Pita Limjaroenrat held some shares in the media company ITV, while the 2017 Constitution forbids MPs from owning media-related businesses [*Prachachat* 2023, 13 May]. The Constitutional Court would dismiss the case only six months later, in January 2024, on the basis that ITV had not been operative since 2007 – that is, well before the beginning of Pita Limjaroenrat's political career [*BBC Thai* 2024, 24 January].

Pita Limjaroenrat's suspension nevertheless prevented Move Forward, which, as anticipated earlier, had named no other candidate premier, from forming a government. The episode paved the way for the second most voted Party, Pheu Thai, to do so instead. Given the widespread opposition toward Move Forward, Pheu Thai entered into talks only with other parties to form a government [*Channel 7* 2023, 22 July]. They eventually announced their intention to form a coalition with parties that included the pro-military Bhunjaithai, Palang Pracharat, and United Thai Nation, but excluded Move Forward [*Work Point Today* 2023, 21 August]. The first Pheu Thai candidate, Srettha Thavisin, became prime minister on 22 August 2023 with 482 votes from the lower and the upper house, relegating Move Forward to the opposition [*Thai PBS* 2023, 22 August]. Shockingly, in the morning of the same day, Thaksin Shinawatra landed at Bangkok's Don Mueang Airport.

Upon his arrival, Thaksin was taken to the Supreme Court, which sentenced him to a total of eight years in prison for three different charges [*Thairath* 2023, 22 August]. A few hours after being held at the Bangkok Remand Prison, Thaksin complained of chest pain, and was transferred to the Police Hospital for an examination [*Thai PBS* 2023, 23 August]. Mr. Sitti Suthiwong, the deputy director general of the Department of Corrections, explained that the ex-premier suffered from insomnia, high blood pressure, chest tightness, low fingertip oxygen levels, as well as other congenital diseases [*Thairath* 2024, 22 August]. He claimed that the situation warranted that the former Prime Minister be detained at the Police Hospital instead of the prison. According to hearsay, the ex-Premier was given a highly comfortable room at the Hospital – a rumour that the Police strongly denied

[*Tnews* 2023, 23 August]. On 31 August 2023, Thaksin requested a royal pardon from King Vajiralongkorn [Phaisan 2023, 8 December]. The next day, the Monarch reduced his eight-year sentence to only one year [*BBC Thai* 2023, 1 September]. The ex-Premier was eventually released on parole on 18 February 2024, after having spent 6 months at the Police Hospital [*BBC Thai* 2024, 16 February]. He completed his one-year term on 31 August 2024.

Meanwhile, as a final blow to Move Forward, on 7 August 2024 the Constitutional Court ordered the Party to be dissolved, banning its executive board, Pita Limjaroenrat included, from politics for 10 years. The Court deemed the Party's proposal to amend the *lèse-majesté* law unconstitutional [*The Standard* 2024, 12 March]. People close to the disbanded party reacted by announcing the formation of a new party, the name of which, Phak Pra-chachon, officially translates into English as People's Party [*BBC Thai* 2024, 9 August]. The latter name is a direct reference to the collective that in 1932 overthrew absolutism, known in Thai as Khana Ratsadon and translated into English, indeed, as People's Party.

Even the Pheu Thai Government was not immune from attacks, however. On 14 August 2024, the Court forced PM Srettha Thavisin out of office for breaching «ethic rules and moral standards» [*The Matter* 2024, 14 August]. The PM was accused of appointing to his cabinet Thaksin Shinawatra's former lawyer, Pichit Chuenban, who had previously served a 6-month jail term for bribery [*The Matter* 2024, 14 August]. The removal of Srettha made it necessary for Pheu Thai to start new negotiations for forming a new Government. They put forward the name of Paetongtarn Shinawatra as candidate premier, gaining parliamentary endorsement.

The composition of the Paetongtarn Cabinet did not differ significantly from the previous one, but, in an apparent act of reconciliation, it welcomed Pheu Thai's longstanding rival Party, the Democrats, by appointing its leader, Chalermchai Sri-on, minister of Natural Resources [*Thai PBS* 2024, 28 August]. Commenting on the entire incident, the legal scholar Prinya Thaewanarumitkul suggested that the Constitutional Court acted on a complaint by somebody displeased with Pheu Thai [Napat Kongsawad 2024, 4 September].

2.4. *Civil and political rights under the Pheu Thai Government(s)*

Despite its longstanding commitment to democratic values, the Pheu Thai administrations failed to meaningfully improve Thailand's human rights situation. Political dissidents continued to face significant challenges after the 2023 elections, largely unchecked by the new government. In fact, the use of *lèse-majesté* laws intensified, the number of prosecutions rose, and prominent activists and politicians faced harsh sentences for perceived insults against the royal family. As reported by Thai Lawyers for Human Rights,

2023 saw the highest number of political detainees in recent years. At least 56 citizens and activists were jailed in 2023, outnumbering last year's figure of at least 46 detainees. Adding the 19 individuals who were detained continuously since 2022 brings the total of at least 67 detainees in 2023. Out of the 67 detainees, at least 37 have not been released and have spent the new year behind bars. This figure surpasses the detainee count for 2021-2022 (22) and 2022-2023 (19) [TLHR 2024, 16 February].

The situation did not improve in 2024, with the figures of lawsuits increasing further [TLHR 2024, 8 November]. 2024 was also marked by the tragic death of the young political prisoner Netiporn Sanesangkhom, and the Government's failure to identify and punish those responsible for a massacre that had taken place twenty years before in the Southern city of Tak Bai. These two cases underscored further the limitations of Thailand's democratic progress.

On 21 May 2024, the 28-year-old female activist Netiporn Sanesangkhom, better known by her nickname, Bung, died in custody after a prolonged hunger strike with which she was protesting her detention for *lèse majesté* and sedition. Her shocking death raised numerous questions about the treatment of political prisoners under the new civilian government [DW 2024, 21 May]. In October of the same year, the Pheu Thai Government failed to complete satisfactorily the investigation into the deaths of Muslim protesters that had taken place in Tak Bai during the premiership of Thaksin Shinawatra. On 25 October 2004, state authorities had used tear gas, water cannons and live ammunition to disperse 2,000 protesters, causing the death of seven people [Amnesty International 2024, 18 October]. After the crackdown, an additional 78 protesters had died while being transported to a distant military camp, stuck inside military trucks [Amnesty International 2024, 18 October]. On 25 October 2024, the case legally expired as the defendants did not report, and the accused did not show up at court [Bangkok Post 2024, 28 October].

On a brighter note, in 2024 Thailand legalized same-sex marriage as put forward by a draft law approved the previous year. The provision grants full legal, financial and medical rights to spouses regardless of gender, making Thailand the first country in Southeast Asia and the third in Asia, after Taiwan and Nepal, to recognize same-sex unions [Thairath 2024, 15 November]. The bill was set to come into effect on 22 January 2025 [Jiraphon Srijaem 2024, 25 September].

2.5. *The return of the King's estranged son*

The biennium 2023-2024 also featured an interesting development for what concerns the Royal Family. On 8 August 2023, Vacharaesorn Vivacharawongse, the estranged second son of King Maha Vajiralongkorn, published

photographs on social media that portrayed him carrying out touristy as well as more highbrow activities in Thailand. The post suggested his unexpected, unannounced and unofficial return to the Kingdom after 27 years of exile in the United States [BBC Thai 2023, 8 August], sparking rumours of a possible reconciliation with the Palace.

Vacharaesorn made other visits to the Kingdom since, where he also obtained a Thai ID card and a passport [Matichon 2023, 15 December]. Although he appeared not to have received any royal titles [BBC Thai 2023, 15 August], his ability to meet prominent figures, including the head of the Thai Buddhist clergy, the Supreme Patriarch [Manager Online 2023, 8 August], led some to speculate that these visits may prelude an important role in the royal affairs.

3. *Foreign Policy*

3.1. *Always cordial relations with Myanmar and Russia*

Despite transitioning to civilian leadership, Thailand maintained pragmatic relationships with authoritarian regimes in Myanmar and Russia, prioritizing economic interests over human rights concerns.

Observers wondered indeed whether the passage from a military-led to a civilian government would result in a less compromising approach to the Burmese Junta. Shortly after Srettha Thavisin took office, however, Thailand supported Myanmar's National Ceasefire Agreement, a pact signed eight months before between the Burmese generals and insurgent groups, and now useful for the former to rein in the gains made by guerrillas in the territory [Thai PBS World 2023, 16 October]. In December 2024, Bangkok hosted an informal consultation in which representative of the Burmese Government discussed the conflict with representatives of their neighbouring countries (India, Bangladesh, China, Laos, and Thailand). According to a well-known analyst, the meeting «marks the beginning of a more conciliatory regional approach toward Myanmar's military administration» [Strangio 2024, 20 December]. Crucially, Thailand has important economic interests in Myanmar. Data of 2023 shows that the Kingdom was the third largest investor in the country, also importing from Myanmar 15% of its natural gas and 15% of electric power [Chambers and Chotisut 2024, 8 July].

The Phue Thai administration also displayed a certain openness toward Russia. In October 2024, PM Srettha Thavisin met Vladimir Putin in Beijing, where they discussed economic matters [DW 2023, 21 October]. The talks enraged groups within civil society who think that Thailand should not support Russia for its involvement in Ukraine. While preserving cordial rapports with Moscow, however, the Kingdom has become a haven for Russian long-term tourists and expats – including critics of Putin, de-

serters and men avoiding military conscription. As of November 2024, a record-breaking 1.5 million Russian citizens had entered Thailand [*The Nation* 2024, 13 December]. Ending the biennium with the prospect of further cooperation, in late 2024, Russia invited Thailand to join BRICS [Fenbert 2025, 2 January].

3.2. *Mediating between the US and China*

As for what concerns Thailand's self-positioning with regard to the US-China competition in the region, the Pheu Thai administration continued to keep good relations with both superpowers without feeling pressured to commit to either. Thailand therefore maintained its traditional non-aligned stance, apparently emerging as a neutral ground where the two superpowers could engage in diplomatic discussions. In January 2024, Bangkok hosted a meeting between the US Advisor for National Security and the Chinese Foreign Minister, where they discussed issues including the Taiwan crisis and the conflict in the South China Sea. According to analyst Benjamin Zawacki of The Asia Foundation, the actors' choice of Bangkok as the location for the talks implied «that both the US and China are comfortable and secure enough in their relations to Thailand vis-à-vis one another» [DW 2024, 30 January].

More complicated, and less negotiable, was the declining environmental situation in the Greater Mekong Region, which is partly linked to China's management of the water flows upriver. In late August, Thaksin Shinawatra commented that the devastating floods that affected the Northern province of Chiang Rai in that period were possibly «caused by an unusually high volume of water from upstream in the Mekong River». And added: «We may need to discuss this with other countries, particularly China, which is also experiencing floodings» [*Thai PBS World* 2024, 29 August]. If carefully formulated, the words of the ex-Premier seemed to point toward a degree of Chinese responsibility in the floods. Receptive to the message, China's Embassy in Bangkok responded that Beijing had operated its dams and water reservoirs as usual, thus denying any responsibility [*Thai PBS World* 2024, 29 August]. The incident may suggest that Thailand's approach to foreign policy operates also via informal channels and on multiple levels, enabling the Kingdom to defend its interests effectively, also from the very superpowers that it would otherwise seem to court.

4. *The economy in 2023-2024*

4.1. *Slow recovery and new challenges*

Thailand's economic recovery during 2023-2024 faced multiple interconnected challenges, from sluggish post-pandemic growth to a crippling

household debt crisis that undermined consumer spending power. These factors impacted an economy that already suffered from structural problems, such as the country's rapidly aging population (20% of Thais were over 60 in 2023 [Srawooth Paitoonpong 2023]). This situation created labor shortages in key sectors; skill mismatches vis-à-vis other countries in Southeast Asia; and a chronic political instability deterring long-term foreign investments.

According to the World Bank, the Kingdom registered an average annual growth of 2% in 2023 [World Bank 2024, no date] with an expected 2.4% growth for 2024, supported by «private consumption as well as tourism and goods exports recovery» [World Bank 2024, 3 July]. Government policies additionally contained the inflation rate [Praewpan Sirilurt, 2023], reduced the cost of electricity and fuel, and kept the prices of pork and chicken, both of which are main staples in Thai cuisine, low [Ministry of Commerce 2023, 8 December].

Private debt was alarming. Data shows that «in 2023, Thai household debt rose to 91.3% of GDP, led by the expansion of consumer loans and housing debt» [Klinthanom 2024, 17 May]. The same research finds that private debt rose by an extraordinary 91% toward the end of the year. Confirming the trend, as of September 2024, the average household debt increased by another 8.4% [Orathai and Satawasin 2024, 10 September]. A study by Chulalongkorn University, which took into account informal loans as well, estimated debt at 104% of the GDP in the fourth quarter of the same year [Somruedi 2025, 9 January].

Also impacting the economy was a burgeoning crisis involving Thailand's car manufacturing industry. In 2024, production dropped by over 20% compared to the previous year, forcing several producers to close permanently [Lamonphet 2024, 25 December]. The crisis featured both a domestic and an international dimension, as it was caused, on the one hand, by prospective Thai buyers' inability to secure auto loans (a consequence of the debt crisis discussed above), and, on the other, by the competition of Chinese manufacturers [Apornrath 2024, 26 July].

Compounding an already unstable economic situation, there were the massive floods that interested 30 provinces in the second half of 2024. In the above-mentioned province of Chiang Rai, the worst flood registered in the past eight decades required costly rescue operations, evacuations of residents and tourists, and caused disruptions in business and commerce [Kom Chad Luek 2024, 11 September]. In September 2024, a research unit of Krungsri Bank assessed that the losses, which remain yet to be fully evaluated, were around 46.5 billion baht, or 0.27% of GDP [Chaiwat 2024, 13 September]. The World Bank emphasizes the imperative for Thailand to devise new strategies of water management and adequate responses to the climate crisis, lest the risk of losses of up to 10% of the GDP [Bangkok Post 2024, 21 October].

5. Conclusion

Inaugurated with a general election in which citizens voted the Army Generals out of power, the 2023-2024 biennium showed the continued detrimental effect of two consecutive military administrations on processes of democratization. The electoral system put in place by the Military-drafted Constitution of 2017 proved indeed effective at inhibiting the formation of a government deemed unacceptable to the powers that be. Acting with what some call pragmatism, and others self-interest, the Pheu Thai Party took advantage of the situation by forming a coalition, while the Move Forward Party, the actual winner, was forced into opposition.

Its immediate gains aside, by the end of the period under review, the Phue Thai Government was tasked with securing back the trust of pro-democracy constituencies, including previous supporters who had lost faith in their leaders and become suspicious [*Manager Online* 2024, 16 August]. To reach that goal, PM Paetongtarn Shinawatra had to manage a multiplicity of critics, some of whom accused her of allowing her father, Thaksin, to exert excessive influence over her administration. She additionally had to face legal petitions and social media campaigns aimed to undermine her leadership [Strangio 2024, 27 August; *The Nation* 2024, 12 October]. Thaksin himself still awaited a court ruling for a controversial comment toward the Monarchy he allegedly made in a 2015 media interview, which landed him a charge of *lèse majesté* [Thairath 2024, 22 August].

While Thaksin's return from exile – along with that of the King's son, Vacharaesorn – had occasionally stolen the scene, the end of the biennium showed that the most immediate concerns for many citizens were financial. With the figures of household debt in the open, the Pheu Thai administration was left with the opportunity as well as the challenge to demonstrate the extent to which its pragmatism can address people's most concrete problems in the realm of the economy.

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In accordance with standard scholarly practice in Thai Studies, in-text citations for Thai authors use their first names rather than their last names. In the bibliography, the full names of Thai authors are presented in the order of first name followed by last name, with no comma between them. This formatting reflects a broader convention in Thailand, where last names are seldom used, including in political and media contexts.

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MYANMAR 2024: WHOSE TIDE HAS TURNED?

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This article highlights the multi-scalar politics of Myanmar, where regional politics and geopolitics interact with and compound national and local issues and conflicts. The first part of 2024 confirmed the trends of the previous year. Ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), in coalition or individually, capitalized on the momentum offered by Operation 1027 with the members of the 3 Brotherhood Alliance gaining ground in Rakhine and Shan States, until a China-brokered ceasefire in January formalized a military withdrawal from key towns and strategic roads. The same groups embarked on 'Part II' of Operation 1027 in late June and July, making additional important gains, as evidenced by the capture of the strategic town of Lashio in Shan State and additional territorial gains by the Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine State. The AA expanded its control of the State further and by the end of the year it had expelled the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF, the junta's military) from most of the state. The junta appeared incapable of taking the strategic or even operational initiative and was under attack from all fronts. It lost control of most of its land borders. Perhaps for the first time since independence, it became possible to think of a defeat of the Myanmar military. And yet, over the summer, the anti-military tide in Shan State came to a halt. Feeling that some EAOs had simply gone «too far» and that a collapse of the junta and – by extension – of the state was conceivable, China changed its policy, extending greater support to the junta and withdrawing support from some of its closest EAOs, even arresting its leaders on Chinese territory. Inter-EAO conflicts ensued in Shan State, favouring the military's position there. Throughout the year, the regime remained embattled, suffering a growing number of defeats, but was not on the verge of imminent collapse.

KEYWORDS – China; Operation 1027 Part II; Arakan Army; Rohingya; Shan State; transnational illicit economies.

1. Introduction

In the years preceding 2024, the situation on the ground in Myanmar consisted of a series of unstable, evolving stalemates, with no side able to prevail over the others. The situation changed rapidly, even unexpectedly, in

* The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/S00405X/1) and the Scottish Council on Global Affairs for the support to the research related to this article.

October 2023 when some ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) made important gains in the north-eastern part of the country (Shan State) and the south-western one (Rakhine State) during what became known as Operation 1027 [Fumagalli 2024].

The first part of 2024 confirmed the trends of the previous year. The EAOs, in coalition or individually, capitalized on the momentum offered by Operation 1027, from the day – 27th October – when the Myanmar National Democratic Army Alliance (MNDAA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) launched coordinated attacks against the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) and their allies in 2023 [Fumagalli 2024]. In the geographical peripheries of the country the MAF lost control of most of its land borders [Michaels 2024, March; *Radio Free Asia* 2024, 30 December]. The Myanmar National Democratic Army Alliance (MNDAA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), part of the 3 Brotherhood Alliance (3BA) alongside the Arakan Army (AA), embarked on 'Part II' of Operation 1027 in late June and July. Fighting came closer to the town of Pyin Oo Lwin in the Mandalay region, site of the important Military Service Academy (a hill station previously de facto the summer capital of British Burma) [Michaels 2024, October]. For a time, in the summer of 2024, it became possible to envisage a road to Mandalay for the armed resistance [*International Crisis Group* 2024, 15 October]. With additional defeats in Kachin, Chin, and Karen States, the tide appeared to have crucially turned against the military, not only embattled (it had been for some time), but incapable of reacting and losing ground (territory, people, resources) on a daily basis.

Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing came under mounting criticism within the army, although he continued to concentrate decision-making in his hands [*International Crisis Group* 2024, 15 October]. And yet, at some point, the anti-military tide came to a halt. Part II of Operation 1027 turned out rather differently from Part I. Feeling that some EAOs – most notably the MNDAA and the TNLA – had simply gone «too far» and that a collapse of the junta and – by extension – of the state was conceivable, China changed its policy, extending greater support to the State Administration Council (SAC, as the junta calls itself) and withdrawing support from some of its closer EAOs, even arresting its leaders on Chinese territory. Inter-EAO conflicts ensued, favouring the military's position. The situation was different elsewhere. The Karen National Union (KNU) made important gains in the east, retaking the town of Manerplaw from the junta-aligned Karen Border Guard Forces.¹ Anti-junta forces made strong advances in the western regions of the country too [Michaels 2024, April], where the AA expanded its hold on the northern and southern parts of the state, including the heavily Rohingya-populated towns of Buthidaung and Maungdaw, cutting off the

1. The KNU had conceived of Manerplaw as the capital of a «historical Karen homeland» (referred to as Kawthoolei).

MAF from the Bangladeshi border and also from the rest of the country to the south [*International Crisis Group* 2024, 27 August; *The Irrawaddy* 2024, 9 February; *The Irrawaddy* 2024, 18 March].

With this in mind, given the varying spatial geographies of Myanmar's conflicts, an overall, nationwide, assessment remains impossible. Observers of local politics have long accepted that Myanmar's fragmentation may not lead to state implosion but rather the emergence of alternative governance arrangements [Loong 2022; Horsey 2024, 31 May; Pedersen 2024].

As it highlights the multi-scalar politics of Myanmar, where regional and global geopolitics interact with and compound national and often very local(ized) issues and conflicts, this article's main contention is twofold. One, while a strategic defeat of the military was for the first time in decades, and perhaps ever, at least thinkable, a complete implosion of the MAF was not imminent. Two, the situation of the battlefield remained highly fluid, with certain parts of the country still fiercely contested. That said, the fact that the MAF no longer control most of the country's land borders was certainly stunning and raised questions about how long the military might be able to endure. China's gradual but steady intervention in support of the MAF throughout 2024, made of high-level visits from the junta (something it had abstained from doing since the coup) and pressure on its allied EAOs, suggested that at least one form of international intervention was relatively effective in the country. This was not peace-making by any stretch of the imagination, but Beijing appeared to have had enough of the fragmentation of political authority on its doorstep, and the political and economic turmoil that it engendered.

The article is structured as follows. First, I review the year on the battlefield(s), highlighting two key novel dynamics: the EAOs' successes, particularly in the states of Shan and Rakhine and, in turn, the military's retreats. A discussion of how different issues shaped and compounded the increasingly dire economic situation follows, while some (predominantly illicit) opportunities also emerged and flourished. Next, I examine the fractured diplomatic landscape, focusing especially on China's role, before concluding.

2. *Domestic situation*

The multi-scalar nature of Myanmar politics and the necessity to move beyond Western-centric state-centric frameworks is illustrated by the cross-border politics in the northern areas of Myanmar, particular in northern Shan State, a region bordering China. This territory, as noted in earlier contributions [Loong 2022; Fumagalli 2023, 2024;] has been historically a contested and fraught area, with the army exerting limited control and different EAOs competing with each other over control of territory, people and resources.

Throughout 2024 the State Administration Council lost control of almost all its borders, retreating further towards the centre, with no clear strategy over how to reverse the losses or lift itself out of its self-inflicted predicament.

Instead, junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing concentrated even more positions in his hands, having added the role of Acting President in July 2024 to those he already held (commander in chief, prime minister, head of the State Administration Council) [*International Crisis Group* 2024, 15 October]. In a sign that discontent was mounting even in the MAF ranks, he reshuffled top positions in the military, prosecuting senior officers for command failures or insubordination. The coup clearly turned out to be a strategic blunder for Min Aung Hlaing, but rather than seeking a way out, he stubbornly – and incompetently – stayed on a ruinous course of action comprising air strikes and retributive violence. He may be presiding over a failing regime, as the International Crisis Group put it [Horsey 2024, 31 May, p. 2], but in 2024 this was still a regime that dies hard.

A possible exit strategy for the regime revolves around the prospect of new parliamentary elections after those of November 2020 were nullified in the immediate aftermath of the coup [Fumagalli 2022]. This scenario has been entertained more by Myanmar's neighbours eager to see violence on their borders decrease than by the anti-coup resistance likely to view any junta-orchestrated elections as nothing more than a sham. Yet, the military has been very keen to indulge its neighbours regarding this prospect. Ever since the military took over in 2021, the junta has been routinely announcing that elections were imminent, without them actually materializing. In 2024 once again, the SAC announced imminent elections, only to postpone them, and to extend the state of emergency. To this end, or perhaps to maintain the fiction of imminent elections, the military decided to hold a census, which – unsurprisingly – was not complete by the end of the calendar year as the junta's control of people and territory shrank further during the year [Michaels 2024, November; *Radio Free Asia* 2024, 20 November].

Resistance groups have been making unprecedented gains in northern Myanmar since the 1027 offensive of October 2023. The 3BA has captured large swathes of territory in the Rakhine, Chin and Shan states. After some hesitation in the first few years after the coup, the 3 Brotherhood Alliance, and most notably the two EAOs operating in Shan State, the MD-NAA and the TNLA, entered the fight against the junta in October 2023. While neither Operation 1027 in 2023 nor Part II in June–July 2024 posed an existential threat to the junta in themselves, what they clearly showed was that the MAF were no longer able to hegemonize the battlefield [Michaels 2024, January], clearly impacting on troops' morale, prompting defections and leading to reshuffles at higher levels. By the end of 2024 the military no longer controlled the North-eastern Military Command (in Shan State) or the Western Military Command (in Rakhine).

2.1. *Shan State*

Even before the 11 January 2024 ceasefire brokered by China (the Haigeng Agreement), the MNDAA had seized the important town of Laukkaing, home to the military's regional operations command, from the MAF,² with the TNLA also capturing roads and towns to its west [Michaels 2024, January]. The ceasefire brought some temporary respite to the junta's forces, but in the summer, fighting resumed and the two EAOs made additional inroads in previously junta-held territory [Connelly and Michaels 2024]. Part II of Operation 1027 led to additional losses for the military, such as that of the strategic town of Lashio, the de facto capital of Northern Shan and seat of the Northeastern Regional Command, in early August. Additionally, the MNDAA seized a number of important border crossings and captured the ethnic Chinese-majority Kokang Special Administrative Zone, from which it had been expelled by the military in 2009. This was the first time the MAF had lost a regional command [Michaels 2024, July]. This gave the 3BA control of major arteries of trade with China and brought the MNDAA and the TNLA closer to launching large-scale attacks into the dry zone. The city of Mandalay appeared potentially vulnerable to operations by the 3BA. This is when China threw its leverage into the conflict, pressuring the two EAOs as other China-aligned EAOs in Shan State (the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the Shan State Progressive Party/Shan State Army, SSPP/SSA)³ intervened to stop the 3BA's advances. The TNLA called for a ceasefire in November. In a surprising turn of events, the Chinese authorities detained the MNDAA's leader Peng Daxun during a visit to the city of Kunming on 18 November, forcing the organization to re-enter political dialogue with the junta [*Frontier Myanmar* 2024, 4 December], so that the MNDAA followed TNLA's lead in calling for its own ceasefire and talks with the junta in December.

2.2. *Rakhine*

The situation in Rakhine State appeared less uncertain in terms of the outcome compared to that in Shan State, with the MAF gradually retreating further to the southern part of the state. The AA's grip and control of territory consolidated and expanded throughout the year. By the end of the year, the state appeared all but lost to the military, with the AA coming very close to being the first EAO to capture a whole state in Myanmar (and more, given that it controls the Paletwa township in Chin State). To recall, the Arakan Army (AA) was established in Kachin State in 2009, be-

2. On 5 January, so a few days before the ceasefire, the 3BA had already accepted the unconditional surrender of MAF troops.

3. The MNDAA, UWSA and NDAA EAOs all trace their lineage back to the China-backed Communist Party of Burma, founded after its collapse in 1989.

fore moving to Rakhine, with conflict taking place on and off between 2018 and 2022. Ceasefires alternated with new outbreaks of violence in 2022 and 2023, when the AA launched an offensive in coordination with the other two partners in the 3BA. Throughout 2024, the AA made rapid advances in the state, particularly. In the first part of the year, it concentrated on the northern part of the state, the symbolically important town of Mrauk U in February, once the capital of the Arakan Kingdom before being conquered by the Burmese Kingdom in 1785, and capturing the Rohingya-majority town of Buthidaung in the township of Maungdaw in May [*The Irrawaddy* 2024, 9 February].

The endgame remained unclear for the AA throughout 2024. It maintained its claims that it seeks a confederacy with Myanmar, though the reality on the ground more closely resembles that of de facto statehood, building up its own parallel institutions dealing with health, education, public administration and justice. The fact remains that by the end of the year the AA controlled 13 townships out of 17 in the territory, with one falling rapidly after the other in November and December, when the AA captured Toungup (which prevents overland supply to the important centre of Kuakphyu from the Myanmar mainland), Ann (home to the headquarters of the Western Military Command and a major pumping station of the oil and gas pipeline to China) [*Radio Free Asia* 2024, 9 December] and Gwa [*Radio Free Asia* 2024, 30 December; Strangio 2024, 31 December]. The AA finalized its control of the border – crucial to the cross-border flow of goods – by seizing Border Guard Post no. 5 with junta and junta-aligned militias fleeing to Bangladesh across the Naf river [Abuza 2024, 7 December]. The MAF remained confined to the state capital Sittwe, Manaung islands (the AA's naval capabilities remained inferior to that of the junta) and, crucially, Kyaukphyu. This centre is vital to both the junta and China. In the Kyaukphyu Economic Zone, China has key energy facilities, such as the gas and oil pipeline, which travel across the rest of Myanmar to Yunnan Province in China. Unlike Shan State, there was no indication that China was pressuring the AA to enter negotiations with the SAC.

And yet, upon closer inspection, not all was well for the Arakan Army, as concerns of inter-communal violence resurfaced once again after a lull of a few years. Its capture of Buthidaung [*The Irrawaddy* 2024, 18 May] was accompanied by reports of abuses (against the local Rohingya population, though the AA disputed the claim) and extensive incidents of arson across the town where many areas were burnt down [Bhattacharyya 2024, 8 October; *Frontier Myanmar* 2024, 12 November; Naw 2024, 12 June; Rahman 2024]. The military weaponized the inter-communal tensions. The military's objective was clearly to drag the Rohingya into the conflict between the AA and the MAF [Bhattacharyya 2024, 23 December], which it is clearly succeeding in doing. In an astonishing twist of events even by the standards of Myanmar's complex and, at times, convoluted conflicts, the SAC effec-

tively entered deals with a number of Rohingya militant organizations (the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, or ARSA; the Rohingya Solidarity Organization, RSO; and the Arakan Rohingya Army, ARA) [*International Institute of Strategic Studies* 2024, 11 December]. Young male Rohingya were reportedly conscripted, with widespread reports of coercion, to fight against the AA [*International Crisis Group* 2024, 10 May]. The absence of a unified leadership among the Rohingya made any negotiation between the community and the AA (or its political wing, the United League of Arakan) challenging [*International Crisis Group* 2024, 27 August].

Elsewhere in the country the situation looked similarly challenging for the junta. In Karen State, the town of Manerplaw retaken by the Karen National Union after losing it to the military-aligned Border Guard Force in 1995 [Strangio 2024, 18 December]. The victory was more symbolic than strategic, as Manerplaw was conceived by the Karens as the capital of an independent Kawthoolei (Karen homeland). The far more important border city of Myawaddy was also seized in the earlier part of the year, but the military retook it in April [Michaels 2024, July]. In Chin State, different anti-military organizations are in control of different parts of the territory, with the AA controlling Paletwa township in the south. In the north, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) seized five major border crossings, taking full control of the border with China in the areas of their operations [*Frontier Myanmar* 2024, 10 December; *Radio Free Asia* 2024, 21 November; *Radio Free Asia* 2024, 13 December].

3. Economy

Already one of the poorest countries in South East Asia prior to the 2021 coup, Myanmar was plunged into a series of crises that compounded each other, with serious impacts on the lives and livelihoods of millions [Mathieson 2024, 6 June; Strangio, 2024, 12 December]. In its end-of-year update, the World Bank reported a multifaceted crisis in which ongoing conflict, natural disasters, rapid currency depreciation, high inflation and outward migration have combined to produce an ‘atrophying effect’ on the formal economy [World Bank 2024].

While a single indicator cannot capture the tragic nature of Myanmar’s economic crisis, the freefall of the national currency, the kyat (MMK), was a good indicator of its predicament. In mid-August 2024 the exchange rate to the US dollar was 7,000 MMK, an enormous loss in value compared to 2019 when the exchange rate was around 1,500 MMK to the US dollar [Abuza 2024, 7 December; *Mizzima* 2024, 6 December]. The Kyat’s value recovered partially in the later part of the year following the Central Bank of Myanmar’s decision to sell foreign exchange on the market on its own online trading platforms. As noted in last year’s contribution [Fumagalli 2023],

different exchange rates exist in the country, with the junta trying to coerce the population to rely on the official and artificially inflated exchange rate for both everyday domestic and international transactions (e.g. remittances from Myanmar nationals working abroad). More generally, the junta's plan – just like in previous years – was to secure as much foreign currency as possible to buy weaponry and ammunitions as military spending consumed about 60% of the national budget in 2024. International migration remained an important coping mechanism for the population, as detailed in a recent report by the World Bank [2024]. As skilled workers in sectors such as ICT or engineering appeared especially mobile, this boded ill for the local economy.

There was very little meaningful legal activity of note. To illustrate the point, Myanmar produced only 300 MW of electricity (against a demand amounting to 540 MW, a 25% decline since the coup), with many power-generating facilities inoperable or in sites beyond the SAC's control. Foreign investment has fallen each year since 2021, from US\$ 1.64 bn in FY2022-23 to US\$ 661 m in 2023-24. In the first seven months of FY24-25 totalled only US\$ 226m [Abuza 2024, 7 December; Mathieson 2024, 6 June].

To mitigate such a stark predicament, the junta kept looking for new revenues, including through discussions with China about possible additional sales of oil and gas or an increase in the sale of gems. The latter move was thwarted by the 3BA's territorial gains, as the TNLA tried to deprive the junta of the control of the ruby trade mined in Mogoke. The TNLA blocked all large-scale mechanized mining, traditionally dominated by the military-owned Myanma Economic Holdings Limited. The SAC sought to recall Myanmar nationals working abroad, exerting pressure on the Thai government (the majority of Myanmar migrants were based there), so that the 2 million legal residents and the more than 3 million undocumented migrants would make their way back to the country. In September 2024, the SAC enacted a rule to force expatriate workers to transfer 25% of their remittances through formal bank channels, where they must use the official exchange rate of 2100 MMK to the US dollar [Mizzima 2024, 6 December].

Not all economic activities suffered in the aftermath of the coup, though. Protracted conflicts intensified the criminality of Myanmar's economy. The country topped the list of 193 countries of the Global Organized Crime Index. In 2023 it was blacklisted by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) [Fumagalli 2024]. A 'sector' that has been thriving in recent years has been that of online scam centres [Clapp and Tower 2024; Fong and McGowan 2024; International Crisis Group 2024, 27 March; Tower and Clapp 2024, 26 September; MacPherson and Wilson 2024; Tiwari 2025] and one of the key reasons behind China's tacit greenlighting of Operation 1027 in the later months of 2023, including the junta's lack of responsiveness to shut them down in Kokang Special Administrative Zone on China's borders [Fumagalli 2024]. As Fong and McGowan note [2024], several South East

Asian countries have become global hubs for cyber scams, an «industry» that generated more than US\$ 75 billion between 2020 and 2024. Myanmar has emerged as the epicentre of this industry, initially around Kokang (which prompted China's pressure on the junta via the EAOs in 2023). Such activities tend to be concentrated along the border with China and, increasingly, Thailand. Tower and Clapp, in their extensive investigation of this phenomenon, highlighted how a pro-military warlord, Saw Chit Thu, operating from Karen State, set up countless (over a thousand) such sites along the Thai-Myanmar border, the most infamous being the Shwe Kokko Park and KK Park in Myawaddy township in Karen State [Clapp and Tower 2024]. Cross-border smuggling has long been a lifeline for many in the country. This is especially the case in Rakhine State. One of the tactics adopted by the MAF against the resistance organizations is the blocking of supply routes, depriving the population living in areas controlled by either EAOs or the People's Defense Forces (the latter usually aligned to the National Unity Government, the successor of the government deposed in the 2021 coup) of essential commodities, including foodstuff [Bhattacharyya 2024, 8 October]. In Rakhine State, where the AA controls more than half of the 17 townships, the junta closed supply routes from the mainland and the southern part of Rakhine, which it still controls. The disruption of already precarious supply routes from the rest of Myanmar (owing to the poor state of roads), have made the smuggling of commodities from across the border in Bangladesh and India a necessity to keep the people of the AA-controlled Rakhine State afloat [Bhattacharyya 2024, 23 December]. Smuggled goods include oil, cooking oil, soaps, washing detergents, flour, garments – typically from India and Bangladesh. Rakhine state is strongly dependent on India and Bangladesh for fuel (diesel and petrol) and medicines (especially from India). In this context waterways have been vital to the local economy, and particularly the banks of the Kaladan river in the town of Paletwa.⁴

The second area in which Myanmar can «boast» some dubious and questionable success is that of opium production. In 2023, Myanmar overtook Afghanistan to become the world's top opium producer after the Taliban banned the cultivation of opium poppies, resulting in a 95% decline in opium production in that country [Strangio 2024, 13 December]. The area of opium poppy under cultivation in Myanmar decreased by 4% between 22/23 and 23/24, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [Strangio 2024, 13 December].

According to the World Bank, about 14 million people, or a quarter of the population, were experiencing acute food insecurity in late 2024, up from around 10 million the previous year [World Bank 2024]. For millions of ordinary people lacking access to aid and basic services, food insecurity

4. Paletwa township is formally in Chin State, but that part of territory is claimed and controlled by the AA.

and continuing brutalization by the MAF and facing a collapsing economy render the situation every day more tragic. The situation remained dire throughout the year.

4. *Foreign policy*

The fact that, for the first time, a collapse of Myanmar's military and the regime became conceivable led to a frenzy of diplomatic initiatives stemming from an urgent need to rethink prior «approaches» to the conflict. However, the diplomatic landscape remained fractured, or disparate [Connelly and Michaels 2024]. A lack of international coordination on Myanmar, stemming from each political actor's suspicion that geopolitical competitors may gain from changes on the ground, have led to, at best, a fragmented form of peace-making [Adhikari 2023], where different actors, primarily regional and non-western, set up their own initiatives.

The UN left the position of Special Envoy for Myanmar vacant for about nine months, in a clear display of where the country ranks in its priorities. As in preceding years, Western «distraction» by other wars, in Ukraine and the Middle East, masked its current haplessness. Beyond an additional round of sanctions [Reuters 2024, 29 October], there was little of note to suggest that western countries and organizations may be willing to dedicate more attention and provide more resources to the people of Myanmar. ASEAN downgraded Myanmar's representation at key meetings in response to its failure to implement the group's «Five-Point Consensus» but has struggled to find ways to de-escalate the conflict and foster dialogue. Laos took over ASEAN's chairmanship in 2024, which, according to ASEAN's current practices which see the rotating chair also hold the chairmanship of the organization's (non-) policy on Myanmar. Just like its predecessors in this post, the Lao People's Democratic Republic did not deliver any substantial changes.

Thailand tried to revamp its Myanmar policy [Strangio 2024, 17 December]. For the first time, all of Myanmar's neighbours met with representatives of the SAC in Thailand on 19 and 20 December [Strangio 2024, 20 December]. Myanmar's decades-long conflicts, including in Karen State on the Thai border, has also led to a significant flow of refugees, particularly since the 1980s, with the town of Mae Sot in Tak Province being on the receiving end of thousands of Myanmar refugees since then. Thailand, just like China, has not officially endorsed the actions of the EAOs, but has none the less accepted their practical existence. If anything, Bangkok accepted their presence as tantamount to a de facto buffer between war in Myanmar and its own territory. This policy has not really worked very well, as random shelling on Thai territory, including but not limited to the border town of Mae Sot are a regular occurrence. In April 2024 Thailand's Defence Min-

ister had signalled its displeasure with such a regular spillover of violence, announcing that the Thai military would shoot down any Myanmar military aircraft operating in its air space [Michaels 2024, April]. And yet in March fighting took place in close proximity to the 2nd Friendship bridge connecting Myawaddy with Tak Province [*Bangkok Post* 2024, 11 April]. On the first of this two-day round of meetings, representatives of the SAC were also in attendance. While little of substance emerged from the gathering, this nonetheless signalled some effort by certain ASEAN members to rethink their engagement approaches.

In 2024 China changed its approach to the crisis in Myanmar, from a fairly minimalistic approach (preventing the potential spillover of instability into its borders) to a more interventionist one. In late 2023, on the occasion of Operation 1027, China's tacit endorsement of the offensive, by and large motivated by Beijing's frustration with the junta's reluctance to crack down on the online scam centres in the Kokang Special Administrative Zone in north-eastern Shan [Fumagalli 2024], stunned external observers. This was – rightly or wrongly – due to the common perception, inside and outside Myanmar, that China's impulse would be to support the authoritarian regime against domestic challengers, which can be regarded as either a stance in favour of regime survival or (its own) border security.⁵ Scam centres in the north-east (particularly the Kokang Special Administrative Zone) have caused enormous damage to Chinese citizens and more generally to China-Myanmar bilateral ties. The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor runs through Shan and Rakhine – active conflict zones – thus directly impacting on investment and trade with China. Furthermore, the wave of refugees appears unstoppable, especially on the Thai and Indian borders. Cross-border smuggling of all substances, from commodities to basic goods and (in a reverse direction) various types of illicit substances including yaba and crystal meth (amphetamines), shows that despite state attempts to seal off their borders this is just not possible.

From mid-2024 onwards China undertook more active efforts to shape the trajectory of the conflict. As both MNDAA and TNLA accumulated gains in northern state of Shan over the summer, China used its leverage on other EAOs to its advantage. Beijing asked the United Wa State Army (probably Myanmar's largest EAO by troop numbers) to pressure MNDAA to withdraw forces. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted live-fire drills on the China–Myanmar border [Michaels 2024, July]. China's new stance also manifested itself in the form of senior level meetings in both China and Myanmar and pressure on a number of EAOs over which it has historically held considerable influence, which took place throughout the remainder of the year. Former Myanmar President Thein Sein paid a visit

5. Both the central government and the provincial one in Yunnan have long maintained ties with certain EAOs, most notably the MNDAA and UWSA.

to Beijing on 29 June. On 19 June, Wang Yi met with junta Foreign Minister Than Swe in Nay Pyi Taw, the first visit since May 2023. The junta interpreted this as an important display of support for the regime at a crucial time, despite the fact that Wang did not offer anything concrete, other than stating that «China's friendship extends to all of the Myanmar people». In early July, junta's number 2 Senior General Soe Win made a visit to Qingdao in Shandong province. Last, but not least, in a surprising twist of events in light of Myanmar's context (where Sinophobia is rampant across both society and the military), there was China's proposal to the junta to form a joint venture security company (JVSC) [*The Irrawaddy* 2024, 15 November]. After seeing the fall of Lashio to the MNDA, the escalation of armed conflict in Rakhine, an attack on the Chinese consulate in Mandalay, and the capture of a Chinese-owned nickel processing plant in Tigyain (Sagaing region) and the China-backed Alpha Cement factory in Patheingyi township (Mandalay region), Beijing felt compelled to come up with a better plan to contain the fallout of the war in Myanmar on its local economic interests [*Radio Free Asia* 2024, 22 November]. On this basis, the junta formed a working committee on 22 October 2024 to prepare a Memorandum of Understanding to establish a security company. The committee's responsibilities include scrutinizing the importing and regulating of weapons and special equipment, ensuring proper control and usage [*The Irrawaddy* 2024, 21 November]. The security company would handle the import of weapons and special equipment. The news followed Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's meeting with junta leader Min Aung Hlaing on 14 August, where they discussed the acceleration of the Belt and Road Initiative. They also debated the smooth operations of oil and gas pipelines connecting Yunnan Province with Rakhine State. Wang emphasized the importance of protecting Chinese projects and personnel in Myanmar. In a meeting held in November, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing told PRC Premier Li Qiang that he would speed up other BRI projects, pledging the construction of the BRI-related Muse-Mandalay-Kyaukphyu train line. This train line would link Muse in Myanmar, on the Chinese border, with Kyaukphyu in Rakhine State in the Andaman Sea. The project was stalled by Operation 1027 and other 3BA advances.

On Myanmar's western borders, both India and Bangladesh struggled to come to terms with the gradual but steady loss of control of the country's borders by the MAF. The areas affected were the regions bordering Chin and Rakhine States [Michaels 2024, May]. Since 2019 the Bangladeshi authorities have been fairly lenient towards the Arakan Army, even turning a blind eye to its activities within its territory [see for example, Fumagalli 2023 and 2024]. The Bangladeshi authorities have similarly neglected the activities of Rohingya militant organizations within and outside the large camps, as these sought to recruit volunteers (or coerce young men) among their ranks as they resumed operations in Rakhine State. The political turmoil with-

in Bangladesh itself in 2024, where long-standing autocratic leader Sheikh Hasina was ousted in August following weeks of protests in the summer [*The Daily Star* 2024, 5 August], led to some repositioning of the country as the new authorities, led by Nobel prize laureate, entrepreneur and philanthropist Mohammad Yunus, focused more on domestic political and economic priorities than cross-border issues with neighbouring Myanmar. India also struggled to come to terms with the post-coup dynamics in Myanmar. Unlike Dhaka, New Delhi never quite tolerated the Arakan Army, which, by operating in the southernmost part of Chin State (Paletwa township) has repercussions for India's north-east. What directly affects India as a result of the AA's operations is that war in western Myanmar interferes with the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project, which, among others, allows the connection between Kolkata and India's own north-eastern states of Manipur and Mizoram [Frontier Myanmar 2024, 3 December]. The Indian state of Manipur, in particular, has been engulfed, since late 2023, in a civil-war like situation, where cross-border instability is one of the factors fuelling the conflict and providing armed insurgents with a safe haven [Maiorano and Khattri 2024].

5. Conclusion

Throughout 2024 the situation on the ground in Myanmar remained extremely fluid. Galvanized by the success of Operation 1027, the three EAOs constituting the 3 Brotherhood Alliance pushed further, building momentum and, crucially, gaining additional territory in two key states, Rakhine and Shan, with additional territory captured by other EAOs, for example in the Kachin and Karen states. Inroads into the central areas remained challenging for the less well-equipped and generally National Unity Government-aligned People's Defence Forces.

The tide seemed to have crucially turned against the military. The disintegration of the military regime appeared at least conceivable, though not an imminent prospect. China's tacit endorsement of the MNDAA and TNLA-led Operation 1027 confirmed the enormous leverage the country has on those organizations and its ability, if not to determine, certainly to shape outcomes on the ground, locally (in Shan State) and nationally, by conveying messages to the junta. However, the anti-junta tide at some point stopped as the MNDAA and the TNLA seemed to push too far for China's liking. Beijing's change of approach – from a bystander eager to protect its interests (trade, investment, border security) without tying this to the junta's fate, to a more interventionist one – reversed the tide. If China established some clear boundaries for some of the EAOs operating in Shan State, it still appeared uncertain as to how to handle the AA, despite its considerable economic interests in Rakhine State. Although interactions between local,

national and international issues and actors were evident throughout Myanmar, the extent to which those interaction took place and, crucially, their impact on conflict dynamics and outcomes, continued to vary significantly across the various geographies of war. The events of 2024 showed that there was no exit strategy in sight for the regime, but nor was a decisive turnaround of the dynamics on the battlefield.

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BANGLADESH 2023-2024: FROM DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING
TO THE MONSOON REVOLUTION, TOWARDS DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

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The years 2023-2024 marked a historical political shift for Bangladesh. Unrest initially emerged in 2023 in relation to the parliamentary elections scheduled for early 2024 grew to eventually turn into a full-fledged anti-establishment uprising. Dubbed the Monsoon Revolution, it resulted in the ousting of Prime Minister Hasina and the creation of an interim government headed by Nobel Laureate Mohammed Yunus. The country faced a difficult economic situation due to a looming balance of payment crisis aggravated by the negative externalities of Russia's war in Ukraine. Besides spiking inflation and unhealthy state of loans across the banking sector, these were record years due to an unprecedented dengue outbreak, whose severity was found to be linked to climate change. The Interim Government tried to restore law and order and tackle the rising cost of living, the most urgent problem weighting on Bangladeshi people, with mixed results. The regime change did not significantly alter the country's international relations, except in the case of India, where Hasina fled in exile. Relations with Myanmar remained strained due to the ongoing civil war in Myanmar's Rakhine State which spilled over into Bangladesh to various extents and kept the Rohingya refugee crisis stalled.

KEYWORDS – Bangladesh; democratic backsliding; Monsoon Revolution; Awami League; development narrative; interim government; Hasina; Yunus; Rohingya.

1. Introduction

This article analyzes the major developments occurred in Bangladesh in terms of domestic, economic, and foreign affairs in 2023-2024. Among numerous significant events, regime change was undoubtedly the most consequential. The year 2023 saw Bangladesh sinking deeper into the process of democratic backsliding. In the early 2020s, democratic institutions across Asia were subjected to different degrees of erosion as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic politics [Pugliese, Fischetti and Torri 2022]. From this point of view, the trajectory of Bangladesh appeared in line with regional trends. However, the autocratic nature of the Bangladeshi state had been manifest for more than a decade under the Awami

League (AL)-led governments, which had widely deployed repression of dissent, police brutality and forced disappearances, repeatedly denounced by national and international observers [Tieri 2021]. Overall, while formally maintaining «democracy» as its official denomination, Bangladesh moved alarmingly closer to a one-party system.

Among the many individuals and organizations identified by the AL Government through the years as threats to its rule hence persecuted by various means, there was Muhammad Yunus. An economist recognized as the father of micro-credit – a system extending small loans to rural people and credited for their effective upliftment from poverty – in 2006 Yunus received the Nobel Peace Prize. He founded Grameen Bank (*Rural Bank*) to provide micro-credit across the country, and Grameen Telecom, another social enterprise. In the latest years, Yunus was victim of judicial harassment at the hands of the AL Government, who implied him in more than 100 cases from corruption to violation of labour laws. In August 2023, an open letter signed by world leaders of the likes of former U.S. President Barack Obama, former U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and more than 100 Nobel laureates, urged the Bangladeshi Government to put an end to judicial harassment against Yunus [Alam 2023, 31 August]. These concerns were echoed in January 2024 in another letter to Hasina, this time signed by twelve US senators [*The Daily Star* 2024, 23 January]. The Bangladeshi Government dismissed these allegations and continued the political vendetta against the social entrepreneur. In an irony of fate, in the summer of 2024, it would be no one else but Yunus, as we shall see, to rise to head the country following Hasina's ousting.

2. Domestic affairs

2.1. *The violent run up to Bangladesh's 12th parliamentary elections*

Democratic backsliding kept manifesting also in violent repression of political opposition ['Bangladesh: violent autocratic crackdown' 2023, 26 November]. The year 2023 witnessed recurring clashes between the police and opposition political parties requesting Hasina to step down in favour of a caretaker government¹. In this political environment, in November 2023

1. In the mid-1990s, the provision for a caretaker government was introduced with a view to manage violence and frauds occurring in relation to parliamentary elections. In 2011, the AL government abolished the caretaker system by amending the Bangladeshi Constitution (15th amendment). Consequently, three general elections took place in 2014, 2018, and 2024 under the aegis of AL governments. In December 2024, the High Court of Bangladesh ruled to restore the provision of a non-partisan caretaker government. It is important to note that the Yunus government is not a caretaker government but an interim government, whose responsibilities are not limited to conducting a free and fair election.

Hasina called for elections to be held on 7 January 2024, further angering the opposition. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Bangladesh's other main party and archenemy of AL, ordered his supporters to boycott them fearing they would be rigged and confirm Hasina for a fourth mandate. In late October 2023, clashes between BNP activists and the police intensified, culminating on the 28th in the death of a policeman and a BNP ward-level leader [*The Daily Star* 2023, 29 October]. Since then and until the January 2024 elections, BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) and other opposition political parties called regular strikes (known as *hartal*).

The elections and their aftermath represented the culmination of the authoritarian tendencies of the Bangladeshi state. Despite protracted protests and use of violence against protesters in the months preceding the elections, these took place on 7 January 2024, boycotted by main opposition parties and alliances such as BNP, JeI, and Ganatantra Mancho,² and amid widespread allegations of foul play by the ruling party, voiced also by international observers (such as intergovernmental organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), foreign press). For example, Ghulam Mohammed Quader, the chairman of Jatiyo Party (JP), which resolved to run for the elections at the very last moment, claimed that the AL had coerced its party to do so to provide a semblance of fair competition [*The Business Standard* 2024, 1 November]. Similar allegations were advanced regarding a set of new parties mostly comprising of former BNP politicians and popularly known as «King's Parties»,³ who would have been put up by state intelligence for the purpose of the 2024 elections. According to Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), the election was neither free nor inclusive [*The Business Standard* 2024, 17 January]. Similar to 2014 and 2018, results favourable to the incumbent party were ensured through connivance by the bureaucracy and law enforcement agencies [Riaz 2024, 18 January]. AL alone managed to secure 223 parliamentary seats, while independent candidates, who were primarily AL-affiliated, won 62 seats. JP won only 11 seats, while Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, Bangladesh Workers Party and Bangladesh Kalyan Party one seat each [Riaz 2024, 18 January]. The then-Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Habibul Awal declared that the January general election had been successful although not fully participatory [*The Business Standard* 2024, 18 January]. In a press briefing, the CEC claimed that the voter turnout had been 28% but soon after increased the figure to 40%, apparently prodded by his colleagues, thus causing controversy [Riaz 2024, 11 January]. Amid widespread domestic and international criticism,

2. A coalition of various minor parties headed by well-known public figures. It did not include BNP and JeI but similarly boycotted the elections.

3. The idea behind the name was that the party leader is the party itself. The so-called King's Parties emerged from the effort of the AL to have well-known ex-BNP leaders forming new political parties running for the elections, so to give an appearance of competitiveness to the latter.

in January 2024 Hasina was sworn in as Bangladesh's PM for the fourth consecutive time [*Daily Star* 2024, 12 January].

2.2. *From new anti-quota protests to the Monsoon Revolution*⁴

In the summer of 2024, new protests emerged, this time in relation to the «quota system» regulating public employment in the country. Based on the quota system, more than 50% of available jobs are reserved for vulnerable categories: women 10%; ethnic minorities 5%; native of underdeveloped areas 10%; children and grandchildren of independence war freedom fighters 30% [Prakash 2024, 25 July]. These quotas had already been object of controversy: in 2018, a massive student protest forced the AL Government to take the decision of eliminating them. However, on 5 June 2024, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh overturned the Government's decision, practically reinstalling the quota system. This sparked a new wave of protests among students. These protests saw the participation of both female and male students in large numbers. Initially they involved university students, but since mid-July other students as well. In particular, protesters alleged that the 10% quota for underdeveloped areas were unnecessary more than 50 years after Bangladesh's independence, and that the 30% quota for children/grandchildren of 1971 war veterans was exploited by the AL Government to fill the high bureaucracy with party loyalists. Although Bangladesh has figured among the world's fastest-growing economies for a decade, the uneven character of economic growth and ensuing inequality became cause of frustration within the country, especially among young adults. Around 18 million young Bangladeshis are unemployed, and university graduates face more difficulty in securing a job compared to less educated peers [Ethirajan & Ritchie 2024, 6 August]. The problem of jobless growth is not unique to Bangladesh but common across South Asia: it has emerged as a key political issue in India as well [Maiorano and Khattri 2024, pp. 260-271]. Meanwhile, also university teachers who had been enrolled on a new national pay scheme took to the streets, adding to the tension which had built up in public universities [Curtis 2025, 23 January].

Tension kept rising in July. Student protests – the student front had organized under the leadership of the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement (ADSM) – had been non-violent so far. The AL tried repeatedly to discredit their cause, first by framing it as an anti-national endeavour – for example, by referring to the students as *razakars*, a term used for those who sided with West Pakistan against Bangladeshi independence in 1971. Later on, in August, it tried to depict the protesting students as a proxy of Islamic extremists, thus proceeding to ban JeI and its student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir [Foyez 2024, 1 August].

4. Also referred to as July Revolution, July Uprising, Gen Z Revolution.

On 15 July 2024, a peaceful protest by Dhaka University students met with violent attacks perpetrated by non-identified individuals. Similar episodes were recorded across the country, featuring as attackers the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), a student union affiliated with AL [New Age 2024, 16 July]. Another threshold moment was the killing of Aby Sayed, a 25-years old Rangpur Begum Rokeya University student whom the police shot dead from a distance of merely 15 metres, the whole event captured on video and circulated widely across media. The government gave the police a «shoot-on-sight» order to quell protests, deployed the Army and shut down internet access for 10 days [Allen 2024, 2 August]. The police conducted nighttime raids to arrest those involved in the student protests. Amid this climate, on 19 July, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, expressed deep concern and called for the violence to end and respect for international human rights standards – a plea he reiterated on 4 August. Meanwhile, on 21 July, the Supreme Court scrapped most of the quotas, rendering the selection for 93% of the government jobs merit-based. Initially the BNP and other opposition parties and coalitions declared solidarity with those protesting against the quota system reforms but denied to have any direct role in the protests. However, law enforcement agencies arrested opposition leaders belonging to the BNP and other parties based on their alleged involvement in violence related to the quota movement [New Age 2024, 22 July]. In September 2024, BNP secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir claimed that at least 422 people affiliated with the BNP had died while being involved in the July-August uprising [ProthomAlo 2024, 15 September].

The tipping point of the uprising came on 3-5 August. On 3 August, students and crowds from Dhaka and nearby areas started gathering in the Central Shaheed Minar in the capital city, calling for the Government's resignation [Abbas 2024, 3 August]. A simultaneous press release by the Chief of Army Staff, General Waker-Uz-Zaman, signalled that the Army distanced itself from the ongoing crackdown against protesters carried out by the Government through the police, thus further boosting the protesters' resolution. The ADSM announced a «Long March to Dhaka» to take place the next day, 4 August, to fulfil the resignation demand. On 5 August, Hasina fled to India⁵ on a helicopter, prompting General Waker-Uz-Zaman to take charge, gather with various political parties, and brief the nation about the sudden regime change. In this way, a number of processes which had unravelled in Bangladesh for more than a decade – steadily growing discontent against AL's authoritarian policies, pervasive political polarization, and youth's status anxiety amid widespread unemployment – all coalesced into the end Hasina's AL rule, which had lasted uninterrupted since 2009.

5. Whether Hasina's move qualified or not as an official resignation was object of controversy.

2.3. *The Yunus Interim Government*

After Hasina was overthrown, Bangladeshi President Mohammed Shahabuddin ordered the release of BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia, jailed in 2018 and in house arrest since 2020 [*Dhaka Tribune* 2024, 6 August].⁶ He also dissolved the Parliament, leaving the country without a government for two days [*BBC* 2024, 6 August]. On 8 August, in line with the request vocally advanced by the student front, Muhammad Yunus formed an interim government in the role of Chief Adviser while President Shahabuddin administered his oath. The Interim Government soon received widespread criticism because most cabinet members (advisers) had little political experience, including Chief Adviser Yunus and members of the student front who had raised to the rank of advisers. Others alleged that the Government was too small – although its members doubled since it first took office. The new government was faced with two immediate challenges. One was maintaining law and order, which had been problematic for months but further deteriorated after the regime fell, as the police was unable to function due to low morale while across the country mobs attacked police stations in retaliation to police brutality. According to Bangladesh Police Headquarters, 44 police personnel were killed during the violence [*BdNews24* 2024, 19 August]. The situation slowly improved, but had not yet returned to normalcy at the time of writing (early 2025). Data by the Bangladesh Police showed that in the four months following the advent of the Interim Government across Bangladesh there was a surge in criminal activities, including murders, robberies, and kidnappings [*Dhaka Tribune* 2025, 10 January]. The deteriorating law and order situation impacted the country's prisons as well. After the government fell, at least 2,241 inmates, including 88 on death row, managed to escape and a large number of them were yet to be found as of late 2024 [Bhattacharjee & Khan 2024, 11 September]. A number of top inmates condemned for terror crimes were released on bail and became again active [*ProthomAlo* 2024, 11 October]. Faced with this law-and-order crisis, the Army stepped in, coordinating with law enforcement agencies – the police, the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), the Rapid Battalion (RAB). Besides, since September, the Army's commissioned officers were authorized by the Interim Government to act as executive magistrates. Even months after the regime change, agitations did not abate. The streets of Dhaka became theatre to recurring protests by garment workers, rickshaw drivers, students, doctors, paramedics, railway staff, and retired police personnel, each seeking their specific demands.

6. It is widely maintained that the corruption case based on which Zia was jailed was fabricated by the AL Government to weaken the BNP, its main political opposition. Hasina and Zia and their parties are divided by competition lasted a lifetime. Later on in August the Interim Government lifted the ban against Jel.

The other urgent problem to be tackled was keeping the price of basic food commodities (potatoes, edible oil, sugar, and onions) at bay. Their rise made the cost of life unbearable for middle-lower classes. Prices remained high despite intervention, causing further criticism against the Interim Government, until they started dropping in mid-December [Halder 2024, 15 November].

Another challenge was determining the number of casualties and ensuring proper treatment and support for those who had been injured or lost a family member in the Revolution. These measures acquired also political relevance since the protesters, especially the student front, had emerged as a key political stakeholder. The Government pledged that those injured would receive free lifetime care at government hospitals. It also established the *July Shaheed Smriti Foundation* to deliver financial support to families of injured people and martyrs of the Revolution [*The Daily Star* 2024, 15 November].

The violence which accompanied the regime change claimed victims on both sides of the political divide. Expectedly, following the downfall of the AL government, people and places associated with the party, including the party office and leaders' residences and businesses, were targeted by violent mobs [*The Daily Star* 2024, 5 August]. These attacks continued into early 2025, when more AL leaders' houses were smashed and torched, including Hasina's family home [*The Daily Star* 2025, 6 February].

In the history of Bangladeshi politics, attacks against religious minorities have often accompanied power transitions [Guhathakurta 2016]. In the first days after the fall of Hasina, some attacks on Hindus took place in various locations while the police was not operational. As a consequence, communal and minority violence emerged as yet another issue triggered by the political churning of July-August. International and Indian media reported of various attacks against Hindu individuals and places of worship from across the country: according to the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council there were more than 2,000 attacks on Hindus between 4 August and the year-end [*Voice of America* 2024, 1 November]. These events were explained as a manifestation of anti-India sentiment due to the fact that Hasina had fled to India. On multiple occasions, the Indian Government raised concerns about the status of minority – including Hindus – in Bangladesh and called upon the Interim Government to ensure their protection [Government of India 2024, 19 December]. Sheikh Hasina, exiled in India, attempted to extract political gains from this situation by accusing Yunus of carrying out a genocide against religious minorities and heading a fascist regime [*The Tribune* 2024, 10 December]. However, others claimed that the seemingly communal violence was actually politically motivated, as the targets had been associated with the AL regime. Some Bangladeshi public figures like Chief Adviser's Press Secretary Shafiqul Alam claimed that Bangladesh is portrayed unfairly in international media

[*Dhaka Tribune* 2024, 7 December]. Also the BBC fact-checking report found that most Hindu temple attacks were false news [Wakefield & Menon 2024, 18 August]. It is not unlikely that India, traditionally close to Hasina's Government, was behind the spreading of fake news with a view to discredit the regime change: according to the Bangladeshi fact-checking initiative *Rumor Scanner*, around 72% of social media sites spreading misinformation about Bangladesh are from India [ProthomAlo 2024, 11 December]. In October 2024, the peaceful celebration of Durga Puja, the main religious festival for Bengali Hindus, sent a reassuring message regarding the status of religious harmony in the country.

The assumption underlying the working of the Interim Government was that national and economic rebuilding had to be preceded by a comprehensive, careful and impartial house-cleaning. In the interest of peace and economic sustainability, each deal and transaction made by the AL Government had to be subject to scrutiny and justice against crimes perpetrated under the regime had to be delivered. To this purpose, the Government formed over 15 reform commissions, the six major ones concerning the Constitution, the electoral system, the police, the judiciary, public administration, and corruption. The *National Consensus Commission*, chaired by Yunus himself, intended to negotiate with political parties and other relevant stakeholders the reform agenda based on their recommendations. Importantly, the to-be-set agenda included the timeline of the next national election, whose date had not been set yet as of late 2024. In his address to the nation on Victory Day (16 December) 2024, Yunus declared that polls were likely to be held in late 2025 in case of minimal reforms, or in mid-2026 in case of more substantial ones. As a consequence, the nature of the reforms and the elections timeline remained a major cause of debate among parties and students, who in the meantime decided to form a new political party.⁷

Among the recent past which the Interim Government subjected to careful scrutiny through the appointment of ad-hoc commissions, there are also the enforced disappearances of opposition politicians, activists, journalists, and intellectuals which took place in AL-ruled Bangladesh since 2009. Upon the invitation of the Interim Government, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) commenced an independent fact-finding investigation on human rights violations during July and August 2024. The final OHCHR report published in February 2025 stated that the former Bangladeshi Government, security and intelligence services, along with groups affiliated with AL, had been involved in serious human rights violations, and estimated that as many as 1,400 people could have been killed between 1 July and 15 August in relation to

7. ADSM and Jatiya Nagorik Committee (the latter being a platform constituted by young professionals) committed to launch a political party by the end of February 2025.

those [OHCHR 2025, 12 February]. In October 2024 and again in January 2025, Bangladesh's International Criminal Tribunal (ICT) issued an arrest warrant against Hasina's alleged involvement in «crimes against humanity» during July-August 2024 [*The Business Standard* 2025, 6 January]. Many of Hasina's ex-ministers ended behind bars facing trials.

3. *The economic situation*

3.1. *Macroeconomic instability and spiking inflation*

In 2023 the Bangladeshi economy was faced by various challenges. Some among them – like the unhealthy state of loans across the banking sector and a looming balance of payment crisis – derived from previous crises and structural vulnerabilities of the country's economy. Due to its limited diversification, Bangladesh long relied on remittances and garment exports for its foreign reserves, thus remaining highly susceptible to foreign exchange crises. In 2023, Russia's war in Ukraine caused an increase in energy and food prices and disrupted supply chains and export demands. Consequently, Bangladesh's difficult post-pandemic recovery was halted and its balance of payment deficit widened. To avoid further reduction in foreign exchange reserves, the Government of Bangladesh intervened by delaying foreign currency payments by state-owned companies and subjecting the repatriation of fund by foreign businesses active in the country to approval by the Bangladesh Bank. Additionally, in February 2023, it obtained from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) US\$ 3.7 billion loans (US\$ 3.3 billion under the *Extended Credit Facility/Extended Fund Facility* and US\$ 1.4 billion under the *Resilience and Sustainability Facility*, to be disbursed over 42 months), aimed at supporting the country's macroeconomic stability and overall economic recovery [IMF 2023, 12 December].⁸

Furthermore, in 2023 the value of non-performing loans across the banking sector kept rising, casting further doubts on the regulatory role played by the Bangladesh Bank [*Dhaka Tribune* 2024, 13 February]. The unhealthy state of credit in the country and widespread nature of untenable practices had already caused indignation and concern in 2022, brought to surface in a large «loan scandal» revolving around the Islami bank [Tierl 2023, p. 288]. An enquiry into Bangladesh economy later promoted by the Interim Government would reveal banking as the country's most corrupt sector (more on this below).

8. Following the ousting of Hasina, the IMF has confirmed commitment to the loans previously pledged and partially disbursed [*Devdiscourse News* 2024, 6 August].

3.2. *Record dengue epidemic: the emerging health implications of climate change*

Between 2022 and 2023, a large dengue⁹ outbreak occurred, with Dhaka and Chittagong – the most urbanized and densely populated areas of the country – emerging as hotspots [Subarna and al-Saiyan 2024]. This was the worst Bangladeshi outbreak on record by both extension and number of casualties, reaching its peak in 2023 and then extending into 2024 (although with lower infection and mortality rates) [Hasan *et al.* 2025]. While unprecedented in its might, the epidemic was linked to a threat well-known to Bangladesh: climate change. It was found that shifting monsoon patterns and hotter temperatures, along with uncontrolled urbanization, supported mosquito breeding, contributing to determine timing and severity of this outbreak. Bangladesh is noted as one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change. While coastal erosion, freshwater salinization, and «climate migration» are widely known consequences of climate change [‘Climate Risk Profile: Bangladesh’ 2024], the dengue crisis drew attention to its serious health implications. It also exposed the unpreparedness of the national health system, which the Covid-19 pandemic had already put under strain, and deep disparities among Bangladeshis accessing health services [Hasan *et al.* 2025].

3.3. *Trade*

The last year of Hasina’s tenure recorded some positive developments in terms of international trade. Bangladesh and India pledged to commence the negotiations for the *Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement* (CEPA) and operationalize two Special Economic Zones (SEZs) «offered by Bangladesh to India in Mongla and Mirsharai» [Government of India 2024, 22 June]. This occurred in June 2024, during Hasina’s visit to New Delhi. It remains to be seen whether the pledges will find prompt implementation, also in light of the political upheavals which occurred in the months following the declaration. In fact, in October 2024, the Interim Government expressed interest in joining the China-led *Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership* (RCEP) [The Daily Star 2024, 17 October]. Bangladesh would benefit from mechanisms such as CEPA and RCEP while coping with the loss of privileges attached to Least Developed Country (LDC) status, which it will leave behind upon its 2026 graduation. The 2024 WTO Ministerial Conference (March, Abu Dhabi), however, deliberated for Bangladesh to continue enjoying duty benefits for 3 more years after graduation [The Daily Star 2024, 3 March]. Bangladesh remained involved in negotiations with the EU to obtain preferential market access under the EU’s Generalized

9. Dengue is a viral fever transmitted by mosquito bite common in tropical and subtropical climates.

System of Preferences Plus (GSP+) program, which requires fulfilment of environmental and labour sustainability conditions and is the second-best preferential tier offered by the EU to vulnerable trading partners after the one currently enjoyed by Bangladesh [‘Bangladeshi Exports to the European Union’ 2024, August]. Ready-made garments continued dominating Bangladeshi exports – accounting for a whopping 82% of the country’s export revenue in 2022/23-2023/24 – including exports to the EU [‘Export Performance’ 2024]. Besides, Bangladesh surpassed China for the first time as Europe’s top knitwear supplier [*The Daily Star* 2023, 18 December].

However, while remaining the pillar of Bangladesh’s exports and GDP, the garment sector remained also lacking in reforms and workers’ rights protection. In November 2023, the Government of Bangladesh (Bangladesh Labour and Employment Ministry) announced a raise in the monthly minimum wage of garment factory workers to BD₹ 12,500 (about US\$ 104; it was BD₹ 8,000 since 2018) [Kashyap 2024, 16 November]. The amount was less than half of what the unions asked for enabling workers cope with spiking inflation, which reached 9.9% in 2023 according to the World Bank [‘Inflation data: Bangladesh’ 2024]. In July 2024, protesting workers incurred in police violence and black-listing, suffering continued violation of their labour rights [Abdulla 2024, 30 July].

3.4. *An emerging counter-narrative to Bangladesh’s «success story»*

For many years, the ever expanding and export-driven ready-made garment (RMG) industry as well as large infrastructural projects most often realized through foreign aid constituted the pillars of the mainstream narrative surrounding the Bangladeshi nation, its development trajectory, and its leadership emanating from the ruling AL. This narrative about Bangladesh’s success story was effectively mainstreamed across policy circles, including internationally. For example, while the AL was still in power, the year 2023 recorded further progress in a number of infrastructure projects. Among them, there was the tunnel under the Karnaphuli river named after «father of the nation»¹⁰ and Hasina’s father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, built on loan by a Chinese company and inaugurated by the PM in October. Undoubtedly, the tunnel had potential to significantly advance connectivity for both the Chattogram hub (located to its north) and southern areas connected to it, already home to various EPZs and industrial zones, and for Bangladesh’s overall links with neighbouring countries through the Asian Highway

10. Even the status of Mujibur Rahman as «father of the nation» could not escape the political churning ignited by the Monsoon Revolution. On 5 February 2025, as a reaction to a message broadcasted by Hasina from exile, mobs vandalized, bulldozed, and set fire to Mujibur’s residence, where he was assassinated in 1975. [Laskar 2025, 6 February]

Network¹¹ [Suman 2023, 28 October]. At the same time, like in the case of similar «mega-projects» previously pursued, its completion was unanimously saluted by both the Government of Bangladesh and the national press as yet another milestone in Bangladesh's development success story under the AL leadership, thus serving to support the party's legitimacy. This was true of other projects as well. Among them there was also the first segment of the Dhaka Elevated Expressway, Bangladesh's first expressway promising to ease the capital's notorious traffic problem, which was opened to traffic in September 2023, inaugurated by PM Hasina [*The Daily Star* 2023, 2 September]. Developments were also recorded in Rooppur, a locality 160 kms north-west of Dhaka were Bangladesh' first nuclear power plant was under construction, built by Russia's state-owned Rosatom with participation of Indian firms through a 90% Russian loan. Following the sanctions imposed on Russia as a consequence of its war in Ukraine, the Russian foreign minister visited Dhaka in September 2023 to confirm commitment to the completion of the project [Bhattacharjee 2024, 23 December] and in October Bangladesh received from Russia the first uranium shipment for the plant [*Aljazeera* 2023, 6 October].

However, after Hasina's ousting, the narrative around AL's development delivery – including through infrastructure mega-projects like the abovementioned – was subject for the first time to serious scrutiny through inquiries conducted by the commissions appointed by the Interim Government. For example, in December 2024, the *Anti-Corruption Commission* commenced an investigation into alleged embezzlement of US\$ 5 billion by Hasina and her family members in relation to the mentioned Rooppur power plant, following allegations of corruption advanced by various politicians [*Business Standard* 2024, 24 December]. Earlier in December, the White Paper Committee headed by eminent Bangladeshi economist Debapriya Bhattacharya released the draft *White Paper State of the Bangladesh Economy: Dissection of a Development Narrative*. The report denounced the pervasiveness of crony capitalism under the AL and the manipulated nature of data used by the party across decades to buttress Bangladesh's «development success story». Banking, infrastructure, energy, and information technology were exposed as the country's most corrupt sectors. The report also called for the Interim Government to declare its plans and account for its activities with clarity [Mavis 2024, 2 December].

In addition to subjecting agreements and projects undertaken by the AL Governments to scrutiny, the Interim Government targeted macro-economic stability, including galloping inflation. It also reorganized the Board of Directors of Bangladesh Bank and restructured those of various

11. The Asian Highway Network or Great Asian Highway is a project aiming to boost connectivity in Asia via the development of the continent's highway network. The Asian Highway Network partners are Asian countries and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

state-owned banks. Nonetheless, due to the volatile circumstances of its appointment, the short tenure invested upon it, and the challenge of keeping together a diverse set of political partners, the Yunus Government received widespread criticism, especially for its inability to deal with continuing turmoil in the garment sector and the rising cost of living weighting heavy on middle and lower classes.

4. *Foreign relations*

4.1. *Bangladesh-US relations*

Bangladesh's relations with the US experienced ups and downs under Hasina's last premiership, but improved following its sudden end. The US remained the country's single largest export market, its main FDI source, and a significant development partner. Several visits by American high-level delegations underscored Bangladesh's geopolitical significance in the Indo-Pacific region. However, due to democratic backsliding, in 2023 Bangladesh was excluded from Biden's *Summit for Democracy* for the second time [The Daily Star 2023, 15 February]. In the same year, the US imposed visa restrictions on Bangladeshi citizens implicated in violation of democratic rights in the run up to the 2024 elections [Mahmud 2023, 23 September]. Also, in government circles there were speculations that the US may use its *Presidential Memorandum on Advancing Worker Empowerment, Rights, and High Labor Standards Globally* released on 16 November 2023 by the Biden administration to interfere in Bangladeshi domestic politics [BSS News 2023, 30 November]. Furthermore, then-PM Hasina's allegation that the US planned to take over St Martin Island (belonging to Bangladesh), an allegation denied by the US Government, contributed to increase bilateral tensions. After her ousting, Hasina blamed her fall on the US, claiming she could have remained in power if she had handed over St Martin Island and the Bay of Bengal to America [Dhaka Tribune 2024, 11 August]. Dhaka's concerns and caution vis-à-vis Washington were confirmed by its decision not to sign the *Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement* (ACSA) and the *General Security of Military Information Agreement* (GSOMIA) with the US prior to the January 2024 elections [ProthomAlo 2023, 10 August].

US involvement in the Bangladesh election issue confirmed that Washington had a clear interest in political stability in South Asia, a key component of the broader Indo-Pacific macro-region. This was evident in US Ambassador Peter Haas' active engagement with multiple stakeholders in relation to the Bangladesh elections, including the Bangladesh Election Commission. At the same time, US involvement revealed certain limitations in US-India cooperation in the Indian Ocean region. The high-level 2+2 *Ministerial Dialogue* (November 2024) reflected that Washington and New Delhi had different approaches to the political turmoil in connection to

the 2024 Bangladesh polls [Sajen 2024, 13 November]. US commitment to promote free and fair elections in the country did not go as far as to bypass India, a regional ally for the US with a shared ambition to counter China in South Asia.

Nevertheless, these difficulties did not reflect on Bangladesh-US dialogues, which went on, as demonstrated by the 7th US-Bangladesh *Trade & Investment Cooperation Forum Agreement* (TICFA) Council meeting and the 9th *Bangladesh-US Security Dialogue* (both in September 2023).

Despite concerns over violation of democratic rights voiced in the run up to the January 2024 polls, following elections Biden confirmed America's commitment to Bangladesh as an economic and strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific [*Dhaka Tribune* 2024, 4 February]. Yet another turn of events occurred in May 2024, when the US imposed sanctions on former Bangladesh Army Chief General (ret'd) Aziz Ahmed and his family for corruption and criminal activities in Bangladesh under Section 7031(c) of the annual Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act [*The Daily Star* 24, 22 May].

Bilateral relations improved following the advent of the Yunus-led Government. Yunus declared he looked forward to receiving US support to rebuild Bangladesh and implement reforms [*The Daily Star* 2024, 15 September]. In a meeting with Yunus on the side of the UN General Assembly in New York, Biden committed to fully support the new executive [*Dhaka Tribune* 2024, 24 September]. Donald Trump's return to the White House in January 2025 did not appear to usher major changes for bilateral relations. The Interim Government welcomed Trump as the new US president and expressed its keenness to work together [*The Daily Star* 2025, 20 January].

4.2. Bangladesh-China relations

Throughout the political upheavals of 2023-2024, Bangladesh-China relations remained stable and positive, eased by China's non-interference in partners' domestic affairs, which allows Beijing to promptly adapt to changes of political leadership [Hossain 2024, 9 October]. China was confirmed as Bangladesh's largest trading partner (imports to Bangladesh) for the 12th year in a row, and its key weapon supplier (72%) [Yuan 2024, 16 August]. However, trade imbalance remained a concern as Bangladesh export accounted for less than 3% of the US\$ 25 billion China-Bangladesh trade [Palma 2024, 10 July]. China signalled its willingness to establish an FTA with Bangladesh by 2026 [*The Financial Express* 2023, 9 November]. In 2023 and 2024, Sheikh Hasina and Xi Jinping had two bilateral meetings, one on the sides of the 15th BRICS Summit in August 2023, and another during Bangladesh's PM visit to China in July 2024, proof to stable relations entertained during the AL era.

Bangladesh remained actively involved in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is a framework launched by the Chinese government

in 2013 whereby China partners with governments and international organisations across the world to promote through loans and joint ventures large development projects, primarily connectivity and energy infrastructure [Marzano and Tieri 2022; Torri 2024, pp. XVI-XX]. The BRI has been object of international scrutiny in relation to debt sustainability and in Bangladesh it also featured prominently in AL's development goals agenda, of which infrastructural mega-projects constituted the milestones [Tieri 2022]. The Padma Bridge Rail Link Project was initially set for completion in June 2024 but later the timeline was extended to June 2025 [Ahmed 2024, 5 October]. Since the Interim Government took office the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel came under serious criticism as the tunnel was making a loss of over BDT 27 lakhs a day [Suman & Byron 2024, 27 October]. Towards the end of Hasina's premiership, Bangladesh had difficulties balancing India and China, particularly in relation to the Teesta River project. While both powers wanted to execute the Teesta's comprehensive management and restoration, Hasina appeared to prefer India over China. Nonetheless, in July 2024, Dhaka and Beijing established a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership [Government of Bangladesh 2024, 11 July].

Since the Interim Government took over, Dhaka-Beijing relations proved very positive. In August 2024, while meeting the Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh, Yunus invited China to relocate solar panel factories to Bangladesh and auspicated closer economic relations between the two countries [*The Business Standard* 2024, 25 August]. In September 2024, the Government also requested China to lower the interest rates on existing Chinese loans from 2 or 3% to 1%, and to extend the 20-years repayment period to 30 years [Bayron & Habib 2024, 13 September]. A key intervention by the Interim Government was to subject all deals previously closed by the AL to review, including foreign-funded projects, so to discontinue those deemed unnecessary or unfeasible [Saif 2024, 12 September]. In September 2024, China sent a medical team to Dhaka to treat individuals injured during the July-August uprising as a symbol of enduring friendship between the two countries [Hasib 2024, 22 September]. Beijing's interest to maintain stable links with Dhaka after the AL downfall was confirmed when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called on Yunus on the sides of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York and expressed a desire to strengthen commercial and economic relations.

4.3. *Bangladesh-India relations*

Overall, relations with India saw a shift from the AL's openly pro-India policy to a more cautious engagement by the Interim Government. In 2023, Bangladesh and India decided to use the Indian rupee to carry out bilateral trade transactions to bypass the US dollar [Uddin 2023, 9 July]. However, trading in Indian currency did not perform according to expectations [Hasan 2024, 28 February]. Bangladesh also started to allow India to use

the Chattogram and Mongla ports for transit and cargo transshipment based on the *Agreement on the use of Chattogram and Mongla Ports for Movement of Goods to and from India* signed in 2018 [Laskar 2023, 26 April]. Hasina's visit to India in June 2024 saw the signing of a railway connectivity MoU based on which the two countries would use one another's railways to operate passenger and freight trains to boost cross-border connectivity with Nepal and Bhutan [The Daily Star 2024, 29 June]. The positive state of bilateral relations was visible when India invited Hasina as a guest at the G-20 summit held in New Delhi in September 2023. Later on, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar cited India-Bangladesh relations as exemplary [Hasib 2023, 17 December]. In turn, Bangladesh publicly took India's side when the latter's relations with Canada underwent turmoil in relation to the killing on Canadian soil of Canadian citizen and Khalistani advocate Hardeep Singh Nijjar, in which Indian intelligence was allegedly implicated [Dhaka Tribune 2023, 29 September]. According to Obaidul Quader, former minister of road transport and bridges of Bangladesh, India stood by the AL during Bangladesh's January 2024 elections [Bhattacharjee 2024, 28 January]. However, since the national election of January 2024, the «India Out» campaign calling for a boycott of India-made products – constituting a large sections of consumer goods in Bangladesh – gained momentum in the country [Voice of America 2024, 21 February].

Since Hasina fled to India, a major shift occurred in Dhaka-New Delhi relations. The main element of friction was Hasina's exile itself, regarding which Dhaka handed over to Delhi a formal request for extradition in December 2024. Furthermore, the Interim Government took a stronger stand regarding the long-standing problem of border killings, i.e. killings occurring on the Indo-Bangladeshi border at the hands of Indian and Bangladeshi border patrols, which see Bangladeshi victims outnumbering Indian ones. Bangladeshi Home Adviser Lt Gen (retd) Jahangir Alam Chowdhury condemned the approach to the border pursued during the AL rule as too accommodating and instructed the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) «not to show back at the border», i.e. to react resolutely to all excesses by India's Border Security Force (BSF) [Daily Observer 2024, 8 September]. According to Bangladeshi human rights NGO Odhikar, 588 Bangladeshis were killed along the border between 2009 and 2024 [Dhaka Tribune 2025, 7 January].

The deterioration in bilateral relations was evident in various aspects. It halted the construction of a diesel pipeline extension under the India-Bangladesh Friendship pipeline [The Business Standard 2024, 2 September] as well as of other road and rails projects [The Daily Star 2024, 25 September]. However, the Interim Government declared its intention to continue projects undertaken under Indian lines of credit (LoC) [The Daily Star 2024, 11 September]. India, on the other hand, stopped issuing visas for Bangladeshi citizens except for medical or emergency reasons [Dhaka Tribune 2023, 30 September]. Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain called for re-

viewing all active MoUs with India to reassess Bangladesh's interest, arguing that the so-called golden era of Bangladesh-India relations had involved just the two Governments and not the people of the two countries [*The Financial Express* 2024, 2 September]. In September 2024, Dhaka strongly protested after Indian Home Minister Amit Shah commented that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – India's ruling party, to whom Shah belonged – would free Jharkhand (an eastern Indian state) from Rohingya and Bangladeshi infiltrators and hang them [*The Business Standard* 2024, 23 September]. All these developments prompted leading Bangladeshi political analyst Shafqat Munir to argue that in the aftermath of the regime change India failed to understand Bangladesh's new reality [Munir 2024, 9 September]. However, during a meeting occurred in August 2024 between India's High Commissioner to Bangladesh Pranay Verma and Bangladesh's Chief Adviser Yunus, and in another meeting between Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar and Bangladeshi Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain in occasion of the UNGA in September, the Indian side expressed interest in maintaining relations cordial despite differences. In December 2024, Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri's day-long visit to Dhaka, which included meetings with the Chief Adviser and top foreign affairs figures, served to ease some of the tension which had developed between the two governments.

4.4. *Bangladesh-Myanmar relations*

Two issues continued dominating Bangladesh's relations with Myanmar: the civil war unfolding between Myanmar's junta and the Arakan Army in Myanmar's Rakhine State on the one hand, and the Rohingya refugee crisis on the other. The civil war in Myanmar not only hindered the Rohingya repatriation process but also presented the risk of the conflict spilling over into Bangladesh [Fumagalli 2024]. In March 2023, a government delegation from Myanmar visited the Rohingya camp in Cox's Bazar under the bilateral pilot project underway, to verify returnees who had crossed the border into Bangladesh and then stayed over as a refugee [*Aljazeera* 2023, 15 March]. Under this pilot project, around 12,000 Rohingyas were supposed to be repatriated in 2023. However, cyclone Hamoon (October 2023) and the Myanmar civil war disrupted the process [Palma & Molla 2024, 29 January]. The civil war gave rise to tensions along the border in Naikhongchhari upazila of Bandarban district and Ukhiya upazila in Cox's Bazar district, spreading fear among Bangladeshi locals. Also, gunfire from Myanmar reached Bangladeshi boats, seriously disrupting communications between Teknaf upazila and Saint Martin Island in Bangladesh. Amid fighting in the Rakhine State, Myanmar's Border Guard Police (BGP), Army, and immigration officials crossed the border to take shelter in Bangladesh on numerous occasions. The recent influx of another 80,000 Rohingyas since August 2024 seeking shelter in Bangladesh caused concern to the Bangladeshi Government, as the country already hosted over one million Rohing-

ya refugees, whose exodus begun in 1978 and intensified since 2017 [*The Daily Star* 2025, 27 January]. Dhaka called upon Naypyidaw to ensure that its internal conflict does not reverberate onto Bangladesh [*The Daily Star* 2024, 10 November]. Since the Arakan Army took control of 271-kilometres border on the Myanmar side, the Bangladesh Home Adviser declared that Dhaka was continuing communication with both the Myanmar Government and the Arakan Army.

4.5. *Bangladesh's regional diplomacy*¹²

Bangladesh continued seeing its «regional diplomacy» in the broader Indo-Pacific region as an important tool to navigate power competition. In April 2023, Dhaka announced its 15-points Indo-Pacific outlook, emphasizing its commitment to a free, open, peaceful, secure, and inclusive Indo-Pacific and its impartiality vis-à-vis existing geopolitical tussles [*Prothom-Alo* 2023, 25 April]. However, experts considered Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific outlook to lack depth [Muniruzzaman 2023, 28 April].

Japan has been an important extra-regional partner in Bangladesh's diplomacy during both the Hasina regime and the Interim Government. Hasina's visit to Japan in early 2023 boosted cooperation in numerous areas such as agriculture, metro-rail, industrial up-gradation, ship-recycling, customs, intellectual property, defence, ICT and cyber security [*New Age* 2023, 9 May]. Japan also identified Bangladesh as one of the four countries with whom to deepen military ties under the Official Security Assistance (OSA) [Hasib 2023, 26 August]. After the regime change in Bangladesh, Japan remained a committed partner [*The Daily Star* 2024, 20 August]. The Interim Government's Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ec-nec), tasked with the review of large infrastructural projects, in relation to the Matarbari deep-sea port expressed a preference for a partnership with Japan rather than India or China, in a clear attempt to avoid taking sides in the context of Sino-Indian geopolitical competition in the Bay of Bengal.

In May 2023, then-Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen saw closer cooperation with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as beneficial to Bangladeshi interests [*The Business Standard* 2023, 25 May]. Similarly, Yunus placed emphasis on bolstering ties with South Asian countries like Nepal, Maldives, Pakistan, and Bhutan and on reviving the SAARC, for which Bangladesh, given its position, could serve as a bridge to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) [*Dhaka Tribune* 2024, 28 August]. The Interim Government defined the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) as an

12. In Bangladesh, the concept of «regional diplomacy» includes regional (South Asian) countries, regional groupings (e.g. the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)), and extra-regional countries located immediately beyond the boundaries of South Asia, such as Malaysia and the Gulf countries.

important mechanism for addressing environmental, climate, and youth issues at the regional level [*New Age* 2024, 28 October]. A landmark moments of Bangladesh's regional diplomacy occurred when United Arab Emirates President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, upon request of Yunus, pardoned 57 Bangladeshi nationals who had been jailed for protesting against the AL Government during the July-August uprising while in the Gulf country, where political protests are illegal [*Dhaka Tribune* 2024, 3 September]. Bangladesh also received Malaysia's full support for national reforms called for by the Yunus Government during Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's short visit to Dhaka in October 2024 [*BdNews24* 2024, 5 October].

5. Conclusion

Of all the events which took place in relation to Bangladesh's domestic, economic, and foreign policy affairs in the years under review, the political upheavals of 2023 which then culminated in the 2024 Monsoon Revolution towered above all for their significance. Their implications can hardly be overstated: with Hasina's fleeing in exile and the formation of the Interim Government headed by Yunus, one of the many intellectuals and policy makers persecuted by the AL regime, a political phase in the history of the country ended and another one opened to the possibility of democratic restoration, fight against rampant corruption, and more equitable growth. Post-Revolution Bangladesh entered into this new phase with much of its population's hearts filled with hope and counting of widespread international support. At the same time, many challenges lied ahead. The new Government was faced with the difficult task of keeping morale and consensus high after having inherited a dire economic situation and the task of juggling a volatile political coalition. On the other hand, the Bangladeshi people and especially the youth who was at the forefront of the Revolution were faced with the challenge to tame tendencies to political polarization and extremism, so inherent to contemporary Bangladeshi political culture, and so dangerous for its prospects of peace and prosperity.

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INDIA 2024: AUTHORITARIANISM CHECKED, THEN REASSERTED

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To understand how India's internal politics changed in 2024, it is necessary to consider diverse topics. They include the main aspects of the authoritarian system that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had created during a decade in power, and the surprising setback that he faced at the national election in April-May despite huge unfair advantages over rival parties. His loss of a parliamentary majority at that election led some to expect that he would moderate his drive for autocratic rule and religious polarization, but that did not happen. Aspects of the economy that affected politics also mattered: economic growth, widening inequality and persistent poverty, the government's surprisingly unhelpful treatment of the middle classes, and its welfare provisions. India under Modi suffered deeply embarrassing downgrades to dismal places in numerous international rankings. Its efforts to address this problem bore little fruit. A fundamental social change – the refusal of so called «lower» castes to accept caste hierarchies – had long been seen at the grassroots. But in 2024 it finally had an impact in national politics, to the disadvantage of Modi's party. He had succeeded in gaining control of nearly all of India's once-vibrant media, and they helped to promote his extravagant personality cult. Partly as a result of it, he relaxed into a self-satisfied complacency which led him to believe and to announce that he is of divine origin. This monumental complacency also led to three startling excesses that have damaged India's international ties – especially with the West and most crucially with the U.S. as Donald Trump takes power.

KEYWORDS – General election; de-institutionalisation; authoritarianism; personal rule; personality cult; divinity; complacent excesses.

1. Modi's drive for authoritarian control and religious polarization

Between 2014, when he became prime minister, and early 2024, Narendra Modi had made great progress in promoting religious polarization – leading a hard-line Hindu nationalist assault to demonise and brutalise minorities, especially India's 172 million Muslims. That effort continued during the national election campaign in April and May 2024 when Modi and others made much use of anti-Muslim rhetoric. He had also made great strides in radically centralising power and in hollowing out democratic institutions in order to impose one-man control of the political system.

The only institutions that escaped his effort at disempowerment and control were the prime minister's office (PMO) and eleven investigative agencies. They were kept strong but were flagrantly misused to mount raids and probes, often on dubious charges, to intimidate or subdue actors in government institutions and in civil society, the media, etc. – to bring them to heel. The aim here was to create an authoritarian government dominated by one man exercising personal rule.

The list of institutions that were hollowed out and controlled is long. They included India's central bank, the election commission, the central information commission, the national statistical organisation, universities, research centres, the comptroller and auditor general's office, the offices of speaker in both houses of parliament, state governors in the federal system, the federal system itself [Kailash 2021, 5 March], etc.

No significant power centre was omitted from Modi's drive for top-down control. And very prominently, parliament suffered. As early as 2015, deep anxiety was evident even among members of parliament from the Prime Minister's own Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) because no consultation was undertaken by Modi. An economist who had advised the BJP told an eminent journalist of his surprise at the amount of «hatred» privately expressed towards Modi by several party leaders.¹ During his first decade in power, numerous bills were rammed through parliament without time being allowed for scrutiny or discussion. By 2019, this disempowering had gone so far that one opposition legislator asked «Are we delivering pizzas or passing legislation?» [PTI 2019, 31 July].

Even cabinet ministers were starved of influence amid Modi's radical centralising. They learned what their policies were from their civil servants who were told by the prime minister's office (PMO). This led to serious delays.

With ministers interminably waiting for instructions from the PMO and unwilling to stick their neck out, decisions are taking much longer. According to sources in the PMO the highest number of files pending has gone up from 1,500 in Manmohan Singh's tenure (before 2014) to 6,000. 'The Prime Minister, being a control freak and travel freak at the same time, compounds the problem', says a former cabinet secretary [Srivastava 2022, 5 February].

The firm control over cabinet ministers from on high may have diminished a little over the last ten years, but Modi's soaring personality cult (discussed below) has ensured that the top-down grip remains tight.

1. The journalist was interviewed by this writer, New Delhi, 25 January 2015.

2. A surprise result of the national election, and Modi's uncompromising response

In April and May, a national election was held for a new parliament. It was not a fair election. The ruling BJP had vastly more money to spend than all other parties put together. But that was not enough. The bank accounts for the Congress Party, the BJP's main rival, were frozen. The leader of another prominent rival party was jailed on dubious charges. Modi had gained full control of the election commission which is supposed to ensure fairness. It helped him. On 110 occasions, it took no action when his words – religiously polarising dog whistles and blatant remarks – violated its model code of conduct. Modi also controlled most print, television and online news outlets.

He and his party entered the campaign in high spirits, hoping that his consecration of the Ram temple at Ayodhya on 22 January would provide an electoral boost. He asked voters to give him 400 seats in a house of 543 – even more than had been won in his thumping victories of 2014 and 2019. Other BJP leaders explained that 400 would enable the new government to change India's constitution.

But when the votes were counted, the result came as a shock. Despite all of its unfair advantages, Modi's party won only 240 seats – embarrassingly short of a majority of 272. It was only able to form a government by relying on two regional parties which were its allies. Modi's personal vote share in his Varanasi constituency fell from 63.62% in 2019 to 54.2%.

This confirmed what has long been known: Indian voters are not mindless sheep who are easily led. They have thrown out ruling parties at roughly 70% of national and state elections since 1977 – internationally, a very high rejection rate. In this election, despite the huge unfair advantages enjoyed by his party, it suffered a reversal.

The causes of this outcome are complex. Most opposition parties coalesced in an imperfect but reasonably successful alliance to prevent the fragmentation of anti-BJP votes. Reliable opinion surveys revealed widespread discontent over inflation and the lack of employment opportunities about which Modi had long made what Indians call «tall promises». The use of anti-Muslim rhetoric failed to generate the expected levels of support.

Many activists in the ruling party's hard-line Hindu nationalist sister organisation, the RSS, sat out the campaign. They were unhappy with Modi for two reasons. His drive for one-man government and his personality cult offended them because they had always believed that their organisation and their cause should take precedence over individual leaders. They also objected to Modi's tendency to seize power by any means. After he had lost state elections, he had repeatedly used threats and inducements to persuade legislators from other parties to defect to the BJP, so that he welcomed turncoats with no commitment to the Hindu nationalism that was so dear to the RSS.

The BJP also suffered from a decline in support from disadvantaged groups – most crucially, the Scheduled Castes (ex-untouchables) and the Scheduled Tribes (tribal people or *adivasis*) – see Table 1 below. Many of them were alarmed by the prospect of a large enough majority for the BJP to alter the constitution in ways that could lead to the weakening or removal of reservations for them in educational institutions and government jobs. By loudly appealing for 400 seats, Modi had blundered.

Some expected that the disappointing election result would make Modi less aggressive in pursuing autocratic rule by consulting the two regional parties on which he depends for his majority, and by toning down Hindu extremism because those two parties have cultivated support from minority voters. He offered financial concessions to those parties, but little else changed.

Soon after the election, he intentionally outraged opposition parties by re-nominating as speaker of the lower house a man who had suspended 110 of their legislators in a single day in the previous parliament. New harsh criminal laws were proposed which broadened the definition of terrorism and, after claiming to abolish sedition, retained it under a different name – and increased punishments to life sentences.

A tough new broadcasting bill was introduced to strengthen the government's grip on digital media. Modi unilaterally lifted the ban on government employees joining the BJP's sister organisation, the RSS. Loud protests from the opposition claimed that this would let RSS members assume powerful roles, and that it was a threat to reservations for disadvantaged castes. But the change survived. Without consulting allies, Modi announced changes in a Waqf bill to take a tough line on provisions for Muslims, to end what he called the «appeasement» of the minorities.

He also vowed to persist with forceful «anti-corruption» efforts, which meant the persistence of widespread raids and arrests by investigative agencies on questionable pretexts. There are eleven such agencies, including the Income Tax Department, the Intelligence Bureau, the Central Bureau of Investigation, and the Finance Ministry's Enforcement Directorate. They have been brazenly misused against opposition politicians, media outlets, India's once hugely constructive civil society organisations (including two Nobel Peace Prize winners), universities and research centres (starting with vengeful attacks on the best), and independent voices. After the election, his right-hand man, Amit Shah, drove the message home: Modi would have total power to act without consulting allied parties [Raman 2024, 30 September].

The only significant change was an effort to repair the damage done among Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe voters by his call for a huge majority. New initiatives to benefit these groups were developed. Analyses of the election result indicated that their anxiety over reservations (see section VI) – along with rising inequality and the severe shortage of jobs – outweighed religious polarization which Modi had stressed during the cam-

paign. But after the election, Modi, Shah and other BJP leaders continued to promote religious intolerance and the brutalization of the vast Muslim minority [Singh 2024, 5 December].

The incendiary BJP Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, warned repeatedly – and preposterously – that if Hindus were not united, they would be slaughtered. He promised that more Hindu temples would be built on the sites of mosques. He and some other BJP state-level leaders continued, without due process, using bulldozers to destroy the homes and businesses of Muslims whom he called the «mafia». This triggered an objection from a UN Special Rapporteur in a submission to the Supreme Court. One reporter wrote that «Anti-Muslim Crimes (Have) Become the Norm» [Puniyani 2024, 11 September]. Another noted «continuing – even growing – impunity and confidence» by violent Hindu extremists [Halarnkar 2024, 2 September]. A fresh spate of beatings and murders of people, mainly Muslims, occurred based on inaccurate allegations that they were in possession of beef [DHNS 2024, 6 September].

Opposition parties had gained enough new seats in parliament to increase pressure on the government, but Modi continued to treat them with disdain. As in the previous parliament, he refused to answer a single question that they raised. He continued to show contempt for opposition parties – evident in Amit Shah’s description of them as snakes, rats, cats and dogs. Modi re-tweeted a BJP leader’s post that included opposition leader Rahul Gandhi in a list of «traitors» and said that he has the «brains of a child». He falsely accused the Congress Party of «cheating» and «embezzling» – and so the caustic diatribes continued [Ghose 2024, 6 August].

3. The economy: growth, inequality, poverty and the middle class

3.1. Concealing data to control the political narrative

As we turn to India’s economy, it is important to note a problem with discussions of it – and of much else. The Modi government has gone to great lengths to conceal or to avoid collecting important data.

This is apparent on many fronts. The most startling is the refusal to conduct a census. For 140 years, Indian governments have held censuses every decade during years ending in the number one. A census was due in 2021, but none occurred. This was perhaps understandable because of the COVID crisis, but none has taken place in the following three years.

That was no isolated example. 16 datasets covering key sectors have not been made available. The sectors include police organisations, law and justice, defence, railways, food security, consumer expenditure, the household consumption survey, youth affairs, educational institutions, livestock, chemicals and fertilisers, and civil aviation [Salve 2024, 31 December]. With concealment on so many fronts, one witty Congress Party leader, Rajeev

Gowda, said that Modi's NDA (National Democratic Alliance) was actually a «No Data Available» regime.

It clearly preferred not to reveal – or even to collect – information. It allowed vacancies to proliferate in many national and state-level information commissions, until the Supreme Court ruled that they must be filled [Singh 2024, 5 December].

The government also manipulates to its advantage the few key sources of data that are available. In 2018, it stopped publishing the National Sample Survey until it could change the way statistics are calculated to paint a happier picture. It also takes advantage of gaps in the available data to make false claims about analysts' findings. An important example was the assertion, re-tweeted 2,500 times, that the International Monetary Fund had projected India as the fastest growing economy on earth. This was untrue. It was based on old IMF data [Mehta 2020, 29 August].

3.2. *Growth*

A more detailed analysis of India's economy appears elsewhere in this volume, but certain aspects of it have implications for politics, the main concern here. Growth rates are disputed, but by international standards, the economy grew in 2024 at a respectable rate. However, there were also worrying signs. Between July and September, it slipped from pace of the 8% of gross domestic product that it reached in much of 2023 to a two year low of 5.4% [Dhoot 2024, 29 November].

Other things also gave cause for concern. Foreign direct investment had been declining for years, and in 2024 it fell by 64%. In October, India experienced the world's greatest exodus of foreign portfolio investment. This has continued: foreign investors withdrew \$ 8.3 billion in January 2025. A Bloomberg report found that manufacturing output had declined sharply to 2.2% from 14.3% the previous year – which was seen by one analyst as «dismal» and «grim» [Narendra 2024, 5 December]. A *Wall Street Journal* study blamed that poor performance on excessive regulations and red tape [Li and Mandavia 2024, 23 November]. This contradicted Modi's much hyped claims to have improved the ease of doing business.

We often hear that the economy that has emerged under Modi is a partnership of the government and big business. But the state has retained immense powers over the economy, so that what has emerged is a somewhat liberalised but far from neoliberal economic order, [Manor 2020, 31 October]. The Modi government holds the upper hand in that relationship and uses it to dominate corporate leaders. That is clear from statements by two iconic captains of industry that the authorities have subjected big business to an «environment of fear», and from the comment by a third that corporations are being treated like «pariahs» [The Wire Staff 2019, 25 December].

Modi's drive for utter dominance on every front is apparent even in ties to such leaders. He and Amit Shah are equal opportunity authoritarians. No one is excluded from their drive for control. What we see here is not classic form of crony capitalism. Their cultivation of «fear» indicates that they are not seeking alliances with all – or many – corporate leaders.

3.3. *Inequality*

During Modi's first decade in power, inequality soared. One analysis drawing on the work of Thomas Piketty's World Inequality Laboratory stated that the economic order has become «more unequal than the British Raj» [Maya and Kumar 2024, 28 October]. Prabhat Patnaik notes that the World Inequality Database shows inequality to be at its worst in 100 years [Dasgupta 2024, 13 November].

3.4. *Poverty*

Analyses of poverty are complex, in part because large numbers of people fall into and out of poverty all the time [Desai *et al.* 2024]. But it is fair to say that economic growth, which in recent times has greatly benefited rich people, has left poorer groups struggling – as the section above on inequality indicates. The Global Hunger Index [DHNS 2024, 20 October] ranked India much lower than all of its neighbours except Pakistan – at 105th among 127 countries. The Modi government disputed these findings, but the Index was developed from its own official statistics. A Bloomberg report found signs of «desperation» among lower income groups [Mukherjee 2024, 11 December]. It added that, as in 2018-19, India's policy makers were not facing up to the problem and taking action to tackle it. Instead, they were «tinkering».

200 million Indians were found to be undernourished, despite growth. One alarming aspect of this was the high level of child stunting – low height for age. The damage done to the bodies and brains of children who suffer from stunting as a result of malnutrition during their first five years is permanent – it cannot be repaired later in life. These incapacities prove costly to those who suffer them and to the good of the nation. A study covering 2019-2022 found that 36% of children in India suffer from stunting – higher than the 34% in sub-Saharan Africa [*The Lancet* 2019, 1 December]. This is a shameful indicator of the toll of increasing inequality amid economic growth.

3.5. *The strange inattention to the middle classes*

The increasing inequality under Modi has also left the middle classes «reeling from income stagnation». A «demand slump among them has recently

become worse, reaching levels “not seen in a long time”». An industrialist spoke of the «shrinking middle class» [Venu 2024, 27 October]. Tax rates paid by the middle classes have not been adjusted for inflation, which worsens their situation [Mukherjee 2024, 11 December]. Growth had greatly benefited the rich, but the middle classes, once Modi’s bed rock supporters, had been disregarded.

This might appear to be a risky gamble, but at the national election, middle class voters largely continued to support the BJP – in part because communal polarization had taken a strong hold among them. And since the election, the government has taken some steps to benefit them.

4. Welfare provisions: encouraging passivity among recipients

The Modi government has provided poor – and indeed non-poor – people with abundant benefits. Among these are five kilograms of food grains per month given to no less than 800 million recipients. The government may have done this because it is aware of something important that its suppression of data has concealed: that despite economic growth, inequality has increased sharply so that large numbers of citizens have made few or no gains. But it has also seen these provisions as a way of attracting votes. They often entail the use of IT systems to send cash payments direct to the bank accounts of recipients [Aiyar and Sircar 2024, 30 November].

This approach to welfare has important political implications. These payments flow directly from the Prime Minister himself to beneficiaries, without middle men. Modi has seized upon this by energetically claiming personal credit, to inspire gratitude among recipients to him – enhancing his personality cult and his drive for one-man government. He stresses that he is preventing intermediaries from corruptly skimming off percentages, and from favouring only some of those who need the benefits. But many, perhaps most of the middlemen who have been cut out of the system are members of his own party. So, this aspect of his relentless drive for personal dominance has irritated BJP activists (former middlemen) and weakened the BJP’s organisation, just as he has undermined a huge array of other institutions within the democratic order. This reminds us of how thoroughly he has pursued de-institutionalisation, a central theme in his politics.

This approach to welfare provisions has often, although not always, paid handsome dividends at election time. Many state governments, including some headed by opposition parties, have adopted it [Kailash 2024, 7 June]. But in numerous cases, this has led to a near-crippling of governments’ ability to fund basic services and badly needed infrastructure projects [see for example Ranade 2024, 27 November].

Another implication of this strategy is crucial. It becomes clear when we contrast this system to the approach used by the previous national government between 2004 and 2014, which was led by the Congress Party. Its

most important pro-poor programme (there were several others) was the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). It gave every rural household the right to demand and receive up to 100 days work, manual labour, per year on development projects. It was shrewdly designed with strong transparency mechanisms to prevent corruption. Wages were paid not through intermediaries but directly via an IT system into workers' bank accounts which were opened anew on an enormous scale. Vast numbers of poor rural dwellers found work under this programme so that it became the world's largest poverty initiative.

A key feature of the MGNREGA was that it sought to make poor villagers *active* participants in public affairs at the local level. They had to take the initiative in seeking work, and in performing labour. It drew many of those people – actively – into the public sphere for the first time. That was especially true of rural women, many of whom had seldom left the household in the past. And in recent years, women have outnumbered men among labourers in the programme.

A major aim of the MGNREGA as it activated poor villagers, was to strengthen their «political capacity». That consists of four things: poor people's political *awareness*, their *confidence* as political actors, their political *skills*, and their *connections* to other poor villagers and to allies among the non-poor [Jenkins and Manor 2017]. The contrast with Modi's approach to welfare provision is stark. He seeks to make recipients *passive* and to allow their political capacity to atrophy, while the MGNREGA seeks the opposite: to make them more *active* with greater political capacity.

5. A fruitless attempt to respond to India's dismal global rankings

The Modi government was acutely embarrassed by its extremely low rankings in over 30 global indices published by reputable international organisations. These dismal assessments covered a broad diversity of important issues. They included hunger, poverty, health, media freedom, education, the condition of democracy, etc.

The government felt compelled to react, and it focused on public relations rather than policy change. It formed a special unit to monitor indices, and to pursue responses designed by the prime minister's office. It instructed at least 19 ministries to tackle 30 international indices: by lobbying some of the organisations that produced them, by «massaging» data to challenge the methods of some, and by developing 'rigged' home-grown indices as alternatives [Jalihal 2024, 28 December].

This was no easy task. Some of the organisations that needed to be challenged were dear to the hearts of many in the Modi government – for example, the World Economic Forum whose Global Gender Gap Index placed India 129th among 146 countries. Another, the Global Hunger Index, showed that 67.1% of infants are anaemic and 35.5% are stunted

– which implies irreparable damaged to the bodies and brains of young children. India’s rank had fallen to 94th out of 111 countries. On investigation, the index was found to be based on *the government’s own statistics*. Nor did these efforts to develop counter-arguments always bear fruit. When the Ministry of Law and Justice was asked to study the decline in rankings for democracy and the rule of law, the ministry actually endorsed them! [Jalihal 2024, 29 December] The government’s revisionist exercise has fallen flat in the international arena, but domestically, it may have been of modest help to the ruling party’s propaganda machine.

6. *Deep social changes at the local level finally emerge in higher level politics*

In the mid-1990s, scholars who studied rural society saw something remarkable. Dalits (Scheduled Castes, ex-untouchables) and other supposedly «lower» castes were increasingly refusing to accept caste hierarchy in villages. And they were increasingly open about it. This was one of the most important changes to occur since Indian independence. Caste hierarchy had been the central element in the way that rural society had worked for generations – and two-thirds of Indians still live in villages.

Very little attention has been paid to the wider implications of this crucial change, so this writer analysed them in nine varied Indian regions. Complex implications emerged at the village level. Most notably, Dalits and other disadvantaged groups developed increasing awareness, assertiveness and skills to operate in the public sphere. But for years, it was impossible to connect those local changes to politics at higher levels [Manor 2015; Jodhka and Manor 2018].

But at the 2024 election, those things came into play in national politics. Modi’s major blunder, his call for a huge BJP majority of 400 seats, alarmed Dalits and other disadvantaged groups. They feared that this might give him the power to weaken or remove reservations for those groups in education and government posts. Many Dalits and other disadvantaged voters shifted their support from the BJP to rival parties, often to the alliance led by the Congress Party. See the results in parliamentary seats reserved for Dalit candidates (because they are numerically strong there).

Table 1: Change in seats reserved for Dalits won at the last two national elections		
	2019	2024
Congress Party	6	20
Congress and its alliance partners	9	33
BJP	46	29
BJP and its NDA allies	54	39
Table compiled by the author on the basis of various sources (Note that the figure of nine seats for Congress and allies in 2019 includes reserved seats for Scheduled Tribes, and is a disputed, provisional number.)		

Similar anxieties among *adivasi* (Scheduled Tribe) voters also led to declining support for the BJP and its allies [Attri *et al.* 2024, 13 August]. (Note that the figure of nine seats for Congress and allies in 2019 includes reserved seats for Scheduled Tribes, and is a disputed, provisional number.) Taken together, these two trends provide an important part of the explanation for the BJP's loss of its majority in parliament – a decline from 303 seats (of 543) in 2019 to 240 in 2024. As a result, after the election, BJP leaders concluded that efforts were needed to regain support from these two groups [Deb 2024, 21 August]. It was a rare post-election change in Modi's approach.

7. *The media, the personality cult and in 2024, Modi's divinity*

7.1. *Subduing the media*

Before Modi took power in 2014, in this writer's view, India's print and electronic media had greater analytical substance than any of their counterparts in the Commonwealth except Britain – greater than in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. But during his decade in power, he has turned nearly all of the print, television and online media into subservient cheerleaders for his authoritarian approach and for religious polarization. He has systematically reduced India's media to the rank of 159 of 180 in Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index – lower than Yemen, Pakistan, Rwanda, Libya, Hong Kong and Zimbabwe. It noted that in India «press freedom is in crisis». The government has «extraordinary power to control the media, censor news and silence critics». It added that

India is one of the world's most dangerous countries for the media. Journalists who are critical of the government are routinely subjected to online harassment, intimidation, threats and physical attacks, as well as criminal prosecutions and arbitrary arrests...Terrifying coordinated campaigns of hatred and calls for murder are inducted on social media... [Reporters Without Borders 2024].

How has this been accomplished? Three things explain it: carrots, sticks and surveillance.

Most media outlets are owned by corporate magnates who have many other enterprises. In India's only partially liberalized economy, the government retains formidable approval powers that can greatly help or hinder those undertakings. If media outlets offer servile praise to the regime and its leader, their broader portfolio of businesses are rewarded – carrots.

But there are also sticks. If a media outlet airs reports that are critical of the authorities, they pay a heavy price. The central government's investigative agencies may threaten or undertake raids on the offices and even the homes of editors and media executives – seizing computers, arresting key personnel, etc. Opportunities for corporate owners' other enterprises

dry up. Those investigators often have no evidence to back up their charges of fraud, income tax offences, foreign currency manipulations or whatever. But the damage is usually painful enough to secure compliance.

And then there is surveillance. Media houses also know that their reports are constantly and thoroughly assessed. The government has a very large team of monitors who sift through media content, and the BJP also has a sizeable team doing the same thing. They contact and warn media executives or editors when they discover coverage that is negative or just even-handed. They express appreciation to media leaders for favourable reports on the government, and especially on the Prime Minister – sometimes urging that the reports be aired again. They may supply media outlets with flattering photos of Modi for publication. These tactics have proved very effective.

7.2. Building Modi's personality cult

The fawning media have enabled Modi to get away with numerous constitutional outrages – by ignoring them. One especially glaring example illustrates this trend. In India's parliamentary system, the prime minister is the head of government, but the head of state is the president who symbolises national unity – like Italy's president or Britain's monarch. But in his drive for personal rule and iconic status, Modi has often side-lined the President. The most spectacular example came at the opening of a new parliament building, the key part of a redesign of New Delhi which the Prime Minister intended to signal a new era in India's political history. In a breath-taking violation of propriety, the President was not invited. Modi presided. The subservient media raised no questions, and merely celebrated.

This was clearly part of a massive effort to enhance the extravagant personality cult that had been constructed around Modi. It has taken many forms. Media outlets feel compelled to refer to him not as Mr Modi but as «PM Modi», a mode of address never applied to his predecessors. Numerous government programmes have the prefix «PM» (for «prime minister» or its Hindi equivalent, «*pradhan mantri*») attached to their titles – to stress his personal role in their creation. Photos of his face appear on vaccination certificates and packages containing many items provided by the government, like cement. Civil servants in government headquarters at the district (county) level have been scolded by ministers for failing to display Modi's photo outside their offices. A new 132,000 seat cricket stadium was first named after Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, an iconic leader of the Congress-led struggle for independence whom the BJP lionises to de-emphasise the role of Jawaharlal Nehru. But it was soon renamed the Narendra Modi stadium. Outside many railway stations and even military installations, the government has placed life-size cut-out photos of the Prime Minister to enable people to take selfies alongside him. His galloping narcissism has no limits.

7.3. *The cult reaches new heights: Modi's divinity*

Over time, the Prime Minister's personality cult has soared breathtakingly. In 2016, a senior BJP leader stated that Modi was «God's gift to India». That man was then made India's vice president. Since sycophancy paid dividends, the claims escalated. Another leader said that he is superhuman, «a repository of unending powers», with «traces» of God in him. But that was not enough. Another said that he was indeed a god. But then another found that inadequate. Modi was the leader of the gods.

Then jaws dropped as the Prime Minister revealed during the election campaign that he had become «increasingly convinced» that he had not been born biologically. His origins were divine: he had been sent to earth to do God's will by cleansing India of evils. He explained that he was persuaded by two plain facts. His stupendous energy can only have originated from on high. And his accomplishments could only be seen as products of *divya shakti*, divine power.

Does he actually believe this? To answer this question, we must consider two things. The first was his *timing* of the announcement. If this was an election ploy, a distraction from what polling showed were voters' concerns – unemployment, price rises and the struggle to make a living – it had limited promise. He revealed it too late, after most votes had been cast. Even if it had been widely believed, it could not produce a thumping election victory. That suggests that he believes it.

The second thing was the *manner* of his announcement. When he resorts to ploys – to exciting surprises aimed at gaining an advantage – he thunders them in speeches to huge crowds. There had been plenty of these, introduced early in the long election campaign, when the BJP's constant polling suggested that the party was performing poorly.

Modi responded in loud early speeches with harsh anti-Muslim messages – both dog whistles and many blatant comments. He said, implausibly, that the Congress manifesto had been inspired by the Muslim League – the pre-1947 party that had achieved the creation of Pakistan. He said that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi was a «fan» of Pakistan, and that if opposition parties took power, they would bulldoze the new Hindu temple at Ayodhya that Modi's government had built.

Then his stentorian speeches became more bizarre. He accused Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge – a very sensible person, to this writer's certain knowledge – of trying to create differences between devotees of Ram and Shiva, «to break our thousands of years of traditions». He criticised people who eat non-vegetarian food which an estimated 65% to 75% of Indians increasingly consume.

He blazed away with these outlandish comments at mass meetings, because early polling suggested that his party had done poorly in the early phases of voting, so that he badly needed a stirring message that could in-

spire voters. The news of his divine origin, if it was only a ploy, might have been useful. But nothing was heard of it at these early stages.

Then in the later phases, the BJP's polling began to yield more encouraging findings. Its mood swung from anxiety to confidence that they would win a solid mandate.² Modi relaxed into complacency and only then did he reveal his divinity not before a mass meeting but quietly, in interviews with fawning journalists. By then, he thought that needed no new ploy or gimmick to win votes. The quiet, complacent manner of that announcement – like its timing – indicates that this was no ploy. He really believes that he is divine.

8. Complacency leads to continuing excesses

The same monumental complacency, the belief that he could get away with anything seen in Modi's claim to divine origin, persuaded him that the brutalities committed against minorities and independent voices could continue despite his party's disappointing election performance. Details on these outrages over the years can be found elsewhere [Manor 2021, 2 March], but the problem gained new urgency in late 2024.

It emerged most vividly in an open letter to the Prime Minister by 17 immensely eminent retired civil servants, diplomats and a former Vice Chief of the Army Staff. These are men who quietly enjoy the esteem of a grateful nation. They are extremely reluctant to comment on public controversies. Their acute anguish was apparent from the fact that they were risking retaliation from a vengeful government. They pleaded with Modi to curb the flood of outrages during 2024.

They called attention to the «extreme anxiety and insecurity» felt by minorities. Actions against those vulnerable groups had always occurred since Indian independence, but «the last 10 years are markedly different» because of the «clearly partisan role of many state governments...».

What started as incidents of bullying or beating up Muslim youth on charges of carrying beef, grew into lynchings of innocent people...followed by Islamophobic hate speeches with clearly genocidal intent. In the recent past there have been calls for boycotting Muslim business establishments...and unrestrained bulldozing of Muslim homes at the behest of chief ministers themselves led by a ruthless local administration [The Wire Staff, 2024, 1 December].

They added that press reports indicated that 154,000 establishments have been bulldozed, and hundreds of thousands of people have been made «homeless or bereft of their place of business. Most of these belong to Muslims».

2. These comments are based on a source close to the BJP camp.

Most recently, India had seen «unknown fringe groups demanding archaeological surveys on medieval mosques and *dargahs* (religious shrines) to prove that they were built over Hindu temples». One such case was especially alarming.

It appears unimaginable...that a local court should order a survey on the 12th century dargah of the Sufi Saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti – one of the most sacred Sufi sites in Asia not just for Muslims but for all Indians who are proud of our syncretic and pluralist traditions. The very thought that a mendicant Saint, a fakir who was an integral part of the Sufi/Bhakti movement unique to the Indian subcontinent, and a paragon of compassion, tolerance and harmony could have destroyed any temple to assert his authority, is ridiculous... An ideological assault on this uniquely syncretic site is an assault on our civilisations heritage and perverts the very idea of an inclusive India that you yourself seek to reinvigate. [The Wire Staff 2024, 1 December]

2024 ended with no sign that Modi or his government would respond to the anxieties expressed in this letter by reining in the mayhem. His narcissistic complacency, seen in his claim to divine origin, appears to have persuaded him that he could get away with anything. Domestically, when he committed serious mistakes, his grip on the media ensured that they would cover for him, and offer him only praise. This may even have convinced that he had not actually made mistakes – that he could do no wrong. Nor was he called to account for grossly extreme actions because adulation from the media swamped criticism. This occurred even at breathtakingly crass moments.

Consider one hideous example. His key Independence Day address in 2024, he said «crimes against women are unforgiveable» and that action should be taken so that «those who commit such sins fear the consequences including hanging to death» [The Hindu Bureau 2024, 15 August]. Here he echoed his nearly identical remarks on the same occasion in 2022. But that earlier speech occurred on the *same day* that 11 Hindu extremists who had been given life sentences for the gang rape of a pregnant 19-year-old Muslim woman and the murder of 14 members of her family including her three-year-old daughter whose head was smashed, were released early from prison. Modi's government approved their release. The authorization was signed by his closest associate, Home Minister Amit Shah. In a system in which power is radically centralised in the Prime Minister's hands, Modi must have agreed to this.

9. Complacency produces three international embarrassments that damage India's relations with the U.S. and other Western governments

As we have just noted, domestically, Modi can largely get away with such actions thanks to his control of nearly all of the media. Internationally, that

is not so easy, and things became much more difficult in 2024. For years, major Western powers looked the other way at such moments because he served their purposes. The French authorities knew all about excesses within India, but in their ardent pursuit of lavish arms sales to New Delhi, they ignored them. The Biden administration was also well informed.³ It knew of Modi's assault on democracy and human rights. It knew that India was acting as the main conduit for the sale of Russian oil to the West – and that its imports of that oil increased 50-fold during 2022 alone. It knew that India was circumventing sanctions by exporting «Common High Priority» items to Russia [Rao 2024, 20 December], and even by permitting brokers to facilitate financial transfers to Iran. But Biden was so acutely anxious for Modi to be a counterweight to China's Xi Jinping that he also tolerated these actions.

However, in 2024 the Prime Minister's complacency led to three excesses that became acute embarrassments. They damaged his and India's standing on the international stage, and its relations with the West: assassination plots, a major bribery scandal, and a stinging critique of the U.S. by India's ruling party.

9.1. *Assassination plots*

During 2024, in a U.S. federal court a trial began of an Indian for allegedly planning the assassination of an American citizen in New York. Very detailed evidence clearly indicates that he acted in partnership with India's security services. The murder was bungled: the «hit man» hired was an undercover U.S. agent. But astonishingly, approval was given from supervisors in India to commit the crime on the *same day* that Modi was honoured with a glittering state dinner in the White House. In India's vastly over-centralised government, it is difficult to believe that the Prime Minister did not approve this. His complacent view that he could get away with such things is astounding.

Detailed evidence also emerged in 2024 indicating that that plot was linked to the successful assassination of a Canadian citizen in that country in 2023. (The targets in both cases were advocates of a separate Sikh homeland in Punjab, a cause with such minimal support in India that one wonders why they were pursued.) Canadian police stated that «the Indian government had orchestrated homicides and extortion in Canada to intimidate Sikh separatists». India's External Affairs Minister angrily insisted that India would never stoop to such actions, but Modi had boasted at election meetings that India would reach out and destroy its enemies in just this way.

The Canadian authorities alleged that Indian diplomats had been «directly involved in gathering detailed intelligence on Sikhs separatists

3. This writer was a member of a team organised by President Carter's Center to inform the Biden administration.

who were then killed, attacked or threatened», and ordered six of them to leave the country – including the ambassador [Miller and Shih 2024, 14 October]. The implication – that the Modi government has gone to the extent of forcing diplomats to participate in such activities – inspires deep dismay within its foreign service.⁴

Things took a gravely troubling turn when Canadian investigators stated that the man in charge of the assassination plot was Amit Shah, India's home minister and Modi's right-hand man. He is by far India's second most powerful leader, but theirs is no partnership of equals. Shah – who refers to Modi as «Saheb» (master), and who has been shown in photographs kissing Modi's hand – is utterly subservient to his leader and informs him of everything important. This again suggests that Modi was aware of the plot. Trials in the U.S and in Canada (where Shah may even be charged) will remain an extremely serious problem for India.

9.2. *A bribery scandal*

In November, the U.S Department of Justice filed well documented criminal charges against Indian businessman Gautam Adani, accusing him of offering \$ 265 million in bribes to state governments in India (a crime under American law). It stated that he had misled U.S. investigators and concealed information from Indian stock exchanges. It issued an arrest warrant against him. Adani denies the charges.

He had close ties to Modi from the latter's days as chief minister of Gujarat state, and had risen from relative obscurity to become one of the world's richest men. He had been the main Indian entrepreneur who was quite openly aided by Modi to obtain contracts across India and internationally for ports, airports, defence contracts, and an array of infrastructure projects. This occurred at a time when other corporate leaders were accusing Modi of creating an atmosphere of fear.

His indictment undermines India's effort, in which Adani was the crucial player, to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative. It also plainly threatens to damage Modi's congenial relations with the American government. Those ties were damaged further by the BJP's response to efforts by opposition parties to raise the issue in parliament. The BJP claimed implausibly that the Congress Party was colluding with anti-India forces in the U.S., including its government. This brings us to a third issue.

9.3. *The BJP's attack on the U.S. government*

In early December, the BJP's official website and BJP parliamentarians claimed that the U.S. government was behind online criticisms of Modi by the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project. It is a team of

4. This is based on confidential communications from senior diplomats.

investigative journalists which was partially funded by the U.S. government for analyses of countries other than India. They said that this was part of an attempt by the U.S. State Department, and the American «deep state», which included the philanthropist George Soros and (bizarrely) the Rockefeller Foundation «to destabilise India by targeting Prime Minister Modi». They added that Congress Party leader Rahul Gandhi was collaborating with this effort.

This became an international incident. The U.S. Embassy in New Delhi issued a highly unusual sharp response, complaining that India's ruling party would make such allegations [The Wire Staff 2024, 7 December]. But BJP leaders continued hammering away with these accusations. Parliament was convulsed by the controversy as 2024 drew to a close, with Congress spokesmen alleging that the BJP had seized upon the issue to distract from the charges against Adani for bribery.

10. *India-U.S. ties: Modi and Donald Trump*

The BJP may have calculated that their claims would appeal to Donald Trump. Soros is a *bête noire* in the imaginings of the America's extreme right. And the «deep state» in the U.S. is often criticised by President-elect Donald Trump – although even the most hysterical of the rightists have never included the Rockefeller Foundation within it.

Indian leaders have clearly stated that Trump's return to power will improve relations between the two countries. He and Modi have had warm ties in the past. Trump admires autocratic «strongmen», and cares little for democracy and human rights. However, things may become difficult. Trump is wildly erratic and he has a strong transactional outlook. When he has the upper hand over someone, he tends to exploit it ruthlessly. As a senior Canadian analyst notes, he «smells weakness the way a shark smells blood» [Coletta 2024].

The three recent controversies noted above have made Modi and India vulnerable. The trials in the assassination cases will give Trump powerful leverage over Modi. If he asks that Amit Shah be dismissed – especially if the Canadians indict him as an alleged conspirator to murder – Modi will almost certainly refuse. Trump could then accept that, but in exchange, insist that India accept onerous demands. He may also insist that Modi distance himself from his favourite tycoon, Adani, who faces charges in U.S. courts. That would again be extremely challenging for the Prime Minister.

Another excruciating problem may arise. Trump has been consistently hostile towards the regime in Iran. The U.S. Treasury has criticised India for «concealing the origin of Iranian shipments and enabling two sanctioned Iranian brokers» active in hiding this. It stated that «millions of dollars worth of Iranian petrochemical and petroleum products...were

ultimately shipped to India» [U.S. Department of the Treasury 2022, 29 September]. And in 2018, India took over the operations of Chabahar Port in Iran. In May 2024, it signed an agreement with Iran to invest \$ 370 million in the port, despite warnings from the U.S. State Department that this might result in sanctions. [Mollan 2024, 15 May]. Biden tolerated these things. Trump may not.

To make matters worse, Trump is preoccupied with tariffs. India's are higher than *any* major economy and Trump has threatened to raise tariffs on India in response. India also has a \$ 33.3 billion trade surplus with the U.S. Trump has spoken of building a tariff wall against India, and has threatened BRICS countries (including India), with 100% tariffs if they try to replace the dollar as a reserve currency [Rao 2024, 20 December].

Some Indian leaders are also encouraged that Trump is closely allied with Elon Musk (at least for the present – Trump often breaks such ties because he demands fealty). Musk has said that he hopes to meet Modi, but he is so volatile that he may not be a steady or even a rational friend. He has huge investments in China and has praised Xi Jinping. He is also prone to hysterical comments. He was once an admirer of Britain, but now believes that it is a police state which Americans should liberate, so that its Prime Minister can be jailed. He scorns all British politicians including the most right-wing, in favour of Tommy Robinson, a rightist incendiary now in prison for the fifth time for public order offences, contempt of court, etc. Musk has been denounced by French, British, German and Norwegian leaders.

Trump will also face pressure to turn against Modi from Christian evangelicals, a key part of his support base. They object to continuing attacks on their co-religionists in India that have been reported by an official U.S. agency. A letter from 400 Indian Christian leaders to Modi and India's President asked for action after a recent «surge» in violence by Hindu extremists – as in recent years, with sadistic relish over the Christmas period. In the first eleven months of 2024, between 720 and 760 such incidents occurred [The Wire Staff 2024, 31 December].

11. *A second Indian republic or a second emergency?*

In summation, what do we find in India at the end of 2024? Some respected analysts have described it as a «second Indian republic» – a successor to the republic that came into being at the adoption of the constitution in 1950 [notably, Vaishnav 2025]. But is that accurate?

The word «republic» implies a political order that is well rooted in a set of robust *institutions* and broadly accepted norms. Among those norms is a belief in a considerable degree of equality among citizens, so that heredity cannot provide the basis for political power.

Some may argue that a republic must also have strong democratic institutions. But some countries in which democracy is constrained – even severely constrained – are commonly called republics. It is not Modi's smothering of democracy that raises the main doubts about this being a second Indian republic. It is the severe weakening of nearly *all* institutions – depriving them of autonomy and power – in the interests of one-man rule. His relentless, narcissistic de-institutionalisation is what makes that term inappropriate.

De-institutionalisation has been a main theme of his time in power. We have seen the systematic hollowing out of a whole array of political institutions – except for coercive instruments like investigative agencies to enable his drive for authoritarianism. Other official institutions, non-governmental organisations and independent voices have been successfully disempowered in order to concentrate power radically to achieve one-man government, personal rule.

Another key theme has been the demonization and brutalization of India's Muslim minority -172 million people, 14.23% of the population. They do not, to put it mildly, enjoy equality in Modi's India. Hindu chauvinism has gained ground under Modi, but it does not yet command mass acceptance. A reliable poll in 2024 found that 69.7% of respondents agreed (fully or somewhat) that the government «must protect the interests of the minorities», and 57.2% thought that the government should give them special treatment.

Is this a political order that will endure? Such vast powers have been concentrated in one man's hands that even his own political party has lost the considerable institutional substance which it once had [Manor 2022, 3 September]. Everything depends upon the leader to whom even the second most powerful man in the country, Amit Shah, openly offers obeisance. The Prime Minister is in good health, but he is 74 years old. He will not live forever. When he passes from the scene, there must be serious doubts about the survival of the regime that he has constructed.

If this is not a second republic, what is it? Once before, India experienced a regime in which immense powers were concentrated in the prime minister's office in order to enable personal rule by one leader, Indira Gandhi. De-institutionalisation – in which powers and autonomy were stripped from a broad array of institutions – was a central theme. Those arrangements prevailed for most of the period from the mid-1970s and beyond the death of Mrs Gandhi until voters ousted her son and successor, Rajiv Gandhi, from power in 1989.

Radically centralised governance prevailed throughout most of that period, but it was most vividly apparent during the emergency (1975-1977) that Mrs Gandhi imposed. It is more accurate to describe the regime today not as India's second republic, but as its second emergency. No formal declaration of a state of emergency has been made under Modi as it was under

Indira Gandhi. But his carefully orchestrated, thorough subversion of the democratic system has gone further than hers did.

After 1989, the grossly over-centralised system crumbled. Institutions that had been starved of power and autonomy, but which *continued to exist*, reasserted themselves as massive powers flowed away from the prime minister's office. State governments and the federal system were also re-empowered. A process of *re-institutionalisation*, of political regeneration, unfolded. India's democracy was revived [Manor 1996]. This renewed republican order survived for a quarter-century, until Modi became prime minister in 2014.

We must note one key feature of the regime that he has created. Yes, every institution except coercive agencies has been systematically undermined to empower just one man. But crucially, those institutions *continue to exist* as they did under Indira Gandhi. He has stopped short of creating a «sultanistic» regime, an authoritarian order based on the personal ideology and personal favours of the great leader [Chehabi and Linz, 1998]. India's institutions are abjectly disempowered, but on paper, they are still there.

That enables Modi to pretend that he sits atop a formidable set of institutions. This might lead us to believe that his new order really is a republic – with enough new features to be a Second Republic. But it lacks the institutional substance to qualify as that. De-institutionalisation has gone much too far. What we have is a second emergency.

If Modi were to leave the scene, the extravagant personality cult that has sustained his power will not pass to a successor. At perilous moments, he has been unwilling to hand responsibility for risky assignments to others who might serve as fall guys if things go wrong, because he must hog the limelight [Manor 2020, 29 April]. He cannot allow others to gain political prominence when things go right. When they go wrong, he depends on the servile media to conceal the damage and heap praise upon him for his daring, forceful leadership.

After Modi passes from the scene, a period of turmoil and power struggles will ensue – with the RSS, which has gained great power under him, seeking to retain its influence. But without its iconic leader's pulling power with voters, amid the disarray as different forces on the Hindu right tear at each other, the BJP will face grim struggles to win elections, even if they remain unfair. The regime is very unlikely to endure, as institutions that have been disempowered under Modi will seek to recover their lost autonomy and power, as they did after 1989.

Since he lost his majority in the 2024 election, we have seen the first faint beginnings of that process. It can only make great gains after Modi's exit, but it is already apparent, especially in the renewed assertiveness of the Supreme Court. In September, it ruled aggressively against the use of bulldozers to raze mainly Muslim homes and enterprises [Pragati 2024, 13 November]. The Chief Justice stated «This is lawlessness...completely high-handed» [The Wire Staff 2024, 6 November]. It then imposed restric-

tions on the Enforcement Directorate, one of several investigative agencies that the government has used to attack and intimidate independent voices [The Wire Staff 2024, 25 December].

If the current regime were a second republic, such doubts would not arise about its capacity to survive in Modi's absence. But what we see instead is a second emergency. It is mightily brutish and intimidating for now, but there must be the gravest doubts about its staying power.

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INDIA 2024: CHALLENGES AND CONTENTION IN FOREIGN POLICY

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India's politicians spend almost half of 2024 focused on the general election held over seven weeks in April, May and June. But once the results were announced, energy returned to India's foreign policy, and the re-elected Modi government moved to deal with a series of pressing issues. This article discusses four of these challenges: stabilising India's relationship with China; working with Russia; developing the strategic partnership with the United States; and sustaining influence in a dynamic neighbourhood. It argues that over the year New Delhi made some in-roads with each but struggled to make substantive progress with any of them. India struck a deal to disengage forces on part of the contested frontier with China, but broader de-escalation was not achieved. India re-engaged Moscow, but at the cost of adding a further irritant into a relationship with the US under growing scrutiny by the Hindu Right. And India sought to maintain and build influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, but suffered significant setbacks, notably in Bangladesh.

KEYWORDS – India; Indian foreign policy; China; Russia; United States; South Asia.

1. Introduction

After a frenetic year of diplomacy in 2023, India's attention returned to domestic issues in 2024. With a general election looming and the first of seven rounds of voting scheduled to start in mid-April, campaigning began early. Growth, jobs, welfare, and identity politics were the main topics of discussion. International relations were barely mentioned, aside from claims by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his allies that after ten years of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rule, India was more highly respected in the world than ever before [Kaushik 2024, 12 April]. Throughout this period, Modi spent most of his time electioneering, turning only occasionally to foreign affairs. In January, for example, he spent no fewer than 11 days visiting Ram temples around India, before finally arriving in Ayodhya to inaugurate a controversial *mandir* built on a site of a mosque demolished by Hindu activists in 1992 [Sharma and Rajesh 2024, 23 January]. His only significant foreign engagement that month was a meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron, whom he hosted in New Delhi as the Republic Day guest of

honour [de Lage 2024, 9 January]. During the following four months, Modi welcomed just one more visitor – the Greek prime minister – and left the country only twice: once in February for a trip to the United Arab Emirates and Qatar and then in March to Bhutan. This pattern of behaviour – intense concern for domestic politics and little involvement in international relations – persisted until the election results were announced on 4 June.

Yet in the background, several complex foreign policy challenges loomed. The biggest was finding an acceptable *modus vivendi* with China. In 2024, relations with Beijing remained tense and testy, after years of armed confrontation on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the wake of the bloody Galwan clash in June 2020 [see Gokhale 2021]. Barely mentioned in election manifestos, this issue nonetheless overshadowed the campaign [Krishnan & Jacob 2024, 24 May]. Three other challenges were less pressing but still tricky to manage. One was calibrating ties with Moscow, without alienating others angered by Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine [Panda 2024, 22 February]. Another was developing the strategic partnership with the United States (US) in a way that enhanced India's autonomy and avoided dependence – a challenge complicated by a growing list of irritants, including the allegations that had emerged in 2023 that Indian officials had plotted the targeted killings of Sikh separatists in Canada and the US [see Hall 2024, pp. 301-302]. And the last was no less vexed: the challenge of maintaining influence in India's near abroad, in South Asia and the island states of the Indian Ocean [Ranjan 2024, 8 May].

India made some progress on all four fronts, but not much. In October, New Delhi and Beijing finally struck a deal to facilitate military disengagement at two key points in Ladakh where Indian and Chinese troops remained in proximity. This agreement promised to restore to Indian forces access to areas effectively closed since the Galwan clash, but it neither restored the wider *status quo ante* 2020 nor substantively improved India's strategic position [Joshi 2024, 28 October]. With Russia, New Delhi tried to walk a fine line, re-engaging Moscow after a couple of years in which it had tried to keep some distance from the Russian leadership, while claiming that India still favoured a peaceful settlement to the Ukraine war [see Ganguly 2024]. This approach played well inside India – especially on the Hindu Right – but irritated others outside the country, without delivering obvious rewards. It did nothing to lift India's stock in the US, for example, where policymakers were unimpressed by Modi's decision to go to Moscow for his first bilateral summit after the election [Nakashima & Shih 2024, 11 July]. When the Indian prime minister visited Washington in September, the US and India reaffirmed their strategic partnership, but throughout the year it was clear that the Modi government and President Joseph R. Biden's administration did not see eye-to-eye on many issues, including Russia [Singh 2024, 6 June]. Internal debates within the Hindu Right about the merits of the relationship also spilled into the public domain. In parallel,

New Delhi laboured to maintain working relationships with its neighbours. Here too India struggled, especially with Bangladesh, following the ouster of New Delhi's preferred leader, Sheikh Hasina.

This article analyses each of these challenges in turn. It argues that in 2024 India found it hard to consolidate the gains it made in 2023, during which time it chaired the Group of 20 (G20) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), reenergised its diplomacy with Global South, deepened defence and security cooperation with the United States and the other Quad partners, and successfully frustrated several Chinese initiatives [see Hall 2024]. The election complicated matters. It distracted India's leaders, as we have seen, but also showed some of them in an unflattering light. The use of divisive and derogatory language to mobilise voters, such as Modi's description of Muslims as «infiltrators» in a speech in Rajasthan, dismayed some foreign observers [Travelli & Raj 2024, 26 April]. Then there was the result itself, which involved sizable losses for the BJP and only a slim majority for its coalition [Palshikar 2024]. This surprised many analysts and prompted some to speculate about the strength and longevity of the Modi government, despite a post-election push to project an image of stability and policy continuity [Markey 2024, 11 June].

However, the election was not the only factor complicating India's international relations. Matters well beyond New Delhi's control continued to cause headaches. The Modi government faced instability and unpredictability caused by wars in Europe and the Middle East, ongoing strategic competition between the US and China, technological change, and multiple political upheavals in states important to India. In short, it had to deal with a «much tougher world» than those confronting its predecessors [Jaishankar 2024, p. 1]. The US Presidential election generated even more disruption, producing one of the closest contests in modern history [Montanaro 2024, 3 December] and preventing Biden from travelling for the Quad summit India was due to host [Haidar 2024, 6 February]. But as we shall see, the Modi government was buoyed by the prospect of a second Donald J. Trump administration, convinced that it would better suit the interests of India and the BJP than another Democrat president in the White House.

2. Stabilisation without normalisation

In 2023, India restored some channels of communication with Beijing that had been cut off or disrupted after the Galwan incident, while sustaining a broad set of trade and travel sanctions and working with other partners to undermine China's influence in multiple minilateral and multilateral forums [Hall 2024, pp. 308-310]. This approach reflected the ongoing «abnormality» of the Sino-Indian relationship, as India's External Affairs Minister (EAM) Subrahmanyam Jaishankar described it [2024, p. 3], following

the series of armed clashes on the LAC in 2020 and 2021 [see Tarapore 2021, 5 May]. In 2022, the two sides had managed to calm the situation, concluding agreements to disengage their forces at some of the so-called ‘friction points’ in Ladakh, but fell short of restoring the *status quo ante*. And in September of that year, as Saheb Singh Chadha [2024] notes, China and India arrived at another impasse, with Beijing refusing to permit India to resume patrols in contested areas around Depsang and Demchok, and New Delhi insisting that their resumption was the necessary precondition for talks on de-escalation and the draw-down of forces.

This disagreement persisted into 2024, despite several discussions between Modi and Xi Jinping at multilateral summits and multiple rounds of diplomat- and military-led talks [Chadha 2024]. Things began to change only after India’s election, amid a debate in New Delhi about the need to stabilise and perhaps strengthen the relationship [see Madan 2024, 2 July]. In July, Jaishankar twice met his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, once at an SCO summit in Kazakhstan and then at an ASEAN meeting in Laos. New Delhi’s diplomatic language also softened, becoming more upbeat about the possibility of a deal on some points of difference [see, for example, Ministry of External Affairs 2024, 25 July]. Further meetings – including one between National Security Advisors in Russia in mid-September – generated more positive statements [Ministry of External Affairs 2024, 12 September]. Then in October India’s Foreign Secretary, Vikram Misri, announced that New Delhi and Beijing had struck a deal on the complete disengagement of forces in Ladakh, as well as the restoration of patrolling rights [Ministry of External Affairs 2024, 21 October].

This agreement promised to end a dangerous standoff that had lasted for four years and four months and brought China and India closer to war than they had been since 1962. But it fell well short of a normalisation of the relationship. The October deal left large numbers of a troops deployed along the LAC all year round, where earlier lighter forces had been present only in the warmer months [International Crisis Group 2023, 14 November]. A wider agreement to withdraw some or all these troops – which New Delhi terms «de-escalation» – is yet to be made, as Jaishankar and other Indian officials have made clear [Ministry of External Affairs 2024, 4 December]. Moreover, the deal left in place a series of other punitive measures imposed on China by India during and after 2020, including the suspension of direct flights to and from China and the issuing of electronic tourist visas; restrictions on Chinese foreign direct investment and the use of Chinese technology in areas of critical importance; and bans on dozens of Chinese apps, including TikTok [Madan 2022, 4 October].

At best, the deal improved the situation on the ground in eastern Ladakh, reduced the risk of another clash between Indian troops and the People’s Liberation Army, and removed an obstacle to further talks. Yet China and India remain far from the pre-Galwan *status quo*. In India’s view, at

least, the presence of large forces near the LAC is «not in accordance with the 1993 and 1996 Agreements» [Ministry of External Affairs 2024, 4 December] on maintaining peace on the disputed border and sustaining confidence building measures. It is not clear that China – or indeed India – will draw down and redeploy these forces any time soon. Both sides have built new infrastructure in these areas since the Galwan clash and they might be reluctant to relinquish whatever advantage they might offer in a future conflict [Swartz 2023, 17 October; Jun & Hart 2024, 16 May].

More worryingly for New Delhi, it is not obvious that India is now in a stronger position vis-à-vis China now than it was before the Galwan clash. It is possible – but by no means certain – that the robustness of India's actions in 2020 and 2021 restored conventional deterrence on the LAC [Set & Pant 2023, pp. 148-150]. It is also possible – but again, not certain – that New Delhi's economic sanctions and soft balancing changed Beijing's strategic calculus and brought China back to the negotiating table. There is some evidence to suggest that Beijing is more concerned about India as an emerging challenge than it was before, but whether that view will translate into a softer or harder policy towards India is not clear [Deb & Jiayue 2024]. But the bigger problem is that New Delhi has not made substantive progress in closing the economic and the military gaps with its northern neighbour since 2020. In 2024, India's economy was still only about 20% and its defence budget perhaps 30% the size of China's – about the same as they were five years earlier [Inamdar 2024; Hooda 2024, 2 July]. The Modi government continues to struggle to implement the reforms needed to stimulate higher rates of growth [Subramanian & Felman 2022] and to direct funds to necessary military modernisation [Mukherjee 2022].

Of course, India can and does also make use of partners to manage the threat, and in recent years New Delhi has forged stronger ties with the US and others for that reason [see Tarapore 2023]. But in 2024 the Modi government tested those relationships, most notably with a determined effort to re-engage Moscow.

3. Perceptions and misperceptions

India's close ties with Russia date back to an earlier effort to balance Chinese assertiveness. In the 1960s, the Sino-Indian border war, the Sino-Soviet split, and signs of a possible rapprochement between Washington and Beijing drove New Delhi to look to Moscow for arms and economic support [Singh 1984]. In 1971, they formalised this tacit partnership with a Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation that provided India with access to the latter's markets, capital, universities, defence technology, and diplomatic support [see Subrahmanyam 2021]. This arrangement annoyed the West but worked – at least in part – for India. Soviet assistance helped to alleviate

some of the pressure on India exerted by China during the latter part of the Cold War, allowing New Delhi to modernise the military, if not the economy [see Clark 1977].

The logic of this strategic partnership dissipated, however, with the normalisation of Sino-Russian and Sino-Indian relations at the end of the Cold War and with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In the 1990s, neither Moscow nor New Delhi needed the other to balance China, and for India a weakened post-Soviet Russia looking to build better ties with the West was anyway far less useful. But the Cold War strategic partnership left three enduring legacies. One is India's long-term dependence on the Russian defence industry for maintenance, spares, repairs, training, know-how, and in some cases ammunition, as well as armoured vehicles, aircraft, and ships. As a result, more than fifty years after the Indo-Soviet Treaty was signed, about 85% of India's large weapon systems are today Soviet or Russian in origin [Lalwani & Sagerstrom 2021, pp. 152-154]. Another legacy is the perception – widely held in New Delhi – that Russia is a reliable friend that respects India and India's concerns. Jaishankar's assessment, made in June 2024, that the Soviet Union / Russia has «never done anything to impact our interests negatively» [NDTV 2024], is shared by many in India's strategic elite. And the last is the conviction or perhaps misperception – also widely held – that Russia is and will remain a «great power», a pole in an emerging multipolar order, which deserves the respect of others, despite past and present economic, social, and political problems [see Sikri 2024, pp. 183-202].

These legacies have shaped India's approach to Russia since the end of the Cold War and especially since the revival of Russian fortunes in the 2000s under Vladimir Putin. They have made New Delhi reluctant to loosen ties with Moscow, despite the development of new and (for India) arguably more advantageous strategic partnerships with others and Putin's increasingly erratic behaviour. They help to explain why the Modi government has maintained a dialogue with Moscow after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and refused to condemn Putin's aggression. But they do not provide a complete explanation. In recent years, two more factors have also played in part in New Delhi's calculations. The first is India's growing thirst for cheap hydrocarbons, needed to fuel the economy, control inflation, and to aid post-COVID recovery. The other is a new but acute anxiety in New Delhi that Moscow is being both lured and forced into a Sino-Russian alliance detrimental to India's interests [Ganguly 2024, pp. 63-64; pp. 57-58].

For all these reasons, India has walked a fine line on the Ukraine war. From early in the conflict, it has taken advantage of Russia's inability to sell oil by buying up large quantities, some to use locally and some to refine and sell on to others [Vickery Jr. & Cutler 2024, 3 September]. At the same time, the Modi government has repeatedly urged all concerned to settle their differences at the negotiating table, lamenting the impact of the conflict

on the global economy [Ministry of External Affairs 2022, 22 September]. Not long after the war began, the prime minister opined in Putin's presence that «today's era is not the era for war» – though he went no further than this mild rebuke [Lau and Saeed 2022, 16 September]. Indeed, New Delhi has gone to considerable lengths to avoid actions that might signal either support or criticism for Russia. In 2022 and 2023, Indian officials sustained dialogue with their Russian counterparts in both bilateral meetings and multilateral gatherings, at the BRICS and the SCO, and Jaishankar met the Russian foreign minister on multiple occasions. But limits were also placed on India's engagement with Moscow. New Delhi was reluctant, for instance, to facilitate a bilateral summit between Modi and Putin, despite a long-standing commitment to hold annual leaders' meetings, a long hiatus since the Indian prime minister's last visit to Russia in 2019, and several personal invitations from the Russian president [see, for example, President of Russia 2022, 16 September].

However, India's approach began to change towards the end of 2023. In late December, Jaishankar went to Russia and stayed for an unusually long five days. He called on Putin, as well as the Deputy Prime Minister Denis Manturov and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. The trip raised questions about the Modi government's intentions, and when they were asked, New Delhi's answers were surprisingly defensive. Shrugging off suggestions the West might be unhappy about the visit, Jaishankar declared that a «country which has maximum friends and minimum adversaries is obviously one with smart diplomacy. Why would a country restrict its friends?» [quoted in Bhaumik 2024, 3 January]. He followed up on these remarks at the Raisina Dialogue in February 2024, observing that «a lot of doors have been shut to Russia», that Russia was turning to Asia as a result, and that «it makes sense to give Russia multiple options» [*Hindustan Times* 2024, 23 February]. These comments – combined with National Security Ajit Doval's bilateral with his Russian counterpart at a BRICS meeting in Moscow in April – suggested that India was becoming more openly supportive of Russia [*Hindustan Times* 2024, 25 April].

At the time, exactly why India might make sure a move was contested. Some argued that following several turbulent months in US-India relations, New Delhi wanted to show Washington that it had other partners on which it could rely [Bhaumik 2024, 3 January]. Others thought that after a couple of years of relative diplomatic neglect, the Modi government was merely trying to reassure Moscow that New Delhi respected Russian concerns and interests and to ensure outstanding defence orders were met. They noted Russian unease about India's deepening ties with the US and about the terms of trade with India, especially in oil [Zakharov 2024, 23 January]. They also pointed to New Delhi's anxiety about ongoing delays to much needed arms supplies, including air defence systems and frigates [Panda 2024, 22 February].

Modi's trip to Moscow on 8-9 July, immediately after the election, intensified and broadened this debate. Critics in the West complained not just about the symbolism and the timing of the visit – it was the first bilateral summit for the re-elected prime minister, and it took place on the eve of NATO's 75th anniversary summit – but also to its optics, which seemed designed to maximise its propaganda value to Russia [Ethirajan 2024, 9 July]. A smiling Modi was greeted by Russian president with a hug; the two were filmed driving in a golf cart and taking tea in the garden of one of Putin's dachas; and the Indian prime minister was awarded the Order of St Andrew the Apostle in an elaborate ceremony [Hall 2024, 10 July]. To Kyiv, this suggested that India's neutrality regarding the Ukraine war was a sham [Giordano 2024, 9 July]. To others, it was taken as a sign that the Modi government might be losing its way in foreign policy [Rehman 2024, 30 July].

These impressions were reinforced by three things. The biggest was that Modi's embrace of Putin did nothing to slow progress in the Sino-Russian «no limits» strategic partnership. In May, Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping agreed to expand bilateral military exercises, conduct maritime patrols, and cooperation on space technologies [Zhen 2024, 17 May]. In July, the Russian leader met Xi again and lauded their partnership [*Al Jazeera* 2024, 3 July]. The second was that the Modi-Putin summit produced little in the way of fresh agreements or solid commitments to honour existing deals, including overdue arms transfers. These meagre outcomes contrasted with recent gains made not just by China but also by North Korea, which appears to be much more adept at exploiting Russia's relative weakness and securing advanced defence technologies from Moscow [Kim 2024, 21 November]. The last was that the summit inadvertently highlighted Russia's disregard for some Indian interests, notably the safety of its citizens overseas. In February, New Delhi acknowledged that almost 100 Indians had been duped into joining the Russian army. Some had been sent to Ukraine; some had died in combat. At that point, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) confirmed that it had «strongly» conveyed its unhappiness to Moscow and expected the Russian authorities to return the men soon [Bhaumik 2024, 27 February]. But by the time Modi went to Moscow six months later, several Indians were yet to be released. And although he secured a personal promise from Putin to facilitate their swift return, as late as mid-December, 19 men were still in Russian military service [*Hindustan Times* 2024, 13 December].

In August, Modi made a surprise visit to Kyiv to meet Volodymyr Zelensky, and – some analysts argued – to respond to India's critics in the West [Markey & Ruppert 2024, 29 August]. And at the close of 2024, his government was still insisting that India would not take a side in the Ukraine conflict [*The Times of India* 2024, 7 December]. Yet its behaviour suggested otherwise. In mid-December, for example, within days of a reaffirmation that New Delhi supported a negotiated end to the war, Defence Minister

Rajnath Singh went to Moscow to take delivery of a new ship and to urge Russia to speed up the transfer of air defence systems. But Singh he also delivered a message, telling Putin that despite «enormous pressure» from others, Indo-Russian «friendship» remains «higher than the highest mountain and deeper than the deepest ocean» [Sharma 2024, 11 December]. These comments – reinforced by an anonymous briefing pointing to the «immense potential» of the bilateral partnership – were taken by commentators as evidence that India was determined to «stand by» Russia [Pandit 2024, 11 December].

What drove the Modi government to do this, despite the meagre gains and the substantial risks involved, in terms of the strain the re-engagement of Russia placed on other partnerships? India's need for arms and mounting concern about Moscow's ability to deliver them, were clear drivers [Pandit 2024, 11 December]. So was the nagging worry that a cornered Russia might throw in its lot with China, forming an alliance that would dominate Eurasia and restrict India's strategic autonomy in that region and beyond [see Tellis 2022, 25 April]. And New Delhi's unshakeable – but far from incontrovertible – beliefs that Russia respects India's interests and deserves respect as a 'great power' in an emerging multipolar order, likely played their parts too [see Chivvis & Geaghan-Breiner 2023, 9 November]. But it appears that the revival of the Modi government's enthusiasm for Russia was also related to tensions in the US-India relations – and to a desire to demonstrate New Delhi's unhappiness with the West and its independence of mind. Certainly, what one analyst termed «Modimania in Moscow» [Turayanova 2024, 15 July] was celebrated as such not just in Russia, but also by the Hindu Right in India [Talukdar 2024, 14 July].

4. *Non-West and Anti-West*

In 2023, Washington and New Delhi took significant strides forward in developing their strategic partnership, reaffirming their commitment to Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies and approving the manufacture of General Electric-designed jet engines in India [Hall 2024, p. 303]. Modi's State Visit in June was widely acclaimed as a success, despite differences of opinion on the Ukraine war and human rights [Lalwani *et al.* 2023, 20 June]. Yet from September onwards the allegation that New Delhi was running a targeted killing programme, first levelled by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, cast a shadow over the relationship. This shadow darkened when in November US authorities unsealed an indictment against an Indian citizen accused of plotting to murder the New York-based head of the «Sikhs for Justice» group, Gurbantwant Singh Pannun [Hall 2024, p. 302]. Both accusations were denied by New Delhi, but this did not stop Indian commentators from suggesting that such covert action might be jus-

tified and from complaining that some Western governments, including the US, were not doing enough to manage threats to India's national security by elements of its diaspora [see, for example, Kapur 2023, 28 September].

This issue festered in 2024, with neither New Delhi nor Washington seemingly able to find a mutually acceptable way to manage it. At the same time, Canada also struggled to establish a working relationship with India to identify who was responsible for the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar and for the alleged intimidation of other Sikh separatists [Miller and Shih 2024, 14 October]. In October 2024, media speculation then forced Trudeau to go public with Ottawa's belief that Indian diplomats had been involved in both activities [Falconer 2024, 15 October]. It was also leaked that Canadian authorities suspected India's Home Minister, Amit Shah, had directed the operation [Reuters 2024, 30 October]. Amid the furore that followed, Canada expelled six Indian diplomats, including the Head of Mission, and India retaliated in kind [Sebastian 2024, 15 October].

In parallel, other irritants emerged in the US-India relationship. Together, these fed narratives popular on the Hindu Right that the Biden administration was not giving India the respect it was due. Some even suggested that Washington's «Deep State» was determined to undermine Modi and the BJP. The US President's inability to travel to New Delhi for Republic Day or for a Quad summit; the Pannun attempted murder case; unflattering reports about the state of democracy, human rights, and religious freedom in India; supposed US involvement in a change of government in Bangladesh; and finally the indictment of the Gujarati billionaire – and Modi ally – Gautam Adani for alleged fraud were all seized upon as evidence of American perfidy [see, for example, Talukdar 2024, 23 December]. In early December, anger about this issue spilled over with a series of social media posts from the BJP official account accusing the State Department of being «behind» a campaign to «target the BJP and India» [Roy 2024, 8 December].

This outburst provided insight into internal debates within the Hindu Right – into arguments rarely aired in public – about the merits of the Modi government's decade-long effort to deepen the strategic partnership with the US. That effort, it must be remembered, was not predetermined, and remains contentious. Large parts of the Hindu Right – including the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* ('National Volunteer Association' or RSS) to which Modi devoted much of his life before entering politics – are deeply anti-Western. Indeed, since the 1920s the RSS has committed itself to purging all remaining elements of Western thought and practice from India, in favour of what they consider authentically Indian alternatives [see Sharma 2011]. When Modi took power in 2014, it was not clear how much of this ideological agenda he intended to pursue, in domestic or foreign policy, nor how affected he had been by US and European criticism of his conduct as Chief Minister in Gujarat, before, during and after the communal violence in that state in 2002 [see Marino 2014, pp. 103-146; Hall 2019, pp. 1-10].

Once in office – and to the surprise of many observers – Modi pushed hard for closer ties with the West and especially the US [see especially Pant 2014]. Yet significantly, Modi's strongest ally in this enterprise – Jaishankar, initially as ambassador to Washington and then as Foreign Secretary – was a bureaucrat, not a BJP politician nor an RSS activist. It was Jaishankar who facilitated a strong working relationship with President Barack H. Obama's administration and with Congress, and who provided a rationale for the strategic partnership – first internally, and then, after retirement from the MEA, publicly [see Jaishankar 2020]. It was Jaishankar who crafted a narrative that reassured Western partners that, whatever qualms they might have about working with a Hindu nationalist government, Modi's *Naya Bharat* («New India») was determined to be a «rule-abiding and responsible player» in the world [Jaishankar 2020, p. 55]. In 2019, Jaishankar's success in these endeavours convinced the prime minister to make him foreign minister [Iyengar 2024, 5 April]. This allowed the government to push ahead with deepening the strategic partnership with the US and with the Quad [Mukherjee 2023]. But Jaishankar's appointment and his agenda did not settle the debate within the BJP – let alone within the RSS – about the kind of relationship India ought to have with the West [see Sengupta 2022, 10 October]. They did not win over anti-Western elements of the Hindu Right sceptical about New Delhi's closer ties with Washington.

A sense of this internal disagreement – and of the implications for the Modi government and the US-India strategic partnership – can be found in Jaishankar's second book, *Why Bharat Matters* [Jaishankar 2024], published just before the election. Despite the title, the book is aimed at a domestic audience than an international one. It really seeks to explain why foreign policy matters to *Bharatis* (Indians), rather than why *Bharat* (India) matters to the world. For that purpose, it includes a lengthy discussion of how Indians ought to think about the West and why India ought to work with it – not against it, as some on the Hindu Right would prefer. Jaishankar concedes that the West's misguided universalism and enduring hypocrisy continues to grate on the Rest. But he observes that its relative power is waning, amid an «emerging multipolarity», and its ability to influence what happens outside the West is declining [Jaishankar 2024, p. 44]. Moreover, he argues – pointing to China's experience – that partnership with the West is the sure pathway to rapid development. There is, Jaishankar argues, «little profit in being anti-West» and a strong pragmatic argument for cooperation [Jaishankar 2024, p. 98]. India must recognise that the optimal strategy combines «[d]eveloping affinities» with the West while remaining confidently «non-West» [Jaishankar 2024, p. 98].

The fact that Jaishankar found it necessary to make this argument speaks to the doubts that persist within the Hindu Right about the Modi government's tilt to the West. And the upsurge of criticism of the US and the Biden administration towards the end of 2024 – including some com-

ing directly from the BJP, as we have seen – suggests, however, that it had limited impact on the sceptics. But by that point in the year, the outcome of the US Presidential election had already changed the rules of the game. In Trump, both the Modi government and the Hindu Right perceives an ideological ally [Madhav 2020, 24 February]. They have enthusiastically adopted his rhetoric, as the BJP's attack on the «Deep State» shows. They are convinced that the earlier Trump administration did more for US-India ties than others, despite evidence to the contrary [see, for example, Singh 2024, 19 September]. They believe that the incoming administration will be tough on China and on Islamist terrorism, reject economic and cultural «globalism», mute criticism of India's democratic backsliding and handling of human rights, and deliver new economic opportunities [Hebbbar 2024, 8 December]. They think that Trump will cut some deal with Putin to bring the Ukraine war to an end – and perhaps also bring Russia back in from the cold [Das 2024, 1 December]. And some also believe that a fundamentally transactional and India-friendly Trump will make some of New Delhi's other recent troubles – including the pending court cases concerning targeting killings – go away [*The Economic Times* 2024, 5 November].

These hopes for a «Trump bump» might be fulfilled, or might not [see Madan 2024, 5 December]. Either way, the past year highlighted irritants in the US-India relationship that could prove difficult to remove regardless of who sits in the White House. One is the growing tendency in New Delhi – apparent in the Modi government's response to the result of the Presidential election – to see US-India ties through an ideological lens, downplaying the bipartisan commitment to the partnership on the American side, and casting the Democrats as somehow inimical to India's interests. The other is the resurgence of a wider mistrust of the US and American intentions more broadly. In 2024, this became obvious in an unexpected way, in the aftermath of the fall of the Bangladeshi leader, Sheikh Hasina.

5. *Sisyphean labours*

In early January, in an election marred by protests, violence, a low turnout, and a boycott by the main opposition party, Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League was returned to power for a fourth term [Riaz 2024, 11 January]. India – which had backed Hasina since 2008 – was happy, but international observers were not. Nor, as it turns out, were many Bangladeshis, who were soon back on the streets, only to be met by armed Hasina supporters and elements of the security forces. Finally, after weeks of violence in which hundreds were killed, Hasina resigned and fled on a military aircraft to India, where she found refuge in a New Delhi bungalow [Riaz 2024, 6 August].

The arc of Hasina's triumph and fall was mirrored by India's broader experience in its immediate region during the year. It had successes but

they were offset by failures. To be sure, there was little or no change in some regional relationships. There were no substantive conversations between India and Pakistan [Faisal & Rehman 2024, 15 October]. Tentative approaches were made to the Taliban in Afghanistan [Krishnan 2024, 14 November] and to Myanmar's ailing military junta [Laskar 2024, 8 November] but neither made progress. But in some of the relationships where New Delhi was more active, India's fortunes fluctuated.

With Nepal, for example, the Modi government had succeeded in 2023 in stabilising the relationship with the historically India-sceptic prime minister, Pushpa Kamal Dahal (known as Prachanda), striking some important deals to import electricity from the land-locked state [Ranjan 2023, 5 June]. In March 2024 Prachanda's coalition collapsed, however, and he was replaced by the traditionally India-friendly K. P. Sharma Oli – a development initially welcomed in New Delhi [Mazumdar 2024, 13 July]. But then Oli went to Beijing for his first visit in office, where he signed a significant agreement for deeper economic cooperation with China under the Belt and Road Initiative [*The Kathmandu Post* 2024, 4 December]. By the end of the year, it appeared that Nepal was determined to pivot away from India, not towards it [Woo 2024, 3 December].

With Maldives, India also experienced ups and downs but ended the year in a better position. President Mohamed Muizzu was elected in November 2023 on an anti-India platform. In 2024, he succeeded in expelling India's small military presence on the islands but then shifted back towards a more friendly posture. In June Muizzu attended Modi's swearing-in ceremony and returned to India for another visit in October, this time seeking a debt bailout that New Delhi was willing to facilitate. By the end of the year, the bilateral relationship had stabilised, albeit with lingering ill-feeling caused by a social media spat over criticisms made of Modi by Maldivian ministers and a short-lived tit-for-tat boycott of Maldives resorts by Indian tourists [Yadav 2024, 26 November].

Only with Sri Lanka did India's position get markedly stronger during 2024. Bilateral ties had been improving since the fall of the China-leaning Gotabaya Rajapaksa government in July 2022 and India's generous economic assistance the wake of that crisis. New Delhi continued to make gains in 2023 and the early months of 2024, securing commitments from Colombo to block Chinese research ships from operating in Sri Lanka's Exclusive Economic Zone and starting talks about the possibility of Indian firms running Sri Lanka's airports [Gamage 2024, 1 March]. Then came the election of the erstwhile Marxist Anura Kumara Disanayake as the new President of Sri Lanka in September and the landslide victory of his National People's Party in the parliamentary poll in November. Some Indian analysts responded to these developments with concern, pointing to Disanayake's past criticisms of India [see, for example, Sharma 2024, 26 September]. But the early signs suggested the new Sri Lankan leader was committed to a

measured relationship with New Delhi and that India was keen to maintain mutual goodwill. Indeed, in mid-December Dissanayake made a State Visit and was warmly received by Modi, and the two promised to deepen the bilateral partnership [Kugelman 2024, 18 December].

The contest between this situation and the one that developed in India's relationship with Bangladesh after the change of government in Dhaka is stark. Hasina's fall prompted an extraordinary outburst of anger in India and a seemingly uncontrolled deterioration in bilateral ties. Jaisankar's statement to parliament immediately after the change of government placed the blame for the upheaval squarely on the protesters, whom he alleged had attacked the police and the properties of people associated with the government, as well as «minorities» [Ministry of External Affairs 2024, 6 August]. India's media went further. The opposition was denounced as militant Islamists; the Bangladeshi army was accused of orchestrating a coup; and news of attacks on Hindus, Hindu property, and Hindu temples dominated the coverage [Mahmud & Sarker 2024, 8 August; Ethirajan 2024, 4 December]. Amid this cacophony, some also accused Washington of instigating «regime change» in Bangladesh and suggested that the US was working with Islamists, China and Pakistan to humiliate India, seize an offshore island for an airbase, and carve a Christian state out of Bangladesh, Myanmar, and India's Northeast [Aneja 2024, 12 August; see also Bajpai 2024, 8 August].

New Delhi did eventually engage the new interim government, sending Foreign Secretary Misra to Dhaka in early December [Ministry of External Affairs 2024, 9 December]. But by that point, it seems reasonable to say that damage had been done, to bilateral ties with both Bangladesh and the US. In Dhaka, the head of the interim government, Mohammed Yunus, complained of a coordinated campaign of «propaganda» coming from India designed to undermine the new regime [*The Times of India* 2024, 4 December]. Meanwhile, Washington was forced to publicly reject claims that the US had played a role in the change of government [Singh and Pitas 2024, 13 August]. Equally pointedly, the US urged New Delhi and Dhaka to resolve their differences peacefully [*Hindustan Times* 2024, 11 December].

6. Conclusion

India's foreign policy changed during 2024 as the Modi government addressed various external challenges in the aftermath of the election. As we have seen, New Delhi moved to stabilise the relationship with China, re-engage Russia, recalibrate the strategic partnership with the US, and react to developments in the neighbourhood – with mixed success. Of course, it did other things too. In the second half of the year, Modi travelled unusually widely, going to Europe three times, Russia and Southeast Asia twice each,

and to Africa, South America, and the Middle East. In parallel, India sustained its outreach to the Global South, begun while G20 chair in 2023, holding a third virtual summit in August 2024 [Ministry of External Affairs 2024, 14 August]. These and other initiatives, like the CARICOM meeting in Guyana that Modi attended in November, were presented as efforts to make India what Jaishankar called a *vishwa bandhu* – a close friend or brother to the world [*Indian Express* 2024, 6 May].

It remains to be seen if others accept this benign view of India and India's role in the world. After all, in 2024 Bangladesh and Canada, and the Biden administration, saw a different avatar – an angry India, animated by religious nationalism and right-wing populism. Indeed, it is possible that this year marked a turning point towards a more assertive and less friendly Indian foreign policy, and an approach to international relations in which the boundary between «non-West» and «anti-West» is increasingly blurred.

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SRI LANKA 2024: POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND GEOPOLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

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As 2024 unfolded, Sri Lanka stood at a crossroad. While economic stabilization efforts showed some progress with the last months showing deflation for the first time since 1961. The challenges of unemployment, debt restructuring and social impact remained pressing concerns. Politically, Sri Lanka witnessed a historic shift in its leadership reflecting the public desire for change in governance. On the geopolitical front, Sri Lanka's ability to navigate the complex web of strategic interests balancing global and regional powers was tested.

KEYWORDS – Elections; system change; democratization; foreign policy; governance.

1. Introduction

As Sri Lanka entered 2024, the country found itself at a pivotal crossroads, grappling with the lingering economic repercussions of its 2022 financial crisis, ongoing political upheavals, and mounting geopolitical pressures in the Indian Ocean region. The economic downturn of 2022, which led to Sri Lanka's first-ever sovereign default, continued to shape the government's policy trajectory. Meanwhile, the elections held in September and November 2024 reflected an increasing public demand for reforms, accountability, and decentralization.

Politically, 2024 marked a historic shift in Sri Lanka's leadership. The presidential election, held on September 21, ushered Anura Kumara Dissanayake into office as the new president. His party, the National People's Power (NPP) – a centre-left coalition – secured a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections on November 14, 2024, forming the new government. The defeat of long-entrenched political elites signalled a public rejection of traditional governance models, underscoring widespread calls for greater accountability and transparency. This electoral outcome reflected the continuation of public demands, voiced during the 2022 crisis, for deeper structural reforms, anti-corruption initiatives, and enhanced social welfare policies.

Economically, Sri Lanka's recovery remained precarious. Up until his defeat in the September elections, President Ranil Wickremesinghe had steered the country's recovery efforts under the guidance of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other key bilateral creditors. However, following his ousting, President Dissanayake and his administration chose to continue the IMF reform agenda without renegotiating its terms and conditions—despite campaign rhetoric suggesting otherwise [Bandara 2024, 7 March; France 24 2024, 7 March]. Given the NPP's history as a centre-left alliance with Marxist-Leninist roots, the new government is likely to face significant challenges in balancing its populist economic promises with the structural reforms demanded by international financial institutions.

On the geopolitical front, Sri Lanka continued to navigate a complex and shifting landscape, balancing the strategic interests of regional and global powers. The year tested Colombo's ability to maintain a delicate equilibrium between influential actors, particularly India and China, while accommodating the growing strategic engagement of the United States and its allies.

Against this backdrop, this article examines the interplay between Sri Lanka's domestic political dynamics, economic reforms, and foreign policy strategies as the country responds to both internal challenges and external pressures. Through a multidimensional analysis, the article aims to offer a comprehensive overview of Sri Lanka's political and economic landscape in 2024, while assessing the strategic implications of its foreign policy choices. Specifically, it explores how domestic political developments and economic reforms have shaped Sri Lanka's foreign policy orientation and regional alliances. It will analyse key political reforms, shifts in party dynamics, and leadership changes that unfolded in 2024, evaluating their impact on governance structures and democratic processes. The article will also highlight major economic policies and recovery efforts under the Wickremesinghe administration and assess how these policies influenced the daily lives of citizens – ultimately contributing to the political transition. Finally, it will evaluate the new government's foreign policy initiatives, with particular focus on evolving relations with key players including India, China, and the United States.

2. Political Developments in 2024

The 2024 elections marked a further weakening of Sri Lanka's established political parties, accelerating the erosion of liberal democratic institutions and reinforcing the rise of populist politics in the country's post-war context [Peiris 2022]. This trend in the political party system can be traced back to 2018, when the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) fractured, leading to the formation of a new political party under the leadership of Mahinda Rajapaksa [Uyangoda 2018]. This development effectively ended the decades-long dominance of the UNP-SLFP-led two-party system that had

persisted since independence. The newly formed Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) initially enjoyed resounding electoral victories, but the economic crisis of 2022, coupled with widespread public demands for political overhaul, delivered a severe blow to the prevailing political order [Ruwanpura & Saleem 2025].

Sri Lanka's democratic institutions have been steadily eroded by political interference and corruption, fostering deep public distrust. A survey conducted in January 2024 by the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), involving 1,350 participants, revealed increasing disillusionment with parliament and political parties – a trend evident since 2011. Notably, while trust in these institutions waned, authoritarian rule and confidence in the military and judiciary remained comparatively higher [CPA 2024]. Successive governments' efforts to consolidate power for self-serving purposes have particularly delegitimized the executive and legislative branches.

The anti-establishment sentiment that fuelled the 2022 mass street protests, known as the *Aragalaya*, was successfully harnessed by the National People's Power (NPP) to secure political dominance in 2024. Positioned as an outsider to the mainstream political landscape, the NPP – led primarily by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP – capitalized on this discontent. Historically, the JVP had never garnered more than 5% of votes in national elections. Yet in 2024, the NPP achieved unprecedented victories in both presidential and parliamentary elections, securing a supermajority with 159 parliamentary seats. Alongside tapping into anti-establishment sentiment, the NPP's campaign featured populist promises, including increasing public sector salaries and reducing taxes [Devapriya 2025].

However, the surge in populist and anti-establishment sentiment represented by the NPP is not without precedent. Similar themes were evident during the 2015 elections, which centred on anti-corruption and good governance, as well as the 2019 elections, which emphasized restoring national security and a disciplined, effective political system [Dassanayake & Gamage 2024]. The election of President Gotabhaya Rajapaksa in 2019, by an overwhelming majority, highlighted the continuing appeal of populist politics in Sri Lanka and raised questions regarding the role and resilience of liberal democratic institutions [Köpke 2022].

The 2019 elections also showcased the increasing influence of professional associations, such as *Viyathmaga*, in legitimizing fragmented political entities [Dissanayake 2020]. This trend is mirrored in the composition of the current NPP government, which brings together a coalition of civil society groups, trade unions, and the JVP. Historically marginalized due to its association with communist insurgencies in the 1970s and 1980s, the JVP has gained newfound legitimacy through the NPP's broader, more inclusive appeal.

With an overwhelming legislative mandate, public expectations for the NPP government are exceptionally high. However, balancing these ex-

pectations while implementing necessary structural reforms—without succumbing to populist pressures—remains a significant challenge. Despite the government's strong parliamentary majority and capacity to enact progressive political reforms, economic constraints severely limit its policy options [Perera 2023]. The IMF program initiated in 2023 requires politically costly reforms, which had previously sparked widespread opposition during the Wickremesinghe administration. While the new government possesses the mandate to carry out such reforms, clear public communication regarding these constraints has, thus far, been largely absent.

2.1. *Creating a National Space*

While the NPP's presidential candidate experienced some setbacks in minority-dominated regions such as the North, East, and hill country, the party's strong overall performance in the 2024 parliamentary elections signalled noteworthy gains even in these traditionally pro-UNP/SJB (as a national political party option) areas. A particularly historic achievement was the NPP's success in securing six seats in Jaffna – a first for a 'national party.' This breakthrough was the result of the NPP's deliberate outreach efforts and its anti-corruption narrative, which resonated not only with local voters but also among diaspora communities [Gamage & Kaur 2025]. The fragmentation of traditional ethnic coalitions, particularly the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), further contributed to this outcome.

The general elections of 2024 underscored that voter disillusionment with established political parties extended to ethnic minority communities as well [Wedagedara and Jayasinghe, 2024]. While the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK – the main political party within the TNA – managed to perform relatively well in the Eastern district of Batticaloa, other minority parties struggled. Specifically, the principal Muslim political parties, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the All Ceylon Muslim Congress (ACMC), suffered notable electoral losses [Uyangoda 2024].

A significant factor behind the NPP's appeal among minority communities was the relative decline of majoritarian nationalist rhetoric (Srinivasan, 2024). The anti-establishment stance of the *Aragalaya* protests momentarily weakened the exclusionary Sinhala Buddhist nationalism that had gained prominence in the post-war period. However, the global resurgence of right-wing conservatism – exemplified by the re-election of Donald Trump – has rekindled nationalist discourse both online and in mainstream media. This ideological space is increasingly being occupied by left-nationalist groups such as the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), led by the Rajapaksa family, and the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP), which includes members formerly aligned with the Rajapaksa political camp. These groups present a potential challenge to the NPP government.

Although public support for the NPP remains strong (Verité Research, 2025), any failure to deliver on its ambitious campaign promises could cre-

ate opportunities for nationalist factions to re-emerge as viable political alternatives.

2.2. *Managing Populist Politics with Pragmatism*

The new government has quickly encountered significant challenges in reconciling its populist campaign promises with fiscal realities. While it pledged to lower fuel prices, raise public sector salaries, and increase tax thresholds, delivery on these promises has so far been partial. Fuel prices were slightly reduced, and subsidies for farmers and fishermen were maintained – both measures previously approved by the outgoing administration [EconomyNext, 2024a]. Additionally, the government authorized a 2,000 km rural road renovation project in the Northern and Eastern provinces. However, the inaugural budget for February 2025 suggests that capital expenditure will remain constrained (PublicFinance.lk, 2025).

Ideologically, the NPP government faces a delicate balancing act between the IMF-driven liberal economic policies it has inherited and the expectations of its left-leaning base [Skanthakumar, 2024; Gamage & Dasanayake, 2025]. The government's 2025 budget adheres to fiscal discipline measures mandated by the IMF and enshrined in the Public Finance Management Act, notably aiming for a primary budget surplus of 2.5% of GDP. Despite IMF-imposed restrictions on state sector expansion, the government approved the recruitment of 7,500 new public employees and increased salaries for state sector workers [Ada Derana, 2025; Newswire, 2025]. Key budget allocations also included an LKR 20 billion bailout for SriLankan Airlines – a loss-making state-owned enterprise – and a 3% increase in military expenditure, bringing it to Rs. 442 billion [PublicFinance.lk, 2025]. Welfare spending rose to Rs. 232.5 billion, reflecting the government's inclusion-focused agenda and its commitment to enhancing social welfare, particularly in health and education sectors. However, the increase, while symbolically significant, is modest in relative terms.

Central to the NPP's electoral success was its focus on anti-corruption, accountability, and recovering stolen state assets; elements of kleptocracy that it characterized the past governments to be. Public support was driven by widespread perceptions that nepotism and elite patronage networks played a central role in precipitating the 2022 crisis. Since taking office, the government has prioritized anti-corruption efforts, institutional efficiency, and accountability, positioning itself as a "government of the people"—committed to austerity and simplicity, in sharp contrast to the mismanagement and excesses of prior administrations. Key actions have included publicized arrests of and confiscation of illegally acquired assets owned by politicians from previous governments, demands for the eviction of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa from his official residence, and the establishment of an Independent Prosecutor's Office – a significant institutional reform aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability [Econo-

myNext, 2025; Samaraweera, 2025]. Public procurement reforms have also been proposed to prevent misuse of state resources [EconomyNext, 2024b]. Nevertheless, emerging critiques point to a lack of high-profile corruption prosecutions, raising questions about the effectiveness of these initiatives and the limits of political rhetoric.

The NPP has further promised substantial constitutional reforms during, including the abolition of the Executive Presidency, widely criticized for its centralization of power and its role in the country's political and economic crises. While the President has announced plans to introduce a new constitution within three years, public consultations are yet to commence.

Economically, the NPP government has largely maintained continuity with the policies of the previous administration, retaining key officials in influential decision-making roles, such as the Central Bank Governor and the Secretary to the Ministry of Finance. This suggests a deliberate effort to sustain the IMF program and prior economic reforms. In line with its clean governance platform, the NPP also pledged to ensure meritocratic appointments. Critics have observed, however, appointments where there is conflict of interest, and of political loyalists that have been appointed to various positions where there are concerns that these moves might contribute to bureaucratic resistance by disrupting established institutional hierarchies and traditions [Bandara, 2025].

2.3. Opposition Political Parties and the Election Aftermath

The performance of opposition political camps in the 2024 parliamentary elections reflected the growing delegitimization of the major political parties (or factions) that had previously governed Sri Lanka. The Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the New Democratic Front (NDF)—informally led by former President Ranil Wickremesinghe and comprising political actors from both the SLPP and UNP – were increasingly unpopular in the lead-up to the elections. Both were widely viewed as part of the entrenched 'old political guard' [Uyangoda and Peiris, 2024]. This prevailing anti-establishment sentiment, combined with infighting between the two camps, contributed significantly to their defeat. The SJB, the main opposition party, particularly struggled to differentiate itself ideologically. Despite its leader's pro-poor political rhetoric, it found itself squeezed between the NPP's centre-left stance and the NDF's centre-right, liberal positioning, making it difficult to present a distinct political alternative.

Following the elections, speculation has grown over a potential alliance between the SJB and UNP to form a liberal front to counterbalance the NPP, especially in light of upcoming local government elections in May 2025. However, such a coalition has not been forthcoming, largely due to personal rivalries of the two parties' leaders and, to some extent, evolving political and ideological differences among the two parties.

Beyond these two major opposition blocs, several smaller parties also underperformed but remain noteworthy due to their potential for future mobilization. Chief among these is the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), now led by Namal Rajapaksa, son of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Despite being the governing party in the 2020 elections, the SLPP secured only three seats in 2024. While now diminished, the SLPP still embodies a 'left' nationalist position that has historically resonated with the Sinhala majority. In parallel, Dilith Jayaweera's Mawbima Janatha Pakshaya (MJP) – which holds one parliamentary seat – also seeks to lead the nationalist discourse. Both parties are attempting to capitalize on the global resurgence of right-wing and nationalist politics, seen prominently in the US and Europe, to regain relevance.

The recent spike in drug-related violence in Sri Lanka has also provided an opportunity for certain opposition groups, particularly those aligned with the Rajapaksa camp, to reignite a national security discourse. Leveraging this issue, they have sought to undermine the credibility of the current government. This strategy has reignited public anxieties surrounding safety and law enforcement, casting some doubt on the NPP's capacity to maintain order [Jayawardena, 2025]. Addressing drug usage and related violence was one of the NPP's key campaign promises, but the increase in incidents has allowed opposition actors to question its effectiveness and commitment. This mirrors political tactics used after the 2019 Easter bombings, when similar fears over national security were instrumental in bringing Gotabaya Rajapaksa to power. The current discourse not only exploits public fears but also aims to reshape the political narrative by portraying the NPP leadership as weak or ineffectual in safeguarding the nation.

With local government elections scheduled for the first half of 2025, and following some setbacks in cooperative-level elections, the NPP faces growing pressure to deliver on its campaign promises in order to sustain its post-election momentum. Particularly in light of the structural reforms initiated by former President Ranil Wickremesinghe under the IMF program, the government's ability to meet public expectations is crucial. The economic hardships endured since 2022 have heightened these expectations, making tangible progress essential for extending the NPP's honeymoon period.

2.4. Social Challenges and Government's Response

The economic crisis of 2022 had a devastating impact on living standards in Sri Lanka, leading to a sharp and sustained rise in poverty. According to the World Bank, over 6 million people (30% of the population) were pushed below the poverty line by the end of 2022. By 2023, poverty levels remained alarmingly high at 25.9%, compared to 11% in 2019, and are projected to stay above 22% until at least 2026 [Gunadasa, 2024; World Bank Group, 2024]. Household coping mechanisms, such as cutting spending on health, education, and nutrition, further exacerbated vulnerabilities [Skanthaku-

mar, 2024]. Women, in particular, bore the brunt of the crisis, as reflected in the surge in female emigration for domestic labour. In 2022, out of over 311,000 registered migrant workers, more than 124,000 (40%) were women [Kotalawela, 2024].

The crisis also deepened multidimensional poverty, affecting sectors like education, healthcare, food security, and basic infrastructure [Athukorala, 2024; UNDP, 2023]. Regional disparities widened, disproportionately impacting rural and estate sector communities [Department of Census and Statistics, n.d.]. As of December 2024, the National Poverty Line stood at LKR 16,619 (US\$ 56.94), with significant variation between urban and rural areas. The rural roots of the crisis were evident during the farmers' protests in the second half of 2021, following the government's decision to ban chemical fertilisers. This shift to organic fertilisers significantly worsened the economic crisis by causing a 20% drop in rice production within six months and an 18% decline in tea production which is the country's main agricultural export (Torrella, 2022).

In response to the increasing economic hardships, the government introduced safety net programs, most notably Aswesuma, launched post-crisis to reform poverty alleviation mechanisms and address the inefficiencies of the long-standing Samurdhi program [Wanigasinghe, 2023]. However, while Aswesuma provided some financial relief, its scope was limited, and implementation challenges hampered its effectiveness. Critics contend that Aswesuma failed to tackle structural inequalities in employment, education, and healthcare, and that the financial assistance offered was inadequate, especially amid persistent inflation.

The NPP government has proposed replacing Aswesuma with the Prajashakthi program, aiming for a more targeted and participatory approach. Key features include using updated indicators like electricity consumption to identify beneficiaries, enhancing community involvement, and increasing the minimum cash grant to Rs. 10,000 per family. The program also seeks to create pathways for long-term independence and ensure fiscal sustainability through digital integration [Hurulle, 2024].

Food insecurity remains a significant concern, closely linked to poverty. The 2024 Global Hunger Index ranked Sri Lanka 56th out of 127 countries, with a score of 11.3, indicating a moderate level of hunger. According to the Index, 4.1% of the population is undernourished, 12.6% of children under five are stunted, and 10.8% are wasted [Concern Worldwide and Welthungerhilfe, 2024].

Despite some improvements in key economic indicators, labour market participation and overall social well-being remain pressing challenges. Although unemployment dropped to 4.5% in the first quarter of 2024, down from the same period in 2023 [Department of Census and Statistics, 2024], labour force participation also declined – from 49.9% in early 2023 to 47.1% in early 2024 [World Bank Group, 2024]. Persistently high unemployment,

coupled with increased poverty, contributed to falling household incomes, exacerbating food insecurity and reflecting in Sri Lanka's declining Hunger Index ranking [Vipulaguna et al., 2025].

These indicators underscore the long-term effects of the 2022 economic crisis and structural dismantling of the welfare system since the 1980s, and highlight the urgent need for comprehensive social policies that move beyond short-term relief to address underlying structural issues—particularly in employment, education, and healthcare—to ensure sustainable recovery and inclusive growth.

3. Economic Landscape and Key Policy Changes

Sri Lanka's economic landscape in 2024 presented a mixed picture, marked by signs of recovery alongside persistent challenges. The country's trajectory was shaped by policy reforms and global economic conditions. Although key macroeconomic indicators showed stabilization, deep-seated structural weaknesses and socio-economic disparities persisted. Fiscal stability and debt restructuring were top government priorities, yet economic growth remained fragile and unevenly distributed, with high debt levels, fiscal constraints, and the need for structural reforms still posing significant hurdles.

The Central Bank of Sri Lanka introduced major policy measures aimed at enhancing monetary stability, controlling inflation, and supporting economic recovery. These included fiscal consolidation, revenue mobilization, and social safety net programs. Despite these efforts, concerns remained over Sri Lanka's reliance on remittances and tourism rather than diversifying into high-value sectors.

In 2024, Sri Lanka's economy showed encouraging growth. The first quarter recorded a 5% expansion, reversing a -10.7% contraction in the same period of 2023 [Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2024a]. Growth continued, reaching 5.5% by the third quarter, up from 1.6% in 2023 [Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2024b], largely driven by improved domestic economic activities.

Tourism and worker remittances were key contributors to the external account. As of December 2024, tourist earnings stood at US\$ 3,169 million and workers' remittances at US\$ 6,675 million [Economic Research Department, 2025]. Additionally, non-tourism services contributed US\$ 304 million by November 2024 [Economic Research Department, 2024a]. These positive developments, bolstered by IMF support, helped stabilize foreign exchange reserves and the exchange rate.

3.1. Debt Restructuring and Fiscal Reforms

A milestone achievement was the completion of Sri Lanka's foreign currency debt restructuring by the end of 2024. The process involved exchanging

defaulted bonds for new bonds, providing significant debt relief. On June 26, 2024, Sri Lanka reached a final Debt Treatment Agreement with the Official Creditor Committee and the Exim Bank of China [Ministry of Finance, Economic Stabilization and National Policies, 2024]. By December, Colombo finalized restructuring talks with investors holding International Sovereign Bonds (ISBs) worth US\$ 12.33 billion, offering them new bonds in exchange [Daily Mirror, 2024]. This facilitated Sri Lanka's emergence from default and an upgrade in its sovereign credit ratings [Fitch Ratings, 2024].

The IMF played a pivotal role, guiding the debt restructuring strategy through its Extended Fund Facility (EFF). Compliance with the EFF required strict fiscal consolidation, debt sustainability targets, and structural reforms. However, the social cost was high. Austerity measures disproportionately impacted lower-income households.

One of the more controversial policies was the revised Value Added Tax (VAT), which aimed to boost revenue but had adverse social effects. The VAT rate was increased from 15% to 18%, and exemptions were removed on 97 items, including essentials like gas and stationery [Ada Derana, 2023]. Consequently, lower-income households now pay about 10% of their income in taxes, compared to 6% under the previous system [Jayawardena, 2024].

To control spending, the government rationalized public sector employment, reviewed subsidies, and prioritized essential expenditures—all measures heavily influenced by IMF recommendations. Though these policies improved fiscal balance and market confidence, the burden fell unequally on vulnerable populations.

Initially, the Central Bank maintained a tight monetary stance with high interest rates, later easing gradually to support growth [The World Bank Group, 2024]. This policy shift, aligned with IMF advice, balanced inflation control and economic recovery, following a data-driven approach.

Inflation declined steadily, eventually turning into deflation between September and December 2024 – the first time since 1961 [The Hindu, 2024]. Factors such as currency appreciation, improved supply conditions, and reduced administered prices contributed to this trend [Economic Research Department, 2024b; The World Bank Group, 2024]. IMF technical assistance strengthened Sri Lanka's inflation-targeting framework, ensuring greater transparency in monetary policy decisions.

However, deflation posed risks, potentially discouraging consumption and business profitability. While currency appreciation lowered import costs, it also risked slowing economic momentum [Baig, 2003; Slater, 2020; Thesing, 2023].

Completing the debt restructuring and securing better credit ratings improved investor sentiment. Despite concerns over political transitions, the NPP government's commitment to continuing economic reforms and the IMF program boosted confidence. By late 2024, Sri Lanka's Business

Confidence Index rose to 118 points, surpassing the neutral threshold [Statistics Department, 2024].

Nevertheless, investments remained concentrated in sectors like tourism, real estate, and textiles [ICC Construct, 2023; International Trade Administration, 2024; Port City Colombo, 2024; US Department of State, n.d.], limiting diversification and job creation.

Yet, Sri Lanka holds significant untapped potential. According to the World Bank, the country's export potential is estimated at US\$ 10 billion annually, with the capacity to create 142,500 new jobs. Diversifying exports beyond traditional products like tea and apparel and integrating deeper into global value chains could bolster resilience. Additionally, leveraging Sri Lanka's strategic location as a regional logistics and trade hub presents promising opportunities.

Expanding FDI in manufacturing, services, and agriculture also could drive long-term growth. Achieving this, however, requires stronger governance, consistent policy-making, and greater investment in research, technology, and human capital.

4. Interplay between Domestic Factors and Foreign Policy

Domestic dynamics have consistently played a pivotal role in shaping Sri Lanka's foreign policy, guiding its diplomatic engagements and strategic choices [Eudon, 2024]. In 2024, Sri Lanka navigated a complex international landscape, balancing longstanding alliances with emerging global challenges. The aftershocks of the 2022 economic crisis prioritized economic recovery, driving Colombo to seek financial stability and investment opportunities. Simultaneously, Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian Ocean elevated its importance amid intensifying great power competition.

The ambitions of regional powers like India and China, coupled with external disruptions – such as the global pandemic, Russia-Ukraine war, Israel-Palestine conflict, and global recession – have heightened Sri Lanka's vulnerability to external pressures [Padmakumara, 2023; Singh, 2023; TASS, 2024]. Notably, in 2024, reports surfaced of ex-military personnel joining both Russian and Ukrainian forces as mercenaries, testing Colombo's diplomatic dexterity as it sought to balance relations with Moscow while addressing concerns from other international actors over the Ukraine conflict [Agence France-Presse, 2024; Jayasinghe, 2024; Jayathilleka, 2024; Sapkota, 2024]. Additionally, escalating tensions in Gaza triggered security concerns in Sri Lanka, particularly regarding potential threats to Israeli tourists and Israeli-linked interests [Ellis-Petersen & Wipulasena, 2024; Theverajah, 2025]. Despite these pressures, Sri Lanka has continued to assert a degree of strategic autonomy, carefully balancing external influences while preserving core diplomatic relationships [Kugelman, 2024].

4.1. *Balancing India and China*

In 2024, Sri Lanka deepened its engagement with India and the West, carefully navigating its economic vulnerabilities and strategic imperatives. Balancing ties with India and China, however, remained central to Colombo's foreign policy, with active engagement from both actors shaping its decisions.

India maintained a vital role as a key partner, with robust economic and political cooperation. New Delhi's timely assistance during the 2022 economic crisis – amounting to US\$ 4 billion in financing – reshaped its public image in Sri Lanka and helped reaffirm its influence amid China's growing footprint. High-level diplomatic visits underscored these strengthened ties. Indian External Affairs Minister visits in June and October 2024, along with National Security Advisor Ajit Doval's August visit for the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC) founding documents, highlighted deepening cooperation. In reciprocation, former President Ranil Wickremesinghe visited India in June 2024 for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's swearing-in ceremony. Prime Minister Modi is scheduled to visit Sri Lanka in April 2024.

Bilateral initiatives expanded to infrastructure and financial connectivity. In February 2024, Sri Lanka and India launched Phase IV of the Indian Housing Project, "Bharat-Lanka," constructing 10,000 homes for plantation workers. The same month, India's Unified Payment Interface (UPI) system was introduced in Sri Lanka, boosting financial integration (Media Centre, 2024). Further cooperation spanned energy and port development, including the renovation of Kankesanthurai Port with an Indian grant of USD 61.5 million and a trilateral energy pipeline agreement with India and the UAE signed in December 2024 [Asian News International, 2024; The Economic Times, 2024].

Conversely, China maintained a lower profile following Sri Lanka's economic crisis but remained crucial to the country's recovery. High-level visits, such as former Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena's March 2024 trip to China – meeting President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Qiang, and Zhao Leji – reinforced economic and diplomatic ties. President Xi's congratulatory message to President Anura Kumara Disanayake in September further highlighted enduring relations. A significant milestone was the successful debt restructuring agreement with China's Export-Import Bank and China Development Bank, easing Sri Lanka's financial burden and stabilizing ties.

China also demonstrated its continued engagement through major projects and defence diplomacy. Discussions advanced on the proposed US\$ 3.7 billion Sinopec oil refinery, a key energy initiative. On the humanitarian front, China's hospital ship "Peace Ark" visited Colombo in December 2024, delivering medical aid. China's engagement in Sri Lanka is also seen to move towards smaller-scale, community-based projects.

However, Colombo's balancing act has been tested by maritime issues. In January 2024, Sri Lanka imposed a one-year moratorium on foreign research vessels, driven by regional security concerns – particularly India's

apprehensions regarding dual-use vessels like China's Xiang Yang Hong 3 [Behera, 2025; Moorthy, 2024a, 2024b]. As the moratorium neared expiration in December 2024, the newly elected government faced the critical decision of whether to extend, lift, or revise port access protocols – complicated by Sri Lanka's ties to both India and China.

Similarly, disputes arose over resource competition. India's January 2024 application to the International Seabed Authority (ISA) to explore cobalt-rich ferromanganese crusts in the Afanasy Nikitin Seamount clashed with Sri Lanka's claim to the area under its proposed extended continental shelf (Attanayake, 2024). While Sri Lanka eventually allowed the moratorium on research vessels to lapse, the incident highlighted its delicate diplomatic tightrope between fostering partnerships and safeguarding sovereignty. The unresolved cobalt dispute further underscored the maritime dimension of India-China competition and Sri Lanka's strategic dilemmas.

4.2. *Relations with the West*

Throughout 2024, Sri Lanka actively strengthened ties with Western nations, focusing on security, economic stabilization, and governance reforms. Relations with the United States notably advanced, highlighted by the Fifth US-Sri Lanka Partnership Dialogue in Washington D.C. [July 2024], which reaffirmed commitments to regional security, democratic governance, and economic cooperation. Military collaboration expanded via the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise in April 2024, enhancing maritime coordination.

Governance and anti-corruption remained core elements of US engagement. In December 2024, Washington imposed sanctions on individuals implicated in corruption, including a former SriLankan Airlines CEO, emphasizing accountability [Agence France Presse, 2024; Reuters, 2024; Tamil Guardian, 2024]. Earlier, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Verma's February visit to Colombo reinforced US support for Sri Lanka's economic recovery and Indo-Pacific maritime stability (U.S. Embassy Colombo, 2024). The return of the Peace Corps after 26 years also marked a significant boost to people-to-people ties.

Sri Lanka maintained active diplomatic engagement with other Western partners. In September 2024, Foreign Secretary Aruni Wijewardane visited London to discuss economic stabilization and follow-up on Sri Lanka-UK Strategic Dialogue initiatives, signalling continued UK support.

Financial ties with international institutions, particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF), remained pivotal. The IMF's July-August 2024 mission, led by Peter Breuer, reviewed Sri Lanka's macroeconomic progress under the Extended Fund Facility (EFF), underscoring the centrality of multilateral engagement to Sri Lanka's financial strategy.

Sri Lanka benefits from the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) scheme, which grants duty-free access to the EU market for

66% of its tariff lines. Sri Lanka's exports to the EU are valued at around US\$ 1.23 billion. Sri Lanka's human rights records, over alleged human rights violations during the civil war and since, including legislation such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act, continue to be potential issues which could derail this access. This occurs in a context where issues over the differential treatment of Israeli and Russian aggression within the West and international organizations, and President Trump's decision to abruptly terminate US-AID program and impose 44% 'reciprocal tariffs' on Sri Lanka, have led to questions over the legitimacy of Western political engagement and human rights discourse in Sri Lanka.

4.3. Foreign Policy Direction of the NPP Government

Sri Lanka's 2024 political shift under President Anura Kumara Disanayake and the National People's Power (NPP) prompted speculation about the new administration's foreign policy direction. Given the JVP's historical criticism of foreign influence and the lack of a major foreign policy focus during the election campaign, uncertainties surrounded its approach.

Contrary to expectations, the NPP government quickly reaffirmed its commitment to a neutral, non-aligned foreign policy, seeking to balance ties with major global and regional powers [Muthukutti, 2024a; Vidanage, 2024]. President Disanayake's early visits to India and China reflected this strategy. His first official visit to India adhered to longstanding tradition, reaffirming Sri Lanka's strategic relationship with New Delhi. His subsequent January 2025 visit to China underscored Colombo's intent to maintain equilibrium between the two regional giants.

Historically, the JVP criticized India's growing influence, particularly in infrastructure projects like the East Container Terminal and Sampur Project, warning of potential sovereignty erosion. However, following the 2022 crisis, the NPP has adopted a pragmatic approach. Disanayake's February 2024 visit to India signalled a shift toward cooperation, and India's acceptance of the new government was evident [Muthukutti, 2024b; Ratnayake, 2024]. The joint statement following Disanayake's December 2024 visit outlined a comprehensive strategic partnership, spanning economic, security, and cultural dimensions – though concerns linger regarding overdependence, especially in energy, digital infrastructure, and security sectors. The President had pledged to revoke the US\$ 442 million Adani wind power project in Sri Lanka during election campaigns; in February 2025, the Adani Group formally announced its decision to leave the project citing reasons of financial unviability. In April 2025, the Indian PM made his first official visit to Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka subsequently completed a bilateral debt restructuring of US \$1.4 billion, which included converting hundred million dollars of loans into grants and India lowering the interest rates on loans extended to Sri Lanka. Several memoranda of understanding (MoU) were signed, including ones on the implementation of HVDC interconnec-

tion for the import/export of power and cooperation in the development of Trincomalee as an energy hub. The latter project may intensify competition between India and China, as China's state energy company Sinopec secured a deal to construct a US \$3.2 billion oil refinery in Sri Lanka's southern Hambantota port. A bilateral defence pact was also signed, indicating deepening strategic relations.

Similarly, the JVP had voiced strong opposition to projects perceived as compromising transparency and sovereignty, such as the Colombo Port City Economic Commission Bill, fearing it could effectively create a "Chinese province" in Sri Lanka. However, recent developments suggest a softening stance. President Dissanayake's visit to Beijing emphasized "win-win cooperation" and, notably, included Sri Lanka's explicit endorsement of the One China policy – hinting at a deeper strategic alignment. This raises questions about potential overdependence on China.

The maritime cooperation agreement signed with China further complicates Sri Lanka's balancing act, addressing maritime security, environmental protection, and personnel training. While intended to diversify partnerships, it also reignites concerns over how Sri Lanka will navigate India's sensitivities regarding Chinese naval access to its ports [Pethiyagoda, 2025].

5. Conclusion

Sri Lanka's political, economic, and foreign policy trajectory in 2024 reflects a period of significant transformation, shaped by both emerging opportunities and persistent challenges. The electoral victory of the NPP marked a decisive departure from the traditional political establishment, propelled by widespread public discontent with entrenched governance failures and economic mismanagement. However, the NPP's capacity to translate its anti-corruption platform and reformist rhetoric into concrete policy outcomes remains to be fully tested. While initial measures toward promoting accountability have been introduced, deeper structural reforms—particularly in the constitutional and institutional spheres—face delays and political complexities. The weakening of rival parties has consolidated the NPP's political dominance, but the potential resurgence of nationalist could pose significant challenges to its long-term hold on power.

Economically, Sri Lanka's trajectory has been characterized by a cautious but fragile recovery under the framework of IMF-led structural adjustments. Progress in debt restructuring, fiscal reforms, and monetary stabilization has helped restore a measure of confidence in the economy. However, these gains have come at a social cost. Vulnerable communities continue to bear the brunt of austerity measures, while inflation, unemployment, and income disparities persist [Sultana, 2024]. The continued reliance on remit-

tances and tourism underscores the urgency for economic diversification and investment in high-value sectors. For Sri Lanka to achieve sustainable growth, the government must prioritize inclusive development strategies, enhance the ease of doing business, and invest in sectors that foster innovation and long-term economic resilience.

On the foreign policy front, Sri Lanka has adeptly manoeuvred a complex geopolitical environment, balancing economic dependencies with an emphasis on strategic autonomy. Relations with India, China, and Western powers reflect Colombo's pragmatic approach to securing financial assistance, investment, and security cooperation while attempting to safeguard national sovereignty. India's role as a key economic and security partner has grown, while China remains a critical player in Sri Lanka's debt restructuring and infrastructure projects. Engagement with Western powers has centred on governance, economic stabilization, and broader Indo-Pacific strategic considerations. However, Sri Lanka's ability to maintain an independent foreign policy amidst intensifying global rivalries will be a defining factor in its regional positioning and long-term stability.

Looking ahead, Sri Lanka's future trajectory hinges on its ability to consolidate democratic governance, implement meaningful economic reforms, and navigate an evolving geopolitical order. The NPP's tenure will be judged by its capacity to deliver tangible political and economic outcomes, particularly in addressing public expectations for systemic change. Failure to do so may trigger renewed political instability or realignments in the coming years. Likewise, sustaining economic recovery will require balancing fiscal discipline with social equity, fostering investor confidence, and promoting strategic investment in growth sectors. The effectiveness of the NPP government's reforms, the durability of economic recovery, and the resilience of Sri Lanka's diplomatic engagements will together determine its trajectory in the years ahead.

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PAKISTAN 2024: POLITICAL TURMOIL AND ECONOMIC INSTABILITY

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Pakistan's general election, held on 8 February 2024, was marred by allegations of vote manipulation and delays in the ballot counting process. International observers called for thorough investigations to assess the integrity and fairness of the electoral process. Reports indicated the detention of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party leaders, including the ousted Prime Minister Imran Khan, along with their supporters. There were allegations of harassment targeting their relatives and journalists by the military, and the PTI was prohibited from utilising its symbol on ballot papers. Despite these coercive measures, independent candidates affiliated with the PTI secured 101 parliamentary seats. In contrast, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), led by Shehbaz Sharif, did not secure the requisite parliamentary majority to form a government, obtaining only 75 seats. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP), led by Bilawal Zardari Bhutto, secured 54 parliamentary seats, which were insufficient to combine with Sharif's faction to form a government. Protracted negotiations culminated in the formation of a larger government coalition, purportedly endorsed by the military establishment. While alleged military efforts were successful in preventing Khan from returning to power, they were unsuccessful in countering the growing popularity of the PTI and the widespread criticism directed at the treatment of the former Prime Minister and his party.

Protracted negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for an additional bailout programme further exacerbated Pakistan's severe economic challenges. The agreement was contingent upon commitments to implement austerity measures, which adversely affected citizens' everyday lives and contributed to the diminishing popularity of the new government. Pakistan also faced security issues, particularly the resurgence of the Pakistani Taliban in the Northwestern border regions and ethno-nationalist unrest in Baluchistan. Geopolitical tensions arising from cross-border skirmishes with Iran and extensive Chinese investments in the region have compounded these issues. US concerns about proliferation have triggered sanctions on suppliers of Pakistan's ballistic missile program, particularly Chinese firms.

KEYWORDS – China; elections; Iran; non-proliferation; PTI.

1. Introduction

Pakistan's general election was held on 8 February 2024. The electoral campaign presented disturbing similarities to the one in 2018, which re-

sulted in the victory of Imran Khan. At that time, it was alleged that Imran Khan's led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) had secured the elections with the support of the military. It is widely believed that Khan's removal in 2022 followed a rift with the army's top ranks, which turned against the former cricket player due to flaws in his governance, poor economic performance, and open confrontation with the military [Corsi 2024, pp. 393-95]. Khan accused the military of orchestrating his removal through a parliamentary vote of no-confidence in April 2022. Following an assassination attempt in November 2022, he intensified his campaign against the military establishment [Corsi 2024, pp. 358-61]. Similarly, in 2024, it was reported that the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) had secured the support of the military. PTI supporters accused the military of marginalising PTI's key leaders through criminal measures driven by political motives [Schorzman 2018, 6 June; Bukhari 2018, 16 July; Zahra-Malik 2018, 21 July].

The election was marred by widespread public distrust regarding its transparency [*The Guardian* 2024, 6 February; Tharoor 2024, 7 February]. Thousands of PTI candidates had their nomination papers rejected. Khan's allies reportedly encountered significant pressure to dissociate from the party under threat of sanctions on the part of the military, with some being apprehended on various charges. Simultaneously, PTI supporters faced detention and harassment. Court decisions compelled the PTI to nominate independent candidates and revoked the party's electoral symbol [Abbasi 2023, 9 September]. Imran Khan was arrested on charges that rendered him ineligible to run in the election, and media coverage of his trial was severely restricted.

PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif stood a strong chance of securing a fourth term.¹ He returned to Pakistan in October 2023 after spending four years in self-imposed exile in the United Kingdom to avoid serving prison sentences on corruption charges [Corsi 2018, 353-56]. On 8 January 2024, the Supreme Court overturned his conviction and sentence on appeal and waived the lifetime ban on politicians with criminal convictions from contesting elections [*The Express Tribune* 2024a, 9 January].

The electoral race was chiefly dominated by the rivalry between Shehbaz Sharif, Imran Khan, and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the leader of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and son of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and former President Asif Zardari [Niaz 2024, 28 January; *The Nation* 2024, 27 January; Chughtai & Hussain 2024, 3 February; Peshimam 2024, 6 February]. Two days after the election, the PML-N nominated Nawaz's brother and previous premier, Shehbaz Sharif, as the party's can-

1. Sharif's first term extended from November 1990 to July 1993; the second from February 1997 to October 1999; and the third from June 2013 to July 2017 [Ellis-Petersen & Baloch 2024, 5 February].

didate for the prime ministerial position [Khan 2024, 15 February]. Khan and the PTI maintained significant popularity for their stance against a perceived corrupt elite. The party and its imprisoned leader used artificial intelligence-generated footage of Khan in their electoral campaign to encourage supporters to vote. However, the PTI faced challenges in fielding candidates after the Supreme Court ruled against the use of its electoral symbol on ballots. Consequently, many PTI politicians ran as independents and secured more parliamentary seats than any of the other major parties. Lacking a party with a clear majority, the PML-N and PPP formed a coalition government, which also included several minor political parties.

Pakistan is grappling with severe economic stress and has reached a new agreement with the IMF for a fresh US\$ 7 billion bailout program, contingent upon the implementation of various economic reforms. The recent austerity measures introduced by the newly elected government have fuelled growing discontent among the populace, amplifying the PML-N's concerns about the political threat posed by the PTI and prompting further attempts to neutralise Imran Khan and his party.

In a potentially dangerous development in foreign policy, Iran conducted missile strikes in Pakistan's Baluchistan province, reportedly targeting militant strongholds. While Pakistan responded promptly with military action, diplomatic efforts successfully prevented further escalation of the situation.

In June 2024, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif met with Chinese President Xi Jinping to seek additional investments; however, no new commitments were made. China expressed concerns regarding the suboptimal execution of its investments, ongoing political instability in Pakistan, and the rising number of militant attacks targeting Chinese workers. In response to these challenges, Pakistan heightened security around the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a crucial infrastructure and economic initiative designed to enhance connectivity and cooperation between the two countries. Launched as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the CPEC has frequently been targeted by militant groups.

Since the Taliban assumed control of Afghanistan in 2021, Pakistan has experienced a surge in militant violence, primarily from the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an extremist coalition supported by Taliban leaders that frequently conduct cross-border attacks. Islamabad has repeatedly urged Kabul to take action against these groups; however, the Afghan government denies any involvement or responsibility.

Meanwhile, the US has distanced itself from Pakistan, shifting its focus toward strengthening relations with India and imposing sanctions on Pakistan's missile program. These actions have further strained diplomatic relations, particularly in the context of Pakistan's growing connection with China and Iran.

2. *The elections and the coalition government*

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's term concluded on 9 August 2023, paving the way for the establishment of a caretaker government. According to Pakistan's constitutional guidelines, elections are mandated to be held within 60 days following the dissolution of parliament under normal circumstances and within 90 days in the case of an early dissolution. However, citing the latest census data, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) postponed the elections to allow for the redrawing of electoral boundaries. As a result, the elections were rescheduled for 8 February 2024 [Corsi 2024, pp. 262–63]. The opposition and its supporters expressed concerns about the timing of the census data release, suggesting it was being used as a pretext to delay the elections, potentially granting the government – and the military – additional time to influence the electoral environment.

In early January 2024, the ECP announced the status of candidates' nomination papers. Of nearly 26,000 applicants, 3,240 individuals, primarily from the PTI, were disqualified from participating for various reasons [Waqar & Gabol 2023, 30 December; *The News* 2024, 2 January].

Initially, Shehbaz Sharif chose not to run as the PML-N candidate in this election, passing the role to his brother, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Like Imran Khan, Nawaz Sharif had been barred from political activities for life due to a 14-year corruption sentence [Voice of America 2023, 29 November], and only his absence from the country prevented his arrest. In 2023, legislation was passed under Shehbaz Sharif's government, stipulating that disqualifications would only be valid for five years [*The News* 2024, January 2; *Herald Tribune* 2024, 18 May]. The PML-N successfully appealed against Nawaz Sharif's conviction, rendering him eligible for the 2024 elections and resulting in the acceptance of his nomination papers [Meakem 2024, 2 January].

In December 2023, the PTI appointed Gohar Ali Khan as its interim party Chairman, a temporary position designated by Imran Khan pending his release from prison [Hussain 2023, 2 December; Hayat 2023, 2 December]. Gohar Ali Khan, who transitioned from the PPP to the PTI, was previously part of Imran Khan's legal team [Samaa 2023, 29 November]. However, his nomination faced criticism from other founding members of the PTI, who questioned the process and claimed that the selection procedure lacked transparency. As a result, on 22 December 2023, the ECP annulled the intra-party elections and ruled that the PTI could not use its traditional electoral symbol, a cricket bat. The ECP-imposed restrictions prevented PTI candidates from contesting elections under the party's name. Following Khan's ousting, the PTI experienced significant internal discord, leading to the expulsion or departure of many members. Some of those individuals – who remained loyal to Imran Khan – chose to run in the elections as independents [*Business Recorder* 2024, 13 January].

The PTI complained about the perceived unfairness of the electoral environment and alleged biases in the scrutiny process, citing the rejection of almost 3,000 nomination papers from PTI candidates, including its leader Imran Khan, who had been incarcerated since August 2023 [Corsi 2024, pp. 356-61; *Reuters* 2023, 30 December; *The Guardian* 2023, 30 December; *The Express Tribune* 2024, 2 January; *The Express Tribune* 2024b, 9 January; *The Express Tribune* 2024, 15 January; *The Express Tribune* 2024, 16 January; Waraich 2024, 12 February].

Khan continued to galvanise his supporters and lead the PTI from his prison cell. A 2024 Gallup pre-election survey indicated that the PTI held a commanding lead with 42% support, outpacing the PML-N at 20% and the PPP at 12% [Gallup 2023]. Khan's campaign utilised digital technologies to target young Pakistanis, who comprised most of the country's population and a large portion of the PTI's voter base [Jan 2023, 3 November; Shahzad 2023, 18 December; Davies 2024, 4 February]. Additionally, the PTI capitalised on citizens' frustrations with the previous coalition government of the PML-N and the PPP, which had struggled alleviate the escalating economic distress and rampant inflation [Hussain 2023, 31 August]. As a result, PTI supporters turned out in large numbers to vote [NBC News 2024, 8 February].

The elections were marred by violence, allegations of military-orchestrated rigging, intimidation against PTI candidates, and nationwide mobile phone and internet shutdowns. PTI leaders, candidates, and supporters faced a nationwide crackdown in the lead-up to the election, and the results announcement was delayed [Gul 2024, 28 June]. Imran Khan vigorously contested the credibility of the PML-N, leading to international calls for an investigation into potential irregularities [Shweta *et al.* 2024, 11 February]. The PTI disputed the election results, claiming electoral fraud, and presented documents highlighting discrepancies between initial vote counts at polling stations and the official results. A senior Rawalpindi official also admitted to manipulating results [Rehman 2024, 18 February; Shaikh 2024, 22 February; PTI 2024]. In response, the United States House of Representatives passed a resolution urging Pakistan to conduct an independent investigation into claims of irregularities and interference in its 2024 general election [United States Congress 2024, 25 June]. However, Pakistan's lower house of Parliament rejected the US request, viewing it as an attempt at interference [Gul 2024, 28 June].

PTI-backed independent candidates prevailed over those from mainstream political parties, securing 101 seats, while the PML-N obtained 75 seats and the PPP secured 54 seats [‘Election Pakistan 2024’; Election Commission of Pakistan 2024; Government of Pakistan 2024a]. At the provincial level in Punjab, out of 297 general assembly seats (plus 66 seats for women and eight for non-Muslim candidates), independent candidates won 138, the PML-N won 137, and the PPP secured ten seats. In the Sindh Assembly, out of 130 general constituencies (plus 29 seats for

women and nine for non-Muslims), the PPP secured 84 seats, while the independent candidates won 14 seats. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, out of 99 general seats (plus 22 for women and three for non-Muslims), independent candidates secured 91 seats, with the PML-N securing five seats and the PPP four seats. Lastly, in Baluchistan, out of 51 general seats (plus 11 for women and three for non-Muslims), the PPP and the PML-N obtained 11 and 10 seats, respectively, while independent candidates won six seats [‘Election Pakistan 2024’; *Pakistan Today* 2024, 10 February; Election Commission of Pakistan 2024].

With no clear majority winner, the PML-N and PPP - having secured the second and third-highest number of parliamentary seats - formed a coalition government with several smaller parties. On 10 February 2024, senior PML-N leaders announced Shehbaz Sharif as their candidate for prime minister. This choice was attributed to his strong relations with the PPP and his familiarity with the establishment. However, the PML-N won fewer seats than anticipated, with Nawaz controversially losing one seat and winning another, which left him with little option but to withdraw [Khan 2024, 10 February; *Dawn* 2024, 13 February]. The coalition agreement between the PML-N and the PPP was finalised after the PML-N consented to support the PPP’s efforts to secure all the top constitutional positions, including a second five-year term for its leader, Asif Ali Zardari, as president, as well as the roles of speaker of the National Assembly and chairman of the Senate [AP News 2024, 9 March; Shehzad 2024, 9 March; Malik 2024, 10 March; *Herald Tribune* 2024, 10 March]. The finance portfolio was assigned to Muhammad Aurangzeb, a former J.P. Morgan executive who had previously served as the president of Habib Bank Limited. Ishaq Dar, the former minister of Finance, was appointed minister of Foreign Affairs. Despite Dar’s lack of formal diplomatic experience, his appointment highlighted the new government’s emphasis on securing financial assistance from international partners as a key foreign policy goal. The new 19-member cabinet officially took office on March 2024 [AP News 2024, 12 March].

3. *The sidelining of the PTI and the rise of political tensions*

After being largely absent in the 2008 general election, the PTI captured 17% of the votes in 2013 and increased its share to 32% in 2018. As already pointed out, Imran Khan’s 2018 electoral victory was widely perceived as being supported by the military apparatus, and during his tenure from 2018 to 2022, he initially aligned with the military establishment. However, tensions with the army surfaced during Khan’s term, particularly regarding his foreign policy and economic decisions, ultimately leading to the ousting of his administration through a no-confidence motion in April 2022 [Corsi 2024, pp. 391-97].

Since Pakistan's inception, the military has governed directly or exerted significant political control. Following General Pervez Musharraf's resignation in 2008, the military establishment facilitated a transition to civilian rule. However, senior generals have since become increasingly involved in crucial government decisions. Many believe the army seeks to uphold a democratic framework through elections while maintaining substantial influence over civilian institutions. Consequently, prime ministers have been appointed when favoured by the military and removed from office when they lose the establishment's support [Goldbaum 2024, 21 February]. The military's influence intensified further under the PTI administration after 2018 [Siddiqi 2024, 23 February]. Khan asserted that he was removed from office when he began to challenge the military's arrangement that had facilitated his rise to power, and claimed that, after his removal, the new government perceived him as a significant political threat [Behera 2024, 5 February; Yousuf 2024, 5 May; Goldbaum & Masood 2024, 12 July; Corsi 2023, pp. 397-99]. In fact, since his ousting from office, Khan has remained a persistent challenge to the military-dominated political landscape in Pakistan. Allegations of military-backed election interference, the sidelining of the PTI, and Khan's purportedly politically motivated imprisonment have fuelled a growing anti-establishment sentiment [Corsi 2024, pp. 361-68; Ellis-Petersen 2024, 31 January; Campbell 2024, 5 February].

On 20 January 2024, a special court sentenced Khan to 10 years in prison for mishandling a sensitive diplomatic document from Pakistan's then-ambassador to the United States in 2022. On 31 January 2024, Khan and his wife were each given 14-year sentences for corruption related to the retention and sale of state gifts and violations of government regulations during his tenure [Corsi 2024, p. 360]. On 3 February 2024, they received an additional seven-year sentence for violating the country's marriage laws, based on allegations that, under Islamic law, their 2018 marriage had occurred too soon after her divorce [Astier 2024, 3 February].

Khan was subjected to multiple allegations of corruption and administrative mismanagement during his tenure in office; however, many of these accusations were either inadequately supported by evidence or effectively challenged by his legal team. Following his arrest, the judiciary suspended Khan's jail sentences in June and July 2024 related to the illegal acquisition and sale of state gifts, the leaking of state secrets, and the unlawful conviction regarding marriage [Shahzad & Shahid 2024, 4 June; *Al Jazeera* 2024, 13 July]. However, Khan remained incarcerated on other charges, including those linked to violence against Pakistani military facilities following his arrest in 2023. The frequent alternation between rulings against and dismissals of charges involving Imran Khan underscores the complex interplay between Pakistan's legal, political, and institutional frameworks [Davies 2024, 5 August]. These patterns reflect the highly polarized nature of Pakistani politics, where allegations of corruption or abuse of power targeting

prominent figures, such as Khan, are often perceived as politically driven. Analysts have often argued that these charges were unfounded, while the United Nations has stated that Khan had been unjustly imprisoned in violation of international law [*Dawn* 2024, 3 June; *Al Jazeera* 2024, 1 July; *Janjua* 2024, 12 July].

On 12 July 2024, the Supreme Court upheld the PTI's eligibility for additional seats allocated to women and minorities proportionate to the number of general seats the party secured. In line with the court's ruling, the PTI was awarded 23 seats, marking a significant setback for Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's ruling coalition and positioning the PTI as the largest party in parliament. While the coalition government retained a simple majority, it lost the two-thirds majority necessary for constitutional amendments [Mo-mand 2024, 12 July; *Dawn* 2024, 15 July; Afzal 2024, 25 July]. Pakistan's judiciary faces a delicate balance between demonstrating independence and responding to external pressures. The court's acquittals and rulings emphasised the judiciary's assertion of independence from Pakistan's military and intelligence structure, highlighting its role as the last line of defence in a country where the civilian government is perceived to maintain an accommodating relationship with military leadership [Gul 2024, 27 March; Haqqani 2023, 9 August]. On 21 October 2024, the government enacted the 26th constitutional amendment, which expanded its judiciary oversight. Under the amendment, the chief justice of Pakistan is no longer required to be the most senior judge of the Supreme Court. Instead, a Special Parliamentary Committee, which includes proportional representation from parliamentary parties, recommends one of the three most senior judges, allowing the government to influence the selection process significantly. Additionally, the Supreme Court's *suo motu* powers and those of the High Court have been removed. The amendment permits the ruling coalition to appoint the chief justice, leading critics – including opposition parties led by the PTI and legal experts – to argue that it undermines judicial independence and strengthens political power [Shabbir 2024, 16 September; Hussain 2024, 17 September; Ashfaq 2024, 30 September; *The Express Tribune* 2024, 30 September; Baloch and Ellis-Petersen 2024, 21 October; Khan 2024, 22 October].

Political tensions escalated on 10 September 2010, following a large rally organised by the PTI in Islamabad, demanding Khan's release from prison. In response, the government ordered the arrest of several PTI leaders and members of parliament while they were attending house sessions, citing a law prohibiting public gatherings in the capital. PTI leaders faced charges of violating rally regulations, deviating from the designated route, and engaging in confrontations. They threatened to resort to force if Khan was not released promptly [Ahmed 2024, 7 September; Iqbal 2024, 10 September; Hussain 2024, 10 September]. On 27 November 2024, the PTI organised another protest march to Islamabad with similar objectives, which resulted in violent clashes with law enforcement agencies [Regan 2024, 27 November].

4. *The economy*

In April 2024, the IMF approved the disbursement of US\$ 1.1 billion to Pakistan, marking the final tranche of a package finalised in 2023 that provided much-needed financial relief. Inflation, which stood at 38% in May 2023, halved to just over 17% in May 2024 [*Business Recorder* 2023, 1 June; Khan 2024, 3 May]. Import control measures helped to ease the external account deficit and attract interest from foreign investors [Davis 2024, 13 May]. However, with looming debt repayments, Pakistan's economic and financial situation remained precarious. Credit rating agencies indicate that out of US\$ 130 billion in external debt, approximately US\$ 20 billion was due for repayment in the fiscal year beginning in July 2024. According to the IMF, half of the government's income in 2024 will be required to service this debt [Aamir 2024, 17 July].

Pakistan generates approximately US\$ 50 billion annually from exports and foreign remittances but spends around US\$ 70 billion annually on fuel and other imports. The salaried class faces heavy taxation. The struggling economy has sparked demonstrations in Pakistani-administered Kashmir, and farmers protesting the decision to import wheat despite record harvests have forced Islamabad to seek another agreement with the IMF [Kiani 2024, 17 April; Masood 2024, 13 May]. Without reforms to address structural weaknesses and relying solely on external assistance, Pakistan has pursued various strategies to manage its economic crises, including increasing the tax-to-GDP ratio, privatising state-owned enterprises, boosting exports, enhancing remittances, improving the business environment, and attracting foreign direct investment [*Dunya News* 2023, 20 November; *The Express Tribune*, 2024, 17 April; Haider 2024, 28 April].

The new government's swift action in initiating negotiations with the IMF for another loan program - the 24th bailout in six decades - demonstrated the urgency of addressing the external financial deficit and preventing a recurrence of a default scenario [Corsi 2024, pp. 355-58; *The Express Tribune* 2024, 16 April]. In June 2024, the new Pakistani government approved its first budget [Government of Pakistan 2024b; Shukla 2024, 18 July]. The budget was crafted with an awareness of ongoing negotiations with the IMF and the austerity measures necessary to control debt and inflation and secure a new bailout package [Jamal 2024]. The US\$ 68 billion budget aimed for an ambitious target of approximately US\$ 44 billion in tax revenue for the upcoming fiscal year, representing a 40% increase over the previous year. It also included salary increases of up to 25% for government employees, in alignment with austerity goals [Ahmed 2024, 12 June; *The Express Tribune* 2024a, 12 June; *Ibid*, 2024b, 12 June; *Ibid*, 2024c, 12 June; *Ibid*, 2024, 13 June]. Base income tax rates were increased, and reduced subsidies led to power charges for consumers which increased as much as 50% [*DW* 2024, 13 July]. The ongoing economic hardship significantly impacted

citizens' everyday lives, resulting in public discontent and a gradual decline in the coalition government's popularity.

In July 2024, the IMF announced its agreement to sign another Extended Fund Facility (EFF) of approximately US\$ 7 billion for 37 months, following an emergency loan in the summer of 2023 that averted a sovereign debt default amid numerous other challenges [Corsi 2024, pp. 355-58].

Assistance from the IMF comes with specific conditionalities, including raising taxes, reducing subsidies, and increasing interest rates. Consequently, Shehbaz Sharif's government was compelled to commit to implementing several reforms to secure the deal, including a substantial effort to increase the country's tax revenue. To fulfil the IMF's requirements for additional financial support, Pakistan also requested three key funders – China, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates – to reschedule its US\$ 12 billion debt for up to five years [Rana 2024, 4 September; Ansari 2024, 5 September]. The US\$ 7 billion IMF loan announcement bolstered foreign investor confidence, prompting Moody's to upgrade Pakistan's local and foreign currency ratings, citing improved macroeconomic conditions and external liquidity [Salman 2024, 29 August]. The new bailout package was approved on 27 September 2024, with an immediate disbursement of US\$ 1 million [International Monetary Fund 2024, 27 September].

5. *Foreign affairs*

5.1. *Relations between Pakistan and Iran*

The relationship between Iran and Pakistan has become increasingly strained, further exacerbating the Sunni–Shia sectarian divide that emerged following the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and during Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's leadership in Pakistan in the 1980s [Fraiooli 2024, 6 March; Hijazi 2024].

Sistan-Baluchistan is a province in Iran that borders Pakistan's Baluchistan and southern Afghanistan. The Baloch, a predominantly Sunni minority group in Pakistan, constitute the majority in both Baluchistan and Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan. Despite substantial investments from China and India in the ports of Gwadar and Chabahar, the Baloch provinces remain politically marginalised on both sides of the border.

Since the 2000s, Iran has focused on targeting the Sunni militant group Jaish al-Adl («Army of Justice»), which is based in Pakistani Baluchistan. This group, which advocates for Sunni rights and has links to al-Qā'ida, evolved from the terrorist organisation Jundullah after its leader was killed in 2010. Jundullah had been active in Sistan-Baluchistan, conducting attacks on Iranian security forces and civilians.

Pakistan has been grappling with Baloch insurgencies since its independence in 1947. As a result, Islamabad has targeted the hideouts of

the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Baluchistan Liberation Front (BLF), both of which are militant groups with ethnic and, at times, separatist agendas [Chandran 2024, 30 January]. For years, both countries have accused one another of harbouring Baluchi separatist groups along their shared border [Vatanka 2014, 24 October].

On 3 January 2024, during a state commemoration in Kerman for General Qassem Soleimani – who was killed in an American air raid at Baghdad Airport in 2020 – two suicide bombings resulted in over 80 casualties. This attack prompted Iran to launch missile strikes against strongholds of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in northern Iraq and, on 16 January 2024, against bases of the militant group Jaish al-Adl in Pakistani Baluchistan [Adams & Davies 2024, 17 January; *ABC News* 2024, 17 January; *Daily Pakistan* 2024b, 17 January; *The Frontier Post* 2024, 17 January; *The Frontier Post* 2024, 19 January]. Pakistan condemned the violation of its air space, recalling its ambassador in Tehran and suspending all high-level engagements with Iran. Iran reciprocated by recalling its ambassador [Momand 2024, 17 January; *Daily Pakistan* 2024c, 17 January]. Islamabad subsequently launched an intelligence operation named Marg Bar Sarmachar, targeting the BLA and BLF hideouts around the Iranian city of Saravan, near the border with Pakistan [Yousaf 2024, 17 January; *The Frontier Post* 2024, 18 January; *The Nation* 2024, 18 January].

The unprecedented escalation raised concerns; however, Pakistan and Iran quickly reached a rapid de-escalation agreement [*Daily Pakistan* 2024a, 17 January; *Dawn* 2024, 17 January]. The Pakistani Foreign Minister at the time, Jalil Abbas Jilani, and his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, agreed to restore diplomatic relations, with representatives from both governments giving speeches highlighting the close ties between their nations. Reports suggest that China was mediating in this process, while the regional security landscape was a significant deterrent to further escalations, as indicated by official statements [Chandran 2024, 30 January].

As Pakistani–Iranian relations improved, Islamabad approved its natural gas pipeline segment in February 2024. The 2,775 km pipeline linking Gwadar to the Iran border has been in the planning stages for over a decade. While Iran has completed its 900 km section, Pakistan has struggled to secure funding for its 80 km portion and now faces a US\$ 18 million penalty for violating US sanctions on Tehran [Jamal 2024, 26 March]. In fact, despite a commitment to complete the project by 2024, progress has been hampered by the threat of US sanctions [Zofeen 2024, 19 April].

The late Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited Pakistan from 22 to 24 April 2024, to strengthen regional and bilateral relations. During this visit, the two countries signed eight agreements and several Memoranda of Understanding focusing on security, judicial assistance, and establishing a special economic zone [*The Nation* 2024, 22 April].

5.2. *The impact of militancy on Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan and China*

Over the past three years, since the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan in 2021, militant violence has surged in Pakistan. The TTP has escalated its attacks on Pakistani security forces and civilians from its bases in Afghanistan [Janjua *et al.* 2024; Hijazi 2024; Hussain 2023, 21 December; Gul 2024, 11 July]. Islamabad's repeated calls for Kabul to rein in TTP-led cross-border terrorism have been largely ineffectual. In fact, the Afghan government did intensify its ongoing repression of terrorist groups within its borders, but this had the perhaps unintended result of pushing these groups to seek refuge in Pakistan. In response, Pakistani authorities bolstered security for the CPEC, inaugurated in 2013 as part of the BRI, and continued to pressure the Afghan government to act against the TTP [Adeney & Boni 2024, 24 June]. On its part, Pakistan has been implementing a range of additional measures to address this issue, including negotiations with the TTP, domestic counterterrorism operations, the construction of a border fence, and the expulsion of thousands of Afghan refugees to increase pressure on Kabul [Kugelman 2023, 1 November]. Additionally, in March 2024, Islamabad's security forces conducted anti-terrorism operations against militants based in Afghanistan following an attack on a military post in North Waziristan [Gul 2024, 18 March; *DW* 2024, 16 March; Government of Pakistan 2024, 18 March; *Pakistan News Express* 2024, 18 March; *Deccan Herald* 2024, 1 April; Rehman & Goldbaum 2024, 10 July]. The new government of Pakistan escalated the issue by bringing it to the attention of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). During the summit held on 4 July 2024, in Astana, Prime Minister Sharif delivered a speech emphasising the urgent need to address the threat of regional terrorism, advocating for a more proactive role on the part of regional countries. He also announced a counterterrorism campaign, *Azm-e-Istehkam* («Resolve for Stability»), aimed at combating the escalating threat of militancy by seeking support from neighbouring countries [Jamal 2024, 8 July]. This military operation focused on revitalising the implementation of the revised National Action Plan against terrorism, which was originally launched in 2014 to eradicate militancy [Jamal 2024, 25 June]. In December 2024, the Pakistan Air Force conducted airstrikes in Afghanistan's Paktika province, targeting suspected TTP hideouts. Pakistani officials reported that these precision strikes destroyed insurgent training facilities and neutralized key TTP commanders. However, Afghan authorities condemned the attacks, asserting that 46 civilians, predominantly women and children, were killed. This incident escalated tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, with the Taliban warning of potential retaliation and emphasizing the intangibility of Afghanistan's territorial sovereignty [*Politico* 2024, 25 December].

In June 2024, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif met with China's leader, Xi Jinping, in Beijing to seek additional support for energy and infrastructure projects. However, no future investments were pledged, as confirmed

by the joint statement issued on 8 June 2024 [Cash 2024, 7 June; Zaman 2024, 10 June]. While China has not threatened to suspend its investments, concerns have been raised regarding continuing projects in vulnerable areas [Government of Pakistan 2024, 8 June]. Beijing has expressed disappointment with Islamabad over the CPEC due to unexpected delays and poor execution. Although Chinese companies swiftly completed the first phase, progress in the second phase has stalled since 2019. This slowdown can be attributed to Pakistan's political instability, epitomised by four different governments since the inception of CPEC, as well as corruption allegations, bureaucratic inefficiencies, natural disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a balance-of-payments crisis from 2017 to 2023.

The volatile security situation also poses a significant challenge [Shoib 2024, 28 June; Rafi 2024, 16 July; Janjua 2024, 14 August; *The Express Tribune* 2024, 27 August; Hussain 2024, 28 August; Najam 2024, 29 August; Jawad & Ahmed 2024, 7 October]. Chinese-funded development projects and investments under the BRI have increasingly become targets of militant violence. Since its initiation in 2015, the CPEC has brought thousands of Chinese workers to Pakistan, who have faced escalating attacks from various groups, including the Islamic State, the Pakistani Taliban – often in retaliation for the repression of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang – and the BLA [Hussain 2024, 20 March; Gul 2024, 25 March; Saifi & Gan 2024, 27 March; *First Post* 2024, 26 March; Haider 2024, 24 April; Kugelman 2024, 26 June].

5.3. *Pakistan and the US administration*

The US Indo-Pacific strategy serves as the cornerstone of US policy in Asia, first emerging under Donald Trump's first presidential term and primarily targeting India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan ['Remarks by President Trump' 2017, 21 August; Government of the United States 2019, 1 June]. The Biden administration has continued this approach to strengthen relations with most South Asian countries, particularly India, while countering China's expanding influence in the region [The White House 2022, February]. This shift has led to a distancing of the US from Pakistan, especially following the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan and the perceived role of Islamabad in the Taliban's resurgence. As a result, diplomatic ties have cooled, and strategic disagreements have emerged, particularly concerning counterterrorism, regional security, and Pakistan's nuclear and missile programs. In response, Pakistan has increasingly turned to China for military and economic support through initiatives like the CPEC [Mohan 2024, 6 September].

In April 2024, the US imposed sanctions on several entities linked to Pakistan's ballistic missile program, citing concerns over the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction [US Department of State 2024, 19 April]. These sanctions resulted in freezing their assets and interests within the US, requiring reporting to authorities, and extended to any entity that is 50% or more owned by the frozen entities [*Ibid.*]. This action followed a history of

US measures against entities engaged in missile technology transfer to Pakistan, which Washington views as destabilising to regional security, particularly in the context of Pakistan's rivalry with India. This situation highlights a complex and challenging policy environment, especially in light of recent US sanctions on Pakistan concerning its connections with Iran and related missile proliferation issues. Notably, during President Raisi's visit to Pakistan, the Pentagon issued warnings of possible sanctions for those engaging in business with Iran [Khan 2024, 22 April; *The Nation* 2024, 24 April].

In September 2024, the US announced sanctions on Chinese companies involved in supplying missile technology to Pakistan, explicitly targeting the Shaheen-3 and Ababeel missile systems, both capable of carrying nuclear warheads. According to a spokesperson from the Department of State, the Beijing Research Institute of Automation for Machine Building Industry collaborated with Pakistan to acquire equipment for testing rocket motors in these missile systems, with potential involvement in larger missile systems. Similar sanctions had been imposed on other China-based companies in October 2023.

While these sanctions are part of a broader US policy aimed at preventing the proliferation of missile technology, they have further strained diplomatic relations with Pakistan. In Islamabad, the sanctions were perceived as aimed to strengthen Washington's partnership with India while undermining Pakistan's defence ties with China and Iran.

During a press briefing, US Department of State Spokesperson Matthew Miller reaffirmed Washington's commitment to opposing support for Pakistan's ballistic missile program through sanctions and other measures, as well as to strengthen international non-proliferation efforts [*The News* 2024, 18 September].

6. Conclusions

The 2024 general elections in Pakistan highlighted a nation grappling with significant political, economic, and security challenges. Allegations of vote rigging and military interference marred the electoral process, effectively sidelining Imran Khan's PTI. Despite facing restrictions, PTI-affiliated independent candidates emerged as a notable parliamentary force. However, the coalition government formed by the PML-N and the PPP, which allegedly received the military endorsement, struggled to secure public trust due to its association with austerity measures and lacklustre economic performance. Meanwhile, Khan's enduring popularity highlighted a persistent divide between the political elite and the general populace.

The military's pervasive influence in political affairs continued to be a defining characteristic of Pakistan's governance, as evidenced by the military-sponsored marginalisation of Imran Khan and its role in shaping elec-

toral outcomes. Economically, the country remained fragile, heavily reliant on IMF bailouts and stringent austerity measures. Rising inflation, mounting debt burdens, and growing public dissatisfaction further compounded the coalition government's political vulnerabilities.

Security issues, including the resurgence of the Pakistani Taliban and unrest in Baluchistan, contributed to the nation's instability. Strained relations with Iran, Afghanistan, and China exacerbated regional tensions, while the United States continued to sideline bilateral relations with Islamabad.

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KYRGYZSTAN 2021-2024: JAPAROV'S SEIZURE OF POWER AMIDST STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

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This article examines Kyrgyzstan's key historical and geopolitical features, along with the main political, economic, and international developments during Japarov's presidency (2021-2024). The analysis contextualises the country's domestic evolution throughout 30 years of turbulent post-Soviet independence and illustrates its main foreign relations under the slogan of a «multi-vector diplomacy». The article further analyses how under Japarov Kyrgyzstan has rapidly transitioned towards an autocratic model of governance, marked by populist undertones and personalist rule. Three key aspects of Japarov's domestic governance are examined: the expanding role of security services under his ally Tashiyev; systematic restrictions on media freedom and civil society; and efforts to re-traditionalise national symbols. While the Japarov leadership has implemented economic reforms to strengthen state control over the economy with some success, the Kyrgyz economy remains highly vulnerable to international fluctuations, as witnessed by its dependence on remittances. Finally, the article explores changes in Kyrgyz foreign policy under Japarov, who has focussed on strengthening relations with Russia and China primarily. This analysis reveals that relations with Russia remain solid despite ongoing changes, while the growing ties with China still present complex challenges.

KEYWORDS – Kyrgyzstan; authoritarianism; Japarov; Russia; China.

1. Introduction

The least populated state in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan is a mountainous landlocked country, nested between Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China. As the other states in the region, Kyrgyzstan acquired sovereignty just over three decades ago. However, its history and culture run much deeper, developing at the crossroads of an indigenous, millennia-old nomadic tradition, the Russian imperial domination (1876-1917), the following Soviet century (1917-1991), and various other influences that were drawn into the region by its strategic relevance [Jacquesson 2021].

As it happens, Kyrgyzstan's peculiarities are often lost within a mainstream discourse that portrays Central Asia as a monolithic entity and only lingers, if anywhere, on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – the most prominent states in the region [Omeličeva 2014; Lottholz 2022]. Language barriers, geopolitical dynamics, and the small niche reserved to Central Asia in In-

ternational Studies further contribute to the scarcity of works produced on Kyrgyzstan.

Yet since its newly found independence, Kyrgyzstan has exhibited distinctive characteristics. At the international level, due to its geographical positioning and with a long border shared with China, Kyrgyzstan has been at the centre of the new patterns of cooperation and competition between Russia and China. Far from being a mere pawn on the Great Powers' chessboard, Kyrgyzstan has strived to use its limited resources creatively, to balance between different international pressures [Godehardt 2014]. On the domestic front and until 2020, Kyrgyzstan was the one Central Asian state embarking on a democratic trajectory, up to being labelled an «island of democracy» in the region. Although there has been no shortage of political turbulence over the last thirty years, the country allowed for active political opposition, a pluralistic media landscape, and a vibrant civil society [Nourzhanov & Peyrouse 2014].

In 2020, however, Kyrgyzstan entered into a new phase of authoritarianism. In October that year, opposition parties denounced as fraudulent the outcomes of parliamentary elections, which saw the significant victory of the pool of social-democratic parties supporting then-President Jeenbekov; as a result, violent street demonstrations erupted in the capital, Bishkek [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2020, 4 October]. The most radical members of the protest attacked the White House, stormed the prison to free Sadyr Japarov – a popular and charismatic opposition leader – and hailed him as Kyrgyzstan's future president. Legitimised by new elections in January 2021, Japarov and his most important political ally Tashiyev (head of the State Committee for National Security and deputy head of the cabinet of ministers) have since dominated the Kyrgyz political scene. Over the last four years, they have imprinted a decisive authoritarian drift to the country's governance system.

In light of the above, this article pursues two main objectives. First, it sketches the main features of the historical and geopolitical context that surrounds Kyrgyzstan. This is particularly important given that no prior article on Kyrgyzstan has been published in the pages of *Asia Maior*. Section two is devoted to such objective. Then, we will analyse the main political, economic and international developments that have characterised Japarov's presidency (2021-2024). In particular, section three delves into Kyrgyzstan's domestic politics, providing an assessment of the most significant reforms and changes introduced by President Japarov and his government. It also examines the country's main economic data, policies, and trends. Section four overviews Kyrgyzstan's most recent foreign policy decisions. Besides questioning whether Bishkek still pursues a «multi-vector diplomacy», the article dives deep into a key contemporary dynamic: the «three game» among Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and China. The concluding section summarises the main findings and analyses possible developments over the near future.

2. *Historical and geopolitical background: Kyrgyzstan before the Japarov presidency*

The territory of present-day Kyrgyzstan has experienced a complex historical trajectory marked by successive waves of conquest, migration, and cultural transformation. While some historical accounts simplistically suggest that the region once fell under the dominion of the Achaemenid, Seleucid, and Parthian Empires, such claims must be approached with caution. These empires were primarily centred in West and Southwest Asia, and their influence on the territories of modern Kyrgyzstan, if any, was likely limited and indirect – facilitated more through transregional trade routes, such as the Silk Road, than by direct administrative or military control. Nevertheless, the region's strategic location along these routes rendered it a site of cultural and commercial exchange across Eurasia [Beckwith 2009].

In the early medieval period, Central Asia became a dynamic arena for the expansive movements of Turkic-speaking peoples, as well as Arab and later Uyghur populations. These interactions contributed significantly to the gradual Islamisation of the region [Barthold 1956]. The ethnonym «Kyrgyz» has traditionally been associated with a confederation of forty nomadic clans, said to have been unified under the legendary hero Manas. While the *Epic of Manas* constitutes a foundational narrative of Kyrgyz national identity and holds considerable cultural significance, scholarly consensus regards Manas as a mythological rather than historical figure. Furthermore, the supposed etymological connection between the term «Kyrgyz» and the number forty remains debated and unsubstantiated within historical linguistics [Gullette 2010].

Following the Mongol conquest of 1207, the region came under the rule of the expanding Mongol Empire but, in the post-Mongol era, experienced intermittent autonomy under various tribal confederations while facing frequent incursions by neighbouring powers, including the Kalmyks, Manchus, and Uzbeks. By the early eighteenth century, portions of present-day Kyrgyzstan fell under the authority of the Uzbek Khanate of Kokand (1709–1876). However, this control was neither territorially uniform nor politically uncontested [Golden 2011].

Kyrgyzstan's modern history is inseparable from Russian imperial and Soviet rule. The region was incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1876, initiating a period of profound transformation. Russian colonisation significantly altered local population's lifestyle, weakening the nomadic tradition while selectively preserving certain cultural and religious practices. The influx of Russian and other Slavic settlers, who were frequently granted access to the most fertile lands, exacerbated tensions within the local population. These tensions culminated in the 1916 uprising, which was triggered by Tsarist policies mandating the conscription of Central Asian men into labor battalions to support the Russian war effort in World War I. The re-

volt was brutally suppressed, resulting in mass casualties and forcing many Kyrgyz to flee to neighboring Afghanistan and China [Chokobaeva 2014]. Following the Russian Civil War, the region was gradually absorbed into the Soviet state. However, it is important to clarify that a distinct Kyrgyz state did not exist prior to the Soviet national delimitation process of the 1920s and 1930s. It was through this process that the Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast was established in 1924, later upgraded to an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1926, and finally to the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic in 1936.

The early Soviet period was marked by sweeping policies of collectivisation and political repression, particularly during the 1930s. These policies brought severe hardship to the local population, including widespread famine, forced sedentarisation of nomadic groups, and purges of intellectuals and political elites. Despite these disruptions, the Soviet era played a central role in shaping Kyrgyz statehood and initiating structural development. Under the leadership of Razzakov – who served as head of government in 1945-1950 and secretary of the Kyrgyz Communist Party between 1950 and 1961 – important industrialisation policies were initiated in the mining, energy, and transportation sectors, in addition to modernising agriculture [Boron 2024]. Two additional aspects characterised this era: the evolution towards greater religious tolerance of Islam, following the initial persecutions of the 1920s and 1930s; and cultural development. In the 1940s and 1950s, a universal secondary education system was introduced, the Academy of Sciences was founded, and the country's first universities were established, including the Kyrgyz State University [Chotaeva 2016].

The first among Central Asian states to declare independence from the Soviet Union on 31 August 1991, Kyrgyzstan was the only country in Central Asia to elect a new President, Akayev, who was not a direct expression of the country's communist party. In this atypical transition, the new Kyrgyz national identity was shaped by Kyrgyz demands for ethnically-based nationalism, on the one hand, and the desire of ethnic minorities – including many Russified Kyrgyz – to maintain the civic nationalism that had been a hallmark of Soviet identity, on the other hand [Huskey 2003]. This tension played out in language policy, where Kyrgyzstan chose a compromise: Kyrgyz became the state language while Russian retained official language status. Additionally, the relatively liberal policies promoted during Akayev's fifteen-year presidency (1991-2005) contributed to giving the country a pluralistic socio-political landscape and initiating a small, albeit weak, market economy.

This notwithstanding, post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan has experienced a fair share of turbulences throughout its 30 years of independence [Laruelle & Engvall 2015]. It is worth noting that, of the six Presidents who have governed Kyrgyzstan since its independence (namely Akayev, Bakiyev, Otunbayeva, Atambayev, Jeenbekov, and Japarov), half of them have taken or lost power as a result of protests in Bishkek – such as the Tulip Revolution of 2005, the April People's Revolution of 2010, and the political upheaval of

October 2020 [Ivanov 2022]. Each turning point brought with itself significant institutional changes, but notable differences set these events apart. To begin with, the Tulip Revolution saw opposition leaders call for uprisings, united by the objective of ending Akayev's fifteen-year presidency.¹ His successor was identified in a consensus figure, Bakiyev, then leader of the People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan. However, Bakiyev soon proved more interested in marginalising his opponents rather than protecting political pluralism, and soon established himself as the country's new autocrat. The Revolution of April 2010, conversely, emerged as a series of spontaneous and violent demonstrations, with opposition party leaders participating only at a later stage. Once in power, they promoted a constitutional reform that attributed centrality to the parliament, guaranteeing freedom for all political parties to participate in the elections. The reform also set a six-year limit to the presidential term [Marat 2016].

Indeed, in the ten years following these reforms (2010-2020), Kyrgyzstan was characterised by particularly vibrant parliamentary dynamics, such that both the 2010 elections and the subsequent 2015 elections were unpredictable in their outcomes. Finally, the October crisis in 2020 saw a combination of spontaneous protests and organised participation by opposition leaders [Doolotkeldieva 2021, 2023]. The reasons for unrest were rooted in three factors: inadequate management of the Covid pandemic by official authorities, the growing power of organised criminal groups, and President Jeenbekov's underestimation of the crucial role of elections in the Kyrgyz context [Bawa & Singh 2022]. Japarov, emerging as the new leader, demonstrated that he had learned lessons from both the 2005 and 2010 revolutions. Although he presented himself as a figure of national unity, he immediately manifested his intention to promote constitutional reforms aimed at strengthening presidential powers [Engvall 2021, 21 January].

In terms of external relations, throughout Akayev's presidency (1991-2005), Kyrgyzstan implemented a so-called «multi-vector diplomacy» – aimed at balancing between a structural relation with Russia and the cultivation of productive relationships with other international actors, especially the United States and China [Swanström 2014]. The US, for example, maintained a presence in Kyrgyz territory through the Manas air base in Bishkek, operational from 2001 to 2014 [Wang 2019]. Although in the first decade of the new millennium the dynamics of great power competition appeared to be quite strong in this part of the world [Kim & Indeo 2013], a decade later the gradual abandonment of the Afghan dossier by the United States caused Central Asia, including Kyrgyzstan, to descend in Washington's priority list, determining the descalation of tensions among great powers [Leksyutina 2024]. Moreover, the global economic crisis of

1. Notably, Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution followed the Rose Revolution in Georgia (November 2003) and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (November 2004).

2008-2009 severely affected the weak Kyrgyz economy through reduced foreign investment and falling commodity prices. This economic vulnerability represented a crucial turning point for the projection of a greater economic presence of Russia and China in the region [Yau 2020, 17 September].

In the mid-2010s, both Russia and China developed various instruments to increase their engagement with the area. Russia focused on economic and security structures, and promoted the Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU)–which Kyrgyzstan joined in 2015–as part of its effort to consolidate regional economic integration. In the security domain, Russia had already re-established its military footprint in Kyrgyzstan in 2003, through the Kant air base, which it continued to develop as a key outpost under the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) [Dzhuraev 2022, 30 August]. For its part, China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The launch of the BRI in 2013 coincided for Kyrgyzstan with a visit by President Xi (September of the same year) during which the parties elevated their relations to the status of «strategic partnership» [MOFA of the PRC 2013]. In terms of timing, it is therefore unsurprising that Kyrgyzstan's accession to the Chinese project was almost immediate, taking place in December 2013.² Within this framework, it is important to note that already during the 1990s, and throughout the 2000s, Beijing already provided substantial economic incentives and concessional loans for infrastructure projects in Bishkek in exchange for adherence to its security objectives [Chokobaeva & Ninnis 2014].

3. 2021-2024: *Kyrgyzstan's authoritarian drift and vulnerable economy*

Having sketched a brief political history of Kyrgyzstan, the article now moves on to more recent developments, focussing on the first years of Japarov's presidency (2021-2024). In particular, this section discusses the main domestic political developments and economic trends. It will emerge clearly that, under Japarov, the country rapidly slid towards an autocratic model of governance, characterised by populist undertones, personalist rule, and a gradual crack down on freedom of expression. Economically, Bishkek appeared more interested in granting stability rather than promoting development – a policy choice shared across Central Asia and autocratic regimes at large. The main macroeconomic indicators show a positive trend, but structural challenges persist.

2. According to the Green Finance & Development Center of Fudan University, the date of Kyrgyzstan's accession to the BRI is 1 December 2013.

3.1. *Domestic politics*

Japarov's first years in power have been characterised by authoritarian reforms and populist overtones. The most significant event was a constitutional referendum held in April 2021, which ushered into the restoration of a presidential system after a decade of parliamentarism. The new Constitution significantly expanded the powers of the president, eliminating the previously established one-term limit and several other checks-and-balances [Government of Kyrgyzstan 2021, 11 April]. In this process, both local officials and the parliament were stripped of autonomy and authority. While the former are now directly appointed by the president, the latter cannot «speak on behalf of the people anymore» – as the Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers, Edil Baisalov, put it [Masalieva 2023, 21 June]. Furthermore, the new Constitution contained numerous vague and primordialist concepts — such as rule of people, spiritual and cultural values — and concealed an integrated system of censorship, contemplating the possibility of prohibiting events to protect traditional moral values [Toktogazieva 2021, 7 April]. The speed and way this new Constitution was adopted highlighted the persistent fragility of Kyrgyz national institutions, judicial system included. Later in 2021, parliamentary elections saw the majority of votes cast in favour of pro-Japarov parties – thereby strengthening the latter's control [Central Commission for elections and referendums of the Kyrgyz Republic 2021, 15 December].

Three further elements have characterised Japarov's presidency so far: the increasing centrality of security services, particularly the State Committee for National Security, led by the President's closest ally Tashiyev; the crack-down on media freedom and civil society [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2024, 10 October]; and the re-traditionalisation of national symbols [Bekmurzaev 2023, 21 December].

The enhanced importance of security services has manifested in the killing and imprisonment of various actors, from political opponents to organised crime figures. For instance, in September 2023-March 2024, crime boss Kolbayev was killed while broker Matraimov and nationalist Maduramov were arrested [24.kg 2024, 26 March]. In some cases, the Japarov-Tashiyev duo appears to have employed a «catch and release» tactic to intimidate the opponents and restrict dissent; with increasing intensity since 2023, numerous arrests have been made of individuals allegedly suspected of planning coups, who were subsequently released [Government of Kyrgyzstan 2024, 12 November]. More recently, the arrest of the Social Democratic Party leader Sultanbekov on vote-buying corruption charges has caused controversy [Government of Kyrgyzstan 2024, 14 November].

By leveraging power structures, the Japarov-Tashiyev tandem has also consolidated its patron-client network and granted greater financial inflows in support of state and private activities. A flagrant example of this falls under the label of «kusturizatsia»: branded as an anti-corruption initiative, *de facto* it is tantamount to state-led extortion [Ismailbekova 2024].

The practice of *kusturizatsia* allows corrupt officials and businesses to make amend for their crimes by paying a fee to the regime or ceding control over illicit resources to the tandem. Far from being implemented in a transparent manner, this practice ends up institutionalising corruption and informal networks, to the detriment of healthy business practices.

Kyrgyz media, which had distinguished themselves in the region for plurality and freedom, have also been subject to persecution by the secret services and state institutions at large. Since the inception of Japarov's presidency, a Law on «Mass Media», a Law on «Protection from False and Inaccurate information», a Law against «LGBT propaganda» and changes to the Law on «Non-Commercial Organizations» have been emanated, providing the legal background for the repression of free press and public gatherings [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2023, 14 August]. In September 2024, the Ministry of Culture issued a formal warning to Radio Free Europe's Kyrgyz branch for allegedly spreading false information; during the same period, the Supreme Court upheld the decision to dissolve the public foundation behind Kloop, an investigative news agency [Committee to Protect Journalists 2024, 29 August]. A group of journalists working for Temirov Live channel was convicted in October 2024 on charges of inciting public disorder [Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project 2024, 11 March]. Notably, since March 2022 Bishkek has issued a ban on public protests, following pro-Ukrainian demonstrations in front of the Russian Embassy.

Increasingly tense relations between official authorities and radical Muslim communities, primarily concentrated in the country's South, are also worth noting. In 2024, the State Committee for Religious Affairs decreed that religious figures can no longer run in local elections, and religious venues cannot be used for political events without prior approval from authorities. A ban on wearing the *Niqab* in offices and public places has sparked further tensions [AKI Press 2024, 2 September]. These positions may indicate Japarov's apprehension regarding the growing support for the Islamic centre-right *Iyman Nuru* party.

Finally, although older generations still express a certain degree of nostalgia for Soviet times [Ercilasun 2010], President Japarov has initiated a campaign of re-traditionalisation of nationalist sentiments. In January 2024, not without protests, a new version of the Kyrgyz flag was presented, while an update of the national anthem was underway at the closing of this essay, giving less prominence to the independence process of the 1990s in favour of greater emphasis on the millennial history of Kyrgyz culture [Bekmurzaev 2024, 7 November]. Within this process, in July 2024 the President officially recognised five victims of Soviet repression as founders of the modern Kyrgyz state [Kabar 2023, 2 October]. Such decisions took place within a broader effort by Japarov to present himself a «native son» of Kyrgyzstan, respectful of traditional obligations, kinship networks, and the nation's historical grievances [Ismailbekova 2021].

3.2. *Economic policy*

Between 2020 and 2023, Kyrgyzstan's economy experienced significant fluctuations. In 2020, the GDP contracted by 7.15% due to the global pandemic. However, the economy rebounded with growth rates of 5.51% in 2021 and 8.97% in 2022; by 2023, GDP growth slowed to 6.2%. Also GDP per capita saw a recovery from US\$ 1,257 in 2020 to US\$ 1,970 in 2023. Inflation rates varied, starting at 6.33% in 2020 and peaking at 13.92% in 2022 before easing to 10.75% in 2023 ['Kyrgyz Republic'].

These changes have taken place within the framework of economic reforms spearheaded by Japarov, focused on two priorities: strengthening state control over the economy and improving fiscal sustainability. Regarding the former, a landmark decision was the nationalisation of the Kumtor gold mine, one of the largest in Central Asia, which initially boosted state revenues but raised concerns about long-term sustainability [Putz 2022, 28 May]. In terms of fiscal policies, a mix of revenue collection and tax enforcement led to a temporary surplus in 2023. However, projections for 2024 indicate a return to a deficit due to large social spending to support key sectors such as agriculture and energy [Balabushko *et al.* 2024, 7 June].

The Kyrgyz economy was severely affected by the Covid pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Facing these crises, the government implemented price controls and export restrictions on essential commodities, including coal and meat. In particular, the Ukrainian conflict precipitated a severe currency crisis in March 2022, with the Kyrgyz currency (*som*) depreciating by 30% against major currencies. Subsequently the exchange rate remained rather stable, thought concerns emerged regarding market manipulation and informal currency trading [International Monetary Fund 2024]. A further factor facilitating economic recovery was Bishkek's readiness to take advantage from Western sanctions on Russia. Leveraging its position as a transit country, Kyrgyzstan has become a hub for the re-export of European goods to Russia and vice-versa, across a variety of sectors that span luxury goods, agricultural products, industrial machinery, and dual-use technologies [Lahiri 2024, 30 September]. This has allowed for a significant 70% increase in EU exports towards Kyrgyzstan during 2021-2023, which coupled with the growth in value of Kyrgyz exports to Russia from US\$ 393 million (2021) to US\$ 1.07 billion (2022), then peaking at US\$ 823 million the following year [*Trading Economics*; Brooks 2024].

During the same timeframe, Bishkek has resumed long anticipated infrastructural projects. These include the Kyzyl-Ompol titanium-magnetite project in the Issyk-Kul region, the Uzbekistan-financed auto assembly plant in Northern Kyrgyzstan and the implementation of two solar power plant projects in the country's Batken and Talas regions [Government of Kyrgyzstan 2024, 30 September]. More recently, Kyrgyz officials have publicly stated that the work on building the long-planned BRI project, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, is scheduled to begin construction.

A wind farm investment agreement has been reached with Russia's Rosatom ['Rosatom Renewable Energy' 2024, 23 December], adding to the many transport and energy projects already under way.

Against such generally positive background, structural challenges continue to affect the Kyrgyz economy. By the end of 2023, the country's public debt reached 60.3% of its GDP – with China remaining the largest creditor, holding 40% of the external debt [International Monetary Fund 2024]. In addition, Japarov's administration has experienced difficulties balancing social welfare commitments with the need to attract foreign investment and improve economic transparency [OECD 2023, 13 December]. Moreover in 2024, the country's energy sector experienced challenges. Due to rising costs and supply shortages, Kyrgyzstan's dependence on regional imports increased significantly, with trade volumes rising by 28% from neighbouring countries in 2023-2024. Kazakhstan became the largest source of imports (35%), followed by Russia (27%) and Uzbekistan (22%) [Cornell and Shaffer 2024, 4 December]. Finally, the economy remains dependent on gold exports, a growing tourism sector, and remittances from migrant workers in Russia. In the context of tourism, the government enacted measures to liberalise investment regulations in the vicinity of the Lake Issyk-Kul region. This enabled foreign nationals to purchase recreational facilities, while maintaining restrictions on land ownership [Government of Kyrgyzstan 2023, 14 August]. Remittances have remained a crucial part of the economy, contributing around 20.4% of GDP in 2023. However, their share of GDP has fallen considerably since 2021 (32.6%), largely due to a reduced migrant workforce in Russia (see next section).

4. Kyrgyzstan's evolving foreign policy under Japarov

Under Japarov, Kyrgyzstan's «multi-vector diplomacy» was significantly recalibrated, refocussing primarily on strengthening relations with Russia and China. Bishkek continued to engage pragmatically with other actors — as evidenced by the signing of an «Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement» with the European Union in July 2024 and a series of strategic agreements with Turkey; but Kyrgyzstan's primary diplomatic focus has narrowed, compared to before 2021. This reorientation is particularly evident when looking at the participation of Bishkek in various multilateral fora – with Kyrgyzstan playing an active role predominantly within the Central Asian Heads of State Summit, the BRICS group, the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). President Japarov's speeches at recent gatherings of these forums have underscored this strategic realignment [24.kg 2023, 19 May; 24.kg 2024, 24 May]. At the regional level, significant progress has been made in border demarcation agreements, with Kyrgyzstan signing

treaties with Uzbekistan in January 2023 and Tajikistan in September 2024 [Imanaliyeva 2023, 27 January; Government of Kyrgyzstan 2024, 4 December]. Given the strengthening of ties with Russia and China in recent years, the remainder of this section provides an analysis of Kyrgyzstan's relations with these two powers.

4.1. *Changing but solid: Kyrgyzstan-Russia relations*

Japarov's rise to power was originally looked at with scepticism by the Kremlin, which granted generous support to his predecessor. Japarov did not have any meaningful pre-existing ties with Moscow, and the way he ascended to power triggered Russian anxieties of a new «colour revolution». Notably, the Kremlin did not invite Japarov to the 2021 Victory Day celebrations in Moscow, while extending a formal invitation to the President of Tajikistan, who was the only Central Asian leader officially in attendance. In a context where border clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had just reignited, such choice resonated in Bishkek as a clear message of disapproval. In retribution, Japarov did not attend a series of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) events throughout 2022 [Mashrab 2023, 1 June].

This rough start, however, did not compromise relations irredeemably. Several statements from both sides have stressed the desire to hold mutually beneficial relations. Since the onset of his term, Japarov has emphasised the importance of Russia as Kyrgyzstan's main strategic partner, particularly in the security domains [Sharshenova 2021, February]. Likewise, the Kremlin has tributed Bishkek with high regards, showing its appreciation for Japarov's work to grant stability to his country, and often referring to Kyrgyzstan with words belonging to the semantic group of «family» and «friendship» [Keyword search]. Rhetoric aside, two main factors contributed to the stabilisation of bilateral relations.

First, Russia's deep penetration into Kyrgyzstan's social, political, and economic spheres forced Bishkek to downsize its criticism of Moscow. Russia remains Kyrgyzstan's main trade partner and source of foreign direct investment [Data]. The Russia-Kyrgyzstan Development Fund continued pumping Russian money into a range of local projects. Moscow owns Kyrgyzstan's principal gas company, is the main supplier of oil products and operates in the country with more than 800 companies. Notably, Kyrgyzstan's GDP is composed up to one third by the remittances of migrants working in Russia [International Monetary Fund 2024]. Furthermore, Russia maintains a military presence in Kyrgyzstan through the Kant Air Base, which hosts the air component of CSTO's Collective Rapid Deployable Forces. Together with the base in Tajikistan, the Kant infrastructure grants Russia a power-projection foothold in the wider Central Asian region, up to the Middle East. It also reassures Kyrgyzstan vis-à-vis potential domestic and international threats, while facilitating the training of Kyrgyz armed and security forces

by Russian specialists. Finally, Kyrgyzstan is kept steadily within the Moscow-centred *russskij mir* (Russian world) from a cultural perspective. A host of public diplomacy initiatives, encompassed by the Russian colonisation of the Kyrgyz media space, contribute to keeping societal relations tight; institutions such as the Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots in Kyrgyzstan provide platforms for consolidating a positive image of Russia.

Second, from the Russian side, the repercussions of the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 imposed the need to foster new relations across the Global South, while reinforcing ties with traditional partners [Averre & Fasola 2024, May]. In Central Asia, Russia's war-mongering behaviour raised diverse reactions, with Kyrgyzstan being a peculiar case [Arynov & Sharipova 2024]. In February 2022, Japarov made cautious statements about the outbreak of the war, emphasising that «Perhaps [the Russian invasion] was a forced measure to protect the peaceful population of the territories of Donbas, where a large number of Russian citizens live» [Japarov 2022, 22 February]. He also declared Kyrgyzstan was ready to stand by Moscow «for 300 more years» [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2023, 20 August]. One month later, when it became clear that Russia would not achieve a swift victory, Bishkek declared its neutrality [24.kg 2022, 9 March]. Though the Kyrgyz population seemed not to blame Russia for the war [Chapman & Zhandayeva 2023], the volatility of Japarov's position reconfirmed the urgency to Moscow to reinforce its authority in the country. Consequently, Russia doubled down on its diplomatic efforts. Almost all members of the Russian Security Council have visited Central Asia since 2022 and Putin personally visited all five countries in 2023 – for the third time since he became president. Notably, Putin's trip to Kyrgyzstan in October 2023 marked his first foreign visit since the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued a warrant for him, thereby sending a clear message of pacification to Bishkek. Besides reconfirming economic and security ties, Moscow has increased its support in the socio-cultural field. In early 2024, Russia announced plans to construct nine Russian-language schools in Kyrgyzstan by 2029, at an overall cost of US\$ 5.5 million [TASS 2024, 16 October].

Overall, Russia appears to have strong «staying power» in Kyrgyzstan. However, two critical issues might impact the relationship between Moscow and Bishkek. First, since the Ukraine war and especially due to the terrorist attacks in Moscow (Krokus City Hall, March 2024; killing of General Kirillov, December 2024) – both allegedly involving Central Asian citizens – a new wave of discrimination has impacted on Russian relations with the region. As a security measure, Russia has decided to limit free movement within the Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU), banning many Central Asian migrants, including Kyrgyz ones, from entering Russia and further complicating bureaucratic procedures for legal work. Moreover, labour migrants from Central Asia are also experiencing a new wave of police abuse [Pannier 2024, 13 August]. As a consequence, Central Asian migrants have become more

exposed to poverty, crime, and radicalisation, and for many Kyrgyz people Russia is not a viable work destination anymore. Bishkek estimated that about 587.000 Kyrgyz citizens lived and worked in Russia in 2022; by the summer of 2024, that number had gotten down to 411.000 individuals [Rickleton 2024, 18 December]. Should this trend continue over the long term, not only the role of Russian remittances in the Kyrgyz economy would shrink, but also the social bond between Russia and Kyrgyzstan could weaken.

Second, the Ukraine war facilitated the spread of a powerful decolonisation narrative across Central Asia. For instance, Kyrgyz and Kazakh elites have made public attempts to move the narrative of the Great Patriotic War away from its traditional Russian focus, underlining the sacrifice of their peoples, too. In the summer of 2024, Kyrgyzstan announced the demolition of the Soviet-era Panfilov Division Museum – provoking Russian ire, albeit the monument had been abandoned decades earlier [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2024, 13 October]. Most notably, Kyrgyzstan's National Commission for the State Language and Language Policies recently announced that Kyrgyzstan could switch from Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet. Perceived as a move to distance Kyrgyzstan from Russia, Moscow retaliated by suspending the import of select Kyrgyz products [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2023, 21 April]. Such decolonisation narrative has not compromised bilateral relations yet. Significantly, surveys show that Kyrgyzstanis are less inclined than Kazakhs to consider Russia's actions in Ukraine as unjustified [Chapman & Zhandayeva 2023]. However, over the long term, these issues could create fractures with Russia, facilitating the reorientation of Kyrgyz foreign policy towards China.

4.2. Booming yet difficult: Kyrgyzstan's relations with China

In the 32 years since the establishment of their diplomatic relations in 1992, China and Kyrgyzstan have gradually enhanced the status of their relationship. Four key moments stand out during this period. In 2007, the two countries signed a declaration expressing their intention to invest in further deepening their relations. In 2013, the two countries established a «strategic partnership» [MOFA of the PRC 2007]. In 2018, they elevated their relations to a «comprehensive strategic partnership» [MOFA of the PRC 2018]. Finally, in 2023, they signed a «comprehensive strategic partnership in the new era» [MOFA of the PRC 2023]. In recent years, on multiple occasions, delegations comprising local political leaders from various regions (Osh, Talas, Issyk-Kul, and Chuyh Oblast) visited China and signed twinning and friendship agreements with Beijing [Chengdu Daily 2023, 26 October].

The strategic rationale underlying China's interest in Kyrgyzstan can be summarised as follows: firstly, to promote security and development in areas adjacent to the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang (XUAR); sec-

ondly, to gain access to the country's resources; and, thirdly, to develop new markets for infrastructure construction by Chinese companies [Godehardt 2014]. This is particularly evident in the wake of the BRI's inception in 2013, when Beijing sought to position itself as Kyrgyzstan's primary diplomatic partner [Muratalieva 2023]. On 9 July 2024, the Chinese state-controlled news outlet *People's Daily* published a 20-minute documentary in which the Chinese Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, Du Dewen, articulated the significance and potential of the BRI in Kyrgyzstan with considerable emphasis [*People's Daily Online* 2024, 9 July]. Indeed, even prior to its accession to the BRI in 2013, Kyrgyzstan had already demonstrated its support for China's strategic priorities, including Taiwan and Xinjiang [*AKI Press* 2007, 14 August]. Nevertheless, since Kyrgyzstan's accession to the BRI, Bishkek has augmented the vigour and unreserved nature of its support [*AKI Press* 2019, 13 June; *People's Daily* 2023, 25 October].³

China often characterises Kyrgyzstan as a politically unstable and anarchic state, where ethnic tensions, endemic corruption, and terrorism continue to pose potential threats [Leksyutina 2024]. However, an examination of Chinese scholarly analyses and media coverage reveals two important developments. Firstly, it can be observed that Chinese media has consistently and increasingly invested in covering both international and domestic political developments in Kyrgyzstan [*Xinhua Daily Telegraph* 2005, 28 March; *Guangming Daily* 2006, 6 July; *People's Daily* 2021, 28 November]. In recent years, Beijing has initiated a targeted campaign to integrate its content into Kyrgyz media, establishing agreements for an enhanced local media presence (including *Xinhua* and *Weibo*) and increasing its content sharing on Russian and Kyrgyz social media platforms [Yau 2022; Yau 2023]. The second observation is derived from China's apparent objective to expedite the development of Sino-Kyrgyz relations, particularly following Japarov's ascension to power in the wake of the 2021 elections. This is corroborated by a plethora of Chinese academic journal publications that have highlighted Japarov's implementation of political, economic, and social reforms [Tao 2021; Guo & Jia 2023] and his interviews in Chinese media outlets [*People's Daily* 2022, 5 September].

Nevertheless, China continues to encounter obstacles in its efforts to cultivate favourable perceptions and understanding among both the Kyrgyz elite and the general population [Owen 2018; Deng 2022]. To illustrate, data from the Central Asia Barometer (CAB) indicate a steady decline in positive public opinion towards China among respondents in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan over the five-year period between 2017 and 2021 [Muratalieva 2023]. As noted by a Kyrgyz researcher, there appears

3. One single episode contradicts Kyrgyzstan's support to China's strategic priorities. Following the publication of the 'Xinjiang papers' in November 2019, Bishkek decided not to sign the letter addressed to the UN Human Rights Council expressing support for China's policies in Xinjiang [Ramzey & Buckley 2019, 16 November].

to be a schism within Kyrgyzstan: while political leaders espouse a growing affinity for China, opposition leaders, traders, and large segments of the public tend to hold more sceptical or negative views [Shailoobek 2021].

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 represented a further significant turning point. As some scholars have observed, it may represent an opportunity for China to increase its interference in the region. As reported by the General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China, the trade turnover between Beijing and Bishkek increased by 26.8% during the initial six months of 2023 in comparison to the corresponding period of the previous year [Ozat 2023]. Conversely, the diminished Russian presence in the region gave rise to two distinct concerns for Beijing. Primarily, it represented a potential source of instability in an area of vital importance to China as far as security and stability are concerned [Sun 2023]. Secondly, it created an opportunity for other actors, including Western states, to intervene and offer an alternative to China [Zeng & Pan 2023].

5. *Conclusions*

The political history of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan reveals a striking duality – whereby distinctive features, such as a pluralistic political system, a relatively free press, and a dynamic civil society have coexisted with traits shared across Central Asia, including political path dependence⁴ and limited resources to enact socio-economic change. Since Japarov's rise to power in 2021, the latter traits have gained prominence. Kyrgyzstan has shifted away from the previous democratic path, expanding presidential powers while reducing civil and political rights. Increased control over state institutions, restrictions on media freedom, and suppression of political opposition have been the hallmarks of this authoritarian turn. Japarov's populist governance has also attributed an unprecedented centrality to secret services, whose control over society is tightening. Moreover, religion and culture have become points of contention and triggers of protest. Highlighting the enduring volatility of Kyrgyz politics, on 16 December 16 Prime Minister was dismissed amid a fraud scandal [President of Kyrgyz Republic 2024, 16 December].

This article has also pointed out that, although the economy has recovered from the pandemic and benefitted from the Ukraine war, structural fragilities persist. National debt has remained substantial, as much as Kyrgyzstan's dependency on external actors for basic needs (e.g., energy supply). Importantly, the downward trend of remittances from Russia

4. Path dependence is a theoretical concept that explains how initial policy choices, institutional arrangements, or historical events create patterns that persist over time, making alternative paths increasingly difficult or costly to pursue [Pierson 2000].

was providing ground for mid-term macro-economic instability. Regarding foreign policy, this article has noted that, under Japarov, Kyrgyzstan has abandoned or at least reduced the scope of its traditional «multi-vector diplomacy» – favouring ties with Russia and China primarily. The analysis of Kyrgyz relations with these two powers reveals the solidity of the relationship with Moscow despite some significant changes, while the partnership with Beijing has been growing but was still facing important challenges.

Over the mid-term, it will be important to monitor the ability of Japarov's administration to keep social peace via stabilising economic reforms and institutional control, amidst a crackdown on political freedom and civil rights. The dismissal of the Prime Minister due to an alleged fraud scandal, in December 2024, seems to point to the continuation along an authoritarian path, wherein the President reshuffles other institutions in accordance with self-serving interests. Historically, however, civil unrest and regime change have erupted swiftly in Kyrgyzstan, so the consequences of individual policy choices might defy Japarov's assessment and trigger political instability, rather than tightening his grip on power. Internationally, the key dynamic for Kyrgyzstan will remain «three game» with Russia and China. Whether the two actors will engage in greater competition over Central Asia or cultivate complementary roles depends largely on factors exogenous to the region. Bishkek does not have either the political will or the structural resources to break established dependency relations; however, it might have the chance to play on the rivalry between Russia, China, as well as Turkey, the US, and the EU to exact greater concessions from each one of these players.

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ARMENIA 2024: QUO VADIS YEREVAN? THE DIFFICULT PATH OUT OF THE RUSSIAN TRAP

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The last stage of the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh shook Southern Caucasus politics at its very foundation. The traditional parameters used for assessing and deciphering regional politics have been upended, as the alliances and alignments developed over the previous thirty years have collapsed and, in many ways, have being overturned. Moreover, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine only adds uncertainty to an already unpredictable regional scenario. At the heart of the regional upheavals lies the crisis of the decades-old alliance between Armenia and Russia, around which Yerevan had built its entire security policy. As a consequence, its failure to function during the Karabakh war left the country almost defenseless in the face of Azerbaijan's military might. As over-dependence on Moscow turned into vulnerability, the diversification of Armenian foreign and security policies became an imperative with a view to ensure the country's resilience to external shocks. The article examines Yerevan's attempt to escape from the multifaceted «Russian trap» and explores the consequences and constraints of this endeavor on both international and domestic levels.

KEYWORDS – Armenian foreign policy; Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; Southern Caucasus; Russia; European Union.

1. Introduction

The recent evolution and the epilogue of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh has profoundly altered the parameters of regional politics in the South Caucasus. In the phase between the 2020 «44 Days War» and the September 2023 Azerbaijan's recapture of the enclave with an «anti-terror operation», resulting in the masse escape of the local Armenian population and in the dissolution of the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh, the alliances and alignments developed over the previous thirty years have collapsed or, in many ways, have being overturned. Moreover, the upheaval in South Caucasus regional politics resulted from the shifting parameters of cooperation between local actors and external powers as much as from the altering patterns of interactions among external powers themselves. That is, upheavals in the year under review cannot be fully understood if not viewed in relation to the broader framework defined by the conflict in Ukraine, which rekindled power competition in the EU-Russian «shared neighborhood» and enhanced local actors' strategic

value along with their ability to extract benefits from competing powers. The regional upheavals went as far as suggesting to observers the end of Moscow's «near abroad» [de Waal 2024] or the end of «post-soviet» era and studies [Pilibossian & Nersisyan 2024, 17 December; Aslund 2023, 4 January].

The turmoil in the Armenian-Russian alliance provides a prime illustration of the above-described trend. A traditional keystone of regional politics, with deep historical roots [Frappi 2022; Suny 1993], the alliance entered a spiral of crisis as a result of the war in Karabakh and, particularly, of Moscow's lack of support during the last stage of the conflict. As a matter of fact, Russian inaction in the face of Azerbaijan's military initiative – if not complacency with the aggressor, as some suggest [Sukiasyan 2024, p. 10] – was one of the key ingredients in Baku's recipe for success [Frappi 2021, p. 26]. Russian inaction, in turn, exposed the contradiction inscribed in Yerevan's over-dependence on a markedly asymmetric alliance or, as the chief of the Security Council, Armen Grigoryan, put it, the mistake of «putting all the security eggs in one basket» [Civilnet 2024, 20 May]. Thus, the last stage of the war finally showed how Yerevan's overreliance on the alliance with Moscow had made Russia simultaneously the main guarantor of and the highest threat to Armenian national security [Shirinyan 2019].

On this backdrop, the present article aims at deciphering Yerevan's attempt to escape the «Russian trap», understood as the all-encompassing asymmetric yet unreliable alliance to which Armenia had long delegated the primary responsibility for its own security. In particular, the article aims at framing the scope and the limits of the current spat in Armenia-Russia relation. It posits that, consistently with Armenia's minor power status, escaping the Russian trap chiefly entails the effort to enhance the country's resilience to external shocks by downgrading the over-dependency on Moscow and the resulting vulnerability. Consequently, escaping the Russian trap essentially means investing in the diversification of foreign and security policies. In no way does this mean breaking off relations with Moscow, something that would be unfeasible due to both the close interrelation among the various layers of regional politics and the striking systemic uncertainties. After all, Armenia decisionmakers seem to be aware of the limitations inscribed in the country's positioning in the international hierarchy of power as well as the dangers caused by the increasing degree of systemic unpredictability. In Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan words: «Small states strive to navigate the rough ocean [of unpredictability] as safely as possible, having in front of them the imperative to protect and preserve their own statehood, sovereignty, and territorial integrity» [RA 2024, 10 September]. Borrowing words from the chairman of the Center for Political and Economic Strategic Studies in Yerevan Benjamin Poghosyan, the new course of Armenian policies walks a difficult tightrope, as it entails being «anti-Russian enough to get something from the West and not anti-Russian enough to burn all the bridges with the Kremlin» [The Economist 2024, 1 August].

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section it introduces the diversification attempt pursued by the Armenian government by scaling down the ties with Russian Federation, on the one hand, and by enhancing dialogue and cooperation with the newly discovered partners in the Euro-Atlantic area, on the other. In the successive sections, it takes stock of the external and internal repercussions and limitations that constrain the diversification attempt. Accordingly, in the third, fourth, and fifth sections focus respectively on the regional, economic, and domestic domains of Armenia's policy.

2. Armenian spat with Russia and the search for alternatives

The September 2023 Azerbaijani military takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh represented a clear watershed in Armenian perception of the alliance with Russia. Already on the eve of the «anti-terror operation», Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan had denounced the «strategic mistake» Armenia had made in depending on just one partner in security matters [Osborn 2023, 3 September]. After that, the alliance started to be portrayed not only as ineffective, but also as a «threat to the national security and territorial integrity of Armenia», due to the failure to meet its responsibilities [*Armenpress* 2024, 28 February]. Thus, while Yerevan's complaints against Moscow's non-compliance to the alliance's duties had occurred regularly since the 44 Days War – and particularly after the September 2022 attack on Armenian territory, vainly invoked by the government as a *causus foederis* [*JAMnews* 2022, 13 September] – it was only over the course of 2024 that Yerevan took the first concrete steps aimed at distancing Armenia from Russia both at bilateral and multilateral level, progressively closing the doors of cooperation which has previously left open.¹

On a multilateral level, scaling back the security ties with Moscow meant primarily «freezing the relations» with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) [Perelman 2024, 22 February]. CSTO, the traditional cornerstone of Russia-driven security cooperation in the former Soviet Union territory, had been joined by Armenia since its very inception, in 1992. Freezing the relations with CSTO meant, in turn, not contributing to the Organization's budget, not joining its summits, and not taking part in its activities, including military drills [RFE/RL 2024, 8 May]. Moreover, confronted with CSTO legal argument for non-intervention in the Arme-

1. In spring 2023 there were still discussions about the possible deployment of a Collective Security Treaty Organization mission along the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Pashinyan himself openly announced the government readiness to accept border observers from the organization [*Civilnet* 2023, 20 April].

nian-Azerbaijani conflict,² by the end of the year Pashinyan declared that the relations with the Organization had passed the «point of no return» [*Civilnet* 2024, 4 December], signalling the *de facto* withdrawal from the organization.

At a bilateral level, security ties with Moscow were chiefly curtailed by downsizing the presence of Russian troops in Armenia. Consistently with a request issued by Yerevan in early March, by the summer Russian border guards completed the withdrawal from the Zvartnots Airport, ending a 32-year period of controlling Armenia's air border [*JAMnews* 2024, 1 August]. Moreover, following a Pashinyan-Putin meeting at the Kremlin in early May, an agreement was reached for the withdrawal of Russian border troops deployed without a clear mandate after the 44 Days War along the border with Azerbaijan – i.e., in the Vayots Dzor, Tavush, Syunik, and Gegharkunik regions – as well as in the Ararat region [*JAMnews* 2024, 6 June]. The move was highly symbolic in nature, as the common patrolling of the borders has been one of the key drivers of Moscow's policy in its near abroad ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Yet, the merely symbolic nature of the withdrawal results from the enduring presence in Armenia of Russian military contingents. Besides Federal Security Service guards still patrolling Armenia's border with Turkey and Iran, Russian contingents are still deployed at the Russian 102nd military base in Gyumri, and 3624th Airbase in Erebuni Airport, in accordance with a 2010 agreement due to expire in 2044 [Nazaretyan 2021, 4 March].

The loosening of Armenian-Russian security ties has been also accompanied by symbolic misalignment gestures in relation to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Reversing a balanced approach kept since the outbreak of the hostilities, at the end of May Armenia's Ambassador to Ukraine paid a visit to Bucha where, besides delivering medical assistance, he lit candles at a memorial to the city residents killed following the invasion, in a gesture dubbed by Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as «overtly unfriendly» [Azatutyun 2024, 10 June]. As an «unfriendly step» was also decried by Russian authorities Armenia's decision to join the International Criminal Court [*France24* 2024, 1 February], which had previously indicted Russian President Vladimir Putin for alleged war crimes and issued an arrest warrant. The gesture, while primarily motivated by the need to provide Yerevan with international legal tools aimed at holding Azerbaijan responsible for potential war crimes [Martirosyan 2023, 4 October], was nonetheless interpreted as symptomatic of the dramatic weakening of the close and consensual relationship previously enjoyed with Russia [Fridrichová & Kříž 2024, pp. 2, 5].

2. During the November 2024 CSTO meeting in Kazakhstan, Putin maintained that Armenia's request for intervention was groundless, as there was no external attack against Armenia «because Armenia did not recognize Karabakh as an independent state, and certainly did not include Karabakh in its state perimeter». No mention was done to the September 2022 shelling of Armenian territory from Azerbaijan [Barseghyan 2024, 29 November].

Actors in the Euro-Atlantic area have been quick to respond to Armenian foreign policy diversification needs and calls for improved cooperation. This was particularly the case with the European Union, as Yerevan started flirting with the idea of joining the block in the future. «Many new opportunities are largely being discussed in Armenia nowadays – Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan declared in early March – and it will not be a secret if I say that includes membership in the European Union» [TRTWorld 2024, 8 March]. Just few days after Mirzoyan's overture, the European Parliament – which in fact never failed to make its political support for Armenia explicit – approved by an overwhelming majority a resolution welcoming Yerevan's expression of interest for EU membership as setting «the stage for a transformative phase» in bilateral relations. Significantly enough, the resolution also praised Yerevan's resolve «to decrease its security dependence on the Russian Federation and include new players in its security mix», while decrying Moscow's attempts «to undermine Armenian democratic credentials» and «spreading chaos and destabilization» [EP 2024, 13 March, p. 5, 2]. Just one month before, Josep Borrell, at that time EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, in a press briefing with Mirzoyan, had announced the decision to launch work on an «ambitious» new EU-Armenia Partnership Agenda aimed at sending «strong signal of our mutual interest in a new strategic phase in our relations», including, inter alia, visa liberalization talks [EEAS 2024, 13 February]. The visa liberalization talks, saluted as «a recognition of Armenia's efforts in strengthening its ties and shared values with the EU», started in September 2024 in accordance with the decision taken by the Council in mid-July [EC 2024, 9 September]. Overall, the so called «resilience and growth plan for Armenia» entailed a € 270 million grant to the country for 2024-2027 [EU 2024, p. 1].

EU was not alone in its attempt to support Armenian diplomatic diversification and economic development strategy. In April a trilateral high-level meeting with Pashinyan was jointly hosted by the EU and the US, exhibiting significant alignment on the effort «to stand shoulder to shoulder by Armenia» [DoS 2024, 5 April]. On its part, the US, besides increasing the level of bilateral assistance aimed at supporting the country's economic resilience and strengthening democratic institutions, announced in June the intention to upgrade the status of the US-Armenia Strategic Dialogue launched in 2022 to the level of Strategic Partnership, as to enhance a structured approach to multifaceted bilateral cooperation [DoS 2024, 11 June].

Quick responses from western interlocutors came also in the security cooperation domain, thereby addressing the most urgent Yerevan's need for diversification of international partnerships. That is, addressing the need to fill a «security gap» resulting from two main causes. The first was the failure of the «Diplomatization of Security» strategy pursued after 2022, aimed to resort to diplomatic pressure to deter Azerbaijani military initiatives [Kopalyan 2022]. The second was the *de facto* cessation of arms

supplies from Russia, despite the procurement deal signed in 2021 [*Reuters* 2023, 24 November].

France has been at the forefront of Euro-Atlantic efforts aimed at supporting Armenia's military deterrence needs – which also benefited from an increased cooperation with India.³ In February, in parallel with a Pashinyan's highly symbolic trip to Paris,⁴ French Minister of the Armed Forces Sébastien Lecornu paid an unprecedented visit to Yerevan. Following up an agreement signed in October 2023 for the supply of anti-aircraft radar systems and a memorandum of understanding on the future delivery of French-manufactured military equipment [*Armenpress* 2023, 24 October], during Lecornu's visit an arms procurement contract was signed, while an agreement aimed at training Armenian military personnel was reached [Bedevian 2024, 22 February]. In addition, since a June visit to France of a delegation led by Defence Minister Suren Papikyan – when a new agreement on the purchase of a modern artillery system was signed – Yerevan and Paris started discussing the possibility to widen the scope of military-technical cooperation with a view to support Yerevan's plans for reform of the defence sector [*JAMnews* 2024, 19 June]. Eventually, bilateral cooperation reached its apex in December 2024, with the signing of a Defence Cooperation Program for 2025 covering «several dozen measures in almost all spheres of the armed forces' operation». They included defence planning, military education, advisory support, and military training [*JAMnews* 2024, 12 December].

A significant widening of security cooperation also took place in Armenian relations with the EU, which thereby confirmed the latter's reversal of its earlier «visibly invisible» role in South Caucasus conflict resolution [German 2007]. Indeed, the EU followed up on its 2022 decision to deploy a monitoring mission on Armenia's border with Azerbaijan by providing Yerevan with military aid meant to strengthen the country's resilience. On the same day the Council opened visa-liberalisation talks with Yerevan, it also approved the sending of military aid worth €10 million through the European Peace Facility instrument. It was a first-ever assistance measure to

3. Building upon the first arms purchase deal signed in 2022, India became in 2024 the first arms supplier to Armenia, also thanks to a new procurement contract sealed in July. Estimates of arms supply deal with Indian companies exceed US\$ 1.5 billion [Nersisian & Melkonian 2024, 5 November]. The diversification in arms procurement strategy benefited from a steady increase in defense budget, gone from US\$ 781 million in 2022 to US\$ 1.4 billion in 2024 and expected to increase further to US\$ 1.7 billion in 2025 [ISS 2024, p. 178; Azatutyun 2024, 26 September].

4. On a two-day working visit to France, Pashinyan's attended the pantheonicization ceremony of Missak Manouchian, a Genocide survivor Armenian immigrant who became hero of the French resistance against the Vichy regime and the German occupier. He was executed along with 21 comrades in February 1944. The awarding of French highest posthumous honor to Manouchian – the first communist resistance fighter to be buried in the Pantheon – was decided by President Macron in June 2023 [*Le Monde* 2024, 21 February].

Armenia aimed at enhancing the logistical capacities of its armed forces, at fostering interoperability, and at improving protection of civilians in crises and emergencies [CoEU 2024, 22 July].

Finally, a limited in scope yet highly symbolic initiative also came on the US-Armenian side. In mid-July an 11-day joint military exercise was organized in the proximity of Yerevan. The «Eagle Partner 24» exercise, whose opening ceremony was attended by the US Ambassador to Armenia and Armenian Defence Minister Papikyan, was designed to increase interoperability of armed forces during peacekeeping and stability operations or, more pragmatically, to «deepen the friendships, deepen the partnership and move the ball forward ten yards», in the words of the US deputy director of the exercise [Miller 2024, 17 July]. Pushing the ball forwarder, in December Papikyan visited the US and met Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin for an «historic» meeting – as it was dubbed by the latter – whereby the US reaffirmed its resolve to continue supporting reforms in Armenia's armed forces and include security cooperation in an enhanced bilateral partnership [*Armenpress* 2024, 6 December].

3. The unintended consequences of the diversification process: the regional «insecurity spiral»

Yerevan's overtures to dialogue and cooperation with Euro-Atlantic partners have been as significant as cautious, at least in public statements. This caution may be explained either by the consciousness of the difficulties inherent in the process of integration in the West [Krikorian 2025] or, more generally, by the awareness of the multifaceted negative repercussions that such openings can have on Armenian security itself [Sukiasyan 2024]. After all, as Armen Grigorian put it, the depth of Armenia's ties with Russia combined with the systemic uncertainties cannot but suggest a careful «step-by-step» approach to the diversification strategy [*Civilnet* 2024, 20 May].

Although dictated by contingent defence needs and by a wider attempt to broaden the spectrum of the country's international relations, Armenian overtures to Western interlocutors have had significant negative repercussions on relations with Russia and Azerbaijan. Both promptly and punctually reacted to most of the abovementioned steps toward an increased Armenian-Western cooperation with harsh declaration and not-so-veiled threats of retaliation. Moscow manifested a tendency to interpret Yerevan's engagement with Euro-Atlantic partners under the lenses of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, as a «confirmation that the West is trying to turn Armenia into an instrument of its policy [...] against Moscow» [Azatutyun 2024, 11 March]. This view, in turn, resulted in the not-so-veiled warning to Yerevan to avoid a «Ukrainian scenario» [Bedevian 2024, 25 July]. As evidence of a wider rapprochement between Moscow and Baku, Azerbaijan shared Russian view about Armenia's Western partners' self-

ish aims, accusing the latter of pursuing «unilateral and biased» policies [Erurygur 2024, 22 July] and «undermining stability» in the South Caucasus [Azatutyun 2024, 17 April]. The Azerbaijani government press agency went as far as saying that Western – and particularly French – support to Yerevan's rearmament policy made a new war in Karabakh «inevitable» [APA 2024, 22 June]. Armenian-Western growing security cooperation, in turn, provided the formal reason for the perpetuation of Azerbaijan's rearmament policy, a «number one priority» for Baku since – in President Ilham Aliyev's words – «Armenia does not want peace; rather, it seeks to buy time and use this period to strengthen its military potential with the support of its foreign patrons» [PRAz 2024, 23 September].

Ultimately, the Armenian security diversification strategy generated a dangerous «insecurity spiral», i.e. a spiral of power and security competition that feeds on the fear that the opponent's defensive moves are actually aggressively motivate and, consequently, require strategic counter-measures [Snyder 1984, p. 477]. Besides testifying the ongoing overturning of traditional regional alignments, the insecurity spiral contributed to an atmosphere of mutual mistrust among regional actors – and, particularly, between Armenia and Azerbaijan – which, in turn, didn't help the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process to move forward. On the contrary, undermining Armenia's most important foreign policy objective, it ended up in adding new hurdles on the path leading to the signing of a peace treaty, despite the positive signals registered during the year.

As far as the Armenia-Azerbaijan relationship was concerned, 2024 had opened with encouraging indications. In December, Azerbaijan and Armenia had agreed to an exchange of prisoners, while Yerevan also green-lighted Baku's bid for hosting the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 29) [PMRA 2023, 7 December]. These signals, in turn, justified widespread optimism among analysts and decision-makers about the possibility of signing a peace treaty by the COP29 meeting, set for November 2024. Furthermore, the belligerents agreed to sign a concise document outlining key principles for lasting peace while postponing the resolution of most contentious issues, such as reopening communications between Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan exclave and delimitating borders. This decision seemed to ease the way to the normalization of bilateral relations. [Borshchevskaya 2024, 19 March]. Encouraging signals also came in the form of an April agreement on the delimitation of the borders in the Tavush area – a point of contention with the potential to trigger new military clashes. Following the 8th meeting of the bilateral State Commission tasked with the delimitation issue, representatives of the two countries agreed to restore the borders as set by the most recent Soviet maps with the consequent return to Azerbaijan of four border villages in the Tavush area that remained under Armenian control [MFA 2024, 19 April].

The positive atmosphere surrounding Yerevan-Baku talks progressively dissolved over the year, while Pashinyan no-show at COP29 certified

the failure of finalizing a peace agreement and the renewed stalemate in negotiations. The regional strategic polarization and resulting spiral of insecurity bore a significant part of the responsibility for the failure, under two perspectives both related to Baku's new negotiating conditions. The first had to do with the negotiating format and the refusal of third-party mediation. Long opposed to the continuation of the thirty-years-old OSCE Minsk Group mediation mandate [PRAz 2022, 12 January], Azerbaijan clarified in January that, despite Armenia's preferences, Yerevan and Baku «don't need any guarantors» and should instead solve their problems bilaterally avoiding the negotiations «to become a geopolitical issue» [PRAz 2024, 10 January]. Thus, despite the hopes raised in February by a German attempt to initiate a mediation [*JAMNews* 2024, 19 February], the trilateral meeting organized by Chancellor Olaf Scholz was a mere exception to what seemed to have become a mandatory negotiating principle.⁵ In turn, the refusal to accept third-party mediation widened the already broad asymmetry in bargaining power between Armenia and Azerbaijan, leaving the former more vulnerable to the latter's maximalist approach to the peace process. This helped framing the second ground where the insecurity spiral intersected with the negotiations, which has to do with their contents.

With a view to finalize a peace agreement, Baku added two more principles and two preconditions [PRAz 2024, 18 December]. The first principle, ostensibly resulting from the ongoing strategic polarization, was the non-deployment of third countries' forces on the mutual border, and the consequent withdrawal of the EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA), deployed on the Armenian side of the border with Azerbaijan. The second was the cessation of the ongoing «lawsuit warfare», i.e. the mutual commitment to refrain from filing international lawsuits against each other. The preconditions to this commitment on Yerevan's part was the dissolution of the OSCE Minsk Group, on the one hand, and, on the other, the amendment of the Armenian Constitution as to eliminate its supposed territorial claims against Azerbaijan. In fact, while Prime Minister Pashinyan repeatedly reaffirmed that «Armenia fully recognizes the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan» [Sahakian& Musayelian 2023, 18 April],⁶ the first article of the Constitution still recalls the fundamental principles enshrined in the September 1990 Dec-

5. As a confirmation, it is worth mentioning that Azerbaijan rejected the attempt of outgoing US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken to organize a trilateral meeting in December. Significantly, Azerbaijani media quoted diplomatic sources maintaining that Baku «does not want the U.S. to participate in the peace agenda at all and does not consider it appropriate» [APA 2024, 5 December].

6. It is worth mentioning, as reported by Pashinyan to the Parliament, that in September 2024 the Armenian Constitutional Court ruled that the reference to the Declaration of Independence made by the Constitution pertains exclusively to the provisions enshrined in the articles of the Constitution and that no article of the Constitution contains any direct or indirect reference to Nagorno-Karabakh [PMRA 2024, 13 November].

laration of Independence [PRAr 2015], which in its preamble calls for the «Reunification of the Armenian SSR and the Mountainous Region of Karabakh» [GRA 1990, 23 August]. Such conditions and preconditions represented the main stumbling block for the finalization of the peace agreement in 2024. While the parties shared the view that its text was 80% complete, nonetheless they proved unable either to compromise on the abovementioned points [AIR 2024, 4 November], or to remove them altogether postponing their solution – as it was unsuccessful proposed by Yerevan at the end of August [Eruygur 2024, 10 September].

As a demonstration of the difficulties inscribed in the attempt to untie the regional security knot, the stalemate of the peace process had negative repercussions on Armenia-Turkey normalization process launched in 2022. This, in turn, represented a key priority for the Pashinyan government, with a view to open the border between the two countries and gain a lifeline to regional and international markets. Notwithstanding progresses in the bilateral talks,⁷ the overall process confirmed to be closely intertwined with the parallel Yerevan-Baku negotiations, as the unyielding Azerbaijani-Turkish axis stands as the main exception to the upheaval of regional alignments. For all the «no-precondition rhetoric» which surrounds the Armenian-Turkish talks, not only did Ankara make the normalization of relations conditional on the signing of a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan [Frappi 2023, p. 468], but also aligned itself with the demands and preconditions put forward by Baku. This is particularly the case for the latter request to amend the Armenian Constitution [Barseghyan 2024, 9 December], which meets Ankara's analogous aversion to the document's indirect claims on «Western Armenia» – namely, Eastern Turkey – as well as to «the task of achieving international recognition of the 1915 Genocide» [GRA 1990, 23 August].

4. *Security vs. economy: Armenian diversification dilemma*

In escaping the Russian trap, Armenian government is facing a «diversification dilemma». While there is an urgent need to broaden the spectrum of international relations, the overwhelming weight exerted by Russia on Armenian economy makes diversification difficult to achieve and, in many ways, unprofitable – especially in the short term and with a view to the 2026

7. Over the course of 2024, two high level meetings were held: the first, on the occasion of Mirzoyan's attendance of the annual Antalya diplomatic forum, in March; the second, between Pashinyan and Turkish President Erdoğan held their annual phone call ahead of religious holidays in Armenia and Turkey. The leaders later met on the margin of the UN General Assembly, in September. Moreover, discussions on the technical aspects of the reopening of borders have continued throughout the year with encouraging outcomes.

parliamentary elections. Indeed, much of the record GDP growth experienced after 2021 owes to the increased trade relations with Russia which, in turn, benefited from Armenia acting as a conduit for international trade flows aimed at circumventing the sanctions imposed on Moscow. Such a «middleman role» resulted in the Armenia-Russia bilateral turnover skyrocketing from US\$ 2.6 billion in 2021 to 12.4 in 2024 [ARMSTAT n.a.], making Russia by far the first trade partner of Armenia. Moreover, the recent growth in Armenian GDP benefited significantly also from the relocation of Russian citizens to Armenia, which boosted domestic consumption [Chervyakov & Giucci 2023].

In comparison to Armenian-Russian turnover, the one with the EU paled,⁸ as a result of both normative and logistic disadvantages. From the first perspective, Armenia's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) ensured tax-free exchanges of goods and services, facilitating the trade flow both with its participants and with its trade partners – such as China [WB 2024, pp. 32-33]. Quite on the contrary, as Armenia progressed from lower middle-income country status to an upper middle-income one for three consecutive years since 2018, in 2022 it lost the tariffs benefits granted by the EU under the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus [EC 2023, 21 November] and, therefore, trading goods became more costly. Moreover, Armenian exports towards the EU were also hampered by the set of rules and standard required to access the EU market, which Armenian companies have difficulty complying with, adding administrative and legal layers to the difficulties of improving trade relations with the EU [Terzyan & Grigoryan 2024, p. 14-15]. This, in turn, was one of the main impediments to grasp the full yet limited potential of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement which, into full force in 2021, set the priorities to strengthen bilateral relations with the EU within the limits imposed by Yerevan's participation in the EAEU. Moving from normative to logistic obstacles, Armenia suffered from an impactful «connectivity gap» resulting from both regional geography and politics. Here the disadvantages stemming from a landlocked condition are compounded by the closure of the borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey because of the Nagorno-Karabakh war. The connectivity gap severely narrowed the trade flows to routes through Iran and Georgia, limiting overall Armenian integration into global economy [WB 2024]. Moreover, it resulted in an increase in overall transportation costs, with a detrimental effect on the competitiveness of national products [Terzyan & Grigoryan 2024, p. 5].

Turnover with Russia was significant not only in quantitative terms but also in qualitative ones, exposing the overall degree of Yerevan's dependence. This was particularly true for Russia's lion share in the country's total

8. According to official data, in 2024 the five largest economies and major Armenian partners in the eurozone – namely Germany, France, Spain, Italy, and Poland – cumulatively exchanged goods and services worth 1.2 million [ARMSTAT n.a.]

imports of key commodities, which decisively impinged upon the Armenian food and energy security.⁹ In turn, the risk of over-dependency on key imports turning into vulnerability to Moscow's pressures or blackmails was not only high but has also been recurrent in regional politics. Hence, in the current environment, economic leverage was an instrument in the Russian hybrid warfare toolkit aimed at retaining influence in the South Caucasus [Meissner and Leitner 2024]. In 2024 there was no lack of examples of its use. For instance, in criticizing Armenian participation in a conference dedicated to Ukrainian Food Security in the context of the Kiev-sponsored «Ukraine Peace Formula» initiative, Maria Zakharova, the spokeswoman of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, issued a veiled threat recalling Armenian dependence on Russian grain [Barseghyan 2024, 23 September]. Similarly, in outlining the potential repercussions of opting for EU membership over the EAEU one, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Overchuk warned Armenia that this would lead to higher energy and food prices, while exports could drop by 70-80% [Ananyan 2025, 16 January]. Making vulnerability worse, the connectivity gap significantly increases Armenia's exposure to the risk of disruption of trade flows either for political or technical reasons. Since fall 2023 and over the course of 2024 this has been the case with Armenian exports to Russia, which were either hit by import bans from Russian health authorities or stuck by adverse weather conditions at the Russian-Georgian border crossing of Upper Lars [Saribekian 2024, 31 July; Aravot 2024, 10 August].

At a wider look, Russian overwhelming weight on Armenian economy has a deeper and structural dimension, because of the control still exerted on key national assets – from energy to transport, from telecommunications to mining, finance, and insurance. This overdependency, in turn, came as a byproduct of the military alliance, consistently with the logic of inseparability of security and economic cooperation, which also led Armenia to join the EAEU instead of pursuing cooperation with the EU [Frappi 2023, p. 455-7]. Moreover, the wide presence of large Russian companies in Armenia's

9. As for food security, Russia provides the bulk of basic food items imported by the country. According to World Bank estimates, it accounts for 98% of imports of key commodities like wheat, wheat flour, and cereals; 35% of agri-food imports; 50% of imports of bread, pasta, and pastries, besides being a primary source of the fertilizers used for domestic production [WB 2024, p. 49]. The energy import picture is not rosier. Armenia is highly dependent on imported fuels and, particularly, on Russian gas, petroleum and coal products, which account «for 63 percent of the country's primary energy supply and is widely used for power generation, heating, and transport». [WB 2024, p. 34]. The overdependency on Russian supply is particularly significant in the gas sector, which owns the lion share (58.4%) in primary energy consumption [ARMSTAT 2025]. Russia accounts for 87% of Armenia's gas consumption, with the remainder coming from Iran. Moreover, Russia holds a monopoly on gas distribution in the country until 2043, making supply diversification unfeasible unless in agreement with Moscow [Krikorian 2024, 7 May].

economy makes them a key taxpayer and contributor to Armenian coffers [Eurasianet 2024, 17 May]. Also, Russia is still by far the first source of foreign investments to the country – accounting for 17% of the total net stocks at the end of 2023, worth € 2.4 billion [ARMSTAT 2024, p. 590]. Finally, another significant source of dependence on Russia, which may arguably be considered as structural, lies in the remittances from Armenian migrant workers. While the influx of personal remittances has been shrinking over the last few years, in 2023 it still accounted for a 6% of the GDP [WBDB n.a.], while the remittances from Russia in 2024 made up for the 42% of its total amount [CBA n.a.].

5. The domestic side of the coin: increasing polarization, decreasing consensus

The overlapping of the external and internal dimensions of the governmental attempt to escape the Russian trap goes well beyond the economic domain. The urgency to reinvent foreign and security policies also affects the domestic political-institutional environment by exacerbating a trend toward polarization originating from the 2018 Velvet Revolution and worsened by the Karabakh military debacle.

In 2024, the clearest manifestation of the polarization trend came from «Tavush for the Sake of Homeland», a protest born out of the April agreement on border delimitation and gathered around the figure of Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan. Its aims, scope and evolution highlighted the then ongoing polarization trend under four perspectives. The first and foremost was the accusation leveled at the government, to bear «a defeatist mindset and a commitment [...] to serve the Turkey-Azerbaijan tandem» [Nazarian 2024, 20 August]. It was an accusation which went up to the point of considering the Prime Minister as a «traitor» or a «Turkish agent» [Pambukhchyan 2024, 23 July]. Similar accusations were made against the government after the initiation of a process aimed at adopting a new Constitution, to be drafted by the end of 2026 and approved by referendum in 2027 [Armenpress 2024, 29 August]. While a constitutional reform plan is as old as Pashinyan's tenure as prime minister, in its current stage the process of adopting a new constitution is manifestly influenced by the need to sign a peace agreement with Baku and normalize relations with both Azerbaijan and Turkey. Thus, a new Constitution stands as a prerequisite for the diversification of the country's foreign policy and economic development or, in Pashinyan words, as a key tool to make Armenia «more competitive and more viable in the new geopolitical and regional conditions» [PMRA 2024, 19 January].

Secondly, the Galstanyan's protest movement clarified both the nature of the institutional opposition to the government and its transnational links. Started as an alleged apolitical movement aimed at impeding «the

unacceptable process of border demarcation» [*JAMNews* 2024, 7 May], the Archbishop's initiative quickly took on anti-government connotations, requesting the Prime Minister's resignation while marching from Tavush to Yerevan. In doing so, it attracted institutional supporters both from the highest ranks of the Armenian Apostolic Church and among the representatives of the power structure ousted by the Velvet Revolution, namely two political forces which used to enjoy an informal alliance before 2018 [Atanesian 2018, 20 July] and never spared harsh criticism of Pashinyan ever since. Moreover, the traditionally strong links between Russia and this reactionary faction – the so called «blacks» in Pashinyan narrative, as opposed to the reformist «whites» [Pambukhchyan 2024, 23 July] – enlarged the scope of anti-government opposition well beyond the country's borders. These links expose yet another layer of the internal-external short-circuit affecting Armenian politics, built upon the accusations levelled against Moscow of running a «campaign of threats and disinformation» against the leadership in Yerevan [Azatutyun 2024, 8 August]. Considering wide coverage of the Galstanyan movement given by Russian-controlled media, it is not surprising that accusation of exploiting «fifth columns» in the country for the sake of weakening the government were made by media close to the ruling party [*JAMNews* 2024f], just a few months before an alleged coup attempt with links to Russia was thwarted by the National Security Service [*Armenpress* 2024, 18 September].

Third, the evolution of the protest movement served as a mirror to the opinions of the Armenian public amid the ongoing political and institutional struggle. Started as the largest anti-government movement since the war, it progressively lost momentum and supporters until its de facto failure. Far from being the result of the consensus around the government, the movement's implosion was rather the demonstration of a widespread disaffection from politics among the Armenian public. The latest poll carried out in the country by the International Republican Institute accurately capture this trend. On the one hand, it showed a sharp decline in consensus for Pashinyan and his government. While still being the most trusted political figure, the leader of the Velvet Revolution's rating stands at a mere 16% - a figure falling to 7% among the respondents between 18 and 35 years. Moreover, between 2018 and fall 2024 the degree of satisfaction with the government fell from 82% to 46% [IRI 2024, pp. 14, 26]. On the other hand, as trust in the government diminishes, there is no corresponding boost in support for the figures or parties in the opposition, exposing the growing degree of public disaffection. All in all, 61% of the respondents – and 76% of the youngest ones – declare not to trust any politician or public person. The dissatisfaction affects also the Armenian Apostolic Church, whose approval rate fell by 26% over the last five years. [IRI 2024, pp. 14, 29].

Lastly, and arguably most importantly, the Tavush movement and the wider border demarcation issue reflected both tangible and intangible as-

pects of the struggle between the government and its critics, along with the challenges of the diversification path then walked. In defending the decision to return the border villages to Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister used to hold a map of the «Real Armenia», as opposed to the «Historical Armenia». While the former is understood as the country falling within the internationally recognized borders, the latter is a broader imagined homeland built upon historical memories of lost lands [PMRA 2024, 25 May; PMRA 2024, 10 April]. Thus, the demarcation process does not merely entail re-drawing the borders of the state, but also re-imagining the boundaries of the nation and the resulting national interest. Juxtaposing the real country with the imagined homeland, Pashinyan opened a new chapter in the long-standing ideological struggle between a reductionist and an holistic understanding of the nation, as well as between the promoters of a national mission aimed at rectifying historical injustices and the advocates of an «Armenian-first» approach to national interest, which shaped the formative years of the «Third Republic» – i.e., the one born on the ashes of the Soviet Union [Frappi 2023, p. 451-2]. Moreover, the process aimed at redefining the borders of the state and the boundaries of the nation intersected the attempt at diversifying the country's foreign and security policies. In fact, in the government view and narrative, the confusion between the Real and Historical Armenia resulted in adverse effects at international level. On the one hand, with a reference to Azerbaijan and Turkey, it brought about «a permanent guarantee of [Armenian] enmity with a group of countries, and a guarantee that those countries will have a reason and an explanation for pursuing an aggressive policy». On the other, and with a clear reference to Russia, the attempt to restore the Historical Armenia allowed «some countries [...] to put a collar on the Republic of Armenia and constrain its actions as an independent state» [PMRA 2024, 25 May]. In its attempt to push a new state and national narrative, the government delves into the polarization fault lines.

Pashinyan's rhetoric targeting the pillars of the «Historical Armenia» ideology – which has been a constituent part of the sense of patriotism which developed up to the Genocide [Sassounian 2024] – is striking a raw nerve of national consciousness. And this happens not only within the country but especially among the diaspora, widening the ranks of his detractors and deepening the divide between the government and the opposition.

6. Conclusions

The last stage of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict dramatically exposed the vulnerability resulting from Armenia's over-dependence on Moscow's security guarantee. The proven unreliability of the latter urged Yerevan to escape the Russian security trap by means of diversification of the country's foreign and security policies. While in its drive towards diversification Yere-

van benefited from the support of France, the EU, and the US, the overall path was still hampered by a multidimensional set of external and internal obstacles, limitations, and contradictions.

The first «diversification dilemma» resulted from the clash between security and economic needs. While the search for security pushed the country away from Russia, economic necessity kept it steadily in Moscow's orbit. Breaking economic ties with Russia was not only concretely unfeasible, but also unprofitable, at least over the short-term. The government's answer to the dilemma seems to come from a hybrid strategy blending compartmentalization of security and economic relations with Russia with a tailored and flexible cooperation with Western partners. Yet, in the mid- to long-term the incompatibility between the membership in the EAEU and the integration path in the EU may result in hard choices to Yerevan, whose repercussions may go well beyond the mere economic domain. In addition, for a landlocked country suffering from the closure of its eastern and western borders, diversifying foreign economic relations entails first and foremost the need to normalize relations with both Azerbaijan and Turkey. This, in turn, highlights once again the close interrelation between the various layers of regional politics and takes the overall assessment back to the wider diversification attempt.

The second contradiction of the diversification path walked by Armenia during the period under review lies in its unintended yet close correlation with the Russian-Western confrontation over Ukraine. On the one hand, the correlation increases Yerevan's capability to extract benefits from its partners in the Euro-Atlantic area; on the other, it potentially leaves the outcome of Armenian diversification process open to the still unpredictable result of the current power confrontation in Eastern Europe. That is, much of the outcome of the diversification effort falls beyond Yerevan's control. Consistently with the limited resources available to a small power, Armenia cannot but pursue external balancing strategies, built upon increased cooperation with the West. This, in turn, means that the attempt to escape the Russian trap depends to a great extent on the continued support of the Euro-Atlantic partners. As Armenia's capability to extract benefits from Western partners is largely dependent on the ongoing confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, the overt support coming from the former may prove to be short-lived and, in any case, limited.

The close correlation with the Russian-Western confrontation resulted in a third and crucial contradiction – or unintended consequence – of the attempt to escape the Russian trap, namely the «insecurity spiral» unfolding at regional level. As a matter of fact, the wider diplomatic tensions engendered a short circuit between the Armenian government's main foreign policy objectives, namely diversifying its security policy on the one hand and finalizing a peace agreement with Baku on the other. Escaping the Russian security trap and normalizing relations with Azerbaijan – and conse-

quentially with Turkey – are two sides of the same coin. It is impossible to effectively pursue the former without achieving the latter. Yet, the greater is Armenian cooperation with the West, the deeper is its isolation vis-à-vis Baku. Here, the end of the decade-old «*pax Russica*» and Baku's refusal of a third-party mediation involving «biased» Western actors, deprives Armenia of the former negotiating mechanisms without substituting them with new ones. Consequentially, Yerevan stands alone in face of Azerbaijan's maximalist conditions for peace, forced to make concessions that are hardly acceptable at home.

The domestic picture is neither rosier nor less thorny than the external one. Here, the main contention points in the peace process – namely the delimitation of the state borders and the requested changes to the Constitution – has rekindled the political and institutional polarization between «blacks» and «whites» in a scenario shaped by a growing public disaffection from politics. What's more, the polarization trend is exacerbated by the immaterial facet of the current national debate. In its attempt to put forward a new vision for the country's development, the Government, acting domestically much less cautiously than in the foreign domain, has been rhetorically targeting the key pillars of national self-identification at home and in the diaspora, thereby widening and tightening the ranks of the opposition. Arguably, this stands as the main challenge to the diversification effort. The path out of the Russian trap toward a diversified foreign policy entails significant tangible and intangible sacrifices. Lacking adequate national cohesion, not only the process risks derailing but also endangers the wider transformation path walked since the 2018 Velvet Revolution.

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SPECIAL ARTICLE

CHINA AND INDIA: COOPERATION AND RIVALRY IN THE GLOBAL LANDSCAPE AND WITHIN THE BRICS

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The paper focuses on the economic roles and geopolitical positioning of China and India on the international stage. It analyses the relationship between these two Asian giants by examining their often-controversial interactions within the BRICS coalition. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part explores the sectors in which cooperation occurs at different levels, alongside the areas where competition is most intense. The second part examines the relationship between China and India within the BRICS coalition, evaluating the impact of the expansion to selected Global South countries initiated at the 2023 Johannesburg summit. The third part analyses the positions and roles of China and India within the UN system and international financial institutions. As the two most populous countries in the world, China and India wield significant influence that cannot be overlooked in international organizations. The concluding section assesses whether the intensifying competition between the two Asian giants on the global stage outweighs their limited cooperation within BRICS.

KEYWORDS – China-India relationship; China-India Conflict and Cooperation; BRICS coalition; BRICS Plus; UN system; international financial institutions.

1. Introduction

This paper explores the relationship between China and India to assess whether cooperation or competition prevails in their interaction. The analysis focuses on economic roles and geopolitical positioning of the two Asian giants on the international stage.

A convenient framework for observing these relations is the BRICS coalition, an alliance where the specific characteristics and individual interests of the two countries must interact with the coalition's shared goals and

strategies.¹ The BRICS coalition was established as a platform for cooperation among member states and draws strength from the Bandung spirit.² The BRICS coalition fosters strong partnerships through regular meetings and holds an annual summit, culminating in a document that outlines future goals and strategies. Over time, the number of meetings between ministers has increased, broadening the areas of cooperation. Competition also arose within the coalition, particularly in terms of individual members' relationships with external partners in Africa, Asia, and South America. So, BRICS serves both as a venue for cooperation – addressing urgent issues such as climate change – and for competition, especially concerning leadership within the coalition and global geopolitical alignment.

My argument is that, despite the significant differences between China and India and owing to their ever-closer economic ties, the two countries depend on one another to counter Western hegemony internationally and within the globalized economy.

The paper is organized in three parts. In the first part, I look at the sectors in which forms of cooperation are manifested at different levels together with the sectors for which competition is most severe. I show that trade cooperation is modest due to India's subordinate position to China, while several cooperation agreements bring the technological development of the two countries closer together in scientific and academic collaboration. Another important area of cooperation concerns the support to multilateral institutions and their actions. However, while it is true that scientific

1. The BRICS coalition, comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and later South Africa, was formed through several key steps. The acronym BRIC was coined in 2001 by Jim O'Neill of Goldman Sachs to describe four rapidly growing economies. The foreign ministers of the BRIC countries held their first formal meeting on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2006 in New York. The first formal summit of the BRIC took place in 2009, in Yekaterinburg, Russia. South Africa was invited to join the group in December 2010 and its participation was formalized at the BRICS Summit in April 2011. The decision to expand the BRICS coalition, informally referred to as BRICS+, was made during the 15th BRICS Summit (2023) when the group extended invitations to join to Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. These nations were invited to become full members starting from January 2024. While, following the election of President Milei, Argentina reversed the decision in November 2023, in January 2025 Indonesia has joined BRICS as a full member.

2. Here the reference is to the Bandung Conference (April 1955) in which a group of Asian and African countries strongly emphasized that peace and security could be enhanced only by international cooperation. The Conference opposed to colonialism and imperialism and promoted the five principles of peaceful coexistence that influenced the future of Non-Aligned Movement: respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful coexistence [Weber & Winanti 2016; Kharel 2020]. It is interesting to note that the BRICS coalition includes countries that at the time of the Bandung Conference were not aligned with Western countries and countries that belonged to the communist world [Adem and Thomas 2017; Acharya and Tang 2008].

research unites the two countries, the industrial sectors linked to technology and innovation appear to set China and India in clear competition with significant repercussions on international markets. A sensitive issue in which signs of competition emerge is geopolitical positioning. China is clearly focused on supporting developing countries through economic cooperation, characterized by significant investments and respect for sovereignty. By contrast, while continuing its international cooperation efforts, especially in Africa, India is more concerned with maintaining close relations with the West – particularly with the United States.

The second part of the paper examines the relations between China and India within the BRICS coalition. Following the expansion to selected Global South countries initiated at the 2023 Johannesburg summit, the coalition has drawn increasing scrutiny from the West. This is largely due to the coalition's growing economic weight – now surpassing that of the G7 – and its potential challenge to the existing world order established after World War II. Even within BRICS, moments of conflict coexist with shared interests, creating significant opportunities for China-India cooperation. These primarily involve the development of new technologies for information management and the digitalization of economy and finance. Additionally, collaboration is expanding in renewable energy, emissions reduction, and climate change mitigation. Despite strong efforts to foster cooperation, underlying competition for leadership remains a major challenge to strengthening BRICS' global influence [Cochrane & Zaidan 2024; Mooradian 2024].

The third part analyses the position and role of China and India within the UN system and international financial institutions. As the two countries with the largest populations in the world, China and India hold significant influence that cannot be overlooked in international organizations. Moreover, as emerging powers, they represent the needs and aspirations of the largest group of developing and emerging nations within these organizations. Within the UN, China is already recognized as a prominent member through its permanent seat on the Security Council, while India is only occasionally admitted. In this context, India asserts its right to a permanent seat. Similarly, in financial institutions such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), China and India operate under the rules established at the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944 by the industrialized countries of the Western world. Given the economic importance of these organizations and the growing economic weight of China and India, 70 years after their founding, the two Asian giants are calling for reform. Their efforts are supported by countries with emerging and developing economies. In this way, the BRICS coalition challenges the West to redefine the global order; although Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa have different reasons to do so.

The concluding section assesses whether the intensifying competition between the two Asian giants on the global stage outweighs the limited co-

operation within BRICS. Based on the most recent developments, we observe the fragile relationship of trust between the two Asian giants and the limited long-term shared objectives which signals the difficulty of maintaining unity within the coalition. However, the need to work in a common way, at least in the immediate future, explains the solidarity that China and India show on many occasions.

2. Economic interdependence and geopolitical competition

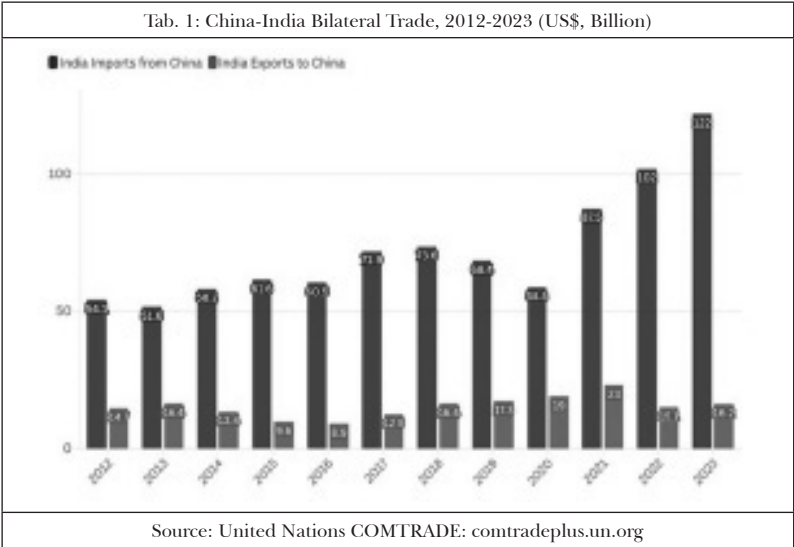
While political and military tensions over the border remained significant obstacles until the early 21st century, China and India have developed strong economic ties. These ties emerged and expanded as both countries opened to international trade from the 1980s onward. However, during the first three decades of their economic liberalization, China and India pursued markedly different paths in international relations. Their mutual recognition of the benefits of trade was formally acknowledged only at the first BRICS summit in 2009. Since then, the rapid economic growth of both nations has led to a steady increase in trade flows and a series of cooperation agreements.

2.1. Domestic and international cooperation

Trade relations between China and India have grown steadily in the most recent decade, between 2012 and 2023. India's imports from China have more than doubled, thus bringing China to the first place among India's importing partners (122.0 US Billion \$; in 2023); India's exports to China also grew, although they remained at relatively low level (16.2 US Billion \$; in 2023). Thus, since 2024 China has become India's main trading partner, overcoming the trade flows with the United States. By contrast, India is a marginal trading partner for China, although it represents a significant outlet/ market for products such as electronics, machinery, chemicals, and active pharmaceutical ingredients.

Despite Prime Minister Modi's *Make in India* initiative, which aims to reduce dependence on Chinese imports, India continues to rely heavily on China for manufacturing inputs, as evidenced by the high and growing levels of material goods imports.³

3. The Indian Prime Minister started the campaign Make in India in September 2014. Make in India 2.0 was introduced in 2019 as an upgraded version of the original initiative. Since 2020, the initiative has been supported by the intervention programme called Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan (self-reliant India mission). However, many authors believe that, overall, the campaign has substantially failed in its aims [Tripathy & Dastrala, 2023; Shastry, 2024].



Beyond trade, China and India engage in extensive multilateral and regional cooperation [Bondre 2021, 8 April; Tellis & Mirski 2013]. On the global stage, both countries support each other within United Nations initiatives on climate change, technology transfer, and debt relief for developing nations. They also advocate for financial reforms in institutions such as the IMF and the WB to enhance the representation of emerging economies in decision-making processes. These efforts not only strengthen bilateral ties but also align both nations with underrepresented countries.

Environmental cooperation is another significant area. While both nations face criticism for high pollution levels, they argue for a phased transition to clean energy, emphasizing that industrialized countries should bear a greater responsibility due to their historically higher emissions. They jointly endorse the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and collaborate on clean energy research, ranking among the world’s leading producers of solar panels and wind energy components [Basile & Cecchi 2019].

During the COVID-19 pandemic, China and India cooperated by exchanging medical supplies and engaging in global health discussions at the World Health Assembly (the decision-making body of the World Health Organization) [Sen & Das 2024]. Despite India’s prominence as a producer of generic drugs, more than 70% of its active pharmaceutical ingredients still originate from China.⁴

4. The information, which is relative to fiscal year 2023-2024, comes from Pharmabiz.com (India’s most comprehensive pharma portal - 6 May 2024).

Cultural cooperation between the two countries is facilitated through institutions such as Confucius Institutes, which promote Chinese language learning in India, and India's initiatives to highlight its Buddhist heritage. However, these exchanges often take place in an atmosphere of mutual suspicion rather than genuine partnership [Shavlay 202; Das 2022].

In recent years, collaboration in digital and financial technology (Fin-Tech) has become more complex. Until 2020, India welcomed Chinese investments in its digital economy. However, it has since restricted access to Chinese applications deemed harmful to national security and public order [*India Today*, December 5, 2023].

In summary, China-India cooperation is shaped by mutual recognition of their differing needs and production capacities.

2.2. Domestic and international competition

Competition between China and India is often more pronounced than their cooperation, spanning territorial disputes and global geopolitical positioning.

A key point of contention is their long-standing border dispute. The 3,440-km-long border, which remains undefined, follows the *Line of Actual Control* – unilaterally established by China in 1959 and confirmed after the 1962 war. This has led to multiple localized clashes over the years. However, at the 2024 BRICS summit in Kazan (Russia) China and India reached an agreement on patrolling arrangements along their disputed border, which may ease tensions between the two nuclear-armed neighbours [Reed & White 2024, 21 October].

Another area of rivalry is control over the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). China has pursued its *String of Pearls* strategy for decades, expanding its presence through infrastructure projects linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁵⁶ In response, India leverages the Quadrilateral Security

5. The term “String of Pearls” was first introduced in a report by the consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton for the U.S. Department of Defence, published in 2004 and later in 2007. It describes China's maritime activities and strategy, analysing its presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and beyond through a network of commercial and military bases and infrastructure projects along key maritime trade routes. The “pearls” refer to ports, airstrips, naval facilities, and economic zones in strategically located countries along sea lanes connecting China to the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. This initiative complements China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and aligns with its long-term objectives of securing trade routes, ensuring energy security, and expanding its regional influence [Booz Allen 2007; see also Manhas 2020].

6. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a Chinese development strategy launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping and operational since 2015. Funded by the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the BRI involves numerous countries across the East and West in developing transport infrastructure to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa along five routes. The initiative consists of two major components: the *Silk Road Economic Belt*, which links China to Russia

Dialogue (QUAD) with the U.S., Japan, and Australia to counter China's regional influence. Additionally, India has strengthened trade and labour agreements with Taiwan, a move China perceives as a challenge to its territorial integrity. However, given the limited economic scope of these agreements, further escalation appears unlikely.

Technological and space-related competition is also intensifying. Both nations are advancing in information technology, following divergent yet ambitious strategies. China leads in technological investments, including space programs under the BRI, while India seeks to counterbalance China's dominance by strengthening partnerships with countries wary of dependence on Chinese technology. Since 2023, India has launched several satellites, including collaborations with NASA [Bhattacharjee 2025, 16 January]. Meanwhile, China continues expanding its space program, including human spaceflight and satellite networks, while indirectly competing through projects such as the *India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor*, which is attracting growing global interest.⁷

Ultimately, China-India relations remain defined by pragmatism. China maintains economic and commercial dominance, while India seeks to curb China's influence and position itself as a strategic partner to Western nations, which are gradually losing ground in Southeast Asia [Zha, 2023].

3. *Global leadership and partnership with emerging countries*

The story of the birth and expansion of the BRICS coalition is now widely known [Basile and Cecchi 2018, 2019, 2023], making even a brief introduction unnecessary – especially considering the 2023 summit and the recent developments in 2024. However, it is useful to highlight a few key features of this coalition and review the major milestones in its evolution.

The first notable aspect concerns the composition of BRICS and the characteristics of its member countries. When the BRIC group (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) was established in 2009, each founding country held significant economic and political weight individually. However, the potential to form a cohesive economic and political alliance capable of addressing

and the Middle East through Central Asia and connects China with Southeast and South Asia and the *21st Century Maritime Silk Road*, which links China to the South Pacific and Europe via the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. For further details, see the Belt and Road Portal (Official Website: eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn); also see [Basile and Cecchi 2019] and [Bharti 2023]

7. *India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC)* is an initiative planned by the United States in the 2023 G-20 Summit strongly supported by the Indian President Modi. IMEEC is a multinational infrastructure initiative aimed at enhancing trade and connectivity between India, the Middle East, and Europe through a combination of rail and shipping networks [Levitan *et al.* 2025; Singh *et al.* 2024].

the 2008 global financial crisis was not immediately evident. At that pivotal moment in international relations, major financial institutions largely ignored the crisis's impact on developing and emerging economies.

The Yekaterinburg Summit (Russia) in 2009, attended by the leaders of Brazil (Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva), Russia (Dmitry Medvedev), India (Manmohan Singh), and China (Hu Jintao), was held in a spirit of demanding not only greater attention but also shared support for countries that had been largely excluded from negotiations on international financial relations. The summit concluded with the *Joint Statement of the BRIC Countries' Leaders*, in which the coalition expressed its aspiration to play a more prominent role within the G20. In this statement, the BRIC leaders positioned themselves as advocates for greater representation of emerging and developing economies in international financial institutions. They also emphasized the need for a stable, predictable, and diversified international monetary system.

Within just five years, significant changes occurred with the rise of new political leaders who would shape the future trajectory of the coalition. By the 2014 summit in Fortaleza (Brazil), the key figures were Vladimir Putin for Russia, Narendra Modi for India, and Xi Jinping for China. These leadership changes had a profound impact, solidifying BRICS as a coalition increasingly focused on expanding its global economic and political influence.⁸ The Fortaleza Summit marked the beginning of the second cycle of BRICS summits, with participants committing to the theme *Inclusive Growth: Sustainable Solutions*. Over the following decade, the coalition's ambitions to play a more dominant role on the international stage grew significantly.

Tab. 2a: BRICS, BRICS+ and G7 Population in 2022			
	Population	Population	Population
	million	Percentage relative to total BRICS members	Percentage relative to World
China	1,410.3	43.8	17.6
India	1,392.3	43.2	17.3
China and India	2,802.6	87.0	34.9
BRICS*	3,223.2	89.7	40.2
New members BRICS 2024*	368.8	10.3	4.6
BRICS+ 2024	3,592.0	111.4	44.8
G7	775.0	24.0	9.7
World	8,025.0		
Source: data.worldbank.org			

8. This is confirmed by the fact that the three leaders are still in charge of their countries in the Kazan Summit, 10 years later!

A major turning point came in 2023 at the Johannesburg Summit (South Africa), when BRICS expanded to include 10 member states. This enlargement drew intense media attention due to its strategic significance. Until 2023, the coalition’s regional composition seemed designed to include representatives from continents historically excluded from the development of contemporary capitalism. However, the admission of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Iran marked a significant shift. It moved the coalition’s centre of gravity further toward Asia and underscored the increasing importance of oil- and energy-producing nations. More than ever before, this expansion required closer global attention. Furthermore, the enlargement reflects an ongoing strategic approach – not only to amplify the voices of emerging and developing nations in international *fora* but also to challenge the leadership of established international organizations, particularly within the United Nations.

Tab. 2b: BRICS, BRICS+ and G7 GDP in 2022			
	GDP	GDP	GDP
	PPP constant 2017 international US \$	Percentage relative to total BRICS members	Percentage relative to World
China	25,684,415	58.6	18.5
India	10,078,991	23.0	7.2
BRICS*	43,847,886	88.6	31.5
New members BRICS 2024*	5,616,017	11.4	4.0
BRICS+ 2024	49,463,903	112.8	35.6
G7	42,132,464	96.1	30.3
World	139,033,278		
*Percentage referred to BRICS+			
Source: data.worldbank.org			

BRICS+ strategy evokes the spirit of the Bandung Conference. Key similarities include the inherent challenge to the Western-dominated world order and the explicit goal of establishing alternatives to Western institutions such as the IMF, WB, and G7. The BRICS+ coalition aims to foster a multipolar order, emphasizing cooperation among developing countries and reducing their economic dependence on the West. However, there are also significant differences. While the Bandung Conference was rooted in a strong anti-colonial and anti-imperialist *ideology*, BRICS+ takes a more *pragmatic* approach. Some members, such as India, maintain cooperative ties with the West, while others, like Russia and China, actively challenge it. Moreover, in 1955, China was still a developing country seeking alliances

within the Global South, whereas today it is an economic powerhouse that largely drives the BRICS+ agenda – creating a potential imbalance within the coalition. Another key distinction is that while the Bandung Conference primarily focused on developing nations in Asia and Africa, BRICS+ includes Middle Eastern and South American countries that play crucial roles in global economic and political affairs [Adem and Thomas 2017].

The significance of the BRICS+ coalition becomes clear when comparing its global economic and political weight to that of the G7 (Tables 2a and 2b).

China and India together account for a significantly larger share of both the global population and GDP compared to the G7. While the G7 represents 30% of global GDP but less than 10% of the world's population, the expanded BRICS alliance in 2024 includes 45% of the global population and accounts for more than 36% of global GDP. This disparity underscores how the representation of countries in international organizations, as established under the Bretton Woods system, no longer reflects contemporary demographic and economic realities.

3.1. *Convergent and divergent interests of China and India in the BRICS coalition*

A shared priority among BRICS members is countering US-led Western dominance in international relations. Both China and India support a new multipolar world order, advocating for reduced Western control over institutions such as the UN Security Council, the IMF, and the WB. A key motivation for reforming the Bretton Woods financial system is the perceived excessive influence of Western nations in the IMF's governance, particularly its outdated quota system, which does not adequately reflect the rising economic power of emerging markets. BRICS members argue that they should receive a larger share of Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) to align with their growing economic weight [Arnold 2024; Tran 2024, 28 March].⁹

A major initiative within BRICS is the process of *de-dollarization*, aimed at reducing dependence on the US dollar for international transactions. Russia and its allies have accelerated this shift in response to Western

9. Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) serve multiple functions. Within the system, they determine the level of financial resources available to each member in times of need. In the management of IMF decisions, SDRs define the voting power of each country on the Board of Governors. This power is determined by a "quota", which measures a country's significance based on several indicators, the most important of which is GDP. The quota is reviewed every five years. For example, according to the most recent quinquennial SDR valuation review, the US dollar accounts for 43%, the euro for 29%, and the Chinese renminbi for 12%. China, with the support of emerging economies, is advocating for more frequent adjustments that reflect economic growth differentials, as well as a broader reform that grants greater influence to emerging and developing countries. See IMF webpage on Quinquennial SDR valuation review: www.imf.org/en/About/Factsheets/Sheets/2023/special-drawing-rights-sdr.

sanctions following the invasion of Ukraine. The de-dollarization process, once a long-term goal, is now being actively pursued as an alternative to the US-dominated financial system and the BRICS are embarking on this process making intra-BRICS international payments with their own currencies [Arnold 2024; Greene 2023].¹⁰

The issue of financial transactions is also central to BRICS cooperation. The BRICS Cross-Border Payment System is being developed as an alternative to SWIFT, the Western-dominated financial messaging system.¹¹ This initiative has gained momentum following the sanctions on Russia, which have encouraged BRICS countries to create mechanisms that bypass external financial controls. Institutions such as the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) and the New Development Bank (NDB) were established before the Ukraine crisis but have now become critical tools for circumventing Western financial restrictions. The Kazan Summit (2024) emphasized the importance of expanding these financial alternatives, with new BRICS+ members playing an active role in their implementation [Arnold 2024; Sithole and Hlongwane 2023].

Within the BRICS coalition, China plays a dominant role, positioning itself as the leading power of the Global South and a counterweight to US hegemony. However, this dynamic creates tensions with India, which resists subordination to Chinese leadership, as it has long aspired to be recognized as a global leader itself. On the one hand, China often presents itself as a champion of multipolarity rather than outright dominance, emphasizing “win-win cooperation” and “peaceful development.” While it may not openly declare ambitions for global leadership in the way some Western powers have, its actions strongly indicate a drive to shape the international order in ways that align with its interests. On the other hand, India asserts a leading role both globally and in Indo-Pacific region. The aspiration for recognition of its leadership was already evident in the actions of previous leaders but it has become particularly significant under Modi. Yet, the roles India’s president has secured on the international stage appear more limited compared to his predecessors [Kesgin & Wehner 2021; Palladio 2025, 17 February; Upadhyay 2022, 12 July; Vinodan & Kurian 2024].

While recent geopolitical crises have shifted global attention away from economic and environmental issues, BRICS remains engaged in ad-

10. The BRICS coalition has supported the de-dollarization path to pursue economic sovereignty, trade efficiency, and political autonomy. However, coalition members can pursue their own paths to reduce their dependence on US dollar [Saaida 2024; Zamhari and Daba 2024].

11. The Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) facilitates secure and standardized communication between financial institutions for international transactions. It acts as a mechanism for enforcing economic policies and sanctions, thereby influencing geopolitical strategies and alliances [Cipriani *et al.* 2023].

addressing climate change. Both China and India have been active participants in international climate agreements, reaffirming their commitment to the principles of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Kyoto Protocol, and the Paris Agreement [Basile and Cecchi 2018; Basile and Cecchi 2019; Prys-Hansen 2022].

Ultimately, while China and India share a commitment to reshaping the global order, their conflicting geopolitical interests and economic strategies introduce challenges to achieving deeper integration within the coalition. As the above considerations suggest, within the BRICS coalition, China and India are stakeholders of economic and political interests that are partly convergent and partly divergent. Relying on the Kazan Final Declaration (2024), it is possible to summarize the areas of convergence and divergence between the two Asian giants, offering insights into the evolving dynamics of political relations within BRICS.

Areas of convergence:

1. *Commitment to multilateralism and a multipolar world:* both China and India seek a more representative and equitable international order. However, while China aims to diminish US influence, India primarily seeks a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.
2. *Economic cooperation and de-dollarization:* both countries support initiatives like the BRICS Cross-Border Payment System to facilitate trade in local currencies and reduce reliance on Western financial institutions.
3. *BRICS Expansion:* both nations recognize the strategic importance of expanding BRICS membership, though their approaches differ.

Areas of divergence:

1. *Geopolitical tensions:* despite diplomatic efforts to ease border disputes, unresolved territorial conflicts continue to create friction between China and India, potentially affecting BRICS cohesion.
2. *Strategic priorities in BRICS:* China advocates for rapid expansion to bolster its vision of a new world order, while India favours a more measured approach. Additionally, India opposes China's BRI, viewing it as a violation of its sovereignty.
3. *Developmental differences:* China's economic dominance within BRICS creates disparities in policy direction, with India seeking a more balanced and inclusive approach.

4. *The international world order*

The UN system and the financial institutions established at Bretton Woods cannot ignore the growing influence of China and India. Their increasing economic power, strategic ambitions, and shared vision of a multipolar world

order underscore their significance. While their objectives sometimes align – such as advocating for greater representation of developing countries – their methods and aspirations often diverge due to geopolitical competition. The UN serves as a crucial platform for both nations to assert their global influence, particularly within the UN Security Council, while the Bretton Woods financial institutions regulate economic transactions in the global economy.

4.1. *China and India in the UN System*

China has been a permanent member of the UN Security Council since 1971, when it replaced the Republic of China (Taiwan). As one of the five permanent members, alongside France, the United Kingdom, Russia, and the United States, China exercises veto power. It is also one of the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping operations, particularly in Africa, strongly supporting development and humanitarian aid initiatives. China consistently opposes US influence in setting the agenda of both the Security Council and the General Assembly [Batman *et al.* 2024].

India, a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for 16 non-consecutive years, has actively sought a permanent seat. Alongside Japan, Germany, and Brazil, India argues that its economic strength, population size, and contributions to peacekeeping missions justify its inclusion. Within the General Assembly, India promotes initiatives focused on climate change, counterterrorism, and sustainable development.

While China and India are both influential within the UN system, their engagement is marked by both competition and cooperation. Their rivalry is evident in three key areas: Security Council membership, voting patterns, and influence within UN institutions. China's veto power grants significant leverage in global security decisions, while India continues to push for permanent membership. China has consistently opposed India's bid, making this a major point of contention. Moreover, China has frequently blocked India's initiatives, particularly those related to Pakistan, while India has resisted Chinese proposals that undermine its own strategic interests [Gowan 2024]. Additionally, China wields substantial influence over UN agencies, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, whereas India, though influential, does not command the same level of institutional control.

Despite these tensions, both nations share common interests in reforming global governance and advocating for the Global South. They support multilateralism, South-South cooperation, and Sustainable Development Goals. Both contribute to UN peacekeeping missions and collaborate on climate negotiations under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. As already said, they emphasize the principle of *Common but Differentiated Responsibilities* and call for greater financial and technological support from developed nations to meet Paris Agreement targets [Qin 2024]. While security and geopolitical conflicts persist, their mutual interest in

restructuring global governance ensures that cooperation remains a fundamental aspect of their UN engagement.

4.2. *India and China in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund*

The WB provides loans and development finance to low- and middle-income countries, while the IMF supports financial stability. China and India, as major emerging economies, play critical roles as recipients, lenders, and decision-makers within these institutions. However, decision-making processes in these organizations are still influenced by post-World War II economic and political structures that favour Western dominance.

China has voting rights in the IMF and has pushed for broader recognition of emerging economies' economic weight. However, its influence remains constrained by existing governance mechanisms that allocate voting power based on a formula established in 1944 (with subsequent adjustments), considering GDP, economic openness, transaction variability, and reserve contributions. Despite these limitations, China continues to advocate for greater representation of developing countries and leverages the growing influence of its financial sector to bolster its demands.

China has also become a major global lender, providing loans through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank AIIB and the BRI. Along with the NDB, these institutions serve as alternatives to the WB and IMF, positioning China as a key competitor in global finance.

India plays a dual role in the international financial system. It is a significant recipient of WB loans, particularly for infrastructure, health, education, and poverty reduction projects, while also advocating for increased representation of emerging economies in global financial decision-making. Through its participation in the NDB, India supports developing countries in reducing reliance on Western-dominated financial institutions and promotes South-South cooperation.

Tensions between China and India within these institutions manifest on three levels. First, in the IMF, both nations advocate for increased voting power for emerging economies. However, China also engages in bilateral agreements that sometimes limit India's influence within the organization [Asmus-Bluhm *et al.* 2024]. Second, through BRICS, China and India have jointly established the NDB and participate in the AIIB. While these institutions challenge Western dominance, China holds a stronger leadership position, with India playing a secondary role [Humphrey & Chen 2021; Zhu 2024]. Third, China's financing of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects has sparked Indian opposition, as India views these loans as creating debt dependencies that could compromise the sovereignty of recipient nations [Papa & Petry 2024; Patrick 2024].

Despite these tensions, China and India share key interests in financial governance reforms. Both advocate for restructuring the IMF and WB

to grant greater influence to developing nations. They also collaborate within the G20 to challenge Western financial dominance and push for de-dollarization by increasing international transactions in local currencies. Furthermore, both nations support debt relief for developing countries and climate finance initiatives [Maglia *et al.* 2024].

In conclusion, while China and India compete for leadership and influence within global financial institutions, they also cooperate in reducing dependency on the US dollar and strengthening economic alliances with the Global South. Their roles within the UN, WB, and IMF reflect a complex interplay of competition and collaboration, driven by their evolving economic priorities and geopolitical aspirations.

5. *The BRICS coalition and the challenge to Western hegemony*

As discussed above, within the BRICS coalition, China and India hold economic and political interests that are partly convergent and partly divergent.

Moreover, BRICS – particularly with its expansion through BRICS+ – actively challenges the Western hegemony that has dominated global politics since the end of World War II. It does so through mechanisms that differ significantly from those underpinning the existing world order. While China remains central to this challenge, and despite the growing divergences among BRICS members with each enlargement, the coalition seeks to build broad consensus by reinforcing multilateralism.

BRICS's positioning in the international arena – particularly in its engagements with the Global South – is characterized by the following principles of international cooperation:

1. Respect for national autonomy and sovereignty
2. Trade policies that do not impose external conditions
3. Economic cooperation based on equity
4. Financing of infrastructure investments
5. Establishing itself as a new leader in global institutions

At first glance, BRICS presents itself as a unified bloc committed to non-alignment. This stance is evident in the principles that members are expected to uphold – particularly the emphasis on sovereignty and autonomy – that contrast sharply with the governance frameworks established under the Bretton Woods system.

However, as discussed in previous sections, the alignment between China and India is largely superficial. Their ability to maintain cooperation depends on systematically managing internal and external competition without allowing tensions to escalate. While the BRICS coalition frequently emphasizes unity, this unity exists only to the extent that it does not challenge the leadership ambitions of either China or India in specific domains.

Alongside the reasons for cooperation, competition also plays a significant role. As examined earlier, China and India systematically avoid direct confrontation on the international stage. China positions itself as a dominant supplier of goods and services, while India benefits from Chinese technological leadership by engaging only in trade sectors where it does not compete directly. Even in long-standing territorial disputes – such as the Himalayan border issue – the two countries have, in recent years, prioritized de-escalation over confrontation. Rather than resolving these disputes, they have chosen to minimize tensions and maintain a façade of diplomatic stability.

In contrast, economic and strategic initiatives such as China's BRI and the India's IMEEC remain distinct and competitive, despite involving different participants and operating on vastly different scales.

Another shared interest between China and India is their role in international financial institutions. While China is a full voting member of the IMF, India remains a second-tier participant. However, both nations advocate for reforms that would reduce the disproportionate influence of founding Western economies and increase the representation of emerging markets. Additionally, China and India have pursued alternative financial mechanisms, including the CRA and the NDB. However, these institutions have yet to pose a significant challenge to the Bretton Woods system, primarily because the governance structures of Western-led financial institutions remain adaptable to global financial shifts – though at a slower pace than many emerging economies desire.

The much-discussed de-dollarization process, often framed as a primary objective for China and an initiative supported by India, appears to be progressing slowly. Rather than representing a concrete strategy, it currently functions more as a geopolitical signal than as an imminent transformation of global financial transactions.

As we have seen, the areas of convergence between China and India outweigh their differences. However, while their divergences are limited, they remain significant enough to shape BRICS dynamics. One key finding in this paper is that within the UN system, China – due to its economic scale, geopolitical influence, and leadership in global affairs – emerges as the *de facto* leader of BRICS, while India, despite its aspirations, plays a more secondary role within the coalition.

Given these dynamics, several critical questions remain regarding BRICS's future in global economic development:

Will resource competition lead to economic or geopolitical conflicts among BRICS members?

Can China sustain its role as the “wealthier relative” in the coalition?

Will BRICS's approach to global governance gain precedence over the G7 framework?

Can reforms in international institutions accommodate a new multipolar world order?

Despite their geopolitical rivalry, China and India share strategic and economic interests within BRICS and in other global organizations. Both nations seek to counterbalance Western dominance, reduce dependence on the US dollar, and advocate for a greater role for emerging economies in global decision-making. However, their motivations differ: while China pursues hegemony and global leadership, India seeks strategic autonomy, balancing its foreign policy between East and West.

Within BRICS, both countries leverage their influence to defend Global South interests, push for financial institution reforms, and develop alternatives to Western-led economic structures. Yet, their bilateral relationship remains tense, with competition in global markets outweighing their cooperation within BRICS. Recent developments indicate that China-India relations are shaped by *pragmatic, selective cooperation* driven by mutual economic interests rather than trust or shared long-term strategic goals.

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SPECIAL ARTICLE

MARITIME ASIA: A «THEATRE OF CONSEQUENCE»

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Conflict, competition and cooperation were evident during 2024 across maritime Asia; the waters running from the Red Sea across the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, the North-west Pacific and the Arctic Ocean. During the year two different combinations were noticeable around the Asian littoral, in geopolitical terms a flexible geometry of alignments. On the one hand, Russia, China, North Korea, Iran and the Houthis in various ways cooperated much more closely with each other during 2024, against the West in general and the US in particular. On the other hand, during 2024 South Korea, Japan and India also moved closer together with each other, with Australia and above all the US. European powers also appeared in maritime Asia in greater force during 2024. A common thread running through these developments was China's growing maritime presence around Asia, reflecting its wider competition regionally with India and globally with the US.

KEYWORDS – Indo-Pacific, China, India, naval, geopolitics, geo-economics, maritime.

1. The broader picture

2024 proved a challenging time for Maritime Asia. Ongoing structural competition across the Indo-Pacific, something of a new Great Game at sea between India and China in the Indian Ocean (the Arabian Sea in the north east, and the Bay of Bengal in the north-west) and between the US and China in the Western Pacific continued to deepen, and be reflected in competitive groupings. These broader realignments in the global security order spill over across all the waters of maritime Asia.

Two ongoing China-related maritime issues, the South China Sea and Taiwan, continued to cause problems, and indeed increased in tension. In the South China Sea, ASEAN and China failed to conclude any Code of Conduct, despite being mooted since 2018, while direct confrontation between the Philippine and a more assertive China was particularly evi-

dent during 2024 as was increasing Chinese pressure against Taiwan in and around the Taiwan Strait.

New outside issues also impacted on Maritime Asia during 2024. First, blowback from military conflict in Gaza between Israel and Hamas, sparked by the Hamas attacks in South Israel in September 2023 brought Iran, China and Russia together in varying degrees behind the Iranian-backed Houthis, who had intervened in support of Hamas. Second, further blowback from the Ukraine War, ongoing since February 2022, brought Iran, China and North Korea in behind Russia during 2024. The US Deputy Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs noted in Japan in November that Europe and the Indo-Pacific were to be acknowledged as «a single theater of consequence» in which «therein we will see further adjustments in the relationships between Pyongyang, Moscow, Beijing, Tehran» [Campbell 2024, 18 November].

In turn, relationships between the four QUAD members of Australia, India, Japan and the US, joined at various points by South Korea were intensified, as shown by their various meetings and exercises arranged and conducted through the year. The QUAD Leaders Summit in September denounced Houthi disruption in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden; announced measures for increasing their own maritime cooperation, and specifically condemned Chinese «coercive» and «intimidating» manoeuvres in the South China Sea [White House 2024, 21 September]. In October 2024, as designated «Partners» Australia, Japan, South Korea and Japan participated for the first time in a NATO Defense Ministers meeting; which labelled Iran, China and North Korea as «security spoilers» [NATO 2024, 17 October]. On the maritime front it is worth noting that Italy deployed its Carrier Strike Group (CSG) for the first time across the Indo-Pacific during 2024, carrying out military exercises with India, Japan and the US, but avoiding any contact with China.

2. *Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden*

Houthi attacks on shipping, which started in November 2023, were condemned on 10 January 2024 in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2722, though China and Russia abstained.

Airstrikes by US and UK forces ensued two days later on Houthi bases in Yemen, and were immediately denounced in the Chinese state media [Global Times 2024a, 12 January]. Subsequently the US continued to use its carrier strength in the Red Sea to launch air strikes and interceptions throughout the year. Israeli attacks on Houthi bases in Yemen in late September 2024 were a direct response to Houthi drone attacks earlier in the month. Houthi attacks on Israel's Red Sea port of Eliat on 17 November represented a further escalation, as did their seizure of an Israeli ship.

Houthi missile attacks on Israel on 13 December were met with air strikes by Israel on 19 and 26 December on Houthi-controlled ports of Hudaydah, Salif, Ra's Isa and the capital's Sana'a International Airport.

Various responses ensued to contain the Houthi attacks. The Gulf States, with the exception of Bahrain, kept relatively quiet over the Houthis, with Qatar instead facilitating discussions during 2024 to broker a ceasefire in the Gaza strip. *Operation Prosperity Guardian* was set up in December 2023 by the US, which involved US and UK ships. However, the only Arab state involved was Bahrain, like Singapore sending some personnel. The other Gulf states of Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were absent. *Operation Aspides* was set up by the European Union in February 2024 and involved naval contributions from France, Germany, Italy, and Belgium. The *Aspides* operations were limited to interception at sea of Houthi drones and missiles, avoiding military strikes on land. The Indian navy dispatched three destroyers in January 2024 to beef up surveillance in the Gulf of Aden, and rescued the Philippine crew members of MV *Confidence*, hit by Houthi missiles, in the Gulf of Aden on 6 March.

Even as Western shipping companies switched routes from the Red Sea and the Suez Canal to the circumnavigation of Africa, the Houthis announced in March 2024 that Russian and Chinese ships would be exempt from attacks. With this exemption China was able to direct its own state shipping companies into picking up more of the Red Sea trade. News emerged, in September, that Iran had brokered ongoing secret talks between Russia and the Houthis for Russia to transfer anti-ship missiles to the Houthis [Irish 2024, 24 September], and, in October, that Russia was providing targeting information to the Houthis [Faucon and Grove 2024, 24 October].

India reached out to Saudi Arabia in 2024. Saudi Arabia's Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Fahd bin Abdullah Al-Ghufaili held talks with his Indian counterpart Admiral R. Hari Kumar on maritime security in the region on 11 January, with particular reference to the Red Sea, the Gulf and the Arabian Sea. India's Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar inaugurated the first India-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Ministerial Meeting for Strategic Dialogue in September. The first EU-GCC Cooperation Council took place in October, reiterated support for UN Security Council Resolution 2722, put out their «demand that the Houthis halt attacks against vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden», and recorded specific appreciation of the *Aspides* operation «with the aim of safeguarding freedom of navigation in the international waters in the Red Sea» [EU-GCC 2024, 16 October].

3. Arabian Sea and Western Indian Ocean

Oman, a GCC member, continued to show its strategic significance for the UK and for India during 2024. The UK Littoral Response Group (LRG) ar-

rived in the Arabian Sea in April 2024, headquartering at port city of Duqm. The LRG is made up of RFA *Argus* and RFA *Lyme Bay*, carrying landing craft, helicopters and marine commandos. It was immediately dispatched to carry out the *Konkan* exercise with India in the Arabian Sea. In February, India was also granted specific zonal space at the port of Duqm, which in turn helps both the general Indian imprint around the Arabian Sea and its operations in the Gulf of Aden/Red Sea. The *Naseem Al Bahr* exercise between India and Oman in October reaffirmed the close relations between these two littoral states.

The France-India-UAE trilateral formed in 2022 followed its naval exercises of 2023 with two *Desert Knight* aerial exercises over the Arabian Sea in January and December 2024, topping and tailing the year.

Growing trilateral cooperation between Iran, Russia and China was on show with their naval exercises *Security Bond—2024* carried out in February in the Gulf of Oman. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium Marine Exercise (IMEX) 2024, organized by Iran, involved naval drills held by Iran, Oman and Russia ships in October 2024 with Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Thailand observing.

On Iran's coast, in May 2024 Indian Ports Global Limited (IPGL) was given 10-year running rights at Chabahar in return for investments of around US\$ 370 million. From India's point of view, this opened the way for the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) which would by-pass the China-Pakistan corridor and leapfrog over Gwadar, Pakistan's China-run port. The India-UAE Virtual Trade Corridor Deal, signed in September, represented an important step towards the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). IMEC, linking India's Western-facing ports with the Gulf and over to the Mediterranean, is an important alternative to China's Maritime Silk Road initiative.

Pakistan's quest for sixth-generation advanced submarines was on show as China delivered the first of eight diesel-electric Hangor-II advanced submarines to Pakistan in April 2024. Pakistan's attempts to keep pace with India were evident in November with its successful flight test of the indigenously developed Ship-Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM). India's Western Fleet was significantly augmented in September with allocation to it, in September, of INS *Vikrant*, an aircraft carrier. She joined its sister aircraft-carrier ship INS *Vikramaditya* at Karwar Port, on the Western Coast of India (Karnataka).

The Lakshadweep islands played an important role for India in 2024. Narendra Modi's first visit of the year, on 2 January, was to these little-visited islands. INS *Jalayu*, the second Indian naval base on the Lakshadweep Islands was opened in March at Minicoy Island, with India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh traveling there with India's two Carrier Strike Groups, altogether 15 ships. In July, India cleared major plans from the Department of Military Affairs to build two military airfields in Lak-

shadweep, involving a new airbase on Minicoy and an extension of the existing air field on Agatti.

Amid competition with China, India recovered its position among the island states of the Indian Ocean. In the Maldives the pro-Chinese administration of Mohamed Muizzu, in power since September 2023, performed something of a U-turn from an «India out» to a «closest ally» position, a somersault highlighted by Jaishankar's visit in August 2024 [Naish 2024, 14 August]. The India-Seychelles relationship was upgraded to a Comprehensive Economic and Security Partnership when Modi met Muizzi in October. In Sri Lanka, elections in September delivered the Presidency to the leftist Anura Kumara Dissanayake, with the Chinese state media looking forward to his tenure, as the new President was «expected to boost ties with Beijing» [Global Times 2024f, 22 September]. Nonetheless, Dissanayake's visit to India in December saw Sri Lanka re-emphasizing security cooperation with India.

The Colombo Security Conclave (CSC) advanced during 2024 in membership and structure. Already made up of India, Maldives, Mauritius and Sri Lanka, the membership of Bangladesh was approved in July. The National Security Advisers of the member countries, tasked with assuring «maritime safety and security», met in August to formally sign the CSC Charter and a memorandum of understanding for the establishment of a Secretariat [Government of India 2024, 30 August].

4. Bay of Bengal and Eastern Indian Ocean

India's Eastern Fleet, was also significantly augmented in August with the induction of India's second nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN), INS *Arighat*, which joined its sister-vessel INS *Arihant* in the port of Visakhapatnam (Andhra Pradesh). In November, the *Arighat* carried out India's first firing of a K-4 nuclear-capable 3,500-mile range ballistic missile.

The *Milan* exercises organized by India in February from its bastion of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands attracted record numbers. 51 delegations were present; naval assets from Australia, France, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Malaysia, Mauritius, Myanmar, Russia, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the United States and Vietnam were present. Neither China, nor Pakistan, were invited; with China denouncing the event [China Military 2024a, 28 February]. Deliberately on show were India's two aircraft carriers INS *Vikramaditya* and INS *Vikrant*.

In October, at India's Eastern Command at Visakhapatnam, India hosted the four-way *Malabar* exercise involving Australia, India, Japan and the United States; exercises condemned in the Chinese state media [Qian 2024, 17 October].

Finally, the 43rd India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) exercise took place on 10-18 December as an expression of further «deepening

maritime ties in a transforming Indo-Pacific». Its timing overlapped with India's Admiral Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS) Dinesh Tripathi's official visit to Indonesia from 15-18 December [Siddiqui 2024, 14 December].

Port control rivalries remain evident. In Myanmar, China's control of Kyaukphyu deep water port had been re-affirmed in November 2023, but was overtaken when India Ports Global Ltd. (IPGL) gained complete operational control of Sittwe in May 2024. However, at Coco Islands (which are part of the Yangon region of Myanmar), where the Chinese have been present since 1994, when they seemingly leased one of them, in April, high resolution imagery showed the completed construction of a military hangar alongside a reconstructed airstrip and jetty. This re-ignited earlier fears of a Chinese intelligence-gathering facility looking across to India's sensitive Nicobar and Andaman Islands.

Indonesia was involved in different-pointing naval exercises in 2024. The largest ever *Super Garuda Shield* was hosted by Indonesia from 26 August to 6 September; a multi-domain exercise involving Australia, Brazil, Brunei, Canada, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, the U.K. and the US. China was a notable absentee. Following talks in Moscow in July by Indonesia's new February-elected President, Prabowo Subianto, the first ever Russia-Indonesia joint naval exercise, *Orruda 2024*, took place in the Java Sea from 4-8 November. This involved KRI *I Gusti Ngurah Rai* and KRI *Franz Kaisiepo* from the Indonesian navy and the RF *Gromky*, RF *Rezky* and RF *Russian Federation Hero Aldar Tsydenzhapov* from the Russian Navy. The largest amphibious exercise held to date between Indonesia and Australia, *Keris Woomera*, took place in the Java Sea from 13-17 November; it involved HMAS *Stuart* and HMAS *Adelaide* from the Australian navy and KRI *Raden Eddy Martadinata* and KRI *Makassar* from the Indonesian navy.

5. South China Sea

China's naval shadow was prominent in the South China Sea during 2024. Live fire joint naval drills were held with Russia in the South China Sea in July. China's own naval strength was apparent in October with the first joint appearance in the South China Sea of the *Liaoning* and *Shandong* Carrier Strike Groups. Friction between China and the Philippines dominated 2024 in the South China Sea, with particular flashpoints at Second Thomas Shoal, Scarborough Reef, Escoda Shoal and Sabina Shoal.

Defence of Philippine waters was encapsulated in the legal «push back» announced by Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos jr. in March 2024 against threats from China to «our sovereignty, sovereign rights, and our jurisdiction in the West Philippine Sea [South China Sea]» [Marcos 2024, 4 March]. President Marcos' Executive Order no. 57 on 25 March

Strengthening the Philippines Maritime Security and Maritime Domain Awareness set up a National Maritime Council. Towards the end of the year, the Philippine Maritime Zones Act and the Philippine Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act were signed into effect by Marcos on 8 November. Two days later, China responded with formally drawing expansive territorial baselines around Scarborough Reef. Marcos also announced in December that the Philippines was seeking a further arbitration award against China, to match the 2016 findings by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), which considered that Beijing's «nine-dash line» enclosing most of the South China Sea based on «historical rights» provided no legal basis for sovereignty.

The Philippines spent much of 2024 seeking and gaining external support, immediately denounced in the Chinese state media as the Philippines' misguided attempt to build a «united front» against China. [Liu 2024, 26 January].

Marcos, during his state visit to Vietnam in January 2024, asserted: «Vietnam remains the sole strategic partner of the Philippines in the ASEAN region maritime cooperation is the foundation of our Strategic Partnership» [Marcos 2024, 30 January]. The visit brought a Maritime Cooperation Agreement to increase coordination on South China issues, whose details were left vague, but tacitly aimed at China, and triggered warnings in the Chinese state media that Philippine-Vietnam cooperation might be to «the detriment of China's interests in the South China Sea» [Wang 2024, 29 January]. The first ever joint drills involving Coastguards ships from the Philippines and Vietnam were organized in 9 August, followed by Letters of Intent between their defence ministers on 30 August engaging to sign a formal defence cooperation agreement.

However, the ASEAN Summit in October brought no direct support for the Philippine position in the South China Sea, and studied silence from other states like Malaysia, whose chief of navy instead stated that «when our ships meet them, their response have been positive; they do not act aggressively» [Bernama 2024, 18 October]

Support was also sought by the Philippines from India. India's Minister for External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar visited Manila in March 2024, where he stressed that «as two seafaring nations of the Indo-Pacific, our maritime cooperation holds great potential». Subrahmanyam briefed his Philippine counterpart about «the Indian Navy's deployments in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea to counter ongoing threats» and reiterated «India's support to the Philippines for upholding its national sovereignty» [Jaishankar 2024, 26 March]. This latter point was immediately denounced in the Chinese state media, under the headline: «India is naive to interfere in South China Sea issue» [Global Times 2024b, 27 March]. Indian support for the Philippines became tangible with the arrival of shipment of Indian-made BrahMos supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles in April.

Various India-Philippine talks were held in September. Foreign Office officials held the 14th India-Philippines Policy Consultation Talks and the 5th Strategic Dialogue on 9 September in New Delhi. The 5th Joint Defense Cooperation Committee (JDCC) meeting held on 11 September in Manila focused on maritime security, including joint exercising, and was upgraded from joint secretaries to defence secretaries level.

Marcos' tilt back towards the US and other associated security partners like Japan and Australia was particularly noticeable during 2024. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's discussions with his Philippine counterpart on 1 April spelt out firmer US commitments to the Philippines «which extends to armed attacks on Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft – to include those of its Coast Guard – anywhere in the South China Sea» [White House 2024, 1 April].

7 April witnessed four-way naval exercises by the Philippines with the US, Japan and Australia, for the first time ever in the South China Sea, explained as being in support of «freedom of navigation» in a «free and open Indo-Pacific», and affirming the validity of the 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal Award [US Department of Defense 2024, 5 April].

The first ever trilateral leader's summit between Marcos, Biden and Kishida was held on 11 April; their Joint Vision Statement emphasized their being «equal partners and trusted friends, united by the vision we share of a free and open Indo-Pacific» [White House 2024, 11 April]. This leadership summit format was repeated in August. It was denounced in the Chinese state media [Ding 2024, 17 April].

The *Balikatan* «Shoulder to Shoulder» Philippine-US exercise, run from 22 April to 10 May, was the largest ever with 17,000 troops from both sides, and joined by Australia and for the first time France. On the one hand, the Philippine Armed Forces stated that «the key event» would be «the sinking of the adversary's vessel», a former Chinese-owned ship [Armed Forces of the Philippines 2024, 16 April]. On the other hand, the event was denounced in the Chinese state media, which pointed out «using Chinese-made ships as targets for military exercises is a ridiculous stunt by Philippines» [Global Times 2024c, 20 April].

Philippine Defence Minister Gilberto Teodoro met his Australian, Japanese and US counterparts in Hawaii on 3 May. Their Joint Readout stated their general «shared vision for a free, open, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific» interspersed with «serious concern over the PRC's repeated obstruction of Philippine vessels' exercise of high seas freedom of navigation and the disruption of supply lines to Second Thomas Shoal». The Joint Readout also «called upon the PRC to abide by the final and legally binding 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal Award» [US Department of Defense 2024, 3 May]. This was immediately denounced in the Chinese state media under the headline «US assembles 'Squad' of allies to counter China» [Global Times 2024d, 5 May].

On the 8 July the Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) was signed, with the Philippines described as «a strategic partner located at a strategic juncture on the sea lanes» [Government of Japan 2024, 8 July]. It was immediately denounced in the Chinese state media [Xu and Guo 2024, 8 July].

Joint US-Philippine patrolling carried out on 31 July in the Philippine's Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea was followed on 2 August with the first ever joint Philippine-Japan drills in the South China Sea, duly denounced in the Chinese state media as «provocative» [Leng, 2024, 17 August]. Further support for the Philippines was on show with the quadrilateral operations carried out by Australia, Canada, the Philippines and the US and denounced as «absurd» in China [Siow 2024, 17 August]. The operations, which took place in the Philippine EEZ area from 7-8 August, were tailed by three Chinese naval units, and denounced in the Chinese state media as «Philippines' provocations» [Global Times 2024e, 9 August].

Five-way joint patrolling was carried out by Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines and the US in the Philippine's Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea on 28 September. This was denounced in China, which responded with its own drills around Scarborough Shoal [Liu 2024, 28 September].

Sama Sama naval exercising commenced for two weeks in the waters off Northern Philippines facing Taiwan, running from 7-18 October. The high-intensity exercise focused on anti-submarine, anti-surface and anti-air warfare, and involved a widest ever participation. Almost 1,000 personnel from Australia, Canada, France Japan, the Philippines and the US, as well as observers from the UK, practised anti-submarine warfare techniques and the patrol of contested waters.

Later that month, the *Kamandag* island amphibious exercises hosted by the Philippines from 15-25 October, saw the largest number of participating countries; with troops from Australia, France, Japan, South Korea, the UK and the US alongside the Philippine Marine Corp. It was immediately denounced in the Chinese state-media as South China Sea-related, and aimed against China [Zhang and Guo 2024, 16 October].

The Australia-Philippine Defense Ministers Meeting mechanism, inaugurated on 15 November, stressed the common concerns over the situation in the South China Sea, reiterated the need there for freedom of navigation, and agreed that the Philippines would participate in the *Exercise Talisman Sabre* next year [Government of Australia 2024].

The General Security of Military Information Agreement signed on 18 November between the Philippines and the US was aimed at enhancing Manila's maritime awareness in the South China Sea through access to US satellite imagery.

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's visit to the Philippines included public disclosure on 19 November that at Palawan he «met with some

American service members deployed to US Task Force Ayungin». «Ayungin» is the Philippine name for Second Thomas Shoal, the source of particular Philippine-China friction. Hence Lloyd Austin's statement revealed the existence of a previously unknown US Task Force involved in a previously unknown operation which seemed to reflect intelligence gathering work by the US military. The fact was immediately denounced in the Chinese state media [Liu 2024, 21 November; Hu and Fan 2024, 26 November].

A five-way defence minister's format was inaugurated on 21 November where the Defence Ministers from Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and the US recorded their «vision of a free, open, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific, where international law and sovereignty are respected» [US Department of Defense 2024, 21 November].

Trilateral Japan-Philippine-US naval patrols mounted on 6 December in the Philippine's EEZ in the South China Sea, were immediately denounced in the Chinese state media [Wang 2024, 6 December].

Finally, a new trilateral Japan-Philippine-US Maritime Dialogue mechanism was inaugurated on 10 December, and recorded their «serious concerns about the PRC's dangerous and unlawful behaviour in the South China Sea» [White House 2024, 10 December]. An inaugural Philippine-India Maritime Dialogue was inaugurated on 18 December, with agreement to deepen naval collaboration.

6. *Taiwan Strait*

Rising tension in the Taiwan Strait was palpable in 2024, as there continued to be speculation on how far successful Russian aggression on Ukraine would embolden China to strike against Taiwan. The victory of the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) leader Lai Ching-te in the Presidential Elections held in May 2024 heightened speculation over Beijing's intentions [Insisa 2024, pp. 147-157].

The formal Joint Sword exercises, initiated in 2022, were expanded in numbers during 2024. «Joint Sword 2024A» and «Joint Sword-2024B» were respectively carried out in May and October. The exercise carried out in October 2024 included the deployment of the *Liaoning* Carrier Strike Group, which carried a record total of 125 aircraft and included 17 destroyers. Taiwan's President Lai also carried out a successful Pacific tour to Hawaii-Marshall Islands-Tuvalu-Guam-Nauru from 30 November to 6 December. However, this was immediately and deliberately followed by unprecedented Chinese drills, in effect a *Joint Sword 2024C*, initiated on 9 December, which involved nearly 90 navy vessels and coast guard ships in the East and South China Seas, in waters near Taiwan and the southern Japanese islands.

What was also noticeable in the second half of the year was the transit situation in the Taiwan Strait, claimed by Beijing as Chinese waters. The US

had been unilaterally transiting on a regular basis, but, in 2024, other Western nations joined the US in challenging China's sovereignty on the Strait. Taiwan obviously welcomed such transits, while China, equally obviously, denounced them.

An instance of this new development was joint US-Canada transits. After carrying out trilateral *Noble Stingray* exercises with Japan in the East China Sea, the USS *Ralph Johnson* and HMCS *Ottawa* transited together through the Taiwan Strait on 7 September, to then carry out *Noble Wolverine Exercise* in the South China Sea. Another joint transit was carried out by the USS *Rafael Peralta* and HMCS *Ottawa* on 1 November. New Zealand's MNZS *Aotearoa* and Australia's HMAS *Sydney* jointly transited on 25 September, indeed simultaneously with Japan's transit, for the first time, by JS *Sazanami*. As far as the Europeans were concerned, the Netherlands for the first time deployed through the Taiwan Strait one of its warships, the HNLMS *Tromp*, on 31 May. Germany sent through the Taiwan Strait the FGS *Baden-Württemberg* and the support ship *Frankfurt*, on 13 September. France's FS *Prairial* passed through on the 29 October.

7. North-East Asia

Japan has felt threatened by Chinese warships increasingly navigating through the Ryukyu Islands via the Miyako and Ishigaki Straits; with Japan placing Type 12 anti-ship missiles on Miyako Island for the first time in March 2024, a move promptly denounced by China as having «obvious offensive characteristics» aimed at China [Wong 2024, 8 April]. The US Marine Corps also set up a new unit at Okinawa in June, the Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR), tasked to lend support along the first island chain, up to the Japanese home islands and down to the Philippines. September saw a further escalation as the Chinese aircraft carrier *Liaoning* transited through the Ryukyu Islands for the first time, between Yonaguni and Iriomote Islands. The Japanese government responded by declaring it was «utterly unacceptable from the perspective of the security environment of Japan and the region» [Parry 2024, 18 September].

Japan, like India, is in an aircraft carrier race with China. Since 2022 Japan has been converting its two helicopter carriers JS *Kaga* and JS *Izumo* into fully-fledged fixed wing aircraft carriers, carrying F-35Bs. The first stage of the converted aircraft carriers was unofficially unveiled in April 2024, and successful test flight landings were carried out in October off the coast of South California on JS *Kaga*. Both helicopter carriers were sent on Japan's 2024 *Indo-Pacific Deployment* (IPD), the longest to date and the most powerful, including as it did both of these carriers.

As part of *Ocean-2024*, two nuclear submarines, the *Krasnoyarsk* and the *Imperator Aleksandr III*, commissioned in December 2023, were trans-

ferred from the Northern Fleet on the Kola peninsula to the Pacific Fleet at Vladivostok. Japan's distrust of Russia and its Pacific Fleet was exacerbated in November 2024 by Japan's first sighting of a Russian Yasen-class nuclear-powered submarine transiting La Perouse Strait between Japan's Hokkaido and Russia's Sakhalin islands, the first time Tokyo has observed this advanced Russian submarine.

Russia-China naval cooperation has also been manifest in North-East Asia where naval exercise *Ocean 2024* saw Russian vessels joined by Chinese vessels in September 2024 in the Sea of Japan, with the combined Russia-China flotilla then proceeding around both sides of the Japanese archipelago. *North-Joint 2024* to the north saw further exercising in the Sea of Okhotsk. Russian and Chinese coast guard vessels sailed together for the first time up to the Bering Sea on 28 September.

South Korea's distrust of Russia was similarly heightened by North Korea's strengthening its military ties with Russia, which involved the danger of potential transfer of nuclear technology from Russia to North Korea. An unexpected development was the dispatch of around 10,000 North Korean troops to fight alongside Russian troops in the Ukraine war in autumn 2024. This followed the supply of North Korean missiles to Russia and Putin's own summit with Kim Jong Un in June 2024. A formal defence co-operation pact was signed in 2024.

North Korea has pushed forward with its own submarine program. A first was the test, in January 2024, of the Pulhwasal-3-31, a new generation of nuclear-capable cruise missile, which was launched by a submarine, its previous testing in 2023 having been carried out from a fixed submerged platform. South Korea's riposte was immediate, and consisted in the launch of a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) from an underwater fixed platform. In April, the newest and largest submarine, a 3500-ton KSS-III diesel submarine, was delivered by Hyundai Heavy Industries and judged a «milestone» as it was able to fire SLBMs [Bergmann 2024, 4 April]. A further twist was that in August news became public that North Korea had started building a nuclear-powered submarine. According to some analysts, this represented North Korea's «biggest threat» yet to South Korea [Newdick 2024, 9 October].

The increasingly tight cooperation between Russia, China and North Korea brought Japan, South Korea and the US still closer together. 2024 started with them setting up an Indo-Pacific Dialogue mechanism on 5 January in Washington. In this occasion, the three countries denounced the «recent dangerous and escalatory behaviour supporting unlawful maritime claims by the PRC in the South China Sea», reiterated the commitment to freedom of navigation, «opposed any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion anywhere in the waters of the Indo-Pacific», condemned North Korea's «unlawful nuclear and ballistic missile programs, growing military cooperation with Russia» and reaffirmed «the importance

of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as indispensable to security and prosperity in the international community» [US Department of State 2024, 7 January]. This new mechanism was immediately denounced in the Chinese state media as «a collective attempt to restrain China» [Zhang 2024, 7 January]. The year ended with a formal Secretariat set up in December to further align Japan-South Korea-US policies and actions for the Indo-Pacific, as well as the second meeting of their Indo-Pacific Dialogue mechanism, which was held in Tokyo on 11 December.

Trilateral drills were carried out in April 2024, in the waters between South Korea and Japan, and, according to a South Korean spokesperson, «the participating forces conducted anti-submarine warfare drills to improve their responses to North Korean underwater threats including from submarines and submarine-launched ballistic missiles» [Shin 2024, 12 April]. In June in the East China Sea, *Freedom Edge*, a first time multi-domain exercise, was followed in July by the initialization of a Memorandum of Trilateral Security Cooperation. In November, a second exercise multi-domain exercise was carried out by Jeju Island, and was denounced in the Chinese state media as a «dangerous sign» for the Indo-Pacific [Global Times 2024g, 13 November].

A parallel trilateral was the inauguration of the first Policy Planning Dialogue in Seoul on 21 October, involving officials from India, Japan and South Korea, tasked to discuss situations in the Indo-Pacific region.

8. *Arctic Ocean.*

The final part of the Asian littoral is Russia's lengthy Arctic shoreline, running along from the Bering Strait. October witnessed China's Coast Guard entering the Bering Sea as part of a joint patrol with Russian forces.

The long-term climate features, the gradual warming of Arctic waters opening up ice-free navigation, is becoming another field for China-Russia cooperation. The meeting between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in May 2024 saw agreement to set up a subcommittee within the Russia-China Commission for the development of the Northern Sea Route. In June 2024, a joint venture was announced between Russia's Atomic Energy Corporation Rosatom and the Chinese shipping company Hainan Yangpu New Shipping to cooperate on operating an Arctic container route all year round. The agreement involves building five ice-class container ships and investing in infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route to overcome the logistical challenges of operating an all-year container route. In September the first Working Group Talks took place, including Rosatom officials and India's deputy Minister of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, to discuss similar Russia-India collaboration. However, as part of a wider European distancing from China, Finland withdrew from China's Polar Silk Road project in October 2024.

Towards 2025

The basic take-away is that the year ended with both loose groupings having strengthened their cooperation in varied formats. Of course, this could be seen as good news for Russia, which gained the help of North Korean troops in its war in Ukraine. However, this was bad news for China, which faced the strengthening and creation of various anti-China-focussed trilateral, and quadrilateral formations. Thus, on 31 December, the Quad Foreign Ministers issued a Joint Statement commemorating the 20th anniversary of Quad cooperation between Australia, India, Japan, and the US and reiterating their «shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific» [Government of Japan 2024, 31 December]. This was immediately denounced in the Chinese state media as «failing anti-China operations» [Deng and Shen 2025, 1 January], which, however, did not conceal Beijing's hope that, under the new US administration, some distancing could occur between India and Japan on one side and the US on the other.

Certainly, the end of 2024 was increasingly overshadowed by the results of the US elections in November where Donald Trump won the Presidency, with inauguration on 20 January 2025, and his Republican Party won both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Whether the Biden administration's more multilateral coalition-seeking approach in 2024 will survive under Trump in 2025 remains to be seen. The President's comments that the US was shielded by both the Atlantic and the Pacific reflected a geopolitical truth but it left open the issue of how far the US would seek to maintain its strength and position across the Pacific, and indeed Indo-Pacific, waters; and if so alongside who and against who? The China-Russia naval cooperation in South-East Asian/East Asian/West Pacific/Arctic waters was one feature emerging in 2024 that particularly irked Washington.

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SPECIAL ARTICLE

GAZA AND THE DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTION

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When and how the Gaza Strip started to be perceived by an increasing number of Israelis as a «demographic threat»? Which were the main plans to «thin» its population? To address these questions, the first part provides a brief historical background, lingering on pre-1948 Gaza, its inhabitants and the conflictual claims regarding its agriculture. The second part brings in the origins of Gaza's demographic (un)balance post-1948, and the plans to expel a large part, if not most, of the local inhabitants. The final section discusses whether or not Zionism has always aimed at «diluting» the number of the inhabitants of Gaza and, more in general, in historic Palestine.

KEYWORDS – Israel; Palestine; Demography; Gaza Strip; Hamas; Zionism.

1. Introduction

An official report drafted by the Israeli Ministry of Intelligence endorsed a plan for the forced and permanent relocation «of the civilian population from Gaza to Sinai».¹ It was leaked to the Israeli press on October 12, 2023. In the months that followed, – in the context of the debates which ensued after the attack carried out by Hamas on 7 October 2023 and the obliteration of Gaza by the Israeli army² – a number of Israeli journalists, diplomats and political leaders have suggested similar solutions.³ The latter came often

1. For the English translation of the plan, provided by *+972 Magazine* on 13 October 2023, see Government of Israel, 2023, 13 October.

2. A study published on *The Guardian* has shown that, in the Gaza Strip, «Civilian proportion of deaths is higher than the average in all world conflicts in second half of 20th century» [Borger 2023, 9 December]. The UN Human Rights Office documented that a large percentage of the Palestinian victims – each of them identified and verified through a methodology which requires «at least three independent sources» – were killed inside «residential buildings», and that 44% of them were children, mainly «from 5 to 9 years old» [UNHR 2024, 8 November].

3. Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Israel Katz, wrote that «All the civilian population in Gaza is ordered to leave immediately» [Post on X 2023, 13 October]; National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir argued that «Gaza must be occupied.

together with proposals in favour of the establishment of Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip, almost 20 years after the unilateral withdrawal of all Israeli forces and settlers promoted by the then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.⁴

This article, largely based on primary sources, aims at providing academic depth to the debates around these issues. A particular attention is devoted to the dynamics through which the Gaza Strip started to be perceived – in the eyes of a growing number of Israelis – as a «demographic threat», as well as on the main plans aimed at «diluting the [local Palestinian] population» [Aderet 2024, 5 December]. The first part provides the historical background, and sheds light on Gaza, its inhabitants and the conflicting claims regarding the local agricultural sector in the period before 1948. The second section discusses the origins of Gaza's demographic imbalance in the post-1948 phase as well as plans to expel a large part, if not the majority, of the local inhabitants. The third part focuses on the Zionist movement, with the aim of assessing whether or not the latter aimed at «thinning out» the population in Gaza and, more in general, in historic Palestine. The conclusions turn the attention on the role of the «vanquished» in relation to the benefits of historical knowledge.

2. *The creation of a «Strip» of Gaza*

Gaza is cited in the inscriptions of the Egyptian pharaoh Thutmose III (1481–1425 BCE).⁵ When the Tangerine explorer Ibn Battuta (1304–1368 CE) visit-

Stay inside it and encourage the voluntary migration of its residents» [Ben-Gvir 2024, 19 January]; Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich stated that Israel should «encourage the voluntary emigration of Palestinians» [Sokol 2024, 1 January]. Six days after the attack carried out by Hamas on 7 October 2023, Israel's President Isaac Herzog stated: «There are no innocent civilians in Gaza. There is an entire nation out there that is responsible» [McGreal 2023, 16 October]. The deputy speaker of the Knesset, Nissim Vaturi, called to «wipe Gaza off the face of the earth» and added «do not leave a child there, expel all the remaining ones at the end» [Post on X 2023, 9 October]. Jerusalem Affairs and Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu has proposed using atomic weapons against Gaza [*Times of Israel* 2023, 5 November]. The former head of the Israeli National Security Council Giora Eiland spoke out in favor of spreading serious epidemics, in consideration of the fact that «severe epidemics in the South of Gaza will bring victory closer and reduce casualties among Israeli soldiers» [Eiland 2023, 19 November].

4. Eyal Weizman, a professor of Spatial and Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London, noticed that Israel's unilateral disengagement from Gaza was «part of the same national security logic of unilateral solutions that the settlements [are] part of – perpetuating and intensifying animosity and violence, rather than undoing them» [Weizmann 2014, 11 January].

5. In late Roman times, Gaza (along with Alexandria and present-day Istanbul and Antioch) hosted some of the most renowned intellectual and cultural centres of the time; they attracted much of the Roman elite.

ed Gaza some 2700 years later, he noted that «it is a place of large dimensions [...] it has no wall around it [*lā sūr 'alayhā*]» [Ibn Battuta 1958, p.73].

The creation of a «Gaza Strip» is far more recent and the result of the tragic events of the last 77 years [Halevy 2016; Abu Salim 2016]; in fact, it has no precedent in the decades, centuries, or millennia prior, when Gaza was, among other things, part of a strategic intersection known as «the way of the Philistines», which connected the land of Canaan with ancient Egypt.

The tragic history mentioned above might be summarized in one data: about 70% of those living in the Gaza Strip, which is a 360 square kilometer area, are refugees who were driven out of Majdal, Huj, Simsim, Najd, Abu Sitta, and dozens of other villages. On the ashes of a number of them were later built Sderot (whose population doubled in the 1990s with the influx of immigrants from Russia), Or HaNer and several other Israeli cities and villages (in addition to Ashkelon, Ashdod, and some areas of the Western Negev, where Nirim⁶ and other villages were founded, Gaza was one of the 16 districts that made up the British-controlled Mandatory Palestine).

Palestinians call these expulsions and the destruction of 418 of their villages al-Nakba («the catastrophe»). It must be clarified that, for the Palestinians, the Nakba represents a process and not a phenomenon linked to a single event or year. Just to limit ourselves to three examples, in February-March 1949, following the signing of the armistice between Egypt and Israel, the Israeli forces expelled over 3,000 Palestinians from their homes in the villages of Iraq's al-Manshiyya and al-Faluja. On 27 June of the same year, approximately 1,500 Palestinian refugees living in Baqa al Gharbiya were removed. On 14 January 1950, 2,600 Palestinians were expelled from their homes in al-Majdal (Ashkelon).

6. The area in which Nirim was established on in 1946 registered massive violence, also of sexual nature, in 1948-9. During the war of 1948, in Benny Morris's words, «many cases of rape» and mutilation of Palestinian women and girl occurred [Shavit 2004, 8 January], including some as young as 12 years old [Lamm 2010, p.63-69] as happened, among many other examples, in Safsaf in October 1948. These historical facts – which aimed also at pushing local families to leave their villages – have also been confirmed in the diaries of David Ben-Gurion [Aderet 2021, 6 May] and by a number of recent testimonies provided by several Israeli veterans (see on this Alon Schwarz's documentary *Tantura*). We also have evidences coming from 1949, including the case of a 13-years old girl raped and then killed by a group of Israeli soldiers in Nirim. It should be noted that both Palestinians and Jews/Israelis committed brutal mutual violence during 1948-9; yet, not a single source has ever attested the perpetration of rapes and sexual violence by Palestinians in that historical phase. A single, partial exception to this stems from the case of Alisa Feuchtwanger, a member of the Palmach paramilitary group. When two militiamen of the Arab Legion tried to rape her in the context of the Kfar Etzion massacre (May 1948), the captain of that same Legion, Hikmat Mihyar, killed them with a gun, preventing the attempted violence from taking place [Kamel 2025, p.151].

AIRBORNE LEAFLET DROPPED OVER THE VILLAGE OF AL-TIRA IN JULY 1948. IT WAS ADDRESSED «TO THE ARABS OF AL-TIRA», SUGGESTING THEM TO SURRENDER «TO PREVENT A NAKBA».



Source: al-Ghubārī 2012. The scan of the leaflet is available on-line at: <https://www.kedem-auctions.com/en/arabs-al-tira---airborne-leaflet-arabic---israeli-war-independence-1948---if-you-want-prevent-nakba>

It should also be noted that the Palestinians were not the first to use the expression al-Nakba. While the expression itself was already existing in Arabic, it was first utilized in reference to Palestine in leaflets that the Israeli armed forces dropped on al-Tira (near Haifa) in July 1948, with the aim of convincing Palestinians to abandon their homes and communities and surrender [Kamel 2022a]. At that point in history, Gaza emerged as the primary location for Palestinian refugees, transforming itself from *Qadā'* to *Qitā'* (from an Ottoman «administrative district» to a «strip» of land) [Al-Nimal 1979]. In Ursula Lindsey and Toufic Haddad's words:

Gaza City was a major city in Palestine prior to 1948. It is also one of the few Palestinian cities that survived the 1948 Nakba, given that most Palestinian were lost in the creation of the state of Israel-West Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa, etc. Gaza City became a city that was teeming with all these refugees who were displaced from their lands, and subsequently it became the seat of the first attempt to try and form an all-Palestinian national government [*Hukūmat 'Umūm Filastīn*] after 1948 [Haddad and Lindsey 2024, 13 June].

It is worth mentioning that the Palestinians are not simply «Arabs», a term through which they are often described in Israel and in Western countries: the thesis according to which, as «Arabs», they can easily be relo-

cated to any other «Arab country» is highly problematic from an historical perspective, beside being in clear violation of international law. To refer to the local populations from the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Gibraltar as «the Arabs» is akin to calling those living in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the United States, Ireland, and Britain «the English»: they all speak the same language but exhibit distinctly different historical traditions, heritages and identities [MacKintosh-Smith 2019].

More than a millennium ago, Jerusalemite geographer Muhammad ibn Ahmad Shams al-Dīn Al-Maḡdīsī (946-1000) made it clear that he identified himself as a Palestinian: «I mentioned to them [workers in Shiraz] about the construction in Palestine and I discussed with them these matters. The master stonecutter asked me: Are you Egyptian? I replied: No, I am Palestinian» [Al-Maḡdīsī 2003, p.362].⁷ About 1.000 years later, on 3 September 1921, an op-ed published on *Falastīn* (which was printed from 1911 until 1948) highlighted that «We are Palestinians first and Arabs second» [MDC 1921, 3 December], thus echoing what was expressed a few years earlier by several Palestinian intellectuals such as Khalīl Baydas (1874–1949) and Salīm Qub'ayn (1870–1951).

In the 1870s the terms «Palestinians» and «Palästinsenser» were also used, in explicit reference to the Arabs of Palestine, by a number of Western observers, including the British consul in Jerusalem James Finn (1806-72) [Finn 1878, p.248] and the German Protestant missionary Ludwig Schneller (1858-1953) [Schneller 1905, p.107]. These few examples, among others (the word *Filastīnī*, «Palestinian», was increasingly used in books and publications in the early 20th century), are there to remind us that, although all identities are ultimately «constructed», there are contexts in which the available sources confirm peculiar backgrounds that are too often omitted or unacknowledged [Kamel 2025].

«Who are they?», asked the Palestinian poet Mahmūd Darwīsh (1941-2008) in his *Une rime pour les Mu'allaqāt* about the local populations under Ottoman rule: «That's someone else problem» [Darwīsh 2000]. In many ways it was indeed a problem of the «others», of people external to the region. For the «locals», that is the «insiders», what made the difference was, on top of religion, the origin from a certain village (which often represented a sort of «protonation in the protonation»), the belonging to a certain hamūla (family clan), a way of dressing, a product of the earth, the use of a specific dialect, a particular dance (like the *dabkeh*, which in Palestine had its own peculiar characteristics), a festival [Kamel 2016, p.14].

A peculiar aspect of Palestinian culture and a glaring example of «protonational cohesion» was the annual Nabī Mūsā festival, which drew

7. Al-Maḡdīsī was a contemporary of Abū Muhammad al-Yāzūrī, vizier of the Fatimid caliph, born in the village from which his name originates: Yāzūr (Yāzūr was attacked by forces of the Haganah on 11 December 1947 and destroyed the following year).

thousands of people from all across Palestine to the Jericho area [Al-'Asali 1990]. The purpose of the festival was to honor the traumatic events associated with the Crusades. Another example, among several others, was the festival known as «The Valley of the Ants». It took place once per year in the area around al-Majdal (Ashkelon). In the words of the Palestinian historian 'Arif al-'Arif (1891-1973), on that special occasion, many of the people who lived in Gaza, al-Majdal, and the nearby villages used to dressing up, bringing food, singing songs until the sun sets, waving flags, and riding horses [Al-'Arif 1943].

3. *How it was*

In 1859 the American Protestant missionary William M. Thomson (1806-94) noted that: «the first time I came into this region I was agreeably surprised to find it not flat, barren country [...] The country is equally lovely and no less fertile than the very best of the Mississippi Valley» [Thomson 1859, p.347]. One decade later, the British consul in Jerusalem James Finn (from 1846 to 1863) made it clear that he did «not know where in all the Holy Land I have seen such excellent agriculture of grain, olive-trees, and orchards of fruits, as here at Ashdod [still in 1945, Ashdod was inhabited by 4620 Arabs and 290 Jews]. The fields would do credit to English farming» [Finn 1868, p.162].

In the 1870s, there were around 468 hectares of irrigated citrus groves in the Gaza area [Badran 1972, p.126]. In 1899, two decades later, John Dickson, the British Consul to Jerusalem (from 1890 to 1906), pointed out that the area of Gaza was «under cultivation, crops of wheat and barley being raised by the Arabs» [ISA 1899, 30 November].

In a Hebrew publication from 1918 titled *Eretz Yisrael ba-'avar u-ba-hove* («The Land of Israel in the Past and Present»), David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973) and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi (1884-1963), who would later become, respectively, the prime minister and second president of Israel, strived to demonstrate the Jewish origins of the local *fellahin* [Ben-Gurion and Ben Zvi 1980, p.196]⁸ (in their opinion, the local population made no contribution in the previous twelve centuries) [Ben-Gurion and Ben Zvi 1980, p.151-5 and 210]. Ben Gurion and Ben Zvi went so far as to undermine the very basis of the thesis of the mass expulsion of Jews – a narrative which have been rejected by many leading scholars of Jewish history [Yu-

8. A slightly less extreme view was that of Ben Zvi, who, in 1929, asserted: «The vast majority of the *fellahin* cannot trace their origins to the Arab conquerors but to the Jewish *fellahin* who, before the conquest by Islam, formed the principal core of the inhabitants of the country» [Ben Zvi 1929, p.39].

val 2006, p.19; Bartal 2008, 6 July; Aldeman and Barkan 2011, p. 159]⁹ – which allegedly took place after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE):

To claim that following the conquest of Jerusalem by Tīto and the failure of the revolt of Bar Kokba the Jewish people ceased to work the soil of Palestine means to show one's complete ignorance of Jewish history and literature of the time [...] Despite the oppression and suffering, the people of the country remained that which it always was [Ben Gurion and Ben Zvi 1980, p.198].

This final quotation clearly contradicts the language of the Declaration of Independence that Ben-Gurion himself read on 14 May 1948, under a portrait of Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) at the Tel Aviv Museum. «After being forcibly exiled from their land», to quote the precise words contained in the Declaration, «people kept their faith during the diaspora» [Kamel 2015, ch. 2].

The reason for the existence of two theses in such strong contrast on a crucial topic such as the *galut* (the «diaspora») can be found in the events that occurred in the three decades between the publication of Ben-Gurion/Ben Zvi's book and the birth of State of Israel. The rising of Palestinian nationalism, the Hebron massacre (1929) and the Great Arab Revolt (1936) had indeed shown, once and for all, the firm opposition of the local majority to any process of assimilation [Kamel 2015, ch. 2]. Such an awareness would soon create the conditions for the development of a new myth, that of the *midbar shemama*¹⁰ («the barren desert»). The hint is to the attempts to present Palestine as a desolate place,¹¹ with a tiny, recently

10. On the use of the Jewish term *shemama* see Yoram Bargal [2004, p.21-22].

11. Yael Zerubavel argued that «the portrayal of the landscape as a 'desolate desert' was clearly based on a selective view of the reality at the time. These descriptions focused on unproductive lands, barren areas, and the malaria-spreading marshlands while ignoring Arab villages and towns and other settlements built by European settlers, as well as the existence of cultivated fields, plantations, and orchards around various settlements. Other sources, however, indicate that the settlers clearly saw the inhabited and cultivated field parts of the land and developed relationships with members of other communities around whom they live. [...] The construction of the desert and the settlement oppositional symbolic landscapes were clearly influenced by predominantly European views of the Orient, which European Zionist immigrants brought with them to the Middle East» [Zerubavel 2008, p.207-208].

arrived Arab population. The region's subsequent development has been significantly impacted by this perception:

From that moment on, [i.e., since the abandonment of the thesis of the Jewish origin of the fellahin] the descendents of the Judean peasantry vanished from Jewish national consciousness and were cast into oblivion. Very soon [...] the modern Palestinian fellahin became, in the eyes of the authorized agents of memory, Arab immigrants who came in the nineteenth century to an almost empty country and continued to arrive in the twentieth century as the developing Zionist economy, according to the new myth, attracted many thousands of non-Jewish laborers [Sand 2008, p. 417].

In the historical phases prior to when the Crusaders destroyed a large part of the Gaza area in the 12th century, the latter was home to a limited yet thriving and well integrated Jewish community (in the context of the «Arab conquest» of the 7th century, the Arab conquerors did not expel the Jews and Christians who lived in the area).¹²

A limited presence also persisted in the following centuries, and until the revolts of 1929, when the Jewish neighborhood of Gaza was destroyed by local Palestinians and all the Jews who were living in Gaza at the time (51 people) fled the city. It the space of just two decades, the 1920s and 1930s, a far greater number of cases of intercommunal violence were recorded than in the previous four centuries combined. Although the ethnic-religious equilibria in the Gaza Strip were significantly influenced by the dynamics linked to the rising of Zionism and the First World War – when Gaza suffered also attacks with chemical weapons¹³ – and other related historical trajec-

12. During the Arab conquest of the seventh century, the region experienced the most widespread – yet less «forced» – of the invasions that were observed there. The language, religion, and political system that the Arabs introduced were embraced by a large percentage of the local inhabitants. Since the latter remained predominantly Christian until the start of the eleventh century, Islam was not forced upon them. This does not mean that the conquest was greeted by the locals «with open arms», and even less that the present-day populations are the direct descendants of the ancient ones – but, instead, that most of the local inhabitants were Arabized in a natural way, in a process of continuity, thus maintaining what in modern times would have been called a «cultural basis» [O'Connor 1996]. This is so not only in consideration of the small number of the invaders but also in virtue of the fact that the Arabic that was introduced significantly preserved the sounds of the local ancient dialects [Kamel 2019, p.16; Al-Mubarrad 1956, p. 439]. Ra'ad wrote that Arabic has the same «sound system as Cananite, reflected in the twenty-eight-sign alphabets of both. Ugaritic also has the same sounds, except that the thirty-sign alphabet has three signs for the aleph: ā, ū, ē. As the only live language in the region for many centuries, Arabic can be said to be the storehouse containing the inventories of the earlier languages» [Ra'ad 2010, p.187].

13. During the Third Battle of Gaza (1917) the troops led by General Edmund Allenby (1861-1936) used approximately 10,000 grenades loaded with asphyxiating gas [Kamel 2022b, p. 90].

ries [Rafeq 1980], it is only as a consequence of the 1948 war that the entire area recorded, from a demographic point of view, an unprecedented shift.

4. Gaza's demographic unbalance

Following Operation Yoav, carried out by the Israeli forces in the Negev (Naqab) Desert in mid-October 1948, the number of refugees in the Gaza Strip rose from 100,000 (which arrived in the previous months) to 230,000. Michael Gallant, father of Yoav Gallant (several times minister in the years 2018-2024), named his son Yoav to commemorate the military campaign that, more than any other, altered Gaza's demographic equilibrium.

In our days, Yoav Gallant and, more in general, some other key political figures and institutions in Israel, are attempting to close the circle of history, this time by reducing the population in Gaza. This objective is scarcely unprecedented. To stick to the period right after 1948,¹⁴ and more precisely to 5 years later (1953), the «Free Officers Movement» which overthrew Egyptian King Farouk in 1952, together with the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA), and the US (under President Harry Truman) agreed to relocate 12,000 Palestinian families from the Gaza Strip to the Sinai Peninsula [Kamel 2024b, 28 October].

Egyptian newspapers first published details on the plan in May 1953. To facilitate its implementation, an Israeli military unit led by Ariel Sharon attacked al Bureij Camp in August 1953, killing about 30 Palestinians. Back then, Egypt was experiencing major internal problems, and Nasser, one of the «Free Officers», who served as prime minister (1954-56) and then president (1956-70) of Egypt, had little interest in taking any responsibility for managing the problem of Gaza's large refugee population, beside also being aware that his country was not ready to confront Israel militarily.

It is indeed only after Israel's «Black Arrow» operation in February 1955 – which targeted the Egyptian forces in response to their active role in providing various forms of support for Palestinian fedayeen activity – that Nasser's approach became more confrontational with Israel and supportive of the Palestinians. A cable sent from Israel to Moshe Sharrett (at the time in Bombay) on 4 November 1956, decried: «The dangers inherent in the expansionist and imperialistic policies of the Nasser regime, whose declared aim is Egyptian hegemony both in African and Western Asia».¹⁵

14. In May 1949, within the frame of the sessions of the UN Commission for Palestine, the delegation of Israel declared that «if the Gaza area were incorporated in the State of Israel, the Government of Israel would be prepared to accept as citizens of Israel the entire Arab population of the area». No details were ever provided on this proposal. See United Nations 1951.

15. A cable sent from Israel to the former Israeli Prime/Foreign Minister Moshe Sharrett (at the time in Bombay) on November 4, 1956 [CZA]. Nasser access to the Canal Zone base became the main source of concern for the Israeli authorities [ISA 1951, 19 November].

The «Sinai plan» for the expulsion of 12,000 Palestinian families was foiled after two years of massive protests throughout the Gaza strip, when Palestinians – which, according to the Israeli Foreign Ministry's liaison officer with the army Arieh Eilan, were experiencing «real hunger» [ISA 1955, 27 March] – chanted slogans such as: «No settlement. No relocation. Oh, you American agents» [Bisīṣū 1980, p.31]. These protests played a seminal role in thwarting a goal that was discussed and cherished already during the war of 1948. In Elisha Efrat's words:

Yigal Allon, a military commander during the War of Independence, used to say that, if he and his men had had another day or two, they would have captured Gaza in 1948. He supposed that, if Israel had captured the Gaza Strip then, there would not have been so many refugees living there, and they would have fled. That was also what David Ben-Gurion thought when he proposed capturing the Gaza Strip in 1955 [Efrat 2006, p.183].

One year later, in October 1956, the Israeli army invaded the Sinai and Gaza,¹⁶ maintaining the direct control of both areas for four months, before being forced to evacuate them due to mounting international (including from the US) pressure [Masalha 1996, p.55-68]. Back then, the new Israel's foreign minister, Golda Meir (1898-1978), argued that «the Gaza Strip is an integral part of the land of Israel»,¹⁷ while Menahem Begin (1913-1992), the head of the Herut party at the time, maintained that Gaza «belonged to Israel by right» [Begin 1956, 28 November].

During those same months, Levi Eshkol (1895-1969), Israel's finance minister, set aside half a million dollars to drive thousands of Palestinians to the Sinai. Ezra Danin (1903-1984) was given responsibility for this plan, known as the «Al-'Arīsh option»,¹⁸ which was gaining popularity at the time. Incidentally, Danin was the same person who in 1962 sponsored «Operation workers», which sought to relocate Palestinians to West Germany [Sharett and Rivlin 1987]. It might be useful to add that in the very same historical phase in which Levi Eshkol was advocating for the emigration of the Gazawis in exchange for economic benefits, Avraham Tamir (1924-2010), on request of Ben-Gurion, outlined a plan – known

16. For a visual understanding of the Rafah and the Khan Yunis massacres perpetrated by the Israeli army between 3 and 12 November 1956 see Sacco 2009.

17. Golda Meir during a Mapai Party rally on 10 November 1956 [Bigart 1956, 11 November].

18. In an irony of history, at the beginning of the XX century, Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism, focused his attention on the al-'Arīsh area. In his diary, on the date of 23 October 1902, he wrote: «When we are under the Union Jack at El Arish then Palestine too will fall into 'the British sphere of influence'». Herzl continued: «He [Chamberlain] liked the Zionist idea. If I could show him a spot among the British possessions which was not yet inhabited by white settlers, then we could talk» [Herzl 1958, p.375].

as *Hafarperet* («The Mole») – for the expulsion of 40,000 Palestinians from Israel to Jordan.¹⁹

After 1967, also thanks to the influential role played by Ada Sereni (Mossad's chief operative in Italy), Yosef Yariv (the head of the Mossad's special operations arm) and others, the Israeli forces intensified their attempts to forcibly relocate Gaza's refugees to Jordan and South American states. To encourage this goal, which was firmly opposed by the Egyptian and Jordanian authorities, they set up «emigration offices» throughout the Gaza Strip and offered financial incentives. In the 1970s, Israel's transfer policies continued to intensify – 38,000 refugees were moved to the West Bank and Sinai in 1971 alone) – and prominent figures such as Yitzhak Rabin (1922-1995) strived to reach an agreement with King Hussein bin Talāl (1935-99) to implement the expulsion of thousands of Palestinians from Gaza to Jordan [Shragai 2025, 15 February].

In the following years and decades, the plan for the relocation of Palestinians from Gaza (mainly) to the Sinai Peninsula, while being offered less assiduously, remained rather popular. A number of Israeli right-wing figures and parties (such as Moledet, established by Rehavam Ze'evi in 1988) have continued to openly advocate for the expulsion of the Palestinians through population transfer. Just to provide a particularly meaningful example, the 2004 «Eiland plan» envisioned that Egypt would cede land roughly five times the size of Gaza to settle there the majority of the Gazawis. The plan was named after Giora Eiland, who served as the head of the Israeli National Security Council between 2004 and 2006.

The 2004 Eiland plan was never implemented, and in 2005, just before a stroke left him permanently incapacitated, Ariel Sharon drove 7,000 settlers out of Gaza while also resettling tens of thousands more in settlements throughout the West Bank [Kamel 2024b, 28 October]. As noted by Justin Alexander:

Gaza's very existence, with its dense, impoverished and growing population, the majority of whom are refugees from what is now Israel, is perceived by some Israelis to pose a demographic threat to the maintenance of a Jewish-majority state next-door; indeed this was a major motivation for the Disengagement [decided by Sharon] [Alexander 2007, p.6].

19. Between 1948 and 1967 all Palestinians in Israel were subject to martial law. In Kafr Qasim – for example – 48 unarmed Palestinians (23 children) were massacred in October 1956 for not being aware of the fact that a curfew had been imposed by the Israeli authorities earlier that day. It has been claimed that the perpetrators of such massacre believed that they were implementing a government policy within the frame of the operation *Hafarperet*, which sought to drive Palestinians out of the «southern Triangle», an area in Israel where many Palestinian cities and villages are concentrated [Rosenthal 2000].

The unilateral disengagement from Gaza was in violation of the Oslo Accords, and, not by chance, exacerbated and prolonged hostility and violence rather than tackling them.

5. *Demography and Zionism(s)*

«Diluting» the Palestinian population was a political goal already before 1948? To answer to this question, it might be useful to start from a specific date, that is 12 June 1895, when the founder of political Zionism, Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), wrote that «we shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border» [Herzl 1960, p.88-90]. Benny Morris [2004, p.40-41], Edward Said [1992, p.13], and numerous other academics have misquoted (cutting some key sentences) this passage to support the claim that Herzl was aiming at driving the Palestinians out of their land. Yet, Herzl did not have Palestine and its people in mind when he wrote those remarks. The geographical frame of the «expropriation» process to which he was alluding was South America: «I am assuming that we shall go to Argentina», Herzl wrote in that same diary on 13 June 1895 [Herzl 1960, p.134].

Herzl never used the terms «Arabs» or «Palestinians»,²⁰ and presented Zionism as an «outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism» [Herzl 2006, p.28]. However, there is no «proof» that he intended to drive out the local inhabitants. It is only from the 1930s onwards,²¹ – when the tensions between the three local communities (Palestinian Jews, Arab-Palestinians and Zionists) sharpened [Kamel 2015, ch. 4; Kamel 2021, 19 August], and after that the 1937 British Peel Commission proposed the simultaneous forced transfer of about 225,000 Palestinians and 1,250 Jews²² – that the subject began to attract increasing attention. It was only then that opinions such as

20. The local majority was ignored in Herzl's correspondence with the Ottoman authorities. Herzl tried in vain to condition potential financial assistance to the Ottoman Empire on two concessions from the latter: the Ottomans' recognition of Jews' right to settle in Palestine and the possibility for the Jews to purchase an unlimited amount of land [BOA].

21. Israel Zangwill (1864-1926) was one of the few Zionists who openly supported the expulsion of the Palestinians prior to the 1930s. In order to establish the Jewish Territorial Organization, he left the Zionist organization in 1905 and argued the following: «We must be prepared either to drive out by the sword the [Arab] tribes as our forefathers did, or to grapple with the problem of a large alien population, mostly Mohammedan and accustomed for centuries to despise us» [Zangwill 1921, p.92].

22. It is with the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) that the concepts of «population transfer» and «ethnic cleansing» became, for the first time in history, two accepted and institutionalized legal solution to international conflicts. Both of them became integral components of a «pattern» that was then replicated, *mutatis mutandis*, in Palestine (through the Peel Commission of 1937) and India/Pakistan (with the partition of 1947) [Kamel 2024a, p.125].

the ones voiced in 1940 by the director of the Department for Land in the Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael (KKL), Yosef Weitz, emerged: «There is no other way», argued Weitz, «but to transfer the Arabs from here to neighbouring countries» [Weitz 1969, 29 September]. Weitz, later on (1949-54), outlined a plan for the expulsion of thousands of Galilee's Christians to Argentina and Brasil [Masalha 1999].

The fact that the Zionist authorities did not aim at expelling them, at least until the 1930s, does not mean that Palestinians, as a general tendency, were treated fairly. For instance, Asher Ginsberg (1856-1927), one of the most influential Zionist thinkers of the time, arrived in Palestine in 1891 and, after spending a few months in the area, wrote an article entitled *Emet me-Eretz Ysrael* («Truth from the Land of Israel») in which he pointed out that «They [Ginsberg was referring to the new settlers who were arriving from Europe] deal with the Arabs with hostility and cruelty, trespass unjustly, beat them shamefully for no sufficient reason, and even boast about their actions. There is no one to stop the flood and put an end to this despicable and dangerous tendency» [Ginsberg 1981].²³

The same year (1891), Moshe Smilansky (1874-1953), a well-known writer from Kiev, arrived in Palestine and, a few years later, recounting his experience, wrote that: «During the thirty years we have been here, it is not they [the Palestinians] who have remained alien to us but we to them» [Mendes-Flohr 1983, p.5]. Yitzhak Epstein (1862-1943), – a Russian writer who immigrated in Palestine in 1886 – spoke to the delegates of the 7th Zionist Congress in 1905, stressing that «in our beloved land lives a whole people which has lived there for many centuries and has never considered the idea of leaving it» [Epstein 1907, p.193-206]. In 1929, renowned historian Hans Kohn (1891–1971), who had been involved in the Zionist movement since 1909, wrote that «we pretended that the Arabs did not exist and were glad when we were not reminded of their existence» [JNUL 1929, 21 November].²⁴

These few examples are there to remind us that the Zionist movement was anything but a monolith, and that many critical aspects concerning the relations with the Palestinian population were visible and relevant already at that time.

23. Asher Ginsberg (also known with his pen name, Ahad Ha'am, that is «One of the people») argued also that «The Arabs, particularly those from the cities, see and understand our activities [...] the day on which our people make sufficient progress as to oblige people to move from the country [...] they will certainly not abandon their positions easily» [Ginsberg 1947, p.23].

24. In the same historical phase, Ruppin expressed similar views [Ruppin 1969, p.33].

6. *The past's future*

In late January 2025, on an Air Force One flight from Las Vegas to Miami, US President Donald Trump outlined a plan to «clean up» Gaza. «We are talking about probably a million and a half people, and we just clean out that whole thing», Trump told reporters, adding that the move «could be temporary» or «could be long-term» [Cuddy and Donnison 2025, 26 January].²⁵ Jordan's King Abdullah II and Egypt's President al-Sisi – two dictators who heavily depend on US funding – have been asked, so far to no avail, to take in Palestinians from Gaza, despite the fact that this represents a clear violation of international law, which prohibits «individual or mass forcible transfers, as well as deportations of protected persons from occupied territory to the territory of the Occupying Power or to that of any other country» [IHL Database 1949, 12 August]. The Jordanian King, in particular, was aware that the moment he would accept to host thousands of Gazawis, the next (very likely) step would be – in line with far-right Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich's plans [Khalil and Shamala 2025, 10 February] – the request to host hundreds of thousands of Palestinians expelled by the Israeli army from the West Bank to Jordan.

A few days after proposing his plan for the mass expulsion of the Gazawis, while speaking at a White House news conference, Trump pointed out that Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip should be relocated, and added that they would be «thrilled» to live elsewhere and were only staying because they had «no alternative» [Gregorian 2025, 4 February]. Right after this, Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz announced the establishment of a new directorate in the Defense Ministry to facilitate the «voluntary emigration» of the Gazawis.

Yet, in light of the epochal catastrophe still raging in Gaza (and, to a more limited but very visible extent, in the West Bank), Palestinians' resistance to expulsions and relocations is today more tenacious than ever. Palestinians are aware that – as in the past – there is nothing «temporary» in their forced removals from their homes. They know that for them there is not, nor will there be, any «right of return».

It is therefore hardly surprising that Palestinians are willing to pay a high price to remain on their land. Equally eager are of course also the Israelis and this is a further reason why anyone caring about this land and its inhabitants must contribute to finding a solution that would allow these two people to coexist. How to do so? A comprehensive answer would

25. The goal of expelling a large percentage of the Gazawis by relying on «Arab countries» had already been proposed by the former US Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the end of 2023, when he addressed al-Sisi, promising further funding in exchange for the «absorption» of the Palestinians in his home country.

require much more space,²⁶ but, also in light of what has emerged in this article, an element appears evident. This is the necessity of knowing and recognizing the tremendous historical cost that the Palestinians have paid so that the aspirations of their counterpart could be realized, bending the arc of history towards an idea of justice and greater understanding, without this affecting the rights and aspirations of any of the involved parties. Reinhart Koselleck (1923-2006), the founder of *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history), noticed that «History may be made, in the short term, by winners, but historical knowledge comes, in the long run, from the vanquished» [Koselleck 2000, p.68].

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26. Deniela Huber focused on the primacy of individual and collective rights guaranteed through international law and international institutions (i.e. the justice component) as opposed to the peace paradigm [Huber 2018, p.251-264].

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REVIEWS

INDIA AND THE WORLD: A HISTORY OF CONNECTIONS, c. 1750-2000

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Claude Markovits, *India and the World: A History of Connections*, c. 1750–2000, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 275 pp. (ISBN 978-1-316-63745-6).

Claude Markovits' *India and the World: A History of Connections*, c. 1750–2000 is a compelling, wide-ranging examination of India's global interactions over two centuries and a half. Across seven sweeping thematic chapters, Markovits explores India's past through its role in the three-fold global exchange of things (commodities, manufactured goods, cultural productions), people (voluntary migration, indentured labour, military conscription), and ideas (religion, political ideologies, the reception of historical events). The author's aim is to explore Indian history through a broader, connected history framework, drawing on methodologies most notably pioneered by Sanjay Subrahmanyam.¹ The book positions India as an active participant in transoceanic networks sustained through multidirectional connections. As Markovits demonstrates, India influenced and was influenced by the world in a dynamic and reciprocal, if sometimes uneven, manner.

The book's opening chronology provides an excellent indication of what is to come, in terms of the monograph's ambitious thematic scope. The chronology features standard political and military milestones, ranging from the Carnatic Wars of 1746–53 to the Kargil conflict of 1999. It also pinpoints, however, cultural moments, from the publication of William Jones's English translation of Kalidasa's play *Shakuntala* in 1789 to the box-office success of the Tamil masala film *Muthu* in Japan in 1998. The masterful balance between economic, political, social, and cultural history underscores the breadth of Markovits's scholarship, which enables him to situate India not just within the frameworks created by European colonialism but also in global landscapes. This broader scope breaks from the more conventional

1. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges* and *Explorations in Connected History: Mughals and Franks*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005.

focus on India's imperial ties, demonstrating that India's global reach extended well beyond them. Markovits takes the reader on a tour from Japan, where the Sindwork merchants of Sindh's Hyderabad sold Japonaiserie trinkets to affluent North American customers in search of exotica, to Benin, where *vodún* followers incorporated images of Hindu gods imported by Indian traders into their religious practices. It is precisely in charting India's interactions with the non-imperial and the non-European – particularly the rest of Asia, Africa, and the Americas – that the book is most gripping and successful.

Chapter 1 examines India's evolving role within the global economy, largely through the trade in commodities such as cotton, opium, tea, and jute. Markovitz examines India's transition from early modern "workshop of the world" to supplier of raw materials to Western nations and Japan. Indian commodities became particularly crucial to the British empire – especially after 1890 when, under the gold standard, India's export surplus helped offset Britain's growing trade deficit. From 1947 an independent India, no longer tied to British financial obligations, aimed to establish an autonomous economy, under a Nehruvian blueprint that envisioned some controlled participation of the world economy in the Indian economy. Despite notable accomplishments, by around 1990 the country shifted its focus once again, reconnecting with the global economy in the neo-liberal turn. Markovits's exploration of India's engagement with global capitalism through its diverse mercantile communities – Marwari, Gujarati, Chettiar, Sindhi – draws from his previous magisterial work, which established that these trading groups forged deep economic and social ties that transcended political boundaries.²

India's transoceanic economic connections were often linked to vast patterns of human migration. In Chapter 2, Markovits explores how Indian men and women moved from the subcontinent to the rest of the world – a movement that was not always voluntary. More than 1.4 million labourers left India under indenture from 1834 to 1916. This included indenture to the old plantation economies of Mauritius, British Guyana, and Trinidad, but also the development of new plantation economies in Natal and Fiji. The chapter also emphasizes other forms of labour migration from colonial India, such as the *kangani* and *maistry* systems. While the Second World War and Indian independence marked a period of reduced labour migration, the phenomenon surged again from the mid-1960s – this time towards Europe, the United States, Canada, and the Gulf's oil-producing states. An increasing proportion of these diasporic Indians were skilled workers and professionals. Markovits is also attentive to the smaller, lesser-researched

2. Claude Markovits, *Merchants, Traders, Entrepreneurs: Indian Business in the Colonial Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750-1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

circulation of immigrant labour into India, which primarily arrived from two South Asian neighbours, Nepal and Bangladesh.

Chapter 3 examines India's longstanding engagement in armed conflicts worldwide, focusing on the Indian sepoys who fought outside the subcontinent. Beginning with an expedition to Manila in 1762 and concluding with the involvement of Indian troops in suppressing an anti-Dutch uprising in Java in 1945, the chapter also highlights India's extensively studied contribution to both World Wars. Markovits compellingly recounts how the Indian army of the post-1947 era took on a new role. From 1950 to 2000, India became the single largest contributor of military personnel to UN peacekeeping missions. More than 40,000 Indian men were deployed in conflict zones from Gaza to Lebanon, Sierra Leone, Indochina, and Korea. The chapter puts to excellent use archival sources authored by soldiers deployed abroad, from Thakur Gadadhar Singh's testimony of the Boxer Uprising in China to the soldiers' letters assembled by British military censors in France.³ Through their voices, Markovits unravels how ordinary Indians interacted with foreign lands and peoples.

The book not only charts India's global linkages in the realm of things and people, but also ideas. Chapter 4 focuses largely on religion, beginning with Hinduism. It discusses Hinduism's role as a world religion, examining how Western intellectual was transformed through the influence of figures such as Rammohun Roy, Keshub Chandra Sen, Swami Vivekananda, Jiddu Krishnamurti, and Swami Prabhupada, as well as the politicised ethnic Hinduism best exemplified by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. The chapter turns to the role of the subcontinent's Muslims in Islamic movements that, though rooted in India, attained a transnational reach. From the modernist, reformist drive of Sayyid Ahmad Khan to the orthodox Sunni position of the Deobandi movement, and from the transnational engagement of the Tablighi Jama'at to the unorthodoxy of the Ahmadiyya sect, Markovits reflects on the diversity India's contributions to Islam. He further explores the part that Indians played in the histories of two other world religions, Buddhism and Christianity.

Chapter 5 evaluates the contributions of Indian writers, artists, and cinema professionals to the global cultural sphere. While Indian literature and visual arts seldom reached large international audiences, there were notable exceptions. The chapter traces the remarkable global journey of the ancient Sanskrit play *Shakuntala*. In the nineteenth century, forty-six translations of *Shakuntala* were published in twelve European languages, inspiring ballets and operas. Markovits also highlights the "Tagore craze" that took over the world when the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore won

3. Anand A. Yang (ed.), *Thirteen Months in China: A Subaltern Indian and the Colonial World* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017); Military Department Records, Compilations and Miscellaneous, 'Military Miscellaneous' Series 1754-1944, Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, IOR, L/MIL/5/ 825-8.

the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 – an infatuation that lasted well into the 1920s, influencing Latin American and Spanish poets in particular. In the domain of cinema, the chapter tracks the rise of India's film industry as a powerful global entertainment force. In the 1950s, the main foreign markets for Indian films were in the Soviet Union, the Middle East, and Africa. To Markovits, this signals the elasticity as a signifier of Indian cinema, onto which these diverse audiences projected their anxieties and aspirations. This argument could have been extended into the 1990s, which saw the emergence of films targeting NRI audiences – most notably, Aditya Chopra's *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) – and the 2000s, when Rajkumar Hirani's *3 Idiots* (2009) became a blockbuster in China. The film's popularity catapulted its lead, Aamir Khan, to stardom in China, echoing Raj Kapoor's rise to fame in the Soviet Union in the 1950s.

Chapter 6 explores the encounters between Indians and others, beginning with the often tense reception that Indian immigrants received in their host countries. Markovits surveys episodes of anti-Indian violence from Burma to Xinjiang and from British Guyana to the United States. He moves on to Indian travel narratives for insights into how Indians perceived the world beyond the subcontinent. These accounts often reveal a narrow perspective, focusing on Indian communities abroad rather than on the local populations among whom they lived. The chapter concludes by discussing how Indians perceived and responded to the foreigners who came to India. Chapter 7 focuses on two pivotal 'global events' in Indian history: the Great Rebellion of 1857 and the Partition of 1947. Markovits establishes that the 1857 uprising had a significant global impact, as evidenced by the extensive writings it inspired in several languages. Partition, in contrast, attracted little contemporary international reaction. He argues that it instead became a subject of comparative analysis for political historians in the decades that followed it.

In the conclusion, Markovits delivers a critique of India's current Hindu nationalist politics, marked by the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) second consecutive victory in the 2019 general elections. He contemplates how this shift relates to India's global history: he sees the BJP's rise as a continuation of a broader global resurgence of right-wing movements but also a significant departure from it, as Hindutva politics seek to define India's past through a unique, a-historical modernity. This vision draws on interpretations of Vedic texts as containing the essence of modern scientific and technological advancements. The chapter closes by pondering what this inward turn in India's global role might mean for the collective future of humanity.

The book's many strengths are offset by a few remarkable absences. The most noteworthy one is the use of gender as an analytical category. Markovits pays close attention to other categories of identity that play a part in India's global connections – most notably class, caste, and religion. In this context, the lack of attention to the circulation of global gender dynamics in

and out of the subcontinent is particularly glaring. These categories could have been further explored through the prism of the body, interrogating how bodily practices connected India with the rest of the world. Fashion, foodways, and physical regimes such as yoga were just some of the arenas in which Indian and non-Indian bodies partook in complex exchanges of cultural practices and representations.⁴ Indian bodies, in particular, at times became symbols of resistance to Western dominance and, at other times, vehicles for the commodification of the exotic “Other”. The Indian princely states were yet another important sphere of interconnection between the subcontinent and the rest of the world, as a growing body of literature on princely patronage, transoceanic travel, and imperial and anticolonial commitments has established. These new connected histories of the princely states have much to add to our understanding of India’s global linkages.⁵

Some Indian regions were much more densely connected with the world than others. Markovits acknowledges this throughout his account: it was Gujarat and Bengal that played major roles in the world economy as producers of textiles; indentured recruitment drew heavily from the Bhojpur region of eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar; mass migration to the Gulf countries predominantly originated from Kerala. More attention, however, could have been paid to these regional disparities. The things, peoples, and ideas that did not travel also have stories to tell. As reverse, negative images of the connectedness that Markovits so expertly explores, they may shed as much light on the contours of global history as the opium trade, the Indian soldiers in the trenches during the First World War, and the writings of religious teachers. Despite these omissions, the book stands as an excellent synthesis of India’s transoceanic interconnections during the early modern and modern periods. Markovits brings together a vast body of research on South Asia and its diasporas, offering a nuanced view of key historiographical debates, particularly around the pivotal events of 1857 and 1947. While the book will undoubtedly appeal to specialists in Modern South Asian Studies, its insightful synthesis of previous scholarship and its clear and engaging prose makes it especially valuable for students and general readers seeking to understand India’s place in world history.

4. Kate Imy, Teresa Segura-Garcia, Elena Valdameri and Erica Wald, eds, *Bodies beyond binaries in colonial and postcolonial Asia* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2024).

5. Teresa Segura-Garcia, “Towards a connected history of the Indian princely states”, *Revue d’histoire du XIXe siècle* 56, no. 1: 132–34, <https://doi.org/10.4000/rh19.5523>, and “The Indian princely states in the global nineteenth century”, *Global Nineteenth-Century Studies* 1, no. 1 (2022): 101–107, <https://doi.org/10.3828/gncs.2022.14>.

IN SEARCH OF CONNECTION WITH SERVICE: CITIZENS, BROKERS, AND CIVIL
SERVANTS

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Adam Auerbach and Tariq Thachil, *Migrants and Machine Politics: How India's Urban Poor Seek Representation and Responsiveness*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023, xi+275 pages (ISBN: e-book 978069 1236100).

Akshay Mangla, *Making Bureaucracy Work: Norms, Education and Public Service Delivery in Rural India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, xx+420pages (ISBN: 978-1009-25801-2 Hardback).

These books explore how citizens in India at the bottom of the social pyramid make claims on government. They are part of a small and, one hopes, growing group of studies that look at governance arrangements in India from the bottom up. They quite deliberately do not start in New Delhi and look out and down at how government agencies interact with citizens. Instead, they explore what citizens themselves want and how they look for people and institutions that can help them get it.

One of the books examines how citizens in slum settlements make demands for services through brokers and patrons whose fortunes depend on getting results. The other examines what parents of primary school children want from schools and what civil servants responsible for primary school education can do to respond effectively.

Both books are based on extensive fieldwork carried out over extended periods of time. Each book reports carefully chosen case studies, surveys, and interactions with respondents. Both are guided by rigorous methods drawn from US political science. Interviews with respondents were conducted in Hindi, either by authors themselves, or by Hindi speaking research assistants. In each case researchers adopted an ethnographic approach – they spent time with people. Formal interviews were complemented by informal encounters, social meetings with participants, and participant observation. People were also kept informed about what the researchers were doing.

Auerbach and Thachil examined access to municipal services in slums in two Hindi speaking cities – Jaipur and Bhopal. At the time of study (research began in 2014) both cities had two- party systems in which the BJP and the Congress competed. The researchers focused on how citizens made claims for provision of basic infrastructure – sanitation, drainage, paths and roads, and especially water supply. They examined the formation and

drivers of the incentive driven, competitive machine politics that connected slum dwellers to brokers, patrons in local politics, and the municipal authorities from which they sought services.

Mangla examined access by Dalit and other underprivileged parents to effective primary schooling for their children. In field work between 2007-2011 and 2013-2014 he focused on the different ways in which civil servants in apparently similar North Indian states – Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand – responded to the inclusion of parents in decisions about how schools operated. In Himachal Pradesh he argues that bureaucratic norms encouraged civil servants to consult parents whereas in Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh they encouraged legalistic enforcement of rules. He proposes that flexibility in applying rules and deliberation with parents enables civil servants to carry out the complex tasks underpinning effective primary education. He extends his analysis to include comparative perspectives from Kerala and also selected countries in Asia and Europe.

In both books active citizens from less privileged social groups are seen seeking access to government services. Slum residents take action on their own terms. Primary school parents respond to opportunities for consultation. Neither are enmeshed in top-down networks. Rather they take part in significant bottom-up action between elections. Although the results reported are limited in scope and the modest citizen claims examined often remain unmet, the books raise two sets of questions. One is about the implications of bottom-up activism for how political parties manage their organisations and pitch their appeals. The other is about how the institutions of governance could respond more effectively to citizen claims for services and facilities that provide value.

Machine Politics

Auerbach and Thachil's findings show that the politics of claim making by the slum residents starts with the residents themselves. The authors examine how people seeking opportunities not available in their home regions move to cities and make their way. They form squatter settlements of small, disjointed groups of residents from diverse backgrounds. Established social hierarchies in rural districts are absent. The tasks of finding a spot to squat, holding on to it, building shelter and creating basic amenities are hard. Residents live on the margins. They are reluctant to approach officials themselves.

They look for people who can help. Such helpers tend to be people like themselves who have had time to find their way around. Critically they are likely to have earned a reputation as problem solvers. The book's findings suggest that in choosing who to ask for help residents do not look for social and religious compatibility. They look for people who can make

effective claims. In doing so, the authors argue, they give rise to a complex set of interactions that drive «an interlocking set of competitive selections through which urban political networks form». Through such interactions, the authors argue, residents become the architects of the networks that connect them to the state.

Brokers are the first link in a network of «mediated access'. They live in the slums themselves. They are readily accessible. They emerge as brokers in a number of ways. For example, they may help a few people and go on to build a following. Or they may be selected by iterative processes, including elections organised by residents. Brokers tend to be a little more educated than other residents, work outside the slums and have access to office holders in political parties and local government. They need to show residents they are aware of problems, know how to get help and develop a record as problem solvers. Ethnicity is less important than effectiveness. So, in many cases, it is party affiliation. Most brokers are men but women, often widows, emerge as brokers too. However, links between residents and brokers are contingent. Competition between brokers is constant. Residents move away from brokers who are not effective.

Brokers work with patrons who can make official connections. They often hold elected offices as ward councillors or as local leaders of political parties. Patrons generally live outside the slums and earn more than brokers. But socially they are similar. Relationships between brokers and patrons are interdependent. Brokers need patrons to solve residents' problems. Patrons need brokers to muster support within party organisations or at ward elections. Brokers are often politically ambitious. A small position within a political party is a start. It offers the prospect of promotion. And greater recognition among residents. It is worth going to some effort to, as one respondent put it, «sneak myself into the party like a monkey».

Ward councillors need brokers to connect them to slum residents. They recognize that to win elections they need the votes of slum dwellers. Brokers come to their attention, for example, by organising events. In bold tactics, they may contest an election against a potential patron and make them «sweat». As with residents and brokers, relationships between brokers and patrons are contingent. Brokers want patrons who can offer personal opportunities as well as help solve residents' problems; patrons want loyal problem solvers who can bolster their local electoral profiles.

The authors pay particular attention to whom among slum residents actually gets help. They identify a gap. Neither brokers nor patrons can help everyone. They argue that for brokers and patrons claiming credit and tagging tangible benefits are key drivers. They show that, for example, fixing pathways, although important to residents, is hard to claim. However, improving access to water by erecting water tanks is much easier to claim. Tanks are visible; signs can be painted on them claiming credit. Accordingly, there are lots of tanks.

The authors argue that the characteristics of the slum machines in Jaipur and Bhopal have wider implications. The resident activity observed may be significant in other urbanising localities in India. It may be significant too for comparative studies, for example, in other regions where rural people are moving to cities to try to improve their lot. Further, the urban slum machines examined, driven by active residents, contrast with the top-down organisations described in much existing literature on machine politics.

However, on potential impacts they suggest notes of caution. The politics they observed were localised, fragmented and focused on basic physical needs. It was not programmatic. Responses to claims focused on immediate needs where credit could be claimed. Unfulfilled claims remained. Claims for more complex services, for example, in education and health were rare. While organised political activity took place between elections it did not evolve into integrated movements with an extended range of claims. Yet it took place and took place independently of top-down machines.

The book rests on careful research and is thoroughly explained. Survey results were cross-checked with scenarios presented to selected respondents. Scenarios covered different kinds of residents and claims. Quotations from residents, examples of how they made claims and examples of how brokers and patrons responded allow a glimpse of gritty slum life. However, discussion of the preparation and calibration of the cross-checking scenarios tended to be given more space. More extensive accounts of the variety of residents' experiences would have been welcome. It would be useful to know whether, when talking about claims and their resolution, residents, brokers and patrons talked about other matters relevant to slum residents. Nevertheless, a strength of the book is that it invites replication studies. It invites too studies that pick up where it leaves off.

Civil Servants and Primary School Parents

Like Auerbach and Thachil, Mangla examined what happens between citizens and government institutions between elections. He probed what he describes as a chasm between citizen aspirations and services received. Citizens, he states, are engaged in a battle for welfare beyond the polling booth. However, while Auerbach and Thachil began with slum residents, Mangla began with relationships between civil servants and primary school parents.

He adopted this focus after he learned about an unexpected civil service initiative in Himachal Pradesh. At an early stage in his research he heard that civil servants in the Himalayan state had arranged mobile schools for pupils who migrated temporarily, with the seasons, to another state. He asked how such an initiative was possible. He went on to ask questions about how civil servants related to parents in selected other states too.

Mangla found that while parents in the states studied were keen to be consulted about schooling, they often struggled to be heard. In some circumstances civil servants drew parents into schooling arrangements. In others they pushed parents away.

He argues that civil service norms made the difference. Norms that encouraged engagement with parents and a flexible application of rules enabled joint deliberation between parents and civil servants. Deliberation led to improved educational outcomes. However, norms that encouraged legalistic application of rules made deliberation difficult. He found that a culture of legalism and rule following could build schools and enrol students. It encouraged reports focused on enrolment numbers and physical infrastructure. But it did not encourage reports on schooling and learning. It tended not to foster effective teaching.

Mangla first outlines the difficult context in which primary schooling took place. He describes it as one of contested decentralisation. Authorities in Delhi initiated policy. But states had responsibility for implementation. Central initiatives and increases in expenditure took place in increments. Reforms built up in layers. Incentives to improve performance lacked bites. In such a context, he suggests, implementation was not the end of politics but a new beginning.

In educational administration he identified three distinct tasks: codifiable, intensive and complex. He argues that codifiable and intensive tasks could enrol students and build infrastructure. But the ability to carry out complex tasks was essential for deliberation with parents and to support innovative teaching. Civil service norms that encouraged flexibility fostered capability to engage in deliberation.

Case studies of primary school administration in Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Bihar provide detailed findings. In Uttar Pradesh near total coverage of primary school age pupils was accompanied by uneven educational outcomes and primary school education of low quality. He found marginalised citizens and a legalistic application of rules. In a large state with strong and restrictive social hierarchies, civil servants worked in a difficult political environment. Educational administrators faced frequent political intervention. Recourse to rules was a way of keeping politicians at bay.

By contrast in Himachal Pradesh political and civil service elites collaborated. Conditions in a small, poor state comprising many isolated and hilly regions encouraged people in government to work together. In the 1950s the first Chief Minister set an example with regular village visits. He worked closely with civil servants and senior officers accompanied him on visits. On matters that cut across portfolio boundaries ministers and civil servants worked together too. In isolated areas civil servants were often cut off during winter and had to rely on each other. Social hierarchies in the state were less restrictive than in Uttar Pradesh. They facilitated commu-

nity consultation. Networks of village councils existed. So did networks of women's organisations. Citizen organisations met civil servants prepared to consult. Politicians encouraged civil servants to get results. Initiatives in deliberation had multiplier effects. Civil service practice in Himachal Pradesh encouraged a focus on community needs. It allowed rules to be adjusted.

When it separated from Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand tried to learn from experience in neighbouring Himachal Pradesh. But the legacy of legalistic rule application in Uttar Pradesh continued. Consultation with parents, although encouraged, did not thrive. Strong community activism did not make effective connections with authorities. Teachers too were not consulted. In a new state with more politicians than before, fears of «too much access» by politicians reinforced recourse to rules.

In a further case Mangla examined the Mahila Samakhyā in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. This was a centrally formulated program of institutional change designed to empower women. However, he found equivocal impacts. Norms of legalism and rules persisted. Indeed, in Bihar the Chief Minister used legalism and rules to drive major shifts in educational administration. The Chief Minister supported also innovative teaching methods. But they did not attract wide take-up.

In Uttar Pradesh the program had management autonomy. It formed another «layer» in the administration of schools. It fostered deliberation, but within limits. Confident women officials in the program set positive examples. Despite operating in a hierarchical society, the program could mobilise Dalit women. However, for civil servants it demanded also a change in the way they interacted with parents. As he observed, they said it required a «new way of speaking». It also generated a backlash from upper castes. And it was difficult to maintain trust with parents. Although Mangla found that deliberation with parents was possible, the practice did not spill over beyond the program.

To his case studies in North India Mangla appended brief discussions of relations between parents and civil servants in four other cases. In Kerala he noted that strong social movements and experience with democratic decentralisation fostered deliberation and local experiments. Beyond India, in Finland social and institutional arrangements promoted deliberation and local flexibility. Even in China institutional arrangements fostered «adaptive government» and «directed improvisation». However, in France a centralised approach to administration fostered adherence to law and rules.

Mangla's discussion is careful and wide-ranging. His case studies provide challenging insights. He argues throughout for the effectiveness of bureaucratic norms that foster deliberation. However, his cases show that such norms are often scarce. Obstacles to productive relationships are prevalent and powerful. Further, the cases show also how embedded civil service norms are in complex institutional arrangements. In Himachal Pradesh political leaders, civil service leaders, and the context in which residents

and civil servants lived and worked, fostered cooperation. In Uttar Pradesh similar factors militated against it. In Uttarakhand institutional changes designed to foster norms like those in Himachal Pradesh proved insufficient. Restrictive norms formed in Uttar Pradesh persisted.

The outstanding question raised by the book is about how civil service norms that facilitate good relationships with citizens can be created and sustained. His discussion provides suggestive hints. Three stand out. First, the civil service as an institution has significant influence. Its internal dynamics are important. It is desirable that its members are encouraged to think, take the initiative and collaborate. In facing difficult and hard to define problems civil servants should have «room to puzzle».

Second, while the initiatives Mangla examined all came from the centre, he identified that local responsibility for implementation could give rise to new issues. The «contested decentralisation» in which these were handled deserves further exploration. If policy formation is thought of as going through cycles of consideration from problem identification to implementation and review, options for consultation of officials responsible for front line implementation could be built into decision making.

Third, political leadership that enables civil service initiatives is critical. Change within civil services, especially change that encourages bottom-up perspectives, is hard to bring about without the support of political leaders. Mangla's discussion of the example of the influential first Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh is significant. It suggests that it would be useful to explore further what it might take for such an example to be more widely replicated.

Conclusion

Both books examine citizen activism and the search for services and facilities from the bottom up. In doing so the books illustrate the importance of looking more closely not only at politics between elections but also at wider citizen activism. The books illustrate too the importance of exploring more fully how the institutions of government appear to citizens. Active slum residents creating networks of access to local governments and primary school parents keen to help shape the education of their children show that citizens are keen to do more than vote at elections. Elections give them choices about who forms governments but not about how office holders, once chosen, choose to act. In much analysis of change in India electoral politics has been seen as an essential driver. These books suggest that another driver may be the willingness of citizens to engage with the state, despite the difficulties that that entails.

The books show that for slum residents and primary school parents services and facilities from government institutions have to be claimed. But

claim making is indirect. Intermediaries, brokers and patrons for slum residents and civil servants for primary school parents, have decisive roles. For slum residents, action is incentive based and transactional. Access to services and facilities remains mediated and limited. For primary school parents opportunities for consultation depend on the willingness of civil servants to make it part of

The books suggest that bottom-up activism may have the potential to extend beyond current limits. Should it do so, it may challenge political parties and government institutions to respond to new agendas that make the institutions of governance more accessible to citizens.

For political parties questions arise about how far brokers keen for party positions may be able to climb within party organisations. Questions arise also about what agendas they might bring with them and how parties, with strong top-down histories, might choose to deal with such agendas.

For the institutions of governance questions arise about the capabilities needed to engage more effectively with citizens. Local government institutions, although approachable through intermediaries, are under-endowed with resources and responsibilities. In Auerbach and Thachil's summary words, local government is «anemic». Civil service institutions in Delhi and state capitals are thinly staffed, often with highly skilled people, but organised to drive down decisions. They are rarely organised to enable decentralisation or to relay upwards information about expressed citizen needs.

In both books the analysis presented is reason enough to read them with care. The questions they stimulate provide reasons to ask for more. Such questions go to the nature of the institutions of governance and whether they are able to adapt to meet the needs of an active citizenry wishing to do more than vote. It is to be hoped that others will follow quickly in the directions they have charted.

CAPABILITY IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR IN INDIA: AGENDAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

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TV Somanathan and Gulzar Natarajan, *State Capability in India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. xii+425 pages (ISBN 978-0-19-285661-6).

Karthik Muralidharan, *Accelerating India's Development: A State-Led Roadmap for Effective Governance*, Gurugram: Penguin Random House India, 2024. xiii+812 pages (ISBN 9780670095940).

Introduction

These books puzzle about how to improve capability and effectiveness in the Indian public sector. They address a persistent question about why, in mission mode, the sector can deliver spectacular results but, in daily operational mode, often fails to meet basic citizen needs. Three critiques recur: civil service arrangements tend to favour the prerogatives of civil servants rather than the effective delivery of services; too few posts are staffed for what needs to be done; and front-line services are often not easily accessible. Incentives for effective performance are weak; perverse incentives proliferate.

Somanathan and Natarajan focus on problems and opportunities for reform in the central civil service. They are frank about problems, many of which they argue relate to how the civil service is organised. They focus on options for improving organisational arrangements, cultures and incentives. They draw on their extensive experience as senior civil servants at central and state levels. Somanathan is cabinet secretary and Natarajan is an additional secretary in the Department of Telecommunications. They draw also on experience during international assignments and on relevant international literature on public policy and management. As reflective practitioners they have sharp eyes for sore points and opportunities.

Muralidharan takes a different but complementary approach. He looks beyond the centre. He argues that state-led initiatives can contribute to effective national governance. After a national overview of public sector problems, he outlines possible agendas for action at state and local levels. He too is clear about problems. He focuses on getting more staff into front line services. He challenges chief ministers to act. He argues that positive results can be achieved within a five-year term in office. Options canvassed are designed to be politically feasible. He draws on twenty years of consult-

ing and research at state level and on experience as a university economist based in California. He supports his analysis with accessible economic reasoning, examples from existing practice, and deft use of numbers to place public sector staffing levels and costs in perspective.

Both books focus on the ability of the sector to do things that citizens value. They propose measures to improve efficiency, effectiveness, economy, equity and accountability. In doing so, they focus also on relations between politicians, civil servants and the society that both are meant to serve. Somanathan and Natarajan refer to building state *capability*. Muralidharan refers to building state *capacity*. Fortunately, the meanings of «capability» and «capacity» overlap. Indeed, in Hindi one word (क्षमता *ksamata*) can be used to refer to both. On occasion both books use both terms. In this paper, for convenience, «capability» is used.

Whatever term is used, building state capability places heavy demands on governance. It has to be worked at. Supporting processes and relationships at many levels in the institutions of state and society are essential.

Capability is not a unitary phenomenon or a stable, easily knowable system. Muralidharan lists a set of components with an emphasis on data management and performance incentives. But, as Somanathan and Natarajan point out, capability «cannot be seen and thus cannot be directly measured». It is a changeable bundle of components and relationships.

Key components include people, skills, organisational arrangements, information, systems, technology, incentives, culture and leadership. However, components differ – some are hard and some are soft. They jostle for priority. Relationships between them need to be managed. What works in one place or at one time may not work in another. Good intentions can be undone by perverse incentives and unintended effects. For this reason, how capability initiatives are formulated and promoted demands close attention. The judgments of political leaders about what is feasible are critical. As with significant policy changes, initiatives to build capability need to be based on well thought out ideas, fit perceived needs, win support or at least acceptance from interested parties, and be introduced at times of opportunity. Wherever possible, improvements in one component need to support improvements in others. Capability building demands alertness to context, evidence, versatility, and persistence.

Constraints on performance

Both books interrogate extensively what Muralidharan terms critical binding constraints. Two often cited constraints are hangovers from colonial practice and the impacts of corruption. However, while not ignoring either factor, the authors focus elsewhere. They locate current problems of capability in how the leadership and organisation of the public sector have evolved since independence.

Two factors stand out. First, governance arrangements for the public sector have tended to follow short term political considerations and the often short tenure of civil service leaders. Second, the expansion of the role of the state, driven by electoral democracy and the ability of citizens to make claims on the state, has given the sector too much to do. In both books these two factors run together.

Somanathan and Natarajan begin by setting out provisions in the constitution about the role of ministers and the structure and responsibilities of the civil service. The roles of political and civil service leaders interlink: governance is a «joint product» of ministers and civil servants. In the work of government, political will and skill need to be joined with civil service expertise. The authors suggest that, where politicians know what they want, the civil service is generally able to deliver. However, they suggest also that a persistent problem of civil service work is «political interference». The terseness of their discussion is, perhaps, an invitation to read between the lines.

In contrast, Muralidharan is explicit. In his view many problems of governance are driven by the narrow incentives to which politicians respond. Politicians, he says, face a dilemma. They often know the complexity of issues of policy, legislation, and administration for which they are responsible. But they seek election in a system that rewards narrow casting. Questions of governance and policy are refracted through the lens of what they think will maintain electoral support. In a first-past-the-post voting system and a segmented society it is possible to win with appeals to narrow segments of voters. Meeting narrow appeals for services and facilities then becomes a priority. Nevertheless – Muralidharan argues – policies to improve equity and access to services for citizens generally, backed by political will, can change the game.

Somanathan and Natarajan are blunt about the inability of the public sector to meet expanded expectations. The civil service appears large. It employs approximately 10 million people. However, it is «understaffed at most levels in most governments». The ratio of civil servants to citizens is low – 16/1000. In comparison the ratio in China is 57/1000 and in the US 77/1000. It is thin on the frontline, has basic administrative deficiencies, and is unable to function with integrity and political neutrality. While the service does a lot with limited resources, it needs to do better. Public systems lack capability to translate even well-conceived policies into good outcomes. Continual auditing, intended to improve integrity and efficiency, constrains rather than improves.

Muralidharan largely agrees. For the scope and range of functions expected of it, the civil service is too small and too ineffective.

Three organisational constraints on performance stand out: civil service structures and processes; compliance with accountability measures; and weaknesses in policy making and implementation. The organisation of the service and the rules by which it runs do not focus consistently on performance.

Civil service structures and process

As Muralidharan states «the system runs for itself». Personnel management is about examinations and rules. Recruitment for cadres providing senior leaders is by rigorous examination. But examinations are not supplemented by measures to promote effectiveness. Nor is recruitment followed by skill-development, career-management and capability-building. Emphasis is placed on rules, procedures and extensive paperwork.

Somanathan and Natarajan examine in detail constraints in the central government. It is not organised to post competent people in the right places. As Muralidharan observes, much of the function of personnel management is to «get people transferred». Structures are fragmented and do not promote collaboration. Responsibilities for difficult issues are often diffused between different ministries and departments. Weak systems discourage delegation and encourage managers to centralise. Successive managers in the same post may take very different directions. Frequent transfers mean that managers do not stay in posts long enough to get results. Promotion by seniority does not reward performance. Ministry heads, when appointed are often near retirement and only serve for short terms. Reluctance of some members of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), who generally occupy the most sensitive positions, to accept deputation to the centre limits availability for the most senior positions. Unfilled vacancies exacerbate staff shortages. For managers with short tenures the difficulties of recruitment – large fields, disgruntled unsuccessful applicants and court challenges – make the costs prohibitive.

Muralidharan sets out how many of the problems identified by Somanathan and Natarajan are replicated at the state level. Weak systems encourage centralisation. District administration, in which IAS officers start their careers, is also prone to centralisation. Too many local civil servants live away from the citizens they are supposed to serve. Staff shortages, unfilled vacancies and absenteeism limit services. Limited skills and facilities encourage harassment of citizens. A focus on paperwork diverts energy away from services. Incentives abound for «creating a façade of performance».

Compliance with accountability measures

Somanathan and Natarajan argue that measures introduced from the early 2000s to cut corruption, and improve transparency and accountability, shrank the public sector's decision space. They probe a perceived gap between good intentions and unwanted results. They examine how implementation of Right to Information legislation and the activities of auditors, vigilance commissions, other investigators, and judges have created for ministers and civil servants incentives for indecision. Contested decisions

can be turned into public scandals. It is safer to make no decision than one that invites prolonged scrutiny, requires extensive responses, and may involve prosecution for corruption.

The authors emphasise especially the adverse effects of a section of legislation in force between 1988 and 2018 designed to prevent corruption. Under this section any decision that provided a pecuniary benefit to a private party without public benefit could indicate corruption. They argue that the broadness of the provision combined with the unexpected impacts of decisions taken in good faith could, and did, subject honest officials to prosecution.

Somanathan and Natarajan welcome the removal of this constraint but are concerned that others remain. Two examples illustrate their concerns. One is the extension of the role of the comptroller and auditor general to include performance audits and assessment of policies. They argue that audit staff show insufficient appreciation of decision-making contexts and deploy insufficient investigative skills. Another example is the role of the judiciary. Courts go beyond examining the law and assess the merits of issues brought before them. When civil servants implement a course of action decided by ministers, they may have to explain what they are doing to a court. Court delays and procedural inefficiencies add to the civil servants' concerns.

The authors argue that, in a shrunk decision space, civil servants do not act in effective ways. For example, critical decisions regarding financial management and infrastructure projects are affected. When receiving requests, they play it safe with an initial rejection, noted on file. With tenders they accept the lowest. Decisions in committee are favoured. Any analysis of quality is restricted to tests that are quantifiable.

Weaknesses in policy making and implementation

Somanathan and Natarajan probe weaknesses in the capability of civil servants to participate in making and implementing public policy. Four stand out. First, context knowledge and expertise, which can enable generalist managers to be effective managers of complex fields, is not built up. Senior officials tend to be generalists. IAS officers tend not to acquire deep knowledge in specific policy fields. Fragmentation and weakness in available technical analysis add to the problem. In house specialists are often not used. Embedded problems in difficult policy fields are not probed. Skills and structures for effective consultation do not exist. Debate often starts only after decisions are made. Reversals, including for no reason, are common.

Second, civil service decision makers often lack hard information. The service's approach to paperwork and reporting takes up much time but tends not to produce useable knowledge.

Third, creativity and fluency in policy advice are not fostered. Nor is appreciation of policy work as requiring patience, messiness, iteration and the second best. Policy work is often seen as implementation writ large. Senior civil servants are preoccupied by implementation. They centralise and complicate it too. Examples are elaborate and counterproductive guidelines for state implementation of Centrally Sponsored Schemes. Politically challenging issues frequently arise. Avoiding disasters is a constant preoccupation.

Fourth, financial management is not strong. The cost of raising revenue is high. Expenditure management is weak and focuses on inputs. It does not ensure that expenditure is applied to intended purposes or within prescribed time frames.

The sustained discussion of constraints suggests the need for improvement on a wide front within and beyond the civil service. However, Somanathan and Natarajan recognise the need for care in picking where to start.

Agendas for improvement

Both books offer targeted agendas for improvement. Somanathan and Natarajan focus on organising more effectively people already in the central civil service while also canvassing a wide range of other possibilities within the service. Their proposals are ambitious, sceptical and top down. They aim for combinations of measures and cumulative effects. Muralidharan, on his part, advocates mixing public sector and market techniques to add new people to civil service agencies in the states. He also canvasses wider opportunities for changing the context in which politics and civil service work take place. His proposals are ambitious, optimistic, data driven and bottom up. He aims for catalytic effects.

Somanathan and Natarajan want to build a civil service comprising «restless armies of value creating agents». The words are borrowed from the American public policy scholar Mark Moore.¹ But the approaches proposed are home grown. They advocate changes to the fabric of the civil service – structures, posts and postings; they suggest improved approaches to policy making and implementation; and canvass a broad range of other options to improve how the service operates.

In the fabric of the service, Somanathan and Natarajan propose, first, a broad banding of ministries. They advocate three sets: welfare, economic, regulatory. Such a reorganisation would focus on the well-being of citizens. There would be fewer overlapping and competing entities. There would be fewer secretary positions. Coordination should improve. A similar rationalisation should take place at state level.

1. Mark H. Moore, *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1997.

Second, they propose a review of posts, functions and cadres. The review would examine what jobs should be about and the levels of expertise required. A review of cadres would examine the rationale for the specialist cadres to which many civil servants are recruited. Review and rationalisation of pay scales are also advocated.

Third, in perhaps the most sensitive of their suggestions, Somanathan and Natarajan propose to change how senior civil servants are assigned to posts. In a mix of old and new procedures, they wish to ensure that senior civil servants are posted to jobs they are qualified to do and want to do. Further, they insist that appointees should be left in post for time to get results. In doing so, they wish to build on the characteristics of the IAS, a person-based service. They explicitly do not wish to move to a position-based service, as is the case in many other civil services. They give four reasons: politicians in office rely on IAS officers; the service retains *esprit de corps* which can help get work done; IAS officers have notable «convening power» – the ability to bring together different groups around a common purpose; and young IAS officers, posted to districts, have initiated many projects that have grown into national schemes.

Reforms proposed include: internal advertisement of vacant posts; applications by interested officers with appropriate seniority; and five-year appointment for successful applicants. Such processes would build on informal practice for senior postings. They would also be consistent with processes used for non-central services. Officers to be posted would no longer be formally uninvolved in posting decisions. Heads of departments would be accountable for posting decisions.

The authors propose further that, in the second part of their careers, officers should be encouraged to specialise. They should also be allowed to gain experience by working externally and be encouraged to develop skills through online courses. However, the authors are cautious about lateral recruits. Lateral appointees take time to become familiar with civil service practices. It is also hard to fit them into a service in which seniority remains important.

With policy making and implementation, Somanathan and Natarajan advocate that policy makers should aim for a «minimum viable product». Most development problems are hard to specify. Uncertainty is common. Rational scepticism should be applied. Officials should not aim for perfection. Second best is often more feasible. Many issues can only be figured out once a project is underway. Policy design should be simplified. Experiments should be encouraged. Policy development is iterative. Good project management is essential and should be driven down to district level.

To allow space for policy development, implementation should be the responsibility of separate teams. However, the authors argue it is important to avoid «freezing» implementation. Coordination should be through policy and implementation teams reporting to a common head. «Plain, simple, persistent monitoring» achieves much.

In other suggestions, Somanathan and Natarajan focus also on what can be done within the civil service. They stress the importance of a culture of probity and effective service. Throughout they de-emphasise over-reliance on rules: heavy regulation tends to be counterproductive; integrity can coexist with light regulation. Building skills, culture, and a sense of personal ownership embeds probity and professional decision autonomy. They recognise that none of this is easy. Much depends on the enrichment of civil service culture and norms, a process that is not easy to «figure out». In this, leaders of the service have important roles. But so, too, do local champions. Such champions can arise at many levels and encourage others with exceptional work.

On several other current or advocated approaches to civil service work they are sceptical. The use of consultants and advisors should be sparing. Outsourcing is not favoured: it bypasses the need to think through what should be done. Post-retirement appointments for senior civil servants, a benefit often eagerly sought, should be restricted; the prospect of such appointments discourages frank advice to ministers. Proposals to administer civil service personnel processes through independent public service commissions are rejected; appointments to such institutions could enable political interference. New public management approaches, including performance pay, are considered to have little potential.

On initiatives in technology and systems, the authors are cautiously supportive. E-government is promising but digitisation on its own is no answer: it bypasses hard thinking. Management information systems can improve data analysis and a focus on the frontline. But their design is critical. Improvements to project assessment capabilities are supported: quality for thick projects; and quantity for thin ones. But evaluation programs and randomised controlled trials are not.

Somanathan and Natarajan's prescriptions are clear and strong. However, implementation of proposed changes to the fabric of the civil service would be demanding. Changes to organisation structures indicate preferred directions but on their own do not enlist the enthusiasm and support of officers affected. For example, lack of coordination between separate agencies can persist when they become units of a merged ministry. Collaborative cultures require persistent fostering.

Reviews of posts and pay disturb career expectations. Proposed changes to selection procedures for postings do so even more. A critical issue is the basis on which individual postings are decided. As the authors recognise, moving away from seniority, even if only in part, entails setting and applying standards that can be contested. Protests, legal challenges and politically directed campaigns could be expected.

Effective implementation of each of these proposals would demand extensive consultation and change management. It would also test political resolve and, within the civil service, leadership persistence.

On policy making and implementation the authors emphasise iteration. However, they do not spell out how this could most effectively be man-

aged. Especially they do not spell out how, when operational responsibilities are separated, iteration in policy formulation and implementation can be managed. Whether one thinks of policy making and implementation as a linear sequence or a series of cycles, it involves complex relationships between separate functions and steps. As the authors emphasise, policy directions often change as they are developed. Contests over directions change initial analysis; changes to analysis tend to change what is contested. Developing guidance for civil servants on managing policy processes would be an essential first step. However, it would be one of many in a change program in which on the job reinforcement would be essential.

Overall, the Somanathan and Natarajan's agendas for civil service reform are substantial. If taken up, their proposals could build important components of capability within the civil service. However, their detailed proposals do not address all the constraints on capability they have identified. In particular, their suggestions on redressing the impact of courts and investigative agencies remain just that. Similarly, discussion of the role of political leadership, understandably, remains muted.

Muralidharan, on his part, aims to improve frontline services to citizens. To do this he advocates sharply improving state level governance and effectiveness. He focuses on the states for two reasons: first, the states deliver an extensive range of services, especially in health, education, and law and justice; and, second, in these sectors the states are responsible also for public spending.

Muralidharan embeds his argument in economic reasoning combined with advocacy of equity, diversity, decentralization and institutional reform. In his view arguments about economic growth and equity need to be redirected. He wants both. Growth provides resources and possibilities; equity helps build the human capabilities to take advantage of opportunities generated by growth. In his terms, Muralidharan's design for equity joins centre left aims with centre right means. Equity can be made more efficient with market methods. Economic policy needs to provide jobs of improving quality, promote productivity and encourage equitable growth. The public sector needs to provide relevant high quality public goods.

To promote equity and efficiency Muralidharan advocates «nuanced decentralization». In his view, the country is too big for central control of service delivery. Many states and districts are also too big. He looks to China for options, where much more responsibility for expenditure is located at local levels.

More generally state institutions need reform. Improving services is more than a matter of more money and more staff. To set directions and provide improved services and facilities, state institutions need to invest in state effectiveness. Two specific initiatives are needed: first, get more staff into service jobs; and second, employ more staff with increasing skills and motivations to perform.

To support his agenda Muralidharan sets out six elements of state effectiveness: data; personnel; quality of public expenditure; tax revenue; federalism and decentralization; and leveraging non-state actors. Relevant information, skilled people, informed judgments, appropriate institutional arrangements, and mutual interaction between participants combine to improve governance. Data, evidence and technology are important drivers. So are how people are recruited, trained and led. So too are the institutions in which people interact. Federal arrangements and decentralization allow for diversity. Contributions from non-state actors augment public sector resources and help explore future directions.

Muralidharan's core proposal is to recruit additional frontline workers through a performance driven apprenticeship scheme. Key elements would be improved task design to transform service delivery; use of technology to capture and use relevant data; performance measurement based on critical outcomes; and pay for performance. Staff would be recruited through existing examinations for civil service recruits, take part in a two-to-four-year practicum, be employed on fixed renewable contracts, and be paid closer to market rates than existing civil servants. During the practicum they would receive competency-based training and, while working on the front line, learn on the job. Service outcomes and participant performance would be monitored. Checks would include phone surveys of service users.

The proposal's design draws on central and state examples of schemes using extra staff to support implementation of new schemes. It is also tight: more staff, locally recruited, employed on contract, less pay than existing civil servants, and more incentives to perform. Improved data on service demand and delivery would be a «foundational investment». Official «visibility» of how citizens experience services should improve.

Muralidharan supports the proposal with worked examples of how extra frontline staff could be deployed. Examples include: education, health, police, courts and justice, and social protection and welfare.

In education he aims for functional literacy. He advocates improved pedagogy and modular assessments. The practicum approach would enable locally employed teachers to learn to teach children from their own communities. Instruction would need to be focused on relevant levels. He rubs in the point by inserting a paragraph in Tamil. When students cannot understand what they see and hear, they struggle to learn.

In health, Muralidharan proposes to incorporate private informal providers into the formal health care system. Many informal providers work alongside a nominally universal system of public provision. He argues that informal providers work harder and cost less. With training through a practicum, they could provide needed services and improve access to healthcare.

In police a practicum and competency-based career management is proposed. Candidates who complete a practicum but do not gain further

public employment would have improved skills suitable for work in private security agencies.

In courts and justice, he advocates a focus on the lower judiciary, where 80% of cases are adjudicated. He proposes judicial clerkships, two for each judge, to help with the workload. As many cases involve disputes over land, he proposes also reforms to land titling to cut the number of cases.

In social protection and welfare, he advocates giving beneficiaries choices. Public provision of poorly designed subsidies, including expensive agricultural subsidies with negative externalities, should be replaced with income support. Public provision of goods for the poor should also be joined by offers of income support. To test feasibility, he advocates pilot, choice-based schemes.

Muralidharan extends ideas for improving front line services to the whole of state civil services. Data driven decision making, competency-based careers, pay for performance, and payment of new staff closer to market rates should be implemented state-wide. Like Somanathan and Natarajan, Muralidharan advocates also stability of tenure for civil servants (a minimum of three years for senior posts), and decision-making autonomy and accountability.

A persistent concern is to improve public sector financial management. The quality of both public expenditure and revenue raising need to improve. Muralidharan favours strategic budgeting, employment of state chief economic advisers, and increased use of return on investment analysis. Improved incentives to make savings are needed, including rules to enable savings to be used for new projects. In revenue raising, specialised skills and skills specific to different sectors should be applied.

Muralidharan throws out a strong challenge to state leaders. His proposals comprise a linked set of reform agendas. On institutional reform he crosses tracks with Somanathan and Natarajan while going further, especially on data management, performance pay and coordinating commissions for civil service personnel and financial management.

Throughout, Muralidharan argues that institutional reform is essential. Personnel management reforms in state civil services need to be coordinated state-wide. So do reforms on data management and financial management. Unlike Somanathan and Natarajan, he advocates coordinating commissions on personnel, financial and data management. Further, agendas for institutional reform should not be confined to the civil service. Options for wider changes, including alternative voting systems (Muralidharan is interested in ranked choice or preferential voting), consultation of citizens through citizens' assemblies and creative use of non-government organisations should be explored.

He acknowledges that reform is not easy. The return on investment is large, but getting support demands convincing explanations and persistence. Specific reforms need to be seen as home grown, well prepared

and fair. Multiple veto points within the civil service need to be negotiated. Opposition is concentrated and benefits diffused. Consultation, communication and opportunities for affected officials to be participate in relevant task forces is critical. Above all, political will in the government of the day is essential.

Six difficulties stand out. First, advocacy of extensive use of technology for data management challenges existing work practices. Second, advocacy of contract employment challenges expectations of life long civil service jobs. Third, advocacy of pay closer to market rates, not only for practicum participants, but also for other new entrants to state civil services is a further challenge to expectations. Fourth, so are performance management and performance pay. Fifth, systems designed to promote accountability and effectiveness need to be reinforced by hard-to-foster norms. Finally, that his proposals are linked constitutes a multidirectional set of challenges to current ideas in the service about appropriateness, legitimacy and feasibility.

That his proposals face difficulties does not imply that they can be ignored. The care, detail and enthusiasm with which Muralidharan has set them out makes them an attractive resource for politicians who wish to do more than just win elections.

Conclusion

Both books demand a careful reading. They meet a select but persistent demand in India for an increased focus on improving the capability of government. From differing directions, they pose the same challenge: improve capability to do the ordinary work of government better. The reform agendas set out extend from within the central civil service, through state civil services, to society as a whole.

Somanathan and Natarajan focus on improving the ability of central civil servants to create value by making better decisions and driving them down to citizens. In doing so they recognise that civil service capability involves many interconnected factors, including partnerships within and beyond government. Muralidharan's focus is complementary but explicitly wider. Bottom-up action by state governments can close last mile service gaps and improve opportunities for ordinary citizens. Initiatives by state political leaders can refocus national political attention towards policy outcomes. Exploring options for reforming electoral systems and widening the range of participants in public policy making can open up fresh options for state and national public policy.

However, for civil service reform to take place three things are needed. The first is political interest and will. The second is persistence over time. For the most part, the books leave open questions about how and why political leaders might take up their suggestions. They also leave open ques-

tions about sequencing the large bundles of reforms proposed, judgments about what is likely to be effective in response to differing needs in a diverse society, and the long time-frames likely to be needed for implementation.

A third element is also needed: recognition that civil service reform has impacts beyond the service. Strategies for civil service reform need change management programs not only internally but also within the wider community. While the books recognise the interdependence of the mix of institutional, process, personnel and cultural elements in civil service reform they do not go into detail about how changes will be explained to the community and actually brought about. Beyond the service, proposals for changes in recruitment processes run against prevalent expectations about government jobs, proposals for decentralization run against the strong centripetal forces in Indian federalism, and proposals for involvement of Non-Government Organisations and citizen consultation run against current political directions.

To create momentum for capability improvement there is much more to do. However, for interested practitioners and scholars these books provide indispensable foundations for defining options and identifying and taking opportunities.

VIOLENCE OF COMMUNALISM AND FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHY OF PEACE

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Emanuela Mangiarotti, *Feminist Peace and the Violence of Communalism: Community, Gender and Caste in India*, Routledge, 2025, 270 pp. (ISBN: 978-1-032-56605-4; ISBN: 978-1-032-56607-8, ISBN: 978-1-003-43633-1).

Feminist research in general and feminist peace research in particular contend with a range of methodological concerns. Primary among these is the need to be critical and reflexive at the same time – especially in studying situations of «conflict» where the researcher may find herself facing the predicament of representing processes of marginalisation as an interlocutor and also producing feminist knowledge as praxis. The latter is especially significant since it assumes a process of production of knowledge that is «dialectically produced and realised in action» (Shah 2017). Apart from reflexivity and critical scrutiny, the «sensitivities» of a feminist peace researcher entails «attendance to power relations», which when enquired from an ethnographer's lens involves an analytical framing of the everyday, contextualisation of agency, and a careful reading of embodiment and experiences (Björkdahl & Selimovic 2021).

In *Feminist Peace and the Violence of Communalism*, Emanuela Mangiarotti remains true to these commitments. She makes a methodologically sincere and analytically robust study of the historical and contemporary narrative processes through which the epithets «communal», communally sensitive», and «riot prone» get attached ascriptively to «Old Hyderabad», and frame the «everyday realities» of being a Muslim in the city. While exploring these processes, the author makes a departure from the prevalent understanding of communalism as inter/intra-religious relations. Such an understanding she argues, reproduces the binaries that sustain the paradigms of domination and exclusion, by homogenising communities into containers marked by religion. This then serves as the primary and often the sole axis along which relationship (of hostility) between communities is mapped. Mangiarotti steers clear of such conceptualisation of communalism to look at the ways in which relations between communities are constituted in a social and political space where a «communal paradigm» is produced by political regimes, media, and dominant communities. In such a paradigm the figure of the Muslim is made «hyper-visible» as «communal» marked by a particularity – *religious identity* – constituted through tropes, which in the contemporary context draw from the dominant ideology of Hindutva and the ruling prac-

tices associated with the national security state. In a significant deployment of the analytical framework of «violence of communalism» the author shifts her scrutiny to the processes through which violence becomes part of «community experience». The «material consequences» of being Muslim, women and lower caste, imbricated in ghettoised lives in Old Hyderabad, which even when there is no spectacle of violence witnessed in «riots», produce the effects of stigmatised existence along multiple and intersecting axes of community, gender and caste.

The book makes these processes visible through six meticulously crafted chapters that focus on different dimensions of experiences of the violence of communalism. The chapters are ordered logically and each chapter is structured persuasively – foregrounding the larger argument of the book, but breaking it down into its constituents, and building it piecemeal through narratives from the fields. The first chapter on ethnography of the city of a «communally sensitive city» is, therefore, important for delineating both - the reasons why Hyderabad, specifically the Old City, as «riot prone» site, is appropriate for mapping the historical processes through which the communal paradigm is constituted - and also for comprehending how, amidst pervasive narratives of Hindu-Muslim antagonism and communalisation of public discourse in articulations of Hindu nationalist supremacy in the political and social spheres and ghettoization, has ironically also provided the «interface» for «women's action».

The entrenchment of social boundaries of communities is imperative for the politics of religious difference espoused by Hindu nationalists. The author elaborates in the second chapter how gendered-mythological narratives, present the Muslim body as an absolute «site of difference» entrenching structural violence that occludes other fundamental axes along which social power is constituted. The use of the framework of structural violence by Mangiarotti is important for building an understanding of how violence is structured in society, and its gendered nature. Unlike violence which takes manifest forms in actions of individuals and groups (as collective violence), structural violence is often intangible even when it actively limits people's capacities to live a full life or meet even the most basic of the needs that are minimum requirements for life itself. It can, however, exacerbate to take overt forms as «spectacular» violence. The figure of the Muslim woman becomes integral to the representation of the Muslim community as atavistic and dangerous, giving the proponents of Hindutva, the justification to intervene and rescue her through laws such as the Uniform Civil Code, that reiterate her passivity. It is significant also how «activist» Muslim women could be appropriated within a Hindutva regime (e.g., in the case of Triple Talaq) or rendered disruptive and delegitimised as anti-national when they made spaces like *chowks* and *chaurahas* – part of their familiar life words – into public spaces of appearance and action. Shaheen Bagh was one such familiar place – a neighbourhood – in the proximity of Jamia Millia Islamia,

close to the border of Delhi with NOIDA in Uttar Pradesh. Over the course of the protests, Shaheen Bagh, a place name, became a metaphor for citizen democracy guided by radical empathy, setting in motion a process whereby «the city street» assumed ubiquity as space where «new forms of the social and political [could] be *made*» (Sassen 2011, 574).

In the ethnographic accounts across chapters but especially in Chapters two and six, the author presents the modalities through which the gendered dynamics of the communal paradigm is navigated and also resisted by those who «live and participate» in the «gendered dynamics of conflict cycles». The everyday navigation of social and political power as well as spectacular resistance become performances, making the processes of subjectivation and inhabitation of religiously marked spaces complex. In doing this the author makes important connections between communalism and socio-economic stratification, with caste as its most significant indicator. Narratives of intersections of social experience of caste, class, community and gender, and their framing of lived experiences in the old city, have been presented by the author as ways in which «subjects of communalism» negotiate and enact differential expressions of social belonging, rupturing «communalisation» of experiences. While the imbrication of caste in the process of communalisation is left tantalisingly underexplored, chapter six is a powerful exposition of the polyrhythms of «collective conversations» among women in community development projects in the Old City. Titled «Communal Conflicts and Women's Everyday Life», the chapter gives a compelling account of «interfaith initiatives» in areas characterised by violence. It is in this chapter that Mangiarotti presents a sustained engagement with essentialist gender ideologies, consistent with a «feminist peace perspective». She examines the community as a fraught social space where «women» are located ambivalently as «agents of peace and victims of communal conflict». Drawing upon ethnographic data, Mangiarotti argues that her research participants were conscious of their location within the family/community and everyday realities of marginalisation. At the same time, they professed an unambiguous awareness of the transformative potential of «daily practices in the social space of interfaith relations». Such a space was created through «everyday cooperation» with community development projects led by local NGOs that emerged as a response to and corroded the dominant figuration of the Old City as a conflict-ridden space of adversarial community relations. In these spaces Muslim and lower caste women permeated/perforated the binary logic of separate spaces to produce spaces of «harmony» on a daily basis. In an innovative use of «Centre» – the word used by the local residents to refer to the building of the Henry Martyn Institute (HMI) – as a spatial metaphor indicative of the building's location at the interface of the Hindu and Muslim *zones*, Mangiarotti refers to the «act» of daily movement of people across these zones to the *Centre*, as reinforcing the Centre as a space of interfaith harmony. These acts rupture the spatial

segregation of zones as sites embodying existing and potential conflict, and the Centre at the interface both joining and separating these zones, transcending «the symbolic and physical boundaries between Hindus and Muslims». The daily act of crossing these boundaries is a public act performed by women, making these boundaries permeable, enabling as the author says, the dismantling of walls that prevent the development of «familiarity» and «access» to the lives of others.

As an «intercommunity» site, the Centre builds a «politics of relationship» offering the possibility of political action «located and expressed in the mundane». Mangiarotti argues that the participants in the Centre's activity saw the community as the «locus of experiential knowledge». In particular, it was intimate knowledge of violence that made the community important – «they know the violence, they know what they need» – as one of her participants expressed – which made interfaith activity effective. Yet, quite like the anti-CAA protests, women's «active role in peace» also assumed «public» forms where Muslim and lower caste women, encouraged by civil society organisations, held hands to form a human chain surrounding the iconic Charminar in the Old City, to prevent violence after Friday prayers in March 2010 in a context of bombings, when communal feelings were especially charged. The idea of «sensational action» with the intention of creating a «buffer zone», the author argues, simultaneously exposed and re-signified the positioning of women in the face communal violence. «Taking action» was a constant refrain in women's narratives, which the author argues placed them within a field of «transversal politics», where women transcended and redrew borders of politicised differences by creative protests.

While Chapters Two and Six, are in my opinion, the most important contributions of the study, the significance of the intervening chapters – Three, Four and Five – lies in mapping the politics of occlusion that frames the communal paradigm in which residents of Old City are located. Chapter Three traces the decline of the Old City and contestations over its «Muslim» past that resonated in deeply troubling ways in the movement for a new state of Telangana. These contestations, the author argues have shaped the narratives of the past and present in Hindu Nationalist discourses. Violence, however, takes many forms. In denying people their history it inflicts an ontological wound. Yet, violence is also epistemological in the sense of populating the urban spaces with religious and cultural symbols of aggressive Hindu masculinities which the author terms «Hindutva's changing choreographies of belonging in the urban space». Chapter Four is an elaboration of the cultural tropes that reaffirm Hindutva's claims to the urban space, while marginalising the Muslim body as a violent other. These, as Chapter Five would argue, pave the way for political elision in which the space for articulation of a Muslim political identity is limited by discourses that present it as a community either in need of reform or containment. The contribution of the book lies precisely in providing a persuasive narrative grounded in

historical-anthropological enquiry into the processes through which a communal paradigm of power gets entrenched and the banal and spectacular ways in which feminist solidarities perforate and corrode it. While doing so, the author offers creative insights from the field through narratives of women making sense of power relations in their lives even as they participate in «community development programmes», turning them into spaces for peace activism. It is important to note that the idea of peace as harmony, embodied in the «Centre» as a physical border *and* bridge, is replete with a feminist transversal practice of critical engagement, which is dialogical and continually evolving. Feminist transversal politics in spaces occluded by right wing politics presents challenges to hegemonic cultural meanings and opens up possibilities of political and ideological alliances and solidarities against normalisation of communal politics.

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THE MAKING OF THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST: WHEN THE PERIPHERY
RULES THE CENTRE

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Guillemette Crouzet, *Inventing the Middle East: Britain and the Persian Gulf in the Age of Global Imperialism*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022, 284 pp. (ISBN 978-0-2280-1406-5).

With *Inventing the Middle East*, we are presented with a scientifically rigorous and valuable study. This book offers an insightful interpretation of the events that led the United Kingdom to conceptualise the *Middle East* as a geopolitical entity and to assume a central political and economic role in the region. It is a well-written book, which is a pleasure to read.

Crouzet suggests a new and extended periodisation for the history of the modern Middle East, as a unified region, arguing for an earlier beginning, prior to the discovery of oil in the 1920s and 1930s. She does so by setting forth a different historical perspective, one through which scholars have usually investigated the role of the region in the international system between the late 1780s and the early 1910s.

Thanks to her approach, the author provides a compelling analysis of the political, geopolitical, and cultural factors underpinning British presence in the Middle East, starting from the analysis of the British diplomatic activities in the Gulf from the end of the eighteenth century to the start of the twentieth century. These activities were shaped by French initiatives in the region – such as Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 and Bourbon diplomatic engagements in North Africa and Persia, in the first decades of the nineteenth century – and later by the perceived threat of Russian expansionism (in Central Asia or, again, in Persia aimed at enlarging the Romanoff Empire).

The book's central argument is persuasive: it highlights the inherent tensions and flaws that characterised British India's policy toward the Gulf. The first two chapters demonstrate how, despite attempts at consolidation, the absence of a coherent imperial project hindered British policy in the area during the first half of the nineteenth century. All the difficulties in crushing the Qasimi piracy – which was not only an economic source for the local authorities, but an instrument of political affirmation among populations for the local noble families and which was seen by presidencies in India as a considerable obstruction to trade and stability – illustrate the inconsistencies, in that time interval, of British regional influence.

Crouzet makes this point because, on the one hand, rather than to evaluate the local events through the traditional lens of the Great Powers' chess game in the area and in Asia, placing London's leadership at the centre of the political contacts, she maintains that the Indian periphery, driven by East India Company's political and economic interests, prevailed in inducing the British meddling into the region, until the Company's dissolution after the Indian Rebellion of 1857. On the other, she rightly notes that both before and after the Company's governmental responsibilities were transferred to the Crown, the British authorities and the governors or Viceroy's dictated the political agenda in the Middle East and Persian Gulf; hence the Indian interests often taking precedence over the homeland's concerns, with London playing a more peripheral role in setting the geopolitical agenda.

Thus, Crouzet adheres to the historiographical studies school flourished in the David K. Fieldhouse's stream of analysis (for example in his *Economics and Empire, 1830-1914*, published in the now distant 1973), where Fieldhouse successfully emphasised the existence of a much more articulated relationship between European Great Powers and their colonial or imperial peripheries during the Age of Imperialism, which presided the European expansion in Africa, Asia and (precisely) Middle East. This, according to Crouzet, explains why, for example, the British government made very little effort to enforce the 1807 *Abolition of Slave Trade Act* in the region, where the slave trade and the use of slaves as divers was necessary to maintain the high level of local pearl harvesting (the most precious in the world), the marketing of which was very profitable both for London and for Indian authorities (Chapter 4, 'The Globalization of the Gulf Economy').

Crouzet's analysis of the British imperial fragilities, the intricate web of perceived challenges to British India's indirect rule over one of its amphibious border areas, the increasingly aggressive, yet inconsistent, policy toward unruly local power players, the attempts and mistakes, which led to a broader and enduring uses of spectacular military expeditions in the area and its immediate environment bring the reader to the subsequent step, that is the analysis of the cultural shift in the British attitude towards the region.

Actually, the transformation of the Persian Gulf as the gateway to the Middle East into a geopolitical area under British control, directly or (more frequently) indirectly carried out, was in need of such an evolution. We cannot condemn this back-and-forth policy, given the fact that the British themselves had to learn not only how to act in the area, but even the exact geographical reality of it. The author devotes Chapter 3 to the efforts made for the geographical construction of the region by British hydrographers and topographers, who made three explorations of it during the "long nineteenth century", for mapping all the coasts and harbours. The cultural construction of the Middle East and Gulf influenced the decision-making of British and Indian political and commercial elites, who became increasingly

interested in archaeology, ancient history, and the vestiges of local past societies, linking them to the region's future role as a critical component of the route to India. The region was portrayed not only as a place of past glories but also as one that could be revived under the right influence: namely, the Raj's assumed ability to transform inhospitable areas into fertile ones.

This combination of enthusiastic interest in antiquity and a fierce desire to create futuristic utopias makes it clear why the Middle East and Persian Gulf have long been within Britain's sphere of influence.

Another significant contribution of the book lies in its application of the concept of globalization to Gulf history. Crouzet convincingly demonstrates how the end of the old political equilibrium in the Gulf and its reinvention under British control – marked the end of old economic and political ties with the Arabian Peninsula, the Red Sea, the Ottoman Empire, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Ironically, it was these contacts that initially drew the Indian (and later British) authorities in Bombay, Calcutta, and London to the region, where they sought to extract profits. The region's integration into a new web of geopolitical and economic relations laid the foundation for the Gulf's modern identity, which has remained largely unchanged since the post-1945 Cold War period. Particularly, Crouzet provides a detailed analysis of the flows of weapons, pearls, and palm dates that originated, or ended, in the region; and convincingly proves that the area became part of the world wider trading system well before oil and gas changed its economy and revenues.

While *Inventing the Middle East* is a methodologically sound and accessible study, its reliance on British documentary and bibliographical sources is a limitation. Future studies on this theme could benefit from a broader range of sources, such as French and Russian sources, but also, for example, the Wahhabi chronicles, Ottoman archives, Egyptian sources, and Qajar documentation, as well as local oral traditions and archaeological surveys based on newly adopted technological studies (such as the video mapping technology). These additional sources could bring new and fresh information on what the Gulf and its different sites were before the British arrival in the region. All these historical sources could help to better assess the local potentates and population's reaction to the shifting political landscape, in favour of an European power: an unusual transformation, given the fact that the previous relations with the Europeans, which dated to the arrival of Portuguese merchants and sailors in the sixteenth century, had left the regional political condition unchanged.

Nevertheless, *Inventing the Middle East* is an insightful and engaging study of how the British envisioned and shaped the Gulf from the 1780s to the early twentieth century. It carefully deconstructs the political and legal structures that emerged from the British interactions with local authorities, making it an essential read for historians and students of Near Eastern studies, global history, and imperialism.

IMPERIALISM WITHOUT EMPIRE?
THE SWISS AND THEIR LEGACIES OF TRANSIMPERIAL MERCENARISM

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Philipp Krauer, *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies: A Transimperial History of Military Labour, 1848-1914*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Leiden University Press, 2024, 236 pp. (ISBN 978-9-0872-8414-5).

Due to its political neutrality, economic growth, and multiculturalism, the history of modern Switzerland after 1848 has often been self-characterized as a special case («*Sonderfall*») within the broader dynamics of European history.¹ In contrast to Europe's tainted history of imperialism and colonialism, this distinctiveness seems justified—Switzerland never had a formal colony. However, since the early 2000s, historians such as Patricia Purtschert, Francesca Falk, Harald Fischer-Tiné, and Bernhard Schär, among others, have challenged this view by demonstrating how colonialism, along with the violence and racism that came with it, were integral to the making of modern Switzerland.² Philipp Krauer's *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies* is a significant contribution to this growing body of work.

At the core of the book are the stories of 5,800 Swiss mercenaries who enlisted in the Royal Dutch East Indies Army (*Koninklijk Nederlands-Indisch Leger*, KNIL) in the Netherlands East Indies. In tracing the stories of these young, mostly underprivileged, Swiss men, Krauer shows how young Swiss actively participated in the European colonial project throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Krauer's approach is situated between two historiographical traditions: the so-called «New Military History» a trend which began in the 1960s, that examines military history through the lens of social, cultural, and economic history; and «New Imperial History» which concep-

1. See Clive H. Church and Randolph C. Head, *A Concise History of Switzerland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), chap. 8; On the *Sonderfall* concept, see Georg Kreis, «Sonderfall,» *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*, December 20, 2012, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/049556/2012-12-20/>.

2. Patricia Purtschert, Francesca Falk, and Barbara Lüthi, «Switzerland and 'Colonialism without Colonies': Reflections on the Status of Colonial Outsiders,» *Interventions* 18, no. 2 (March 3, 2016): 286–302; Bernhard C. Schär, «Switzerland, Borneo and the Dutch Indies: Towards a New Imperial History of Europe, c. 1770–1850,» *Past & Present* 257, no. 1 (December 31, 2022): 134–67; Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

tualizes empires as networks of circulation of people, objects, or ideas. In tackling this multi-pronged approach, the author builds upon Daniel Headrick's framework in *Tools of Empire* (1981) by conceptualizing Swiss mercenaries as «agents of historical entanglements» or, living «tools of empire» within the broader scheme of European imperialisms.³

The book asks three main questions. What was the role of the Swiss mercenaries in the perpetuation of Dutch colonial power? How did these Swiss mercenaries interact with each other, their Dutch masters, and the indigenous population? And following Bernhard C. Schär's conception of the «trans-imperial» what was the role of the Swiss in the construction and perpetuation of a «trans-imperial military labor market» that allowed the Dutch to recruit men for their fledgling imperial wars while also providing care and pensions to their veterans?⁴ Ultimately, Krauer examines how these experiences with imperialism helped shape modern Switzerland [p. 18].

In answering these questions, the book's argument is quite straightforward. Through its participation within the European trans-imperial military labour market, «thousands of Swiss mercenaries were also deployed both outside of Europe and after the founding of the modern federal state in 1848[.]» thus contributing to Dutch imperialism and the violence that came with it» [p. 153]. The book's primary contribution is to reposition the Swiss as active players in European imperialism abroad—and show how this participation shaped the history of the modern Swiss nation-state.

In Chapter II, Krauer provides an overview of the shape and dynamics of the trans-imperial military labour market that emerged in 19th century Europe. He points out that during the second half of the 19th century, the Dutch employed Swiss mercenaries in large numbers. This was due to the Dutch wars of colonial expansion in the Malay Archipelago, namely the costly Java War (1825-1830) and the Aceh Wars (1873-1912). Meanwhile, the European economic crisis of the 1870s also provided a steady supply of young volunteers to the Netherlands [p. 44]. Beyond socioeconomic motivations, Swiss volunteers were drawn by the allure of adventure and the prospect of traveling to the far-flung East Indies [p. 64].

Of course, the life of a colonial soldier was not all adventure, pomp, or glory. In addition to the rigors of military training, Chapter III vividly illustrates how Swiss soldiers encountered the monotony and boredom of military discipline, the social and racial hierarchies in the colonies, the threat of tropical diseases, disillusionment (and insubordination), and ultimately, the nature of colonial violence itself. The author contends that «Swiss mercenaries contributed in various manners to the maintenance and

3. Philipp Krauer, *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies: A Transimperial History of Military Labour, 1848-1914*, Global Connections: Routes and Roots 9 (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2024), 18.

4. On the notion of the «trans-imperial,» see Schär, «Switzerland, Borneo and the Dutch Indies.»

proliferation of a colonial regime of awe, fear, and violence» [p. 80]. The vivid accounts from Swiss mercenaries – such as Jean Aimé Theodore Humberset, who noted in his diary how his unit burned down several villages during the Borneo War against the Sultanate of Banjarmasin (1859-1863); Karl Schmid, who «praised the courage of a compatriot who sneaked behind enemy lines and set fire to a village» during the Aceh War (1873-1912); or Hans Christoffel, who, as a unit commander in the infamous *Marechausee*, oversaw the violent counterinsurgencies against the Alas and Gayo people during the Aceh War in 1904 [p. 80]. Three years later, in 1907, Christoffel and his unit were deployed to Flores, where they massacred 795 people in a three-month long expedition [p. 82]. Just like the other Europeans in the KNIL, the Swiss recruits originated from the lower strata of society, and they ultimately became perpetrators of colonial violence [p. 83].

In addition to the normal ebb-and-flow of martial life, the author also discusses the Swiss mercenaries' relationships with local concubines (*njai*) and the sexual life of the soldiers. Speaking about the 'vices' of barracks, Krauer explains how concubinage, abolished only in 1913, was often exploitative and abusive [p. 84]. Swiss soldiers recorded their own racialized views of these relationships – Heinrich Brandenberger, for instance, complained how the *njais* «kept up to six men at a time», and Arnold Egloff calls the *njai* was «like a cat», as she «did not remain faithful» and «only loved money, but not the man who would give it» [p. 84]. The mixed-race children of these relationships, often abandoned and/or marginalized, became an underclass within Indies society [p. 85]. However, some Swiss also married their *njais* and brought them back to Switzerland, such as Brandenberger, who married Lina Sampet in 1911, and settled with her in Switzerland in 1920 [p. 85].

One of the book's most interesting aspects is its analysis of how Swiss participation in imperialist projects helped shape Swiss national identity. Quoting historian Rudolf Jaun, the author notes that in the absence of military victories or defeats due to its neutrality, Switzerland instead built its martial-nationalist discourse upon the battles fought by Swiss mercenaries from the 16th to the early 19th centuries.⁵ However, after the formation of the Swiss federal state in 1848, the state distanced itself from the colonial mercenary histories, as they were considered anathema to the self-perceived liberalism of the Swiss political class [p. 65].

The lasting influence of colonialism was also evident in a domain for which Switzerland is renowned for – finance. Central to Chapter IV are the flows of remuneration, from the Dutch colonies and the metropole to the

5. Rudolf Jaun, "Armee Und Nation: Schweizerische Militärdiskurse Des 19. Jahrhunderts Im Widerstreit," in *Die Konstruktion Einer Nation: Nation Und Nationalisierung in Der Schweiz, 18.-20. Jahrhundert*, ed. U. Altermatt, C. Bosshart-Pflugger, and A. Tanner (Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 1998), 150–51; Krauer, *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies*, 65.

Swiss state, which resulted from the business of mercenaryism. To be fair, colonial soldiers were not a path to wealth. Recruits did accept large signing bonuses when securing their contracts, but most of these funds circulated domestically as they were mostly spent in the colonial training depots of Harderwijk and Nijmegen [p. 97]. In terms of regular pay, however, the levels were quite low – a fact that is well-established in the literature. A soldier's weekly pay was one guilder in 1860, an amount which only increased marginally to 1,65 guilders in 1867 [p. 99]. According to the author, what was important was the constant transmission of pensions and veterans benefits to retired mercenaries in Switzerland. The transfer of these monies depended upon the «trans-imperial labour market» established a century earlier, which consisted of a network of actors and institutions, first the Dutch Consul General in Bern; Dutch private companies J. van Daehne & Co., Furnée & Co., and C.J. Sutterheim; and Swiss Cantonal War Commissioner (such as the one in Basel), and Swiss banking service providers such as Marcuard & Cie [pp. 103-5]. Many of these institutions employed Dutch officials and former Swiss mercenaries or other citizens that had direct experiences in the Dutch colonial sphere. The author suggests that the flow of colonial money from the mercenaries – either from signing bonuses, legal or illegal compensation, or pensions and veterans' disability benefits – supported the livelihoods of the poorer strata of Europeans, even for a country without colonies such as Switzerland.

Ultimately, in chapter V, the author endeavours into post-colonial studies, as he discusses the discursive representation of imperialism and colonialism through the general collective memory of the Swiss nation. Building upon Gloria Wekker's work on the Dutch Empire, the author traces how, through the mercenaries' «colonial gaze» reflected through letters, postcards, memoirs, diaries, and newspaper articles, the Swiss became active participants in the long history of European colonialism.⁶ These personal archives of Swiss mercenaries contain what the author calls the permeation of a «colonial logic» that was built upon a dynamic relationship between the «European self» vis-à-vis the «extra-European other» [p. 128]. The Swiss mercenaries ultimately reproduced the colonial stereotypes of Javanese, Malay, or other «natives» as «simple people», «easily contented», or having a generally «peaceful character».⁷ Meanwhile those from the Outer Islands (Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, or other islands) were considered «savages» the Chinese and Arabs were «untrustworthy», as they were traders – one even compared them with Jews (!), and so on [pp. 130-5]. These

6. Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Krauer, *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies*, 121–22.

7. For an excellent discussion on the coloniality of these stereotypes, see Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1977).

stereotypes and discourses were distributed and transmitted to the lower classes of urban and rural Switzerland [p. 149]. So much, perhaps, for «*Sonderfall Schweiz*».

While the book makes use of an impressive range of German, French, and Dutch official and private sources – from archives to diaries and photographs – the book's reliance upon European sources means that indigenous perspectives remain largely absent, albeit for a few exceptions. In terms of racial stereotypes, perhaps it would be beneficial to see how the indigenous population viewed the German-speaking members of the KNIL in comparison to their other counterparts. Further, the book could have benefited from the voices of other actors – such as Swiss financiers, traders, engineers, plantation owners, or missionaries. Another interesting path to take is, of course, to examine how other European nation-states benefited from colonial flows of mercenary remuneration such as the case here with the Swiss.

Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies makes a significant contribution towards the historiography of Swiss exceptionalism by revealing Switzerland's entanglements in European imperialism. In tracing the personal accounts of Swiss mercenaries within the KNIL and the networks that they produced, the author offers compelling evidence that Switzerland was an active and complicit actor in Europe's colonial history. The book's strongest contribution lies in its rich multilingual archival work and its ability to connect the Swiss tradition of mercenaryism to the broader debates on the nature and consequences of Dutch and European colonial, racial, and economic entanglements abroad. In this regard, *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies* serves as a crucial addition to the literature on Switzerland's global history and her role in the European global imperial networks.

REPACKAGING COLONIAL VIOLENCE:
RACE, WAR, AND THE MYTH OF BRITISH COUNTERINSURGENCY IN MALAYA

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Kate Imy, *Losing Hearts and Minds: Race, War, and Empire in Singapore and Malaya, 1915-1960*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024, 352 pp. (ISBN: 978-1-5036-3675-3).

Kate Imy's *Losing Hearts and Minds: Race, War, and Empire in Singapore and Malaya, 1915-1960* is a deeply researched and conceptually rich study that interrogates the fraught realities of colonial militarism in Southeast Asia. By centring on the experiences and testimonies of soldiers and civilians across multiple conflicts – including the First World War, the Second World War, and the Malayan Emergency – Imy challenges the often-celebrated narrative of Britain's «successful» counterinsurgency in Malaya. With her analysis extending from the Singapore Mutiny in 1915 to the final years of British colonial rule in the region, she suggests that the famed strategy of «winning hearts and minds,» popularised by Sir Gerald Templer during the Malayan Emergency, was in fact deeply rooted in earlier imperial practices and haunted by persistent failures.¹ The book thus complicates the notion of a singularly triumphant British «model» of counterinsurgency and exposes the racial and gender hierarchies that continually undermined Britain's efforts to secure genuine local support.

Imy's approach blends social, cultural, and military history, illuminating how imperial power operated through overlapping structures of race, class, gender, and faith. Drawing on a remarkably broad source base – letters, diaries, memoirs, court-martial records, propaganda materials, oral histories, and state archives from multiple countries – the book demonstrates that Britain's invocation of «hearts and minds» was far from a benign or purely humanitarian tactic [p. 7]. Rather, it was a mode of colonial governance and warfare that pivoted on the selective inclusion and exclusion of diverse peoples (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian, and various Commonwealth troops) in a hierarchy that both sought to harness their labour and loyalty yet invariably restricted their access to power. Imy's central argument is that far from decreasing violence, the «hearts-and-minds» rhetoric often

1. Kate Imy, *Losing Hearts and Minds: Race, War, and Empire in Singapore and Malaya, 1915–1960*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024, 2.

intensified colonial oppression, creating a cycle in which civilians and soldiers alike felt betrayed, alienated, and coerced.

A hallmark of strong scholarship lies in its engagement with existing literature and historiographical debates, and *Losing Hearts and Minds* makes significant interventions across multiple fields. In re-examining British Malaya, Imy moves beyond the familiar narrative of a paternalistic colonial administration adept at managing multi-ethnic populations. Rather than accepting the conventional view that Britain's success stemmed from its ability to balance competing interests, she underscores the extent to which racial and gender inequalities were embedded within the structures of colonial rule. Drawing on the work of scholars such as John Newsinger and Karl Hack, she integrates insights from postcolonial theory, particularly the understanding that colonial categories – such as «coloniser» and «colonised», » «white» and «non-white» – were neither fixed nor benign but constituted through violence, exclusion, and contestation.² In her introduction, she explicitly acknowledges a broad historiography that has shaped discussions of the Malayan Emergency as an archetype of counterinsurgency, citing works by C. A. Bayly and Tim Harper, Kumar Ramakrishna, Anthony Short, Richard Stubbs, Leon Comber, David French, and others.³ By weaving these perspectives into her analysis, she challenges the trope of British «success» and highlights how that narrative was sustained by Cold War imperatives and subsequent military doctrines.

This perspective is further reinforced by her approach to the history of war and society, where she departs from traditional military histories that emphasise high-level strategic decisions and diplomatic manoeuvres. Instead, she adopts a bottom-up approach that foregrounds the lived experiences of those who navigated colonial militarisation. Her broad temporal scope, spanning from 1915 to 1960, is especially important in resisting the tendency to treat the Malayan Emergency as an isolated event. By tracing continuities from the early twentieth century, she reveals how ideologies of «martial race», discriminatory labour practices, and racial segregation in military recruitment shaped not only Britain's counterinsurgency strategies

2. John Newsinger, *British Counterinsurgency* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Karl Hack, *Defence and Decolonisation in Southeast Asia: Britain, Malaya and Singapore, 1941–1968* (Richmond, UK: Routledge Curzon, 2001).

3. See C. A. Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: Britain's Asian Empire and the War with Japan* (London: Penguin, 2005); Kumar Ramakrishna, *Emergency Propaganda: The Winning of Malayan Hearts and Minds, 1948–1958* (Richmond, UK: Routledge Curzon, 2002); Anthony Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya, 1948–1960* (London: Muller, 1975); Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds in Guerilla Warfare—the Malayan Emergency, 1948–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Leon Comber, *Malaya's Secret Police, 1945–60: The Role of the Special Branch in the Malayan Emergency* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, and Australia: Monash Asia Institute, 2008); David French, *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency, 1945–1967* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

but also how colonial subjects perceived imperial rule. Rather than viewing these as distinct phases in British governance, she demonstrates that they were part of a longer history of racialised violence and control.

At the same time, Imy places Singapore and Malaya within a broader transnational and global context. By examining their roles in the First and Second World Wars, the Japanese occupation, and the Cold War, she highlights the extent to which anti-colonial struggles, pan-Asian networks, and inter-imperial conflicts were deeply interconnected. Her analysis aligns with scholars who argue that decolonisation was not a simple shift from colonial empire to local nationalism but rather a process shaped by competing global ideologies and regional struggles. She notes, for instance, the contributions of Christopher E. Goscha and Christian F. Ostermann, situating Singapore and Malaya in the wider context of Cold War fault lines, while also referencing Cheah Boon Kheng, Teng Phee Tan, Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, and others who illuminate the roles of non-European actors [p. 2].⁴ This long-range perspective makes *Losing Hearts and Minds* not only an essential contribution to Southeast Asian history but also a work that speaks to broader questions of empire and its transformations in the twentieth century.

Imy's core argument is that Britain's repeated attempts to bolster its rule by appealing to local «loyalties» rested on a fundamentally unequal foundation. She posits that every incarnation of this strategy—from early colonial policing in the interwar era, to the frantic mobilisation of Asian and Commonwealth soldiers during the Second World War, to the systematic campaign to defeat communist insurgents in the 1950s—was embedded in structural racism and selective recognition of who counted as «loyal». These colonial categories were repeatedly undone by the realities of everyday violence, betrayals, and cultural interaction. As she demonstrates, the gap between the discourse of «hearts and minds» and the lived experiences of individuals was vast. The «hearts-and-minds» approach claimed to foster interracial cooperation but instead reinforced racial hierarchies through forced resettlement, mass internment, and psychological warfare. As seen in colonial policing, where Malay and Chinese officers were reduced to subservient roles to surveil European communists, British counterinsurgency relied on coercion rather than care, leaving many to see colonial rule as repressive rather than legitimate [p. 63].

4. See Christopher E. Goscha and Christian F. Ostermann, *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945-1962* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Cheah Boon Kheng, *Red Star over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict during and after the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, 1941-46* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2003); Teng Phee Tan, *Behind Barbed Wire: Chinese New Villages during the Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960* (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2020); Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, *Radicals: Resistance and Protest in Colonial Malaya* (Delkab: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015).

The book is organised into seven main chapters, each focusing on a different conflict or period, and its structure moves chronologically. The first chapter, *Race War in Singapore*, analyses the 1915 mutiny of Indian troops in Singapore, illustrating how the universalising myth of white British power was shaken by local alliances that crossed expected racial lines. Indian soldiers found willing civilian collaborators from diverse backgrounds – Malay, Chinese, and even some European – challenging British assumptions that whiteness itself guaranteed loyalty or compliance. As Frank Kershaw Wilson reflected on the uprising, he experienced «*an unpleasant consciousness of being a white man*», a sentiment that, as Imy argues, «*laid bare the vulnerability of colonial racial hierarchies and the military state meant to support them*» [p. 13]. The mutiny revealed that British control was more fragile than it appeared, as soldiers and civilians alike defied racial divisions imposed by the colonial order. The second chapter, *Making Enemies between the Wars*, examines the aftermath of the 1915 mutiny, showing how British authorities militarised policing and reinforced racial hierarchies. Chinese and Japanese communities in Singapore found that British gratitude for their wartime support was fleeting. Japanese journalist Koji Tsukuda recalled that the British had «greatly valued» Japanese intervention, even claiming they outperformed British forces. Yet, by 1917, the British General Staff dismissed their role, stating that «the Japanese did not do much» [p. 47]. This selective recognition of loyalty deepened mistrust and foreshadowed racial tensions that shaped colonial rule in the interwar years.

The following three chapters examine the Second World War and the Japanese occupation. Imy argues that the fall of Singapore in 1942 underscored fundamental British failures to protect the colony. Despite official propaganda, white British soldiers were prioritised for evacuation, while local populations, particularly the Chinese, bore the brunt of Japanese reprisals. Civilians' relationships with the Japanese occupiers varied widely, ranging from forced labour to uneasy cooperation and genuine collaboration. As Imy observes, «Facing British and then Japanese indifference, many soldiers depended on civilians for survival, further reducing their exalted status as men of arms», a reliance that «gave civilians repeated exposure to soldiers' frailties, underlining the loss of British power» [p. 145]. The experience of Prisoner of War (POW) and internment camps further blurred the lines between friend and foe, though racial ideologies remained deeply entrenched. Attempts to reassert martial-race status or to align with anti-colonial sentiment shaped identities during this time of acute crisis.

The final two chapters focus on the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960), with a particular emphasis on the British-led counterinsurgency campaign against predominantly Chinese communist guerrillas. Imy rejects conventional readings that celebrate Templer's «*hearts-and-minds*» approach as a prime example of enlightened counterinsurgency. Instead, she underscores the campaign's heavy reliance on extrajudicial killings, the forced resettlement

ment of entire Chinese communities into «New Villages», and psychological operations that targeted civilian women's bodies and reproduction as sites of ideological control. Imy writes, «Templer rebranded many aspects of the Emergency without changing its essential components, for instance renaming 'bandits' communist terrorists (CTs) and resettlement areas 'New Villages.' The underlying practice of extreme violence remained» [p. 205]. For Imy, the so-called success of the Malayan Emergency is a myth that persists partly because it has been frequently invoked – especially in American counterinsurgency circles – as a model. Her archival evidence, however, confirms that British efforts to minimise violence by winning over civilian populations were consistently undermined by the same racial biases and gender hierarchies that had defined colonial rule for decades.

One of the book's great strengths is Imy's multifaceted use of sources. She draws on archival collections from Britain, Australia, New Zealand, India, Nepal, Malaysia, and Singapore. Moreover, she underscores the importance of oral histories collected in different languages, and she is candid about the frailties of translation and transcription. By foregrounding these methodological challenges, Imy highlights the interpretative choices she must make in reconstructing local voices – particularly those of individuals marginalised by race, class, or gender. This makes the text not just a historical study but also an exercise in historiographical reflection [p. 9]. Such meticulous engagement with first-hand testimonies – especially diaries, letters, and personal interviews – enables Imy to illuminate the emotional dimensions of war and empire. She is attuned to how fear, betrayal, and aspiration shaped people's decisions to collaborate, resist, or simply survive. Crucially, she does not reduce these choices to a simple binary of «loyal» or «disloyal», «heroic» or «traitorous». Instead, she insists upon the contingent nature of human agency under conditions of extreme stress. The tension between the official archive (military reports, propaganda leaflets, state documents) and personal stories is a central motif throughout the book, giving it a powerful human dimension.

Imy's analysis of «hearts and minds» as a deeply gendered and racialised project is particularly compelling. Building on conceptual insights from Ann Laura Stoler, Homi Bhabha, and other theorists of colonial discourse, the author demonstrates how British rule systematically conflated whiteness with legitimacy and authority.⁵ This conflation explains why, in moments of crisis (e.g., 1915 mutiny, 1942 Japanese invasion), British officers found themselves baffled by the «inexplicable» alliances among Asians—alliances they had dismissed as improbable given the supposedly natural racial hierarchies. Further, the «hearts-and-minds» rhetoric and the paternalistic

5. Ann Laura Stoler, «Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia», *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 3 (July 1992): 514–51; Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995).

assumption that British colonial officials could «uplift» or «protect» local populations served to mask the systemic violence intrinsic to the colonial order [p. 69].

Gender likewise emerges as a critical axis of inequality. Women – particularly Chinese and Eurasian women – appear both as the objects of state propaganda and as agents who navigated spaces of forced labour, internment, and resettlement. Imy devotes sustained attention to how the colonial regime, and later Commonwealth forces in the Emergency, used women's bodies and reproductive capacities as symbols of either compliance or subversion. The propaganda images she cites (showing communist women giving birth in the jungle vs. the domestic serenity of women aligned with the colonial state) illustrate how crucial gender tropes were in shaping the rhetorical strategies of British power [p. 234].

Imy's ability to balance theoretical discussions with meticulous historical research ensures that her work remains accessible while deeply engaged with postcolonial critiques of racialised colonial structures. She aligns with postcolonial scholars in her analysis of race, gender, and imperial discourse but never allows theoretical abstraction to overshadow the empirical richness of her study. Instead, she seamlessly integrates conceptual discussions with close readings of textual and oral evidence, producing a work that is both analytically rigorous and grounded in human experiences. Her ethical engagement with the process of scholarship is also evident, particularly in the introduction and acknowledgements, where she reflects on the challenges of academic labour and the impact of institutional constraints. By situating her research within the realities of conducting scholarship during the COVID-19 pandemic, she offers a candid commentary on the intersection of intellectual work and institutional power [p. xi].

There are, however, areas where readers might have wished for further engagement. While her discussion of the Japanese occupation includes perspectives from British, Eurasian, and local Asian actors, one might wonder whether deeper engagement with Japanese-language materials could have provided additional insights. The absence of these sources – perhaps due to linguistic constraints or archival restrictions – may limit the full picture of how the Japanese military understood the shifting loyalties in Singapore and Malaya. Similarly, although the book convincingly situates Singapore and Malaya as key points within a broader imperial network, a more explicit comparison with contemporaneous crises in Burma or the Dutch East Indies could have further reinforced her argument about the continuity of colonial structures. Nonetheless, this focus on Singapore and Malaya is not a weakness but a strategic choice that ensures narrative depth.

Another consideration is the extent to which continuity is emphasised throughout the book. While Imy makes a compelling case for the persistent structures of racialised governance and counterinsurgency, there are moments where greater attention to contingency might have further nuanced

the analysis. The distinct local political dynamics of the 1910s, for example, as compared to the early Cold War era, could have been explored in more detail to highlight not just the continuities but also the transformations in British colonial governance. The book effectively dismantles the triumphalism surrounding the Malayan Emergency, but additional clarity on what specifically changed in governance strategies, beyond the intensification of policing, might have added further depth to her argument.

Imy's work will be vital for scholars of empire, colonial and postcolonial studies, Southeast Asian history, and military historians looking to understand the lived dimensions of war. Graduate students in history, political science, anthropology, and cultural studies will find the book's interdisciplinary methodology – marrying archival work with theoretical insights – particularly instructive. Instructors designing courses on the British Empire, World War II in the Pacific, and decolonisation can draw on Imy's chapters to illuminate themes of race, gender, and power in an accessible yet deeply analytical manner. For undergraduate teaching, excerpts from *Losing Hearts and Minds* – especially sections dealing with personal letters, diaries, and the propaganda images – could effectively illustrate the complexities of wartime collaboration, the interchange of local and global forces, and the emotional toll of colonial warfare on everyday lives. Furthermore, Imy's critical stance toward the notion of «successful» counterinsurgency in Malaya offers a useful foil to more traditional military histories that treat Templer's approach as a polished model for modern warfare.

In *Losing Hearts and Minds*, Kate Imy provides an essential corrective to simplistic treatments of British counterinsurgency and imperial policy in Southeast Asia. By digging into the tangled layers of personal testimony, racialised military recruitment, gendered propaganda, and the harsh realities of internment and forced resettlement, she underscores that colonial power did not so much «win» as it forcibly imposed itself – often at the expense of those whose hearts and minds were supposedly being courted. The book's significance lies in its compelling demonstration that the Malayan Emergency, while invoked in later decades (most notably by American leaders in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan) as a model counterinsurgency, was a project shaped by deeply flawed colonial logics – logics which perpetuated systemic violence and racism under the guise of reform. Imy's insistence that we view the Emergency within a broader arc of twentieth-century conflict in Malaya and Singapore disrupts the myth of an exceptional «success story». Instead, she points to a history replete with ruptures, betrayals, and shifting allegiances, none of which are easily reduced to neat narratives of good governance. From a stylistic standpoint, Imy writes with clarity and engagement. She balances theoretical sophistication with a consistent sense of compassion for those caught up in the imperial machine. The inclusion of extensive personal stories anchors the book in a tangible reality, ensuring it never becomes a purely abstract treatise. Scholars and students will appre-

ciate this balance of rigorous academic detail and attention to the human dimensions of historical processes.

In conclusion, *Losing Hearts and Minds* stands as a major contribution to the study of empire, war, and decolonisation in Southeast Asia. By uncovering the racial, gendered, and emotional scaffolding that underwrote Britain's military ventures in Singapore and Malaya, Imy reorients our understanding of «hearts-and-minds» warfare. Instead of an innovative strategy that minimised force, it was a repackaging of colonial violence, reinforced by paternalistic rhetoric and the illusion of racial brotherhood. Imy's carefully crafted research, broad temporal scope, and vivid narrative arc ensure that her study will become a touchstone for those investigating the entwined histories of race, war, and imperial power in Asia—and, indeed, for anyone interested in the complexities of colonial rule worldwide.

THE CONFORT WOMEN OF SINGAPORE

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Kevin Blackburn, *The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2022, 208 pp. (ISBN 978-981-325-186-1).

Decades after Kim Hak-sun first delivered her public testimony detailing her enslavement as a ‘comfort woman’ during World War II, the legal fight to hold Japan accountable for war crimes and crimes against humanity continues. In April 2024, 18 families of late Chinese comfort women filed landmark lawsuits in Shanxi province against the Japanese government—the first such challenge in a Chinese court—seeking formal apologies and compensation.¹ The enduring fight for justice and reparations for comfort women remains one of the most urgent historical and moral issues today and

necessitates persistent inquiry on Japan’s wartime atrocities. Kim’s powerful account in 1991 had opened the doors for many other former comfort women to speak out about their experiences, not just in South Korea, but also in the Southeast Asian countries of Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Yet, similar testimonies have not been forthcoming in Singapore, which was a major centre of comfort stations that catered to rank-and-file Japanese soldiers and *ryōtei*, or restaurants that offered sexual services to officers and administrators. Why is this so? Kevin Blackburn’s *The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory* picks up on this silence as an entry point to address the lacuna in studies of the comfort women system in Singapore and explore the representation of comfort women in Singapore popular culture and collective memory. Drawing on studies done on comfort women originating from other parts of Asia that were occupied by Japan during the war, Blackburn highlights the transnational nature of the comfort women issue and points out similarities and differences between post-war Asian societies that could explain why Singapore comfort women had not come forward with their testimonies. Blackburn furthermore shows the interplay between state imperatives and state support for the comfort women’s pursuance of recognition and compensation. Blackburn examines the history of comfort women in Singapore during Japanese Occupation and discusses their silence and portrayal in the media with a sensitivity to gender.

1. Alyssa Chen, “Families of China’s WWII ‘Comfort Women’ Seek Japanese Compensation, Apologies in Landmark Lawsuits,” *South China Morning Post*, May 2, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3260963/families-chinas-wwii-comfort-women-seek-japanese-compensation-apologies-landmark-lawsuits>.

Chapter 1, titled “Lee Kuan Yew and Masculinist Memories of the Comfort Women,” begins the book with an assessment of the responses in Singapore to the 1991 international controversy over comfort women. Particularly, Blackburn argues that Singapore founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s 1992 keynote speech to an audience of Japanese businessmen, in which he mentioned that the “chastity” of young Singaporean girls had been “saved” by young Korean women and girls enslaved in the Cairnhill Road comfort station in Singapore, reflected ‘masculinist’ memories of comfort women in Singapore. In these memories, which were published in the press following Lee’s statement, ideas that men were entitled to sexual gratification with women’s bodies were tacitly accepted. Blackburn posits that Lee’s statement signalled that the government would be potentially unsympathetic to the comfort women’s cause which, in addition to press reports similarly suggesting that there were few of them, deterred local Singapore comfort women from coming forward with their experiences and demands for justice and compensation.

Chapter 2 examines “The Role of the Women of Singapore in the Sex Industry of the Japanese Military,” in which Blackburn focuses on the year 1942, when the Japanese military established the comfort women system in Singapore. Drawing extensively from oral interviews, Blackburn shows the various ways in which women became entrapped in the sex industry of the Japanese military. Some women were forcibly abducted, whereas others were tricked and trafficked by local brokers from their own community. Women also had differing experiences in the sex industry. Whereas some women were enslaved in comfort stations designated for rank-and-file Japanese soldiers, ‘low-grade’ geisha and Japanese women provided sexual services in *ryotei* restaurants reserved for military officers and high-ranking civilian administrators. Others, including many local women, worked in restaurants that also operated as brothels. The experience of Ho Kwai Min, a Cantonese ‘high-class’ prostitute, reveals the ways in which women resisted and sought agency while illuminating the endemic physical violence in the sex industry of the Japanese military.

Chapter 3 looks “Inside the Comfort Stations of Singapore” to investigate how they operated between 1943 and 1945, during which comfort stations proliferated in Singapore. Drawing from a range of sources, from testimonies, memories to written records of individuals who had been in comfort stations in Singapore, this chapter also examines the experiences of comfort women, specifically the ways in which they dealt with the working conditions of the comfort station. The conditions were appalling. Comfort women served long queues of Japanese soldiers in a “sex factory-like system”; it was not uncommon that the women were forced to have sex with 30-50 soldiers on “busy” days. When the few opportunities arose, comfort

women asserted their agency. Blackburn posits that, while the sources suggest that the known comfort stations in Singapore were managed by private managers, the comfort women system was ultimately under the control of the Japanese military.

Chapter 4, focusing on “Korean and Indonesian Comfort Women in Singapore,” explores the origins of the comfort women and compares how they were brought to Singapore. Blackburn contends that the methods used in the recruitment of Korean and Indonesian women as comfort women and their working conditions were not dissimilar. Deception was a key strategy. The recruitment of these women through Korean and Indonesian co-operation offers striking parallels. While Indonesian women were pressured by their parents to accept deceptive offers to further their education or for employment such as nursing, similar promises made to Korean women saw them being trafficked via well-established networks in Korea to various parts of Asia under Japanese Occupation to work in comfort stations. Though most of the comfort women in Singapore were Korean, it appears that Indonesian women formed the second largest group, who comprised entirely of the women in the comfort stations at Katong and the offshore island Pulau Bukom. The experiences of Korean and Indonesian comfort women in Singapore corroborate studies conducted on other contexts that there were numerous ways in which comfort women were recruited and differing conditions in which they worked.

Chapter 5, titled “The Comfort Women Returning to Live in Postwar Society,” investigates the postwar circumstances that discouraged women involved in the sex industry of the Japanese military in Singapore to speak to their families about their experiences or to return to their communities where they faced stigmatisation. Indonesian, Korean, and Singapore women returned to their respective societies that were unsympathetic to their wartime experiences. In Singapore, the returning British colonial authorities and community leaders were particularly perturbed by the large numbers of Singapore women who were driven to prostitution during the Occupation and continued doing so as livelihood after the war. Marked as ‘fallen’ women, these women were portrayed by their critics as a moral-corrupting influence on men and as vectors of venereal diseases. A Girls’ Training School was established along the lines of ‘rehabilitation’ to offer vocational education to these women so that they could obtain alternative employment or marry and establish their own households. By the 1950s, little was discussed about Singapore women who had been in the wartime sex industry. Blackburn posits that it was highly probable that these women decided to remain silent about their experiences so that they could reintegrate into society rather than remain stigmatised. He furthermore contends that the early postwar discourse on women engaged in the sex industry exemplifies

the perpetuation and reinforcement of women's subordinate status in society via "male-controlled language."

Chapter 6 explores "The Silence of the Local Comfort Women of Singapore" in the context of state effort in the 1990s to incorporate wartime experiences of the local population into a "narrative of national survival." The English, Malay, and Chinese presses sought to no avail former comfort women to speak out about their experiences because of their potential stigma and loss of social status, the conservative patriarchal nature of Singapore society, and the absence of local feminist activist organisations that had enabled comfort women to publicly testify about their experiences in other countries. Blackburn suggests that the presses' failure in securing stories of Singapore comfort women can be explained by Ho Kwai Min's interview in a Chinese documentary about prewar female entertainer-prostitutes that catered to wealthy men. After the documentary aired, Ho experienced ostracization and scorn from her social circles. Another reason why Singapore comfort women did not demand compensation while many in other countries were doing so was the lack of financial incentive. Arguably, the compensation the women could have hoped to receive would not have been worth the social cost of being marked as 'fallen' women. Other reasons include the ambiguity of the ways in which women were engaged in the wartime sex industry that could cast aspersions on them as well as the lingering memories of early postwar disapprobation on women in prostitution.

Chapter 7 explores the remembrance of "The Comfort Women of Singapore as 'Dark Heritage'." Comfort women had been depicted in numerous plays and television dramas in Singapore, be it as a main character or supporting cast, contributing to an awareness of the transnational nature and diversity of women's sexual enslavement by the Japanese military in Singapore. State recognition of the wartime atrocities experienced by comfort women came in the limited form of conservation of a site that had served as a comfort station. The conclusion situates the study of comfort women in Singapore in broader, ongoing debates about comfort women in East Asia and points out the ethical obligations of scholars writing about trauma.

In conclusion, *The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory* makes for a sobering read. It is a tall order to write a book about silence. Blackburn's effort to investigate the history of comfort women of Singapore despite the paucity of testimonies from Singapore comfort women is admirable. For anyone who desires to understand the ways in which public memory of war is shaped by history, society, and politics, this book is an essential read.

MARITIME CONNECTIONS:
NAVIGATING THROUGH VIETNAMESE HISTORY

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Li Tana, *A Maritime Vietnam. From Earliest Times to the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024, 341 pp. (ISBN 978-1-009-23764-2).

In the early twenty-first century, Vietnam's relationship with the sea is undeniable. On the one hand, the S-shaped country's 3260-kilometre-long coastline welcomes a growing number of national and international tourists, enjoying the modernising seafront on the Pacific Ocean or discovering the beauty of Vietnamese bays from the deck of cruise liners. On the other hand, sea borders fuelled tensions with neighbouring countries, especially People's Republic of China, over the control of the East Sea—also known as the South China Sea—along with its islands and rich fisheries and energy resources.

Recently, scholars have begun to explore Vietnam's maritime history, particularly from the perspective of colonial and post-colonial Indochinese ports.¹ In *A Maritime Vietnam*, historian Li Tana takes a step further by examining the sea connections of eastern Indochina before the nineteenth century. By getting to the roots of Vietnamese history, she aims to partake in its historiographic renewal inasmuch as she goes beyond its traditional frame, based on rural territories as well as on a national and nationalist approach. Currently an Honorary Senior Fellow at the Australian National University's College of Asia and Pacific Studies in Canberra, Li completes and widens her previous works dealing with both the Mekong region and the Tonkin Gulf.² Rather than presenting a history of the East Sea and its Vietnamese coastline, she explores the ways in which maritime dynamics shaped Southeast Asian governance, economies, societies, cultures, and re-

1. See for instance the international conference organised in Đà Nẵng in 2022: "From the Port to the World. A Global History of Indochinese Ports (1858-1956)", University of Sciences and Education – University of Đà Nẵng, 27-29 October 2022: <https://www.gis-reseau-asie.org/evenement/colloque-international-du-port-au-monde-une-histoire-globale-des-ports-indochinois-1858>.

2. *The Nguyen Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Ithaca/New York: Cornell University Press/Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998. Li Tana also edited: with Nola Cook, *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004; with James A. Anderson, *The Tongking Gulf through History*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023.

ligions. She informs us on the genesis of modern Vietnam, shedding light on what Vietnam was *and* is, linking past and present through the lens of a *longue-durée* history.

Li's book is structured around case studies that are skilfully interconnected, offering a broad yet cohesive picture of Vietnam's maritime past. The study unfolds in three main sections. The first three chapters focus on the pre-Dai Viet period, laying the foundations of ancient sea-land connections (Chapter 1). From the beginning, some common features are highlighted, *i.e.*, the effects of geomorphological changes, the development of port cities as well as agricultural activities – especially linked to the cultivation of rice –, and the impact of local and regional migration. During the first millennium AD, two territories played their cards right: China-dominated Jiaozhi (Chapter 2) and Linyi (Chapter 3). The first one appears to be an economic and cultural hub, through the diffusion of aromatics and Buddhism, testifying of Sino-Indian relations. It faced southern competition with Cham's Linyi, also specializing in aromatic plants used in religious cults, and expanding north and south. As early as the eleventh century, Dai Viet did not put an end to regional connections.

The second section of the book examines the rise of Dai Viet and its «Maritime Resurgence» (Chapter 4). From the eleventh century onwards, despite the inland location of the first imperial city, Thanh Long, the Ly dynasty actively engaged with the sea. Forced migration and maritime raids were central to territorial expansion. Salt production, particularly from coastal marshlands, became a key economic activity. Meanwhile, further south, Champa remained a major economic hub benefitting from a Chinese presence and, above all, from its role in Muslim trading networks (Chapter 5). The regional incorporation of Vietnam into Muslim trade networks, including ceramic circulation, persisted until the sixteenth century (Chapter 6). The Vietnamese took the most of the Ming dynasty's ban of foreign trade, filling the gap thanks to the arrival of craftsmen from China.

The third section explores Vietnam's transformation during the Age of Commerce (sixteenth–eighteenth centuries) considering Tongking, in the north of the Indochinese Peninsula, (Chapter 7) and Dang Trong/Cochinchina, in the South (Chapter 8). The northern territory became integrated into the global silk and silver trade, in which Japan was a significant player. These commercial networks transformed the Tongking's society and territory particularly through the multiplication of markets and communal halls (*đình*), which served as trading posts and social spaces. The involvement of women in peddling activities also renegotiated social and sexual relations while maritime wealth strengthened the role of villages as much as that of the administrative elite, with an increasing number of literati replacing the military on the political scene. In Cochinchina, the Nguyễn established a distinct «Maritime Entity» in the seventeenth century. They adopted Malay-style *ghe bầu* ships, developed maritime salvage operations,

and expanded their influence over key ports and entrepôts. Cochinchina, thus became an intermediary between China and Japan, integrating forest products into its commercial networks.

The final chapters examine the decline of Vietnam's «water frontier» through political and economic changes following the Tay Son rebellion which started in the 1770s. By the mid-eighteenth century, a great diversity of products circulated via Vietnamese ports, including rice, tea, tin, pepper, and sugar. Trade reached its peak in the 1760s, driven by triangular exchanges between the Gulf of Siam, Hué and Canton. However, speculation, corruption, and the Tay Son uprising disrupted this network, leading to the mass emigration of Chinese established in the peninsula, a major link in the trade chain, and economic regression. Chapter 9 details this economic regression, while Chapter 10 explores the Nguyễn dynasty failure to ensure economic prosperity. Unlike other Southeast and East Asian states, the Nguyễn struggled to ensure political integration and economic stability. Instead, regionalism prevailed: southern ports remained export-oriented, while the North was subjected to a grain-shipping system, named '*tao van*', in order to feed the Central provinces. After decades of free trade, rice consequently became a highly political commodity.

All in all, this book offers a stimulating study of the history of Vietnam that does not ignore politics and dynasties but links them to economic, social, and cultural phenomena. The book puts the predominance of political facts and actors into perspective, stressing the role and agency of economic actors, including craftsmen, smugglers, and migrants. While questioning land and sea borders, the historian also reveals the shaping and unshaping of territories that took part in the formation of Vietnam and the Vietnamese society to the present day.

Li's approach offers a connected history highlighting the complex entanglement of relations forged on the Indochinese peninsula. While China remains central, Li's book widens the horizon by considering other Asian populations and territories, to include Muslim merchants from the Middle East and the Ottoman Empire, as well as European traders, particularly the Dutch VOC and the British. In doing so, her work not only addresses historians of Vietnam but represents a valuable piece of Southeast Asian global history. Li employs a *connected history methodology* that ignores the borders between history and archaeology, geomorphology, and, to a lower extent, economy, literature and poetry. Archaeological findings are put to the forefront right beside a particularly rich use of the existing Vietnamese, Chinese, English, French and Japanese scholarship. If some of the attached maps, especially in the first chapters, could appear quite blurry to readers freshly diving into the history of Vietnam and Southeast Asia, this is easily counterbalanced by Li's thoughtful and instructive writing style. Furthermore, her use of micro-history along with detailed case studies of human and commodity circulation serve a dual function: it compensates the lack of

historical evidence in order to seize the social dimension of sea-land connections and facilitate the understanding of complex interactions. Through this study, Li Tana's book paves the way for new studies on Vietnam, and Southeast Asia, transcending traditional boundaries.

SEARCHING FOR MIGRANT VOICES IN THE GLOBAL ARCHIVE

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Martin Dusinberre, *Mooring the Global Archive: A Japanese Ship and its Migrant Histories*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, 304 pp. (ISBN 978-1-009-34651-1). DOI: 10.1017/9781009346535

In his second monograph, Martin Dusinberre presents new research on Japanese labour migration to the Hawai'i and Australia in the late nineteenth century, contextualising it within broader processes of imperialism, settler colonialism, and industrialisation. At the same time, he explores the coal extraction and trade that enabled steamships to move across the Asia-Pacific region. Adopting a global history framework, the book critically engages with established narratives, using empirical findings to address epistemic and methodological issues in a way that challenges established views. As the author states in the Preface [p. xxi], these methodological concerns lie at the heart of his study.

The book contains six chapters, each of which introduces a specific primary source – a painting, a court testimony (as quoted in a newspaper report), a map, a filed statement, or a diary entry – as a gateway into the case study under discussion. These sources frame broader analytical themes while also prompting reflections on historical methodology. Each chapter follows a similar structure: a discussion of the primary source leads to an investigation of a historical problem, followed by a concluding section where the author addresses the methodological implications of his findings. While the chapters can be read independently, their thematic coherence and consistent design contribute to the book's overall unity.

Chapter 1 introduces the *Yamashiro-maru*, a Japanese steamer built in England in 1884, whose two-decade career included early service in the government-sponsored programme for labour migration to the Hawai'i (1885–94). The ship's history serves as a starting point for the discussion of global interactions, but also to spark reflections on historical method. Dusinberre rejects the temptation to build a linear narrative by tracking the lifespan of the *Yamashiro-maru*, out of concern that such a conventional approach might lead him to pursue «a diffusionist view of progress» that would emphasise Japan's effort to catch up with the West [p. 13]. He then signals two other «archival traps» of which he became aware in the course of his investigations. One is reliance on digitised collections that reproduce, or even amplify, the epistemic bias of their physical archives of origin. Through sev-

eral examples across the book, Dusinberre makes it a point that institutional archives reflect the perspective of those who selected and recorded the information; therefore, they tend to underrepresent the voices of people that were subaltern because of their gender, social class or ethnicity. The other trap lies in the distraction written sources overall provide from other material evidence that can be crucial to filling archival gaps, as well as to understanding the specific context in which the archives were born and grew.

Chapter 2 explores Japanese migration to Hawai'i, focusing on the socio-economic motives, work conditions in the sugarcane fields and contrasting representations of the labourers by various institutional actors and press writers. Besides using sources to deconstruct the migrants' supposedly homogenous identity, Dusinberre argues that, from the viewpoint of native Hawaiians, the main reason to promote immigration from Japan might have been not to solve a labour shortage problem, but rather to repopulate their islands through marriages with another Pacific nation whom they perceived as relatively close to themselves.

Chapter 3 complements the previous one by extending the inquiry to other sources that shed light on the mentality of migrant workers, their cultural background and the ties they maintained with their hometowns. The analysis centres on a specific case from Western Japan, that is the port town of Murotsu and its inland districts. Dusinberre concludes that the emigrants' work culture, while familiar with concepts of economic circulation, did not embrace a labour-intensive mode of production; therefore, their attitude does not fit into the theory of an «industrious revolution» sustaining growth in nineteenth century Japan and parts of Europe. The chapter also reconsiders the relationship between Japanese immigrants and native Hawaiians, intervening in the historiographic debate over the former group's possible role as conscious agents of settler colonialism. Dusinberre remains dubitative about intentionality but points out that successful immigrants in practice built their status upon a system of dispossession of the natives.

Chapter 4 shifts the scene of investigation to Australia's Queensland and its sugar industry in the 1890s. Differently from Hawai'i, Japanese immigration there was not state-sponsored, but organised with the support of private enterprises. Dusinberre juxtaposes the economic interests that favoured the importation of labour, as well as the development of bilateral trade, with racially charged discourse on the «Japanese threat» to white workers in the Australian press and political circles. Owing to the Anglo-Japanese Treaty of Commerce of 1894, which granted Japanese subjects free entrance into the Dominions, the immigration issue became entangled with the question of Australian autonomy within the British empire.

Chapter 5, while keeping the main scene in Queensland, takes as object of inquiry another kind of labour, that is prostitution resulting from trafficking. Discussion stems from the case of Hashimoto Usa, a young woman who travelled from Nagasaki to Thursday Island in 1897 via Shanghai and

Hong Kong. By dissecting a statement that Hashimoto made under interrogation, Dusiñberre widens the scope of his analysis to regional trafficking routes and hubs of prostitution, spanning from Vladivostok to Batavia. He shows how Japanese officials monitored migrant prostitution in Australia as a problem that affected national reputation and could therefore hamper «respectable» migration. From the standpoint of method, the core question this chapter raises is how to read sources beyond the narrative framing that appears in the archive. Hashimoto's case demonstrates that, even in a first-person testimony, the speaker's viewpoint gets blurred under the filter of translation and written recording by other individuals.

In Chapter 6, the author departs from his focus on migrants to explore the logistics of steam navigation. He follows the path of a piece of coal from seam to ship, describing labour in Japanese mines, in the loading ports and aboard steamers. Dusiñberre also stresses the strategic importance of Japanese coal for the development of Pacific navigation from about the 1860s. He reconsiders Commodore Matthew Perry's earlier mission to Japan in the light of this geopolitical factor and concludes that securing access to fuel was a main drive of US policy towards that Asian country.



Through its case studies, *Mooring the Global Archive* composes an articulate and nuanced picture of Japanese labour migration within the author's selected time and geographic frame. The book does not touch on the developments of that phenomenon into the early twentieth century. This choice seems consistent with the exclusion of California, South America and other places from the geographic scope of discussion. Notwithstanding these intentional limits, the book captures well the regional dimension of migration and links it firmly to long-term processes of a global scale. The analysis blends meticulous research based on a wide range of primary sources with sophisticated conceptualisation on methodological issues. There are, however, some imbalances in the overall design.

In the first place, there is a gap between some of the author's declared goals and the results he delivers. Although he aims to «contribute to a new literature which argues that Japanese overseas migrants were central to the making of the imperial state», or «Japanese state-building» [pp. 34, xx], the evidence presented does not substantiate this claim. Rather than proving the centrality of migration with respect to either Japan's politics, economy or society, the book deals with peripheral topics and perspectives that usefully integrate research on more pivotal themes in the history of that country.

Secondly, and more strikingly, the author's attempt to question dominant narratives by «positioning the labourers' experiences and imaginations at the heart of [his] story» [p. 34] leads to few departures from sources that express the viewpoint of other actors. If the reader expects to find reference

to diaries, private correspondence, legal testimonies or some material legacy, perhaps provided by the families of the descendants, then this work will disappoint. Aside from Hashimoto's statement, a few individual voices surface in other documents relating to prostitution [pp. 190-91, 212]. Earlier on, in Chapter 2 [p. 92], Dusinberre quotes four passages from cane field songs collected by Franklin Odo (2013). In a logical tour de force, he links the sense of drifting these songs convey to the workers' understanding of the circulation of goods and labour; to introduce his analysis of socio-economic conditions in Murotsu. The lack of first-hand testimonies in the book, however, may be justified by the relatively low literacy among migrants in the period examined (compulsory education was introduced in Japan in 1872), along with the difficulty to access sources outside the official archives.

A further methodological gap, in terms of divergence between aims and results, is the absence of Native Hawaiian and Indigenous Australian perspectives. In Chapter 2, Dusinberre acknowledges the need to overcome the «marginalization of Native Hawaiian voices» and finds a promising resource in «the huge collection of nineteenth-century Hawaiian-language newspapers which have now been digitized». However, he also admits that his «own language deficiencies have precluded [his] taking the lead in conducting such research» [pp. 73-74]. Consequently, his hypothesis of Hawaiian support for Japanese immigration as a means of repopulation rests on a single newspaper article, which he got translated by two assistants [p. 75, note 103]. In Chapter 4, he similarly argues for the need to reframe narratives on Australian history. In this case, his «archival departure point» is a bark painting by a contemporary Yolŋu artist, representing ancestral territory in a unified vision of land and sea. Dusinberre presents this artwork, and its legal implications, as an example of a worldview alternative to the one embedded in a map by a Japanese shipping company, the NYK. However, after remarking in this way the importance of directionality for the unsettling of colonial narratives, he acknowledges not having the skills to interrogate «the Yolŋu country archive» [p. 170]. Overall, Dusinberre's renunciation to explore native sources is emblematic of the difficulty to research global history by relying only on one's own professional skills and cultural background. As he aptly concludes, «herein lies one impetus for collaborative research projects» [p. 170].

Concerning the book structure, it is noteworthy that chapters do not include a paragraph or section devoted to reviewing the literature on major topics in a systematic way. Reference to previous scholarship is abundant but comes interspersed with the presentation of the author's own findings and methodological reflections at the expense of clarity. Some critique to concepts and trends in historiography would have deserved further space in the main body of the text. In the final note to Chapter 6, for instance, Dusinberre mentions that his approach to this part of the book «has encapsulated the so-called volumetric turn in history» [p. 266], then provides reference to

a journal article without further comments. To the non-specialized reader, the lack of literature review sections might make it difficult to appreciate the book's contribution to the study of overseas migration and other topics.

In the seamless flow of narration and analysis that makes up this book, an unusual feature is the high frequency of metahistorical passages on the author's «practical positionality». In response to Marc Bloc's invitation to show the reader «the site of an investigation» [p. xxi], Dusinger explains continuously how he conducted research and what he thought in the process. Though functional to addressing the epistemic questions that constitute one of the main concerns of the book, this approach leads at times to the reporting of superfluous details. Professional historians will relate sympathetically to the situations described (as negotiating with one's spouse a detour from holiday in search of sources), but some of this information adds little, if anything, to the reader's understanding of the intellectual process behind research. Furthermore, at certain points the author projects his expectations onto the description of sources. In presenting the NYK map, for instance, he notes that «its emboldened shipping routes seemed wilfully to cut across transpacific tensions over race and migration» [p. 126]. After reading the book, this reviewer was left with the impression that, among the many voices gathered in its chapters, Dusinger's was the loudest.

Despite these reservations, *Mooring the Global Archive* is a piece of solid research that deserves attention. Besides contributing to the advance of global history with a wealth of empirical evidence, it tackles methodological issues of wide relevance in an innovative way.

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AN ISLAND IN BETWEEN: HISTORY AND GEOPOLITICS OF TAIWAN

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Stefano Pelaggi, *Lisola sospesa: Taiwan e gli equilibri del mondo*, Rome: LUISS University Press, 2022, 231 pp. (ISBN: 9788861058453)

Stefano Pelaggi's book offers a thorough yet concise geopolitical and historical analysis of Taiwan's position in the contemporary international system, exploring both political and social dimensions. Pelaggi covers a wide historical spectrum, tracing Taiwan's indigenous origins and its socio-political transformations through a few key historical phases: the Japanese Occupation, the return of the Kuomintang, the party's retreat to the island after its defeat in the Chinese Civil War, the White Terror years, and Taiwan's democratization process, which has led it to become one of the most efficient and stable democracies in the world. Beyond this, the author addresses Taiwan's ongoing diplomatic, economic and political challenges. Its clarity and accessibility make the book suitable for a broader audience, extending beyond purely academic circles. Moreover, its interdisciplinary approach, which integrates geopolitical, historical, and political perspectives, provides a rich and multifaceted analysis of Taiwan's evolving role in the world.

The book is divided into fourteen chapters. The author has adopted a chronological and thematic structure that spans from the 16th century to contemporary times in just 230 pages. The narrative begins with Taiwan's early encounters with European colonization (Dutch and Spanish) and concludes with an exploration of the most recent grassroots movements opposing rapprochement with the People's Republic of China, as promoted by the Kuomintang (KMT) leadership in the past decade. Each chapter focuses on a specific phase of Taiwan's history or a critical aspect of its cultural, social, or political environment, offering readers a nuanced understanding of the island's complex evolution. In the introduction and the first chapter, Pelaggi situates Taiwan within the current international system, analysing its geopolitical significance in the Taiwan Strait dispute, and exploring the island's role in US-PRC relations. This section provides a comprehensive background for understanding Taiwan's precarious position in global geopolitics, highlighting its strategic importance in the East Asian region. The second chapter delves into Taiwan's history prior to the Japanese occupation, with a focus on the island's indigenous heritage and its interactions with the early European colonial powers, such as the Portuguese, Dutch, and Spanish. The chapter also explores the influence of the Chinese Qing Dynasty, which shaped Taiwan's early socio-political structures. This discus-

sion is crucial to understanding the heritages of Taiwan's shifting identity, which continues to influence its internal development and its responses to external affairs. The discussion then moves into the third chapter, that analyses the fifty years of Japanese rule (1895-1945), highlighting its transformative impact on Taiwan's infrastructure, economy, and society. This chapter focuses on how this period laid the background for Taiwan's earlier modernization, including developments in agriculture and infrastructures.

The return of the Kuomintang and its retreat to Taiwan following their defeat in the Chinese Civil War are examined across thematic chapters – from the fourth to the ninth – which explore the political and sociological trajectories undertaken by Taiwan's civil society during this transformative period, particularly after the establishment of the martial law. These in-depth thematical analyses are seamlessly integrated into the book's overarching historical narrative, adding interdisciplinary dimensions that deepen the reader's understanding. The political and historical legacy of Chiang Kai-shek is explored through the issue of his monumental political statues, alongside the White Terror era and the tensions between the authoritarian governance and civil society (chapter 4). Additionally, Taiwan's transformation into the industrial and entrepreneurial hub we recognize today is explored through the role of family-led small and medium enterprises in driving the island's growth during that period (chapter 6). Furthermore, the diplomatic role of Song Meiling – Chiang Kai-shek's wife – and the political legacy of his son, Chiang Ching-kuo, in shaping Taiwan's subsequent democratization and reforms are discussed in chapters 5 and 9, respectively, contributing to a more in-depth description.

The subsequent section, covering chapters 10 to 14, addresses the events of the last thirty years, characterized by Taiwan's gradual democratization and its evolving role within the global political landscape. These chapters provide a dual focus. On the one hand, they analyse Lee Teng-hui's presidencies and his pivotal role in steering Taiwan's democratisation process (chapters 9 to 12). On the other, they delve into economic and geopolitical issues, including Taiwan's critical role in the global semiconductor industry (chapter 10) and the dynamics of cross-Straits relations following the deaths of Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo (chapters 12 to 14). As for the economic perspective, the author emphasizes the island's pivotal role in the global technology supply chain, particularly as a critical player in the US-PRC competition over technological dominance. Furthermore, this analysis is framed within a broader discourse on national identity and civil society, approaching them both from an historical and geopolitical perspective. He examines the role of Hakka and Hokkien indigenous minorities in shaping the identity of native Taiwanese people, particularly in the context of the predominance of Han people in public office following the Kuomintang's retreat in 1949. From a political and geopolitical standpoint, Pelaggi explores the contrast between the island's democratic stance

and the authoritarian governance of the Communist party in the mainland. Chapter 14 focuses on the most recent grassroots civil movements, analysing their implications within the context of the Taiwan Strait dispute. These events, such as the 2014 «Sunflower Movement», underscore the growing importance of Taiwan's evolving political and social identity. The author provides a detailed account of the «Sunflower Movement» and its reception by Taiwanese civil society, illustrating how ideological concerns, particularly among younger generations, play a critical role in shaping Taiwan's domestic and international policies. This analysis aims at highlighting how Taiwan's identity and values are increasingly becoming decisive factors in discussions about potential rapprochement between the two sides of the Strait.

Pelaggi's research methodology is synthetic, as his goal seems looking to analyze the major events that have shaped Taiwan's history. His approach integrates geopolitical perspectives with historical accuracy. While relying primarily on existing academic literature rather than archival research, Pelaggi successfully constructs a comprehensive and cohesive narrative. He offers a broad overview of the pivotal phases in Taiwan's history and its evolving role within the contemporary international system – an issue of critical importance in today's international dynamics.

The book stands out for its comprehensive scope and its ability to merge historical, geopolitical and cultural dimension of Taiwan into a single, concise narrative, despite being no longer than 230 pages. Indeed, one of the book's key strengths is its interdisciplinary approach, which enables the author to connect Taiwan's internal developments with its external relations in the context of cross-Strait relations with the People's Republic of China and, more broadly, with the United States and Europe. The book examines the evolution of Taiwan's civil society, offering a multidimensional perspective on the island's journey from the «White Terror» era to democratization. A noteworthy example is the thematic exploration of Taiwan's business sector, which was driven by civil society actors who were excluded from the bureaucracy during Chiang Kai-shek's presidency. Furthermore, the chapter dedicated to Taiwan's semiconductor industry is seamlessly integrated into the historical narrative, emphasizing its vital role in the contemporary economic and political international system. Finally, the thematic chapters that delve into political and cultural elements, such as the monumental political statues of Chiang Kai-shek (chapter 4), the diplomatic of Madame Chiang (chapter 5), and the days of the Yuan occupation during the 2014 Sunflower Movement (chapter 14) – to name just a few – skilfully intertwine historical events with the personal stories of key historical figures.

On the other hand, a few weak points can be detected. Firstly, the historical narrative ends with the Sunflower Movement of 2014 and his consequences both nationally and internationally but does not delve into the developments of Tsai Ing-wen's first and second administrations. The author only mentions about recent events in the introductory chapter, where

he had briefly summarized the island's latest history, focusing primarily on its international relations disregarding its internal dynamics. Secondly, the sources Pelaggi relies on are predominately from Italian and Anglo-American scholars. While these provide a valuable basis, incorporating Chinese-language sources would have significantly enriched the work, offering a more nuanced perspective on Taiwan's history and its complex identity. Finally, the author's informative approach broadens the book's appeal beyond the Italian academic sector; but the absence of original source research represents a missed opportunity. Taiwan's history, its geopolitical significance in the current international system, and the emergence of a new political and social identity – particularly across the younger generation – are critical areas that need deeper investigations. A more detailed exploration of these elements would provide a better understanding of Taiwan's role as a pivotal actor in contemporary global affairs, especially in the context of its complex relationships with key players such as the People's Republic of China, the United States and, by extension, the European Union.

Nevertheless, *L'isola sospesa, Taiwan e gli equilibri del mondo* is an appreciable contribution to the Italian field literature. While it does not rely on original archive research and instead draws on pre-existing works – primarily from Western scholars – the book's structure and the themes it explores make it a valuable starting point for engaging with Taiwan's history. *L'isola sospesa, Taiwan e gli equilibri del mondo* serves as a well-crafted foundation for further developing a debate on Taiwan's history, culture and politics.

APPENDIX
LIST OF THE ASIA MAIOR'S 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 Major*, 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 Major*, 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 Major*, 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 Major*, Vol. IV/1993);

Vol. V Giorgio Borsa e Enrica Collotti Pischel (a cura di), *Luci e ombre sullo sviluppo in Asia Orientale. Asia Major 1994*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 1994 (*Asia Major*, Vol. V/1994);

Vol. VI Giorgio Borsa e Giovanna Mastrocchio (a cura di), *Tra Democrazia e neoautoritarismo. Asia Major 1995*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 1995 (*Asia Major*, Vol. VI/1995);

Vol. VII Giorgio Borsa e Giovanna Mastrocchio (a cura di), *Integrazione regionale e ascesa internazionale. Asia Major 1996*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 1996 (*Asia Major*, Vol. VII/1996);

Vol. VIII Giorgio Borsa (a cura di), *Continua il miracolo asiatico? Asia Major 1997*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 1997 (*Asia Major*, Vol. VIII/1997);

Vol. IX Giorgio Borsa (a cura di), *L'Asia tra recessione economica e minaccia nucleare. Asia Major 1998*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 1998 (*Asia Major*, Vol. IX/1998);

Vol. X Giorgio Borsa e Michelguglielmo Torri (a cura di), *L'incerta vigilia del nuovo secolo in Asia. Asia Major 1999*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 1999 (*Asia Major*, Vol. X/1999);

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Vol. XII Giorgio Borsa, Corrado Molteni e Francesco Montessoro (a cura di), *Trasformazioni politico-istituzionali nell'Asia nell'era di Bush. Asia Major 2001*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 2001 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XII/2001);

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Vol. XV Corrado Molteni, Francesco Montessoro e Michelguglielmo Torri (a cura di), *Multilateralismo e democrazia in Asia. Asia Major 2004*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2005 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XV/2004);

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Asia Maior think tank owes a debt of gratitude both to the Centro Studi Vietnamiti of Turin, which hosts the think tank official seat, and, in particular, to its Director, Ms. Sandra Scagliotti, for her continuous and generous support. This debt is here gratefully acknowledged.

Finito di stampare.
nel mese di giugno 2024
da The Factory s.r.l.
Roma