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


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# Asia in 2020: Coping with COVID-19 and other crises

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

# China 2020: A foreign policy characterized by growing resilience, fading responsibility and increasing uncertainty

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*In 2020 Chinese foreign policy had to contend with the global repercussions of the spread of an unprecedented virus causing a global pandemic, the SARS-CoV-2 (commonly known as COVID-19). Suspicions about the Chinese origin of the virus have strongly weakened the image of a responsible country much promoted by the diplomacy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the last decade. Chinese leaders were obliged to recognize that in the West, the number of those objecting to the Chinese political system is on the rise. In spite of China's aid to Western countries to fight the Coronavirus crisis, initiatives to oppose China's authoritarian resilience and its growing political relevance in world affairs were also launched or revitalized, such as the International Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC) and the Quadrilateral Security Alliance (Quad). On top of that, other issues contributed to affect China's foreign policy in the course of 2020: the growing estrangement between Washington and Beijing; the current uncertainties of China's relations with Europe and an endless pressure derived from the competition with great powers in the Indo-Pacific region.*

Keywords – Chinese Foreign Policy; COVID-19; United States; Europe; Indo-Pacific.

## 1. *Introduction*

This article identifies two major trends characterizing China's foreign policy in the course of 2020: (a) reacting to the spread of the coronavirus pandemic; and (b) reacting to the narrative of great power competition that considers China's global role as a major threat to world politics. With regard to the second trend, the analysis here focuses on those actors and regions towards which competition was a major determinant affecting China's foreign policy in the year under review: the United States, Europe and the Indo-Pacific region. About the latter, the author recognizes that so far, no Chinese official documents have used the term Indo-Pacific. Nevertheless, following the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 China's strategic ambitions sprawled de facto across the Pacific and Indian oceans. Therefore, we can affirm that its foreign policy «has politically entered the Indo-Pacific


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without acknowledging it officially».[1] The rise of China has coincided with a period during which the reshaping of the international order also reflects North-South inequities, whereby questioning the longer-term position of the Anglo-American and European models of governance. To this extent, the real issue at stake is not whether China's leaders are pursuing status quo or revisionist foreign policies;[2] rather, it is China's capability to exercise global leadership and soft power.

As far as the global pandemic was concerned, China's struggle to fight the coronavirus seemed to be more related to containing the virus within the country than it was to preserve Beijing's international reputation and foreign relations with those countries that remained sceptical to its response to the crisis. At the same time, during 2020 it became clear how Sino-American relations have worsened from a political and economic point of view, but particularly from an ideational standpoint. It is therefore not surprising that, in China, media outlets, as well as academic scholarship, have devoted increasing attention to stress how «Sino-US relations are at a critical historical juncture».[3]

In a speech made on the occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations, entitled «Global Vision and Firm Commitment as a Major Country», the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, stressed the challenges shaping world politics in the time of COVID-19 from a Chinese perspective. Of particular note, Wang Yi affirmed that international society urges «solidarity over division, opening-up over isolation, and cooperation over confrontation».[4]

If one reflects on the words of the Chinese diplomat, his remark symbolizes the challenges characterizing the foreign policy of the PRC for the year 2020: *division* versus solidarity; *isolation* over opening up; and *confrontation* instead of cooperation. First, in 2020, China's foreign policy suffered from an unprecedented mistrust which emerged among foreign countries regarding China's place in the world. The global pandemic caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 has had repercussions all over the world and has spared no country. However, in the case of China, difficulties arose on several fronts (political, economic, cultural, and normative) and appeared on several levels (international and domestic). As never before, heads of states, international organizations, and international public opinion appeared

1. 'Kai He & Mingjiang Li, 'Four reasons why the Indo-Pacific matters in 2020', *Oxford University Press Blog*, 7 February 2020.

2. See, e.g., Alastair Iain Johnson, 'Is China a Status Quo Power?', *International Security*, Spring 2003, Vol. 27, No. 4, pp. 5-56.

3. '警惕挑起意识形态对抗的危险行径', (Be alert to dangerous acts that provoke ideological confrontation), 人民日报 *People's Daily*, 9 September 2020.

4. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Upholding Multilateralism to Tackle Global Challenges – Remarks by State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Global Advisory Board Meeting of the School of Public Policy and Management of Tsinghua University*, 7 November 2020.

very divided while debating on China and COVID-19. Unfortunately, such division reached extreme peaks, which also translated into xenophobic and racist incidents directed towards the Chinese community, mostly in the Western countries.[5]

Second, in 2020, Chinese leaders feared the country's growing isolation in the international system. During President Donald Trump's term of office, the US policy on China was rather transparent: to castigate China for «raping» the (US) country, referring to Beijing manipulating its exports by making its economy more competitive on a global scale.[6] However, at that time, or at least during the first half term of the Trump administration, the European Union (EU) – and particularly its member states – were more or less reluctant to turn their back on China, given Trump's continuous dismissal of multilateralism, among other things. Remarkably, with the election of the new President, the forthcoming (four) years, according to analysts, might see a more isolated China. The Biden-Harris agenda has already scheduled for 2021 a «Summit for Democracies», with the intent of countering threats from autocratic powers, as well as to find common initiatives on technology and 6G, aimed at weakening Chinese authoritarianism.[7]

Third, China's confrontation with great powers has been exacerbated on many fronts. The year under review opened with hopes of a strong US-China deal, after the partial easing of tariffs at the end of 2019. Nevertheless, expectations were remarkably lowered in 2020, given that months after the finalization of the phase one trade deal, economic problems that had caused the conflict still remained unresolved.[8] Unsurprisingly, the economic front is not the only victim of the worsening China-US relations. The opinion article written by the director of national intelligence John Ratcliff, in late December 2020, and which appeared in the form of an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* made the rounds of international online media. Ratcliff, a former Republican congressman, defined China as «National Security Threat No.1», meaning that, China is stealing technology and know-how from the United States, which is the greatest threat to democracy and freedom worldwide.[9] Confrontation is thus spilling over from economic to security and political issues. Chinese foreign policy in 2020 was also affected by the worsening of the already historically tense China-India relationship. The ongoing Himalayan border conflict politically and militarily worsened,

5. 'Covid-19 fueling anti-Asian racism and Xenophobia worldwide', *Human Rights Watch*, 12 May 2020.

6. 'Trump accuses China of «raping» US with unfair trade policy', *BBC*, 2 May 2016.

7. 'Biden's «Summit of Democracies» can rally allies against autocracies', *Politico*, 9 December 2020.

8. Ryan Hass & Abraham Denmark, 'More pain than gain: How the US-China trade war hurt America', *Brookings*, 7 August 2020.

9. John Ratcliff, 'China is Security Threat No.1', *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 December 2020.

with strong negative repercussions on China-India economic relations. More positive has been China's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, which decisively contributed to the successful establishment of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the mega-trade bloc of Asian nations, of which Beijing has always being a great supporter.

Given these challenges with regard to China's foreign relations, what were the main issues affecting China's external relations in the year under review? This article begins with a discussion of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on China's foreign policy. It then presents an analysis of the most salient issues shaping the China-US relationship over the course of 2020. The paper then turns its attention to examining China's foreign relations with regard to controversial matters in China's foreign policy: the relationship with the EU and China's growing engagement in the Indo-Pacific. These themes represent key areas of contention in world politics, whose management has been the main objective of the PRC foreign policy, and where China's interests are deemed to be growing in the future. With reference to all these actors and regions, the focus of the analysis is to identify specific moments in which the foreign policy of the PRC was at a crossroads, given China's expanding relevance in world affairs, for the purpose of highlighting the most relevant issues shaping Beijing 's foreign policy agenda in 2020. This article makes use of journalistic sources and academic literature in both the Chinese and English languages. With regard to the former, the author is conscious of the fact that some of the sources used in this article – i.e., the *Guanming Daily* or the *People's Daily* – are official newspapers of the Chinese Communist Party. Accordingly, the author is fully aware that such sources cannot but reflect the *Weltanschauung* and political objectives of the party-state, shedding a positive light on them. It is precisely this awareness that allows any independent scholar, by critically engaging with these politically-charged sources, to arrive at a better comprehension of Beijing's policies.

## 2. *China's foreign policy in the context of COVID-19*

With direct reference to the global pandemic, China's foreign relations in 2020 have been characterized by an attempt to solve a central political conundrum: how to safeguard China's power in world affairs in ways that will avoid criticism of its authoritarian political system, but which will be in line with its image as a responsible country in the eyes of the West, while also continuing to be a model to the developing world. China's foreign policy in 2020 is the story of a country struggling to deal with the consequences of one of the worst pandemics in history, in parallel with growing criticism from the international community about the political and economic relevance of the PRC in world politics. In this respect, three important issues

with regard to the outbreak of COVID-19 in the year under review need to be recognized.

First, the Chinese government has been under fire, as the authoritarianism of China's political system in managing the COVID-19 pandemic has generated consistent criticism from liberal Western democracies. During the period from mid-January to March 2020, China's exposure to criticism regarding pandemic management was unprecedented. The outbreak of COVID-19 confirmed to the world a reality that leaves little room for imagination: the second largest economy in the world, perhaps soon to be the first, is still a society in which little or no space for personal privacy and freedom of speech is guaranteed. When, between January and March, it became clear that the disease caused by the virus had emerged in Wuhan, but Chinese government officials were hiding the bad news, the international community – led by the US – began to blame China and the Communist Party for spreading the virus to several countries worldwide. In Europe, French President Emmanuel Macron questioned China's handling of the coronavirus outbreak.[10] German Chancellor Angela Merkel urged transparency about the origin of the coronavirus.[11] Joseph Borrell, the EU High Representative, complained of a global battle of narratives affecting cooperation across borders, but recognized the initial cover-up of crucial information by Chinese party officials.[12] Yet, for those less critical of China, the Xi Jinping administration was also worthy of praise for having strengthened its aid campaign to exhausted EU governments by sending masks, gloves, ventilators and medical experts, and by helping them to deal with the outbreak. Italy, one of the major countries hit by the pandemic, and with the highest number of COVID-19 victims in Europe, praised China openly, with Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio publicly thanking President Xi Jinping for sending medical equipment and doctors.[13] The truth is, the coronavirus crisis reignited longstanding debates about China's lack of democracy and its authoritarian practices. Those who criticized China for not being a democracy blamed the PRC and its political leaders for being silent about the discovery of the coronavirus genome. The situation worsened when Dr. Li Wenliang, among the first doctors to recognize the outbreak of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19), died on February 7, after becoming infected. In the West, Dr. Li stands as «the hero who told the truth», the Chinese whistle-blower who fought against censorship but was punished by the au-

10. 'Coronavirus: Macron questions China's handling of outbreak', *BBC*, 17 April 2020.

11. 'Germany pushes China for answers to coronavirus origin', *South China Morning Post*, 21 April 2020.

12. 'EU HRVP Joseph Borrell: the Coronavirus pandemic and the new world it is creating', *EEAS*, 24 March 2020.

13. 'Italy's Foreign Minister hails Chinese Coronavirus aid', *Politico*, 13 March 2020.

thorities for demanding freedom of speech. Then, once the management of the pandemic appeared to be under control, those with a negative view of China lamented the illiberal way used by the authorities to contain the spread of the virus.[14] According to this narrative, it would have been precisely the misuse of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and intrusive technology that helped the government to defeat the new coronavirus in China. While the surveillance system employed by Chinese authorities to track the movement of the citizens, in collaboration with the country's three most famous tech giants – Tencent, Alibaba and Baidu – has been functional in tracking the virus through the creation of ad hoc applications, it has been heavily criticized as an extremely invasive tool, limiting individual freedom.[15]

Second, the COVID-19 outbreak further complicated China's foreign relations with the world. On the one hand was China's growing material competition with the United States; on the other, was an expanding normative divergence between the Chinese politico-economic systems and their Western counterparts.[16] Furthermore, the global pandemic, according to some conspiracy theories, did not possess a «zoonotic» animal origin but was engineered in a lab, in Wuhan, China.

If China-US relations were already at their lowest point in decades, to complicate matters further, the vaccine race exacerbated competitive geopolitical imperatives among the major players involved. The Chinese government benefited greatly from advertising the COVID-19 vaccine as a global public good, but above all, it gave China the opportunity to give access to vaccines to developing countries. According to some experts, the announcement to grant developing nations priority access to coronavirus vaccines is part of China's strategy to strengthen international influence and soft power.[17] From China's point of view, COVID-19 vaccines are neither a geopolitical weapon nor a diplomatic tool, and the politicization of vaccine development must be avoided at any cost.[18] As instrumental as it might be, China's position was in contrast to Trump's strategy of «Putting America first for vaccines», a grim picture that has been criticized even by those pharmaceutical firms financed by the American government.[19] At the beginning of June, Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang attended the Global

14. 'Hero who told the truth: Chinese rage over coronavirus death of whistleblower doctor', *The Guardian*, 7 February 2020.

15. 'China's giants, from Alibaba to Tencent ramp up health tech efforts to battle coronavirus', *CNBC*, 3 March 2020.

16. Hongyi Wang, 'The Global Pandemic and China's Relations with the Western World', *CIGI Report*, 22 June 2020.

17. 'Developing nations are first in line for China's Covid vaccines. Analysts question Beijing's intent', *CNBC*, 9 December 2020.

18. 'Commentary: China's decision to join COVAX will strengthen global vaccines cooperation, *Xinhua*, 11 October 2020.

19. 'Opinion: Pzifer vaccine refutes Trump's nationalism, attacks on science', *The Mercury News*, 24 November 2020.

Vaccine Summit organized by the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI). In his speech, the Chinese Premier remarked that China «proposed building a global community of health for all…[China] would continue to provide assistance, within its capacity…in affected nations, especially developing countries».[20]

That said, one of the most important initiatives in China's foreign policy, the BRI, is now envisioned as a fundamental component of the world's post-corona economic recovery, namely, the Health Silk Road (健康丝绸之路). As yet undefined though it may be, the new concept highlights new practices in China's health diplomacy, but in particular, its growing role in global medical supply and investment towards the developing world.[21] The fact that Xi Jinping reaffirmed China's commitment in improving global public health governance through the formula which highlights China's willingness to «build a community of common health for mankind» is emblematic of the relevance of China's health sector.

Third, by bringing global health governance deficits into the spotlight, the coronavirus outbreak reinforced the Chinese narrative about China's desire to take the lead in global governance. On September 22, PRC President and CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping delivered a speech on the occasion of the 75th United Nations General Assembly. For the occasion, President Xi outlined China's vision of the world: avoid zero-sum game thinking; abandon ideological debates; surpass the trap of civilizational conflicts; and respect each other's independent choices. Moreover, Xi reiterated the need to support economic globalization and to safeguard the multilateral trading system with the World Trade Organization at its core. The Chinese leader envisions a reform for the global governance system that is based on extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits, promotion of equal rights for all countries, equal opportunities, and equal rules, so that «the global governance system conforms to the changed world political economy».[22]

Only two days later, on September 24, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi built on President Xi's remarks by stressing China's five proposals to reform the global governance system: 1) to follow the principle of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits; 2) to implement international coordination to cope with non-traditional security threats; 3) to reinforce coordination and cooperation among major countries; 4) to make firm commitments to follow the 'international law order' (meaning respect

20. 'Chinese Premier delivers speech at global vaccine summit', *XinhuaNet*, 6 June 2020.

21. Ngeow Chow-Bing, Covid-*19, Belt and Road Initiative and the Health Silk Road*, Bonn: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), October 2020, pp. 1-26.

22. '习近平在第七十五届联合国大会一般性辩论上的讲话-全文', (Xi Jinping's speech at the general debate of the 75th UN General Assemply -full text), 新华网, 22 September 2020.

of the sovereignty principle and non-interference); and 5) to strengthen and implement the UN system.[23] While the two speeches are in line with China's narrative, aimed to increase its leadership in global governance, they also highlight Beijing's intention to become a valuable alternative to the United States. Remarkably, it appears unclear whether China's ambition to reform the global governance system is justified solely by a long-standing aspiration to make the world more equal and suitable for developing nations, or simply to suit its national interests. Current normative explanations discussed by Chinese scholars and practitioners with regard to the Chinese approach towards global governance tend to emphasize not only the need for a more equal world, but particularly, an increasing tendency to believe that the Western-led world is unable to tackle global challenges and difficulties within a changing international environment.[24]

Last but not least, it is important to stress that aside from the official speeches, the publication of a key document noted the relevance of COVID-19 to Chinese foreign policy. On 7 June 2020, the State Council Information Office (SCIO) released the White Paper *Fighting COVID-19: China in Action* (抗击新冠肺炎疫情的中国行动). The 65-page document is divided into four parts: 1) China's fight against the epidemic: a test of fire; 2) Well-coordinated prevention, control and treatment; 3) Assembling a powerful force to beat the virus; and 4) Building a global community of health for all. Despite the fact that the timeline provided in China's COVID-19 White Paper matches neither those provided by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission nor the official timelines articulated by the World Health Organization, it is worth mentioning China's emphasis on international engagement and particularly, commitment, aimed at saving the global economic system while fighting the virus.[25] Publishing the White Paper is one attempt by leaders in Beijing to demonstrate China's official response to COVID-19, but to «deliver … a strong rebuke to Western media and politicians' rancorous accusations of China on alleged 'cover-up' and 'delay' in its response».[26]

In the words of Zhang Weiwei, associate researcher at the China Institute of International Studies (China's Foreign Ministerial official think tank), the Trump administration and some Western politicians have spread unscientific speculation, unfounded accusations, and numerous lies about COVID-19 and China.[27] Chinese researchers spared no criticism first, by

23. 'Wang Yi raises five proposal to improve the global governance system', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 24 September 2020.

24. '推进多边主义基础上的全球治理变革', (Promote global governance changes based on multilateralism), 光明日报, *Guangming Daily*, 19 November 2020.

25. April H. Arlevi, 'Fighting the battle for the Pandemic narrative: The PRC White Paper on its Covid-19 response', China Brief – *The Jamestown Foundation*, 24 June 2020.

26. 'China issues White Paper in fighting Covid-19', *Global Times*, 7 June 2020.

27. Zhang Weiwei, 'Blame game diminishes Western appeal to Chinese poeple', *China Institute of International Studies*, 11 May 2020.

comparing Westerners critical of China to Joseph Goebbels, the minister of Propaganda in Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945, and then by comparing the recent China-bashing offensive in the West to the Eight-Nation Alliance, the multi-national military alliance which, in 1900, invaded China to crush the Boxer uprising. Strong criticism against the West was also levelled via the *Global Times*, in response to the establishment, on 4 June 2020, of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC). The alliance is an international cross-party group of legislators «working towards reform on how democratic countries approach China».[28] The *Global Times* defined the alliance «a Western-value based anti-China alliance […] a platform for a handful of anti-China forces in the West to collude and attack China over various related issues».[29]

## 3. *China-US relations*

### 3.1. *The economic dimension*

The China-US relationship can be defined as «the world's most complicated bilateral relationship».[30] However, it would be wrong to assume that the relationship has only recently become problematic. For instance, according to Chinese scholars and political elites, China's surpassing Japan as the world's second-largest economy in 2010 fuelled tensions between Washington and Beijing over regional security and economic affairs.[31] Furthermore, Beijing is deeply resentful of the US alliance system and policies, which are perceived as confrontational machinations to contain China's peaceful rise.[32] Yet, it is true that – with the Trump administration questioning the Washington-made post-war consensus on the global order – US commitment to its historical allies in the region, namely Japan and South Korea, has become less certain.[33] In the course of 2020, Washington and Beijing have butted heads over Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Tik Tok, Huawei and more.

28. *Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China* (www.ipac.global).

29. 'Anti-China incitement by Western-values based alliance a hopeless case', *Global Times*, 16 December 2020.

30. Huiyun Feng & Xiaojun Li, 'On US-China Relations: Problems and Prospects', in Huiyun Feng, Kai He & Xiaojun Li (eds.), *How China Sees the World: Insights From China's International Relations Scholars*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

31. Minghao Zhao, 'Is a New Cold War Inevitable? Chinese Perspectives on US-China Strategic Competition', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 12, Issue 3, Autumn 2019, pp. 371-394.

32. Adam P. Liff, 'China and the US Alliance System', *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 233, March 2018, pp. 137-165.

33. Eric Heginbotham & Richard J. Samuels, 'Vulnerable US Alliances in Northeast Asia: The Nuclear Implications', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 44, Issue 1, 2021, pp. 157-175.

In May 2020, the White House published a document titled «United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China», in which the relationship with the PRC is defined as one of great power competition and based on principled realism.[34] In this regard, it is worth analyzing the dimensions of strategic rivalry between China and the US.

Starting with the US-China trade conflict, the year under review opened positively with the «Phase One Economic Trade Agreement», signed on 15 January 2020. The content of the deal includes some of the most salient issues shaping China's economic competition with the United States which includes: 1) China's commitment to increase purchases of American products and services by at least $200 billion over the next two years; 2) a 50% cut in tariffs by the United States on a $120-billion list of Chinese goods, to 7.5%; 3) stronger Chinese legal protections for patents, trademarks and copyrights; 4) pledges by China to refrain from competitive currency devaluations; and 5) improved access to China's financial services market for US companies.[35]

As soon as this was signed, nonetheless, an interview released by the American TV programme Fox and Friends, in which President Trump announced doubts about deepening economic cooperation with China, immediately froze Chinese enthusiasm about the deal. Given the size of its economy, Chinese leaders soon stated that they did not intend to submit to American dictates and even less to the mood changes of the President in office.[36] Nevertheless, the deal was announced as «historic», being hailed by both sides as a victory, even if, from the very start, the international community remained sceptical about the possible positive results of the agreement.[37]

In the first six months of the year under review, the deal did not achieve what was really needed to truly end the dispute, namely, lower tariffs and other trade barriers to allow US producers to compete fairly in the Chinese market.[38] However, an official statement issued by the Office of the United States Trade Representative positively assessed China's efforts in making structural adjustments, to ensure greater protection for intellectual property rights, remove impediments to American companies in the financial sector, and increase the purchase of American products.[39]

34. 'United States approach toward the People's Republic of China', *The White House*, 22 May 2020.

35. 'What's in the US-China Phase 1 trade deal', *Reuters*, 15 January 2020.

36. 'Fate of phase one trade deal implies future of relationship', *Global Times*, 10 May 2020.

37. 'China, US, sign «historic» trade deal', *The Diplomat*, 16 January 2020.

38. 'Is the US-China Phase One Trade Deal Working?', *Cato Institute*, 30 October 2020.

39. 'Statement on call between the United States and China', *Office of the United States Trade Representative*, 24 August 2020.

In the year under review, the economic dimension of China's foreign policy towards the United States has been consistently affected by contingent global challenges, such as the worsening of the COVID-19 pandemic. Notwithstanding China's commitment to respecting the phase one trade deal, signed eleven months earlier, and to boosting purchases of US agricultural and manufactured goods, energy and services by more than $200 billion, Beijing is still far behind in its purchase commitments, due to the pandemic. This explains why the President Elect, Joe Biden, initially oriented to revise the deal signed by the Trump administration, will almost certainly opt to retain the tariffs on Chinese goods, and be as amenable as possible to the requests advanced by the previous US administration in the deal.[40]

Even more importantly, according to US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer, it seems highly probable that Joe Biden has no interest in fully subverting Trump's policy towards China, a policy which in fact «changed the way people think about China in the economic sphere».[41] A recent survey of US views on China, conducted by the Pew Research Center, demonstrates not only that negative views of China continued to grow after President Donald Trump assumed office in 2017, but that ratings for China have never been so negative since the Center began asking the question in 2005.[42] On the matter of partisanship, there is a gap when evaluating economic issues in the Sino-American relationship. For instance, Republicans and Republican-leaning independents are more likely than Democrats and Democrat-leaning independents to see the US trade deficit with China, the loss of US jobs to China, and China's growing technological capabilities, as very serious problems.[43] Surveys also show that Americans are divided on getting tougher with China on trade. Around half of the respondents believe it is more important to build a stronger relationship with China, while 46% place more value on getting tougher with China.[44]

The Pew Research Center has also conducted a survey about negative perceptions of China worldwide. According to the report, views of China have grown more negative in recent years, across many advanced economies. In most countries, views soured significantly as a consequence of China's response to the coronavirus pandemic.[45]

Surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center in monitoring views of China worldwide were criticized in China. The *Global Times*, a tabloid news-

40. 'Keep tariffs on China and «hold their feet to the fire» says US trade tsar', *South China Morning Post*, 17 December 2020.

41. *Ibid*.

42. 'U.S. views of China increasingly negative amid Coronavirus outbreak', *Pew Research Center*, 21 April 2020.

43. *Ibid*.

44. 'Americans fault China for its role in the spread of Covid-19', *Pew Research Center*, 30 July 2020.

45. 'Unfavourable views of China reach historic highs in many countries', *Pew Research Center*, 6 October 2020.

paper directly under the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), defined the surveys as an attempt by the Western elites to destroy China's international accountability and an expression of unjustified resentment towards the Chinese leadership.[46]

### 3.2. *Other issues at stake*

Ideological and political criticism continued to shape the trajectory of China's relations with the United States in the course of the year. In February, Cui Tiankai, the Chinese ambassador to the US, remarked on the need to have a more inclusive and multipolar world in the 21st century, instead of the «End of History» and the «Thucydides Trap».[47] Nevertheless, relations among the two countries steadily deteriorated during the course of the year, and numerous issues beyond the trade conflict contributed to a worsening of relations, such as the misunderstanding over rights abuses in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. At the end of July, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) imposed sanctions on the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), the quasi-military governmental organizations operational in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), accused of physical abuse against the Uyghur minority.[48]

Increasingly harsh criticism from the US about China's Xinjiang policy is reaping rewards: in 2020, within the context of the General Assembly's Third Committee (on Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Issues), 39 countries called on China to respect human rights and particularly those of people belonging to the religious and ethnic minorities of Tibet and Xinjiang.[49]

The Hong Kong issue also contributed heavily to a deterioration of the China-US relationship in 2020. On 30 June, the law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (Security Law) entered into force. Since being announced by the National People's Congress on 22 May 2020, the law has been criticized by politicians in the United States. Then in June, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that he would impose visa restrictions on CCP officials believed to be responsible for undermining freedoms in Hong Kong.[50] The Chinese response left no room for interpretation: «We urge the US side to immediately correct its mistakes, withdraw the decisions

46. 'Western public opinion cannot stop progress, happiness', *Global Times*, 7 October 2020.

47. Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, *Remarks by Ambassador Cui Tiankai at the Forum on US-China Relations*, 2 February 2020.

48. 'On sanctioning human rights abuses in Xinjiang, China', *US Department of State*, 31 July 2020.

49. '2020 Edition: which countries are for or against China's Xinjiang Policies?', *The Diplomat*, 9 October 2020.

50. 'US imposes Visa restrictions on Chinese officials over Hong Kong security law', *BBC*, 27 June 2020.

and stop interfering in China's domestic affairs. The Chinese side will continue to take strong measures to uphold national sovereignty, security and development interests».[51] From a Chinese perspective, US politicians are not human rights defenders, but are simply making use of a «double standards of human rights» (人权双重标准), politicizing the issue, while not respecting the rights of American minorities, for instance with regard to healthcare inequalities and rights to be cured in the US.[52] From an American perspective however, the function of human rights as an unquestionable foreign policy ideal is de facto embedded into the American foreign policy towards China. It dates back to at least 1976, when it was «touted as a promising candidate to replace anticommunism in the U.S. ideological arsenal».[53] It would therefore be a mistake to consider ongoing discussions about human rights in China-US relations solely as the result of Trump's policies.

Other factors further complicated China's relations with the United States, such as the 2020 presidential elections, which represented another fundamental benchmark in the context of China-US relations. Both candidates running for office vowed to be tough on China and used the China card to win votes among US citizens. If, in their respective campaigns, they spared no criticism, it was because Beijing is considered as the biggest foreign policy risk faced by the United States.[54] Whereas Trump declared his intention to increase scrutiny of Chinese companies doing business in the United States, and to dedicate more political and military resources to push China back at multiple levels, Biden announced his intention to build an international, democratic front to challenge China on different levels, politically and economically. US presidential elections piqued the interests of political leaders and the general Chinese populace alike. As a response, Chinese media outlets used the US elections to criticize the weaknesses of Western democratic countries by labelling their political systems as a source of entertainment, even «a sneak-peek into the US and its chaotic society, or even, an inspiration of hardworking».[55]

The Chinese leadership manifested an ambivalent attitude towards the US elections. In the first phase, the Chinese government appealed to what are deemed to be the fundamental pillars of its foreign policy: non-interference and full respect for a country's internal sovereignty. As such, the

51. Embassy of the PRC in the United States of America, *Remarks by Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy on the US imposing Visa Restrictions on Chinese officials over Hong Kong related issues*', 27 June 2020.

52. '罔顾生命全的人权卫士' ('Human rights defenders' who disregard the right to life), 人民日报, *People's Daily*, 27 September 2020.

53. Lowell Dittmer, 'Chinese Human Rights and American Foreign Policy: A Realist Approach', *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 63, No. 3, 2001, pp. 421-459.

54. 'Why China is the biggest foreign policy risk facing the U.S., according to a scholar', *CNBC*, 4 November 2020.

55. 'Chinese people showing interest in US presidential election for laughs, comicalness', *Global Times*, 5 November 2020.

US elections were described as concerning US internal affairs only, about which China and its leaders had nothing to say.[56] Then, with numerous countries recognizing Biden's victory, Chinese leaders officially congratulated the US President-elect, but did so late, in contrast with other world leaders, such as Russia's Vladimir Putin, Mexico's Lopex Obrador and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro.[57]

It is worth mentioning that, for the year under review, China's cultural relations with the United States have also reached their lowest point in years. While disputes between the US and China are mostly about trade issues or human rights standards, both the educational and civil society sectors were strongly affected by the situation. Mike Pompeo accused Confucius Institutes (CIs) to recruit Chinese spies and attacked their activities as a matter of «national security».[58] Results of China-bashing policy against CIs were not long in coming and on 6 October the Senate passed without amendment and by Unanimous Consent the bill S.939 also known as the «CONFUCIOUS Act». The bill aims to further regulate American postsecondary educational institutions maintaining close links with cultural institutes directly founded by the Chinese government.[59] Then, at the beginning of December the US State Department suspended five exchange programmes with China by labelling them «soft power propaganda tools».[60]

### 3.3. *High-tech competition*

Apart from the political and economic dimensions, in 2020 China's foreign relations with the United States were affected by increasing frictions concerning common values and rights in the digital domain. The dispute began with the US' ban on WeChat and TikTok. The decision was made unilaterally by the US administration as a reminder of the fact that the internet domain is not subject to Chinese diktat. In August, President Donald Trump declared executive orders to ban the two major Chinese apps, TikTok and WeChat, due to national security issues, but concerns were targeted particularly around data security and data privacy.[61]

The TikTok saga, however, suffered a bizarre twist, when ByteDance, the Chinese company that owns TikTok, selected Oracle, an American hi-

56. 'China's lessons from the U.S. elections? No, thanks.', *The Japan Times*, 11 November 2020.

57. 'No comment: some world leaders silent on Biden's win', *Al Jazeera*, 8 November 2020.

58. 'In Defence of Confucius Institutes', *Counterpunch*, 2 November 2020.

59. S. 939 - CONFUCIOUS Act, 116th Congress (2019-2020), *Congress.org* (https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/939).

60. 'US ends exchange programs with China, calling them propaganda', *Reuters*, 5 December 2020.

61. 'Why is the Trump administration banning Tik Tok and WeChat?', *Brookings*, 7 August 2020.

tech giant, as its «trusted technology provider» in the US.[62] More specifically, the computer tech firm Oracle and American famous retailer Walmart proposed a joint venture called TikTok Global, through which the customer data emigrated from a Chinese to a US-controlled infrastructure, with Oracle and Walmart retaining 20% of TikTok Global and ByteDance and the rest retaining 80%.[63]

In summary, Washington's growing concerns about the risks posed by Chinese high-tech giants is a result of the difficulty on the part of the United States (and Europe) in finding the right response to China's rise as a technological superpower. On September 8, Chinese Foreign Ministry Wang Yi announced the establishment of the «Global Initiative on Data Security» (全球数据安全倡议). The initiative came only a month after Mike Pompeo's announcement, on September 5, of the «Clean Network Initiative», a comprehensive approach «to safeguarding the nation's assets including citizens' privacy and companies most sensitive information from aggressive intrusions by malign actors, such as *the Chinese Communist Party* (emphasis added)».[64]

Apparently, the Chinese initiative has been perceived as a direct response to the US Clean Network. In the words of Zhao Lijian, Foreign Minister Spokeperson, «China is always candid, open and ready to work together with others on data security. If other countries, especially those who have been deliberately smearing China with lies and groundless allegations, can make the same commitment, it will be greatly conducive to enhancing mutual trust and cooperation on the issue of data security».[65]

To Wang Lei, Networks Affairs Coordinator at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Global Data Security Initiative is a further step in China's contribution to the global governance system, and a consequence of China's growing engagement as a responsible power in international affairs.[66] Realistically, though, China's strategy represents Beijing's firm commitment to define global norms with regard to data security and trade, as well as a reaction vis-à-vis Washington's growing concerns to impose measures on Chinese companies operating in the United States.

Besides confrontation with the United States, in the course of 2020, the Xi Jinping administration has tightened his grip on the entire Chinese high-tech industry. As a consequence of this, the State Administration for

62. 'The Tik Tok Saga: everything you need to know', *Cnet*, 18 September 2020.

63. 'Trump's Tik Tok deal explained: who is Oracle? Why Walmart? And what does it mean to our data?', *The Conversation*, 22 September 2020.

64. U.S. Department of State, *The Clean Network* (https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-clean-network/index.html).

65. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Foreign Minister Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on September 8, 2020*.

66. '外交部官员 全球数据安全为全球治理注入新动力' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Official Statement: the Globla Data Security Initiative injects new impetus in Global Governance), 新华网, *Xinhua*, 24 October 2020.

Market Regulation fined Alibaba, Tencent-backed online bookstore China Literature and logistic group Shenzhen Hive Box, for failing to report past deals.[67] More broadly, China's policies in high-tech industries and technologies can be seen as the result of conscious actions taken by the Chinese leadership in response to globalization and its consequences in the last decades. Whereas the modernization of the state system is an inevitable trend, leadership's manoeuvres in reshaping state's interests at the global level also mirror specific Chinese characteristics, such as a new form of nationalism, the politics of cultural identity, regime survival and the monopoly of power by the CCP.[68]

## 4. *Europe*

### 4.1. *Relations with the European Union*

In the year under review, China's external relations with the EU were mixed. 2020 should have been a productive year for Beijing's relations with the EU, given they were celebrating the 45th anniversary of their diplomatic relations, but the coronavirus crisis put China's «year of Europe» on hold. Since 2016, the EU has taken several concerted steps against unfair Chinese trade and economic practices, which culminated with the publication, in March 2019, of the *EU Strategic Outlook,* in which the PRC is labelled, for the very first time, as a strategic rival.[69] The major event in the Sino-European context was the 22nd EU-China Summit, which took place virtually via video conference on 22 June. With no half measures, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, affirmed that engagement and cooperation with the PRC were not under discussion, but declared that the EU and China «do not share the same values, political systems or approach to multilateralism. We will engage in a clear-eyed and confident way, robustly defending EU interests and standing firm on our values».[70]

European Commission (EC) President Ursula Von der Leyen further added that, although economic relations were strong and secure, trade and investment between China and the EU were still unbalanced. Furthermore, with reference to the Hong Kong issue, the EC President added that human rights and fundamental freedoms are non-negotiable and that the Summit

67. 'Alibaba fined over past deals as China gets tougher on Big Tech', *Financial Times*, 14 December 2020.

68. Zheng Yongnian, *Globalization and State Transformation in China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

69. European Commission and HR/VP contribution to the European Council, *EU-China: a strategic outlook*, 12 March 2019 (https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf).

70. European Council, *EU-China Summit via video conference 22 June 2020*, 22 June 2020.

should be considered only as a starting point for further progress along a path whose route had yet to be discussed.[71]

On the Chinese side, there was no direct reference to trade deficit or human rights. Instead, the China-EU relationship after the Summit was defined as instrumental to the world's economy, while China and the EU were labelled as the «twin engines» (双引擎) of the world economy.[72] This should come as no surprise. Overall, China's drive into Europe has mainly focused on the economic dimension, i.e., large investment in mergers and acquisition (M&A), often directly related to «Made in China 2025 targets». Remarkably, the PRC's European policy took shape in a period in which the EU was characterized by decades of low growth, the Euro crisis, the spectre of fragmentation (epitomized by Brexit), but especially, a situation of uncertain and arrested integration, which makes the EU a political entity as different as possible from China's Leninist and centralized party-state.[73]

Meanwhile, in Germany, and amidst mounting criticism, the Chancellor seemed ready once again to strengthen ties with Beijing. Angela Merkel has always expressed the need to seek dialogue with China on the basis of a relationship of trust, even though this trend is no longer in line with the thinking of most European governments, which are concerned about China's economic assertiveness.[74] The German leader affirmed that Europeans need to «recognize the decisiveness with which China will claim a leading position in the existing structures of the international architecture».[75] Merkel is aware that the EU is not a geopolitical superpower like the United States and that no country in Europe can allow the kind of confrontation Washington carried out against Beijing over the past couple of years. Simultaneously, and as a reflection of the unprecedented disapproval by EU member states and institutions of China's human rights and Hong Kong policies, China began to recognize the deterioration of EU-China relations, or at least, the fact that political relations are developing amid growing uncertainties.[76]

Aside from the June Summit, EU-China relations for the year under review were markedly determined by the Comprehensive Investment

71. European Commission, *Statement by President von der Leyen at the Joint Press Conference with President Michel, following the EU-China Video Conference*, 22 June 2020 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dH5aXeUH5tA).

72. '习近平会见欧洲理事会主席米歇尔和欧盟委员会主席冯德莱恩' (President Xi Jinping meet with European Council President Micheal and European Commission President Von der Leyen), 新华 网, *Xinhua*, 22 June 2020.

73. Francois Godement, 'China's Relations with Europe', in David Shambaugh (ed.), *China & The World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

74. 'Merkel comes under fire at home for China stance', *The Financial Times*, 7 July 2020.

75. 'Merkel says EU has strategic interests in working with China', *Bloomberg*, 27 May 2020.

76. Zhang Jian, 'The impact of Covid-19 on Europe and Sino-European Relations', *China International Relations*, September/October 2020, pp. 101-111.

Agreement (CAI). On December 30, the EU and China officially concluded negotiations for an agreement that had been under discussion since 2013. On paper, the CAI agreement envisions a more balanced commercial relationship with China for EU member countries. It is expected to improve market access to European companies; to reinforce the non-discriminatory treatment of and equal competition for European companies in China; to ameliorate transparency, predictability and legal certainty of the investment environment between China and the EU; to strengthen provisions for dispute settlements; to guarantee rights in the labour sector; and to safeguard environmental sustainability.[77]

In practice, there are fundamental issues that still need to be carefully evaluated, when considering achievements made for EU countries in the context of CAI. First, it is important to evaluate how the new agreement differs from, or adds something to, the existing bilateral investment treaties (BITs) in place between China and EU member countries.

Second, the agreement signed on 30 December is meant to better discipline the behaviour of Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). With CAI negotiations, they are now expected to provide specific information, upon request, of whether the behaviour of a specific enterprise complies with the treaty obligations. Otherwise, dispute resolution under CAI can be requested.[78] The problem is that no supranational mechanism has yet been designated to separate the two parts in the event of a dispute; nor is it clear if and how the EU will be able to upgrade the CAI in the future.

Third, there are important concerns about possible overlapping legal foundations between the CAI and Chinese laws. In 2019, China has passed the Foreign Investment Law (FIL), with the intent to regulate foreign companies and individuals doing business in China, as well as to further implement market opening reforms in the country. However, Articles 34 and 37 of the FIL, a foreign investment information reporting system for the management of foreign investment, has been established. Yet, the CAI does not specify the extent to which, and to what authority European enterprises must report their activities in China. In addition, in July 2020, the National People's Congress Standing Committee opened discussions on the Draft Data Security Law. The law lacked media attention in the West, due to the coronavirus crisis, but it is of fundamental importance with regard to the rights of consumers and the personal data of Chinese citizens. The new law is expected to upgrade the protection of consumers

77. European Commission, *Report: 34th negotiating round: EU-China CAI*, 24 November 2020. The updated documentation concerning the agreement will become available after the finalization of this article at the European Commission's Document search by section (https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/cfm/doclib_section.cfm?sec=120).

78. European Commission, *Key elements of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment*, 30 December 2020.

and personal data with matters of military and national data, and could therefore have a direct impact on international or foreign ventures operating in China.[79]

A further decisive factor influencing EU-China relations for the year under review has been the American election. While campaigning, Joe Biden affirmed that in order to deal with the China challenge, US foreign policy was looking forward «to build[ing] a united front of U.S. allies and partners to confront China's abusive behaviour and human rights violation».[80] De facto, Joe Biden has taken seriously the idea of reinforcing the national commitment to advancing human rights and democracy around the world, by proposing the organization of a global Summit for Democracy.[81] Within such a context, the EU, with its institutions and member states, is expected to be a relevant partner in confronting China's growing authoritarianism, starting with the Hong Kong and Xinjiang issues. This explains why the China-EU investment agreement curbed the enthusiasm of the US administration, which perceived the signature as determined by the window of opportunity prompted by the expiry of Germany's leadership of the EU Council.[82]

Although relations between China and the EU, in the course of 2020, were strongly affected by the latter's attempt to develop an increasingly structured China Policy, uncertainties remain around the corner. The EU's possible synergies with the incoming Biden administration, and whether or not the transatlantic agenda will prevail over relations with Beijing are bound to influence the shape of the future EU-China relations.

### 4.2. *China-CEECs relations*

Finally, with regard to China's strategic priorities in Europe, the important 2020 China-CEEC Summit between China and Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs), originally scheduled for the first half of the 2020, was postponed due to the coronavirus crisis. Since mid-2012, China has been reinvigorating its relations with Eastern European countries. The Chinese rationale of such a growing engagement has the potentiality to adversely affect those EU governments and institutions concerned about China's ascending assertiveness in world affairs, particularly in this region. Notably, observers are divided between those who believe that China's initiative, labelled «17+1», is an empty shell and those who be-

79. 'China's Draft Data Security Law: A Practical Review', *The Diplomat*, 24 September 2020.

80. Joseph R. Biden Jr., 'Why America Must Lead Again. Rescuing US Foreign Policy after Trump', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020.

81. *The Power of America's Example: The Biden Plan for Leading the Democratic World to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century* (https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/).

82. 'China-EU investment deal: Joe Biden repeats call for coordinated approach to handle Beijing', *South China Morning Post*, 31 December 2020.

lieve that this will eventually be China's Trojan horse, to divide and conquer Europe.[83]

Although the event has been postponed indefinitely, the *China-CEECs Cooperation Progress and Evaluation Report (2012-2020)* was still presented in Beijing in December. According to the report, it was only in the course of 2019 that the bilateral trade volume between China and Central and Easter European countries reached 95.42 billion of US dollars.[84] Apart from economic exchanges, the report notes how political interactions and cultural events have developed rapidly in less than a decade. Symbolic of the importance and relevance of the China-CEECs relations was the participation, at the presentation of the report, of Qin Gang, the vice foreign minister and current secretary general of the Secretariat of China-CEEC Cooperation.[85] The cooperation between China and CEECs countries is organized along the *Sofia Guidelines for Cooperation*, established in 2018 during the 7th 16+1 Summit and then revised the following year, in 2019.

### 5. *The Indo-Pacific region*

China's foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific has been defined as «nonchalant».[86] In the words of Senior Lecturer at the Australian National University's Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs Zhang Feng, Beijing's avoidance of an open confrontation in the Indo-Pacific derives from the reassessment, on the part of Chinese strategic experts and officials, of previous decisions which are now considered erroneous. This is the case, for example, of the excessively negative perception of Obama's 2011 pivot to Asia, seen as an entirely anti-China offensive.[87] Of a different opinion is Robert S. Ross, Associate at the John King Fairbank Center, Harvard University. In his view, it was in fact US policy towards China at the time of Obama's administration which unnecessarily compounded Beijing's assertiveness, undermined regional stability, and decreased possibilities of cooperation between Beijing and Washington.[88] What is certain is that, in reality, Chinese politicians and

83. 'Engaging China in 17+1: Time for the ACT Strategy', *The Diplomat*, 7 April 2020.

84. '17 1 合作成果更丰硕' (17+1 Cooperation: more fruitful results), 人民网, *People's Daily online*, 15 December 2020.

85. '外交部副部长秦刚　中国一中东欧国家合作进展与评估报告(2012-2020)发布仪式' (Vice-foreign minister Qin Gang attended the launching ceremony of 'China-CEEC Cooperation Progress and Evaluation Report), 外交部 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14 December 2020.

86. Zhang Feng, 'China's curious Nonchalance towards the Indo-Pacific', *Survival*, 61, 3, 2019, pp. 187-212.

87. *Ibid*.

88. Robert S. Ross, 'The problem with the pivot. Obama's New Asia Policy is unnecessary and counterproductive', *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2012, pp. 70-82.

diplomats do not look favourably on the growing importance of the «Indo-Pacific» concept in international affairs. On the one hand, the idea of an Indo-Pacific strategy is perceived in China as a confrontational one, in which countries in Asia are forced to take sides between China and the United States.[89] On the other, the possibility of a rule-based Indo-Pacific order, as envisioned by the Japanese or US governments, is perceived de facto as a containment policy against China and the BRI.[90]

As expected, the Xi Jinping administration raised substantial criticisms over the recent initiatives launched by the Japanese and US governments to counterbalance China's presence in the region. On 13 October, in Kuala Lumpur, the Chinese Foreign Ministry affirmed that the US Indo-Pacific strategy is an old-fashioned Cold War mentality plan and that East Asian countries «ha[d] the right to achieve their own development stability as well as the right to pursue independent foreign policies».[91]

Though China's «independent foreign policy» principle (独立自主外观政策) dates back to Mao's 1958 instruction of «maintaining independence and keeping initiative in our own hands and relying on our own efforts»,[92] in recent years, China's noninterventionist foreign policy has changed by becoming more proactive. It is worth remembering the year of 2013 as a turning point in China's foreign policy, when Xi Jinping delivered a speech at the foreign affairs conference of the CCP, on 24 October and presented China's foreign strategy known as «fenfayouwei (striving for achievement)» (奋发有为).[93] From this moment on, China's international confidence has grown, but its foreign policy also started to be perceived, worldwide, as more aggressive.

In the same year, former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe declared that «as the Asia-Pacific or the Indo-Pacific region become more and more prosperous, Japan must remain a leading promoter of rulers […] [Japan] […] is not, and will never be, a Tier-two nation».[94] To this extent, the term Indo-Pacific is intended today both as a geopolitical and geo-economic space central to world politics, but particularly for defending the global in-

89. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Work closely to Maintain Development and Stability in the Asia-Pacific region*, 4 September 2020.

90. Jonathan Fulton, 'The Gulf between the Indo-Pacific and the Belt and Road Initiative', *Rising Powers Quarterly*, 3, 2, 2018, pp. 175-193.

91. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Wang Yi: US Indo-Pacific Strategy Undermines Peace and Prospects in East Asia*, 13 October 2020.

92. See, e.g., Ronald C. Keith, 'The Origins and Strategic Implications of China's «Independent Foreign policy»', *International Journal*, 41, 1, Winter 1985/1986, pp. 95-128.

93. Li Zhiyong, '中国奋发有为外交的根源性质与挑战' (China's 'striving for achievement' diplomacy: characteristics and challenges), 国际展望, Vol. 2, 2018, pp. 70-90.

94. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *«Japan is Back», Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 22 February 2013.

terests of those countries most involved within the region, such as the United States or Japan, which aim to counterbalance China's ascending position in international affairs.[95] Yet, it is not a geographical reality: each country has its own «Indo-Pacific», based on the different interests of its proponents. In China, the term «Indo-Pacific» (印太) entered the Chinese lexicon only recently and it defines an alternative to the mainstream international concept «Asia-Pacific», a term extensively used by President Barack Obama during his second term in office.[96] However, from a Chinese perspective, the concept is representative of a substantially growing competition in global politics, as well as China's growing confrontation with Quad Countries (India, Australia, US and Japan).[97] The grouping of four democracies has been labelled as such, following the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), an informal strategic dialogue which came back into existence in 2017 and was established specifically with the intent to strengthen the «Free and Open Indo-Pacific» (FOIP) strategy.[98]

In the course of 2020, China's relations with Quad countries have drastically deteriorated, in light of a changing balance of power that responds to the need for new forms of security cooperation and economic priorities in Asia. Start with Australia, in the year under review, Sino-Australian relations suffered amid growing tensions due to political and economic confrontation: from Beijing restrictions on billions of dollars of exports in numerous key Australian industries, to Canberra's menace of boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics in 2022, with particularly damaging episodes towards the end of the year. Remarkably, Prime Minister Scott Morrison, leading the charge for an investigation into China's responsibility for the coronavirus outbreak, was not welcomed by leaders in Beijing.[99]

Moving on to the Sino-Indian front, the relationship remains complex. In the course of 2020, the long-standing 40 years border dispute worsened bilateral tension. Chinese and Indian armed forces have been locked in a confrontation since May of 2020, even though diplomatic measures are also under discussion, with the intent to boost a much-needed de-escalation in the course of 2021, to what appears to be one of the worst border disputes in

95. Felix Heidux & Gudrun Wacker, 'From Asia-Pacific to India-Pacific. Significance, Implementation and Challenges', *SWF Research Paper*, 9, 2019, pp. 1-46.

96. '印太' 概念演变 (Evolution of the Indo-Pacific concept), 全球, *Globe Magazine*, 2 December 2017.

97. *Ibid*.

98. On the history of the Quad, see, e.g., Patrick Gerard Buchan & Benjamin Rimland, 'Defining the Diamond: The Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue', *CSIS Briefs*, March 2020; Tanvi Madan, 'The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the «Quad»', *War on the Rocks*, 16 November 2017.

99. 'Australia wants international probe into coronavirus origins, prompting backlash from China', *South China Morning Post*, 22 April 2020.

decades.[100] Yet, additional factors have contributed to complicating Sino-India relations. As for the case of Australia, it is a matter of balance of power in the region. Since the start of his second term of office in 2019, Prime Minister Modi has been promoting a nationalist vision for a Greater India of «one religion, one language and one culture», in which flexing muscles in its periphery and provoking border disputes with its neighbours is part of New Delhi's strategy to outflank China in a post-coronavirus world.[101] But, as noted elsewhere, this is nothing new with regard to Sino-Indian relations, given that recent rapprochements – such as the one which occurred in 2018 – were not enough to ameliorate a situation in which New Delhi is apparently and increasingly perceived as playing a fundamental role in the anti-China balance of power now occurring in the Indo-Pacific.[102] On December 5, the *Global Times* hosted a debate about Sino-Indian relations at its annual conference (环球时报年会争论中印话题). Most likely, India's favourable reception of the Indo-Pacific strategy, launched by the United States, is perceived negatively by China. Undoubtedly, Chinese experts are concerned about India jumping on the US bandwagon against China, intending to contain Beijing's ascending interests in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, the historical legacy concerning control over the borders and sovereignty matters are also rooted in the China-India relations debate. In the words of Colonel Zhao Xiaozhuo, Senior Fellow of the Institute of War Studies at the Academy of Military Sciences, People's Liberation Army (PLA), India is pursuing a «cannibalization policy» (蚕食政策) towards China, meaning that India is violating China's sovereignty at the borders. In his view, the use of force may also become an option in the future.[103] Undoubtedly, among Chinese experts and scholars who play an important role as government advisors, the perception of an increasingly aggressive Indian foreign policy towards China, supportive of the US strategy in the Indo-Pacific region has been growing.[104] In this regard, Khan noticed, there is a curious paradox to Xi Jinping's PRC. Notwithstanding the fact that China is more powerful than at any point since 1949, it feels today more insecure than it has since 1968-1969, when the threat of war with the Soviet Union was looming.[105]

100. For a detailed analysis of the China-India Himalayan confrontation, see Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2020: Confronting China, aligning with the US', in this Asia Maior issue.

101. Liu Younfa, 'Recent India-China border clashes: Causes, consequences and policy recommendations', *Shanghai Institute for International Studies*, 2020, pp.1-9.

102. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2018: the resetting of India's Foreign Policy?', *Asia Maior*, XXXIX/2018, pp. 295-320.

103. '环球时报年会争论中印话题' (Global Times Annual Conference discusses Sino-Indian issues), 环球网, *Global Times online*, 5 December 2020.

104. See for instance Xu Fei, '印度新邻国外交战略及其对华影响'(India's New Neighbor Diplomacy Strategy and the impact on China), 国际展望, Vol. 2, pp. 52-69.

105. Sulman Wasif Khan, *Hunted by Chaos: China's Grand Strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping*, Cambridge (MA.): Harvard University Press, 2018.

Beijing leaders are more supportive of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which envisages: 1) ASEAN centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region; 2) ASEAN-led mechanisms as platform for dialogues among countries; and 3) an ASEAN-led narrative that promotes «an Indo-Pacific region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry».[106] It is in this context that Chinese leaders have welcomed the signing of the mega trade agreement, the RCEP, also much desired by ASEAN. The RCEP negotiations began in 2012 and only concluded in November 2020, after eight years and 27 rounds of negotiations. Neither India, which deliberately pulled out from the agreement, nor the United States are part of the deal, and therefore, the mega pact is believed to leverage China's position as the most powerful economy within the RCEP, to further exert its influence in the region.

It must be stressed that China's economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific is not limited to the RCEP. In the year under review, and after years of being excluded from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Chinese President Xi Jinping announced, at the 27th APEC Economic Leaders Meeting, in November, that China is favourably considering its intention to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Perhaps leaders in Beijing are aware that joining the CPTPP would be a necessary but complementary step to accomplishing China's opening up of the economic strategy, with regard to those sectors strategic to the Chinese economy: services, high technology, intellectual property rights, and the digital economy. Unsurprisingly, the evolution of Beijing's foreign policy is about restoring China's place at the centre of regional and global affairs. Viewed from Beijing, the so-called hub and spokes alliance, namely the network of bilateral alliances pursued by the US in East Asia with countries such as Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan and Australia, is a source of irritation.[107] In this regard, ASEAN has the potential, no doubt, to represent a valuable alternative for the PRC's leadership, seeking recognition of China's status as a peer and responsible state in the region.

## 6. *Conclusion*

In 2019, China's foreign policy was characterized by Xi Jinping's strong diplomatic activism and tireless efforts to ameliorate its leadership and China's international reputation.[108] In 2020 however, the coronavirus pandemic had an unprecedented impact on world politics by forcing countries

106. 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific', *ASEAN Website*, 23 June 2019.

107. Mark Beeson, 'Can the US and China coexist in Asia?', *Current History*, September 2016, pp. 203-208.

108. Barbara Onnis, 'China's Foreign Policy 2019: Xi Jinping's tireless summit diplomacy amid growing challenges', *Asia Maior*, XXX/2019, pp. 47-71.

to rethink how they interact with each other in the international system. Looking at the diplomatic agenda of the Chinese leadership for the year under review, one will notice that some important events have taken place anyway. Among the most relevant, it is worth mentioning Yang Jiechi's attendance at the Libya Conference in Berlin (14 January); the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (6 July); the 2020 AIIB Annual Meeting (27-28 July); the 27th APEC Economic Leaders Meeting (20-21 November); the 2020 G20 Riyadh Summit (21-22 November); the 17th China-ASEAN Expo and China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit (27 November). The Xi Jinping's administration has been successful in consolidating China's engagement with regional and global institutions in different regions of the world, from neighbouring countries to the Middle East.

There are two important differences with regards to China's foreign policy and diplomatic agenda as compared with the past that need to be mentioned. The first, perhaps least important, is that given the outbreak of COVID-19 most of the events took place in virtual mode; the second, is that in the first half of 2020 the agenda was almost entirely focused on meetings with regards to the pandemic. Just to name a few: the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting on Coronavirus disease (18 February); the G20 Extraordinary Virtual Leader Summit on COVID-19 (25 March); the BRICS Extraordinary Conference on COVID-19 (27 April); the Global Vaccine Summit (3 June); the Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity against COVID-19 (16 June). As illustrated in this article, the global pandemic has had negative repercussions at China's domestic level, but it has fundamentally turned the spotlight back on China's political system and its diversity with liberal democracies, by also heavily affecting the course of China's foreign policy and its relations with the West. While the election of Joe Biden in the Oval Office will certainly improve China's relations with the United States, it remains to be seen if the new administration may be ready to radically rethink the existing China policy agenda. The establishment of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC) group in 2020 is just an example emphasizing the fact that increased collaboration among Western countries, US, Australia, Canada, Germany, Sweden, the UK, and the EU, is on the rise to counter the challenge of China's ascendancy on the world stage. In this regards the European Union may be of great help in striking a balance between the two largest economies in the world, even if, with Chancellor Merkel soon out of politics, EU's China policy is expected to look different in the future.