



ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXI / 2020

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

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni

viella

A large, intricate mandala pattern in a light brown color, partially visible on the right side of the cover. It features complex geometric and organic shapes, including concentric circles, teardrop shapes, and floral motifs.

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 978-88-3313-827-5 (Paper) ISBN 978-88-3313-828-2 (Online)

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

Annual journal - Vol. XXXI, 2020

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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INDIA 2020: CONFRONTING CHINA, ALIGNING WITH THE US*

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During 2020, India's foreign policy was unaffected by the COVID-19 and dominated by two key developments, on whose analysis this article is focussed. One was the turning for the worse of the India-China relation, of which the heating up of the Himalayan border, which saw clashes between the militaries of the two countries, was at the same time cause and effect. The other key foreign policy development in the year under review was the tightening of the India-US connection, which, in 2020, increasingly looked as a de facto anti-China military alliance. The India-China confrontation is tackled by dwelling on three points. The first is the history of the incidents and clashes along the Himalayan border, whose seriousness is proven by the fact that, for the first time in 45 years, there were losses of human life. Then, a main objective cause of turbulence along the China-India border, namely the undefined nature of the de facto border (the so-called LAC, Line of Actual Control) is examined. Finally, the two mirror-like explanations of the border crisis are scrutinised. Then, the focus of the analysis moves on, zeroing on the India-US connection. It highlights the bizarre situation which, during the year under review, saw the worsening of the economic connection between the two nations – a direct result of US President Trump «America First» policy – coupled, however, by their growing military closeness. The fact that this apparently contradictory process resulted in something akin to a de facto military alliance, and the institutional developments that fleshed it out are examined. Finally, the fact is underlined that, even if largely unrecognised by Indian politicians and public opinion, the tightening of the US-India military alliance resulted in India's loss, or at least drastic diminution of its vaunted «strategic autonomy». As a proof of this, the unravelling of the India-Iran strategic ties is examined.

KEYWORDS – India's foreign policy; India-China Himalayan border; India-China tensions; LAC; India-US connection; India's strategic autonomy; India-Iran strategic ties.

* Some parts of this article, and most particularly its conclusion, have been rewritten – the conclusion in a radical way – in response of the detailed, and intelligently argued, objections of an anonymous referee. These objections were aimed «to help the author achieve a bit more objectivity in her [sic] narrative». I very much doubt that they have reached their declared goal, but, no doubt, they have helped me to put my theses into a historical perspective – which I have done when re-writing the conclusion. Also, I want to point out that, in spite of his/her radical disagreement with my basic theses, the referee – in a show of intellectual honesty which is not so usual when touchy contemporary political questions are discussed – judged this article «a good manuscript». Here, while emphasising that my and the referee's visions of India's foreign policy remain radically different, I want to express not only my gratitude for the referee's criticism, but, more importantly, my most sincere admiration for his/her intellectual integrity.

1. *Introduction*

The COVID-19 pandemic powerfully impacted on India's internal situation. India's foreign policy, on the contrary, was largely unaffected by it. Hence, in 2020, India's international relations were moulded by two pandemic-unrelated political developments: the confrontation with China and the increasingly closer alignment to the US. The former process occurred in a way unexpectedly, as India-China relations at the end of 2019 appeared to be improving. The latter process, on the other hand, occurred in spite of the problems caused to India by the neo-protectionist policies of the Trump administration and their adverse impact on India.

This article is focussed on the analysis of these two developments, which – as shown below – are strictly interrelated.

2. *The India-China confrontation*

The most dramatic and highly visible development characterizing India's foreign relations in the year under review was India's confrontation with China along the Himalayan border. In a way, it was an unexpected process, as, at the end of 2019 and in the first quarter of 2020, the relations between the two Asian giants appeared to have taken a turn for the better. On 21 December 2019, at the 22nd meeting between Chinese and Indian special representatives on boundary issues, the two sides «reached consensus on strengthening trust measures». They also «agreed to make regulations on safeguarding peace and tranquility in border areas, enhance communication and exchanges between the border troops of the two countries, as well as expand border trade and personnel exchanges». In fact, the atmosphere of the meeting was so good that Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval went so far to claim that «Chinese and Indian leaders have provided a new vision and strategic guidance for the development of bilateral ties and the solution of boundary issues».¹ Still in March 2020, Senior Fellow and Director of the China Program at the Stimson Center Yun Sun pointed out that «China and India have announced 70 events throughout the year to celebrate the 70th anniversary of their diplomatic relations». She also noted that the official rapprochement between these two global giants «represents a case of major realignment – a rare case for the Chinese playbook».²

Of course, Yun Sun, in her article, highlighted the many problems that still beset India-China relations. Nevertheless, it is clear that, at that

1. 'China, India agree to enhance mutual political trust to properly handle border issues', *Global Times*, 22 December 2019.

2. Yun Sun, 'China's Strategic Assessment of India', *War On The Rocks*, 25 March 2020.

point in time, hardly anybody was expecting the dramatic developments that would take place some weeks later. It is to these developments that we must now turn our attention. First the chronology of the India-China confrontation along the Himalayan border will be sketched out; then one of the key factors in causing tensions along the border, namely the undefined nature of the LAC (Line of Actual Control), will be examined; finally, the different explanations offered by the two parties on the causes of the border crisis will be discussed.

2.1. *A chronology of the 2020 India-China confrontation*

Things along the LAC (Line of Actual Control, the de facto, although un-demarcated, India-China border) started to heat up in May. On 5-6 May 2020 roughly 400 troops clashed on the northern bank of Pangong Lake (or Pangong Tso)³, although without using firearms and without casualties. The situation was quickly defused and a disengagement implemented by falling back on mutually agreed pre-existing protocols. Some days later, however, in a different point of the de facto border – at Naku La, in Northern Sikkim – another clash followed, characterized by hand-to-hand fighting, which caused «minor injuries» among the militaries involved.⁴

These confrontations caused alarm and anger in the Indian public opinion; proposals to disengage the Indian economy from the Chinese one as a form of reprisal came to the fore, together with the suggestion to open new anti-China fronts in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.⁵ Along the border, however, military officers representing the two parties started talks aimed to deescalate the ongoing crisis.⁶ Nonetheless, in the night between 15 and 16 June, in the Galwan Valley, which runs from China-held Aksai Chin to India-held Ladakh, «soldiers of the two sides savagely fought each other with nail-studded clubs and stones».⁷ This resulted in the death of at least 20 Indian troops, the capture of dozens

3. Pangong Lake spans India-held Eastern Ladakh and China-controlled West Tibet. It is an endorheic lake, namely a lake with no outflow to other external bodies of water; and, being situated at a height of more than 4,000 m., is the world's highest saltwater lake.

4. Ameya Pratap Singh, 'What to Make of India and China's Latest Border Clash', *The Diplomat*, 12 May 2020.

5. E.g. Kunal Purohit, 'Modi ramps up plan to reduce India's dependence on China with new 'self-reliant' campaign', *South China Morning Post*, 14 May 2020; Ananth Krishnan, 'Can India decouple itself from Chinese manufacturing?', *The Hindu*, 19 June 2020; Nitin Pai, 'How India can end Chinese transgressions: Take conflict to a place Beijing is worried about', *The Print*, 26 May 2020; Brahma Chellaney, 'India must inflict costs on China /Opinion', *Hindustan Times*, 20 August 2020.

6. Ajai Shukla, 'How China and India Came to Lethal Blows', *The New York Times*, 19 June 2020.

7. Sanjeev Miglani & Yew Lun Tian, 'India, China want peace but blame each other after deadly border clash', *Reuters*, 17 June 2020.

more – returned to the Indian side on 18 June – and an undisclosed number of Chinese fatalities.⁸

Incidents along the LAC are common enough – and possibly difficult to avoid, given un-demarcated nature of the India-China border. What made the 15/16 June clash shocking, putting it in a class apart, was the fact that it resulted in human losses for the first time in 45 years.

In their respective countries, the two governments tried to underplay the relevance of the border tension. Whereas, however, the Chinese government, no doubt helped by its authoritarian character, kept the internal situation under control, the state of affairs in India was different. Anti-China hostility and requests of stern actions and reprisals against the northern neighbour became dominant in both the traditional and new media, coupled with criticism for the apparent inaction of the Modi government. No doubt in order to defuse the situation, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on 19 June, stated: «No one has intruded and nor is anyone intruding, nor has any post been captured by someone».⁹ Unfortunately, the same day, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, pouring oil on the fire – in a declaration that was in open contrast with India's concept of where the LAC stands – stated that the whole Galwan Valley was located inside Chinese territory.¹⁰

In spite of the clearly growing tension between the two countries, they went ahead with the previously planned trilateral meeting between the foreign ministers of Russia, China and India, scheduled on 23 June. The meeting, held in video conference due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, was short of concrete results as far as the India-China border problem was concerned. To this outcome contributed Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's decision, ruling out the possibility of Moscow acting as a mediator.¹¹

Six days later, on 29 June, the Indian government banned the use of 59 Chinese mobile apps.¹² This measure was in line with the revision of India's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) policy, introduced on 18 April, namely before the first India-China 2020 clashes along the Himalayan border.

8. Keith Jones, 'Dozens die in India-China border clash', *World Socialist Web Site*, 17 June 2020; Sam McNeil & Ashok Sharma, 'China says it agrees to solve tensions with India after deadly border clash', *Global News*, 17 June 2020; Shuvu Batta & Keith Jones, 'India and China remain on knife edge as war tensions continue', *World Socialist Web Site*, 19 June 2020.

9. Devirupa Mitra, 'Modi's «No Intrusion» by China Claim Contradicts India's Stand, Raises Multiple Questions', *The Wire*, 20 June 2020.

10. Ananth Krishnan, 'The Hindu Explains - Who does Galwan Valley belong to?', *The Hindu*, 21 June 2020.

11. The Wire Staff, 'At Russia-India-China Meet, India Talks of Need to Respect Legitimate Interest of Partners', *The Wire*, 23 June 2020.

12. Government of India, Press Information Bureau, *Government Bans 59 mobile apps which are prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of state and public order*, 29 June 2020; see also Deepal Jayasekera & Keith Jones, 'India takes economic reprisals against China as border frictions continue', *World Socialist Web Site*, 8 July 2020.

Allegedly aimed to curb «opportunistic» takeovers of Indian firms during the COVID-19 pandemic on the part of foreign entities, the measure made FDIs possible only after receiving the government's green light.¹³

What identified the measure as explicitly anti-China was the fact that it targeted only «an entity of a country, which *shares land border with India* or where the beneficial owner of an investment into India is situated in or is a citizen of any such country».¹⁴ Given that FDIs from any other bordering country, apart from China, were negligible, whereas Chinese FDIs in India were not only massive, but growing,¹⁵ the revised FDI policy could only be aimed at making Chinese FDIs difficult.

The restriction on FDIs from China and the banning of Chinese mobile apps was soon followed by India's customs authorities' decision to subject containers of goods coming from China or including components made in China to more thorough inspections, which resulted in slowing down the whole customs verification process.¹⁶ These decisions were taken in conjunction with a vehement and widespread anti-China campaign carried out by both the traditional and new media. Although, of course, differently from what happens in an authoritarian country like China, in a democracy the media (at least, most of them, most of the times) are not controlled by the state, their vehement anti-China campaign could not but strengthen the impression that a strategy was being implemented to decouple the two economies. This was a prospect that did not fail to worry the Chinese, as evidenced by the numerous articles on the subject in the *Global Times*, the Chinese daily which acts as the Communist Party's mouthpiece in front of the international public opinion.¹⁷ Also, in late July, the Chinese ambassador in New Delhi, Sun Weidong, warned that a forced decoupling of India and China economies would result in a «loose-loose» outcome.¹⁸

13. Prabha Raghavan, 'Eye on China, govt nod made must for FDI from neighbouring countries', *The Indian Express*, 19 April 2020; Prabha Raghavan, 'Explained: Why India tightened FDI rules, and why it's China that's upset?', *The Indian Express*, 23 April 2020

14. Prabha Raghavan, 'Eye on China, govt nod made must for FDI (emphasis added).

15. Ananth Krishnan, 'Following The money: China Inc's growing stake in India-China relations', *Brookings India Impact Series*, March 2020.

16. 'India «holds» Chinese goods from clearance, to backfire and hurt global industrial chains: expert', *Global Times*, 25 June 2020.

17. For a few examples among many, see 'GT investigation: Can India's fragile economy survive its own «boycott China» campaign?' 25 June 2020; 'India «holds» Chinese goods from clearance, to backfire and hurt global industrial chains: expert', 25 June 2020; 'Indian app users, influencers baffled, hurt by ban of China's TikTok, WeChat', 3 July 2020; 'Economic decoupling from China will backfire for India: experts', 13 August 2020; 'India's narrowing trade deficit with China is unsustainable', 24 August 2020; 'India unable to threaten China militarily, economically: survey', 27 August 2020.

18. C.K. Nayak, 'China warns India against «forced decoupling» of their economies', *Reuters*, 30 July 2020.

This manoeuvring on the economic front did not prevent the continuation of negotiations in relation to the border problem: on 5 July Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, during a phone conversation, agreed to pull back troops from the disputed borders.¹⁹ Pursuing this goal, disengagement talks went on along the border, carried by the respective corps commanders. At the end of August, however, the situation on the ground worsened once again.

While it is difficult to establish the exact sequence of events, it appears that, in the night of 29 August and the early morning of 30 August, Chinese and Indian troops implemented a series of moves and countermoves along the disputed border. The Chinese military landed on the southern bank of Pangong Lake, traditionally claimed by India as its own territory; the Chinese move, however, was countered by thousands of Indian special forces, made up of ethnic Tibetans trained in guerrilla warfare, who – implementing a plan which, according to some sources, had been in the making «weeks in advance» – took hold of the mountain peaks dominating the southern bank of Pangong Lake. This move automatically put the Chinese militaries deployed on the southern bank of the lake in a position of tactical inferiority. At the same time, Indian forces occupied the heights dominating parts of the northern bank of Pangong Lake.²⁰

This incident – the first major one after the deadly clash of mid-June – was followed by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's call for calm and further dialogue and by a meeting, on 31 August, between the military commanders of the troops involved in the face-off.²¹ Meanwhile, the Indian Government, coupling the military movements on the border with the continuation of its strategy aimed at imposing economic sanctions on China, on 2 September banned 118 Chinese mobile apps.²²

The situation along the border remained tense, with Indian and Chinese militaries accusing one another of discharging firearms in proximity of

19. 'NSAAjit Doval talks to China's Wang Yi, troops pulled back along LAC: Read full statement here', *The Hindustan Times*, 6 July 2020.

20. Jeffrey Gettleman, Sameer Yasir & Hari Kumar, 'India and China Face Off Again at Border as Troops Move In', *The New York Times*, 31 August 2020; Keegan Elmer, 'China-India border clash: foreign ministers call for calm ahead of talks', *South China Morning Post*, 1 September 2020; Sudhi Ranjan Sen & Archana Chaudhary, 'India Captured Strategic Outposts in Stealth Move Against China', *Bloomberg*, 2 September 2020. On the Indian special forces made up by ethnic Tibetans, see: Benjamin Brimelow, 'A secretive unit India sent to its disputed border with China is more than just a military challenge to Beijing', *Business Insider*, 10 September 2020; Rahul Bedi, 'Why China Is So Upset About India's Predominantly Tibetan Special Frontier Force', *The Wire*, 10 September 2020.

21. Keegan Elmer, 'China-India border clash'.

22. Government of India, Press Information Bureau, *Government Blocks 118 Mobile Apps Which are Prejudicial to Sovereignty and Integrity of India, Defence of India, Security of State and Public Order*, 2 September 2020.

Pangong Lake on 7 September. Again, this was a dangerous development, as it went against the mutually accepted protocol, which had not been broken since 1975, prohibiting the use of firearms along the border.²³ Also, information leaked by an anonymous military source revealed that the discharge of firearms on the part of the Indian army had not happened by accident but following the decision, taken soon after the Galwan Valley clash, to unilaterally change the rules of engagement.²⁴

A possible diplomatic breakthrough occurred a few days later, on 10 September, when India's and China's Foreign Ministers met in Moscow. The talks resulted in a joint five-point statement, the first being the need of «not allowing differences to become disputes».²⁵

The content of the joint statement was judged in radically different ways. According to some analysts, it did not amount to much, as it did not include «concrete proposals on how the border standoff and rival claims over where the LAC lies are to be resolved».²⁶ According to others, however, the statement represented «a big breakthrough», for the simple reason that it forestalled the risk of an all-out border war, which, in the previous months had increasingly appeared to be a clear and present danger. According to an analyst, the statement also pursued the objective of calming the two public opinions, allowing both governments to claim that they had won (or not lost) in their confrontation with the other.²⁷

Whatever the evaluation of the political meaning of the September Statement might have been, it is nonetheless a fact that its political relevance

23. Abhijnan Rej, 'India and China Exchange Accusations About Gunfire as Window for Diplomacy Narrows', *The Diplomat*, 9 September 2020; Ravi Agrawal, 'India-China Tensions', *Foreign Policy's* South Asia Brief, 10 September 2020.

24. Rahul Singh, «No restrictions on using firearms»: India gives soldiers freedom along LAC in extraordinary times', *Hindustan Times*, 20 June 2020; Dinakar Peri, 'LAC standoff / If PLA comes close, Indian troops can fire: official', *The Hindu*, 24 September 2020.

25. The other four were: the shared conviction that the prevailing situation in the border areas was not in the interest of either side; the joint wish «that the border troops of both sides should continue their dialogue, quickly disengage, maintain proper distance and ease tensions»; the resolve that «both sides shall abide by all the existing agreements and protocol on China-India boundary affairs»; the joint decision to continue «dialogue and communication through the Special Representative mechanism on the India-China boundary question»; the resolution that, as the situation eased, «the two sides should expedite work to conclude new Confidence Building Measures to maintain and enhance peace and tranquillity in the border areas». Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Media Centre, *Joint Press Statement - Meeting of External Affairs Minister and the Foreign Minister of China (September 10, 2020)*, 10 September 2020.

26. Jordan Shilton & Keith Jones, 'India-China border conflict remains on knife's edge', *World Socialist Web Site*, 12 September 2020.

27. Private communication on the part of Dr Filippo Boni to the author, 10 January 2020.

was quickly and drastically diminished by the persisting and deep-seated diffidence of each of the two parties for the other. Each party did not conceal its belief that the other party usually lied and had a history of breaking faith and failing to keep to agreements.²⁸

Amid this atmosphere of mutual suspicion, the talks among the corps commanders of the troops positioned along the LAC continued, bringing about the agreement not to deploy additional troops along the *de facto* border.²⁹ However each side was «adamant» that the onus was on the other «to initiate “de-escalation” by withdrawing troops» that had allegedly crossed what each side considered the correct positioning of the Line of Actual Control.³⁰ This resulted in a stalemate and prevented disengagement of the two militaries on the ground.³¹

At the beginning of winter, with both sides ruling out the possibility of drawing down troops near to the LAC, the two militaries were reading to spend the coldest months of the year in the desolate altitudes of the Himalayas. They had to face not so much the dangers caused by potential aggression from the opposing troops as the deadly risk brought about by the extreme weather conditions of the Himalaya in Winter time.

2.2. *The undefined nature of the LAC*

An unending source of friction and tension between China and India has been the undefined nature of the LAC, namely the *de facto* border between the two countries. LAC – namely «Line of Actual Control» – is a misleading label, as it implies that, taken together, the two parties involved – China and India – effectively control the entirety of the Himalayan territories which form the geographical boundaries between China and India. This, however, is not the case: China and India permanently control a series of points sprinkled along the Himalaya. Among these points lay territories which are *de facto* «no man lands» and have never or only fitfully been patrolled by either militaries or, only apparently paradoxically, are patrolled by both, although at different times of the year. Connecting the points effectively held by either China or India, the two governments have *notionally* drawn the segments making up the LAC. I write «notionally» because the resulting

28. Xie Wenting, 'Chinese-Indian foreign ministers reach consensus beyond expectations; peace depends on India keeping promise: expert', *Global Times*, 11 September 2020; Shishir Gupta, 'China violates border agreements with India, swears by 2003 pact on Tibet / Analysis', *Hindustan Times*, 31 December 2020.

29. Dinakar Peri, 'LAC standoff / If PLA comes close, Indian troops can fire: official', *The Hindu*, 24 September 2020.

30. Rohantha De Silva & Keith Jones, 'Indian and Chinese militaries dig in for prolonged border standoff, as “de-escalation” efforts flounder', *World Socialist Web Site*, 30 September 2020.

31. Yun Sun, 'Confrontation in the Himalayas: China's growing risk tolerance', *ORF*, 25 September 2020.

line has not been mutually demarcated on the ground; on the contrary, in some sectors the militaries of the nation notionally claiming that area as part of the territory under their actual control have never set foot on it, or have done so only temporarily, or only recently.

What makes things confusing and, therefore, dangerous is that the «notionally» drawn LAC by China and the «notionally» drawn LAC by India are widely divergent, as immediately shown by the fact that the Indian LAC is 3,488 kilometres long, whereas the Chinese LAC is only around 2,000 kilometres long.³² This means that territories claimed by China and territories claimed by India as being inside their respective LACs frequently overlaps. While this is much less frequent in the eastern sector of the de facto border, which spans the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, and the middle sector, on the northern border of the Indian states of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, the divergence between the two LACs is at its maximum in the western sector, where India-held Ladakh abuts against China-held (although India-claimed) Aksai Chin.³³

MAP 1 – The disputed India-China western border



Source: M. K. Bhadrakumar, 'An India-China reset is still possible', *Asia Times*, 13 September 2020.

32. Sushant Singh, 'Line of Actual Control (LAC): Where it is located, and where India and China differ', *The Indian Express*, 1 June 2020

33. *Ibid.*

In this situation, incidents between the military of the two nations are bound to happen, and, as a rule, each time they happen each of the two parties is bound to claim to be inside its own part of the LAC, while the other party is transgressing. Of course, as a rule both claims are equally right – or equally wrong – as they make reference to two different LACs.

The two public opinions have the tendency to consider their own country's version of the LAC as the indisputably correct one, that, as such, the other party does not accept only out of deviousness and arrogance. However, the plain truth is that, quite apart from the crucially important fact that neither LAC is clearly demarcated on the ground, neither is more legitimate than the other, as both are based on unilateral claims grounded on dubious historical and/or political justifications.

Of course, whereas the two public opinions appear, as a rule, oblivious to the reality of the matter, the two governments are fully aware of it. They have tried to find a solution at least from 1988, when Rajiv Gandhi, after a period of tension which had pushed the two countries very near to a new all-out war, went to Beijing, starting a period of thaw which would continue during the following 17 years.³⁴ In the period between 1993 and 2013, five major China-India bilateral agreements were signed, aimed at the maintenance of peace and tranquillity along the border and at keeping open communication channels particularly on the ground.³⁵ Nonetheless, although the two sides had agreed to negotiate a border settlement since the time of Rajiv Gandhi's 1988 Beijing visit, no concrete result was ever reached, not even a shared agreement on where the LAC actually laid.³⁶

The latest attempt at defining a mutually agreed LAC was made by Indian Premier Narendra Modi during his May 2015 visit to China. However, nothing came out of Modi's attempt. According to the explanation then

34. On the India-China relations see, e.g., Shivshankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016; Shyam Saran, *How India Sees the World: Kautilya to the 21st Century*, New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2017.

35. The five agreements are: (1) the 1993 Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China border areas; (2) the 1996 Agreement on Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along the LAC; (3) the 2005 Protocol on Modalities for the implementation of the Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along the LAC; (4) the 2012 Agreement on the establishment of a working mechanism for consultation and coordination on India-China Border Affairs; (5) the 2013 Border Defence Cooperation Agreement.

36. It must be stressed that the problem of where the LAC actually lay does not coincide with the problem of where the international border between the two countries lay. China claims as inside her international borders the whole Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh (which is clearly inside the Indian LAC). On her part, India claims the whole of Aksai Chin (inside the Chinese LAC) and Gilgit-Baltistan (controlled by Pakistan, which, following a border adjustment with China, ceded the Trans-Karakoram Tract, namely the part bordering with China-held Xinjiang, to China following the Sino-Pakistan Agreement of 2 March 1963).

given by Deputy Director General for Asian Affairs at the Chinese Foreign Ministry Huang Xilian, previous attempts to clarify where the LAC actually laid had «encountered difficulties». So much so that the Chinese had identified the problem not as «a building block for the process of negotiations», but as a «stumbling block». Accordingly, the Chinese had preferred to sideline the problem and focus on reaching an agreement on a mutually accepted «Code of Conduct».³⁷ However, at the times when these words are written (early January 2021) no Code of Conduct had been agreed. This lends credence to the suspicion that, as argued by Indian international relations expert Sana Hashmi, China's proposal of a Code of Conduct «is nothing more than a strategy to delay the solution [of the border question]».³⁸ Anyway, whatever the rationale behind China's decision, the unsolved LAC problem has continued to represent a time bomb, which could explode on its own or whose explosion could be caused by either of the two parties at will.

2.3. *The two mirror-like explanations of the border crisis*

The prevailing explanation of the border crisis on India's part – an explanation widely accepted world-wide – goes as follows. An increasingly aggressive China has cold-bloodedly confronted India, unprovokedly pushing her back several kilometres along the Ladakh/West Tibetan border, in fact depriving her of the largest chunk of territory since the 1962 war.³⁹ This aggressive behaviour is part and parcel of China's increasingly belligerent conduct «across the board in Asia – in the Senkakus, on Taiwan, in Hong Kong, in the South China Sea, with Australia and so on».⁴⁰ In the specific case of the Himalayan border, China's aggression has the military objective «to straighten and push the LAC westward to dominate, to take the heights, to cut off Indian forward deployments, and to isolate sub-sectors in the event of a conflict».⁴¹

The military objective, however, is of secondary importance to the political one, namely the design to enhance China's influence in the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. By showing that India cannot defend itself, Beijing aims to highlight that India is an utterly unreliable counterweight to Chinese power, to fall back upon for the other nations of those two areas (the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia). Additionally, the increased military pressure on the land border aims to induce India to drasti-

37. 'China wants agreement with India on code of conduct at border', *Mumbai Mirror*, 4 June 2015.

38. Sana Hashmi, 'India-China Code of Conduct on Border: The «Paradigm Shift» Challenge', *Caps Infocus*, 15 June 2015.

39. 'India Does Not Have the Option to Impose Serious Economic Costs on China: Shyam Saran', *The Wire*, 3 September 2020 (full transcript of the interview given by former foreign secretary Shyam Saran to Karan Thapar).

40. Shivshankar Menon, 'What China Hopes to Gain From the Present Border Standoff With India', *The Wire*, 3 November 2020.

41. *Ibid.*

cally increase her forces there, and, as a consequence, the relative allocation of military expenditures. This is bound to cause a corresponding scaling down of the budget allocated to India's maritime forces, radically decreasing any potential deterrence to China's expanding presence in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.⁴² Sometimes this explanation is prefaced by a reference to China's criticism and opposition in the UN to the 2019 dismantling of the Jammu & Kashmir Union state, seen as proof of China's unprovoked and unjustified malevolence towards India and a prelude to the 2020 Himalayan aggression.

On its part, China claims that the 2020 border tensions have been triggered by India, who has «occupied “commanding heights” at various points along the LAC and upgraded infrastructure at an accelerated pace since 2014».⁴³ In fact, in the words of Renmin University strategic affair expert Liu Zongyi, «India has continuously encroached on our territory and occupied the commanding heights. As a result, at several strategic points, many commanding height positions all along the Sino-Indian border are under Indian control». This, according to Liu, has resulted in the fact that: «This summer, when China took tough countermeasures in the Pangong Lake and in the Galwan Valley, India accused us of aggression. India has been acting in this manner for decades, and the West has always turned a blind eye. And now when China decided to act a bit tough, all are blaming us».⁴⁴

What are the reasons of India's aggressive behaviour? Still according to Liu – who was reiterating what, in China, was a widely circulated theory – India had been «emboldened» by its growing closeness with the United States. In fact, according to Liu: «Presently India and the United States have formed a *de facto* military alliance». Even more worrying, according to the Renmin University strategic affair expert, was that: «We may still continue to pursue the line of thinking that the main pressure we are facing is from the United States and not India [...] But the fact is, India and the United States today have become a single entity. In some respects, it is India which is leading the U.S., and is becoming a leading anti-China force».⁴⁵

Once closely examined, the two above summarized explanations are the same description of the same phenomenon, although seen from opposite points of view. Each party feels threatened and reacts; each party, in feeling threatened, has sound reasons to feel the way it feels; the reaction of each

42. *Ibid.*

43. Ananth Krishnan, 'As ties with India plunge, Chinese scholar calls for hard-line «reset»', *The Hindu*, 26 September 2020, quoting Chinese scholar Liu Zongyi.

44. Liu's comments – quoted in Ananth Krishnan, 'As ties with India plunge, Chinese scholar calls for hard-line «reset»' – are particularly significant because addressed to Chinese public opinion. Originally made on 21 September 2020, during an interview to a popular Chinese portal, Liu's comments became available in English thanks to the translation by Professor Hemant Adlakha of Jawaharlal Nehru University.

45. *Ibid.*

party to the perceived threat by the other cannot but heighten the threat perception of the other. All this triggers a vicious circle of heightening tension.

Two elements are important, in order to put the above explanations in the right perspective. One is the question of China's criticism to the Modi government's 2019 decision to downgrade the Jammu & Kashmir state to two Union territories. This is an apparently internal Indian question, and, as such, outside the pale of any legitimate criticism on the part of China. The point, however, is that, while restructuring the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir in two Union territories, Indian Home Minister Amit Shah – namely the number two in the Modi government – outspokenly stated in Parliament in two different occasions (19 November and 3 December 2019) that the whole of previous princely state of Kashmir was «an inseparable part of India». Accordingly, both the so called POK (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir) and Aksai Chin, namely the Himalayan territory under Chinese control at least from the early 1960s, were Indian and, in Shah's words, worth to die for.⁴⁶ In the light of these declarations, the creation of the Union territory of Ladakh, almost inhabited but now under India's central government's close control and, according to Shah, legitimately including the whole of China-held Aksai Chin, could not but be perceived as a threat by China.

The second elements which is important in order to put the prevailing explanations of the China-India 2020 confrontation in the right perspective is the question of the increasing US-India closeness. Liu's statement that: «In some respects, it is India which is leading the U.S., and is becoming a leading anti-China force» is obviously an over-the-top statement, although one sometimes made even by Western analysts.⁴⁷ But Liu's claim that: «Presently India and the United States have formed a de facto military alliance» contains more than one grain of truth. It is therefore to the state of the India-US relations that it is now necessary to turn our attention.

3. *The India-US relations*

3.1. *The state of the India-US relations at the time of President Trump's official visit to India*

On 24 and 25 February 2020, US President Donald Trump officially visited India for the first, and, as it was to become clear at year end, for the

46. 'PoK, Aksai Chin part of J&K, we are ready to die for the region: Amit Shah', *Business Standard*, 22 November 2019; 'PoK, Aksai Chin part of J&K; will give life for it: Amit Shah in Lok Sabha', *Business Standard*, 5 December 2019.

47. E.g., Frances Martel, 'India's Modi Supplants Trump as China's Toughest Global Adversary', *Breitbart*, 25 Jun 2020. It is a well-known datum that *Breitbart* is a far-right publication; it is therefore food for thought that the assessments of a far-right western analyst and a People Republic of China's intellectual so strictly coincide.

last time. Most commentators judged the event as high on optics and low on contents, which, to a certain extent was a correct assessment. However, Trump's passage to India is a good vantage point from which to summarize the state of India-US relations on the eve of both the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and, more important from the limited standpoint of this article, the heating up of the India-China border.

At the international level, Trump's «America first» policy had translated into the launching of neo-protectionist trade policies and the «increasingly irresponsible treatment of allies and strategic partners».⁴⁸ Aimed primarily at China, Trump's neo-protectionism had not spared most other nations, including US' treaty and non-treaty allies. Among Washington non-treaty allies, India, notwithstanding its strategic closeness to the US, had soon found herself at the receiving end of a series of economically adverse measures.⁴⁹ In March 2018 came the US's decision to impose heavy import tariffs on steel (25%) and aluminium (10%). Also, later in 2018, news came that the Trump administration intended to limit the concession of H-1B non-immigrant visa, allowing US companies to employ foreign workers. H-1B non-immigrant visa were mainly employed by Indian citizens; any restriction on their concession was bound to adversely affect more than 300,000 Indian professionals and their spouses and children.⁵⁰ On 29 May 2019, President Trump announced the imminent termination of the preferential tariff treatment allowed to India under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP). The decision, which became effective on 5 June 2019, terminated the preferential tariffs enjoyed by Indian exports worth almost US\$ 6 billion.⁵¹

Eventually these measures were damaging enough to force India to react, by imposing tariff duties on 28 US products, primarily in the agriculture sector. A «mini trade war» ensued between India and the US.⁵² A solution for

48. Yogesh Joshi, 'India 2019: Foreign policy dilemmas and their domestic roots', *Asia Maior*, XXX/2019, p. 416.

49. On the US economic measures targeting India in 2018 and 2019 see, respectively, Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2018: The resetting of New Delhi's foreign policy?', *Asia Maior*, XXIX/2018, pp. 302-303; and Yogesh Joshi 'India 2019: Foreign policy dilemmas and their domestic roots', pp. 416-417.

50. According to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), there were as many as 419,637 foreign nationals working in the US on H-1B visas as in October 2018. Of these, 309,986 were Indians. 'Three-fourths of H1B visa holders in 2018 are Indians: US report', *The Economic Times*, 20 October 2018. On the question of the H-1B and H-4 visas see also 'Will End Permits For Families Of H-1B Visa Holders In 3 Months: US', *NDTV*, 22 September 2018, and 'US To Revise H-1B Definition, Planning Repeal Of H-4 Visa: 10 Points', *NDTV Profit*, 18 October 2018.

51. 'Donald Trump terminates India's preferential trade status under GSP programme', *LiveMint*, 1 June 2019; Kritika Suneja, 'Donald Trump terminates preferential trade status for India under GSP', *The Economic Times*, 1 June 2019.

52. The expression «mini trade war» has been coined by Chad P. Bown. See his 'Trump's Mini-Trade War with India', *Peterson Institute for International Economics*, 8 July 2019 (<https://www.piie.com/blogs/trade-and-investment-policy-watch/trumps-mini-trade-war-india>).

these economic tensions was searched in a comprehensive trade deal between India and the US. Announced by Trump on the eve of his passage to India,⁵³ the trade deal, however, did not materialize.⁵⁴

As a rule, this state of affairs should result in cold if not outrightly adversarial relations. Counterintuitively, however, in the case of the India-US relationship this did not happen: the difficulties caused by Trump's neo-protectionist policy appeared to be more than compensated by the tightening of the Washington-New Delhi strategic connection. This had three different and complementary main aspects: the first was the institutionalization of close consultation at the foreign policy and defence levels; the second was the increasing coordination between the US and Indian militaries; the third was the ballooning US sales of weapons and weapon-systems, particularly belonging to the high technology spectrum, to India.

The institutionalization of close consultation and coordination at the foreign policy and defence levels took place through the launching of the 2+2 Defence Dialogue, which involved the foreign and defence ministers of the two states. By the time of Trump's passage to India, the 2+2 Defence Dialogue meetings had gone through two sessions, on 6 September 2018 and 18 December 2019 (another one would follow in October 2020).

The coordination between the two militaries, favoured by the 2+2 Dialogue, saw the signing on 6 September 2018, during the first 2+2 Dialogue meeting, of the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA). It was one of the so-called foundational agreements, aimed at making possible both close interoperability between the militaries of the two countries and the sale of high-end technology from the US to India.⁵⁵

As far as the steep increase in arms sales from the US to India is concerned, it received an additional push when, on 3 August 2018, India was granted the Strategic Trade Authorization-1 by the US. The STA-1 status opened the way to the sale of high-technology products, particularly in the

53. Sanjeev Miglani, 'Trump says working on a very big trade deal with India, but will take time', *Reuters*, 19 February 2020.

54. Trevor Cloen & Irfan Nooruddin, 'The U.S.-India trade deal fell through. What happens now?', *The Washington Post*, 5 March 2020.

55. The first foundational agreement, the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), was signed in 2002. It ensured security standards for the safeguarding of critical information shared by the US with India. The second foundational agreement, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) was signed in 2016. It granted warplanes and warships of each of the two countries access to military bases and ports of the other. For an introduction to the nature of the «foundational agreements» see Samran Ali, 'Indo-US Foundational Agreements: Contributing to India's Military Capabilities', *Perspectives (Centre For Strategic And Contemporary Research)*, Issue No. 18, 4 December 2020. See also Snehesh Alex Philip, 'The 3 foundational agreements with US and what they mean for India's military growth', *The Print*, 26 October 2020. It should be noted that the Indian press speaks sometimes of three foundational agreements and sometimes of four, depending on the choice to consider GSOMIA, which was signed much earlier than the other three foundational agreements, as part of them.

defence and civil space sector. Significantly, in Asia only Japan and South Korea, namely two close US allies, already enjoyed STA-1 status.⁵⁶ US arms sales to India had been rapidly and steeply increasing after 2005, but during the Trump presidency they went through a new qualitative jump. From 33.6 billion US dollars in 2016 (President Barack Obama last year in office), they almost doubled during the Trump presidency, reaching US\$ 55.66 billion and US\$ 55.40 in 2018 and 2019 respectively.⁵⁷ By the beginning of the year under review, the strategic connection, but most particularly the giant sales of US arms to India, had become the mainstay of US-India relations. Significantly, Trump's official visit to India may have been high on optics and low on contents, but it is a fact that during it a US\$ 3 billion deal was signed for the sale to India of state-of-the art US military helicopters.⁵⁸

Summing up, on the eve of the breaking out of the COVID-19 pandemic and the heating up of the India-China border, the relationship between the US and India was a close and deepening military alliance in all but name. It was also an alliance that, for both parties, only made sense in opposition to China. This remains true even though most Indian analysts and politicians, with a few honourable exceptions, continued to deny, then and afterwards, that the relationship with the US was a *de facto* military alliance – and one clearly aimed at China. The bulk of the Indian analysts also went on asserting that India's much vaunted «strategic autonomy», namely the ability to act according to its own national interest rather than conforming to the indications of a hugely more powerful ally, remained intact. No doubt all those making these claims were convinced that, contrarily to a well-known saying, words speak louder than facts. Unfortunately, this was not a conviction widespread beyond India's international borders, in particular its northern ones. In turn, this might contribute to explain the sudden heating up of the Himalayan border.

56. 'India third Asian nation to get STA-1 status from US', *The Indian Express*, 4 August 2018; 'Explained: What is US-India Defence Technology and Trade Initiative', *The Indian Express*, 19 October 2019.

57. Kashish Parpiani, 'India-US Defence Trade Continuity Under Trump', *ORF Issue Brief*, 2 July 2020, table 1.

58. Steve Holland & Aftab Ahmed, 'After raucous welcome in India, Trump clinches \$3 billion military equipment sale', *Reuters*, 25 February 2020. The helicopters sold to India were the AH-64E Apaches, with the capability to operate at high altitudes, and the MH-60 Romeo Seahawks, generally considered the most capable and mature Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) Anti-Surface Warfare (ASuW) multi-mission helicopter available in the world. Both kind of helicopters would enhance India's capability to challenge China both along the Himalayan border and in the Indian Ocean. *Ibid.*; 'Explained: What are the MH-60R naval choppers, AH-64E Apaches India has bought?', *The Indian Express*, 27 February 2020.

3.2. *The state of the India-US relations after President Trump's official visit to India*

In the period following Trump's official visit, the US-India relations continued along the same tracks. The Trump administration went on turning a deaf ear to India's economic requests: in March it closed the door on reinstating India's GSP benefits;⁵⁹ in June came the announcement that H1-B visa would continue to be suspended up to the end of the year.⁶⁰

As in the preceding period, in spite of the disappointing state of the US-India economic relations, the strategic connection between Washington and New Delhi continued to flourish. US arm sales to India climbed steadily,⁶¹ and, according to a spokesperson of the US Department of State, speaking at the end of October, as of 2020 the United States had authorized more than US\$ 20 billion in defence sales to India.⁶² Perhaps more importantly, the de facto India-US alliance further solidified as shown by New Delhi giving in to the Washington sponsored expansion of Exercise Malabar (on which more later) and the signing of the last of the so-called foundational agreements, considered by the US as the sine qua non to the full expansion of a defence engagement with another nation.

Exercise Malabar was an annual plurilateral military exercise, which had been going on for several years and, since 2015, included the US, Indian and Japanese navies.⁶³ It had come to be considered as the first step toward greater defence coordination between the countries involved. In 2007, Exercise Malabar underwent a spectacular qualitative and quantitative expansion, bringing together the navies of the US, Japan, India, Australia and Singapore.⁶⁴ It was followed by the attempt to give it a clearly structured political dimension through the launching of a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or QSD, or Quad was officially an informal strategic forum including the US, India, Japan and Australia; de facto it was the first step in institutionalising an

59. Kashish Parpiani, 'The US closes the door on reinstating India's GSP benefits', *India Global Business (North America Edition)*, 13 March-26 March 2020.

60. 'H1-B visas among those suspended till year end', *The Hindu*, 23 June 2020.

61. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, *U.S. Security Cooperation With India* (Fact Sheet), 21 July 2020.

62. 'India Resists U.S. Pressure to Buy Armed Drones as Trump Looks for Foreign Policy «Wins»', *Defense News*, 29 October 2020.

63. On Exercise Malabar see, e.g.: Waqar-un-Nisa, 'Indo-US Naval Cooperation: Geo-Strategic Ramifications for the Region', *Policy Perspectives*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2019, pp. 41-59; Sumit Ganguly & M. Chris Mason, *An Unnatural Partnership? The Future of U.S.-India Strategic Cooperation*, Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, May 2019.

64. Gurpreet S. Khurana, 'Joint Naval Exercises: A Post-Malabar-2007 Appraisal for India', *IPCS Issue Brief*, No. 52, September 2007.

anti-China alliance, of which Exercise Malabar would constitute the military muscle.⁶⁵

For various reasons, this first attempt at institutionalising an anti-China alliance soon collapsed;⁶⁶ the Quad was disbanded in 2008 and Exercise Malabar continued in the more modest shape of a bilateral exercise, which had characterised it previous to 2007. However, the Quad was resurrected on 11 November 2017.⁶⁷

As in its previous avatar, the finalities of the new Quad remained undefined, which could not conceal its status as a *de facto* alliance in progress, aimed at containing China. Eventually, that the US's goal was exactly the upgrading of the Quad from an informal forum to a structured military alliance was made explicit on 31 August 2020 by US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun. The latter, during an online discussion organised by the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum, argued that the Indo-Pacific region was lacking in «strong multilateral structures», which made necessary, «at some point», to formalise a structure like NATO. The nucleus on which to build the Indo-Pacific NATO was the Quad, which, according to Biegun, would expand to include Vietnam, South Korea and New Zealand sometime in the future.⁶⁸

All this was quite enticing, but from New Delhi's point of view, a tad dangerous, as India was the only one of the Quad nations to have a (very long and unsettled) land border with China. It is true that, as already noted, following the heating up of the Himalayan border in the previous months some Indian analysts had argued that, in order to contain China's push on the Himalaya, the best countermove would be to open a second front in the South China Sea.⁶⁹ But the problem was that a NATO-like Quad, although redoubtable on the seas, was not in the position to send land forces to strengthen the only land border between China and the Quad nations. Differently put, a NATO-like anti-China Quad alliance, although apparently tempting, was a dangerous proposition for India. Hence, already in the past, New Delhi, while willing to join in the Quad, had always been extreme-

65. On the history of the Quad, see Tanvi Madan, 'The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the «Quad»', *War on the Rocks*, 16 November 2017; Rahul Roy-Chaudhury & Kate Sullivan de Estrada, 'India, the Indo-Pacific and the Quad', *Survival*, Vol. 60, No. 3, June–July 2018, pp. 181–94; Patrick Gerard Buchan & Benjamin Rimland, 'Defining the Diamond: The Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue', *CSIS Briefs*, March 2020.

66. On the reason behind the sudden folding up of the first Quad see Kevin Rudd, 'The Convenient Rewriting of the History of the «Quad»', *Nikkei Asia*, 26 March 2019. Rudd was Australia's prime minister at the time of the events.

67. See fn. 65.

68. M.K. Bhadrakumar, 'India gains nothing out of «Asian NATO»', *Indian Punchline*, 3 September 2020.

69. E.g., Nitin Pai, 'How India can end Chinese transgressions: Take conflict to a place Beijing is worried about'.

ly reluctant to let it assume the aspect of an open anti-China military alliance.⁷⁰ Accordingly, and not surprisingly, Biegun's suggestion to transform the Quad into an Indo-Pacific NATO left New Delhi cold.

When the 2020 Quad security meeting was held in Tokyo (on 6 October) no much of tangible came out of it; also, the difference of approach between the virulent and open anti-China speech of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the much more cautious approach of the other foreign ministers, who avoided any openly confrontational anti-China tone, was in evidence.⁷¹ As in previous Quad meetings, open anti-China belligerence appeared to be directly proportional to the geographical distance from China of each of the four Quad countries.⁷² However, during the Quad meeting in Tokyo – although the decision was disclosed only later⁷³ – the Americans were successful in reaching the objective to convince India to expand Exercise Malabar, by involving Australia. That was a move that New Delhi had resisted in the previous years;⁷⁴ now, on 19 October, Australia got invited.⁷⁵ Accordingly, Exercise Malabar 2020 was again upgraded to a quadrilateral drill. It took place in two phases, the first from 3 to 6 November, off the coast of Visakhapatnam in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, the second from 17 to 20 November in the Arabian Sea. The importance of the exercise was highlighted by the participation, during the second phase, of two aircraft carrier battle groups: the US Navy's Nimitz Carrier Strike Group and the Indian Navy's Vikramadiya Carrier Battle Group.⁷⁶

70. Giulio Pugliese & Sebastian Maslow, 'Japan 2018: Fleshing out the «Free and Open Indo-Pacific» strategic vision', and; Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2018: The resetting of New Delhi's foreign policy?', both in *Asia Maior* XXIX/2018, pp. 123-124 and 297-313 respectively.

71. Geeta Mohan, 'Quad ministerial meet held with an eye on China; no announcement on military exercise yet', *India Today*, 6 October 2020; Jesse Johnson & Satoshi Sugiyama, '«Quad» meeting in Tokyo prizes symbolism over substance', *The Japan Times*, 7 October 2020.

72. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Asia Maior in 2017: The unravelling of the US foreign policy', *Asia Maior*, XXVIII/2017, pp. 19-20.

73. Devirupa Mitra, 'New Defence Agreement Done, Trump Administration Sees in India an Ally on China', *The Wire*, 27 October 2020.

74. On the India-Australia relationship and its difficulties, see Dhruva Jaisankar, *The Australia-India Strategic Partnership: Accelerating Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2020.

75. Dinakar Peri, 'Australia to join Malabar naval exercise next month', *The Hindu*, 19 October 2020.

76. Dinakar Peri, 'Malabar 2020: the coming together of the Quad in the seas', *The Hindu*, 31 October 2020; Shuvu Batta & Keith Jones, 'With Malabar exercise, Quad emerging as US-led, anti-China military alliance', *World Socialist Web Site*, 16 November 2020. See also Salvatore Babones, 'The Quad's Malabar Exercises Point the Way to an Asian NATO', *Foreign Policy*, 25 November 2020. It should be noted that the 'Asian NATO' of which Babones speaks ought to be, as in his opinion has become the real NATO, «primarily a training and standards-setting organization, not an armed defense force».

Meanwhile, on 27 October 2020, in concomitance with the third 2+2 security dialogue, the last of the so-called Foundational Agreements, enhancing India-US interoperability at the military level was signed. It was the Indo-US Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for geo-spatial co-ordination, or BECA, which had been negotiated «for more than a decade».⁷⁷ BECA would allow the militaries of the two countries to access an extensive assortment of geospatial data from each other. In particular India, being able to access to the US' «highly accurate navigation satellite networks», would acquire the capability «to strike targets thousands of kilometres away with great accuracy».⁷⁸

3.3. *The costs for India of the de facto military alliance with the US*

Summing up what has been argued so far, it is clear that the trend that already characterised the India-US relationship at the time of Trump's official visit to India had become even more pronounced by the end of the year under analysis. In particular, by the last quarter of 2020, it was difficult to see what was the difference between the shape taken by the US-India strategic connection and a formal military alliance. Nevertheless, most Indian analysts and the public opinion at large appeared convinced that India's strategic vicinity to the US did not amount to a military alliance. This opinion nicely dovetailed with the criticism to the state of India-US connection made by well-known US foreign relations expert Ashley Tellis, although from a quite different standpoint. In Tellis's opinion the India-US military alliance did exist, but, in fact, mainly on paper. This was the result of the lack of a systematic follow up work to make the foundational US-India agreements operative. In Tellis's view, this left the two sides in need «to know much more about each other's forces, where they are located, what their doctrines are and how they operate».⁷⁹

The prevalent Indian opinion on the US-India strategic connection and Tellis's criticism of its state coincided in assessing it as a loose construction. One, in fact, that was lying dormant, but that Indians – in Tellis's opinion mistakenly – thought could be activated at will, in case of need. Along the same line of thinking, former Ambassador M.K. Bhadrakumar, referring to BECA and the other foundational US-India agreements, had stated: «The Indians at large harbour a notion that their country is cherry-p-

77. Vivek Raghuvanshi, 'India, US sign intel-sharing agreement amid tension with neighboring China', *Defense News*, 28 October 2020.

78. Rohan Venkataramakrishnan, 'What you need to know about the India-US 2+2 dialogue and their efforts to deal with China', *Scroll.in*, 28 October 2020. See also Vishnu Som & Arun Nair, 'What BECA, Key Defence Agreement, Means For India, US: 10-Point Guide', *NDTV*, 27 October 2020.

79. Seema Sirohi, 'China Tensions: Can the US or the Quad Come to India's Help?', *The Wire*, 5 December 2020.

icking out of the American basket of goods».⁸⁰ This was a delusion that was coupled with the conviction that activating the alliance at will or «cherry-picking» out of the American «basket of goods» could be done without paying any (political) price. Put differently, with very few exceptions Indian analysts and opinion-makers seemed convinced that, in spite of the tightening of the India-US connection, India's much vaunted «strategic autonomy» had remained untouched.

Reality, however, was somewhat different: the foundational agreements – as had been feared by the Indian governments in power before 2014 – had the potentiality to allow an increasingly closer US control of some key ganglions of India's defence apparatus; moreover the foundational agreements were bound to create problems as far as the supply of weapons from Russia was concerned; finally, the tightening of the connection with the US was already limiting the field of action open to Indian strategic initiative.

No doubt, the data and high technology security equipment which India received from the US thanks in particular to COMCASA, the foundational pact signed in 2018, and BECA were indeed «force multipliers» as claimed by the US. They were an extraordinary powerful asset for the Indian military in an age when war is becoming overwhelmingly digitalized. The problem was that – as pointed out by Indian military expert Pravin Sawhney – the high technology COMCASA security equipment, necessary to process and make use of the BECA-supplied data, was vulnerable to US pre-implanted «nano malware (malicious software) codes that start functioning when certain conditions are met, or outside instructions are given after months or even years». Also, in Sawhney's view: «Since US (cyber) experts would be authorised COMCASA system users, they could corrupt datasets on command for as long as they want». In this situation, the US «could even overwrite Indian short-range, point to point radio frequency connections by long-range high-powered signals from beyond physical parameters». Last but not least, Sawhney pointed out that the US had developed «impressive nano weapons capable of transiting through cyberspace to disrupt or destroy physical infrastructure». In conclusion, in Sawhney's opinion: «The reality is India has cut off its nose to spite the Chinese by flaunting untested strategic ties with the US».⁸¹

The second problem was that, as noted by M.K. Bhadrakumar, «the coordinates or inputs that BECA provides may not be useful beyond a point in their application, since something like seventy percent of Indian weapons are of Russian origin, which may be incompatible with the US services». Of course, more widespread became the utilization of BECA-supplied data and

80. M.K. Bhadrakumar, 'Emerging contours of the US-Indian military alliance', *Indian Punchline*, 24 October 2020.

81. Pravin Sawhney, 'Why India's Latest Defence Agreement with the United States May Prove a Costly Bargain', *The Wire*, 27 October 2020.

their processing through COMCASA high technology security equipment, greater was the incentive for India to progressively whittle down dependence on Russian weaponry. This was a process bound to be strengthened by the fact that «Russia would have misgivings while transferring cutting-edge military technology in future», because of US capability to penetrate the working of India-owned weaponry, made possible by the increased US-India interoperability.⁸² All this was, of course, a success for US diplomacy, but much less so for India's capability to maintain its «strategic autonomy» when confronted by US pressure.

The point is that, even before the signing of the last foundational agreement between the US and India, the latter's inability to cope with the pressure of the former, when implementing its foreign policy, had become visible. The most glaring example of this involution is represented by the unravelling of the India-Iran connection. And it is on this problem that we must now focus our attention.

3.4. *The India-Iran connection as a case study of India's loss of strategic autonomy*

Undoing the then flourishing India-Iran relation had been an avowed goal of the US foreign policy since 2005. Up to 2019, however, India, while pursuing increasingly closer ties with the US, had somehow managed to maintain a tolerably good relation with Iran. New Delhi had appeased the US by diminishing its oil imports from Iran, but the diminution had been implemented by small descending steps and along a long period of time. At the United Nations, India had started to vote in favour of US-sponsored motions against Iran, calling on Iran to stop alleged uranium enrichment – which it did in 2005, 2009 and 2011. At the same time, however, India had opposed any anti-Iran sanctions. New Delhi had also actively mediated between Tehran and the International Atomic Energy Agency, encouraging the former to respond to the explanations demanded by the IAEA. In fact, the post-2005 India's Iranian foreign policy had been so effective to succeed in the apparently impossible task of satisfying both the US and Iran.⁸³

When Iran agreed a long-term deal on its nuclear programme with the P5+1 (the US, UK, France, China, Russia and Germany), which led to the lifting of most of the sanctions by January 2016, India was in the ideal position to make the most of it. This was the aim of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he visited Iran on 22-23 May 2016. Modi concluded his two-day visit by signing a number of agreements, committing an investment

82. M.K. Bhadrakumar, 'India's remains of the day in Ladakh', *Newsclick*, 28 October 2020.

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

of US\$ 500 million to develop Iran's only oceanic port, Chabahar, on the Gulf of Oman, and a further US\$ 20 billion investment in infrastructure projects. Included among the latter was the construction of a US\$ 400 million railway connecting Chabahar to Zahedan. This was an Iranian city near to the Afghan border and not far from the Afghan city of Zaranj, which was the starting point of an India-built highway leading to the Afghan city of Delaram.⁸⁴

These agreements were the premise to the implementation of a wider geostrategic project, involving the construction of new rail links and modern road belts in Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The last two countries were of central importance in opening the transit towards Europe not only because of their geographical position, but because of their abundance of water resources, which could be used to enable the operation of electrified rail networks.⁸⁵ The aim of the whole project was to open a major connection which, bypassing Pakistan and China, would open a fast communication route between India and Europe. Of course, even Iran and the Central Asian countries involved in the project would greatly benefit from it.

The pact sealing this great infrastructure operation was signed not only by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, but also by then Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. Unfortunately, however, the prospects for completing this grandiose project suddenly dimmed when Donald Trump entered the White House (20 January 2017). The new President had never concealed his unhappiness about the Iran deal; eventually, he formally pulled out from it in May 2018. This was soon followed by the imposition of heavy sanctions both on both Iran and those nations or entities which maintained economic ties with it.⁸⁶

India found herself at the receiving end of Trump's decisions. Iran, in fact, continued to be relevant for India as a main oil supplier and, following the trilateral India-Iran-Afghanistan deal of May 2016, as the crucially important corridor bypassing Pakistan and reaching Afghanistan and Central Asia.

After trying to find some way out, India substantially decreased the volume of imported Iranian oil. Eventually, in May 2019, officially declared to have stopped importing it altogether, although doubts remained

84. On Modi's visit to Iran see, e.g., Internet Desk, 'Modi's visit to Iran: highlights', *The Hindu*, 22 May 2016; Rishi Iyengar, 'What Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Visit to Iran Means for Asia', *Time*, 24 May 2016; K.P. Fabian, 'Modi in Iran: A Successful Visit', *IPCS*, 25 May 2016.

85. Francesca Salvatore, 'Il fallimento (voluto) della Via della Seta Indiana', *Insideover*, 5 September 2020.

86. Mark Landler, 'Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal He Long Scorned', *The New York Times*, 8 May 2018; Sason Hadad and Tomer Fadlon, 'The Second Round of Sanctions against Iran: The Impact on Iran and the Global Oil Market', *INSS Insight* No. 1110, 27 November 2018; Andrew Stanley, Sarah Ladislav & Frank Verrastro, *Iran Sanctions at the Halfway Point*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018; Ellie Geranmayeh & Manuel Lafont Rapnouil, *Meeting the Challenge of Secondary Sanctions*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019.

that some Iranian oil continued to be imported.⁸⁷ At the same time, the future of the India-Iran infrastructure project remained shrouded in uncertainty. Logically, it should have been in Washington's crosshairs. However, the development of the Chabahar port and the building of the Chabahar-Zahedan corridor would open an easy connection to Afghanistan, which could be exploited by the US in its struggle against the local insurgency. Also, Chabahar and its corridor were in direct competition with the Chinese-developed nearby Pakistani port of Gwadar, the terminal of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), namely a crucial part of China's sponsored Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As already argued elsewhere, this clarifies why then-US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, during his October 2017 tour of the Middle East and South Asia, *de facto* gave the green light to India to proceed with the Chabahar project.⁸⁸ However, given Trump's unpredictability, there was no assurance for New Delhi that Tillerson's go-head could not be suddenly reversed. This uncertainty could not but be strengthened by Trump's sudden firing of Tillerson, via Twitter, on 13 March 2018.

The uncertainty over the future of the project, brought about by the unpredictability of Trump's decisions, was enough to discourage the participation of partners and investors. It is also possible that, as argued by Italian analyst Francesca Salvatore, it was the Indian government itself that had second thoughts about the whole project.⁸⁹ Having a good relationship with Trump by completely stopping the existing economic relations with Iran might have seemed more important to the Modi government than pursuing the grandiose plan of structural investments that would have opened up a privileged path for trade exchanges between India and Europe.

The Modi government never put a formal stop to the Chabahar-Zahedan project, but, following Trump's anti-Iranian sanctions, began to mark the step as far as its implementation was concerned. Eventually Tehran, tired of the Indian delays in implementing the project, decided to complete it on its own. In July, Iranian Transport and Urban Development Minister Mohammad Eslami inaugurated the track-laying process for the 628 km Chabahar-Zahedan line. The line would be extended to Zaranj across the border in Afghanistan. According to official Iranian sources, the

87. Niall McCarthy, 'Who Imports Iranian Oil?', *Statista*, 24 April 2019; Nayanima Basu & Mahua Venkatesh, 'India gives in to US pressure, fully stops import of Iran oil', *The Print*, 9 May 2019; John Prentice Caves III, 'Oil Trade Between Iran and India Plummets', *The Iran Primer*, 12 June 2019; Suhasini Haidar, 'India says Iran oil imports not stopped', *The Hindu*, 3 July 2019; Arvind Kumar & Seshadri Chari, 'India's changing dynamics with Iran on oil import', *The Sunday Guardian*, 26 October 2019; Amiti Sen, 'India-Iran trade dips 79.4 per cent in April-Nov; may fall further', *Business Line*, 7 January 2020.

88. Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2017: Narendra Modi's continuing hegemony and his challenge to China', p. 284.

89. Francesca Salvatore, 'Il fallimento (voluto) della Via della Seta Indiana'.

entire project would be completed by March 2022 and would be carried out without India's assistance.⁹⁰

How Iran had been able to find the necessary resources to start the construction of the Chabahar-Zahedan line on its own was explained by a news item which followed closely on the heels of the inauguration: this was that Iran and China had «quietly drafted a sweeping economic and security partnership that would clear the way for billions of dollars of Chinese investments in energy and other sectors».⁹¹ According to a leaked version of the Iran-China agreement, it «would vastly expand Chinese presence in banking, telecommunications, ports, railways and dozens of other projects. In exchange, China would receive a regular – and, according to an Iranian official and an oil trader, heavily discounted – supply of Iranian oil over the next 25 years».⁹²

It had undoubtedly been the prospect of substantial Chinese funding that had enabled Iran to start working on the Chabahar-Zahedan line. It should also be added that the agreement provided for the lease of the Chabahar port to China. Moreover, China would also be put in charge to develop Bandar-e-Jask, a port 348 km west from Chabahar. Also in the cards was a tie-up between Chabahar and the Chinese-run Pakistani port at Gwadar.⁹³

The Iran-China agreement – which had been approved by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's cabinet in June – was still to be ratified by the Iranian majles (consultative parliament) and made public by both China and Iran. There is little doubt, nevertheless, that, being the project supported by Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, its early ratification on the part of Iran's consultative parliament could be taken for granted.⁹⁴

Former Indian Ambassador to Iran K.C. Singh, in commenting the Iran-China deal and its possible consequences on the Iran-India connection, cautioned that it «impinges on India's "strategic ties" with Iran».⁹⁵ Frankly, however, one wonders which kind of «strategic ties» still existed between India and Iran. By July 2020, the caving in of the Modi government to US pressure had damaged, apparently beyond repair, the India-Iran con-

90. Suhasini Haidar, 'Iran drops India from Chabahar rail project, cites funding delay', *The Hindu*, 14 July 2020.

91. Farnaz Fassihi & Steven Lee Myers, 'Defying U.S., China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership', *The New York Times*, 11 July 2020 (updated on 30 November 2020).

92. *Ibid.*

93. Suhasini Haidar, 'Iran drops India from Chabahar rail project, cites funding delay'.

94. Farnaz Fassihi & Steven Lee Myers, 'Defying U.S., China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership'.

95. Suhasini Haidar, 'Iran drops India from Chabahar rail project, cites funding delay'.

nection, contributing to push Iran into the arms of China.⁹⁶ This was making impossible the realization of the ambitious project to open a sea-land highway connecting India to Europe, circumventing those land barriers (Pakistan and China) which made virtually an island of India. Indian analysts and politicians could still discuss India's strategic autonomy as if it existed and was politically relevant, but the impression is undeniable that, by the end of the year under review, India's «strategic autonomy» still existed only in the realm of fantasy.

4. Conclusion

Summing up what has been said so far, it is clear that India's foreign relations in the year under review, while unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic, were moulded by two main developments: the adversarial relation with China and the increasingly close military connection with the US. In turn, there is no doubt that the two developments were strictly interconnected. This remains true even if, as pointed out by a shrewd Indian analyst, and as shown in this article: «It is impossible to decide which of two things caused the other one — the mushrooming US-Indian military alliance or the continuing downhill slide in the India-China relationship».⁹⁷

Of course, this author is well aware that the bulk of Western and Indian analysts do not share the explanations offered in this article on the causes of the India-China Himalayan clash. In fact, most of them forcefully argue that Beijing's actions are part and parcel of an aggressive global strategy, belligerently carried out by China not only along the Indian border but in the whole of the Indo-Pacific. This author, nevertheless, after following the evolution of the India-China connection since 1989 on a yearly basis, has reached a different conclusion. His contention is that the ongoing downturn in the relations between the two Asian giants started in 2006 as a reaction on the part of China to what she perceived as a dangerous change in India's foreign policy. In fact, China's reassessment of her relation with India was the response to what this author has labelled as the US «nuclear seduction» of India. This was a «seduction» which started in 2005, when then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited New Delhi promising Washington's support to the design of making of India a great power. It was a «seduction» which was carried to fruition in 2008, with the civil nuclear agreement between the two nations.⁹⁸

96. E.g., Andrew Korybko, 'India and Russia are responsible for pushing Iran into China's arms', *The Express Tribune*, 15 July 2020.

97. M. K. Bhadrakumar, 'Emerging contours of the US-Indian military alliance', *Indian Punchline*, 24 October 2020.

98. These events have been closely analysed by this author in the articles published in *Asia Maior*, Vols. XVI&XVII/2005-2006; XVIII/2007; and XIX/2008.

The 2008 civil nuclear agreement firmly inserted India in the US geo-strategic area of influence – or, at least, Beijing perceived it as bound to have that result. It was the prospect of the forthcoming conclusion of the civil nuclear US-India agreement which triggered first China's unofficial warning of its danger (through a television interview by China's Ambassador in New Delhi⁹⁹), and then Beijing's reversal of the positive trend which had been characterizing India-China bilateral relations, since Rajiv Gandhi's China visit in 1988. It is worth stressing that it was a positive trend which, hitherto, had not been derailed, if not for a few years, even by India's nuclear experiments in 1998.

The analyses on the China-India-US trilateral relations are many, and many are tremendously well-crafted. They are mainly built around two radically different theses. The majority opinion is that China – as noted above – has embarked on an aggressive and extremely dangerous escalation to world power; the minority opinion is that China is pursuing a mainly defensive policy, aimed at preventing the danger of her own political, economic and military strangulation on the part of the declining hegemon, the US, and its allies.

Both theses have been, and will continue to be, powerfully and intelligently argued. In the end, nonetheless, this writer – being himself a historian rather than a political analyst – is convinced that the problem of the real springs and intentions of China's foreign policy in the late XX and early XXI centuries, including her India policy, will only be solved by historians, once they will be able to accede to the confidential documents of the parties involved. Which, of course, they will be able to do only in a not so near future.

This means that the knowledge of the inner springs of China's foreign policy is not available to us for the time being and, accordingly, a correct comprehension of the real causes of the events discussed in this article re-

99. The interview was given by Ambassador Sun Yuxi to CNN-IBN on 19 November 2006, just a week before then PRC President Hu Jintao arrival in India for an official four-day visit. See, e.g., 'China lays claim to Arunachal', *Hindustan Times*, 19 November 2006. What, at the time, was noted by few commentators was that it was the first time ever that China claimed territory south of the McMahon Line. In other words, Sun Yuxi's statements signalled a radical change in China's policy in relation to the Himalayan border issue. In fact, Beijing had hitherto accepted the McMahon line as the de facto border with India. Some commentators dismissed Sun's statement as a diplomatic gaffe. With the benefit of hindsight, however, it is easy to realise that it was a warning to the Indian government. From this point of view, it is noteworthy that the change in Chinese policy was signalled in a television interview, not through an official statement by the Chinese government or a diplomatic note to the Indian government. It is clear that Beijing wanted to warn Delhi of the real risk of a change of China's policy, but without making it irreversible yet. Whether the policy was enforced would depend on India's continuing her rapprochement with the US through the finalisation of the civil nuclear deal. At the time, it was by no means a foregone conclusion that the nuclear deal would be finalized.

mains a matter of conjecture. Nevertheless, how the chain of events took place and some of the features characterising them can be singled out and analysed, as has been attempted in this article. Also, it is possible to highlight the (provisional) consequences of the chain of events analysed in this article. In doing it, this article has argued that the deterioration of India's relation with China (it does not matter what are its causes) and India's increasingly closer relation with the US (and even here, it does not matter what are the causes of this development) have translated into a radical diminution of India's much hyped «strategic autonomy». This loss of autonomy – it has been argued – is shown, for example, by the deterioration of the India-Iran relations.

Of course, one can challenge the above conclusion, by arguing that the contradictory shifts in India's foreign policy *vis-à-vis* Iran varied according to Indian interests. Differently put, they depend upon a realistic appraisal of their costs and benefits. According to this view, Iran does not fit into India's national priorities; as a consequence, India's pro-Iran stance can easily and conveniently be bargained for greater support from the US.

This is a thesis not without its own logical potency. However, if Iran does not fit into India's priorities, one wonders why New Delhi has focussed so much time and effort first in strengthening (in the 1990s and early 2000s) and then in maintaining (since 2005) her connection with Tehran. Also, it begs the question what are the advantages that India has obtained, and/or is going to obtain, by abandoning her connection with Iran.

To this writer, in the last analysis such advantages seem to be essentially two: the first, of a more general nature, consists in avoiding the imposition of US sanctions; the second, which has become apparent particularly during Narendra Modi's premiership, consists in India having the possibility to buy huge amounts of American state-of-the-art advanced weapons and weapon systems, necessary to keep China in check.

Concerning the first advantage flowing from the increasingly tight US connection, it goes without saying that avoiding the danger to end up in the grip of Washington's devastating economic sanctions is undoubtedly in India's interest. Nonetheless, accepting to give up an economically profitable and important connection with a friendly country to avoid US' wrath cannot be construed, by any stretch of the imagination, as being a demonstration of «strategic autonomy».

Concerning the second alleged advantage, we have a situation in which the US is helping India in protecting herself from a danger – the adversarial relation with China – which, in this author's opinion, Washington itself has intelligently, deliberately, and decisively contributed to create. Accordingly, even this second supposed advantage is far from being proof of the good health of New Delhi's much vaunted «strategic autonomy». Rather, it seems a demonstration, as clear cut as any, of the increasing subservience of India's foreign policy to the US imperial goals.

Summing up, this author's contention is that a loss of India's strategic autonomy – signalled by her botched Iran policy, but visible even in other areas – has indeed been taking place. Also, it is worth stressing that this loss is the end result of a strategy first conceived and put in motion by the George W. Bush administration, whose aim was the strengthening of the US position of influence in what was later called the Indo-Pacific. It was a process which – rather unwisely, according to this writer – was accepted as beneficial to India by then India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. He played a key role in making it possible, going so far as to put his position as prime minister at risk to make the US-India nuclear deal possible. He did that convinced that the nuclear agreement would make possible a new and more advanced phase in the modernization of India.¹⁰⁰ Unfortunately, more than 10 years later, the basic result of that agreement appears to have been a powerful contribution to the progressive loss of India's strategic autonomy.

All the above means, without a shadow of doubt, that, in the last analysis, the loss of India's strategic autonomy started well before Modi's time. Nevertheless, it is worth stressing that Prime Minister Modi, far from being able to reverse this process, has not even been able to contain it. This is that same political leader who loves to present himself, and is presented by his many admirers, as an all-powerful demiurge, a man who «changed the face of India's foreign policy»,¹⁰¹ an extraordinary politician who «has given Indian diplomacy a new focus, energy and zeal», surprising «in almost every instance [...] both his admirers and his critics».¹⁰²

Maybe the truth about Narendra Modi's abilities is slightly different.

100. See the sources quoted in fn.99, in particular the last one.

101. Manasi Gopalakrishnan & Mahesh Jha, 'How PM Modi changed the face of Indian foreign policy', *Deutsche Welle*, 6 May 2019.

102. Subhash Agrawal, 'Indian Diplomacy Under Prime Minister Modi', typescript, 2020 (the author is the director of *India Focus*, a political risk report for international executives, diplomats and bankers).