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ASIA MAIOR

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Asia in the Waning Shadow of American Hegemony

Edited by

Michelguglielmo Torri, Elisabetta Basile, Nicola Mocci

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FOREWORD

ASIA MAIOR IN 2017: THE UNRAVELLING OF THE US FOREIGN POLICY IN ASIA AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

In previous years, the authors of the forewords to the *Asia Maior* volumes have been arguing that the dominant leitmotiv in the present evolution of Asia was the conflict between a declining world hegemon, the US, and a rising challenger, China. In particular, the history of the decline of the hegemonic power of the US in Asia, from the peak reached soon after WW2, and that of the rise of China was analysed in some detail in the foreword to *Asia Maior 2009*. The conclusion reached there was unambiguous: the US long-term decline was a stark reality that was evident «not only for the Chinese ruling élite, but for whoever analysed the present historical phase without the blinkers of Eurocentric conceit». However, in the same essay, the undoubted reality of the US decline was put in historical perspective, by comparing it with that of the archetypal empire in the history of the West, namely the Roman Empire. As argued in the 2009 foreword, the fact that the Roman Empire was on a steeply declining trend had clearly been perceived by the members of its intellectual élites well before the final fall. In particular, historian Cassius Dio, in every respect a member of the Roman ruling class, saw the passage from the reign of Marcus Aurelius to that of Commodus – which he directly witnessed – as the descent «from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust». ¹ Again as noticed in the 2009 foreword, the clear perception of the crisis and its gravity, however, does not detract from the fact that the decline and fall of the Roman Empire was a long-drawn affair, not without important and partially successful attempts at reversing it. At the end of the day, a decline that Cassius Dio had seen as beginning with Commodus's rise to power in 180 C.E. had its final dénouement with the sack of Rome by the Goths in 410 C.E., namely 330 years later. ² «The decadence and fall of American hegemony – concluded the 2009 foreword – will, in all likelihood, be much

1. Cassius Dio, LXXII, 36, 4. On the perception of the ongoing decline by members of the intellectual and political élites of the Roman Empire well before its fall, see Santo Mazzarino, *La fine del mondo antico*, Milano: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1995 [1st edn. 1959], ch. 2. For an English translation, see *The End of the Ancient World*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976.

2. Of course the Western Roman Empire continued to exist for some decades more, but after 410 it effectively ceased to be the hegemonic power in the Western Mediterranean region, a transition of which the Roman Senate was acutely conscious.

quicker; but it is unlikely that anyone who reads these lines today can witness the definitive conclusion of this process.»³

In the years since those words were written, nothing has happened – according to this author – which can invalidate the conclusions there reached. But – as shown once again by the history of the Roman Empire – if robust and even apparently successful attempts to reverse a long-term decline affecting an imperial power are possible, equally possible – and perhaps more probable – are temporary accelerations of the process of decline, usually brought about less by a quickening of the long-term structural causes of decline than by a failure in leadership. This is exactly what appears to have happened in 2017, during the first year of Donald Trump's presidency.



This is not the place to attempt an in-depth analysis of the personality and policies of the 45th US president. But some points, relevant to understanding what happened in Asia in the year under review, are in order. As observed one year ago, in the foreword to *Asia Maior 2016*: «The unexpected election of Donald Trump as the new US president, on 8 November 2016, brought to power a politician whose programme, although lacking in clarity and coherence, appeared to have as its polar star the objective of undoing most if not all of the major policies and reforms carried out by his predecessor.» Differently put, and limiting ourselves to the field of foreign policy, Donald Trump's political ideas on how to manage relations between the US and the remainder of the world were – and have continued to be – few, roughly conceived and, more importantly, highly dysfunctional.

This weakness in vision was compounded and magnified by the personality of the new president, who was seen by other heads of state or heads of government as a shallow and vain person, whose weaknesses of character could easily be manipulated.⁴ As far as Asia is concerned, in 2017 the lack of vision and shallowness of character of the new US president, although somewhat contained by the professionalism of the US civil and military bureaucracies, translated into something akin to a foreign policy catastrophe. In turn, the resulting US loss in power and prestige and the consequent «disorder under the heaven» of Asia, not only facilitated the

3. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Declino e continuità dell'egemonia americana in Asia', *Asia Maior 2009*, p. 29.

4. Tell-tales of this attitude by the Asian leaders have been the utilisation of psychologists' advice on how to tackle the American president by Shinzō Abe or the particularly ostentatious reception that the Chinese leadership gave to Trump during his official visit to Beijing. Regarding these two episodes, see the articles on Japan by Giulio Pugliese and Sebastian Maslow, and on China by Francesca Congiu and Christian Rossi in this same volume.

continuing rise of China, but allowed – or, rather, forced upon – other major Asian countries, namely Japan and India, an increasingly proactive role in the attempted containment of China.



The Obama administration had clearly perceived the problem posed by China's rise and had reacted to it through a policy which, for all its imperfections, had the advantage of being a well thought-out and coherent grand policy. It was based on two pillars: the «Pivot to Asia», namely the redeployment of the bulk of the US military forces in the Asia-Pacific area, and the TPP (Trans Pacific Partnership), namely a 12-country⁵ free trade agreement, which aimed at establishing a set of US-decided new rules, which would mould not only any future economic interexchange in the Asia-Pacific but the working itself of the local economies. As argued, among others by Francesca Congiu in previous Asia Maior issues, the *political* aim of the whole exercise was the imposition of these new, US-made rules even on China. In fact, the new pact – from which China was excluded – meant Beijing faced the dilemma of accepting those Washington-dictated rules, entering the TPP, or being excluded from the advantages of trading with those countries included in the TPP.

True to his promise to withdraw the US from the TPP «from day one» of his presidency, on 23 January 2017 – soon after his swearing in as the 45th US president on 20 January 2017 – Donald Trump officially ended the US's participation in the TPP, effectively demolishing one of the two pillars on which the «contain China» policy of his predecessor had been based. By doing that, Trump «unilaterally» gave away «the biggest piece of leverage he had to deal with the biggest challenge in the world of trade», represented by «the increasingly troubling behaviour by the world's second largest economy, China».⁶

The exit from the TPP was only the first step in a policy that moved from the idea that multilateral trade organisations and pacts, including organisations and pacts once promoted and hitherto sponsored by the US, were impediments to realising Trump's «America first» policy. Significantly, in September 2017 news filtered that the termination of the 2007 South Korea-US trade agreement (KORUS), which had been dubbed as «horrible» by Trump, was under serious consideration.⁷ Also, in November, during the

5. In 2016 the TPP included Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam, and the United States.

6. The evaluation is that of Edward Alden, a senior analyst of the Washington-based Council of Foreign Relations. Srinivas Mazumdar, 'Trump's TPP move boosts China's clout in Asia', *Deutsche Welle*, 24 January 2017.

7. Damian Paletta, 'Trump preparing withdrawal from South Korea Trade deal, a move opposed by top aids', *The Washington Post*, 2 September 2017; Michelle Ye Hee Lee, 'Trump wants to end «horrible» South Korea-U.S. trade deal. Koreans disagree',

Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Da Nang, President Trump «mounted the podium to essentially deplore the uselessness of multilateral trade organisations like APEC» and «devoted nearly a third of his address to whining about unfair treatment meted out [to the US] by the World Trade Organisation.»⁸

At the economic level, all the above signalled the transition from Obama's grand strategy to a new, petty strategy, based on the pursuit of bilateral free-trade agreements, securing greater balance in trade between the US and those countries with whom the US had significant trade deficits. This was a strategy that had several drawbacks.

The first drawback was that, while China was by far the main offender, with its US\$ 347 billion trade deficit with the US, the list of the other Asian countries with a two-digits trade surplus (in billion dollars) with the US basically included all the main US allies in the region, starting with Japan (with a US\$ 69 billion trade surplus).⁹

The second drawback was that the US sudden decision to withdraw from the TPP, its threatened exit from KORUS, its criticism of institutions such as APEC and the WTO showed how untrustworthy the US had become even in its relations with its closest allies.

The third drawback was that, short of resorting to a mutually destructive trade war, it was difficult for the US to convince the offending nations to drastically scale down their trade surpluses. But this de facto impotence was accompanied by a style of negotiation characterised by inflexibility, arrogance and hardly-veiled threats. Arrogant and blustering impotence appeared to have become the leitmotiv of US economic (and, as we shall see, not only economic) policy in Asia (and, of course, not only in Asia).

The final and possibly most important drawback – although one hardly perceived by the US and international public opinion – was that of the «value chains». In today's economic world, in two thirds of the cases the production process of any given good is carried out in different countries. This means that something produced for example in China, which is finally

The Washington Post, 14 September 2017. The US position on KORUS continued to be an argument of contention between Washington and Seoul for the remainder of the year. See Marco Milani's article in this same issue.

8. Nayan Chanda, 'Trump Abdicates Global Leadership to China's Xi', *Asian Sentinel*, 17 November 2017.

9. Apart from China and Japan, the other Asian countries with two-digit trade surpluses in billion dollars were: Nepal (38); Vietnam (32); South Korea (28); Malaysia (25); India (24); Thailand (19) Taiwan (13); Indonesia (13). The Philippines, Cambodia, Sri Lanka had a modest surplus in the order of US\$ 2 billion; that of Pakistan was even lower (US\$ 1 billion). Only Singapore had a trade deficit (US\$ 2 billion) with the US. The source of these data is the USA Census Bureau. They are reported in 'US has trade deficits with most Asian trade partners', *The Nation (Thailand Portal)*, 16 June 2017.

exported to the US, most times includes research and design activities for critical components which are usually carried out in advanced countries, including the US, and which are usually high value-added. The same product very often includes parts manufactured in advanced industrial countries, among which, of course, is the US. Then the product is assembled in China, where the cost of labour is lower than in the other countries producing all or most components of that given product. This is the phase that has the lowest value-added. Finally the product is exported to the US, where the consumer is offered marketing, logistics and after-product servicing, namely high valued-added activities, which are usually carried out by US market-knowledge industries. All this means that, under the profile of the value chain, a «made in China» product sold in the US is effectively made by China only marginally and can include US-made components that, from the viewpoint of value-added, can represent most of the value of a given product. Hence a policy of heavy tariffs on that given product is self-defeating, as it hurts not so much its apparent producer, namely China, but other producers and distributors who, in many cases, are American.¹⁰



In short, Trump's new foreign economic policy in Asia was badly conceived, designed to either hurt or alarm even long-term or potential US allies, difficult to apply and, ultimately, self-defeating. More or less the same features were visible in Trump's more strictly political dealings with Asia. Here, the main problem, on which, throughout the year under review, much of the attention and activities of the new administration was focused, was the North Korea crisis. As pointed out by Sebastian Maslow and Giulio Pugliese, it was made a priority by Trump in the US foreign policy, «from early on in his presidency».

The North Korea crisis was triggered by the aggressive nuclear armament policy carried out by its new and young leader, Kim Jong Un. It found expression in a series of nuclear tests and launching of medium and long-range missiles, capable of carrying nuclear warheads. This was a policy that, as indicated in the articles by Marco Milani in this and in previous *Asia Maior* articles, most international analysts and the political representatives of the potential targets of a North Korean nuclear attack, perceived as being based on a series of «provocations». More rarely noted was the fact that Kim Jong Un's «provocations» were accompanied by repeated statements that North Korea's overarching political objectives remained the same as those pursued by his two predecessors: his grandfather, Kim Il Sung, and his father, Kim Jong Il. These were: first the assurance that North Korea would not be invaded again; and, second, the economic support to replace

10. David Dollar, 'Global value chains shed new light on trade', *Brookings*, 10 July 2017.

the hydropower capacity destroyed by the US aviation during the Korean War (1950-53).¹¹ These two (rather moderate) requests made by Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il were agreed to by the Clinton administration in 1994, «when North Korea pledged to stop producing plutonium in exchange for nuclear power plants».¹²

This was an agreement that worked well enough up to the terrorist attacks in the US of 11 September 2001. Although it was clear from the beginning that there had been no involvement by Iraq, Iran and North Korea, those countries were referred to, by then-US President George W. Bush, as the «axis of evil» (29 January 2001). More worrying for the North Korean leadership (and, one supposes, for the Iranian one) was the fact that the «axis of evil» speech was followed one year later by the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq (launched on 20 March 2003) on the trumped up charge that Baghdad owned weapons of mass destruction. In the first phase of the invasion, which appeared headed for an easy and rapid military success, rumours started to circulate that Iran would be next. This being the situation, Kim Jong Il's decision to start in earnest a nuclear weapons programme, which brought about the first North Korean nuclear test in 2006, only appears as rational and prudent: Saddam Hussein's fall from power, his hunting down and hanging, the massive destruction of Iraq and the loss of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives¹³ had come to pass not because Saddam did have weapons of mass destruction, but for exactly the opposite reason. The nuclear programme was taken up by Kim Jong Il's successor, Kim Jong Un, and strengthened. No doubt the fate of Muammar Gaddafi's Libya and Bashar al-Assad's Syria could not but reinforce his resolve.

George W. Bush's tough line on North Korea was «largely continued»¹⁴ by the Obama administration and – in one of the very rare cases of continuity between the Obama administration and that of his successor – was taken up – and taken up with a vengeance – by the Trump administration.

As noticed by Marco Milani in this same volume, Trump took an uncompromising stand on the North Korean question. During his first months in office, he apparently relied on China to curb North Korea's nuclear ambitions, by pursuing a strategy aimed at making the political

11. The analysis of the roots of the North Korean crisis is squarely based on Richard Rhodes & Michael Shellenberger, 'Atoms for Pyongyang', *Foreign Affairs* (Snapshot), 23 May 2017.

12. *Ibid.*

13. According to a study published in the well-known medical journal, *The Lancet*, «as of July, 2006, there have been 654,965 (392,979 – 942,636) excess Iraqi deaths as a consequence of the war, which corresponds to 2.5% of the population in the study area.» Gilbert Burnham, Riyadh Lafta, Shannon Doocy, Les Roberts, 'Mortality after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: a cross-sectional cluster sample survey', *The Lancet*, Vol. 368, Issue No. 9545, 21 October 2006, p. 1421 (online version at www.thelancet.com, published on 12 October 2006).

14. Richard Rhodes & Michael Shellenberger, 'Atoms for Pyongyang'.

and economic isolation of Pyongyang complete. When this strategy failed to bring Kim Jong Un to his knees, Trump «moved to a very confrontational approach based on maximum pressure and dangerous rhetoric, which included the possibility of a military conflict with North Korea.»¹⁵ But, of course, the threat of a direct military attack on North Korea, and its utter destruction, openly made by the US president, were totally unrealistic. By then Kim Jong Un could rely on a credible nuclear force: no doubt North Korea could be reduced by the US to a radioactive wasteland, but the cost for the US's closest allies in Eastern Asia, South Korea and Japan – and consequently the political and economic fall-out for the US itself – would be simply devastating. At the end of the day, exactly as in the field of economic foreign relations, President Trump's preferred approach to North Korea was characterised by arrogant and blustering impotence. In the second part of the year, this even became evident to the same Trump administration, which, as noted below, gradually gave in to the moral suasion exercised by China, taking a less uncompromising and more realistic stand.



One of the main results of the foreign policy of Donald Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama, had been the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), namely the deal to limit the Iranian nuclear programme.¹⁶ As noted by President Obama himself, the JCPOA was «a deal between states that are not friends», and was «not built on trust [but] built on verification».¹⁷ Exactly for these reasons, the deal, although an imperfect one, was basically good.¹⁸ Certainly, the International Atomic

15. Marco Milani in this same Asia Maior issue.

16. The JCPOA was signed in Vienna on 14 July 2015 by Iran, the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council – China, France, Russia, United States, UK – plus Germany) and the European Union. For the full text of the agreement, see U.S. Department of State, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (<https://www.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/jcpoa>) or 'Full text of the Iran nuclear deal', *The Washington Post*, without date (<https://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/documents/world/full-text-of-the-iran-nuclear-deal/1651>).

17. 'Deal Reached on Iran Nuclear Program; Limits on Fuel Would Lessen With Time', *New York Times*, 14 July 2015, quoted by Luciano Zaccara in this same issue.

18. As remarked by Iran's Foreign Minister, Mohammed Javad Zarif, the JCPOA was not «a perfect deal». According to Zarif: «I believe we do not have a perfect deal in the real world because a deal has two sides; it requires give and take for the two sides, for each of the two sides to take some part home. Now, this deal had seven or eight sides: the P5+1, Iran, and the European Union.» But, in spite of all the difficulties related to the finalisation of the agreement, what was important – according to Zarif – was that, by negotiating the deal all parties «agreed to a common objective, and that common objective [was] that Iran should have a nuclear program that would remain exclusively peaceful.» 'Javad Zarif: The Full Transcript', *Politico Magazine*, 2 October 2017.

Energy Agency (IAEA), in charge of guaranteeing Iran's compliance with the clauses of the deal, went on to periodically certify Tehran's adherence to them. This was a situation that satisfied all the countries involved in the deal, including the US during the Obama presidency, basically because it powerfully contributed in stabilising the situation in one of the more dangerous geopolitical areas in the world.

Things, however, changed once Donald Trump entered the White House. The new president's attitude towards Iran – which had been undefined during his electoral campaign – gradually hardened.¹⁹ After the DAESH high profile 7 June terrorist attack on Iran, which left 17 dead and 52 wounded people in its wake, the US presidential office, while joining in the condolences offered by 40 states, coldly and provocatively stated that: «We underscore that states that sponsor terrorism risk falling victim to the evil they promote».²⁰ Finally, preceded by repeated criticism aimed at Iran, on 13 October 2017 Trump announced his decision to disavow the JCPOA. He decried it as «one of the worst and most one-sided transactions the United States has ever entered into», accused Tehran of «multiple violations» to the deal, and described Iran as «the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism», allegedly supporting al-Qa'ida, Hamas, Hezbollah and the Taliban.²¹

The president's decision to «decertify» the Iranian deal, while not yet translating into the cancellation of the US participation in the JCPOA, cast a very dark shadow on the medium term survival of the pact. In so doing, Trump called into question what had been a key result reached by Washington's foreign policy in West Asia. Significantly, Trump's decision was immediately criticised by the leaders of the UK, France and Germany and by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini.²² For his part, IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano issued a statement restating the agency's findings that Iran was complying with its JCPOA obligations.²³

One could speculate on the real reasons behind Trump's savage and unprovoked attack on Iran, and the lies justifying it, in particular the one echoing Israeli long-standing propaganda, according to which Iran was the main state sponsor of international terrorism, rather than one of its main

19. Suzanne Maloney, 'Under Trump, U.S. policy on Iran is moving from accommodation to confrontation', *Brookings*, 11 May 2017.

20. The White House, *Statement by the United States President*, 7 June 2017 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-terrorist-attacks-iran>).

21. Mark Landler & David E. Sanger, 'Trump Disavows Nuclear Deal, but Doesn't Scrap It', *The New York Times*, 13 October 2017; Eugene Kiely, 'Trump on Iran's «multiple violations»', *FactCheck.org*, 14 October 2017.

22. Perhaps as significantly, Trump's decision had the enthusiastic approval of Israel and Saudi Arabia. Julian Borger, Saeed Kamali Dehghan, & Peter Beaumont, 'Trump threatens to rip up Iran nuclear deal unless US and allies fix «serious flaws»', *The Guardian*, 13 October 2017.

23. Julian Borger, 'Iran is adhering to nuclear deal limits, UN says, despite Donald Trump claim', *The Guardian*, 1 September 2017.

adversaries. But the only point that is important to stress here, coherent with the themes of this foreword, is the fact that in West Asia – exactly as in East Asia – Trump’s new foreign policy appeared both irrational and dysfunctional.



For almost all of the year under review, most observers had the distinct sense of the absence of an overarching Asia policy by the US. This was strengthened by the contradictory stands often taken by Trump and some of his closest associates, by the tensions surfacing between the former and the latter, by the consequent sudden discarding by Trump of some of these associates, and by the shifting in policies followed by the administration in its dealings with Asian countries. These shifts were such as to sometimes give the impression that different and contradictory policies were being implemented.²⁴ The foreign policy of the new administration was eventually defined, in the case of the Af-Pak area, by Donald Trump in his 21 August 2017 speech²⁵ and, more generally, by the release on 18 December 2017 of the latest US document on National Security Strategy (NSS).²⁶

The NSS document, published one year after the election of the 45th US president, was, according to Yuki Tatsumi, the Director of the Japan Program at the Stimson Center in Washington, «the very first attempt to translate President Donald Trump’s campaign promise of «America First» into national strategic goals». It also reflected «the unique, «disruptive» nature of the Trump administration».²⁷

The NSS document, which had at least the advantage of clarity, singled out China and Russia as representing a clear and present danger to «American power, influence, and interests». It also referred to the Indo-Pacific region as the most important geographical world area as far as US security interests were concerned.

An examination of the guidelines included in the 2017 NSS document is not relevant to the understanding of US policy in Asia in the year under review. Accordingly, it will not be examined here. It has been

24. An example of this latest phenomenon is offered by US policy in relation to Sri Lanka, examined by Fabio Leone in this same issue.

25. Julian Borger, ‘Trump to expand US military intervention in Afghanistan’, *The Guardian*, 22 August 2017. For analyses on the impact of Trump’s Af-Pak policy on Afghanistan and Pakistan see the articles by Diego Abenante and Marco Corsi in this Asia Major issue. For its impact on India see Sourina Bej, ‘What Trump’s Afghanistan Policy Means for India’, *The Diplomat*, 15 July 2017.

26. The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>).

27. Yuki Tatsumi, ‘The US National Security Strategy: Implications for the Indo-Pacific’, *The Diplomat*, 21 December 2017.

noted only because the delay in its publication is relevant as an indication of the difficulty experienced by the new US administration in getting its act together and defining – if not implementing – a coherent foreign policy.

Of course, this situation of uncertainty could not but create a void of power at world level. In Asia, this void was filled by the activism of the US's main challenger, China, and two of the US's closest allies, Japan and India.



Since the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency, Beijing has appeared well aware of the problems that the new presidency would cause but, at the same time, fully prepared to transform the incoming crisis into an opportunity. Accordingly, even by 11 January 2017, China explicitly stated what its foreign policy objectives were by making public a White Paper, *China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation*. In it, China's economic, political and military approaches to foreign relations in Asia and in the oceans surrounding it were clearly stated.²⁸

At the economic level, the White Paper, in sharp contrast to President Trump's «America-first» neo-protectionism, highlighted the importance of pursuing a common and inclusive economic development, based on integration and free trade.

At the political level, the White Paper put pressure on «small and medium sized» countries, which «need not and should not take sides among big countries». Here its goal was to prevent any future US-sponsored security initiative, with the barely-veiled threat of applying economic pressure on those «small and medium sized countries» tempted to play against China in league with one of its adversaries. Nevertheless, the White Paper sought to reassure all countries that China did not seek to radically change the existing security order, but merely to «improve» it. Also, while assuring China's adherence and contribution to international rules, the White Paper was highly critical of these same rules, which Beijing clearly saw as subordinate to the national interest of the US.

Again at the political level, the White Paper's attitude towards those countries that were singled out as the other «major countries», namely the US, Russia, India and Japan, was decidedly mild. This, of course, was only

28. For the full text of the White Paper – which was prepared by a think tank of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with inputs from other ministries, including Defence – see The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *Full text: China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation*, 11 January 2017 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/32618/Document/1539667/1539667.htm>). For an analysis of the contents of the White Paper see Fabio Leone, in this volume; also Manoj Joshi, 'White Paper on Asia-Pacific Security Reveals China's Regional Ambitions', *The Wire*, 14 January 2017; Daljit Singh, 'China's White Paper on Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region and Chinese Grand Strategy', *ISESAS Yusof Ishak Institute Perspective*, No. 22, 7 April 2017.

to be expected in the case of Russia, a de facto ally, but somewhat surprising in the case of the US and, even more, in those of India and Japan. In all cases, China stressed its intention to continue its efforts aimed at building mutual beneficial relations and closer partnerships.

At the military level, finally, the White Paper was forthright in claiming a more expansive global security role for China, commensurate with its growing importance. Also it made no mystery about the fact that its armed forces would grow in relation to China's «international standing and its security and development interests».

China's publication of the January 2017 White Paper was only precursory to a series of high profile foreign policy initiatives, aimed at reclaiming the role of world leader and defender of globalisation. The first was Xi Jinping's speech in Davos on 17 January 2017, in defence of globalisation; the second was the hosting, in Beijing (14-15 May 2017), of the first Belt and Road Forum; the third was Xi Jinping's speech at the APEC forum in Manila on 18 November 2017, not only in defence of globalisation but also of the necessity to improve the environment and to tackle climate change.²⁹

Through these and other foreign policy initiatives, in 2017 Beijing unambiguously positioned itself as the main defender of globalisation – and globalisation with «a human face»³⁰ – and as the architect of a uniquely Chinese approach to it, mainly represented by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), specifically the gigantic infrastructure project aimed at connecting China with the remainder of Eurasia plus Africa.

Of course, the generosity of the Chinese approach to other nations, particularly the politically weaker and the geographically closer to China – as publicly expressed in the January White Paper and in the Xi Jinping's public speeches at Davos, Beijing and Manila – could be doubted. Indeed, critics disputed it by quoting several examples proving Beijing's non-adherence to the guidelines set out in the White Paper, particularly in relation to China's overbearing behaviour in the South China Sea dispute or vis-à-vis Taiwan. Similarly, the benefits for all those countries involved in the BRI could be and were disputed, by declaring the BRI to be but a tool used by China to push them into a debt trap. But the clarity and effectiveness of Beijing's foreign policy was in stark contrast to the confusion and inefficiency of that followed

29. On the first two steps see the exhaustive analysis by Francesca Congiu and Christian Rossi in this same volume. On the third see Nayan Chanda, «Trump Abdicates Global Leadership to China's Xi», *Asia Sentinel*, 17 November 2017.

30. «We should uphold multilateralism, pursue shared growth through consultation and collaboration, forge closer partnerships, and build a community with a shared future for mankind», said Xi in Manila. For the full text of Xi's Manila speech see, e.g., Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Ireland, *Speech by President Xi Jinping at APEC CEO Summit*, 18 November 2017 (<http://ie.china-embassy.org/eng/zlt/2d2/t1321119.htm>).

by the Trump administration during its first year. Even more significant was the contrast between Trump's emphasis on the narrow interests of one's own country as the only guiding principle of foreign relations and Xi's exhortation to build a «shared future for mankind».

The different qualitative level in the Chinese and US approaches to foreign policy was clearly visible even in the more strictly political field. Again, a case in point is the North Korean crisis. As noticed by Congiu and Rossi in this issue, «Beijing was aware that, in order to settle the Korean issue, it was fundamental to take into consideration the legitimate concerns of all parties and to address them in a balanced way.» This implied a de-escalation process to be reached through reciprocal concessions by North Korea on the one hand, and the US and South Korea on the other. Also, it implied the refusal of war as a solution to the crisis. For these reasons, Beijing sponsored the adoption by the international community, in particular the US, of the «Four Nos» approach: (1) No hostile policy towards North Korea; (2) No intention to attack North Korea; (3) No attempts to undermine or replace North Korean government; (4) No efforts to artificially hasten Korean reunification.

During the year under review, China's soft moral suasion together with the hard reality of the facts on the ground brought about a widespread acceptance of China's position by the international community. By November 2017, even the US, disregarding Trump's original «fire and fury» approach, «admitted that it was open to the possibility of bringing the Pyongyang regime to the negotiation table to find a shared and peaceful solution».³¹ In other words, it wasn't Trump's blustering and threats that had opened the way to a solution of the North Korean crisis, but Xi Jinping's cautious and steady policy (which, incidentally, as shown by Marco Milani, had received the full-hearted support of the new South Korean president, Moon Jae-in).



In 2017, the crisis of the US-centred order in Asia was not only accompanied by the smooth and purposeful moves of Beijing, aimed at occupying the position of world leadership left vacant by Trump's myopic and dysfunctional foreign policy. The crisis also saw Japan and India engaged in supplanting the absence of any meaningful American leadership by implementing a two-pronged policy, aimed at containing China on the one hand, and challenging the Trumpian neo-protectionist policy on the other. In some cases this happened through joint initiatives; in other cases through separate moves. Also, as far as the contain-China policy was concerned, whereas Japan moved cautiously, India exhibited a certain degree of impetuosity. Be it as it may, it does not come as a surprise that

31. Francesca Congiu & Christian Rossi, in this *Asia Maior* issue.

the traditionally good relationship between Tokyo and New Delhi became increasingly closer during the year under review.

The different approach by Japan and India to the China challenge was highlighted by their different reactions to China's invitation to take part in the Belt and Road Forum. Japan accepted the invitation; India was the only other major world country, together with the US, to turn the invitation down.³² However, soon after the conclusion of the Belt and Road Forum, Japan and India joined hands by announcing at Gandhinagar, in May 2017, the launch of an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). As noted by Michelguglielmo Torri and Diego Maiorano in this *Asia Maior* issue, this initiative, in the making since 2015, was technically similar to the China-sponsored BRI and in direct and obvious competition with it.

Later in the year, the premiers of India and Japan met once again in Gandhinagar, for the 12th India-Japan Annual Summit (13-14 September 2017). Apart from the granting by Japan to India of about 190 million yen in low-interest loans for a high-speed railway and other infrastructure projects, and apart from the financing by Japan of the spread of the Japanese language in India,³³ the summit warranted special attention for its anti-Chinese political bent. Abe and Modi, without ever mentioning China, nevertheless squarely espoused the US position on the South China Sea dispute, proclaiming their adhesion to «freedom of navigation at sea, overflight and unobstructed trade based on international law».³⁴ Also, they pledged to work together to enhance defence cooperation between their respective countries, even by organising «joint field exercises» between the Indian Army and Japan's Ground Self-Defence forces in the following year. The two premiers also stressed the interest of their respective nations in jointly promoting and enhancing the existing «cooperative frameworks» with the US and Australia. These cooperative frameworks, de facto, were mainly characterised by being aimed at containing China.³⁵

This last project began to be realised two months later, with the sudden rebirth – at Manila on 11 November – of the quadrilateral entente

32. Rather funnily, however, India did not turn down the participation to five of the 15 BRI projects approved in 2017 by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). These included: *India: Andhra Pradesh 24x7 – Power For All* (approved on 2 May 2017); *India: India Infrastructure Fund* (approved on 15 June 2017); *India: Gujarat Rural Roads (MMGSY) Project* (approved on 4 July 2017); *India: Transmission System Strengthening Project* (approved on 27 September 27, 2017); *India: Bangalore Metro Rail Project – Line R6* (approved on 8 December, 2017). See the AIIB website (<https://www.aiib.org/en/projects/approved/index.html>). I am indebted to Christian Rossi for this insight.

33. 'Abe, Modi resolve strong Japan-India ties to underpin the regional order', *The Japan Times*, 14 September 2017.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Wasantha Rupasinghe & Keith Jones, 'India and Japan strengthen their anti-China «strategic partnership»', *World Socialist Web Site*, 18 September 2017.

between Australia, India, Japan and the US, or «Quad». The Quad had originally been conceived by then-Japanese prime ministerial candidate Shinzō Abe in 2006 and had taken shape the following year under the sponsorship of then-US Vice President Dick Cheney. Presented as a forum for the exchange of views among its four members in order to reach «a balancing [sic] approach to foreign policy», the Quad had immediately been seen by Beijing as an alliance aimed against China. Beijing's strong diplomatic reaction, the hesitation on the part of Australia, Abe's sudden fall from power in September 2007 and the opposition of the Left in India, then supporting the Manmohan Singh government, had consigned the Quad to oblivion, apparently for ever, by the end of that year.³⁶ However, on 12 November, 10 years later, the Quad resurfaced with a meeting in Manila of senior officials from the four nations which had originally come together in the first Quad. This was accompanied by a series of bilateral consultations between the political leaders of the four countries involved, who were taking part in the 31st summit of the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on 13-14 November 2017. The end result was the release of four official statements on behalf of the countries involved, stressing the convergence of interests uniting the members of the quadrilateral entente. Although characterised by some differences, all four statements espoused a contain-China policy, together with the US stand against North Korea. The main difference among the four statements appeared to be the major or minor outspokenness in openly taking an anti-Chinese stand, which, in turn, seemed predicated on the major or minor geographical proximity with China, the Indian and Japanese statements being softer than the Australian and American ones.³⁷

While there was no guarantee that the Quad in its new avatar could be more effective and long-lasting than its earlier one, the very fact that India and to a greater extent Japan, had actively cooperated in resurrecting it is highly significant of the dynamism of the contain-China policy being followed by New Delhi and Tokyo.

Japan's possibly more momentous initiative in filling the void left by Trump's dysfunctional foreign policy was the leadership that it provided in keeping afloat the TPP minus the US. While, after the announcement of the US withdrawing from the pact, many had feared or hoped that China might take the place left vacant by the US, nothing like that happened. China pursued its own free-trade policy, in particular through its proactive involvement in negotiating the Regional Comprehensive Economic

36. Tanvi Madan, 'The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the «Quad»', *War on the Rocks*, 16 November 2017.

37. Ankit Panda, 'US, Japan, India, and Australia Hold Working-Level Quadrilateral Meeting on Regional Cooperation', *The Diplomat*, 13 November 2017.

Partnership (RCPE).³⁸ It was Japan which resolutely took leadership of the 11 remaining TPP nations, steering them towards a new pact, christened Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).³⁹ Although at the end of the year, the Japan-sponsored effort to make the CPTPP take off had not yet reached completion, its success appeared a distinct possibility.

For its part, India, which in previous years had often complained about Chinese trespassing along the common northern border, moved its army into the Doklam Plateau, namely a territory disputed between Bhutan and China, but which, as acknowledged by New Delhi itself, undoubtedly outside Indian territory. India's move – explicitly aimed at preventing the construction through the Doklam Plateau of a highway by the Chinese – was allegedly made following a request by Bhutan. Although this thesis was belatedly and unenthusiastically validated by Thimphu, it was clear from the beginning that India's intervention beyond its own borders was part and parcel of the increasingly anti-Chinese foreign policy followed by the Modi government. This same policy had already found expression in India's absence at the Belt and Road Forum and in its participation in the launching, together with Japan, of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor.

India's trespassing into the Doklam Plateau on 18 June 2017 triggered a two-month confrontation with China. This brought about a situation of tension not seen since the 1962 Sino-Indian war, which was made particularly dangerous by the actual and belligerent involvement of those countries' public opinion. Eventually, on 28 August 2017, following some behind-the-scenes negotiations, the two armies, in an apparently abrupt move, disengaged and left the Doklam Plateau. In so doing, China, while maintaining its claims to the Doklam Plateau, asserting its intention to occasionally patrol it again in the future and retaining the possibility of restarting the road work at some undefined time in the future, de facto

38. Launched on 20 November 2012, in the margins of the East Asia Summit, held in Phnom Penh, the RCPE is a free-trade agreement bringing together the 10 ASEAN nations plus China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. See, e.g., Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership* (<http://dfat.gov.au/trade/agreements/negotiations/rcep/Pages/regional-comprehensive-economic-partnership.aspx>) for additional information on the pact. At the end of the day, the main difference between the TPP and the RCPE is the fact that the latter excludes the US, automatically making China its most powerful member. In fact the RCPE appears to have the same (negative) features as the TPP, including the secrecy surrounding its negotiation and its contents, and its predisposition to put corporate profit before public interest. For an analysis of the RCPE drawbacks, based on leaked documents (available at <http://bilaterals.org/rcep-leaks?lang=en>), see Sam Cossar-Gilbert, '5 Hidden Costs of the RCEP to People and Planet', *The Diplomat*, 12 October 2017.

39. Srinivas Mazumdaru, 'Trump's TPP move boosts China's clout in Asia', *Deutsche Welle*, 24 January 2017.

gave in to India, vacating the Plateau and giving up the construction of the disputed road. Whichever explanation one chooses to give regarding the true reasons of the confrontation, the fact remains that New Delhi had willingly and coldly engaged Beijing beyond India's own border, thus facing it down.



Washington's willing abandonment of its role of leadership in the Eastern sector of Asia, Beijing's attempt at filling that same role (and not only in East Asia), Tokyo and New Delhi's activism in implementing their own policies as a substitute to Washington's vacancy either precluded or created what some commentators, to borrow a Chinese expression, defined as «disorder under the heaven». What in fact did happen was that the whole geopolitical situation in Asia and in the two oceans surrounding it entered into a state of flux, which opened a set of new and favourable possibilities to many of the smaller countries in the region. As noted by Bonn Juego in this same *Asia Maior* issue, in the current geopolitical competition between the US and China «it appears that whereas these great powers treat international relations essentially as a zero-sum game, the perspective and interest of small players are shaped by the opportunities to make the most of the newly-opened political space to overcome the constraints of underdevelopment». Taking these opportunities was not an easy feat, and, as noted by Fabio Leone, when dealing with the foreign policy of Sri Lanka, some of the small players had to act as «tightrope walkers» between the opposing pulls of the major powers at work in Asia. Nevertheless, as shown in many of the articles collected in this *Asia Maior* issue, these opportunities were effectively taken on several occasions. At the end of the day, the crisis of US hegemony translated into the creation of new opportunities not only for its main competitor, China, and for its closer allies in the region, Japan and India, but also for countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan and, to a certain extent, even Taiwan.



An integral – and this time real – part of the supposed disorder under the heavens of Asia was the explosion, in the year under review, of the long simmering Rohingya crisis. The Rohingya are a Muslim minority in Myanmar, a mainly Buddhist country. As noted by Marzia Casolari, this ethnic group, prevalently settled in the Arakan region, has had «a well-established presence in Burma since the 12th century» and, until the colonial period, was «well integrated into Burmese society at large». In the first half of the 20th century, however, a distinct Arakan Muslim ethnic consciousness took shape, bringing in its wake a request for the creation of an autonomous area, or an area with special status within Burma. Burma, which took the

name of Myanmar in 1989, has traditionally been crisscrossed by a plethora of ethnic groups. Most of them have eventually been accommodated, although uneasily and imperfectly, within the Myanmar state. The Rohingya, however, represent an exception. This is possibly related to the Rohingya's ethnic religious connotation – as already noted the Rohingya are Muslims – in a country that not only is mainly Buddhist, but where – as noted by Matteo Fumagalli – an aggressive form of Buddhist nationalism has become rampant.

In 2017 the explosion of the Rohingya crisis provoked a forced exodus of almost biblical proportions, with more than 600,000 people forced to run from their homes, looking for refuge mainly in neighbouring Bangladesh. The crisis was revealing from different and numerous viewpoints. It clearly exposed how limited and imperfect Myanmar's transition to democracy had been; it also highlighted the shallowness of the democratic credentials not only of the Myanmar military élite, which still play such a fundamental role in the Myanmar political system, but also of Myanmar's world-known democratic icon, de facto government head and Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

In addition, the Rohingya crisis laid bare the indifference of both the main international organisation in which Myanmar was included, namely APEC, and the international community at large. Certainly, as shown by Matteo Fumagalli, Myanmar could not have proceeded in the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya without the tacit or explicit support of countries such as China, India and the US. At the end of the day, the only countries or foreign powers who tried to somehow intervene in favour of the Rohingya were Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Vatican.

Bangladesh, which bore the brunt of accommodating the bulk of the Rohingya refugees, reached a controversial agreement with Myanmar on 23 November 2017, aimed at making possible the return of the Rohingya refugees to Myanmar. But, as pointed out by Matteo Fumagalli in this issue, the agreement did not create the conditions for reaching its alleged goal and, anyway, could not solve the Rohingya problem. For its part, Indonesia, the biggest Muslim state world-wide, took up the Rohingya cause, in particular within APEC, of which it is part. But Jakarta's stand came to naught, revealing Indonesia's limited international weight, even inside APEC. Significantly Malaysia, the other APEC Muslim majority country, which, among all the APEC countries was the one which absorbed more Rohingya refugees,⁴⁰ judged it less important to intervene on their behalf than preserving the APEC principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of a member state.⁴¹

40. However, Rohingya refugees in Malaysia are around one tenth of those in Bangladesh.

41. K.C. Boey, '«Malaysia must lead Asean on Rohingya crisis», *The Malaysian Insight*, 16 December 2017.

In fact, APEC, then under the annual rotating chairmanship of the Philippines, cold-shouldered the whole issue. The *Chairman's Statement*, namely the concluding document of the 31st annual APEC meeting (held on 10-14 November 2017 at Clark Air Base, Pampanga), made no specific reference to the condition of the Rohingya as victims of state violence and forced to migrate. Rather, it coldly noted that «a number of Leaders» from ASEAN «expressed support to the Myanmar Government in its efforts to bring peace, stability, rule of law and to promote harmony and reconciliation between the various communities, as well as sustainable and equitable development in Rakhine State.»⁴² As pithily put by Bonn Juego in this same *Asia Maior* issue: «In effect, ASEAN protected the interests of its member state Myanmar, in the name of regional unity as well as national sovereignty, while denying the existence of refugees and the humanity of the Rohingya.»

Basically, the only world leader to make a stand in favour of the Rohingyas was Pope Francis, again the only world leader to visit Myanmar and Bangladesh during the Rohingya crisis (the pope was in Myanmar, on 27-30 November, and in Bangladesh on 30 November-2 December 2017). Without the support of military divisions – as once noticed by Joseph Stalin – and without any economic pressure tool which he could apply, the pope, by his mere presence, raised world awareness on the Rohingya's plight. Also, he exercised his moral suasion on the leaders of the two countries that he visited. Much criticised in the West for not making use of the word «Rohingya» during his visit to Myanmar,⁴³ the pope's stance in favour of Myanmar's persecuted Muslim minority was unambiguous. Once that has been noted, the fact remains that the pope did not have any magic wand to solve the Rohingya crisis. Moral suasion can well work, but, as noted by Zac Davis, «we may not see the fruits until later».⁴⁴



In 2017, the domestic evolution of the countries analysed in the present *Asia Maior* issue appeared dominated by two elements. At the economic level, GDP growth – fuelled basically by neoliberal policies – continued to be

42. *Chairman's Statement of the 31st ASEAN Summit*, pp. 18-19, quoted in Bonn Juego in this same issue.

43. On the Myanmar leg of the papal visit, see Luke Hunt, 'Pope Francis Wades Into the Rohingya Crisis', *The Diplomat*, 7 December 2017. On the Bangladesh leg, see Marzia Casolari's article in this same issue.

44. Zac Davis, 'Did Pope Francis chicken out when he didn't mention the Rohingya in Burma? Hardly', *The Washington Post*, 29 November 2017. On the question of the pope not using the term «Rohingya» during the Myanmar leg of his 2017 Asian tour see also Gerard O'Connell, 'Pope Francis explains why he did not use the word «Rohingya» in Myanmar', *America – The Jesuit Review*, 2 December 2017.

remarkable, even if, in certain cases, slower than before.⁴⁵ As is only normal in neoliberal-propelled economic growth – and as noted in most articles included in this issue – it brought about increasing disparities at the social level. In fact, both features were nothing new, as they have been dominating the development of most Asian countries during the past years.

Both the slowing down of the economic growth and the widening of social disparities were behind the crisis of legitimacy that has been threatening several Asian ruling élites, starting with the Chinese one. The crisis of legitimacy and its causes have been perceived with major or minor clarity by the ruling classes of the countries involved, which have reacted in more or less effective ways. Again the case of China is exemplary, because, as argued by Francesca Congiu and others in this and in previous *Asia Maior* issues, the whole gigantic Belt and Road Initiative can be viewed also as a tool to relaunch China's growth.

The second element that has dominated the evolution of Asia in the year under review – an element that, even in this case, was already present in previous years – appears to be largely, even if not exclusively, related to the Asian ruling classes' need to push forward neoliberal policies, while managing the widening disparities induced by them. The result has been the democratic involution of many Asian countries and the emergence or continuation of strong-men regimes not only in openly authoritarian countries, such as China, but in allegedly democratic ones, such as India, the Philippines and, to a certain extent, Japan. This dismal situation has been worsened by the rise or the persistence of religious radicalism in several countries. In fact, no majority religion in Asia seemed immune from the more or less murderous siren songs of extremism: neither Islam (as shown in the case of Indonesia and Pakistan), Hinduism (as shown in the case of India), nor Buddhism (as shown in the case of Myanmar).

Yet, as in 2016, some countertendencies were visible. They were represented in particular by the cases of South Korea and Sri Lanka, where the process of democratic strengthening, already underway in the previous years, continued. Also in Kazakhstan an analogous, although still weak, tendency in favour of a widening of the democratic space took shape during the year under review. Finally, the case of Iran deserves to be remembered.

45. Apart from the data scattered in the articles in this issue and related to the single countries there analysed, an overview of the general economic trend in the Asia-Pacific region is given in International Monetary Fund, *Regional Economic Outlook: Asia Pacific, October 2017: Making the Most of the Upswing*, October 2017 (<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/APAC/Issues/2017/10/09/areo1013>). In 2017 the general GDP growth of Asia was estimated by the IMF at 5.6%.



As pointed out time and again in previous *Asia Maior* issues, Iran has a most peculiar political set up, characterised by the fact that an authentically democratic system, headed by a president elected by universal (male and female) suffrage every four years, is encapsulated inside an uncompromisingly authoritarian one, headed by the supreme leader of Iran – or, according to the Iranian constitution, simply the «leader» (*rahbar*). In charge for life, the *rahbar* is the representative of the religious-military élites which achieved power during the revolution of 1978-79 and have been holding it ever since. As such, the supreme leader – who presently is Ali Khamenei, in office since 1989 – enjoys extremely wide direct and supervisory powers.⁴⁶

The tension existing between the two systems is evident and has increased in recent years. While the supreme leader's ultimate power has remained safely in place, the democratic system has widened and established deeper roots. This was evident in the year under review, which saw both the presidential and municipal elections. The presidential election resulted in the clear defeat of the conservative candidate, Ibrahim Raisi, allegedly favoured by the *rahbar* himself, and in the reconfirmation of the progressive candidate, Hassan Rouhani. As pointed out by Luciano Zaccara in this issue, Rouhani won with a larger margin than that of the 2013 elections – 57% against 51% – with a turnout of 73%, slightly higher than four years earlier. For his part, Raisi won a mere 38% of the popular vote, «rather less than anticipated by those who had forecast him to be the next successor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei».⁴⁷ Also the municipal elections favoured the pro-Rouhani and reformist candidates. Particularly relevant was the defeat of Tehran's conservative mayor, Baqer Qalibaf, by reformist politician, Ali Najafi.

All this means that democratic potentialities in Iran are much stronger than those of countries that, in the recent past, have been singled out as examples of successful processes of democratisation and, as such, much praised and favoured by western countries. However, in Iran the positive outcome of a transition to fully-fledged democracy – in any case a long and difficult process – is subordinate to Rouhani's ability both to solve the internal economic problems besetting his country, and having Iran accepted as a responsible stakeholder by the international community. These are two sides of the same coin, as any normalisation of Iran's international position would favour its economic growth, allowing a regularised economic cooperation

46. The supreme leader has direct control of the armed forces, the judicial system, state television, and all other key governmental organisations. He sets the election guidelines. He can intervene by decree – and has often done so – in practically any branch of government.

47. Luciano Zaccara, in this volume.

with more advanced countries. But, as recalled, in the year under review the acceptance of Iran as a responsible international stakeholder found a main hindrance in the hostile and obstructive stance taken by US President Donald Trump.

Strangely – but perhaps not so much – the conclusion is inescapable that, by taking his prejudiced stance against Tehran, the 45th US president entered in a de facto league with the most backward – and anti-American – forces in Iran. This was a de facto alliance whose ultimate result – if successful in achieving its aims – cannot but be the rolling back of any Iranian advance towards fully-fledged democracy, thus pushing the Middle East towards an even more confrontational situation that the one prevailing in 2017.

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