



# ASIA MAIOR

Special Issue 2 / 2022

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

Edited by  
Giulio Pugliese  
Andrea Fischetti  
Michelguglielmo Torri

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A large, intricate, golden-colored mandala graphic is positioned on the right side of the cover. It features complex, symmetrical patterns with multiple layers of floral and geometric motifs, resembling traditional Indian or Middle Eastern art.

ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES - EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE

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

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ISBN 978-88-3313-880-00 (Paper) ISBN 979-12-5469-179-3 (Online)

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

Annual journal - Special Issue, No. 2, 2022

The annual issues of this journal are 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. The special issues are published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & by a guest university institution. This issue is published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & the Robert Schuman Centre – European University Institute.

*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](http://www.asiamaior.org).

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## FOREWORD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Giulio Pugliese & Andrea Fischetti