



# ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXIII / 2022

---

## **Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises**

**Edited by**  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Filippo Boni**  
**Diego Maiorano**

---

**viella**

A large, intricate mandala pattern is positioned on the right side of the cover, extending from the middle to the bottom. It features complex, symmetrical geometric and floral designs in a light beige color, partially overlapping the orange background.

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

# ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989  
Vol. XXXIII / 2022

## Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises

Edited by  
Michelguglielmo Torri  
Filippo Boni  
Diego Maiorano

viella

Asia Maior. The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989.

Copyright © 2023 - Viella s.r.l. & Associazione Asia Maior

ISBN 979-12-5496-365-0 (Paper)      ISBN 979-12-5496-366-7 (Online)

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

Annual journal - Vol. XXXIII, 2022

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](http://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	<a href="mailto:abbonamenti@viella.it">abbonamenti@viella.it</a> <a href="http://www.viella.it">www.viella.it</a>			

## EDITORIAL BOARD

**Editor-in-chief** (direttore responsabile):

Michलगuglielmo Torri, University of Turin.

**Co-editors:**

Filippo Boni, The Open University.

Diego Maiorano, The University of Naples «L'Orientale».

**Associate editors:**

Axel Berkofsky, University of Pavia;

Giulio Pugliese, University of Oxford and European University Institute;

Emanuela Mangiarotti, University of Pavia;

Pierluigi Valsecchi, University of Pavia.

**Consulting editors:**

Elisabetta Basile, University of Rome «Sapienza»;

Kerry Brown, King's College London;

Peter Brian Ramsay Carey, Oxford University;

Rosa Caroli, University of Venice;

Jaewoo Choo, Kyung Hee University (Seoul, South Korea);

Jamie Seth Davidson, National University of Singapore;

Ritu Dewan, Indian Association for Women Studies;

Laura De Giorgi, University of Venice;

Kevin Hewison, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill;  
Lucia Husenicova, University Matej Bel (Banská Bystrica, Slovakia);  
David C. Kang, Maria Crutcher Professor of International Relations, University of Southern California;  
Rohit Karki, Kathmandu School of Law;  
Jeff Kingston, Temple University – Japan Campus;  
Mirjam Künkler, Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study – Uppsala;  
Noemi Lanna, University of Naples «L'Orientale»;  
James Manor, School of Advanced Studies – University of London;  
Aditya Mukherjee, Jawaharlal Nehru University;  
Mridula Mukherjee, Jawaharlal Nehru University;  
Parimala Rao, University of Delhi;  
Guido Samarani, University of Venice;  
Marisa Siddivò, University of Naples «L'Orientale»;  
Eswaran Sridharan, Institute for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania;  
Arun Swamy, University of Guam;  
Akio Takahara, University of Tokyo;  
Edsel Tupaz, Harvard University alumnus, Ateneo de Manila University and Far Eastern University;  
Sten Widmalm, Uppsala University;  
Ather Zia, University of Northern Colorado;

**Book reviews editors:**

Elena Valdameri, ETH Zürich;  
Aurelio Insisa, University of Hong Kong;  
Luciano Zaccara, Qatar University.

**Graphic project:**

Nicola Mocchi.

Before being published in *Asia Maior*, all articles, whether commissioned or unsolicited, after being first evaluated by the Journal's editors, are then submitted to a double-blind peer review involving up to three anonymous referees. Coherently with the spirit of the double-blind peer review process, *Asia Maior* does not make public the name of the reviewers. However, the reviewers' names – and, if need be, the whole correspondence between the journal's editors and the reviewer/s – can be disclosed to interested institutions, upon a formal request made directly to the Editor in Chief of the journal.

Articles meant for publication should be sent to Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com), Filippo Boni (filippo.boni@open.ac.uk), Diego Maiorano (dmaiorano@unior.it); book reviews should be sent to Elena Valdameri (elena.valdameri@gess.ethz.ch).



## ASSOCIAZIONE ASIA MAIOR

Steering Committee: Filippo Boni, Marzia Casolari, Matteo Fumagalli, Michelguglielmo Torri (President).

Scientific Board: Guido Abbattista (Università di Trieste), Domenico Amirante (Università «Federico II», Napoli), Elisabetta Basile (Università «La Sapienza», Roma), Luigi Bonanate (Università di Torino), Claudio Cecchi (Università «La Sapienza», Roma), Alessandro Colombo (Università di Milano), Anton Giulio Maria de Robertis (Università di Bari), Thierry Di Costanzo (Université de Strasbourg), Max Guderzo (Università di Siena), Giorgio Milanetti (Università «La Sapienza», Roma), Paolo Puddinu (Università di Sassari), Adriano Rossi (Università «L'Orientale», Napoli), Giuseppe Sacco (Università «Roma Tre», Roma), Guido Samarani (Università «Ca' Foscari», Venezia), Filippo Sabetti (McGill University, Montréal), Gianni Vaggi (Università di Pavia).



CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli extra-europei  
"Cesare Bonacossa" - Università di Pavia

Steering Committee: Axel Berkofsky, Arturo Colombo, Antonio Morone, Giulia Rossolillo, Gianni Vaggi, Pierluigi Valsecchi (President), Massimo Zaccaria.



**viella**

*libreria editrice*

via delle Alpi, 32

I-00198 ROMA

tel. 06 84 17 758

fax 06 85 35 39 60

[www.viella.it](http://www.viella.it)

## CONTENTS

IX	MICHELUGUGLIELMO TORRI, <i>Foreword. Asia in 2022: The consequences of the war in Ukraine, US-China rivalry, democratic decline and popular protests</i>
1	SILVIA MENEGAZZI, <i>China 2022: The 20<sup>th</sup> party congress and popular discontent in Xi Jinping's China</i>
23	GIULIA SCIORATI, <i>China 2021-2022: A foreign policy of «re-branding»</i>
43	MARCO MILANI & ANTONIO FIORI, <i>Korean peninsula 2022: Stuck between new leadership and old practices</i>
79	COREY WALLACE & GIULIO PUGLIESE, <i>Japan 2022: Putin and Abe Shocks thwart Kishida's enjoyment of three golden years despite major defence overhaul</i>
131	AURELIO INSISA, <i>Taiwan 2022: Cross-Strait security spirals further down</i>
157	CLAUDIA ASTARITA, <i>Hong Kong 2021-2022: A new life in the shadow of China</i>
177	RIWANTO TIRTOSUDARMO & PETER B.R. CAREY, <i>Indonesia 2019-2022: The authoritarian turn as leitmotif of president Jokowi's second term</i>
215	GEOFFREY C. GUNN, <i>Timor-Leste 2021-2022: Electoral change and economic reset</i>
233	SALEENA SALEEM, <i>Malaysia 2022: 15<sup>th</sup> general elections and deepening political polarisation</i>
249	EDOARDO SIANI, <i>Thailand 2022: The «post-pandemic» era</i>
261	MATTEO FUMAGALLI, <i>Myanmar 2022: Fragmented sovereignties and the escalation of violence in multiple warzones</i>
281	SILVIA TIERI, <i>Bangladesh 2022: Challenging post-pandemic times</i>
299	DIEGO MAIORANO, <i>India 2022: Political realignments in a BJP-dominated system</i>
327	MICHELUGUGLIELMO TORRI, <i>India 2021-2022: Playing against China on different chessboards</i>
371	DIEGO ABENANTE, <i>Sri Lanka 2022: The aragalaya protest movement and the Rajapaksa's fall from power</i>
387	MARCO CORSI, <i>Pakistan 2022: The geopolitics of Imran Khan's fall and the fledgling government of Shehbaz Sharif</i>
411	FILIPPO BONI, <i>Afghanistan 2022: Life under the Taliban</i>
425	GIORGIA PERLETTA, <i>Iran 2022: Domestic challenges to state legitimacy and isolation in the global arena</i>
447	CARLO FRAPPI, <i>Armenia 2022: Looking for a way out of the Nagorno-Karabakh impasse</i>
479	<i>Review article</i>
505	<i>Reviews</i>
573	<i>Appendix</i>



## FOREWORD

### ASIA IN 2022: THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE, US-CHINA RIVALRY, DEMOCRATIC DECLINE AND POPULAR PROTESTS

In introducing the political and economic situation in Asia in the year 2022 one feels like quoting Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr's well-known aphorism, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, «the more things change, the more they stay the same». In fact, while discussing the Asian situation in 2021, this journal pointed out that it was characterized by three major worrying developments; the COVID-19 pandemic, the US-China confrontation and the authoritarian involution of the region. It also pointed out that all three developments, far from representing something new, were the continuation of trends which had started well before – at the end of 2019 in the case of the pandemic; several years earlier in the other two cases. Finally, that introductory essay highlighted that the continuation of the pandemic could be considered as both the unwelcoming backdrop against which the other two main developments unfolded and a contributing cause to the worsening of the negative results that they were anyway bound to cause.

In 2022, the only major change was that the COVID-19 pandemic gradually declined in importance in shaping the political and economic evolution of the region. This was the end product of the progressively weakening of its virulence, heralding the imminent transformation of the pandemic into a manageable endemic disease.<sup>1</sup> However, the pandemic role as the unwelcoming backdrop against which US-China confrontation and authoritarian involution unfolded was taken up by another overarching negative development: the cascading effects Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the remainder of the world, Asia included.

Against this new negative backdrop, the two other characterizing features of the political and economic set-up in Asia, namely the US-China confrontation and the authoritarian involution in most Asian countries, continued to unfold, maintaining most aspects which had already characterized them in the previous years. This continuity included the reactions to the authoritarian involution, which, as previously, took the shape of waves of popular protests.

1. Emily Molina, 'COVID-19 pandemic vs. endemic: What's the difference, and why it matters', *ABC News*, 3 March 2022; Claire Klobucista, 'When Will COVID-19 Become Endemic?', *Council for Foreign Relations*, 14 November 2022.





Unleashed on 24 February 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine was most probably conceived by Moscow as a blitzkrieg which, in the space of a very short period of time, would assure total control of the country's key strategic hubs, including the Ukrainian capital, and allow regime change in Kyiv. Unexpectedly, Ukrainian resistance, massively supported by the US and the main European countries, metamorphosed the supposed blitzkrieg into «the largest (inter-state) conflict since the Korean War across a range of measures: battlefield deaths, personnel committed, ordnance used».<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, in today globalized world a war of this magnitude could not but have a series of cascading effects not only on the countries directly involved in it and their closer supporters, but on the world at large, including, of course, Asia. These cascading effects can be classified as belonging to two different main categories. One is represented by the lessons that policy makers, military staffs, opinion makers and public opinions «consciously and unconsciously»<sup>3</sup> will derive from the war – its causes, the way it is being fought and its possible conclusion. The other is the actual negative economic impact of the war over much of the world, at a time when a slow and painstaking recovery from the devastation caused by the COVID pandemic was underway.



The lessons of war are probably destined to be the most important outcome of war itself. But these lessons are destined to be fully translated into practice less in the present than in the future, as they will take their final form only once the war is finally over. Whether it ends in victory for Russia, or victory for Ukraine, or a stalemate along the lines of the Korean War, the teachings that will be learned from the Russian war on Ukraine will be different. In spite of this, some lessons were learned in the year under review and some preliminary conclusions were drawn.

The most immediate of these lessons was that the generally held conviction that Russia's armed forces were a redoubtable, highly efficient, practically unstoppable juggernaut was shown to be only a myth. This realization could not but negatively affect one of the most flourishing Russian exports, that of arms and arm systems, which was not only a conspicuous source of economic gain but also of political influence, principally in Asia. Up to the Ukraine war, Russia was a main supplier of arms and arm systems in particular to India and Vietnam, but also to Malaysia, Indonesia,

2. Michael Wesley, 'The war in Ukraine: implications for Asia', *Lowly Institute*, 28 October 2022.

3. Ibid.

the Philippines and Thailand. It is true that Russian arms sales to South and South-east Asia were already declining before the war in Ukraine, due in part to fear of US sanctions under the *Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act* (CAATSA) of 2 August 2017, and in part to competition by the US and Israel and, in the case of South-east Asia, by China and South Korea too. Nevertheless, on the eve of the war in Ukraine, Russian arms still represented a major part of the weapons and weapon systems sold to South and South-east Asia. In this situation, the meagre performance of Russian weaponry during the war could not but raise concerns in the buyers. Not surprisingly, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines either stopped or cancelled new arms purchases.<sup>4</sup> India continued to buy Russian arms, but there is little doubt that the diversification process already underway in favour of Israel and, above all, the US was bound to continue and increase.

Once all this is said, it is necessary to point out that the decline in Russian arms sales was bound to be less ruinous than Russia's maladroitness on the Ukrainian battlefields would suggest. In particular, India and Vietnam have a long-standing relation of friendship with Russia. While friendship is a rather brittle motivating factor in international relations, in the cases of India and Vietnam two elements strengthen it. The first was that, because of these pre-existing long-term friendly relations, the arsenals of both India and Vietnam were replenished with Russian arms. To suddenly cut any connection with Russia would be tantamount to put a stop to the supply of spare parts, indispensable in maintaining the efficiency of the bulk of the weapons in use both in India and Vietnam. To this it must be added that, as noted by security and defence expert Richard A. Bitzinger, actual or potential buyers of Russian arms «may find it hard to resist the appeal of Russian arms deals, which often come without political strings and with innovative payment schemes».<sup>5</sup>



As noted above, the final lessons of the Ukrainian war will only take their final form and, therefore, fully determine their politico-military consequences at the end of the conflict. The economic consequences of the conflict, nonetheless, were already in full display soon after the beginning of the invasion. Both Russia and Ukraine are main food exporters; at the start of the war, they accounted between them for more than one third of the world's wheat and barley exports and some 70% of sunflower oil ex-

4. Richard A. Bitzinger, 'The Russia-Ukraine War: Lessons for Southeast Asia', *IDSS Paper* No. 008 - 13 January 2023.

5. *Ibid.*

port.<sup>6</sup> Besides, Russia was a main energy exporter, being the third largest petroleum producer in the world.<sup>7</sup>

The disruptions of the war in Ukraine and the imposition of increasingly stringent sanctions on Russia on the part of the US and the wealthiest western countries adversely impacted on a series of supply chains originating in either country. This caused conspicuous negative effects on the economies of many countries, most of them geographically distant from the Ukrainian battlefields. As already noted, these harmful cascading effects badly impacted on economies still trying to recover from the COVID pandemic.

Asia was a region highly affected by the negative economic consequences of the war, both because most Asian countries imported Russian oil, and because some of them imported agricultural commodities from either or both Ukraine and Russia. The steep rise in the price of energy caused by the war and the dwindling availability of Ukraine or Russian food commodities, along with the disruption of global supply chains, pushed up inflation in most Asian countries and diminished food availability. Diminishing food availability adversely effected the situation in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh; the energy crisis spread much wider, negatively impacting the economic situation not only in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, but also in Bhutan, Central Asia, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.<sup>8</sup>



The Russia-Ukraine war immediately became «a classic “proxy war”, where powerful states supply weapons, intelligence and training to defenders fighting against the powerful states’ enemy».<sup>9</sup> It was a «proxy war» that pitted the US and Russia against one other. This, and not sympathy or hostility towards Ukraine, determined the positioning of the different world countries to a large extent.

In Asia, this proxy war soon interacted and, in a way, became part of the ongoing US-China confrontation. As a rule, states aligned with the US, which were part of the multi-layered system of formal or informal alliances

6. Soumya Bhowmick, ‘Ukraine-Russia conflict: Impact on South Asia’, *ORF – Raising Debates*, 24 February 2023.

7. Ananya Raj Kakoti and Gunwant Singh, ‘Effects of Russia-Ukraine conflict on Asian Economies’, *Hindustan Times*, 23 May 2022.

8. For Central Asia see Yunis Sharifli, Chia-Lin Kao, and Bermet Derbishova, ‘Russia’s War in Ukraine and Its Impact on Central Asia’, *The Diplomat*, 24 October 2022; for the Philippines see Xinshen Diao, Paul Dorosh, Karl Pauw, Angga Pradesha, and James Thurlow, ‘The Philippines: Impacts of the Ukraine and Global Crises on Poverty and Food’, *IFPRI*, 2 August 2022; for the other countries, see the related essays in this volume.

9. Michael Wesley, ‘The war in Ukraine: implications for Asia’.

and ententes built or being built by the US to contain China, immediately sided with Ukraine. This was the case of Japan,<sup>10</sup> South Korea,<sup>11</sup> Taiwan<sup>12</sup> and Singapore,<sup>13</sup> which joined the US and its western allies in condemning the Russian invasion at UN (with the exception of Taiwan, which is not represented at the UN). These states also promptly imposed sanctions on Russia. In many other cases, however, Asian countries chose a different position. Apart from a minority of states – North Korea,<sup>14</sup> Iran,<sup>15</sup> Myanmar<sup>16</sup> – which openly sided for Russia, most Asian countries chose different forms of self-proclaimed «neutrality». In turn, «neutrality» ranged from actual equidistance – as in the case of the ASEAN countries minus Myanmar – to badly disguised support from Russia. To this latter group belonged the two most important Asian countries; China and India.

Apparently, China's position is not difficult to fathom. The political evolution of Asia at least from 2008 onwards has been characterised by the growing confrontation between the US and China. At the same time the Russia-China connection has become increasingly tighter, as shown by their cooperation in dealing with Taliban-dominated Afghanistan and, even more, by the signing of the joint China-Russia statement on 4 February 2022. Signed just 20 days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Joint Statement asserted that the friendship between China and Russia had «no limits».

The above appears to delineate a situation in which China could not but support Russia. In reality, however, the Russian invasion put China in a difficult situation.<sup>17</sup> If China's foreign policy, in the period under review, was «primarily preoccupied with domestic audiences rather than international ones»,<sup>18</sup> there is little doubt that the lack of enthusiasm shown by

10. Corey Wallace and Giulio Pugliese, 'Japan 2022: Putin and Abe Shocks Thwart Kishida's Enjoyment of Three Golden Years Despite Major Defence Overhaul', in this volume.

11. Marco Milani and Antonio Fiori, 'Korean peninsula 2022: Stuck between new leadership and old practices', in this volume.

12. Aurelio Insisa, , 'Taiwan 2022: Cross-Strait security spirals further down', in this volume.

13. Sebastian Strangio, 'Singapore Announces Sanctions on Russia Over Ukraine Invasion', *The Diplomat*, 1 March 2022; Warren Fernandez, 'Why Singapore had to take a strong stand against Russia's attack on Ukraine', *The Straits Times*, 26 MAR 2022.

14. Marco Milani and Antonio Fiori, 'Korean peninsula 2022: Stuck between new leadership and old practices'.

15. Giorgia Perletta, 'Iran 2022: Domestic Challenges to State Legitimacy and Isolation in The Global Arena', in this volume.

16. Matteo Fumagalli, 'Myanmar 2022: Fragmented sovereignties and the escalation of violence in multiple warscapes', in this volume.

17. Giulia Sciorati, China 2021-2022: A Foreign Policy of «Re-Branding», in this volume.

18. *Ibid.*

the Chinese audiences for Russia's aggression against Ukraine<sup>19</sup> could not fail to play a role in cooling relations with Russia. Also, a major war is not something conducive to the promotion of international trade, which is the mainstay of China's economic growth. Finally, the war did damage the conspicuous economic interests held by China in Ukraine.<sup>20</sup>

All this pushed China to assume a position of neutrality, de facto re-assessing the «no-limit friendship» promised to Russia in the 4 March Joint Statement. Accordingly, although «Beijing did not sanction nor condemn Moscow military operation»,<sup>21</sup> it stressed its continuing friendship with Ukraine.

In sum, China's position on the war was, initially, one of effective neutrality, grounded on equidistance from Russia and Ukraine. It was the US-promoted discourse on the war that gradually pushed China's to move to a kind of «neutrality» which hardly concealed its support for Russia. In fact, the US, following on the tracks already laid at the Summit for Democracies of 9-10 December 2021, interpreted the Ukraine war as the clash between world democracies, defending themselves, and world autocracies, bent on challenging world democracies. In this interpretation «China and Russia were paired up in the same category of countries», opposing democracy.<sup>22</sup>

Even more important in shifting China's neutrality towards de facto support for Russia was, however, another factor, namely US President Joe Biden's comparing the Russian invasion of Ukraine to a potential future invasion of Taiwan on the part of the People's Republic of China.<sup>23</sup> In turn, Biden's was only the most glaring example of a series of bipartisan stances by American politicians which, partly recognising the status quo based on the «One China» principle, but partly supporting Taiwan search for either autonomy or outright independence, had conveyed the message that the US position on the future of Taiwan was changing in a negative direction with respect to Beijing's objectives.<sup>24</sup>

In the case of India, it was clear since the beginning that her «neutrality» was nothing different from ill-disguised support for Russia.<sup>25</sup> As just

19. E.g., Frederik Kelter, 'Russian 'invasion was wrong': Views from China on war in Ukraine', *Al Jazeera*, 31 Mar 2023.

20. E.g., Stella Qiu, Hallie Gu and Tony Munroe, 'Factbox: China's business and economic interests in Ukraine', *Reuters*, 23 February 2022.

21. Giulia Sciorati, *China 2021-2022: A Foreign Policy of «Re-Branding»*.

22. *Ibid.*

23. E.g., Kevin Liptak, Donald Judd and Nectar Gan, 'Biden says US would respond «militarily» if China attacked Taiwan, but White House insists there's no policy change', *CNN*, 23 May 2022.

24. E.g., Chris Megerian and Matthew Lee, 'EXPLAINER: US keeps world guessing on Taiwan stance', *AP News*, 23 May 2022; James Lee, 'The One-China Policy in Transition', *The Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 7 November 2022.

25. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2021-2022: Playing against China on different chessboards', in this volume.

noted, the Ukraine war was read by the US and other western countries as the clash between democracies and autocracies; hence, India's positioning as a de facto Russian supporter came as an unpleasant surprise to the West, given the still dominant idea there that India was not only a democracy, but indeed the largest one in the world. An additional cause of surprise was the fact that in the previous years the military connection between the US and India had become so close to appear, for all intents and purposes, a de facto military alliance. In fact, at least since 2014 India has been steadily – and, after 2019, increasingly rapidly – progressing from being a real, although imperfect, democracy to an electoral autocracy, not substantially different from the political set-up prevailing in Russia.<sup>26</sup>

Once the above has been pointed out, it is necessary to stress that proximity or distance from democracy has never been a key factor in moulding Indian foreign policy, now as in the past. Accordingly, two were the motivating factors of India's pro-Russia policy. One, immediately evident, was that, in spite of the process of differentiation followed by India – the world's main arms importer – at least since 2005, the bulk of the arms in the Indian arsenals continued to be of Russian origin. To suddenly and completely cut the Russian connection – a connection going back to the 1950s – would have a ruinous effect on India's war capabilities. The other motivating factor was India's reluctance to isolate Russia, for fear of pushing it into too strict an embrace with China. Both these motivating factors originated from Indian hostility towards China, which, in the period under review, continued to be the polar star guiding India's foreign policy. As, in the final analysis, the US too saw China as its main and most dangerous adversary, Washington and its allies – after the initial disappointment – rapidly accepted Indian position.<sup>27</sup>



What has been said so far has already led us to confront the other major development which, as in previous years, continued to manifest itself in Asia. This was the intensifying US-China rivalry and the doubling down of both regional and external powers on the Indo-Pacific as the *locale* of great power rivalry. While these trends were set in motion several years ago,<sup>28</sup> 2022 saw an exacerbation of tension; Washington and Beijing accelerated the building or strengthening of political and/or economic ententes aimed at containing the other's influence, enhanced the rhetorical arguments

26. This involution has been exhaustively documented in the previous issues and in the special issue no. 2 of this journal as well as elsewhere.

27. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2021-2022: Playing against China on different chessboards'.

28. The deepening tensions between the US and China have been under the lens of *Asia Maior* since the publication in 2006 of the double volume XVI & XVII/2005-2006.

against one another, and, in an ominous new development, flexed their military muscles.

As far as the building or strengthening of political and/or economic ententes aimed at containing the other's influence is concerned, in the year under review it became clear that the Biden administration, in its policy aimed at containing China, had gone back to the basics of the Pivot to Asia strategy. Conceived and head-started by the Barack Obama-Hillary Clinton duo in 2009-2013, the Pivot to Asia was a strategy articulated in two interconnected policies: the redeployment in the Asia-Pacific of the bulk of US military might and the building of a new economic free exchange network – the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) – including the countries on the two sides of the Pacific.

The TPP aimed at shaping the most extensive and important free-trade area in the world, ruled by norms devised by Washington and, as a consequence, designed to perpetuate US economic hegemony. The TPP's unsaid but decisively important political objective was to put China before a dilemma: either enter the most extensive free-trade area in the world, accepting Washington's imposed rules, or remain outside it, in a much-reduced economic space. Of course, in both cases, the US would come out on the top, greatly limiting China's economic power.

The TPP, however, was ditched by Obama's successor, Donald Trump, as soon as he assumed the presidency of the US. While the Trump administration aimed at strengthening and expanding the US dominated military arc of containment around China, any kind of economic pacts or ententes with the US treaty and non-treaty allies was discarded. In Trump's simplistic Weltanschauung, the economic relations of the US with the remainder of the world, China included, were to be limited to bilateral relations based on the new President's «America First» signature policy. According to this policy, either the US unilateral threat of imposing custom tariffs or their actual imposition would be enough to subordinate the remainder of the world, China included, to Washington's desiderata. This was a ham-handed approach that, far from subordinating China to US directives, caused a spat of problems with basically all the Asian states part of the American sphere of influence.

As far as these states were concerned, the adverse consequences of Trump's «America First» economic approach were partly offset by the rise in the volume and value of arms and arm systems exported by the US to Asian countries, together with the sponsoring by Washington of new military pacts or the consolidation of existing ones. However, as China's strength was firmly grounded on its giant and growing economy, an arc of containment only built on military might could not but be brittle. This was something fully visible to the Biden administration, headed by Obama's former vice-president and repleted by former Obama's security experts. While the anti-China objectives of the Biden administration did not change and several of the

instruments employed by the Trump administration were not discarded,<sup>29</sup> they were integrated and sometimes modified through the adoption of other and more sophisticated non-military devices.

An example of the Biden administration following the military approach favoured by the previous administration was the launching of a new, US-sponsored, trilateral military pact, AUKUS. Announced on 15 September 2021, AUKUS, which included Australia, the UK and the US, was aimed at enhancing the military cooperation between the member states in a number of high-technology military domains, but, in particular, to supply Australia with nuclear-powered submarines. At the same time, the Biden administration gave up the objective openly pursued by the preceding administration to transform the Quad – the quadrilateral entente including Australia, India, Japan and the US – into a NATO-like military anti-China alliance. The militarization of the Quad was a transformation that had been resisted by India, namely the only Quad member-state with a land border with China – and an extremely long and difficult one to defend at that. Accordingly, the Biden administration, in clearly defining – for the first time ever – the finalities of the Quad in 2021, discarded any open military objective. Nonetheless, it outlined as part of the «Spirit of the Quad» a set of non-military strategies openly aimed at countering China in such crucial sectors as information and communications technology, quality infrastructure investments and «vaccine diplomacy».<sup>30</sup>

Along the same lines was the launching of another four-states entente, announced on 18 October 2021 and including India, Israel, the UAE and the US. The new entente – sometimes called «Western Quad», but whose official name became I2U2, with reference to the initials of the names of its four member – was presented as a forum on economic cooperation between its four members. Nonetheless, there are few doubts that the initiative had been sponsored by the US as a way to counter and possibly block China's growing economic penetration into Israel and the UAE.<sup>31</sup>

The most important US initiative in Asia, unambiguously aimed at containing China by resuscitating the economic side of the Obamanian Pivot to Asia, was, however, Biden's launching of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). The creation of the new entente was personally announced by the US President during his first visit to Asia since assuming office (20-24 May 2022), on the 23, just before the beginning of Quad leaders' summit in Tokyo. On 23 May 2022, the entente – which according to American plans was to further expand – included 13 member-states, accounting

29. Vivek Mishra, 'From Trump to Biden, Continuity and Change in the US's China Policy', ORF Issue Briefs and Special Reports, 8 September 2022.

30. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2021-2022: Playing against China on different chessboards', in this volume.

31. *Ibid.*



for two-fifth of the world GDP.<sup>32</sup> A few days later, an additional member joined the entente, being welcomed as the 14<sup>th</sup> founder state: Fiji.<sup>33</sup>

The IPEF was «neither a “pact” nor a “deal”», but «a loose framework of Asian countries that would provide an early warning system for supply-chain issues, encourage industries to decarbonize, and offer US business reliable regional partners outside China».<sup>34</sup> In fact, the purpose of the IPEF was not that of «securing reciprocal market access among the members through wide-ranging tariff cuts», as had been the case with the TPP.<sup>35</sup> Rather, it intended to favour economic growth by establishing common enforceable rules and operable standards, adopted by all the member-states. These rules would regulate four different sectors, namely: (a) fair trade; (b) supply chain resilience; (c) infrastructures and decarbonization; (d) tax and anti-corruption. In each of these sectors the rules would be set through negotiations, each of the participating countries being at liberty to choose in which and how many areas to join the negotiations and whether or not to adhere to their results.<sup>36</sup>

Even if the IPEF was not an economic pact along the lines of the TPP, it nevertheless had the same main political aim. Given the decisive role that would be played by the US in the IPEF-sponsored negotiations, it is clear that - exactly as had been the case with the TPP, before Trump’s maladroitness decision to ditch it - the IPEF would allow the US to play a decisive role as «rule-setter» in the Asian economic space. Quite unambiguously, these rules would be aimed to favour the decoupling of the economies of the member-states from China and to favour the penetration of US enterprises.

In sum, the IPEF had the potentiality to be a game-changer in the economic – and, therefore, political – international relations in Asia. However, in 2022, these potentialities were just that, namely potentialities. Only the future would show whether these potentialities translated into concrete results.



As shown by the essays on Timor-Leste, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Armenia published in this volume – China was not less active than the US in building or strengthening or maintaining

32. Besides the US, the other states were: Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, India.

33. ‘White House welcomes Fiji to its Indo-Pacific economic plan’, *Reuters*, 27 May 2022.

34. M.K. Bhadrakumar, ‘IPEF will be a hard sell in the Indo-Pacific’, *Asia Times*, 25 May 2022.

35. Amitendu Palit, ‘The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework: An Inclusive Quad-plus Initiative’, *ISAS Brief* No. 934, 25 May 2022.

36. *Ibid.*

political and/or economic networks aimed at consolidating its own influence and diminishing that of the US.<sup>37</sup> Beijing was also active in Central Asia – where, nonetheless, its influence was exerted at the expense of Russia's<sup>38</sup> – and in the South Pacific – where, however, Beijing's gains were limited.<sup>39</sup>

What was becoming clear in the year under review was that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – which had repeatedly and massively come under fire for the alleged economic dependence it created vis-à-vis China and the environmental damage it caused – while remaining a key weapon in the panoply of the strategies used by Beijing to promote its influence world-wide, was losing momentum. The launching in 2021 and 2022 of two new initiatives on the part of Beijing – the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI) – appeared designed to complement the BRI in the task of strengthening China's influence world-wide.

The GDI, as announced by Xi Jinping in a pre-recorded video address to the UN General assembly on 21 September 2021, had as its declared aim fostering balanced, coordinated and inclusive development, which would make possible to reach the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.<sup>40</sup>

Xi's announcement was followed by the launching, again at the UN, of the Group of Friends of the GDI on 20 January 2022, and a ministerial meeting of the same group on 20 September 2022. By that date, the number of the countries involved in the new Beijing-sponsored project was around one hundred. Although much about the GDI remained vague, it became clear that the new initiative was not aimed to take the place of the BRI, but to complement it. While the BRI remained focussed on physical infrastructure projects, the GDI would provide sustainable-development grants and capacity-building, helping developing countries to combine economic development with decarbonisation of their economies. Already in his announcement of September 2021, China's President had engaged not to

37. In Armenia, however, China's influence was limited, as Yerevan bought arms not only from China, but also from India. Moreover, following the weakening of the protection offered by Russia against Azerbaijan – an unforeseen result of the war in Ukraine – Yerevan, while maintaining strict relations with Moscow, deepened its engagement with the EU and France. See Carlo Frappi, 'Armenia 2022: Looking for a way out of the Nagorno-Karabakh impasse', in this volume.

38. Giulia Sciorati, *China 2021-2022: A Foreign Policy of «Re-Branding»*.

39. Nick Perry, 'China wants 10 Pacific nations to endorse sweeping agreement', *AP News*, 26 May 2022; 'EXPLAINER: What's at stake for China on South Pacific visit?', *AP News*, 26 May 2022; David Rising and Nick Perry, 'China's Pacific plan seen as regional strategic game-changer', *AP News*, 28 May 2022; Aileen Torres-Bennett and Nick Perry, 'China falls short on big Pacific deal but finds smaller wins', *AP News*, 30 May 2022.

40. 'China headed towards carbon neutrality by 2060; President Xi Jinping vows to halt new coal plants abroad', *United Nations*, 21 September 2021. On the UN 2030 Agenda, see: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.

build new coal-fired power projects abroad. A year later, at the ministerial meeting of the GDI Group of Friends, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced a set of measures aimed at kickstart the GDI, including the creation of two ad hoc centres to promote different aspects of the programme, and an increase in investments in the China-UN Peace and Development Fund (established in 2016).<sup>41</sup>

Beijing's other major foreign policy initiative in 2022 was the launching of the Global Security Initiative at the annual conference of the Boao Forum for Asia, held on the southern Chinese island of Hainan. Here, during a video speech held on 21 April 2022, Xi, highlighted the opportunity to «uphold the principle of indivisibility of security» and «oppose the building of national security on the basis of insecurity in other countries». Hence, according to Xi, global security could only be based on the respect of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, while paying attention to the «legitimate» security concerns of all.<sup>42</sup>

Both the GDI and GSI were based on principles apparently in line with those of the West, in the first case, or at least not antithetical with them, in the second case. Both initiatives had little resonance in the West, but what they had was negative.<sup>43</sup> The GDI and GSI were in fact seen as part of China's effort to push back the influence of the West, but most particularly the US, at the international level. Which, of course, to a large extent they were. This, nonetheless, does not detract from the fact that many countries in the developing world could not but see positively the principles on which the two initiatives were based and the potentialities they had. Of course, how and if these potentialities would be fulfilled was something that only the future could tell. In the present, what was clear was the fact that they represented China's powerful and well-articulated counter-push to the anti-China containment policy sponsored by the US.

41. 'Wang Yi Chairs the Ministerial Meeting of the Group of Friends of the Global Development Initiative', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The People's Republic of China*, 21 September 2022. On the GDI see also: 'Wang Yi Chairs the Ministerial Meeting of the Group of Friends of the Global Development Initiative', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The People's Republic of China*, 21 September 2022; Anthea Mulakala, 'China's Global Development Initiative: soft power play or serious commitment?', *Devpolicy Blog*, 18 October 2022; Yu Jie, 'Climate justice with Chinese characteristics?', *Chatham House*, 7 November 2022.

42. 'The Global Security Initiative. Concept Paper', *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Italy*, 21 February 2023; Federico Giuliani, 'Che cos'è la Global Security Initiative, la nuova proposta sulla sicurezza globale della Cina', *InsideOver*, 28 Febbraio 2023.

43. E.g., 'China's Global Development Initiative is not as innocent as it sounds', *The Economist*, 9 June 2022; Michael Schuman, 'How China Wants to Replace the U.S. Order', *The Atlantic*, 13 July 2022; Joseph Lemoine and Yomna Gaafar, 'There's more to China's new Global Development Initiative than meets the eye', *Atlantic Council*, 18 August 2022.



As shown in this volume, the building of opposite networks of influence, containment and counter containment on the part of the US and China was accompanied by the enhancement of the rhetorical arguments against one another. China was persistently depicted by Western politicians, analysts and media as a repressive state, a threat to the US-led liberal order and an extremely dangerous adversary of the West in general and the US in particular. Even perfectly acceptable principles, such as green development and security for all nations were criticized as both without solid foundations and ultimately aimed to push back the liberal order. Along this line of reasoning, the GDI was criticized as being unsupported by substantial resources and promoting economic development without human rights. On its part, the GSI was decried as basically a ploy to justify and therefore support Russia in its deplorable attempt to subjugate a democracy, friendly with the West.<sup>44</sup>

Chinese criticism of the West, but the US in particular, was not less shrill. In Beijing's considerate opinion, the West acted according to a «cold war mentality», carrying out an anti-China competition that boiled down to «all-out containment and suppression, a zero-sum game of life and death». As far as the war in Ukraine was concerned, it had been made inevitable by the NATO unrelenting expansion in Eastern Europe.<sup>45</sup>



In the year under review, maybe even more worrying of the enhanced rhetorical confrontation between the West and China, was the rise US-China military tension. The key flashpoint of this tension was Taiwan. As already noted, Washington's growing ambiguities on the future of the island had been observed with growing alarm and anger by Beijing. This alarm and anger escalated following the decision by the speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, to visit Taiwan. Such a public display of support by a high-level US representative was met with an unprecedented display of military capabilities by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA).<sup>46</sup> While things relatively calmed down towards the end of the year, this was a potent reminder of what escalating tensions in the region could potentially trigger.

44. See the preceding footnote.

45. E.g., 'China's Xi says countries must abandon 'Cold War mentality,' warns against confrontation', *CNBC*, 17 January 2022; Rodion Ebbighausen, 'Why China thinks the West is to blame for the war in Ukraine', *Deutsche Welle*, 14 March 2022; Qin Gang, 'How China Sees the World', *The National Interest*, 26 December 2022; 'The Guardian view on China-US relations: can the downwards spiral be halted?', *The Guardian*, 9 March 2023.

46. Aurelio Insisa, 'Taiwan 2022: Cross-Strait security spirals further down'.

The other major development under way in Asia – documented in this volume and a continuation of a long-term trend – was the shrinking of liberty in most Asian states, even if not in all of them. In the year under review, this process – documented not only by this journal, but also by organizations devoted to analysing the state of democracy around the world, such as Freedom House<sup>47</sup> – took place both in openly authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states and in self-styled democracies.

The political set up in China became increasingly authoritarian.<sup>48</sup> This had negative cascading effects on the situation in Hong Kong.<sup>49</sup> Also, the increasingly brutal military dictatorship in Myanmar was actively supported by China, which «sent experts to the country to create a new firewall to deliver sophisticated surveillance equipment to suppress online dissent and control the narrative surrounding the coup».<sup>50</sup>

In Malaysia, the 15<sup>th</sup> general elections were held and they were free. The political landscape, however, was characterised by a series of disturbing trends, in particular a deepening political polarisation along racial lines and the instrumentalization of race and religion for political gains.<sup>51</sup>

In Thailand, Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha remained in office despite the legal expiry of his mandate.<sup>52</sup>

Bangladesh saw a decline in those extra-judicial killings and open use of violence, in particular at the hands of the notorious the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), which had characterised the local situation in previous years.<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, this positive development was accompanied by a state-promoted campaign of harassment against dissidents, their family members, their supporters and family members of forcibly disappeared persons. Also, the public activities of the major opposition party (the BNP) were systematically obstructed either by the police or members of a student union affiliated with the party in power (the Awami League). On its part, the NGO Affairs Bureau, which is part of the Prime Minister Office, cancelled the registration of a prominent private Bangladesh-based NGO, Odhikar, well-

47. E.g., ‘Freedom in the World 2023, Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy’, *Freedom House*, 2023.

48. Silvia Menegazzi, ‘China in 2022: The 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and Popular Discontent in Xi Jinping’s China’, in this volume.

49. Claudia Astarita, ‘Hong Kong 2021-2022: A new life in the shadow of China’, in this volume.

50. Matteo Fumagalli, ‘Myanmar 2022: Fragmented sovereignties and the escalation of violence in multiple warscapes’.

51. Saleena Saleem, ‘Malaysia 2022: 15<sup>th</sup> General Elections and Deepening Political Polarisation’, in this volume.

52. Edoardo Siani, ‘Thailand 2022: the «post-pandemic» era’, in this volume.

53. Silvia Tieri, ‘Bangladesh 2022: Challenging Post-Pandemic Times’, in this volume.

known for its monitoring of human rights violations. The situation of the Rohingya refugees remained difficult, and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, during an official visit in Bangladesh, while commending the South Asian nation for providing a haven «to more than 1 million Rohingya refugees» noted the «increasing anti-Rohingya rhetoric in Bangladesh», and decried the «stereotyping and scapegoating Rohingyas» as the source of crime and other problems.<sup>54</sup>

In Pakistan, the loss of army support was decisive in determining the fall from power of Prime Minister Imran Khan. This, in turn, opened a long-term crisis characterized by political uncertainty, the rise of political contestation and popular discontent.<sup>55</sup>

In Afghanistan, the first full year under Taliban rule witnessed «the staggering regression in women and girls' enjoyment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights» and the rapid disappearance of women and girls have «from all spheres of public life».<sup>56</sup> Female civil servants and judges were sacked; secondary education for girls was suspended; the sphere of movement for women was limited within the domestic walls; travels with a mahram (a close male relative) became mandatory in most cases; equally mandatory became a strict dress code. Finally male family members were made punishable for women's conduct, thus «effectively erasing women's agency and prompting increased domestic abuse».<sup>57</sup>

Less disastrous, but still so negative to trigger a popular backlash (on which more later), was the women's situation in Iran. There, at the beginning of the year under review, the Headquarters for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, the powerful religious organisation responsible for defining regulations relating to the hijab and Islamic attitudes in Iran, sent a 119-page document to government offices and agencies aimed to tighten control on women's clothing by imposing further restrictions on their individual choices. The ostensible goal of the *Hijab and Chastity Project*, as this directive was named, was that of «cleansing society of the pollution caused by nonconformance with Islamic dress codes».<sup>58</sup> Of course, this policy was expression of the increasing authoritarian trend which had seen its turning point in the presidential elections of 18 June 2021 and their controversial results.<sup>59</sup>

The most relevant cases of democratic involution were, however, those of the two largest Asian democracies: India and Indonesia. The trans-

54. *Ibid.*

55. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2022: The geopolitics of Imran Khan's fall and the fledgling government of Shehbaz Sharif', in this volume.

56. Filippo Boni, 'Afghanistan 2022: Life under the Taliban', in this volume.

57. *Ibid.*

58. Giorgia Perletta, 'Iran 2022: Domestic Challenges to State Legitimacy and Isolation in The Global Arena'.

59. Luciano Zaccara, 'Iran 2021: The year of transition', *Asia Maior* XXXII/2021, pp. 400-410.

formation of India from a real, although imperfect democracy into an electoral autocracy, grounded on the principle that the only real Indians are the Hindus, has already been documented in depth in several articles published in previous issues of this journal and elsewhere. In the year under review, this involution continued, although not without opposing tendencies. The grip on power of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its undisputed leader, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, strengthened, while threats to freedom of expression and minorities' rights became more pronounced.<sup>60</sup>

In the case of India, the de-structuring of democracy is carried out in order to transform a secular democracy into a *Hindu Rashtra*, namely a Hindu polity whose overriding objective is the alleged «protection» of Hindu people and their culture. This, in practical terms, means the transformation of the plural Indian society into a Hindu dominated society, where all non-Hindus, including agnostics and atheists, are to be considered as second-class citizens. In the case of Indonesia, the de-structuring of democracy has profoundly different motivations. The man behind Indonesia's democratic involution, President Joko Widodo, popularly known as «Jokowi», is not a man looking at a supposedly glorious and largely mythical past, but a man in a hurry, pursuing the transformation of the nation he leads into a highly developed and industrialized country. This is an objective which Jokowi has pursued by increasingly sacrificing the principles of democracy and secularism.<sup>61</sup> Particularly ominous have been President Jokowi's compromises with a militant version of Islam, until recently extraneous to Indonesia's historical traditions, but in later years impetuously on the rise. Differently from the syncretic and tolerant form of Islam historically prevalent in Indonesia,<sup>62</sup> the new version, presently on the rise, is based on a narrow and literary interpretation of the Quran and the Hadiths and is powerfully influenced by the Wahabi Islam, possibly the most regressive versions of Islam. The rising influence of Wahabi Islam, in Indonesia as elsewhere, has been the result of the policy followed by the Saudi government, wealthy non-governmental organizations and individuals in the Gulf states and organizations like the Jeddah-based World Muslim League, since the 1980s. All these organizations and individuals have been channeling conspicuous funds to Indonesian Islamic preachers, often educated in the Middle East, advocating a more fundamentalist approach to their religious tradition and supportive of the establishment of an Islamic state. In Indonesia, these preachers, by an adroit use of social media, have extended their influence to a key sector of the Indonesian

60. Diego Maiorano, 'India in 2022: political realignments in a BJP-dominated system', in this volume.

61. Riwanto Tirtosudarmo and Peter Carey, 'Indonesia, 2019-2022: The authoritarian turn as leitmotif of President Jokowi's second term', in this volume.

62. E.g. Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed. Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971.

society such as the urban youth with a background in the sciences or engineering.<sup>63</sup>

This rather dismal overview, nonetheless, does have exceptions that help to make it less depressing. There is no doubt that, as documented in the essays in this volume as well as the findings of the main organizations devoted to analysing the state of democracy around the world, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan remain full-fledged democracies. But an additional case that deserves to be highlighted is that of Timor-Leste. The country is classified as a «flawed democracy» in the *Democracy Index* compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit. However, as shown in this volume, the March-April 2022 Presidential election and its follow up were a demonstration as clear as any that in the small South-east Asian state democracy is on the rise.<sup>64</sup>



The shrinking of liberties in Asia did not go unchallenged. The year under review was characterised by waves of popular protests that took place in several Asian countries as a reaction to the ongoing tightening of the pre-existing spaces of freedom.

In China, widespread protests erupted against the Chinese Communist Party's handling of COVID-19 and the implementation of the draconian Zero-COVID policy. These protests started following a fire in Urumqi (Xinjiang), namely the region witnessing the longest lockdown in China. The fire, which killed at least 10 Uighur residents basically because of the present strict anti-COVID regulations prevented rapid and effective action against the blaze, triggered a series of protests across the country, including major cities like Shanghai and Beijing.<sup>65</sup> Few doubts are possible that they played a role in the unexpected termination of the zero-COVID policy, decided shortly thereafter by Beijing.

Iran was another country characterized by sustained and widespread protests. There, the killing of 22-year-old Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini kickstarted widespread political demonstrations. Young girls, high-school pupils, and university students vocally criticized the Islamic Republic (and the very foundations upon which it stands), and physically attacked and vandalized its symbols and political icons.<sup>66</sup>

63. E.g., Fred R. von der Mehden, 'Saudi Religious Influence in Indonesia', *MEI@75*, 1 December 2014; Krithika Varagur, 'How Saudi Arabia's religious project transformed Indonesia', *The Guardian*, 16 April 2020.

64. Geoffrey C. Gunn, 'Timor-Leste 2021-2022: Electoral change and economic reset', in this volume.

65. Silvia Menegazzi, 'China in 2022: The 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and Popular Discontent in Xi Jinping's China'.

66. Giorgia Perletta, 'Iran 2022: Domestic Challenges to State Legitimacy and Isolation in The Global Arena'.



Protests also erupted in Thailand, where a small group of activists demonstrated in the major northern city of Chiang Mai, wearing the masks of Guy Fawkes. Their protest was against the proposed Bio-Circular Green strategy,<sup>67</sup> and, more broadly, for the stepdown of the Premier, the dissolution of Parliament and the rewriting of a new, «truly democratic» constitution.<sup>68</sup>

In Sri Lanka, the protests, initially inspired by economic difficulties, eventually turned into an uprising of unprecedented proportions and impact. The Janatha Aragalaya («people's struggle») led to the resignation of President Rajapaksa, despite the latter's attempts at cracking down on the protesters.<sup>69</sup>

Last but not least, demonstrations erupted even in Afghanistan. In spite of the brutal repression by the Taliban regime, women took the streets in December to protest against the ban that prevented them from studying.<sup>70</sup>

With the exception of Sri Lanka and, to a lesser extent, China, the results of these waves of protests were limited. They nevertheless signalled the will not to surrender to the arbitrariness of authoritarian and generally brutal states by important sections of local civil societies.



In concluding the introductory essay to the past issue of *Asia Maior*, this author, reflecting on the three crises that had marked Asia in the year 2021, pointed out that: «history teaches us that pandemics, it does not matter how devastating and deadly, run their course over a period of a few years». Which, he noted, did not hold true in the case of the other two crises - US-China confrontation and authoritarian involution.<sup>71</sup> The rather pessimistic conclusion was that, even if the COVID pandemic disappeared or lost force, the other two crises would continue to unfold, negatively affecting Asian societies.

Forecasts, even those best founded on in-depth analysis of the present and the past, have an unfortunate tendency to prove inaccurate, sometimes blatantly so, with the passage of time. In the present case, this author had not foreseen – in spite of the signs of danger already visible in the conclud-

67. The Bio-Circular-Green Economy Model (BCG) has the commendable aim «to use natural assets more efficiently with as least impact on the environment as possible». Royal Thai Embassy, Rome, Republic of Italy, *Thailand Activates the BCG Model for a Sustainable Recovery from COVID-19*. In the demonstrators' opinion, however, its implementation was heavily skewed in favour of state agents and big corporations.

68. Edoardo Siani, 'Thailand 2022: the «post-pandemic» era'.

69. Diego Abenante, 'Sri Lanka 2022: the *aragalaya* protest movement and the Rajapaksas' fall from power', in this volume.

70. Filippo Boni, 'Afghanistan 2022: Life under the Taliban'.

71. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Asia Maior in 2021: Pandemic crisis; US-China confrontation; authoritarian involution', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXII/2021, pp. 37-38.

ing months of 2021 in Eastern Europe – that Russia would actually invade Ukraine. Accordingly, he had not taken into account that even in the case of the COVID pandemic progressively losing force, its malignant effects would be substituted by those triggered by the war against Ukraine. Nonetheless, in spite of that omission, the forecast made one year ago – namely that any optimism on the future of Asia appeared to be misplaced – turned out to be accurate. Unfortunately, on the basis of the in-depth and richly nuanced 19 analyses included in this volume, at the closing of 2022 the perspectives on the future of Asia have not substantially changed. The situation remains bleak, and much optimism about the future of the region is unwarranted.

*Michelguglielmo Torri*

*The author wishes to thank Filippo Boni for the useful preparatory work that greatly helped the writing of this foreword.*



# CHINA 2022: THE 20<sup>TH</sup> PARTY CONGRESS AND POPULAR DISCONTENT IN XI JINPING'S CHINA

*Silvia Menegazzi*

LUISS University  
smenegazzi@luiss.it

*The most significant issue of 2022 in the People's Republic of China (PRC) was the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held from 16 to 22 October 2022. The outcome was unprecedented: after a decade in office, Xi Jinping was confirmed for a third mandate as the general secretary of the CCP. The other equally important phenomenon concerns China's COVID-19 control strategy and its impact on Chinese society. While seemingly unrelated, there is a link between these two important developments. Whereas in the first half of the year China's ability to lock down entire cities appeared to be a successful strategy to maintain consent and to prevent the spread of COVID-19 casualties on the Chinese territory, it was precisely the weaknesses and failures of the same zero-COVID policy that most challenged the newly confirmed leadership of Xi Jinping.*

KEYWORDS – 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress; Xi Jinping; zero-Covid policy; protests.

## 1. Introduction

The most significant issue of 2022 in the People's Republic of China (PRC) was the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held from 16 to 22 October 2022. The outcome was unprecedented in China's political system: after a decade in office, Xi Jinping was confirmed for a third mandate as the General Secretary of the CCP. The intention to extend his time in power had already been announced in 2018; what is striking, however, is that political moves established by Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues at the end of the 1980s to decentralize power within China's political system – fixed terms of office limits, a mandatory retirement age, delegating authority from the Party to a government agency, and the holding of regular meetings of party institutions – seems to have vanished in the light of a political change that today appears irreversible. Remarkably, whereas one of the Deng regime's first needs was to re-establish the Party's legitimacy by acknowledging its errors [Fairbank 1987: 344], Xi Jinping's main imperative is instead to re-legitimize the CCP to serve as «the vanguard and guard of the Chinese state» [Allison 2017, 31 May]. At the same time, the selection of the new cadres appointed within the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) confirmed rumours, leaks and news made by China watchers and academics over the course of the last decade about Xi's intention to

eradicate any traces of factional opposition within the Party, but particularly against himself.

The other equally important phenomenon concerns China's COVID-19 control strategy and its impact on Chinese society. While in the majority of Western countries restrictions ended and life looked much like it did back in 2019, in China – the country in which the pandemic originated – lockdowns reached record levels in 2022. For instance, the Japanese financial holding company Nomura estimated that in April 2022 approximately 373 million people across 45 cities in China were under some form of lockdown because of the spread of the Omicron variant [*Kyodo News* 2022, 16 April]. However, the Chinese platform dedicated to the monitoring of Coronavirus cases, CCDC Weekly, ceased reporting data from the National Health Commission (NHC) on 17 November 2022 [Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2022]. This was due largely to the fact that at the start of November 2022 protests spread in China as citizens reacted with anger to «zero-COVID» policy. Immediately thereafter, protests were branded by international media as the new «White Paper Movement» (*baizhi xingdong*) or «Blank Paper Protests» (*baizhi kangyi*). Radio Free Asia, when reporting the spread of the protests, interviewed some Chinese citizens. Remarkably – and unlike what it is expected in a country where information is constantly under control – they were making reference to protests occurred outside Mainland China, from protesters in Hong Kong, holding up blank sheets of paper in 2020 while protesting against the National Security Law, to Russia, earlier in 2022, when protesters opposing the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine were arrested while holding up blank sheets as a form of protest [*Radio Free Asia* 2022, 28 November].

Though seemingly unrelated, these two important developments are actually linked. On 13 October 2022, on the eve of the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CCP, a physicist working at the Beijing Melon Network Technology Co., Ltd, Peng Lifa, – disguised as a construction worker – displayed two large banners on Sitong Bridge, Third Ring Road, Beijing, demanding the removal of Xi Jinping. One of the two banners read «We want food, not nucleic acid tests / Freedoms not lockdowns / Dignity, not lies / Reform, not Cultural Revolutions / Elections, not rulers / To be citizens, not slaves». The second banner read: «Boycott classes. Boycott work. Depose the traitorous despot Xi Jinping» [Carter 2022]. The *New York Times* defined Peng as «China's Protest Prophet» [Li 2022]. In *change.org*, the leading nonprofit petition website worldwide, the petition titled «Free Peng Lifa 彭立法, the banner hero against Xi Jinping and the 'zero-Covid' policy» received a total of 5,648 signatures ['Free Peng Lifa' 2022].<sup>1</sup> During an episode dedicated to the Sitong Bridge

1. Although the number of signatures was relatively low (5,648), the petition appears relevant as an indication of a rising public awareness of the problem. It was also an attempt to attract the attention of foreign observers, as the petition was addressed to petition was directed to Joseph R. Biden, Antony Blinken and Nancy Pelosi.

protests, the *Bu Mingbai Podcast* (不明白播客) – a Chinese podcast launched in 2022 by several journalists in order to encourage uncensored discussions among Chinese people about topics directly or indirectly related to contemporary China – reported that just hours after the incidents occurred, numerous Weibo and WeChat accounts were lost or deleted because of the reposting of the incident online. As a consequence, people reacted through the launch of a «toilet revolution», by writing for instance, the same slogans in public toilets [‘EP-023’ 2022]. While broadly and internationally covered by media, the protests did not last long: in mid-December the Xi Jinping administration announced the easing of the zero-COVID policy in parallel with the total re-opening of China, scheduled for January 8, 2023.

Despite fleeting moments of apparent normality, important questions remain unanswered. One is whether the protests occurred as a contestation following the conditions of millions of people living in lockdown for the previous three years, or as a «window of opportunity», to dare to protest for something bigger: political change in the PRC. The spread of protests towards the end of the year inevitably reignited a debate about political contestation and change in contemporary China, among Chinese citizens – particularly those living abroad – as well as within the international community. Whereas in the first half of the year China’s ability to lock down entire cities appeared to be a successful strategy to prevent the spread of COVID-19 casualties on the Chinese territory, it was the same strategy (and its mismanagement) that proved to be the main cause of popular discontent, through what can be defined as a real «boomerang effect». The weaknesses and failures of the zero-COVID policy became manifest worldwide in the second part of the year, challenging precisely the newly confirmed leadership of Chinese President Xi Jinping. In this regard, three main considerations should be made when assessing the linkage between authoritarian politics and popular discontent in contemporary China in the light of the zero-Covid policy. The first concerns the framing potential of health issues in Chinese politics and society. As compared with the West, healthcare was not, originally, a matter of major concern for the Chinese population although its relevance has become evident in the public eye. The second is about capital mobilization among urban populations vis-à-vis (potential) dangerous repression. The fact that for the first time in decades, students dare to protests at universities and on the streets of intensively populated cities cannot be underestimated, as government crackdown on the protests was more difficult to manage. Third, in the light of such events, CCP’s response appeared to be constrained between prioritizing the Party’s legitimacy and a costs-benefits analysis to assure its survival, which, however, was not without the risk of dangerous concessions [Hurst 2022, 5 December].

This essay reviews the major political and economic events which took place in the PRC in 2022 by exploring two major developments: the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and the COVID-19 situation. Following this introduc-

tion, the second section covers China's domestic politics with a focus on the two major events: the National People's Congress (NPC) and the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. The third section offers a general overview of China's economic performance for the year under review. The fourth section of the essay further elaborates on China's zero-COVID policy with a focus on the protests that occurred between September and December 2022, as well as the governmental response. The fifth and concluding section briefly elaborates on China's domestic reactions to one of the most striking events to occur in 2022; Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed analysis of Chinese public opinion towards the war in Ukraine. However, the ongoing conflict stands as one of the clearest examples in international affairs showing that Chinese leaders are mindful of public perceptions and of their performances on the world stage. To this extent, not only public opinion can shape China's foreign policy, but it is key for political legitimacy, by ensuring a responsiveness mechanism while avoiding rebuffing the public which could be politically costly [Li 2022]. Afterall, if not based on direct political participation, the legitimacy of the Party, even in Xi Jinping's authoritarian China, must guarantee excellent performances and results, be they economic, foreign policy, or both.

## 2. *Party and politics*

### 2.1. *The National People's Congress*

The year 2022 began with a very well-known political event in China – the National People's Congress (NPC).<sup>2</sup> The NPC is China's highest legislative body that meets once a year, usually in March. For the year under review, the 5<sup>th</sup> Session was held from 5 to 11 March, while its Standing Committee (NPCSC) held a total of six sessions (from 33<sup>rd</sup> to 38<sup>th</sup>). In parallel with the annual meeting of the NPC was the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. These two events – taken together – were labelled «Two Sessions» (*Lianghui*).

The NPC agenda covered a total of 10 topics: 1) deliberation on the 2021 government work report; 2) review of the report of the 2021 Development Plan and the draft of the 2022 Development Plan; 3) review of the 2021 Central and Local Budgets and draft of the 2022 Central and Local Budgets; 4) draft amendment to the Local Organic Law; 5) draft conclusion on the NPC Election Decision; 6) deliberation on a draft regarding Hong Kong Election measures; 7) deliberation on a draft regarding Macao Election measures; 8) deliberation on the work report of the NPCSC; 9) deliberation on the work report of the Supreme People's Court; 10) deliberation on the work report of the Supreme People's Procuratorate.

2. The NPC shall not be confused with the NPC of the CCP.

The Work Report of the NPCSC substantially represents the most important document regarding the future trajectories of the Chinese economy. Overall, China's government Work Report in 2022 recognized China's economic challenges and risks, with Premier Li Keqiang announcing the need to strengthen the implementation of a prudent monetary policy, while GDP growth for the year 2022 was estimated at 5.5% [Xinhua 2022, 5 March]. However, it should be noted that the world economic recovery struggled with the global outbreak of COVID-19 and that the PRC was no exception. In this regard, data concerning China's GDP growth were denied by the World Bank, as the DC-based institution cut China's expected growth for 2022 to 2.7%, down from 4.3% in June 2022 [Al Jazeera 2022, 20 December].

The Work Report in 2022 also identified eight major tasks for the year under review: 1) achieving stable macroeconomic performance; 2) attaining job security; 3) achieving internal consumption and market vitality; 4) implementing innovation-driven development strategy; 5) expanding domestic demand and promoting regional development and new urbanization; 6) boosting agricultural production; 7) achieving the stable growth of foreign direct investment; and 8) developing green and low-carbon, people's well-being, and social governance [The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2022]. Some of these major tasks are indeed key priorities in China's domestic politics as is, for instance, unemployment. In August 2022, China's urban youth unemployment rate was unprecedented, having reached a peak of 19.3%. However, the problem is not simply the number itself, but rather, the far more complex economic, political, and social consequences behind it: the stark competition that is on the rise in Chinese society, burnout reactions increasingly common among young people, structural imbalances in the labor market [Bram 2022, 16 August]. To some in fact, the growth of unemployment rate in China could prove dangerous to the point of weakening the Party's *eudaemonic legitimacy* – the legitimacy that in a regime is justified by successful economic performance and effective provision of economic benefits to individuals in society [Feng 1997]. The growth model that China pursued during the last 10 or 20 years is in fact more and more often put into question by millions of young Chinese. The new trends and discourses emerging in and percolating through the Chinese Internet show increasing dissatisfaction among China's young population, as evidenced by the spread of terms such as «involution (*nei juan hua*)», «lying flat (*tang ping*)» or «letting it rot (*bai lan*)» [Bram 2022]. Remarkably, the Chinese leadership is aware of such weaknesses which Xi Jinping labelled «the principal contradiction» facing Chinese society nowadays, namely, «the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life» [Xinhua 2017, 20 October]. Such maxim, in parallel with the two centenary goals, is an important concept for the New Era terminology introduced by the Chinese President Xi Jinping since the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. However, besides further stressing the relevance of the «dialectical ma-



terialism» often embedded within the Chinese political discourse, the concept achieved very little in defining China's practical road map to economic growth and growing economic inequalities within society.

## 2.2. *The 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress*

The 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the CCP was held from 16 to 22 October 2022. There are two levels of analysis when studying the meaning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Party congress, namely, major changes in the Party structure (personnel) and the documents produced at and by the Congress (with a focus on policymaking and ideology). As mentioned, the 20<sup>th</sup> CCP Party Congress was the most important political event in China for the year under review. The outcomes of the Congress were many: from the (expected) concentration of power in the hands of the Chinese President Xi Jinping to an intensification of public dissent within and outside Mainland China, up to a further squeeze on the Taiwan issue [Bush *et al.* 2022].

With regard to the Party's structure, the most important outcome was the re-election of Xi Jinping as General Secretary of the 20<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the CCP during a session over which Xi himself presided, and which was attended by 203 CCP members and 168 alternate members. The seven members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau were also elected: Xi Jinping, Li Qiang, Zhao Leji, Wang Huning, Cai Qi, Ding Xuexiang and Li Xi. The need to strengthen Xi's leadership is evident here: besides him and Wang Huning (Xi's close ally and China's most important political theorist), all other new members of the PBSC are envisioned as being part of Xi's faction. Li Qiang, took office as China's Prime Minister in March 2023. He was already well known in the news because of his position as former Zhejiang Governor and his unsuccessful management of COVID-19 policy in the Shanghai area. The majority of international media outlets justified Li Qiang's appointment because of his proximity with Xi Jinping, but he does possess substantial leadership experience, having governed the three most important provincial economies in China: Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Shanghai ['Li Qiang' 2022]. Zhao Leji is also considered to be close to Xi Jinping and made his political fortune as Party Secretary in the Chinese province of Qinghai, when its GDP tripled, and it succeeded in achieving rapid economic growth ['Zhao Leji' 2022]. Cai Qi is considered to be one of Xi Jinping's most trusted confidants. From 2017 to 2022 he served as the CCP Secretary in Beijing. Ding Xuexiang served as Xi Jinping's Chief of Staff in 2007 and 2013 [Goh 2022, 23 October]. He has never served as a Provincial or Municipal Party Secretary nor as a Minister in the State Council and for this reason his policy preferences remain substantially unclear ['Ding Xuexiang' 2022]. Li Xi served as Party secretary of Liaoning and Guangdong. He was one of the main supporters of two important projects signed by Xi: the Maritime Silk Road project and the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Bay Area, China's potential Silicon Valley.

In light of the names considered above, commentators and political analysts conclude that President Xi Jinping has been able to appoint many loyalists into the top positions within the Party's core apparatus, with very limited space left to political opposition [CSIS 2022, 28 October]. This is a very different situation from the one depicted by Andrew J. Nathan back in 2003, when China's political regime was «in the middle of a historic demonstration of institutional stability» [Nathan 2003]. Between 2002 and 2003, the transition from the third generation of leadership, headed by Jiang Zemin, to the fourth, headed by Hu Jintao, was orderly, peaceful, timely, and stable [Nathan 2003: 7]. These were the years in which the selection of Party cadres within the new Politburo was made by consensus within the old Politburo only, and where political power between factions was transferred and shared through a stable and informally accepted norm-bound procedure in Chinese politics [Nathan 2003].<sup>3</sup> Twenty years later, not only has institutional stability vanished, but after decades of collective leadership, Xi Jinping is returning China to personalistic leadership [Shirk 2018]. However, the academic literature on this point diverges with regard to how leadership succession also resulted in institutional instability. For instance, Victor C. Shih maintains that, since Mao's era, decades of «coalitions of the weak» laid the groundwork for complete domination by princelings over the other two major factions (the Chinese Youth League and the Shanghai faction).<sup>4</sup>

To others, the fact that Xi Jinping was successful in assuring the strength of his own faction for a third mandate proves that, contrary to the theory of balance factionalism applied to Chinese politics, factional power politics within the CCP, rather than being on the wane, dominates the party [Choi *et al.* 2021]. Rather, Xi Jinping has been able to strengthen his faction by promoting more of his clients than his two predecessors, and the two other factions were not closed enough to counterbalance the rise of princelings' networks within Chinese politics and society [Choi *et al.* 2021]. As such, one should recognize the complexities of the inner workings of the leadership, which goes well beyond the allocation of posts to single individuals within a certain faction and explains the selection of the seven members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau (see above). As Cheng Li remarkably showed, Xi's inner circle is far more complex than usually portrayed by international media and is composed of three important associations or networks: 1) native-place associations, that is, the so-called Shanghai-gang, including the iron triangle in the PBSC; 2) Xi's longtime

3. To Fewsmith, however, the fact that the fourth generation headed by Hu Jintao was ready to take over did not mean that the lingering influence of Jiang Zemin and his ageing third generation disappeared simultaneously [Fewsmith 2003].

4. According to Shih, in the context of authoritarian politics, leaders often prefer to preserve their power from internal challenges, rather than making recourse to institutional development and crisis management. Hence, they prefer very junior or historically tainted officials to be part of the ruling coalition of China [Shih 2022].

friends formed through school ties; and 3) Xi's protégés from the provinces and cities in which he served as a top leader, and in which he cultivated an important web of political relationships [Li 2016: 302].

In a nutshell, to deeply comprehend how the structure and dynamics of the leadership of the CCP evolved since Xi Jinping took power in 2012, it is not enough to look at CCP's major institutional events from an organizational point of view: it is necessary to also devote particular attention to how leadership selection and promotion occur at the provincial and local levels.

Leadership selection within China's military was also part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and the new lineup of the Central Military Commission (CMC), China's highest military and operational decision-making body, was also unveiled: Zhang Shenmin, Liu Zhenli, Li Shangfu, He Weidong, Zhang Youxia, Miao Hua. The CCP maintains strict control over the CMC. For instance, the fact that no civilian has been named CMC Vice Chairman is a sign that the CCP has not yet selected a successor to Xi Jinping; Xi Jinping was CMC Vice Chairman from 2010 to 2012, while Hu Jintao served as CMC Vice Chairman from 1999 to 2004 [*ChinaPower* 2022, 25 October].

In relation to the ideological-political sphere, a total of five documents was published by the State Council Information Office as an output of the Congress: 1) full text of Constitution of CCP; 2) full text of the Report to the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CCP; 3) full text of resolution on Work Report of 19<sup>th</sup> Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI); 4) full text of resolution on 19<sup>th</sup> CCP Central Committee Report; and 5) full text of resolution on Party Constitution Amendment. For the purpose of this article, we will focus on the full text of the Report to the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CCP (herein the Report) [State Council Information Office 2022].

The Report – in its English version – consists of 64 pages in Word format. In its essence, it is a summary of the speech that Xi Jinping gave on the first day of the congress. The Report makes reference to the country's major tasks for the years ahead: building a high-standard socialist market economy, modernizing the industrial system, advancing rural urbanization across the board, promoting coordinated regional development, and improving trade and investment cooperation, though it provides no substantial information on how the related policies will also be implemented [State Council Information Office 2022a]. Furthermore, although major challenges listed in the document seem to pertain to the country's economic development, the reference to the ideological context that must be strengthened in line with the Party's interests is particularly evident. For instance, the Report stresses the relevance to the Chinese political system of the so-called «whole-process people's democracy» (*guocheng renmin minzu*). As it reads in the SCIO website, the formula «whole-process people's democracy» possesses a specific meaning to the CCP. Precisely, it is a concept made of two key phrases: 1) the phrase *whole-process* means

that «the people-engage in democratic elections, consultations, decision-making, management, and oversights according to the law»; 2) the phrase *people's democracy* means that «the Chinese people participate, in accordance with laws and in various ways and forms, in the governance of the state, economic, cultural, and social affairs» [State Council Information Office 2022b]. Nevertheless, there is no evidence of free elections (except at the local level) in Mainland China, neither participation in political affairs is mentioned in the SCIO definition. Besides official definitions provided by Chinese state media, the formula «whole-process people's democracy» has its roots in Marxism-Leninism and it stresses the historical roots of so-called «socialism with Chinese characteristics» [Chen 2021]. At the same time, the urgency for a new narrative underlying the Chinese vision of the very idea of democracy, and often opposed to that of the West and the United States, is also the result of China's growing ambitions to provide an alternative to the democratic principles and governance of the West, in part as a result of the US-China growing rivalry. And yet, China's democracy was also criticized by the very candidates and voters participating in grass-roots level elections, by questioning for instance, the real opportunities for participation at the county and township level in China [South China Morning Post 2021, 4 December].

In this light, another formula, «deliberate authoritarianism», may be more appropriate with reference to China's political system. Precisely, a regime style that makes common use of authoritarian deliberation and in which legitimacy builds on decision makers' ability to legitimate their decisions by relying on politics that generate persuasive influence at the societal level [He and Warren 2017: 156]. As such, the Report calls for improving the system of institutions through which the people run the country, by suggesting, in particular, that deputies to people's congresses should strengthen ties with the general public. Furthermore, consultation procedures and mechanisms should also be implemented, by reinforcing the role of the CPPCC as a specialized consultative body between the Chinese civil society and decision-makers. Yet, the Report also makes explicit reference to consolidating and developing «the broadest possible patriotic united front» to realize the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation, which includes the following three major aspects: 1) taking a distinctively Chinese approach to handling ethnic affairs; 2) promoting the principle that religions in China must be Chinese in orientation and must adapt to Chinese socialist society; and 3) improving the work related to Chinese nationals overseas to give shape to a powerful joint force for advancing the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. In addition, the Report also mentions the role of intellectuals who are not Party members to provide better political guidance on theoretical and political issues [State Council Information Office 2022: 35].

In this regard, what also emerges from the report is that in the Xi Jinping era, patriotic education goes beyond Party-building practices, being understood by CCP leaders as a major force against old national threats such as religious extremism and foreign intrusion. Although the PRC is officially an atheist state, religious control has become an important priority for Xi Jinping's agenda. For instance, in 2021 the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) issued the Measures on the Management of Religious Clergy to implement surveillance over the five tolerated religious group in China – 1) the Buddhist Association of China; 2) the Chinese Taoist Association; 3) the Islamic Association of China; 4) the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement; 5) and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. Article 3 of the Measures requires clergy loyalty to the CCP, while Articles 6 and 12 prohibit religious extremism and foreign infiltration using religion [United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2021].

Regarding the management of Chinese nationals overseas, it is worth mentioning the report released in September 2022 by Safeguard Defenders, a human rights NGO founded in late 2016 in Madrid. The publication, titled *100 Overseas. Chinese Transnational Policing Gone Wild*, reveals the establishment of at least 54 police-run overseas police service centres across five continents through which the PRC, rather than using international police or judicial cooperation mechanisms, is controlling Chinese overseas nationals [Safeguard Defenders 2022]. Among the most criticized methods used by Chinese unofficial police corps overseas are involuntary returns consisting of threats to family in China, targeting victims in foreign countries, and kidnapping abroad. Chinese transnational policing is the «international version» of Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign launched back in 2012 and consists of two main pillars: Operation Fox Hunt and Operation Sky Net. The first was launched in 2014 under the Ministry of Public Security with the objective of capturing international fugitives accused of financial crimes. The latter is an expansion of the former and it was launched in 2015, under the CCDI, to catch economic fugitives abroad. According to data released by the Spanish NGO, around 230,000 suspects of fraud and telecom fraud were successfully persuaded to return to China, but this would have happened without regard to international law and by violating the territorial integrity of third countries [Safeguard Defenders 2022].

Last but not least, while concluding the section dedicated to China's domestic politics, it seems important to mention an event that occurred in 2022 concerning one of China's most famous leaders of the past, Jiang Zemin. About a month after the conclusion of the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, on November 30, 2022, PRC's former President, Jiang Zemin, died from leukaemia. On December 6, 2022, Xi Jinping addressed his eulogy from the Great People's Hall in Tiananmen Square [*Xinhua* 2022, 7 December].

### 3. *The economy*

In relation to China's economic performance for the year under review, it is necessary to consider four main (interlinked) trends: 1) the status of China's economic recovery; 2) trade; 3) investment; 4) consumption.

According to data adjustments made within the «China Economic Update» published by the World Bank in 2022, China's predicted GDP growth was 2.7% – half of government's estimates for 2022 (5.5%) [World Bank Group 2022]. Major international media outlets attributed China's economic slowdown largely to the uncompromising zero-COVID policy implemented by the government, which had the objective of keeping cases as close to zero as possible [Bloomberg 2022, 22 December]. At the same time, when assessing the impact of the zero-COVID policy on the Chinese economy, the individual containment policies implemented by the government to deal with the pandemic should also be considered. In particular, full-scale lockdowns across major Chinese cities and mobility restrictions from early 2022 caused a draconian fall in retail sales. Ironically, it seems that it was precisely the alternation of limited lockdowns and random re-openings that increased China's stagnant consumption [Garcia Herrero 2022]. With regard to available data, it was estimated that in September 2022 there were 33 cities and 65 million people in China under some sort of lockdown, in parallel with as many as 103 cities across 26 provincial-level regions reporting COVID cases [Caixin Global 2022, September 5].

The China Economic Work Conference (CEWC) was also held from 15 to 16 December 2022. The event is one of the country's most important meetings for discussing China's economic policies and agenda. At the conference, the government reiterated that China's number one priority was to keep economic stability [The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2022]. Among other envisioned measures there were a proactive fiscal policy and a prudent monetary policy. The meeting also stressed the confirmation of a new model of development paradigm [The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2022]. The concept is strictly associated with the Dual Circulation Strategy. More specifically, as explained in an opinion article released in *Qiushi* – China's political theory journal edited by the CCP – this new development paradigm consists in considering the domestic market as «the mainstay», while the domestic and foreign markets must reinforce each other [Qiushi 2021, 2 November]. Finally, some other domestic priorities mentioned at the CEWC were housing conditions and rural revitalization. However, future objectives at the international level included the joining of two paramount Free Trade Agreements (FTAs); the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (an initiative now led by Japan), and the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement – virtually signed in 2021 by Chile, New Zealand and Singapore [The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2022].

Remarkably, there are other important reasons to illustrate the decline of the Chinese economy, including the crisis of the property market, climate change, and the fact that China's tech titans are losing investors due to the regulatory crackdown launched back in 2021 [BBC 2022, 5 October]. According, for instance, to the China-Britain Business Council, the crisis of China's real estate sector resulted from a mix of different causes; the failure to regulate the industry sufficiently while it was booming, and the lockdowns during the COVID pandemic, which prevented potential buyers and visitors making offers on properties [China-Britain Business Focus 2022, 1 September]. Unsurprisingly, the year 2022 was also a difficult year for China's tech sector. Following China's actions against monopolistic practices of Internet tech-giants in 2021, two important measures taken by the Cybersecurity Administration of China (CAC) took effect in September 2022. Precisely, in order to implement data security management previously announced through the Cybersecurity Law (CSL), the Personal Information Protection Law (PIPL) and the Data Security Law (DSL), the Measures for Security Assessment of Outbound Data Transfer, and the Guide to the Application for Security Assessment of Outbound Data Transfer were also established [Guo *et al.* 2022].

In conclusion, new and old factors must be considered to explain the performance of the Chinese economy in 2022. As Barry Naughton reminds us, since the start of China's period of «reform and opening up» in 1978, market-oriented system reforms and openness to the outside were China's two prominent features of policy orientation. However, there is no shortcut for China's path to development, and to talk of any specificities of the Chinese economic model is too simplistic and abstract as a concept [Naughton 2021]. Similarly, it is an undeniable fact that China's economy has been beset by a long list of economic problems, the post-COVID recovery being just one. While the Xi Jinping administration pledged to revive internal consumption and to support the private business sector, a critical point is the fact that while external rebalancing simply deals with the nexus external versus internal demand, internal rebalancing implies different structural reforms, including a shift from investment to consumption on the demand side; a transition from industry to services on the supply side; a reduction of credit intensity and improved allocated efficiency [Zhang 2016].

#### 4. COVID-19 and its impact on chinese society

##### 4.1. The spread of protests as a response to anti-COVID measures

The zero-COVID policy in China almost bankrupted the country. This has been considered as the main explanatory variable behind the spread of protests that erupted in different regions and cities across China between September and November 2022. Nonetheless, it should be noted that social pro-

tests in China are not the exception but the norm. For instance, in a book published in 2018, Teresa Wright argues that popular discontent in China is related to several issues and affects different social groups, from workers to environmentalists, from dissidents to ethnic minorities [Wright 2018]. And according to the *China Labour Bulletin*, from January 2015 to December 2017, there were 2,595 construction worker protests in China with the highest concentration found in Henan, Guangdong, Shandong, Hebei, and Sichuan [China Labour Bulletin 2018]. Environmental activism in China also comes with a long-standing tradition. In 2012, for instance, Chinese people clashed frequently with the government and the police creating social disorder, with *Nature* reporting on 1,000 environmental protests only in the eastern city of Qidong, Jiangsu province [Gilbert 2012]. Despite protests being a common phenomenon in China, the most striking feature of COVID-related protests occurring in 2022 was that no one could have foreseen their occurrence, although it was clear that many Chinese were suffering the zero-COVID policy.

Before providing details on the events regarding COVID protests for the year under review, three observations can be made. First, the extreme intransigence of the zero-COVID policy can be attributed to the marked increase in social control following Xi's promulgation of the comprehensive national security concept, resulting in a transformation of security's management in China [Chestnut Greitens 2022]. In a nutshell, dissatisfaction in China mounted within a context in which strict measures around societal control seemed to have degenerated well before the start of the pandemic.

Second, the zero-COVID policy's fall from grace in the eyes of the Chinese population resulted from the waning trust in the slogan widely promoted by the Xi Jinping administration «people first, life first» (*renmin zhis-hang shengming zhishang*) [People's Daily 2021, 29 December]. In this regard, while it is true that the number of victims in China during 2022 appeared rather low – particularly when compared to Europe and the United States – strict lockdowns, such as that of Shanghai in April, with stories of desperation about the lack of food and supplies, questioned the rhetoric of Xi's slogan that people must be put first [Kwan 2022, 8 April]. Third, intergovernmental relations between central and local governments vis-à-vis health governance practices not only affected public reactions differently across China, but it also affected the very governance through which the same zero-COVID policy was implemented across the country. For instance, in contrast to what it is expected within an authoritarian context, the management of the pandemic during the first phase of the disease – the outbreak in Wuhan from January to March 2020 – included *de facto* an institutional mobilization occurring at different levels; from the Hubei Provincial government to the Wuhan municipal government to the central public health technocrats [Ran and Yan 2021]. While public outcry against non-transparency in COVID policies puts the central government under pressure, data showed that local officials and central public health technocrats did not always adhere to the



same strategies while implementing central government's guidelines [Ran and Yan 2021].

The first COVID-related incident occurred on September 18, 2022, when 27 Chinese citizens were killed in a bus crash in southwest China's Guizhou province. The incident was not directly related to Covid-related restrictions; however, it was considered by a vast majority of Chinese public opinion the first in a long series showing the dramatic drawbacks of the rigid anti-epidemic measures adopted by Chinese authorities. Then, on September 27, dozens of people took part in a protest in the southern Chinese tech hub of Shenzhen – in Shawei, a neighbourhood in Futian district. With a population of more than 18 million people, three districts were put in lockdown all at once, for just 10 infected cases – Futian, Luohu and Longgang – but with another 15 districts marked as medium risk, thousands of residents were only allowed to walk within their housing compounds [*The Standard* 2022, 28 September].

In October things were no better and protests increased in number and intensity. In the days before the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CCP, banners with explicit political meaning were hung from Sitong Bridge, Hainan district, Beijing. Unlike other protests, here the reference was made directly to the Chinese political leadership, as well as to President Xi Jinping, and the illiberal dimension of the Chinese political system – accused of not allowing Chinese citizens to freely select rulers and decision-makers. In mid-November, violent protests related to the zero-COVID policy also occurred in Guangzhou, when crowds of people crashed through barriers and marched against the Chinese police force. Protests occurred mainly in the Haizhu and Tianhe districts [*Euractiv* 2022, 30 November].

Among the worst instances, however, there was the protest that erupted in Urumqi, Xinjiang, which was, indeed, the event sparking the anti-COVID wave of protests across the whole country. For the year under review, it is well known that the city of Urumqi experienced one of the longest lockdowns in China: over 100 continuous days. On November 24, 2022, a fire broke out in a residential tower block. As reported by Radio Free Asia, the victims in the Urumqi fire that sparked protests were all Uyghurs [*Radio Free Asia* 2022, 2 December]. Yet, the number of people who lost their lives is not very clear: while the official number released by Chinese authorities reported 10 dead Uyghurs, the Canada-based organization Uyghurs Rights Advocacy Project (URAP) issued a statement about the fire, strongly condemning the death (or 'massacre') of 44 Uyghurs [Uyghurs Rights Advocacy Project 2022, 28 November]. Also worthy of note is URAP's strong condemnation of China's zero-COVID policy as a tool used by the Chinese government to target and control Uyghurs [Uyghurs Rights Advocacy Project 2022, 28 November].

In the aftermath of the Urumqi fire, on November 26, Shanghai residents gathered in Wulumuqi Road – the Chinese name for Urumqi Road –

to mourn victims of the tragedy. Initially, in the day after the event, mourners in Shanghai lit candles and laid flowers. However, as the hours wore on, protests began to mount, underlying the frustration of the Chinese population with the anti-COVID measures. For instance, protesters were wearing face masks with '404' written on them, «referring to the recurring online censorship in light of various epidemic-related incidents».<sup>5</sup> On the second day of the protests, on Sunday, November 27, a wave of analogous demonstrations spread to different cities in China: Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Wuhan, Lanzhou, Nanjing [*The Guardian* 2022, 28 November]. On the same day, expressions of dissent were also manifested in Chinese universities: Tsinghua and Peking University in Beijing, Nanjing Tech University, Wuhan University, out of a total of 79 institutions reportedly affected by unrest caused by long-running lockdowns and restrictions [*Times Higher Education* 2022, 28 November]. Although the mobilization must be interpreted as a reaction to COVID restrictions, it is worth mentioning that many demonstrators possessed common characteristics; young, disillusioned people in their twenties, mostly students, but also recent graduates without a job [*The New York Times* 2022, 10 December].

To conclude, by observing the anti-lockdown protests in China in 2022, it is possible to identify three major trends characterizing the spread of discontent: first and foremost, the deterioration of the Chinese economy as a direct cause of the zero-COVID policy; second, the accumulated mental and physical deterioration of Chinese society; and third, the vague and increasingly missed synergy between the local and central governments in China regarding to how deal and implement zero-COVID measures.

#### 4.2. *From zero to no-COVID policy*

Rather than focusing just on the events related to the COVID-19 protests, it is also necessary to mention some of the possible causes and outcomes, including the evolution of the zero-COVID policy enforced by the Chinese leadership through the course of the year. On December 27, 2022, the State Council's Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism Press Conference was held in Beijing. On that occasion, Mi Feng, NHC Spokesperson, announced a new phase in China's fight against the Coronavirus [National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2022]. Among the decisions announced during the conference, it figured out that the one taken by the State Council earlier on (namely, the prevention and control measures for Class A infectious diseases stipulated in the Law of the PRC on the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases) would no longer be applied to the Coronavirus disease. More practically, the downgrade made by the NHC for the Coronavirus from a Class A to Class B disease meant that quar-

5. 404 is the error code given when a page on the Internet can no longer be found [Koetse 2022].

antine for people entering China was no longer required, with an end to sealed control of COVID-19 cases and the designation of high-risk areas.<sup>6</sup> As reported by the Chinese Center for Disease and Control Prevention, it should be noted that on 11 November 2022, China had already announced a partial optimization of COVID-19 rules, among which was a reduction of the quarantine period for incoming travelers from 8 to 10 days, the request of one negative nucleic acid test for inbound travelers 40-hours before their departure instead of two, as well as the discontinuation of isolation regulations for inbound travelers after finishing the required quarantine period at their first point of entry [Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2022]. Following this, on 15 November 2022, was the issue by the NHC of an official circular letter announcing a suite of 20 new measures to further optimize the country's COVID-19 control policy also from a national point of view, from the optimization of pandemic control measures at schools to the implementation of COVID-19 measures in companies and industrial parks, but particularly the avoidance of «excessive anti-Covid measures».<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, the Chinese leadership was well aware from the start that in order to deal with the explosion of the Omicron variant in China, and its impact on the Chinese public opinion, a change of policy was not sufficient; a new official narrative was also necessary. On 9 December 2022, Zhong Nanshan, China's famous epidemiologist, expressed his views on Coronavirus prevention and control during a Q&A session with journalists in Guangzhou. When asked how serious the new Omicron variant was, and how to deal with it, Professor Zhong assured journalists that not only had Omicron rarely been seen as a danger invading the lungs, but that it seldom caused death. As such, he maintained, the most serious and urgent task for Chinese people was to get vaccinated and to strengthen immunization in this new stage of epidemic prevention [People's Government of Yongfeng County Jiangxi Province 2022]. Remarkably, only a year earlier, in 2021, Zhong Nanshan was a major supporter of China's zero-COVID strategy, which he considered to be a necessary and relatively low-cost strategy, particularly when compared with COVID's (mis)management in the West [Menegazzi 2022:42].

For the year under review, official data on the number of Coronavirus deaths in China present important differences compared with the previous year. In 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported 131,315

6. To be more precise, since 9 January 2020 COVID-19 has been classified as a Class B disease – a class including among others HIV and H7N9 bird flu. Nevertheless, notwithstanding this classification, it was decided that COVID-19 management would be the same of a Class A disease, that is, similar to bubonic plague and cholera.

7. To consult the full list of new measures, see for instance, 'Graphics: China's 20 new measures for optimizing Covid-19 response', *CGNT*, 15 November 2022.

confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 5,699 deaths [Menegazzi 2022].<sup>8</sup> In 2022, the same organization signaled a total of 10,982,185 confirmed cases with 34,280 deaths confirmed. Therefore, according to data released by WHO in 2022, the number of COVID-19 deaths in China increased by approximately 600% [WHO 2022]. To some extent, data were also confirmed by Chinese authorities. At the start of January 2023, Jiao Yahui, Head of the NHC's Medical Affairs Department, affirmed that China had recorded 59,938 COVID-related deaths between December 8, 2022 and January 12, 2023, although of these deaths only 5,503 would have come from respiratory failure caused by COVID infections [CNN 2023, 15 January]. However, as remarked by other journalists and commentators, the most striking question that remains is why China ended its zero-COVID policy so abruptly, given that it was an important element of Xi Jinping's political legacy [Yu 2023, 11 January].

## 5. Conclusion

In 2022, Jin Canrong, professor and associate dean, School of International Studies, Renmin University, published and endorsed numerous posts on his Weibo account reporting statements made by Lavrov – the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – on the Ukrainian War. In March 2022, a month after the start of the conflict, Cui Hongjian, Director of the Department of European Studies at the China Institute of International Studies in Beijing, declared that as soon as the war started, Russophobia spread widely across Europe, thus preventing European countries from thinking clearly about their strategic interests at stake [Cui 2022, 18 March]. These are just two of the numerous comments showing the views of elites in China about the war in Ukraine. In reality, consonance with the feelings of academic elites as well as citizens concerning China's foreign and domestic politics stands as a cornerstone to the CCP's legitimacy [Cerny 2022, 25 November]. According to the US-China Perceptions Monitor, which conducted a survey of Chinese public opinion regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 75% of respondents agree that supporting Russia in Ukraine is in China's national interest, whereas roughly 60% of respondents support China mediating an end to the conflict [US-China Perception Monitor 2022, 19 April]. According to another survey, in 2022 Chinese opinion concerning Russia was still intended in positive terms, with the Russian Federation being the most positively perceived country as opposed to the United States, which was the most negatively perceived [Turcsanyi *et al.* 2022]. The debate over the issues

8. These were alarming data also compared to neighboring countries, including Japan [Wallace and Pugliese 2022].

of regime legitimacy as linked to, or reliant on, citizen feelings is central in order to understand the relevance of public opinion in China. The proponents and supporters of the liberal democratic model emphasize that, in the absence of a multi-party system, fair elections, a firm separation of power, etc., the role of public opinion in affecting decision-making is limited, if it exists at all. However, there is little doubt that a solid foundation of popular support is key to ensure the regime's stability, avoiding the potentially dangerous construction of an alternative public discourse concerning how political affairs are to be managed in contemporary China [Chu 2013].

Conventional wisdom suggests that public opinion is irrelevant to the Chinese government. However, the spread of the protests in light of the zero-COVID policy – and the subsequent decision by the Chinese government to abruptly relax its related restrictions – showed the world that even within China's authoritarian context, the CCP's legitimacy also relies on the support of the Chinese citizens. The degree to which Chinese leadership is constrained by Chinese public opinion in its decision-making process and policy implementation remains an open question. Nevertheless, the way in which Chinese leaders manoeuvred their position on the COVID issue with respect to citizen opinion provides important lessons for how it might respond to future legitimacy crises caused by other aspects of domestic and international turmoil.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aljazeera, 2022, 20 December, 'World Banks slashes China's growth outlook to 2.7 percent in 2022'.
- Barclay Bram, 2022, 'Involution: the generation turning inward and away from Xi's Chinese Dream', *Asia Society*.
- Barclay Bram, 2022, 'The 19 Percent: The Social Consequences of China's Youth Unemployment Rate', *Asia Society*, 16 August.
- BBC, 2022, 5 October, 'Five Reasons why China's economy is in crisis'.
- Bloomberg, 2022, 22 December, 'China's Soaring Covid cases push economic activities off a cliff'.
- Brookings Institution, 2022, 'Ding Xuexiang – 丁鞠想', *Brookings Institution*, 20 October.
- Brookings Institution, 2022, 'Li Qiang – 李强', *Brookings Institution*, 20 October.
- Brookings Institution, 2022, 'Zhao Leji – 赵乐际', *Brookings Institution*, 20 October.
- BuMingbai Podcast, 2022, 'EP-023 四通桥后, 哪些年轻的抗议者' (After Sitong Bridge Protests, other young protests occurred), 29 October, (<https://www.bumingbai.net/2022/10/ep-023-kathy-the-protester-text/>).
- Bush, R.C., Fu, D., Hass, R., Kim, P. M. and Li, C., 2022, 'Around the Halls: The outcomes of China's 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress', *Brookings Institution*, 25 October.
- Caixin Global, 2022, 5 September, '33 cities in China are under some sort of lockdowns'.

- Carter, Cindy, 2022, 'Protest Posters: the flames of Sitong Bridge cannot be extinguished', *China Digital Times*, 19 October.
- Cerny, Michael, B., 2022, 'The War in Ukraine in Chinese Public Opinion', *RAND*, 25 November.
- CGTN, 2022, 15 November, 'Graphics: China's 20 new measures for optimizing Covid-19 response'.
- Change.org, 2022, 'Free Peng Lifa 彭立法, the banner hero against Xi Jinping and the 'Zero-Covid' policy'.
- Chen, Stella, 2021, 'Whole-Process Democracy', *ChinaMediaProject*, 23 November.
- Chestnut Greitens, Sheena, 2022, 'After a wave of protests, China's silent crackdown', *Journal of Democracy*, December.
- China Labour Bulletin, 2018, 'The Workers Movement in China 2015-2017', *China Labour Bulletin*, August.
- China-Britain Business Focus, 2022, 'China's real estate crisis explained', *China-Britain Business Focus*, 1 September.
- ChinaPower, 2022, 'How did the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress impact China's Military?', *ChinaPower*, 25 October.
- Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022, 'China announces optimization of Covid-19 rules', *Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention*, 11 November.
- Choi, E.K., Wagner Grieves, J., and MacDonald, A., 2021, 'From Power Balance to Dominant Faction in Xi Jinping's China', *The China Quarterly*, 248 (1): 935-956.
- Chu, Yun-han, 2013, 'Sources of Regime Legitimacy and the Debate over the Chinese Model', *The China Review*, 13(1): 1-42.
- CNN, 2023, 15 January, 'China says 60,000 people have died of Covid since December'.
- CSIS, 2022, 'Unpacking the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress', Transcript, 28 October.
- Euractiv, 2022, 'Covid protests escalate in Guangzhou as China lockdown anger boils', 30 November.
- Fairbank, John King, 1987, *The Great Chinese Revolution 1800-1985*, New York: Harper & Row.
- Feng, Chen, 1997, 'The Dilemma of the Eudaemonic Legitimacy in Post-Mao China', *Policy*, 29 (3): 421-439.
- Fewsmith, Joseph, 2003, 'The Sixteenth Party Congress: The succession that didn't happen', *The China Quarterly*, 173: 1-16.
- Gilbert, Natasha, 2012, 'Green protests on the rise in China', *Nature*, Vol. 488, 16 August.
- Goh, Brenda, 2022, 'Ding Xuexiang: from Xi staff chief to ruling elite', *Reuters*, 23 October.
- Graham, Allison, 2017, 'What Xi Jinping wants', *The Atlantic*, 31 May.
- Guo, B., Li, G. and Xiao, M., 2022, 'China issues guidance on the Security Assessment of Outbound Data Transfer', *WhiteCase*, 10 October.
- Herrero, A. G. 2022, 'The Covid-19 Pandemic and China's Economic Slowdown', *China Leadership Monitor*, 74: 1-11.
- He, B., and Warren, M.E., 2017, 'Authoritarian Deliberation in China', *Daedalus*, 146(3):155-166.
- Hurst, William, 2022, 'What the protests tell us about China's future', *Time*, 5 December.

- Koetse, Manya, 2022, 'Tribute to Urumqi at Shanghai's Wulumqi Road', *What's on Weibo*, 26 November.
- Kwan, Rhoda, 2022, 'Desperation amid food shortages in Shanghai as Covid lockdown bites', *The Guardian*, 8 April.
- Kyodo News, 2022, '370 mil. People under some form of lockdown in China due to Covid', *Kyodo News*, 16 April.
- Li, Cheng, 2016, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era. Reassessing Collective Leadership*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Li, Xiaojun, 2022, 'How Public Opinions shapes China's Foreign Policy', *LSE Blog*, 20 May.
- Li, Yuan, 2022, 'China's Protests Prophet', *The New York Times*, 7 December.
- Menegazzi, Silvia, 2022, 'China 2021: Coping with the resilience dilemma of the Chinese model', *Asia Maior*, XXXII/2021: 39-61.
- Nathan, Andrew J., 2003, 'China's changing of the guard: Authoritarian Resilience', *Journal of Democracy*, 14 (1): 6-17.
- National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2022, '国务院联防联控机制2022年12月27日新闻发布会介绍新冠病毒感染实施乙类乙管措施有关情况' (Press Conference of the Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism of the State Council held on September 27, 2022 introducing the situation for the implementation of Class B measures for the Coronavirus disease), *National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China*, 27 September, (<http://www.nhc.gov.cn/xwzb/webcontroller.do?titleSeq=11500&gectype=1>).
- Naughton, Barry, 2021, *The Rise of China's Industrial Policy: 1978 to 2020*, Academic Network of Latin America and the Caribbean on China.
- People's Daily, 2021, '人民至上生命至上 | 站疫这一年习近平这样说' (The people are supreme, life is supreme, In the year of epidemic war affirmed Xi Jinping), *People's Daily*, 29 December, (<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2021/1229/c164113-32319966.html>).
- People's Government of Yongfeng County Jiangxi Province, 2022, '终南山院士解答防疫新阶段百姓关切点:发热是否上医院?感染新冠怎么办?' (Zhong Nanshan answers people's concerns in the new stage of epidemic prevention: is it necessary to go the hospital with fever? What to do if infected with the New Coronavirus?), *People's Government of Yongfeng County Jiangxi Province*, 13 December, (<http://www.jxyongfeng.gov.cn/xxgk-show-10227601.html>).
- Wallace, Corey, and Giulio Pugliese, 2022, 'Japan 2021: The Liberal Democratic Party emerges stronger despite domestic tumult', *Asia Maior*, XXXII/2021: 63-93.
- Radio Free Asia, 2022, 2 December, 'Victims in Urumqi fire that sparked protests were all Uyghurs, officials confirmed'.
- Radio Free Asia, 2022, 28 November, '白纸运动:无言却隐含强烈控诉', (The White Paper Movement: Silent, but it contained strong accuse.), (<https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/zhengzhi/hx1-11282022110845.html>).
- Ran R. and Yan J., 2021, 'When transparency meets accountability: how the fight against Covid-19 pandemic became a blame game in Wuhan', *The China Review*, 21 (1): 7-36.
- Safeguard Defenders, 2022, '110 Overseas. Chinese Transnational Policing Gone Wild', *Safeguard Defenders*, 29 October.
- Shih, Victor, C., 2022, *Coalitions of the Weak. Elite Politics in China from Mao's Stratagem to the rise of Xi*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Shirk, Susan L., 2018, 'China in Xi's New Era: the return to personalistic rule', *Journal of Democracy*, 29 (2): 22-36.

- Sina.com, 2022, 18 March, '催洪建:恐俄症让欧洲进退失据', (Cui Hongjian: Russophobia puts Europe at loss), ([https://k.sina.com.cn/article\\_1686546714\\_6486a91a02001mr8h.html](https://k.sina.com.cn/article_1686546714_6486a91a02001mr8h.html)).
- South China Morning Post, 2021, 4 December, 'China is touting its 'whole-process democracy' as the superior model. So how does it work in practice?'.
- [State Council Information Office 2022a] State Council Information Office, 2022, *Full text of the report to the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, 25 October.
- [State Council Information Office 2022b] State Council Information Office, 2022, *Understanding China's whole-process people's democracy at two sessions*, 9 March.
- The New York Times 2022, 10 December, 'Even as China eases Covid rules, some youths still fear a grim future'.
- The Guardian, 2022, 28 November, 'China Covid protests explained: why are people demonstrating and what will happen next?'.
- The Standard, 2022, 28 September, 'Tech Hub lockdown sparks rare protests'.
- The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2022, *Full Text: Report of the Work of the Government*, 12 March.
- The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2023, *China holds Central Economic Work Conference to plan for 2023*, 17 December.
- Times Higher Education, 2022, 28 November, 'Demonstrations on scores of campuses in China Covid protests'.
- Tracking the Epidemic (2022), *CCDC Weekly*, (<https://weekly.chinacdc.cn/news/TrackingtheEpidemic.htm>).
- Turcsanyi, Richard Q., Klara Dubravcikova, Kristina Kironska, Tao Wang, James Iocovozzi, Peter Gries, Veronika Vasekova, Andrew Chubb, 2022, *Chinese views of the world at the time of the Russia-Ukraine war. Evidence from a March 2022 public opinion survey*, Palacky University Olomouc and CEIAS.
- United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2022, *Factsheet China*.
- US-China Perception Monitor, 2022, 'Chinese Public Opinion on the War in Ukraine', April 19.
- Uyghurs Rights Advocacy Project, 2022, 'URAP Statement on the massacre of 44 Uyghurs in Urumqi fire', 28 November.
- World Bank Group, 2022, 'Navigating Uncertainty. China's Economy in 2023', China Economic Update.
- World Health Organization, 2022, 'China Situation'. (<https://covid19.who.int/region/wpro/country/cn>)
- Wright, Teresa, *Popular Protest in China*, London: Wiley, 2018.
- Xinhua, 2017, 20 October, 'Xinhua Insights: China embraces new "principal contradictions" when embarking on new journey'.
- Xinhua, 2022, 7 December, '永别的时刻前行的时刻将泽民同志追悼大会侧记' (The moment of farewell, the moment of moving forward. Side notes on Comrade Jiang Zemin's Memorial Conference), ([http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-12/07/content\\_5730363.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-12/07/content_5730363.htm)).
- Xinhua, 2022, 5 March, '十三届全国人大五次会议开幕会', (Opening Ceremony of the Fifth Session of the Thirteenth National People's Congress), ([http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-03/05/content\\_5677331.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-03/05/content_5677331.htm)).
- Zhang, L., 2016, 'Rebalancing in China. Progress and Prospects', IMF Working Paper, WP/16/183, *International Monetary Fund*.
- Zhang, Y. & Liu, Z., 2021, 'Nation to advance new development paradigm', *Qinshi*, 2 November.





## CHINA 2021-2022: A FOREIGN POLICY OF «RE-BRANDING»

Giulia Sciorati\*

University of Trento  
giulia.sciorati@unitn.it

*In 2021 and 2022, China's foreign policy had to come to terms with the re-starting of in-person diplomatic exchanges worldwide after the two-year hiatus imposed by COVID-19 mobility restrictions, the US's China policy under the democratic presidency of President Joe Biden, and, above all, the instability caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. With the international system increasingly moving toward bloc-based calculations rooted in the ideological differences characterising the world's superpowers, China continues to be confronted with pressing questions on the role it envisions for itself in the international system. In light of this highly challenging international context, China's foreign policy has primarily relied on three core mechanisms during the two years under review. First, the adoption of anti-Western and anti-US narratives that counterbalance the discourse on Beijing developed by Washington. Second, the adoption of a neutral stance in its relations with Russia, despite the limitations of the concept as a viable stabilising tool in current international affairs. Lastly, a re-branding of Chinese multilateralism through introducing new initiatives aimed at countering the criticism raised against the Belt and Road initiative during the last decade and consolidating the country's international partnerships.*

**KEYWORDS** – Chinese Foreign Policy, United States, Taiwan, Russia, Post-Soviet Space

### 1. Introduction

In 2021 and 2022, the UK magazine «The Economist» reserved nine (and a quarter) of its 102 covers specifically for China. In all those, the country was negatively visualised by representations that define Beijing as either a repressive state, a threat to the US-led liberal order or, more generally, a US adversary. Although the editorial preferences of a magazine merely offer a one-sided version of international affairs, these choices make a striking case for how China's foreign policy has been communicated in the Western world in the last two years.<sup>1</sup> By skimming through the covers in order of publication, a story unfolds with tech-related issues giving way to value-driven clashes touching upon the core principles of the Chinese political

\* The author is grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments and suggestions and the Asia Maior editorial committee for the support received.

1. The magazine covers can be freely browsed at: <https://www.economist.com/weeklyedition/archive>

system. In a sense, the «mistrust» identified by Silvia Menegazzi as a significant concern for the country in her review of China's 2020 foreign policy for a previous issue of this journal materialises [Menegazzi 2021].

Despite their simplicity, such representations of China have the merit of having visualised an essential aspect of Beijing's foreign relations in the past two years – that is, a China-vs-the-West lens through which decision-makers have interpreted the international system and communicated their country to Western political élites and the general public. Such constructions have been mutually constituted with the US under the Presidency of Joe Biden, who has doubled down on competition with China, framing it as a contest between political systems (namely, autocracies vs democracies) and, thus, contributing to consolidating the we-vs-them conceptualisation of his predecessor further. Lastly, China's neutral stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated the identification of democratic and autocratic country groupings as constitutive of the international system, notwithstanding Beijing's discursive hostility to bloc-based calculations.

Taking stock of the international situation in the last two years, the article investigates China's foreign policy posture, unpacking its responses to systemic and domestic stimuli and contextualising its international relations in light of the domestic context. In so doing, the analysis aims to answer the question of the core issues affecting China's foreign policymaking in the two years under review and critically examine the country's decision-making process as Beijing's in-person diplomacy re-starts after the two-year-long limitations imposed by the internal management of COVID-19 infections. The first section discusses the significant trends characterising Chinese foreign policy in 2021 and 2022, detecting a predominant inward-looking approach to international affairs and a profound cross-sectoral anti-Western narrative as a strategy of choice. The following sections reflect on three core directions of the country's foreign policy during the last two years – namely, the US, Russia, and the countries of China's post-Soviet neighbourhood. This work offers some considerations on why and how these vectors have evolved, reserving particular attention to systemic *and* domestic drivers.

Concerning sources, this article uses official documents, media articles, reports, speeches and remarks of political leaders, and secondary literature in English, Chinese, and Russian. The author is aware that some of the data analysed – especially in the Chinese and Russian cases – cannot be taken at face value as their framings of international events, strategies, and policy choices primarily aim to shed a positive light on national governments and, therefore, are not transparent in how political objectives or worldviews are presented. However, only by *critically* examining these types of sources can scholars aim to deepen their understanding of the complexity of China's foreign policy today. Indeed, such critical exercise makes a step forward in the de-Westernisation and de-hierarchisation of the discipline of International Relations by including considerations driven by investigations of indigenous sources of knowledge-formation.

## 2. *China's foreign policy in the wake of COVID-19 re-openings*

While 2021 was a «virtual» foreign policy year for China because of the country's self-imposed international mobility restrictions, 2022 marked the return of in-person exchanges in China's diplomacy. The traditionally overlooked annual Council of the Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) made it to international media outlets in September 2022 primarily owing to President Xi Jinping's in-person attendance, his first trip abroad since January 2020 [SCIO 2022c]. With Xi travelling again, China is signalling its return to normalcy in managing foreign relations. However, the two-year hiatus should not mislead, as the country's foreign policy machine has not discontinued its operations but functioned differently. In particular, Chinese embassies worldwide have been put at the frontline more than usual, enacting abroad the foreign policy decisions taken at home.

The suspension of international travel for diplomatic and political officials during the pandemic has been emblematic of a broad tendency in China's foreign policy. Indeed, the country's behaviour in both 2021 and 2022 has clarified what decision-makers understand as foreign policy—an extension of China's domestic agenda, primarily preoccupied with domestic audiences rather than international ones. In June 2021, China's Ambassador to France and Monaco, Lu Shaye 卢沙野, explained the country's new approach to diplomacy in a virtual interview with Zheng Ruolin 郑若麟, a famous researcher from Fudan University based in France. Among other issues, the diplomat contended that Chinese diplomacy today should be understood as being informed: «not by what foreigners think of us, but by what the people at home think of us» [Lu & Zheng 2021, June 16]. This statement is telling as, under this lens, foreign policy is no longer about managing foreign relations but becomes an extension of the domestic agenda [Godement 2022, 14 September].

How the Chinese political leadership has answered central questions of China's foreign policy in the last two years offers empirical evidence for how this argument was put into practice. For example, political discourse on Taiwan has emphasised the construction of the issue as a domestic problem rather than a foreign affair, linking the island's sovereignty to China's past greatness and the concept of «national humiliation» (*guochi* 国耻) over which Xi has encouraged the transmission of nationalist messages to a domestic audience as his predecessors had done in the past.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, power centralisation under Xi, particularly in the political and security domains, contributed to developing a domestic-looking foreign policy in China. Adherence to «Xi Jinping's thought» (*Xi Jinping sixiang* 习近平思想), for example, has decided on officials' career advance-

2. On the nexus between nationalism and the concept of humiliation in Communist China, see the seminal work by Callahan [2004].

ments just as much as other skills [Berkofsky & Sciorati 2022]. During the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) held in October 2022, Foreign Minister Wang Yi's promotion to the Politburo Central Committee and the directorship of the prestigious Central Foreign Affairs Commission is indicative of the career benefits derived from acting according to the baseline set by Xi [MOFA of the PRC 2022d].

However, this approach to foreign policy decreased the relevance of discussions among decision-makers, raising the value of baseline-consistent stances at the expense of experience, expertise, and information. The trade-off has been to increase the chances of miscalculations. The publication of a statement on the «no-limit friendship» between China and Russia a few weeks before Moscow invaded Ukraine is a case in point [*Renmin wang* 2022, 4 February]. China spent a consistent amount of international political capital to raise the status of its relations with Russia, according to the baseline understanding that Moscow is a partner (*huoban* 伙伴) with which Beijing shares similar norms, values, and ideas. Nonetheless, with Ukraine, the baseline was disattended, and China was forced to spin this narrative quickly after the invasion, as, at the very least, Russia's operation violated the principles of national sovereignty (*guojia zhu quan* 国家主权) and territorial integrity (*lingtu wanzheng* 领土完整) that are central to China's foreign policy imperatives.<sup>3</sup>

The future of such a close-to-the-baseline approach to foreign policy, reaching a height in 2022, now appears to be fading, as its primary incarnation – the wolf warriors (*lang zhan* 狼战) – is experiencing a downfall. One needs only to look at the recent demotion of Foreign Ministry spokesperson and globally renowned wolf warrior Zhao Lijian 赵立坚, who, on 9 January 2023, acquired the position of Deputy Head of the Ministry's Department of Boundary and Oceanic Affairs [Wang 2023, 9 January]. In the last few years, Zhao had been a symbol of the wolf-warrior mentality, and his demotion hints at distension (at least, in discourse) in the diplomacy pursued by Beijing. However, such distension appears to be primarily inward-looking, mainly aimed at reshuffling officials, and the anti-Western narrative promoted in Chinese political discourse is set to endure.

Competition with the West (the US, in particular) re-confirmed the centrality of great power logic in Chinese foreign policy considerations. Complicit Biden's call for increased coordination among democracies worldwide, ideological divergences acquired even more relevance in great power confrontations during the last two years.<sup>4</sup> With the China-US global competition now centred on ideological grounds, Beijing operates within a domain where the country has scarce chances of negotiation as ideology

3. For a comprehensive overview of China's foreign policy from a conceptual and empirical viewpoint, see Lanteigne [2020].

4. For a geographically based reflection on Biden's Summit of Democracies, see Brown, Frances Z. *et al.* 2021, 6 December.

and, mainly, a revival of Leninism have been one of Xi's significant goals at home.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout 2022, ideological tensions with the West have become so prominent that partially eclipsed core foreign policy principles *en vogue* since the Maoist period. For instance, China's stance on the war in Ukraine makes this prioritisation obvious. Neutrality and a pervasive anti-Western narrative characterise China's approach to the war, despite Russia's evident violations of Ukraine's territorial integrity and national sovereignty. Beijing continues to develop a discourse on its relations with Moscow, wherein the country is portrayed as a partner, essential in the China-US confrontation at the global level [Chestnut Greitens 2022].

Amid this «battle of narratives» with the West, some observers indicated that China's leadership has admitted to the shortcomings of its state-directed soft power, which had been a critical priority under the presidency of Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, Beijing is now seen as re-spotlighting economic diplomacy rather than pursuing more cultural endeavours. Others have presented empirical evidence for such a preference—above all, the term soft power has been omitted in Xi's 20th National Congress remarks, in contrast with the past [Huang 2022, 2 December].

However, dismissing the soft power aspect of China's foreign policy practice might be premature. As the foreign policy choices of the last two years have shown, traditional soft power tools like education, cultural, and think tank exchanges were hindered by COVID-19-induced mobility restrictions in and out of China. Nonetheless, the concept of influence remains central to systemic competition with the US/the West and, under the current highly mistrustful international situation, influence can, at best, be raised through a mixture of coercive and attractive means, so labelling soft power as a «thing of the past» is untimely. For example, in 2021 and 2022, the narrative presenting China as a potential economic development «model» (*di'anfan* 典范) continued to be shared particularly with the country's partners in the developing world, arguing for Beijing's booming economy to be an example for others, especially in light of pandemic-driven economic slow-downs. Not only has Chinese aid – developmental or health-based – worsened countries' economic dependency on China, but it has also attracted foreign political élites toward the economic giant [Fuchs and Rudyak 2019; Carmody, Zajontz, and Reboredo 2022]. As Beijing conducted it during the pandemic, health diplomacy makes a striking case for this dynamic, as do the Global Development Initiative (GDI – *Quanqiu fazhan changyi* 全球发展倡议) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI – *Quanqiu anquan changyi* 全

5. Gore (2021) offers a compelling reading of Xi's approach to CPC rejuvenation and the use of Leninism as a tool.

6. For an analysis on the evolution of Chinese soft power, see, among others, Repnikova 2022.

球安全倡议).<sup>7</sup> These concepts represent China's most crucial foreign policy conceptualisations in the last two years, respectively launched in multilateral settings, namely the UN General Assembly in September 2021 and the Boao Forum in April 2022.

In a recent expert comment, Francesca Ghiretti voiced the concerns of several scholars in looking at these two initiatives as instruments for China to phase out the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI – *Yi dai Yi lu* 一带一路) after the numerous setbacks and widespread criticism expressed over the project in the last decade [Ghiretti 2022, 1 November]. However, the GDI, GSI, and BRI have been mentioned together in Chinese discourse so far, notwithstanding these initiatives' similar aims. Shared goals include raising China's profile in the world by respectively promoting a China-inspired economic development and a «new» security concept, one that opposes the US's traditional security umbrella and focuses on the notion of «indivisible security» (*diqu anquan* 地区安全) – i.e. the security of a single state is profoundly linked to its region's.<sup>8</sup> The transmission of such goals to others was facilitated by current international crises – that is, the COVID-19-induced economic recession, the war in Ukraine, and the security situation in post-US Afghanistan, which makes it easier for China to present alternatives to traditional US approaches, thus raising the country's global influence. Since its launch, the GDI has led to positive results, especially in light of the formation of an UN-backed «Group of Friends of the GDI» (*zhi you xiaozu* 之友小组) comprising around one hundred countries, mainly from the developing world [Wang 2022]. Expectations are for a similar grouping to be established in the context of the GSI in the short run.

In 2021 and 2022, China's foreign policy has been characterised by an inward-looking posture, thus understanding foreign policy as responding to domestic considerations. Such conceptualisation has led to specific internal dynamics of the Chinese political system (above all, domestic power centralisation) informing the country's foreign policy choices. The limitations imposed by the pandemic have also diminished the extent of the country's traditional soft power tools and prompted the prioritisation of activities aimed at attracting foreign élites but also preoccupied with raising the country's influence worldwide vis-à-vis the US.

### 3. *China-US relations in the wake of ideology-based competition*

The 2022 report on China's international strategy published by Fudan University is particularly telling about the country's understanding of its

7. On health diplomacy, see Fazal 2020, September 16.

8. This construction has been absent in the latest Chinese official remarks on the GSI because of the argument's similarity with Russia's justifications for invading Ukraine.

relations with the US. For instance, in one of the contributions, Professor Lin Minwang 林民旺 of the Research Centre on International Affairs argues that, in 2022, Beijing has «come to hold an advantageous position in the China-US strategic competition» [Lin 2023].<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, several issues precipitated the two powers' bilateral ties in the last two years, crystallising the relations into a state of everlasting competition.

In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian war have emphasised the role of Taiwan in the China-US confrontation in different ways. First, the pandemic has intensified discussions on the island's autonomous participation in international institutions (especially the World Health Organization – WHO) vis-à-vis mainland China's traditional role of mediator for Taiwan. In May 2022, for instance, Biden signed a bill to design a strategy to support Taiwan's re-claiming observer status in the WHO [US Congress 2022]. Second, the war in Ukraine has inspired narratives juxtaposing autocracies and democracies' conflict behaviour worldwide, presenting China-Taiwan unsolved tensions as an East Asian variety of the conflict occurring in the post-Soviet space, one that was threatening to burst at any moment [Applebaum 2022, 14 December]. Critically considered together, the main contribution of these two external catalysts has de facto been to raise the tones of a conversation that had been ongoing since the «unfinished» Chinese civil war (1927-1949) and the subsequent establishment of a Communist China in the mainland and a Nationalist China in Taiwan [Samarani 2008, pp. 179-192], which respectively underlies the question of Taiwan's «unresolved» sovereignty. Moreover, these two significant episodes occurred when the re-organisation of the special status of Hong Kong's relations with Beijing in 2019 damaged the belief that a similar future would be viable for Taiwan.<sup>10</sup>

Because these issues played out at the systemic level, they necessarily entered into the foreign policy considerations of the two global superpowers, with Taiwan acquiring an even more delicate position than in the past regarding China-US bilateral relations. When observing the interactions between these three political entities in 2021 and 2022, what mainly emerges are the significant changes in the US's diplomatic posture toward Taiwan during the last fifty years; China's military and discursive activism on the issue of the island's ties with Beijing; and Taiwan's strive to military innovations and crisis response mechanisms. As argued by a Taiwanese International Relations scholar during an informal conversation with the author in December 2022, the Taiwanese government's attention to military preparedness does not match the feelings of the island's civil society, as «people are so used to the military pressure that, overall,

9. In Chinese, 来掌握中美战略竞争的主动权.

10. On the implications of Beijing's responses to the 2019 Hong Kong protests to Taiwan-Mainland China relations, see, among others, Kwok, Dennis W. H. *et al.* 2022, January 31.



the Taiwanese population remains unpreoccupied of what happens in the Taiwan Strait».<sup>11</sup>

A noteworthy aspect of China-US-Taiwan relations in the last two years concerns the US's approach to Taiwan, especially given the formal transition from the Republican presidency of Donald Trump and Biden's Democratic administration that occurred on 20 January 2021. As Silvia Menegazzi noticed, even back in 2020, the US presidential elections had been a prominent external driver for Chinese foreign policy [Menegazzi 2021]. Therefore, Biden's early decisions on issues of contention between the US and China have been closely monitored by Beijing, which assumed that these pronouncements would hint at the US's China policy for the next four years. Unsurprisingly, from early 2021 onwards, Taiwan had been on top of the list with the future of Trump's strict economic policy.<sup>12</sup>

On the US's relations with the island, the strong commitment to maintaining a bipartisan approach to Taiwan has been evident from the start of the Biden administration, and the Secretary of State office's passage from Republican Mike Pompeo to Democrat Anthony Blinken makes an interesting case in this sense. Indeed, one of Pompeo's final acts was to announce the suspension of the 1979 Taiwan Contact Guidance Act's enforcement, which regulated the contacts between US diplomats and government officials and their Taiwanese counterparts [Barnes and Qin 2021, 10 January]. If implemented, this suspension would have better clarified the US's position toward Taiwan and made the country's traditional strategic ambiguity marginally less ambiguous.<sup>13</sup> Although Blinken eventually blocked the Act's suspension, a few months later, the State Department issued new, more permissive guidelines on diplomatic contacts with Taiwan, thus mediating between the US's tradition and Pompeo's more radical approach [Price 2021].

This episode empirically shows that a certain continuity between the Republican and Democratic approach to Taiwan has been maintained – one that is potentially detrimental to China-US relations as it relaxes Washington's constraints to engaging the island. US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's two-day visit to Taiwan in August 2022 represents the most significant stretch to the US's traditional Taiwan strategy to date, despite Pelosi herself arguing for «the United States ... to oppose unilateral efforts to change the status quo» in the region [Pelosi 2022, 2 August]. Indeed, this more permissive behaviour on the part of the US has been counterbalanced by an attempt to commit at least discursively to the «One China policy», over which lies the historical compromise that led to China-US diplomatic relations in the 1970s [Congiu & Onnis 2022, pp. 71-97]. For example, during the virtual summit with China's President Xi Jinping held on 15 November

11. Online conversation with the author 2022, December 12.

12. To expand on Trump's China policy, see Hass 2020.

13. For a review of the US strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan, see Pan 2003.

2021, Biden remarked that his country «strongly opposes unilateral efforts to change the status quo or undermine peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait» [The White House 2021a]. Still, during a press conference commenting on the Xi summit the following day, the US President was quoted saying that Taiwan «is independent. It makes its own decisions» [The White House 2021b]. Although Biden and his aides quickly contextualised the controversial statement [Martina and Brunnstrom 2022, 19 September], the mixed messages the US has been conveying to China over Taiwan in the last two years – partly recognising the status quo and partially supporting the island's strive to autonomy (if not independence) – have profoundly clashed with China's approach to Taiwan, thus damaging China-US relations at the core. In fact, the competition between the two superpowers has worsened recently, with Taiwan's chip industry at the centre of China and the US's global technological rivalry.

Whether China had been responding to a more active US in the Taiwan Strait or vice-versa, under a *realpolitik* lens, the practical result has been for both Beijing and Washington to increase (or, perhaps, make more evident) their military presence in the region. As Xi was cited saying during an inspection tour in Fujian province, Chinese officials were asked to «take bigger strides in exploring a new way of integrated development on both sides of the Taiwan Strait» [*China Global Television Network* 2021, 27 March].<sup>14</sup> A similar message was later reiterated during Xi's celebratory speech for the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the CPC on 1 July 2021, when the tone was raised: the country's commitment to take action to oppose Taiwan's independence, in fact, was made clear [CPG of the PRC 2021].

Between 2021 and 2022, China has, in fact, been reported repeatedly violating Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), with notable incursions including the record daily access of 56 military aircraft on 4 October 2021 and that of a KA-28 anti-submarine helicopter 21 February 2022 [*Focus Taiwan* 2021, 10 April]. At the same time, US warships have routinely transited the Taiwan Strait, and Washington has sold a considerable number of weapons to Taipei in the last two years while also deploying military trainers, consistently with the Taiwan government's striving to scale up the island's military forces [Ripley *et al.* 2021, 28 October].

In sum, despite the US discursive attempts to safeguard its stance over Taiwan, the island's sovereignty and its role as a political entity in the international system has become a highly contentious node in China-US relations in the last two years, aggravated by the likewise active US and Chinese approaches to the island that have prompted Taiwan's militarisation.

14. The Fujian province is geographically located on Mainland China's side of the Taiwan Strait.

#### 4. *China-Russia relations in the wake of the war in Ukraine*

Although the US remains a primary vector in China's foreign policy considerations, the international community has placed the country's relations with Russia under the spotlight during the last few years. Beijing and Moscow's coordination on the future of Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the US military in August 2021, first, and China's neutrality on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, second, have raised questions on the nature of the two countries' ties. Nowadays, the puzzle of Sino-Russian relations triggers the systemic ideological competition between democracies and autocracies, which has been made evident, for example, by the US-led «Summit for Democracies» held in Washington D.C. on 9-10 December 2021 [US Department of State 2021] and forcefully criticised by both Beijing and Moscow. During a video consultation with a Russian counterpart, China's Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng 乐玉成, for instance, stated that the Summit was «a *sacrilege* to offend democracy ... because it ... will ... aggravate the chaos and division in the world» [MOFA of the PRC 2021, emphasis added]. These universally perceived tensions between the West and the rest of the international system, as well as democracies and autocracies, are critical to understanding China's current approach to Russia and contemporary international relations.

In the last two years, Sino-Russian relations majorly developed at the discursive level, primarily due to the constraints imposed by the conflict in Ukraine, which have limited China's ability to strengthen its ties with Moscow openly. Chinese diplomats and government officials presented two discourses on the country's ties with Russia. First, China integrated its relations with Russia into broader narratives discussing the US's role in the international system. Second, consistent with the country's past approaches, Beijing has conveyed that Sino-Russian relations are a «non-alliance, non-confrontation, and not targeting on any third party» [MND of the PRC 2021] and a «partnership ... [that] does not target any third country» [TASS 2022, 12 June].

However, the best-known mutual characterisation of the bilateral ties comes from the previously mentioned Joint Statement of 4 February 2022, which, despite its recent release, envisions a relationship between China and Russia no longer existing. In the document, Beijing and Moscow state that the «friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no “forbidden” areas of cooperation, strengthening of bilateral strategic cooperation is neither aimed against third countries nor affected by the changing international environment and circumstantial changes in third countries» [Renmin wang 2022, 4 February]. When this construction is thoroughly examined, what transpires is that it repeats older Chinese political statements, among which are the media remarks of former Foreign Minister Wang Yi 王毅 on 2 January 2021 that are worth noting, as they use very similar wording («no limit, no forbidden zone») [Xinhua 2021, 2 January].<sup>15</sup>

15. In Chinese, 没有止境, 没有禁区.

Twenty days after the Joint Statement's publication, Russia invaded Ukraine and China showed signs of reassessing the «no-limit friendship» label. Indeed, the statement given to the press by Russia's ambassador to the US, Anatoly Antonov, the previous June («nobody can divide Russia and China») was put under duress [Zhao 2021, 22 June]. In the early stages of the Russian invasion, not only did representatives of the country's diplomatic service reiterate the idea that China and Ukraine continued to maintain friendly relations but also that Beijing respected Kyiv's political system and was willing to support Ukraine in negotiating a political settlement with Russia [Guancha 2022, 17 March]. Still, Beijing did not sanction nor condemn Moscow's military operation.

At the same time, the country discussed Russia's military actions in as neutral terms as possible. The discourse constructed by China's political élite centred on ascribing responsibility to the «Cold war mentality» (*Lengzhan siwei* 冷战思维) and «bloc confrontation» (*jítuan duìkàng* 集团对抗) promoted by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and, by extension, the US. These constructions are particularly evident in the transcript of Xi's remarks during the first telephone call held with Biden since the invasion, during which the Chinese President contended that global and regional security could only be maintained by abandoning these behaviours [CPG of the PRC 2022].<sup>16</sup>

Since then, China's discourse on Russia and the war de-emphasised the humanitarian crisis through which the conflict had been presented until then and stressed the systemic confrontation that was unfolding beyond Ukraine – one that China refused and that was associated with the ideas and values that had characterised the US-led Summit for Democracies. By promoting this interpretive lens, China and Russia were paired up in the same category of countries that opposed such a worldview. However, China's attempted neutrality in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine had a negative impact on its international image, as a large part of its foreign policy had been centred on the notion that China opposes imperialism because it had experienced colonialism and foreign invasions in the past. Thus, China's neutrality falls short of expectations among decolonial partners.

The critical moment that facilitated the overall normalisation of Sino-Russian ties after the rigidity experienced with the invasion of Ukraine and China's embrace of an anti-West narrative, however, occurred when Biden openly voiced to the media some of the public debates that had been surrounding China's approach to the war, thus comparing the Russian invasion

16. Xi specifically stated that «the long-term solution lies in mutual respect among major powers, abandoning the Cold War mentality, refraining from confrontation between camps, and gradually building a balanced, effective, and sustainable global and regional security architecture». In Chinese, 长久之道在于大国相互尊重、摒弃冷战思维、不搞阵营对抗，逐步构建均衡、有效、可持续的全球和地区安全架构。

of Ukraine to a potential future invasion of Taiwan initiated in mainland China [Jacobs 2022, 23 May]. In practical terms, these tensions resulted in the development of Beijing and Moscow's bilateral ties in the second half of 2022, particularly in energy and space research [TASS 2022, 5 May].

After the US comparison between Ukraine and Taiwan, China constructed a discourse on its relations with Russia and the war linked to the limitations and miscalculations of US global security, mimicking an argument presented in 2021 by the Russian Foreign Ministry about the US withdrawal from Afghanistan [DW 2021, 14 April]. As China presented them, however, the US failures in Afghanistan and Ukraine were represented as evidence of the need for a new security architecture rooted in the notion of «indivisible security» and, therefore, connected to China's GSI.

In sum, despite China and Russia's claim of sharing a no-limit friendship, constraints to the full development of bilateral relations have become prominent in the last two years, as exemplified, in particular, by China's responses to the war in Ukraine. China has not openly supported Moscow in its military operation in Ukraine, although bilateral cooperation in specific sectors has progressed, especially in the energy domain. Beijing's attempts to mediate its position on Russia have mainly involved constructing an anti-US discourse and launching an alternative framework for global security.

### 5. *China and Central Asia in the wake of russian revisionism*

Despite its geographical proximity to China, Central Asia is an area whose relations with China have become apparent to the West only recently, complicit to Xi's 2013 launch of the BRI in Kazakhstan's capital of Astana and the numerous state visits Chinese diplomats and top government and CPC officials conducted in the region in the last decade.<sup>17</sup> In an English-language media commentary, the Director of the recently established Hainan-based Research Centre for Asian Studies (RCAS), Nian Peng, stressed that Central Asia has «undertaken an ever more significant role in China's neighborhood diplomacy, especially after the Russia-Ukraine war» [Peng 2023, 10 January]. Empirically, Xi's first official state visits abroad to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan after a two-year-long precautionary hiatus emphasised the region's superior status in China's foreign policy priorities [SCIO 2022a, 2022b].

Travelling limitations notwithstanding, China-Central Asian relations continued to evolve during the last two years, deepening ties. Particularly noteworthy is the virtual celebration for the 30th anniversary of the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the five Central Asian republics held on 22 January 2022 [China Daily 2022, 25 Jan-

17. According to the author's calculations, Xi made twelve official state visits to Central Asian states since 2013.

uary]. Xi's remarks during the meeting hinted at Beijing's understanding of Central Asia as a region whose ties with the country are more profound than the usual bilateral or multilateral frameworks through which the two interact – namely, the «China + Central Asia» forum and the SCO.<sup>18</sup> An aspect that was made evident in this context is China's notion of its relations with the region as having consolidated in full. Xi opened his remarks by stating that «the Chinese people often say [that] “one should be able to establish himself at the age of 30”» [*China Daily* 2022, 25 January], making a parallelism between the country's relations with the region and Chinese conventional wisdom. After all, as of January 2023, China has established comprehensive strategic partnerships with all Central Asian states, including Turkmenistan, one of the most secluded countries in the world [Peng 2023, 10 January].

Questions of security – either regional or global – dominated China's approach to Central Asian countries in the last two years. Indeed, Chinese academic works on international relations have consistently marked insecurity as a defining aspect of China-Central Asia relations.<sup>19</sup> In 2021 and 2022, the insecurities prompting Chinese discussions on the region were mainly linked either to regional issues – namely, the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border conflicts and the January 2022 protests against a gas price increase in Kazakhstan – or a more global dimension, such as the withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine. On the insecurities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, China has been discursively proactive, proposing that regional actors maintain the lead in solving insecurities and painting a role for the country as a supporter of national governments. This discourse is particularly evident in the case of the Kazakh protests mentioned above when the Kazakh population took to the streets to object to the sudden rise in liquefied gas prices following the elimination of a government cap. However, the protests soon turned into broader opposition to Kazakhstan's government and political leaders [Kudaibergenova and Laruelle 2022]. With China's unsuccessful attempts to consolidate its position with Central Asian audiences over the years, the country relies on élite relations to develop its regional influences [Qin and Li 2018]. Therefore, Beijing commented on the protests by emphasising the special ties between the Chinese and Kazakh governments while also adopting language supportive of Astana's political élite and terminology consistent with the one employed in Kazakh political discourse. For instance, during an official press conference, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin 汪文斌 stated that China «*supports all efforts that will help the Kazakh authorities to restore calm as soon as possible*» [MOFA of the PRC 2022a, emphasis added] and referred to the

18. On the «China + Central Asia» forum (C+C5), see Prón 2022, May 26.

19. For an overview, see the directory «Chinese Scholarship on Central Asian Affairs» published by The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs. Particularly relevant works include Yuan 2016.

protests as «violent terrorist acts» (*baokong xingwei* 暴恐行为), mimicking the Address of the Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev [Akorda 2022].<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, China's Afghanistan insecurity-management vision centred on regional powers, especially Kabul's neighbours. This approach was made evident during the March 2022 Tunxi meeting, when representatives of states neighbouring Afghanistan met in China to discuss the country's future after the US troops' withdrawal. The meeting's joint declaration shows China's exclusive role as a humanitarian and developmental aid provider, with other regional actors taking the lead in security [MOFA of the PRC 2022c]. Beijing indirectly confronted Afghanistan's insecurity by financing a military outpost in the eastern Gorno-Badakhshan province in Tajikistan: the structure was envisioned as a central node for Chinese and Tajik police forces to exchange information on Afghanistan [Sciorati 2021, 2 November].

Lastly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine heightened insecurity perceptions in the whole post-Soviet space, thus linking Central Asia to global security issues – a change China has been closely monitoring. Central Asian countries have looked attentively at Russia's violent revisionism, with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan voicing their concerns about the war [Stronski 2022, 30 March]. Kazakhstan, in particular, openly indicated its neutrality in the conflict and clarified the legal constraints preventing it from sending troops to third countries, thus precluding any military support to Moscow [Vaal 2022, 3 March]. Moreover, the country opened its borders to Russians fleeing the military draft [Lillis 2023, 17 January].

In this context, Xi's September 2022 in-person state visits to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were highly symbolic. For the first time, China expressed support for Central Asian countries' independence as Russia's potential territorial expansion had become a tangible threat. As Wang Yi stated to the press, «President Xi Jinping reiterated his support for Central Asian countries in safeguarding *national independence*, sovereignty and security» [MOFA of the PRC 2022b, emphasis added]. China has attempted to consolidate its regional standing and increase its political capital, banking on Russia's popularity drop with Central Asian political élites.

These recent episodes of Chinese engagement with Central Asia are evidence of a broad tendency in the country's relations with the region—one that exemplifies the transition from purely multilateral frameworks to «bilateral multilateralism» in a restricted form.<sup>21</sup> In practical terms, the BRI prompted this shift in China's international relations governance a decade ago. However, the launch of the C+C5 forum in 2020 and its consolidation in 2021 and 2022 institutionalised bilateral multilateralism, pushing

20. In Chinese, 中方支持一切有利于哈当局尽快平息事态的努力。

21. The term «bilateral multilateralism» is here used to refer to China's practice to use multilateral regional frameworks a) to coordinate bilateral dialogues between China and single participating states and b) as an institutionalised bilateral dialogue between China and regional actors as a whole.

China-Central Asia relations into a «bloc era» similar to what China had been experiencing with Africa with the «Forum on China-Africa Cooperation» (FOCAC) throughout the years [Sciorati & Silvan forthcoming]. As Russia's dependency on China grows in light of the war in Ukraine, China's autonomous development of relations with Central Asia is set to increase undisturbed.

In the last two years, China's interest in Central Asian countries signalled a foreign policy attentive to the Eurasian continent's existing connections, especially regarding sub-regions like Central Asia, South Asia and Gulf countries and their potential future role in supporting the rise of the country's global influence vis-à-vis the US.

## 6. Conclusions

Noticing the Western characterisation of China as a hostile actor in the international system during the last two years, the article has presented an analysis of the country's foreign policy behaviour, looking at its implementation from within. This work has contributed to answering the question of the core issues that affected China's foreign policy in 2021 and 2022 by also touching upon the systemic and domestic considerations that have informed the country's behaviour in these two years.

A prime consideration is China's general branding of the West (and, in particular, the US) as an antagonist, a promoter of a worldview that the country deems to be highly conflictual. For instance, during the latest in-person meeting between Xi and Biden on 14 November 2022, Xi stated that: «Sino-US relations should not be a zero-sum game, wherein you lose, and I win; I go up, and you go down. The success of China and the US is an opportunity rather than a mutual challenge», hinting that such a connotation was underscoring the US notion of Sino-US relations [*Renmin wang* 2022, 14 November].<sup>22</sup> Similar statements have also emerged regarding China's stance toward the war in Ukraine. These tensions suggest that Beijing and Washington adopted highly conflicting narratives during the last two years to define their relations and respective roles in the international system. Despite China's claim that the country is not supporting the formation of a bloc-based system, the ongoing battle of narratives with the US, in practical terms, now leads to a «battle of truths» for the international community, indirectly provoking a division.

Secondly, in 2021 and 2022, China's foreign policy has been characterised by reframing the conceptual boundaries of strategic ambiguity. On the one hand, the US has renegotiated its trademark stance vis-à-vis Main-

22. In Chinese, 中美关系不应该是你输我赢、你兴我衰的零和博弈, 中美各自取得成功对彼此是机遇而非挑战.



land China-Taiwan relations, weakening the principle that had determined Washington and Beijing's diplomatic balance since the 1970s. Under Biden, the US has made its position toward Taiwan's political autonomy from Mainland China less ambiguous than in the past, intruding on an uncrossable «red line» in Beijing's internal affairs. As Xi stressed in the same speech mentioned above: «Taiwan's independence is incompatible with peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait» [*Renmin wang* 2022, 14 November].<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, China has developed its responses to Russia's revisionism. Instead of stabilising the country's international affairs as the US strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan had done during the Cold War, China's neutral stance on Ukraine had contributed to escalating the perception of a divided international community along ideological lines. Although the Ukrainian and Taiwanese situations are not comparable, both issues have spurred a re-definition of the strategic ambiguity concept and its validity as a tool to maintain the stability of the international system.

Lastly, with the expansion of the «China vs US narrative» and the erosion of the balancing clout of strategic ambiguity, Chinese foreign policy in 2021 and 2022 had been characterised by the country's attempts to regroup its partner countries around yet uncontested multilateral initiatives like the GDI and the GSI. As the BRI appears to be losing momentum as it approaches its tenth anniversary, the «re-marketisation» of Chinese multilateralism in this international context has become pressing. Beijing's post-Soviet neighbours – an area where the country had established a solid foundation under the BRI – have now been included in the priority list of the country's foreign policy, given the in-built tensions between the region and Russia that re-surfaced with the war in Ukraine. In the last two years, China strived to strengthen the C+C5 and made its presence felt by the region's political élites, thus, aiming to consolidate its position within the post-Soviet neighbourhood and guarantee the stability of its Western borders.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Applebaum, Anne, 2022, 'China's War Against Taiwan Has Already Started', *The Atlantic*, 14 December.
- Barnes, Julian E., & Qin, Amy, 2021, 'State Dept. Moves to Ease Restrictions on Meeting with Taiwan Officials', *The New York Times*, 10 January.
- Berkofsky, Axel & Sciorati, Giulia, 'A Three-Pronged Foreign Policy for the New Era', in Axel Berkofsky & Giulia Sciorati (eds.), *China's Foreign and Security Policies: Who Decides What and How?*, Milan: Ledizioni, 2022, pp. 109-126.

23. In Chinese, 但「台独」同台海和平稳定水火不容.

- Brown, Frances Z., Usman, Zainab, Jones, Erin, Lledó Elisa, Ichihara, Maiko, Stuenkel, Oliver, Shah, Aqil, & Quarcoo, Ashley, 2021, 'Global Views of Biden's Democracy Summit', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 6 December.
- Callahan, William A., 2004, 'National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism', *Alternatives*, 29(2): 199-218.
- Carmody, Pádraig, Zajontz, Tim, & Reboredo, Ricardo, 2022, 'From «Debt Diplomacy» to Donorship? China's Changing Role in Global Development', *Global Political Economy* 1(2): 198-217.
- Chestnut Greitens, Sheena, 2022, 'China's Response to War in Ukraine', *Asian Survey*, 62(5-6): 1-31.
- China Daily*, 2022, 25 January, 'Full Text: Remarks by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Virtual Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations Between China and Central Asian Countries'.
- China Global Television Network*, 2021, 27 March, 'Xi Jinping Inspects SE China's Fujian Province'.
- Congiu, Francesca, & Barbara Onnis, 2022, *Fino all'ultimo stato: la battaglia diplomatica tra Cina e Taiwan*, Roma: Carocci.
- [CPG of the PRC 2021] Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2021, 习近平:在庆祝中国共产党成立100周年大会上的讲话 (Xi Jinping: Speech At the Celebration of the 100th Anniversary of the Founding of the Communist Party of China), 1 July.
- [CPG of the PRC 2022] Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2022, 习近平同美国总统拜登视频通话 (Xi Jinping Holds a Videocall with President of the United States Joe Biden), 18 March.
- DW*, 2021, 14 April, 'Taliban, Russia Criticize US Over Afghanistan Exit'.
- Fazal, Tanisha M., 2020, 'Health Diplomacy in Pandemical Times', *International Organization*, 74(1): 78-97.
- Focus Taiwan*, 2021, 10 April, '56 China Military Planes Enter Taiwan's ADIZ, Setting Another Record'.
- Fuchs, Andreas, & Rudyak, Marina, 'The Motives of China's Foreign Aid', in Ka Zeng (ed.), *Handbook on the International Political Economy of China*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019, pp. 391-410.
- Ghiretti, Francesca, 2022, 'After the Party Congress, Where Is the Belt and Road Initiative Going?', *King's College London*, 1 November.
- Godement, François, 2022, 'China's Foreign Policy: It's Time for a Return to Low Profile', *Institut Montaigne*, 14 September.
- Gore, Lance L. P., 2021, *The Chinese Communist Party in Transformation: The Crisis of Identity and Possibility for Renewal*, Singapore: World Scientific.
- [Guanha 2022, March 17] *Guanha*, 2022, March 17, '中国大使表示中国是乌克兰朋友, 愿助乌发展经济, 外交部回应' (The Chinese Ambassador Said that China is A Friend of Ukraine and is Willing to Help Ukraine Develop its Economy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Responded).
- Hass, Ryan, 2020, 'Lessons from the Trump Administration's Policy Experiment on China', *Working Paper for the Penn Project on the Future of U.S.-China Relations*.
- Huang, Kathy, 2022, 'China Is Locked into Xi Jinping's Aggressive Diplomacy', *Foreign Policy*, 2 December.
- Jacobs, Jennifer, 2022, 'Biden Misspeaks on Taiwan, Says US Military Would Intervene', *Bloomberg*, 23 May.

- Kudaibergenova, Diana T. & Laruelle, Marlene, 2022, 'Making Sense of the January 2022 Protests in Kazakhstan: Failing Legitimacy, Culture of Protests, and Elite Readjustments', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 38(6): 441-459.
- Kwok, Dennis W. H., Lee, Chun-Yi, & Rigger, Shelley, 2022, 'Momentous Changes in Hong Kong: Implications for Taiwan', *SOAS University of London*, 31 January.
- Lanteigne Marc, 2020, *Chinese Foreign Policy: An Introduction*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Lillis, Joanna, 2023, 'Kazakhstan: New Migration Rules to Hit Russians Fleeing the Draft', *Eurasianet*, 17 January.
- [Lin 2023] Lin, Minwang, '2022年中国外交：处变不惊，知难而进' (China's Diplomacy in 2022: Stay Calm and Advance Despite the Difficulties), in *Fudan Guoji Zhanlue Baogao 2022*, Beijing: Research Centre for International Affairs of Fudan University, 2023, pp. 24-29.
- [Lu & Zheng 2021, June 16] Lu, Shaye, & Zheng, Ruolin, 2021, '郑若麟对话驻法大使卢沙野：「我们现在外交风格变了，你们要适应我们的新风格」' (Zheng Ruolin's Dialogue with Lu Shaye, Ambassador to France: «Our Diplomatic Style Has Changed Now, You Need to Adapt to Our New Style»), *Guancha*, 16 June ([https://m.guancha.cn/lushaye/2021\\_06\\_16\\_594555](https://m.guancha.cn/lushaye/2021_06_16_594555)).
- Martina, Michael, & Brunnstrom, David, 2022, 'Analysis: Biden Hints at Risky Policy Shift on Taiwan Independence', *Reuters*, 19 September.
- Menegazzi, Silvia, 'China 2020: A Foreign Policy Characterized by Growing Resilience, Fading Responsibility and Increasing Uncertainty', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020: 45-70.
- [MOFA of the PRC 2021] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021, *Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng: The So-Called «Democracy Summit» Has Been Reduced to a Complete Farce*, 3 December.
- [MOFA of the PRC 2022a] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022, 2022年1月7日外交部发言人汪文斌主持例行记者会 (On January 7, 2022, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Hosted a Regular Press Conference), 7 January ([https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt\\_673021/202201/t20220107\\_10479922.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202201/t20220107_10479922.shtml)).
- [MOFA of the PRC 2022b] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022, *A Trip that Pointed the Way Forward in Turbulent Times and Reinvigorated the Ancient Silk Road - State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi on President Xi Jinping's Attendance at the Samarkand Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and State Visits to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan*, 17 September.
- [MOFA of the PRC 2022c] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022, *The Tinxu Initiative of the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan on Supporting Economic Reconstruction in and Practical Cooperation with Afghanistan*, 1 April.
- [MOFA of the PRC 2022d] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022, 外交部党委扩大会议传达学习贯彻党的二十大精神王毅同志出席并讲话 (Comrade Wang Yi Attended and Delivered a Speech at the Enlarged Meeting of the Party Committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Convey, Study, and Implement the Spirit of the 20th CPC National Congress), 25 October ([https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202210/t20221025\\_10791928.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202210/t20221025_10791928.shtml)).
- [MND of the PRC 2021] Ministry of National Defence of the People's Republic of China, 2021, 国防部新闻局就近期涉军热点问题答记者问 (The Information Bureau of the Ministry of National Defence Answers Reporters' Questions on

- Recent Military-Related Hot Issues), 1 March ([https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?\\_\\_biz=MzA4MTkxNTQ3Mw==&mid=2650029263&idx=1&sn=11e4555b4b5086e951a87f90f9625b83&chksm=878d27f1b0faace7d7c858aa5fb09e1cc730c87ecf330c1a1fbbfc7307799aa64ecd048854b8#rd](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA4MTkxNTQ3Mw==&mid=2650029263&idx=1&sn=11e4555b4b5086e951a87f90f9625b83&chksm=878d27f1b0faace7d7c858aa5fb09e1cc730c87ecf330c1a1fbbfc7307799aa64ecd048854b8#rd)).
- Pan, Zhongqi, 2003, 'US Taiwan Policy of Strategic Ambiguity: A Dilemma of Deterrence', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 12(35): 387-407.
- Pelosi, Nancy, 2022, 'Nancy Pelosi: Why I'm Leading a Congressional Delegation to Taiwan', *The Washington Post*, 2 August.
- Peng, Nian, 2023, 'Berdimuhamedov's China Visit Pushes Forward China-Central Asian Relations', *The Diplomat*, 10 January.
- [Akorda 2022] Presidency of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's Address to the People of Kazakhstan*, 7 January 2022.
- Price, Ned, 2021, *New Guidelines for U.S. Government Interactions with Taiwan Counterparts*, 9 April.
- Proń, Elzbieta, 2022, 'The War in Ukraine and its Potential Implications for Central Asia: China's Perspective', *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, 26 May.
- [Qin & Li 2018] Qin, Haibo & Li, Lili, 2018, '中国对中亚的公共外交: 现状、挑战与方向' (China's Public Diplomacy in Central Asia: Status, Challenges and Directions), *The Journal of Xinjiang University (Philosophy, Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*, 46(4): 61-69.
- [Renmin wang 2022, February 4] *Renmin wang*, 2022, 4 February, '中华人民共和国和俄罗斯联邦关于新时代国际关系和全球可持续发展的联合声明' (Joint Statement Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on International Relations and Global Sustainable Development in the New Era) (<http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0204/c1001-32345502.html>).
- [Renmin wang 2022, 14 November] *Renmin wang*, 2022, 14 November, '习近平同美国总统拜登在巴厘岛举行会晤' (Xi Jinping Holds a Meeting with US President Joe Biden in Bali) (<http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2022/1115/c1024-32566091.html>).
- Repnikova, Maria, 2022, *Chinese Soft Power*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ripley, Will, Eric Cheung & Ben Westcott, 2021, 'Taiwan's President Says the Threat from China Is Increasing 'Every Day' and Confirms Presence of US Military Trainers on the Island', *CNN*, 28 October.
- Samarani, Guido, 2008, *La Cina del Novecento. Dalla fine dell'impero a oggi*, Torino: Einaudi editore.
- Sciorati, Giulia, 2021, 'Not a Military Base: Why Did China Commit to an Outpost in Tajikistan?', *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, 2 November.
- Sciorati, Giulia & Kristiina Silvan, 'Russo-Chinese Relations Under the BRI: The Reshaping of Central Asia', in Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Benjamin Houghton & Jia Liu (eds.), *China Moves West: The Evolving Strategies of the Belt and Road Initiative*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, forthcoming.
- [SCIO 2022a] State Council Information Office, 2022, *President Xi Jinping Makes a State Visit to the Republic of Kazakhstan*, 15 September.
- [SCIO 2022b] State Council Information Office, 2022, *President Xi Jinping Holds Talks with President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan*, 15 September.
- [SCIO 2022c] State Council Information Office, 2022, *President Xi Attends the Restricted Session of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, 16 September.

- Stronski, Paul, 2022, 'Central Asia's Response to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 30 March.
- TASS, 2022, 12 June, 'China Does Not Want War in Ukraine, But Sanctions Are Not Helpful Too – Minister'.
- TASS, 2022, 5 May, 'China, Russia to Develop Major Strategic Projects in Energy – Chinese Ambassador'.
- [The White House 2021a] The White House, 2021, *Readout of President Biden's Virtual Meeting with President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China*, 16 September.
- [The White House 2021b] The White House, 2021, *Remarks by President Biden in Press Gaggle*, 16 September.
- US Congress, 2022 *A Bill to Direct the Secretary of State to Develop a Strategy to Regain Observer Status for Taiwan in the World Health Organization, and for Other Purposes*, 13 May.
- US Department of State, *The Summit for Democracies*, 2021.
- [Vaal 2022, 3 March] Vaal, Tamara, 2022, 'Казахстан Не Поддерживает Ни Россию, Ни Украину – Минобороны' (Kazakhstan Does Not Support Russia or Ukraine – Ministry of Defense), *Vlast*, 3 March (<https://vlast.kz/novosti/48974-kazakhstan-ne-podderzivaet-ni-rossiiu-ni-ukrainu-minoborony.html>).
- [Wang 2023, 9 January] Wang, Hanli, 2023, '外交部新闻司原副司长赵立坚已任边界与海洋事务司副司长' (Zhao Lijian, Former Deputy Director of the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Has Been Appointed Deputy Director of the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs), *Mei Ri Jingji Xinwen*, 9 January (<https://www.nbd.com.cn/articles/2023-01-09/2626857.html>).
- Wang, Yi, 2022, *Jointly Advancing the Global Development Initiative and Writing a New Chapter for Common Development*, 21 September.
- [Xinhua 2021, 2 January] Xinhua, 2021, January 2, '王毅：中俄战略合作没有止境，没有禁区，没有上限' (Wang Yi: China-Russia Strategic Cooperation Has No Limits, No Restricted Areas, and No Upper Limits) ([http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2021-01/02/c\\_1126937927.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2021-01/02/c_1126937927.htm)).
- [Yuan 2016] Yuan, Jian, 2016, '连续性 with 断裂性 – 近代中国知识视野下的«中亚»范畴流变' (Continuity and Disruption – Category Evolution of «Central Asia» from the Perspective of Modern Chinese Knowledge), 27(4): 137-140.
- [Zhao 2021, 22 June] Zhao, Nuoya, 2021, '俄大使返美复工先见崔天凯，介绍俄美领导人峰会情况' (Returned to Work to the US, the Russian Ambassador First Meets Cui Tiankai, Introduces the Status of the Russia-US Leaders' Summit), *Guancha*, 22 June (<https://www.163.com/dy/article/GD62E1JO005372R2L.html>).

KOREAN PENINSULA 2022: STUCK BETWEEN NEW LEADERSHIP  
AND OLD PRACTICES\*\*\*

Marco Milani

and

Antonio Fiori

University of Bologna  
marco.milani6@unibo.it

University of Bologna  
antonio.fiori@unibo.it

*The most consequential political event that took place on the peninsula in 2022 was the election of a new president in South Korea. The very narrow victory of the conservative candidate Yoon Suk-yeol marked a clear break with his predecessor Moon Jae-in and returned the image of a very divided country. The division continued throughout the year and contributed to a rapid and sharp decrease in the approval rating of the new president, together with a series of disasters and incidents that hit the country. The election of Yoon also influenced inter-Korean relations, with a return to a tougher position in Seoul. The resurgence of missile tests by North Korea, combined with this new attitude in the South, inevitably led to an exacerbation of tension that took the form of repeated military provocations and reactions, especially in the second half of the year.*

*The spread of COVID-19 continued to be a relevant factor influencing social and political developments on the Korean peninsula. On one side, South Korea was able to adapt its strategy to the spread of the new and much more contagious «Omicron» variant; on the other side, North Korea experienced its first, officially recognized, wave of infections, that did not lead to the collapse of the country's healthcare system and was managed with a relatively low number of deaths, according to government data. In terms of international relations, the attitude of both Koreas was a return towards traditional alliances and practices. North Korea openly supported Russia, and its invasion of Ukraine, and China, in order to weaken the position of the United States and to benefit from the split among the great powers within the UN Security Council. South Korea's new president restored the pre-eminence of the alliance with the U.S. and of the country's role within the liberal international order.*

**KEYWORDS** – South Korea; North Korea; presidential election; Yoon Suk-yeol; Lee Jae-myung; Itaewon crowd crush; Kim Jong Un; State Policy on the Nuclear Forces; North Korea missile tests; Inter-Korean relations; U.S.-Korea relations; China-Korea relations; Russia-North Korea relations.

\* This article is the outcome of a joint research effort of the two authors. More specifically, however, Marco Milani wrote sections 1; 2.1; 2.2; 2.3; 3.1 and 3.2, Antonio Fiori wrote sections 2.4; 2.5; 4.1; 4.2 and 5.

\*\* This work was supported by the Seed Program for Korean Studies of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the Korean Studies Promotion Service at the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2021-INC-2230003).

## 1. *Introduction*

The main political event that dominated the year and had important consequences on the entire peninsula was the presidential election in South Korea. After a very harsh campaign, the final result registered the victory of the conservative candidate Yoon Suk-yeol against the progressive opponent Lee Jae-myung, with a very thin margin. The election mirrored the situation within the country, with a very strong polarization between the two political fronts; a polarization that continued throughout the year, with multiple attacks against members of the opposition and an attempt by the new government to overthrow most of the policies of its predecessor. This situation, together with a series of natural disasters and incidents that hit the country, led to a rapid decrease in the popularity of the new President that remained in very low numbers until the end of the year.

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to be an important factor that characterized the political, social, and economic development on the Korean peninsula in 2022. However, compared to the previous two years, the situation was very different: South Korea was hit by the wave of the much more contagious «Omicron» variant, but thanks to the high level of vaccination in the country, the reduced aggressiveness of the new variant and the government's ability to change and adapt its strategy, the consequences in terms of deaths and hospitalization were greatly reduced. On the contrary, in North Korea the first officially acknowledged wave of infection was registered between April and May, after two years of strict anti-virus controls at its borders. The number of cases grew exponentially in April and May; however, according to the official numbers, the wave of infections was put under control during summer and the emergency was declared over in August, with a very low rate of mortality.

The election of Yoon Suk-yeol in South Korea had important consequences also for inter-Korean relations. During the campaign he had made abundantly clear that dialogue and cooperation with North Korea was not his priority. This return to a tougher position, typical of conservative administrations, was matched by a resumption of missile tests by Pyongyang, that exceeded any other previous year, and by new military provocations, that significantly increased the level of tension on the peninsula. The new South Korean administration decided to resume joint military exercises with the United States, after a four-year hiatus, and to respond to North Korea's provocation through military actions; this new dynamic created a vicious cycle that led to a series of actions and responses that strongly aggravated the situation on the peninsula. Undoubtedly, the decision of the North Korean leadership to approve a new law on the use of nuclear forces that made its use possible also as a pre-emptive instrument contributed to this tension.

Inevitably, also South Korea's foreign policy was influenced by the election of a new president. Yoon's approach strongly favoured the al-

liance with the United States and a possible rapprochement with Japan, compared to the more balanced position of his predecessor. In addition, Yoon tried also to pursue a more active role for the country on the global stage, through a diplomacy aimed at supporting the norms and values of the liberal international order. This posture created frictions with China; however, the South Korean government has been able to keep the tension under control with Beijing so far. On the other side of the Korean peninsula, Pyongyang fully aligned with its traditional allies: China and Russia. North Korea was one of the few countries to support Russia's invasion of Ukraine and one of the first to recognize the independence of the People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk and later the referendum organized by Moscow for the annexation of Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia to the Russian Federation. The alignment with Russia and China against the United States and other Western countries not only gave North Korea the opportunity to reinforce its traditional accusations against Washington and the post-Cold War liberal order, but it turned out to be a very advantageous situation: the split between these powers within the UN Security Council protected Pyongyang from additional international sanctions in response to its missile tests.

## 2. Domestic politics

### 2.1. *A turbulent start: between the spread of the new COVID-19 variant and the presidential elections*

The presidential elections, scheduled for 9 March, and the electoral campaign dominated domestic politics in South Korea in the first months of 2022. The emphasis on this crucial event relegated in a secondary position in the domestic debate not only the last months in office of President Moon Jae-in, but also the resurgence of COVID-19 cases, caused by the spread of the new «Omicron» variant.

The COVID-19 pandemic had dominated the previous two years in the South Korean domestic debate, with a very positive control of the spread of the infection in 2020 and a more complicated management of the situation in 2021 [Milani 2020, pp. 74-79; Milani 2021, pp. 98-102]. The fairly effective strategy deployed by the government was not devoid of controversial aspects, in particular for what concerned the gathering and use of personal data in order to maintain a high level of surveillance over the spread of the pandemic; however, the public's attitude about monitoring has remained largely favourable throughout the pandemic, due to the ability of the authority to rapidly flatten the curve of infections and keep the numbers under control.

When the country seemed to be ready for a transition toward a «normal» life, through the «living with COVID» government plan, the emergence



of the much more contagious «Omicron» variant put the normalization of the situation into question. The second stage of the government plan, that aimed at easing restrictions to public gatherings and lifting social distancing measures, was suspended in December 2021 and again in January and early February 2022, with the goal of slowing the spread of the new variant [Smith 2022a, 4 February]. Despite these efforts, the number of cases significantly increased during January, followed by an exponential growth starting from February [*Yonhap* 2022b, 19 February].

This drastic transformation of the expected scenario, however, did not completely deter the South Korean administration's efforts to return to a normalization of the country's social and economic life. Despite the rapid rise of cases, that exceeded 100.000 in mid-February, the government decided not to respond through a tightening of restrictive measures, but with the implementation of a new strategy that focused specifically on the most vulnerable patients and on the most severe cases. Drawing on the knowledge and examples of other countries that had experienced the wave of the «Omicron» variant before South Korea, and supported by the high rate of vaccination within the country, patients who tested positive but did not experience severe symptoms could quarantine at home and look after themselves, while treatment was reserved to the patients in difficult medical conditions [Kim 2022a, 4 February]. At the same time, the government continued to consider the possibility of lifting restrictions to achieve some sort of normalcy for the population. As the situation progressed in February, this new model proved to be effective: the new variant, while extremely contagious, led to fewer cases of severe symptoms and hospitalization. The number of new cases continued to grow but the number of critically ill patients and deaths remained under control. Based on this situation, the government decided to start lifting restrictions again by late February [Shim 2022, 18 February].

The new approach put in place by the South Korean government to address the changing conditions caused by the new variant, with the sudden ending of the previous «test, trace and treat» policy that had been consistently pursued in the previous two years, was not received positively by the population, which in many cases considered it as an abandonment by the State of its responsibility [Choe 2022a, 17 February]. Nevertheless, the ability to adapt the anti-COVID strategy to the changed situation turned out to be a pragmatic and effective path for South Korea, that paved the way for a rapid return to an almost normal situation without causing an uncontrolled increase in hospitalizations and deaths.

Despite the exponential growth in the number of COVID-19 cases, in the first months of 2022, the domestic political debate was dominated by the electoral campaign for the presidential elections, scheduled for 9 March. The main parties had picked their candidates in the last months of the previous year: on the conservative side, the People Power Party had selected the former general prosecutor with no previous political experience

Yoon Suk-yeol; the progressive Democratic Party, chose the governor of the Gyeonggi province Lee Jae-myung; the leftist Justice Party nominated Sim Sang-jung; and the centrist People Party nominated Ahn Cheol-soo.

As usual in the South Korean political system, which is dominated by the two main political parties, from the beginning the electoral race focused on the two main candidates, Yoon and Lee, who both tried to present themselves as «new» and «clean» faces in South Korean politics [Milani 2021, pp. 107-108]. The narrative that the candidates pursued throughout their campaign was characterized by a certain degree of anti-politics and even populism. On one side, Yoon put emphasis on his novelty in the political competition, not having held elective or government positions before, and on his career as a prosecutor during which he investigated high level political and business figures, including former Presidents Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye. In this way, Yoon Suk-yeol and his electoral team tried to turn a possible weakness of his candidacy – the lack of political experience – into a positive one, framing his image as an outsider not tainted by the corruption and untrustworthiness of the political élite. On the other side, Lee Jae-myung drew attention to his humble origins, his political career from grassroot and without the support of the party establishment and on a reputation of being an effective and practical politician, built on his previous experiences as mayor and governor [Davies 2022, 3 March].

This emphasis of both candidates on their previous accomplishments and on their personal characteristics shifted the focus of the electoral campaign from their political programs towards a personalization of the political confrontation, with the result of being dominated by negative messages sent by one contender against the other and by personal attacks and accusations from both sides. Throughout the months that led to the election several scandals that involved people very close to the candidates emerged. For this reason, the competition morphed into a sort of «unlikeable election», with voters forced to choose more according to their antipathy rather than their political inclination [Shin 2022, 3 February].

In this controversial context, the political part that experienced more internal tension during the campaign was that of the conservatives. While progressives were able to consolidate the support behind their «outsider» candidate after he won the primary elections, for conservatives this process proved to be much more complicated. The strong personalization on the figure of Yoon Suk-yeol clashed not only with part of the establishment, but also with the leader of the People Power Party, Lee Jun-seok, who had been nominated a few months before, in June 2021, and was himself a young political outsider. The clash between these two key figures emerged towards the end of 2021 and was temporarily resolved through a mediation in the first days of January, when Yoon also decided to completely reshuffle his electoral committee in the hope of giving a fresh start of his campaign after a not very positive beginning [Kim 2022a, 9 January].

The first television debate, held on 3 February, largely reflected the generally negative attitude of the entire campaign, more than a clear exposition of the different political programs. What the two main candidates, Lee and Yoon, presented in this occasion and throughout the campaign was a combination of their previous experiences and of the traditional guidelines of their respective parties. Lee Jae-myung continued along the same lines of his tenure as mayor and governor, proposing solutions to social and economic problems that focused on the active intervention of the government, in particular through the creation of a universal basic income for all individuals. As for the housing prices problem, one of the key issues during the campaign, Lee proposed the construction of 3 million new houses in five years, with the direct intervention of the government, and also tougher regulations on speculative home buyers [Kim 2022, 6 March]. On the other side, Yoon Suk-yeol, in addition to vowing to eradicate corruption based on his experience as prosecutor, proposed a series of market-oriented solutions to the country's problems such as the deregulation of the real estate market and the elimination of government obstacles for small and medium businesses [Kim 2022, 6 March]; in terms of social issues, Yoon continued to support the idea of abolishing the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and made several remarks against the feminist movement, in order to appeal to the growing anti-feminist front composed mostly of young males [Draudt 2022, 8 February]. Regarding foreign policy, both candidates lacked experience and expertise, resulting in both of them relying on the foreign policy traditions of their respective parties [Milani & Fiori, 2019]. Lee Jae-myung proposed a «practical approach» to North Korea, that included dialogue and negotiations, and a balanced position in the region, especially between China and the United States [Lee 2022, 23 February]; Yoon Suk-yeol, instead, put the most emphasis on the alliance with Washington, both on the peninsula and in the region, and thus on a tougher position not only towards North Korea but also towards China [Yoon 2022, 8 February].

Two days before the beginning of the official campaign, that started on 15 February, one key event seemed to steer the election in one direction. During the previous weeks, the two main candidates had remained almost at the same level around 35% each in the polls, with neither looking likely to gain a decisive advantage [Kim 2022, 11 February]. On 13 February, the third candidate Ahn Cheol-soo, with a projected consensus of around 9%, proposed to merge his candidacy with that of Yoon Suk-yeol of the conservative People Power Party, in a joint effort to defeat the candidate of the Democratic Party [Yonhap 2022a, 13 February]. Ahn proposed to hold a sort of primary election, through a public opinion poll, in order to decide who was going to be the candidate between the two. The offer was not accepted by Yoon who was nominated as the frontrunner of the conservative party months in advance and did not want to risk losing his candidacy, also considering the huge gap in terms of popular consensus in Yoon's favour. However, while disagreeing

on the methods, Yoon's electoral team showed interest in the idea of having a unified candidacy against Lee Jae-myung [Jang 2022, 14 February]. One week after the proposal, Ahn decided to withdraw it, citing the fact that he had not received any response from Yoon [Lee 2022a, 20 February]. Despite the fact that the two centre-right candidates were not able to find a common ground for a unified candidacy, the move was a warning sign for Lee Jae-myung, pondering how close in the polls the two front runners were and how Ahn's support for Yoon might affect the final outcome. Over the following weeks, while election day was fast approaching, the team of the two centre-right candidates continued to negotiate to find a viable solution that could lead to a unified candidacy [Kim 2022b, 27 February]. This solution was ultimately found on 3 March, just 6 days before the election, when Ahn Cheol-soo publicly announced his withdrawal from the competition and his support to the conservative candidate Yoon Suk-yeol [Kim 2022, 3 March].

The electoral process began with early voting on 4 and 5 March with a very high turnout for the early stage, at 36,93% [Lee & Joo 2022, 5 March]. When the polls closed on 9 March, a little over 77% of the eligible voters had cast their ballot, in line with the previous election. The final result reflected the uncertainty that had dominated the entire campaign: despite the last-minute withdrawal of Ahn, the two main candidates remained extremely close, with the conservative Yoon Suk-yeol obtaining a slight majority of just 0,73%, or around 247.000 votes out of over 34 million valid votes. The picture painted by these results, and by the general tone of the electoral campaign, was that of a strong polarization between conservatives and progressives and a that of a country deeply divided along ideological and party-political lines.

	Yoon Suk-yeol	Lee Jae-myung	Sim Sang-jung
Votes	16.394.815	16.147.738	803.358
Percentage	48,56%	47,83%	2,38%

[Source: National Election Commission, Republic of Korea, <http://info.nec.go.kr> (Data have been elaborated by the authors)].

## 2.2. *Yoon Suk-yeol's first months in office and the rise of political tensions*

Unlike what had happened after the previous election in 2017, that came after Park Geun-hye's impeachment and removal from office, this time there was a proper transition period between the election and the official inauguration of the new presidency, scheduled for 10 May. The new president-elect Yoon Suk-yeol nominated a transition committee, that was headed by Yoon's last-minute electoral ally Ahn Cheol-soo [Kang 2022, 13 March]. The new president and his committee had then to interact with the outgoing Moon Jae-in's government.

The first weeks of cohabitation between Yoon and Moon were not without frictions. The new president-elect, a few days after his victory, announced his commitment to move the presidential offices from the *Cheong Wa Dae* – the traditional residence of South Korean presidents, in a secluded area of the capital – to the building of the Ministry of Defence, located in a much more central area of Seoul. The decision, aimed at making it, symbolically and practically, more accessible to the people, created tensions with the outgoing administration which considered it impractical from a logistic and security point of view and also expensive. On his side, Moon Jae-in decided to appoint a new governor of the Bank of Korea, Rhee Chang-yon, on 23 March, a few weeks before the end of his mandate. On 28 March, 19 days after the election, Yoon and Moon finally met for the first time and agreed to cooperate for a smooth transition of power [Shin 2022, 27 March]; however, tensions and disagreements remained between the two.

Despite these initial problems, Yoon and his transition team seemed to advance quickly to take over the main positions of the government, while also benefiting from the general positive atmosphere in the country thanks to the sharp decrease of COVID-19 cases, after the peak of the «Omicron» wave, and the government announcement of a plan to end most restrictions [Choi 2022a, 15 April]. The new president also started to present the most important members of the new cabinet, with a mix of experienced politicians – such as Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Park Jin and the Minister of Economy and Finance Choo Kyung-ho – and professionals – such as the Minister of Defence Lee Jong-sup, and the Minister of Trade, Industry and Energy Lee Chang-yang. The sensitive position of Minister of Justice, in charge also of the relationship with the judicial power, was given to the former prosecutor Han Dong-hoon.

On 10 May, Yoon Suk-yeol's presidency was officially inaugurated, with the new president giving a speech that emphasized the need of healing domestic political and economic divisions, fighting to defend international norms and values, and also proposing an economic plan for North Korea in exchange for denuclearization [*Yonhap* 2022c, 10 May]. Yoon's honeymoon, however, proved to be very short lived. The opposition of the Democratic Party immediately started to vocally criticize the cabinet appointments, citing a very limited role for women and the fact that some members of the new government were involved in scandals. Despite this tension, Han Duck-soo was confirmed as prime minister by the National Assembly, in which the Democratic Party held a majority, and the new executive started to be fully operative [Joo 2022, 20 May]. As its first move, the new administration approved an extra budget of 59,4 trillion won (US\$46 billion) to support small businesses hit by the pandemic restrictions [Kim 2022, 12 May].

Political polarization between the two parties remained dangerously high in the following months. Lee Jae-myung, who lost the presidential

elections by a razor-thin margin, entered the National Assembly winning a seat in the by-election on 1<sup>st</sup> June [Lee 2022, 2 June]. The poor performance of the Democratic Party in the administrative elections that were held on the same day paved the way for Lee also to become leader of the party, after the resignation of the previous leadership and a landslide victory in internal election in August [Shim 2022, 29 August]. From his new position, Lee started to harshly criticize Yoon's government. A further factor creating political tension was represented by a series of investigations, both from the prosecution and the new government, involving members of the previous administrations and other high officials of the Democratic Party. The opposition immediately presented them as politically motivated, both because of the direct role of the new government, but also for the alleged connections between Yoon and his former colleagues in the prosecution. Two of the cases concerned inter-Korean relations. In July, the prosecution indicted former chiefs of the National Intelligence Service (NIS), Park Jie-won and Suh Hoon, for the repatriation of two North Koreans fishermen in 2019 that was decided in a matter of days apparently without abiding by the due procedure; Yoon's administration also pledged to open a government investigation to determine the circumstances of the event [Choe 2022c, 22 July]. The second case involved the death of a naval official that was killed by North Korean forces in 2020 in the waters close to the inter-Korean maritime border [Milani 2020, p. 91]; the government at the time released a report according to which the official was trying to defect to the North. The new administration decided to launch an inquiry also on this incident, disputing the previous reconstruction and asserting that no meaningful attempts to save the official's life were made and that evidence were withheld to support the government version. In both cases, Moon administration was accused of mishandling the situation to reach an outcome that would not endanger relations with North Korea [Alexandre 2022, 23 December]. The government investigations were soon followed by the actions of the prosecution: in October the former ministry of Defence, Suh Wook, was arrested for abuse of power and falsification of documents, but released soon after [Park 2022a, 8 November]; on 3 December the former head of NIS, Suh Hoon, was arrested for covering up the initial investigation on the naval official death [Bremer 2022a, 5 December].

The main controversy between the government and the opposition erupted when the investigation started to involve Lee Jae-myung, leader of the Democratic Party, in connection with several cases concerning development projects and corruption when he was mayor of Seongnam and governor of Gyeonggi. In early September the general prosecutor summoned Lee for interrogation regarding the accusation of violation of the electoral law for having spread false information about his involvement in a real estate scandal when he was presidential candidate. Soon after he was indicted for the same charges [Lee 2022, 12 September]. Tension

rose again when one former close collaborator of Lee, Kim Yong, was arrested in late October for allegedly having received illegal funds from a real estate developer, and then having used the funds for Lee Jae-myung's electoral campaign [Kim 2022c, 23 October]. A few days later, for the same investigation, the police raided the headquarter of the Democratic Party [Kim 2022, 24 October]. These moves were immediately denounced by the opposition as politically motivated and as a revenge of the new government against the former presidential candidate Lee. It became increasingly clear that Lee was one of the key figures for the investigation and also that an eventual indictment or even arrest of the leader of the opposition would represent a new disrupting factor in an already problematic and polarized political situation.

### *2.3. Disasters, social unrest, and the free fall of Yoon's popularity*

Political tension and confrontation with the opposition were not the only concerns of the new President in his first months in office. After a very short honeymoon with the public opinion, Yoon's approval rating started to decrease fast. After peaking at around 53% in early June, it started to drop substantially in the following weeks: by mid-July it was around 30%, then it decreased further to 25% in August, and remained around 30% until the last weeks of the year [Cha 2022, 16 December]. This prolonged low level of popularity was motivated by different factors. On one side, external reasons contributed to this negative trend, such as the economic situation affected by the rising inflation rate and energy prices; on the other side, a series of controversial issues emerged among nominees for his cabinet, such as misappropriation of political funds and abuse of power [Choi 2022b, 6 July], as well as internal strife within the conservative party. More than the issues themselves, it was the way in which the new President did not properly and resolutely managed these problems that disconcerted the public opinion, that saw it as a signal of his lack of experience.

This situation even worsened when South Korea was hit by massive rains in August, that caused floods and landslide in different areas of the country, including Seoul, with 9 deaths and 6 missing persons [Choe 2022d, 8 August]. The extraordinary amount of rain certainly took the entire country by surprise; however, the government, and the President in particular, showed a lack of efficiency and decisiveness in facing the crisis. In particular, Yoon was criticized for his decision to stay at his private home during the crisis instead of coordinating the response from his presidential office or visiting the damaged areas [Kim 2022b, 9 August].

A second issue that the new government had to face concerned the turmoil in workers' organizations and labour unions. The strong neoliberal approach that Yoon presented during his campaign as his economic agenda had created concerns in these organizations. Soon these concerns were put into practice through strikes and demonstrations. In early June, unionized

truck drivers went on strike, demanding the extension of a minimum pay scheme and fuel subsidies to cope with the increase in fuel prices; the strike disrupted the export supply chain of the country, with significant economic damages and was called off after 8 days, when the government decided to accept the requests [Kim & Yang 2022, 15 June]. In early July, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions organized a demonstration in central Seoul that attracted more than 50,000 people, to ask for better working conditions [Yonhap 2022d, 2 July]. Later the same month, the workers of the Daewoo shipyards ended a 51-days strike after finding an agreement with the management [Yonhap 2022e, 22 July]. Unionized truck drivers went on strike again in late November asking for a permanent minimum pay system – that was extended until the end of 2022 after the previous strike – but the government refused to accept and issued back-to-work orders that basically made the strike illegal. The mobilization ended after two weeks, when the National Assembly passed a law to extend the minimum pay for three more years [Park 2022b, 9 December]. In all these circumstances, the government and the President himself strongly opposed and criticized workers' strikes and demonstrations, increasing tension between the parties involved and also at the social level.

The biggest – and most tragic – crisis that the country had to face took place on 29 October, when a crowd of young people was crushed in a small alley in the neighbourhood of Itaewon, in Seoul, during the Halloween celebrations, causing 159 deaths and almost 200 injured. It became immediately clear that the main reason behind this tragic incident was the total lack of a crowd control system by the public authorities, even though the huge number of people in the area could have been largely anticipated [Rashid 2022, 30 October]. The presence of the police was very limited, and no measures were taken in advance to prevent such a massive crowd to gather in a very small area [Lee & Kim, 2022, 1 November]. Two days after the event the Mayor of Seoul, the Chief of police and the Minister of the Interior presented official apologies; however, none of them resigned [Kim 2022d, 1 November]. Also, the investigation that was launched immediately after the tragedy started to focus mostly on the local police and first responders and their lack of preparedness, rather than those responsible in the Ministry or at the national level. The «Itaewon tragedy» concurred to the low level of popularity of the President and the government; criticisms, not only from the political opposition but also from large portions of the public opinion, pointed at the incompetence of parts of the institutions and also at their indifference, demonstrated by the inability to accept to take the political responsibility of what had happened. While the trend of low approval rating seemed to slightly recover towards the end of the year, Yoon Suk-yeol's first months as president were thus mostly characterized by difficulties, partially for external reasons but also for his lack of experience in managing State affairs and in politics more in general.



#### 2.4. *North Korea fell prey to the COVID-19*

In early 2020, when the COVID-19 epidemic started to manifest itself worldwide, North Korea provided an immediate and aggressive response, by sealing its borders [Milani 2020, pp. 83-84]. This self-containment policy clearly meant inflicting more damage on an economy already injured by chronic mismanagement and UN sanctions enforced in response to Pyongyang's nuclear and missile tests. Towards the end of January 2022, North Korean freight trains to China resumed operations, unloading cargo at an airfield in the border town of Uiju – which might have been converted into a disinfection site – upon their return [Williams & Makowsky 2022; *Global Times* 2022, 17 January]. Chinese exports to North Korea consistently grew until April, reaching the highest amount – US\$98 million – from the outbreak of the pandemic, including pharmaceutical products [Brown 2022, 24 May].

As soon as the threat of the COVID-19 decreased, Pyongyang started to progressively ease restrictions and hold large political events, as it was the case, in April 2022, with the celebrations for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kim Jong Un's rule, the 110-year anniversary of the birth of Kim Il Sung or the Army Day, during which hundreds of thousands of people gathered in the capital city. As a result, the virus resurfaced and spread throughout the country, also due to the elevate infectiveness of the «Omicron» variant. After authorities had publicly admitted the first case of COVID-19, on May 12, the situation rapidly deteriorated: during an emergency meeting, Kim Jong Un blamed the institutions of the Workers' Party for «incompetence and a lack of responsibility» in tackling the virus outbreak [KCNA 2022c, 12 May]. The next day, state media acknowledged that a «fever whose cause could not be identified» had spread since late April [KCNA 2022d, 13 May]; in addition, Kim admitted that his country was experiencing «the biggest upheaval» ever since its establishment [KCNA 2022e, 14 May] and that a maximum emergency epidemic prevention system had to be put in place in the nation [KCNA 2022e, 14 May]. On 15 May, the number of reported cases peaked to almost 400.000 [KCNA 2022f, 16 May]. However, towards the end of the month a steady decline was registered. It is to be highlighted, however, that it remains unclear what methodology for data collection has been adopted by North Korean authorities and, of course, verification of data is substantially impossible.

After having denied for years any virus outbreak, to the point that the country was proudly defined «a uniquely clean land on the planet» and «a place free of infection from the virus» [DPRK Today 2020, 16 October], the admission that North Korea had eventually succumbed to COVID-19 was ostensibly due to different reasons. The first was to boost Kim's legitimacy and increase domestic control over the population at a juncture when economic hardships and border closures could have ignited some degree of public discontent. When it became evident that the outbreak of the pan-

demic could not be camouflaged any more, the national propaganda decided to portray Kim Jong Un as a generous father figure to the nation, who blamed officials for failing to stop the spread that was whipping the country. At the same time, it is not difficult to suppose that the decision to limit any internal movement, justified with the need to protect public health, was aimed at intensifying the crackdown on so-called «anti-socialist and non-socialist behaviour» [Lee 2022, 30 May]. Another reason had to do with North Korea's *juche* (self-reliance) ideology: specifically, the regime wanted to prove the international community that, despite widespread reserves, it could fight the virus and prevail without relying on external support. This became evident after North Korea refused several offers of vaccines and medical supplies and blamed South Korea for the spread of the virus without any evidence: accepting humanitarian aid, in fact, would send a message, especially to Seoul, that Pyongyang's behaviour could be influenced by others' economic superiority.

The dramatic situation was worsened not only by the inadequate and poorly resourced healthcare system or by the limited testing capacity, but also by the presumably low levels of vaccination. Although many speculated that shipments containing medical supplies, presumably vaccines, had been imported from China [Betts 2022, 4 June], nobody can confirm the exact proportion of North Koreans who have been vaccinated. The regime has constantly shunned offers of vaccines from the World Health Organization's COVAX scheme, supposedly both because administering the jabs would have required outside monitoring and to avoid drawing attention to the dramatic conditions within the country [Jang 2022, 3 May].

The virus surge and consequent protracted lockdowns, in addition to a coronavirus outbreak in the border city of Dandong, forced Pyongyang to cut again, at the end of April, bilateral trade with China [MFA PRC 2022b, 29 April]: Beijing's exports to Pyongyang sharply decreased to US\$14.5 million in May and remained nearly unchanged in June [Bremer 2022b, 20 December]. Since then, corn and rice prices soared in North Korea, disproportionately affecting low-income households, and raising speculations that the country could face a worse famine than that of mid-1990s [Kobara 2022, 7 August].

Between May and June 2022, the number of reported new cases of fever dropped, especially in Pyongyang where the lockdown was immediately lifted, even though this improvement did not convince the World Health Organization [Reuters 2022, 1 June]. At the very beginning of July, an investigation report released by the state-run news agency KCNA implicitly explained that Seoul had to be held responsible for COVID-19 outbreak in North Korea [KCNA 2022g, 1 July]. According to the document, in fact, the virus had started to spread after an 18-year-old soldier and a 5-year-old child had come into contact with «alien items» on a hill near the border in the Ipho-ri area of Kumgang county, in early April. Without providing

further specifications, the report stressed the need «to vigilantly deal with unusual items coming by wind and other climate phenomena and balloons» [KCNA 2022g, 1 July] along North Korea's southern border, blaming the practice recurrently adopted by various organizations of activists and defectors based in South Korea.

On 11 August, few days after state media had communicated that the spread of fever was in its «terminal stage» [KCNA 2022h, 3 August], Kim Jong Un – during a meeting with medical and health officials and scientists, whose contribution he praised for «defusing the serious epidemic spread crisis» and defending the «best social system in the world» [KCNA 2022k, 11 August] – declared victory in the national battle against COVID-19, ordering the lifting of maximum anti-epidemic measures imposed in May in all areas, except for border regions, and the resumption of normal public activities. In the end, according to the Commander of State Emergency Ri Chung Gil, North Korea had reported an «unprecedented miracle in the history of the world health community» [KCNA 2022l, 11 August], since out of 4,77 million infections only 74 citizens died, which represented a fatality rate of 0,0016%, the lowest in the world. During the same meeting, the sister of the North Korean leader, Kim Yo Jong, vice department director of the Central Committee of the Party, addressed the gathering and revealed that Kim Jong Un himself had suffered from high fever during the pandemic emergency, but he could not lie down due to the concerns about caring for his fellow citizens [Shin & Smith 2022, 11 August]. She also took the opportunity to blame South Korea again for causing the coronavirus outbreak by sending «rubbish», balloons and counter-propaganda materials, and urged strong retaliatory measures against the neighbour [KCNA 2022m, 11 August].

In September, after five months of suspension, a freight train service between Dandong and Sinuiju was resumed, presumably upon Pyongyang's request. The value of trade with China between January and August 2022 amounted to US\$ 503,24 million, 70 percent less than the same period in 2019 [*Kyodo News* 2022, 26 September].

### *2.5. A more aggressive nuclear posture: The introduction of the State Policy on the Nuclear Forces*

The new law on the State Policy on the Nuclear Forces, promulgated by the Supreme People's Assembly on September 8, on the eve of the celebration of the 74<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea, closed the circle in North Korea's nuclear strategy that had been initiated in 2013, when the regime declared the country's permanent status as a nuclear weapons state and enacted the law on «consolidating position of nuclear weapons state» for self-defence [KCNA 2013, 1 April]. This posture had been clearly reaffirmed in 2017, when, after firing an inter-continental ballistic missile, North Korea claimed it had mastered nuclear-

strike capability and became a full-fledged nuclear state [KCNA 2017, 29 November]. Therefore, rather than marking a sudden change, the newly passed law should be considered as a reaffirmation of an already existing nuclear doctrine.

It must be highlighted, though, that before the introduction of the recent law, the regime had constantly suggested that the primary mission of its nuclear weapons program was to deter war and secure regime stability; accordingly, its attitude had always been seen as solely defensive. This was evident in the article 1 of the 2013 law, that clearly stated that nuclear weapons were a means for defence necessary to cope with the «ever-escalating policy of the U.S. and nuclear threats» [KCNA 2013, 1 April]. Subsequent statements, however, had challenged this claim, explicitly referring to the possibility that North Korea reserved the right to employ a tactical use of nuclear weapons, if provoked. This change in posture was probably also motivated by the fact that, during his electoral campaign, Yoon Suk-yeol had pledged to revive the so-called «Kill Chain» strategy, originally conceived by President Park Geun-hye [Ahn 2013, 1 October], by stating that there would be «no recourse, but a pre-emptive strike» if signs of an «imminent» attack from Pyongyang emerge [Kim & Kwon 2022, 12 January].

On 25 April, in a speech celebrating the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Korean People's Revolutionary Army, Kim Jong Un, despite insisting on the defensive nature of his country's nuclear arsenal, stretched the boundary of self-defence and the circumstances for using nuclear weapons, by clarifying that «if any forces try to violate the fundamental interests of our state, our nuclear forces will have to decisively accomplish its unexpected second mission» [KCNA 2022b, 26 April], conceivably implying that their use would not be limited to the prevention of war. Against this backdrop, one of the main peculiarities of the new law is represented by the fact that, beyond providing a detailed description of the missions, role, and conditions for use of nuclear weapons, it includes a declaration of intent to initiate pre-emptive nuclear attacks and it describes in greater detail the scenarios that could trigger such contingency [Klingner 2022]. More specifically, pre-emptive nuclear strikes are possible if an enemy attack, nuclear or non-nuclear, is deemed imminent or if an attack against «strategic objectives» of the country, including its leadership, is identified [KCNA 2022n, 9 September].

Another important feature introduced by the new law regards the delegation of authority with respect to commanding the use of nuclear weapons. This, of course, does not question the fact that Kim Jong Un, in his position as President of the State Affairs Commission, retains «all decisive powers» with regards to the use of nuclear weapons, but elucidates that in case the safety of the leader as well as the «nuclear command and control system» is in danger from hostile forces, «automatic and immediate nuclear strikes» shall be launched [KCNA 2022o, 9 September]. This might indicate

that Kim Jong Un, while retaining the final decisive power, could, in specific circumstances, delegate certain authorities to key officials, so to avoid that an eventual decapitation of the regime could automatically enable the enemies to neutralize North Korean nuclear forces. According to some analysis, the new “decentralized” system – based on the employment of tactical nuclear weapons – heightens the credibility of a «first-use strategy» (threatening to launch nuclear weapons before one’s adversaries to deter aggression, as it is the case of present-day Pakistan) by increasing the chances of successfully recurring to nuclear weapons [Panda 2021]; however, it also risks that giving authority to domestic rivals could result in them using it to challenge the leadership of current leader Kim Jong Un. The update of the nuclear command and control system could also reflect the leader’s growing confidence as a ruler and the fact that he is not concerned with potential internal threats.

In his speech addressed to the Assembly enacting the new law, Kim Jong Un underlined the «impossibility of denuclearization» and «irreversibility of advancement of nuclear forces» [KCNA 2022o, 9 September], a message that clearly conveyed the idea that the regime is not only determined to continue building its nuclear arsenal, but also that Pyongyang will never accept to engage again in any talks premised on its denuclearization. This statement wiped out three decades of dialogue and negotiations on denuclearisation, intensifying the risk of a nuclear confrontation.

As might be expected, North Korea’s nuclear doctrine, inscribed in the new law, combined with the ever-expanding nuclear arsenal, has fostered indignation and extreme preoccupation in the South, reigniting a never dormant political debate on how Seoul should respond. A growing chorus of voices argues that the only way to guarantee South Korea’s security is to develop a homegrown nuclear program [Shin & Jung 2022]; a position that has been recently taken into consideration even by President Yoon Suk-yeol [Chosun Ilbo 2023, 13 January].

### 3. *Inter-Korean relations*

#### 3.1. *North Korean missile launches mark the end of Moon Jae-in’s era of inter-Korean dialogue*

Presidential elections in South Korea represented a key moment also for what concerned inter-Korean relations. After five years characterized by a conciliatory approach under Moon Jae-in – with significant achievements especially during 2018 [Milani 2018, pp. 78-88] – a new government could indicate a new course for relations between North and South Korea. Certainly, Moon’s last months in office could not bring about any new breakthrough between the two Koreas and Pyongyang appeared to be well aware of this moment of transition. In the first weeks of 2022, the North Korean

regime continued performing missile tests, that were resumed in the second half of the previous year; however, the quantity and diversification of the launches foreshadowed a complicated year on the peninsula.

In January alone North Korea performed 6 missile tests for a total of 9 launches, that included hypersonic missiles, short-range missiles launched from a train, and an intermediate ballistic missile, the Hwasong-12, the most powerful since November 2017 [Wright 2022, 17 February]. This series of tests demonstrated the highly diversified military arsenal of the country and also the resolve of the regime to improve its defence capabilities and show them to the rest of the world. This intention was also officially declared by the leadership, after a meeting of the party's Politburo, when it stated that the regime would consider the resumption of all the military activities, including intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and nuclear tests [Zwirko 2022a, 20 January].

After a short hiatus in February – that not surprisingly coincided with the Beijing Winter Olympics – launches resumed by the end of the month, this time pointing directly toward more powerful missiles. On 27 February and 5 March, North Korea tested what Seoul's intelligence described as powerful ballistic missiles, while according to the regime they were aimed at developing the capability to put a satellite into orbit [Smith 2022b, 5 March]. The launches continued in March, with a failed test of the same kind on 16 March, and on 24 March a confirmed launch of an ICBM, with Kim Jong Un himself attending [Shin 2022a, 25 March]. It was the first time since November 2017 that North Korea tested this kind of weapon and soon after the regime had declared the self-imposed moratorium on nuclear and ICBM tests. Symbolically it could thus be considered as the end of the era of rapprochement and dialogue that had begun with that declaration.

The election of Yoon Suk-yeol pointed towards a major restructuring of Seoul's inter-Korean policy, certainly not in the direction of more dialogue and cooperation. The final weeks of Moon's presidency, in April, brought also interesting developments. In particular, the outgoing president sent a goodbye letter to Kim Jong Un and he reciprocated with a letter characterized by a respectful tone that included a mention of the fact that inter-Korean relations could improve through sincere efforts from both sides [Choe 2022b, 22 April]. These promising words, however, were not matched by actions: North Korea continued to launch missiles and restarted demolishing facilities at the tourist site of Mount Kumgang that had been built as an inter-Korean cooperation project during the «Sunshine policy» years [Zwirko 2022b, 11 April]. In this tense but fluid situation, Yoon Suk-yeol was preparing to officially inaugurate his presidency and to start being responsible also of the relations with Pyongyang.

### 3.2. *More missile launches to greet the beginning of Yoon's presidency*

Yoon Suk-yeol's presidency was officially inaugurated on 10 May and North Korea performed missile tests on 4, 7, 12 and 25 May, for a total of 8 missiles, including one launched from a submarine and one alleged ICBM. The new president, who unlike Moon Jae-in came from the conservative party, marked a significant difference with his predecessor, with a return toward the traditional hardline approach to North Korea focused on the idea of denuclearization before cooperation. The reference to the conservative playbook was clear from the very beginning: in his inaugural speech, Yoon refrained from directly attacking Pyongyang, but he referred to the nuclear threat and vaguely proposed an «audacious plan» [담대한 구상] to improve North Korea's economy and the quality of life of its people [Yonhap 2022c, 10 May]. An idea that sounded very similar to other initiatives proposed by his conservative predecessors, like Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak. At the same time, Yoon declared that the «age of appeasing North Korea is over» and put new emphasis on the military response against North Korea's provocations [Foster-Carter 2022a]. When Pyongyang performed the largest missile test in one single day, firing 8 missiles in the East Sea from 4 different locations, on 5 June, South Korea and the U.S. responded the following day firing 8 missiles of their own [Ko 2022, 6 June]. This move marked a clear difference between the new administration and the previous one, that used to condemn the tests but refrained from responding with military actions in order to not increase tension. These numerous tests, together with the declaration of the resumption of all military activities at the beginning of the year, seemed to point towards the direction that the seventh North Korean nuclear test was imminent. Over the course of the summer, and in the following months, the attention was drawn to this possible move; however, despite all the expectations, the nuclear test did not materialize.

Yoon Suk-yeol's ambitious plan was officially presented during his speech for Liberation Day, on 15 August. A few days before, Kim Jong Un, in a speech marking another historical event, the 69<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Panmunjom armistice, made his first direct reference to the new South Korean president. Referring to Yoon by name, Kim attacked Seoul's government actions and warned of military actions as a response to possible future threats from the South [Ji 2022, 15 August]. Yoon's speech regarding his administration «audacious plan» sounded certainly more conciliatory than Kim's declaration: the basic idea was that South Korea was ready to implement a comprehensive plan of economic aid and assistance to the North, in case Pyongyang decided to stop developing nuclear weapons and «embarks on a genuine and substantive process for denuclearization»; then the President listed a series of practical interventions to support North Korea's economy [Yonhap 2022f, 15 August]. While the plan was pointing in the positive direction of cooperation, it did not represent something new from what other conservative presidents had proposed in the past and, more importantly, it

had no chances to be positively accepted by Pyongyang [Stent 2022, 24 August]. The plan went against two of the core tenets of contemporary North Korean ideology, which also underpin the stability and legitimacy of the regime: the fact that the status of nuclear state is non-negotiable and the emphasis on self-reliance; giving up the nuclear program in exchange for economic assistance from South Korea would have been a betrayal of both these principles. Unsurprisingly, the response of the regime, which came through a statement of Kim Yo Jong, clearly rejected the initiative with also disparaging terms [Lee 2022, 19 August].

The last part of the year was characterized by a new resurgence of tension between the two Koreas. Yoon's more muscular position took the form of a resumption of joint military exercises between South Korea and the United States, with the launch of the massive *Ulchi Freedom Shield* exercises at the end of August, after a four-year hiatus [Yonhap 2022g, 22 August]. North Korea's response followed its traditional principle of meeting «pressure with more pressure» and restarted its missile tests in September, with a pace never seen before. In just one week, from 25 September to 1<sup>st</sup> October, Pyongyang launched 7 short-range ballistic missiles and on 4 October it launched and intermediate ballistic missile that flew over Japan, for the first time since 2017 [Mackenzie & Mao 2022, 6 October]. In addition to the strong condemnation of Seoul, Tokyo and Washington, South Korea retaliated with the launch of 4 missiles in a joint exercise with the United States, confirming the new approach of Yoon's government of responding to this provocation with military actions.

Over the following weeks missile tests and military actions continued. In addition to the launches, North Korea also fired rockets and artillery shells in areas located very close to the inter-Korean border and one of its ships crossed the Northern Limit Line (NLL) – the de facto maritime border between the two Korea. South Korea responded flying some of its F-35A fighters close to the border and firing warning shots to the intruder ship [Kwon 2022b, 20 October]. The most tense situation was reached in early November: in just one day, 2 November, North Korea launched 23 missiles and rockets of different kind from different locations, both in the East and West Sea, one of which flew over the NLL and landed close to the island of Ulleung, South Korea's territory; in addition, the same week Pyongyang launched 9 ballistic missiles in 4 different events. According to the regime, the launches were defensive measures taken against the massive aerial joint exercises *Vigilant Storm*, between South Korea and the U.S. [Foster-Carter 2022b, p. 103]. This trend of provocation, military exercises and retaliations continued in the following weeks, with more launches, that included a successful test of an ICBM on 18 November the most powerful ever tested by North Korea, in November and December. On 26 December, the level of tension reached a new peak when 5 North Korean drones flew over South Korea for several hours and then came back untouched, with Seoul's aerial



defences unable to shoot them down [Kim 2022, 26 December]. This last provocation certainly represented a major step, but still perfectly in line with the trend of escalating tension consolidated over the previous months by the reckless actions of Pyongyang, but also by the posture of Yoon's administration and its emphasis on military response. A trend that will most likely continue also in the following months.

#### 4. *International relations*

##### 4.1. *Reinforcing old alliances: North Korea's relations with China and Russia*

North Korea's foreign relations mostly focused on strengthening relations with its two most important partners during 2022. China certainly represents the key country. Kim Jong Un, in the attempt to improve relations between the two countries, while plagued by the outbreak of the pandemic, did not miss the opportunity to convey congratulatory messages to Xi Jinping for the hosting of Winter Olympics in Beijing. Although Pyongyang did not send athletes to Beijing – after the International Olympic Committee suspended the North from the games in response to its refusal to participate to the Summer Olympics in Tokyo in July – Kim stated that China had «left an indelible trace in the history of the Olympics with their indefatigable efforts» despite «an unprecedentedly severe health crisis and the hostile forces' manoeuvres» [KCNA 2022a, 22 February], possibly referring to U.S.-led diplomatic boycotts of the Winter Games over China's poor human rights record.

In recent years, despite China's economic and political influence on North Korea largely overshadowed that of Russia, Moscow and Pyongyang have boosted ties, as it was pledged in the meeting that took place between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin in Vladivostok, in April 2019, shortly after denuclearization talks between Washington and Pyongyang collapsed in Hanoi. It was a symbolically relevant summit for Kim, who had the possibility to show how, even at a difficult juncture, his country was not internationally isolated. The relationship was revamped by the support offered by Pyongyang, months before Moscow launched its «special military operation» in Ukraine, when it accused the U.S. hegemonic attitude and denounced NATO for pursuing eastward expansion that posed a grave threat to Russia's security [MFA DPRK 2022a, 1 February]. The Ukrainian crisis has ushered in a new geopolitical scenario in which the Kremlin and the DPRK may become increasingly intimate, perhaps to the point of resuscitating the alliance that had existed during the Cold War [Lukin 2022, 27 September].

After having continued to blame the U.S. for being the real cause of the war in Ukraine and the West for applying double standards, emphasising the earlier «devastation of Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya» [MFA

DPRK 2022b, 28 February], on 2 March, soon after the outbreak of the conflict, North Korea unequivocally aligned with Belarus, Eritrea, and Syria in voting against the UN resolution condemning Russia for the invasion of Ukraine. After all, this merely replicated what Pyongyang had done – along with other 10 countries – in 2014, when it voted against UN resolution 68/262 that condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea, by attributing the crisis to the interference of the United States and other Western countries [UN 2014, 27 March].

The sense of a shared vision was further exhibited by the meeting between Kim Jong Gyu, Director General of European Affairs Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of DPRK, and Alexander Matsegora, Ambassador of the Russian Federation to the DPRK; even though the war in Ukraine was not explicitly mentioned, the two talked about the necessity to strengthen strategic cooperation on «regional and international situations which are raised as urgent and concern both sides» [MFA DPRK 2022c, 4 March]. Shortly after, on 22 March, this meeting was reciprocated, as Russia's deputy foreign minister Igor Morgulov met with the North Korean ambassador to Russia, Sin Hong Chul to discuss the «development of bilateral relations in the context of changes taking place in the international arena» [Jewell 2022, 23 March]. Although at lower levels, these meetings were particularly noteworthy, since the Russian embassy was one of the few to be kept open in North Korea following Pyongyang's decision to close its borders in response to the pandemic, while, on the other side, North Korean diplomats symbolically multiplied contacts with Russian counterparts at a time when many foreign countries were reducing their presence in Russia.

The renewed alignment among China, Russia and North Korea became crystal-clear when, on 26 May, the U.S.-led UNSC resolution – in response to Pyongyang's repeated ballistic missile launches – that would have imposed additional restrictions on the amount of petroleum North Korea is allowed to import, was frustrated by the unprecedented veto opposed by China and Russia [Nichols 2022a, 26 May]. Russia's UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia highlighted the «ineffectiveness and inhumanity» of further sanctions, while China's UN Ambassador Zhang Jun not only declared that the imposition of additional sanctions against North Korea would have a detrimental effect and possibly escalate tensions, but also implied that the situation on the peninsula had developed in that way «thanks primarily to the flip flop U.S. policies» [UN 2022, 26 May]. The unprecedented move from two permanent members of the UNSC, who had condemned North Korea's activities in the past, signals a renewed effort to counter the global influence of the U.S. and its allies and may result in a more aggressive behaviour of North Korea that is protected by the two great powers from external pressure.

Pyongyang's most significant gesture of support for Moscow took place on 13 July, when North Korea became the third country, after Russia and Syria, to recognize the independence of the Donetsk People's Republic

(DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). The information was officially conveyed to the two breakaway regions by Choe Son Hui, North Korea foreign minister, who also expressed Pyongyang's aspiration to develop state-to-state relations [MFA DPRK 2022d, 14 July]. Soon after, Donetsk embassy in Moscow also announced the news in a Telegram post accompanied by a photo of North Korean ambassador to Russia giving in the hands of the Donetsk's representative, Olga Makeeva, a document stating Pyongyang's recognition of the separatist region [*European Pravda* 2022, 13 July]. In addition, Matsegora announced that North Korea could send workers – who were identified as being «highly qualified» and «capable of working in the most difficult conditions» – to Donetsk and Luhansk to rebuild the war-shattered infrastructures [McCurry 2022a, 19 July]; this would be a clear break from Russia's position in December 2017, when Moscow backed the UNSC sanctions requiring member states to expel all North Korean workers from their territories within two years.

The decision taken by the North Korean government not only spurred global indignation, given that according to the rest of the international community the two breakaway regions still represented an integral part of Ukraine, but also prompted Kyiv to instantly cut diplomatic ties with Pyongyang, which were established in 1992, in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union; this decision, however, was not particularly problematic for Pyongyang, given the minimal level of contacts with Kyiv. In the meantime, Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin exchanged letters wishing the two countries form closer ties to frustrate threats and provocations from «hostile military forces» [Smith 2022c, 15 August].

After having enjoyed China's support at the UNSC, Pyongyang showed its gratitude by harshly protesting the U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan at the beginning of August. In reaffirming that Taiwan is «an inseparable part of China» and expressing full support for the «One China» principle, North Korean foreign ministry spokesperson declared they «vehemently denounce» any external force's interference in the issue of Taiwan [KCNA 2022i, 3 August]. Few days later, the Workers' Party sent a «solidarity letter» to the Communist Party of China, denouncing Pelosi's visit to Taiwan as a «shameless provocation» and cataloguing it a «serious infringement» of Beijing's sovereignty [Yi 2022, 10 August]. Pyongyang's rhetoric became even more bellicose after Pelosi travelled to Seoul, and, while in South Korea, decided to visit the border area and discuss with her South Korean counterpart, Kim Jin-pyo, about anti-North Korean deterrence [Lee & Kim 2022, 4 August]. Without any ambiguity, Jo Yong Sam, director general at the North Korean Foreign Ministry's press and information affairs department, accused Pelosi – identified as the «worst destroyer of international peace and stability» – of stirring up the atmosphere of confrontation in the region and to clearly show the Biden administration's hostile policy toward North Korea [KCNA 2022j, 6 August].

In September, U.S. government officials confirmed the suspects reported by *The New York Times* [Barnes 2022, 5 September] asserting that Moscow was seeking to purchase millions of rockets and artillery shells from North Korea [U.S. Department of Defense 2022, 6 September] – an activity which would be a violation of UN resolutions that banned Pyongyang from exporting or importing weapons from other countries – in order to overcome international sanctions that were presumably causing supply shortages. Without any hesitation, Russia's UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia dismissed media reports about his country buying ammunitions from North Korea, labelling the U.S. intelligence findings «another fake thing that's been circulated» [Madhani 2022, 7 September]. On its side, despite affirming that it would be an uncriticizable right of any sovereign state to import and export military equipment, North Korea indignantly denied any arms deal with Russia [KCNA 2022p, 22 September].

At the beginning of October, North Korea also became the only UN member state to recognize the Moscow-backed late-September referendums (condemned by the international community as illegitimate) in Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, stating that Pyongyang respected the will of the majority of the people who «supported the integration into Russia» [KCNA 2022q, 4 October]. On October 5, few hours after North Korea had fired a missile over Japan, the UNSC convened for an emergency meeting; the session, however, ended with no agreement, despite warnings from the U.S. and its allies that the Council's inability to reach consensus would have undermined the authority of the body. Russia and China, once again, insisted that it was the «irresponsibility» of U.S.-led military exercises that prompted Pyongyang's action [Knickmeyer 2022, 6 October].

On 5 October, the U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, appealed to the UNSC to unanimously condemn North Korea multiple missile launches, including a long-range rocket that flew over Japan. However, as it had happened in May, China and Russia defended Pyongyang, asserting that the launches were to be seen as a response to U.S.-South Korea military drills and that the UNSC needed to play a constructive role instead of relying on pressure [Nichols 2022b, 6 October]. In sum, it appears clear that the UNSC has been paralyzed due to major powers – U.S. on one side and Russia and China on the other – confrontation and North Korea is benefitting from this rivalry.

#### 4.2. *South Korea's foreign policy under the new administration*

The election of Yoon Suk-yeol as the new president of South Korea strongly influenced the country's foreign policy, marking a sharp departure from his predecessor. In April, a diplomatic delegation headed by the foreign minister *in pectore*, Park Jin, was dispatched to Washington to upgrade the relationship to the higher level of a «comprehensive strategic alliance» [Lee 2022, April 6]. The discussion focused on a variety of issues, ranging from

North Korea threatening posture to trade, to the COVID-19 pandemic, without disregarding the war in Ukraine and, most likely, how to deal with China. Meanwhile, at home, Yoon envisioned his country's role as a «global pivotal state», assuming that it was the moment for South Korea to take on more responsibilities, including, for example, providing more developmental aid overseas, as in the case of Ukraine, or addressing global challenges, including supply chain management, climate change and vaccine production [Kim 2022, 14 April]. Implicitly, this was a veiled attack on his predecessor's feebleness in the realm of foreign policy and to his focus on the improvement of relations with Pyongyang. In addition, after a long hesitation, Yoon also announced that he would «positively review» South Korea's joining of QUAD, if invited [Peri 2022, 26 April].

On 10 May, when Yoon Suk-yeol assumed office, it appeared immediately evident that South Korea's foreign policy would undergo major modifications, as it had been pledged during the electoral campaign, when he mentioned the necessity to restore a «comprehensive strategic alliance» with the U.S. and to establish relations with China based on «mutual respect» [Yoon 2022, February 8]. This approach emphasised the need to build a constructive connection with Beijing, but simultaneously clarified the determination to align strategically with the U.S. In addition, to China's disappointment, Yoon detailed the differences with the Moon administration, criticizing the outgoing president's tenure for his alleged weakness, and called for a more hardline approach in foreign policy; for this reason, Yoon not only favoured the existing deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, but also called for additional units to be placed around Seoul [Kwon 2022a, 4 February]. This would mean a clear break from the «3-Noes» – no additional deployment of THAAD batteries; no South Korean participation in a U.S.-led regional anti-missile system; and no trilateral alliance with the U.S. and Japan – announced by Moon Jae-in in late 2017 and seen by China as a prerequisite to maintain positive relations. Nonetheless, Xi Jinping made a congratulatory call to Yoon upon his election [MFA PRC 2022a, 25 March].

On 21 May, only eleven days after taking office, President Yoon held the first meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden in Seoul, ahead of the QUAD summit to be held in Tokyo. During the meeting, the two leaders confirmed their willingness to develop the comprehensive alliance and to boost cooperation extending «from security to economy and technology» [White House 2022a, 21 May], as clearly illustrated in the joint statement. Given the Biden administration's active promotion of the «reshoring» of production to contain China and alleviate supply chain vulnerabilities, the cooperation with South Korea was deemed pivotal. Against this backdrop, Washington was very satisfied when Yoon announced to the American president his willingness to join as a founding member the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), an initiative launched by the Biden administration in October 2021

as a regional instrument encompassing major Indo-Pacific countries for trade facilitation, standards for the digital economy and technology, supply chain resiliency, decarbonization and clean energy, infrastructure, and worker standards. The IPEF was launched on 24 May in Japan and President Yoon, to the displeasure of Beijing, joined virtually. In addition, the Yoon-Biden summit paved the way to the restart of the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) – deferred under Moon Jae-in – and the return to suspended U.S.-South Korea military exercises, seen as increasingly necessary by both administrations given the growing threat represented by North Korea's missile launches. The massive *Ulchi Freedom Shield* joint exercises were held from mid-August to early September.

At the end of June, Yoon Suk-yeol participated in the NATO Summit in Madrid: it was the first time a South Korean president had been invited to the Summit, and it showed that Seoul and other Asian democracies had been driven closer to European democracies due to mutual fears of Russian and Chinese power. On the sidelines of the Summit Yoon took part in a short trilateral meeting – the first of its kind since September 2017 – with Biden and the Japanese Prime Minister Kishida, in which the three leaders agreed to respond to North Korea's nuclear and missile threats through trilateral cooperation [Lee 2022b, 30 June]. Yoon also declared he was «delighted» to meet with the Japanese Prime Minister for the first time [White House 2022b, 29 June]. After all, Yoon had already started courting Tokyo during the electoral campaign, when he had consistently called for the improvement of bilateral relations [Onchi 2021, 23 September], that had sunk to historic lows over the previous four years. After assuming office, Yoon continued to make extremely positive comments about Japan, and his intention to mend ties was reciprocated by Kishida.

At the beginning of August, in an apparent move to not harm his country's relations with China, Yoon decided not to meet with Nancy Pelosi during her visit to South Korea, opting for phone talks instead [McCurry 2022b, 4 August], claiming he was on vacation. Yoon was harshly criticized both at home and abroad and many suspected that, despite his appeals aimed at strengthening his country's alliance with the U.S., this move was meant at not irritating Beijing [Shin 2022b, 4 August]. Few days later, however, the South Korean Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy announced that Seoul had decided to join the «Chip 4», the semiconductor supply chain network which included U.S., Japan, and Taiwan [Kim 2022, 9 August]. Although it was professed that this was not an attempt aimed at isolating China, it remains to be seen to what extent Beijing believes this is genuine. Finally, on 24 August, the two governments commemorated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of bilateral diplomatic ties, with events in the two capital cities; prior to the ceremony, the two foreign ministers attended a virtual event – due to COVID-19 – on the submission of a joint report on the development of Seoul-Beijing relations [Kim 2022, 24 August].

In September, South Korea-U.S. discord on the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), enacted by the Biden administration and aimed at reducing American domestic inflation, started to emerge. One of the main components of the IRA, in fact, are tax credits to support the adoption of electric vehicles made in the U.S., which are considered by Seoul as both a violation of trade rules and, above all, contrary to the deep economic partnership between the two countries, to the point that the legislation was seen by South Koreans as a «betrayal» [Lee & Kim 2022, September 2].

Yoon and Kishida met again in New York in September on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly and in Phnom Penh in November on the sidelines of the ASEAN-East Asia Summit. In both occasions, the two leaders touched on few points of mutual interest: the first was North Korea's missiles and nuclear threat against which they would cooperate bilaterally and in conjunction with the U.S.; the second was a discussion on each other's vision for the Indo-Pacific region, that spurred the possibility of an alignment in pursuit of a free and open Indo-Pacific based on «inclusiveness, resilience, and security» [MOFA Japan 2022, 13 November]; while the third – sensitive – issue concerned wartime forced laborers. Doubtlessly, the last point is also the most problematic: even though the two governments wished to give a definitive solution to this issue by the end of 2022, there were no noteworthy achievements, also due to the fact that Tokyo insisted that the issue had been settled in past bilateral agreements. At the beginning of 2023, the South Korean government unveiled a plan based on a «creative approach» according to which the compensation of Koreans who were forced to work for Japanese firms during World War II could be granted using funding from a domestic foundation rather than funds from the companies involved in forced labour [Chang 2023, 12 January]. Obviously, the victims and civic groups rejected the plan, categorised as «humiliating», asserting that the issue was not about money but about addressing past human rights violation by Japan.

In mid-November, Yoon had a short bilateral summit with the Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Bali, on the sidelines of the G20 Summit. Despite pledges on trust building and common interests, the meeting exhibited marked differences with regards to the approach to North Korea, with Yoon asking for a more assertive response by China to Pyongyang's provocations and Xi avoiding giving a direct answer and suggesting engaging in dialogue with the North.

Towards the end of the year, the Yoon administration released the «Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region» [The Government of the ROK 2022]. The previous administration of Moon Jae-in had maintained a lukewarm attitude towards this policy paradigm, that was strongly sponsored by the United States in the region, with the goal of keeping a balanced position between Washington and Beijing. Unlike his predecessor, Yoon immediately showed interest towards this approach

and for a more active role for South Korea within this paradigm. The government document outlined a broad range of areas for collaboration, encompassing both traditional and non-traditional security issues, including economic security, maritime security, counterterrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, climate change, energy security, cyber security, and new technologies. Its emphasis on future-oriented diplomacy, particularly the importance of «collective» alliances with Indo-Pacific countries to create a durable and resilient regional order, was one of its most significant elements. As a cornerstone of Yoon's approach, the strategy saw the development of South Korea as a «global pivotal state» as its ultimate objective. Yet, Seoul also tried to maintain a more prudent positioning, compared to other regional actors such as Japan, between its two indispensable partners – Washington and Beijing – while aiming at expanding the country's trade, investment, and security relations beyond the two major powers.

As it has been demonstrated, since the inception of his presidential mandate, Yoon Suk-yeol has showed a firm determination in rejecting his predecessor's attempts to balance Seoul's relationship with Beijing and Washington, reaffirming that a strong alliance with the United States would be the foundation for South Korea's foreign relations with Beijing and Pyongyang. Against this backdrop, Yoon has embraced a more active and outward-looking diplomatic posture, by making his country assume a position as a pivotal player in maintaining the international order. This strategy is to be implemented through the strengthening of trilateral relations with U.S. and Japan, the active cooperation in areas such as climate, technology, and global health, and a possible increase in collaboration with regional groupings, such as the QUAD. At the same time, the Yoon administration has renounced to consider China as a «strategic challenge», in the same vein as U.S. and Japan; on the contrary, it has been named «a key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific region» [The Government of the ROK 2022], possibly not to undermine the crucial economic relation between China and South Korea or to lose China's assistance in pressuring North Korea back to the negotiating table. What remains to be seen is whether Yoon will be able to keep some distance from his predecessor's balance between the U.S. and China and at what cost.

## 5. Conclusions

As had been the case in the previous year, also in 2022 the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic has engaged the leaderships of both Koreas. In the South, the spread of the «Omicron» variant surprised the Moon Jae-in government, marking a rapid increase in infections, and jeopardizing the accurate «test, trace, and treat» policy that had been globally lauded as a virtuous «model» to take inspiration from. Luckily, the new variant proved to be less



malicious than the «original» one and Seoul was rapidly able to control it without putting under stress its healthcare system. In the North, the government had to admit – after a long period of continuous denial – that the virus had permeated national borders and that meant the country had to be tightly sealed, with all the difficulties that it would imply, above all from the economic point of view, given that relations with traditional allies, China and Russia, were immediately shut down. In addition, to demonstrate its flawless conduct and obtain legitimation, the regime tried to convince the population that South Korea was to blame for the spread of the pandemic.

Despite the pandemic, South Korea elected its 13<sup>th</sup> president, after a very heated campaign. The success of the conservative candidate, Yoon Suk-yeol, condemned progressives to the opposition, even though the narrow margin between the two candidates reflected the deep division and polarization existent in the nation's society. One of the factors that granted Yoon the final victory was his firm intention to correct the various supposed mistakes of the previous administration, widely criticized for his sputtering economic policies, the adoption of a dangerous balance between the United States and China, and its North Korea policy, which was often seen as «appeasement». Despite the prompt announcement of his administration's plans for major reforms in labour, pension and education, as well as in the healthcare sector, already in the first months of his mandate, Yoon's approval rating dropped below the 30%, amid criticism over controversial personnel appointments, internal feuding within the conservative party and concerns over his lack of experience. This, to a certain extent, has also undermined his foreign policy approach, which revolved around the necessity to strengthen the alliance with the United States – although constantly trying not to anger China – improve relations with Tokyo and bolster Seoul's role on the global stage, while adopting a more rigid stance towards Pyongyang. Even though Yoon marked few symbolic successes, such as being the first Korean president to attend the NATO summit, it remains to be seen whether he has carefully considered the dire situation South Korea is in or he is just following a course of action in foreign policy that is completely opposed to that of his predecessor.

The pandemic did not weaken Pyongyang's aggressiveness, given that North Korea fired more missiles in 2022 than in any other year on record. On top of that, North Korea has issued a new nuclear law in September that not only made clear that the regime would never give up nuclear weapons, but also implies that nuclear deterrence may be used pre-emptively. The assertive posture adopted by the North Korean regime may have also been a consequence of the unprecedented shielding offered by Beijing and Moscow, who have prevented the UNSC to adopt further sanctions on Pyongyang, making it gain confidence and feel secure, beyond benefitting from the economic assistance from the two allies. In particular, the relationship with Russia seems to have recently regained strength, also given

Pyongyang's recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk's independence and the supposed offer for both workers and weapons to Moscow. Although the triangulation among Russia, China, and North Korea is developing primarily due to the difficulties and conflicts experienced by all the three states in the international system, it remains to be seen how this relationship can develop in the future.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahn, Hong-wuk, 2013, '박 대통령 «킬 체인·한국형 MD 조기 확보»' (President Park, «Early Establishment of Kill Chain and Korea Missile Defense System»), *The Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 1 October (<https://www.khan.co.kr/politics/defense-diplomacy/article/201310012246415>).
- Alexandre, Chelsie, 2022, 'South Korea's Former NSA Arrested Over Handling of Border Killing', *The Diplomat*, 23 December.
- Barnes, Julian E., 2022, 'Russia is Buying North Korean Artillery, According to U.S. Intelligence', *The New York Times*, 5 September.
- Betts, Bryan, 2022, 'Gavi 'understands' North Korea administering COVID-19 vaccines from China', *NK News*, 4 June.
- Bremer, Ifang, 2022a, 'Ex-security chief arrested over North Korea's 2020 killing of ROK citizen', *NK News*, 5 December.
- Bremer, Ifang, 2022b, 'North Korea-China trade dips nearly 20% in November after reaching pandemic high', *NK News*, 20 December.
- Brown, William, 2022, 'North Korea's Imports From China Jumped in April, Just Before the «Fever» Hit', *38North*, 24 May.
- Cha, Sangmi, 2022, 'South Korean President's Support Rate Hits Highest Since July', *Bloomberg*, 16 December.
- Chang, Dong-woo, 2023, 'Gov't mulls compensating forced labor victims via public foundation despite victims' opposition', *Yonhap News Agency*, 12 January.
- Choe, Sang-Hun, 2022a, 'South Korea, a Virus Success Story, Now Finds Its Model Unsustainable', *The New York Times*, 17 February.
- Choe, Sang-Hun, 2022b, 'Departing South Korean Leader Exchanges Farewell Letters With Kim Jong-un', *The New York Times*, 22 April.
- Choe, Sang-Hun, 2022c, 'South Korea's New President Calls for Criminal Investigation of Past Government', *The New York Times*, 22 July.
- Choe, Sang-Hun, 2022d, 'Record-Setting Rainfall Inundates Seoul, Killing at Least 9', *The New York Times*, 8 August.
- Choi, Soo-hyang, 2022a, 'South Korea to lift most COVID curbs next week as Omicron wanes', *Reuters*, 15 April.
- Choi, Soo-hyang, 2022b, 'Scandals plague S.Korean president Yoon's nominees despite vow to clean up politics', *Reuters*, 6 July.
- [Chosun Ilbo 2023] '[사설] 한국 대통령의 사상 첫 '자체 핵 보유' 언급이 갖는 의미' ([Editorial] The meaning of the Korean president's first mention of 'own nuclear weapons'), 13 January 2023 (<https://www.chosun.com/opinion/editorial/2023/01/13/6CORQ7T4NJJDYHP72MQQGNNMJD4/>).

- Davies, Christian, 2022, 'South Korea's raucous politics: presidential election defined by mudslinging and scandal', *Financial Times*, 3 March.
- [DPRK Today 2020] '«위대한 우리 인민 만세!»' (Long live our great people!), 16 October 2020 (<https://dprktoday.com/news/48443>).
- Draudt, Darcy, 2022, 'The South Korean Election's Gender Conflict and the Future of Women Voters', *Asia Unbound*, Council of Foreign Relations, 8 February.
- European Pravda*, 2022, 'North Korea Recognizes Independence of Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics - Russian News Agencies', 13 July.
- Foster-Carter, A., 2022a, 'North Korea-South Korea Relations: An Inauspicious Start', *Comparative Connections*, 24(2): 111-128
- Foster-Carter, A., 2022b, 'Drones in a Darkening Sky, tactical nuke talk: Pyongyang's provocations escalate', *Comparative Connections*, 24(3): 101-114.
- Global Times*, 2022, 17 January, 'China, North Korea resume rail freight, to facilitate normal trade'.
- Jang, Na-rye, 2022, 'Ahn Cheol-soo calls for campaign merger with Yoon, heads butt over method', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 14 February.
- Jang, Seulkee, 2022, '국제사회 코로나 백신 지원 지속 거부하는 북한의 속내는?' (What's behind North Korea's continued refusal to accept COVID-19 vaccines?), *DailyNK*, 3 May.
- Jewell, Ethan, 2022, 'North Korean, Russian officials talk ties amid «changes» in world order: Moscow', *NK News*, 23 March.
- Joo, Kyung-don, 2022, 'National Assembly confirms PM nominee Han', *Yonhap News Agency*, 20 May.
- Kang, Seung-woo, 2022, 'Ahn Cheol-soo to head President-elect's transition team', *The Korea Times*, 13 March.
- [KCNA 2013] '자위적핵보유국의 지위를 더욱 공고히 할데 대한 법 채택' (Law on Consolidating Position of Nuclear Weapons State Adopted), 1 April 2013.
- [KCNA 2017] '대륙간탄도로켓 《화성-15》 형시험발사 성공-조선정부성명' (DPRK Government Statement on Successful Test-fire of New-Type ICBM), 29 November 2017.
- [KCNA 2022a] '김정은총비서 중국주석에게 구두친서-베이징겨울철올림픽 성공' (Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Sends Verbal Message to President Xi Jinping), 22 February 2022.
- [KCNA 2022b] '김정은총비서 조선인민혁명군창건 90돛경축 열병식에서 연설' (Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Speech at Military Parade Held in Celebration of 90th Founding Anniversary of KPRA), 26 April 2022.
- [KCNA 2022c] '조선로동당 제8기 제8차 정치국회의-김정은총비서 참석' (8th Political Bureau Meeting of 8th Central Committee of WPK Held), 12 May 2022.
- [KCNA 2022d] '김정은총비서 국가비상방역사령부 방문' (Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Visits State Emergency Epidemic Prevention Headquarters), 13 May 2022.
- [KCNA 2022e] '조선로동당 중앙위원회 정치국 협의회-김정은총비서 지도' (Consultative Meeting of Political Bureau of Central Committee, WPK Held), 14 May 2022.
- [KCNA 2022f] '39만 2,920여명의 유열자 새로 발생,8명 사망' (Spread of Epidemic and Result of Treatment Informed), 16 May 2022.
- [KCNA 2022g] '악성비루스의 류입경로 강원도 금강군 이포리-국가비상방역사령부' (Route of COVID-19 Inroads Verified in DPRK), 1 July 2022.
- [KCNA 2022h] '방역형세를 안정적으로 통제관리,공고화된 방역보루축성에 총력 집중' (Anti-epidemic Situation Controlled and Efforts Focused on Building Up Strong Anti-epidemic Bulwark in DPRK), 3 August 2022.

- [KCNA 2022i] ‘조선민주주의인민공화국 외무성 대변인 중국의 통일위업수행을 저해하려는 미국의 기도는 좌절을 면치 못할것이라고 강조’ (Spokesperson for DPRK Foreign Ministry on Chinese Government’s Righteous Stand), 3 August.
- [KCNA 2022j] ‘조선민주주의인민공화국 외무성 보도국장 담화 발표’ (Statement of Director General of Department of Press and Information of DPRK Foreign Ministry), 6 August.
- [KCNA 2022k] ‘전국비상방역총화회의-김정은총비서 지도’ (Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Meets Officials and Scientists in Anti-epidemic and Public Health Sector), 11 August 2022.
- [KCNA 2022l] ‘리충길부장 전국비상방역총화회의에서 토론’ (Speech of Commander of State Emergency Anti-epidemic Headquarters), 11 August 2022.
- [KCNA 2022m] ‘김여정부부장 전국비상방역총화회의에서 토론’ (Vice Department Director of WPK Central Committee Makes Speech at Anti-Epidemic Work Reviewing Meeting), 11 August 2022.
- [KCNA 2022n] ‘김정은총비서 최고인민회의 제14기 제7차회의에서 시정연설’ (Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at Seventh Session of the 14th SPA of DPRK), 9 September 2022.
- [KCNA 2022o] ‘조선민주주의인민공화국 핵무력정책에 대한 법령 발표’ (Law on DPRK’s Policy on Nuclear Forces Promulgated), 9 September 2022.
- [KCNA 2022p] ‘조선민주주의인민공화국 국방성 장비총국 부총국장 담화 발표’ (Vice Director General of General Bureau of Equipment of Ministry of National Defence of DPRK Issues Press Statement), 22 September.
- [KCNA 2022q] ‘조선민주주의인민공화국 외무성 조철수 국제기구국장 담화’ (Press Statement of DPRK Foreign Ministry Official), 4 October.
- Kim, Arin, 2022a, ‘How South Korea went from «test, trace, treat» to «let it spread»’, *The Korea Herald*, 4 February.
- Kim, Arin, 2022b, ‘Yoon bashed for working from home as downpour traps him overnight’, *The Korea Herald*, 9 August.
- Kim, Byungwook & Heekyong Yang, 2022, ‘South Korea truckers return to work after strike deal; shares rally’, *Reuters*, 15 June.
- Kim, Deok-Hyun, 2022, ‘(Election 2022) Key election promises and policy views of two leading presidential candidates’, *Yonhap News Agency*, 6 March.
- Kim, Eun-jung, 2022, ‘S. Korea, China mark 30th anniversary of diplomatic ties with joint ceremonies’, *Yonhap News Agency*, 24 August.
- Kim, Han-joo, 2022, ‘Prosecution raids DP headquarters over illegal political funds probe’, *Yonhap News Agency*, 24 October.
- Kim, Hyung-jin, 2022, ‘S. Korea launches jets, fires shots after North flies drones’, *AP News*, 26 December.
- Kim, Jaewon, 2022, ‘Third candidate holds key to tight South Korean presidential race’, *Nikkei Asia*, 11 February.
- Kim, Mi-na, 2022, ‘Ahn Cheol-soo pulls out of presidential race, endorses Yoon Suk-yeol’, *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 3 March.
- Kim, Mi-na & Hyuk-chul Kwon, 2022, ‘Yoon says preemptive strike is only answer to N. Korea’s hypersonic missiles’, *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 12 January.
- Kim, Min Joo, 2022, ‘Interview with South Korea’s next president, Yoon Suk-yeol’, *The Washington Post*, 14 April.
- Kim, Sarah, 2022a, ‘Yoon pulls campaign back from the brink’, *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 9 January.
- Kim, Sarah, 2022b, ‘Yoon says Ahn rejected opposition merger deal’, *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 27 February.

- Kim, Sarah, 2022c, 'Close confidant of DP chief arrested over illegal political funds', *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 23 October.
- Kim, Sarah, 2022d, 'Top officials give apologies for tragedy in Itaewon', *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 1 November.
- Kim, Yon-se, 2022, 'Cabinet approves Yoon's 1st bill on W59tr-extra budget', *The Korea Herald*, 12 May.
- Kim, Young-bae, 2022, 'Chip 4 is about more than Korea - it's about breaking up Taiwan's monopoly', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 9 August.
- Klingner, Bruce, 2022, 'The Troubling New Changes to North Korea's Nuclear Doctrine', *The Heritage Foundation*, 17 October.
- Knickmeyer, Ellen, 2022, 'UN Security Council splits, again, over North Korea missiles', *AP News*, 6 October.
- Ko, Jun-tae, 2022, 'South Korea and US fire 8 missiles as response to North Korea's provocations', *The Korea Herald*, 6 June.
- Kobara, Junnosuke, 2022, 'North Korea's triple economic woes stoke fears of 'silent' famine', *Nikkei Asia*, 7 August.
- Kwon, Hyuk-chul, 2022a, 'Yoon's call for additional THAAD to protect Seoul stirs controversy over practicality', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 4 February.
- Kwon, Hyuk-chul, 2022b, 'Two Koreas locked in cycle of eye-for-eye shows of force, reprisals', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 20 October.
- Kyodo News*, 2022, 26 September, 'China-North Korea freight train operation resumes after 5-month hiatus'.
- Lee, Bon-young, 2022, 'S. Korean president-elect's envoy says it reached consensus with US on upgrading alliance', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 6 April.
- Lee, Chae Un, 2022, '코로나 봉쇄 속 비사회주의의 단속 강화...노크 없이 집 들이쳐 검열' (N. Korea orders Unified Command 82 to intensify crackdowns on anti-socialist behavior), *DailyNK*, 30 May.
- Lee Haye-ah, 2022a, 'Ahn drops proposal to merge campaigns, vows to finish race on his own', *Yonhap News Agency*, 20 February.
- Lee, Haye-ah, 2022b, 'Yoon stresses importance of S. Korea-U.S.-Japan cooperation amid N.K. threats', *Yonhap News Agency*, 30 June.
- Lee, Haye-ah & Kyung-don Joo, 2022, 'Early voting for presidential election ends with record 36.93 pct turnout', *Yonhap News Agency*, 5 March.
- Lee, Jae-myung, 2022, 'A Practical Vision for South Korea: How Seoul Can Lead in Asia and Spur Growth at Home', *Foreign Affairs*, 23 February.
- Lee, Jeong-Ho & Heejin Kim, 2022, 'South Korea Sees «Betrayal» in Biden's Electric Vehicle Push', *Bloomberg*, 2 September.
- Lee Jung-Youn, 2022, 'NK leader's sister slams Yoon's «audacious initiative» road map', *The Korea Herald*, 19 August.
- Lee, Michael, 2022, 'Lee Jae-myung wins an assembly seat, immunity too', *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 2 June.
- Lee, Michelle Ye Hee & Min Joo Kim, 'South Korea admits police crowd control was «inadequate» before crush' call response before Seoul crowd crush', *The Washington Post*, 1 November.
- Lee, Minji & Na-young Kim, 2022, 'Kim, Pelosi agree to support efforts for denuclearization of N. Korea', *Yonhap News Agency*, 4 August.
- Lee, Sung-Eun, 2022, 'Indictment of DP leader Lee Jae-myung roils political waters', *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 12 September.
- Lukin, Artyom, 2022, 'Russia and North Korea: Moving Toward Alliance 2.0?', *38North*, 27 September.

- Mackenzie, Jean & Frances Mao, 2022, 'North Korea carries out sixth missile launch in two weeks', *BBC News*, 6 October.
- Madhani, Amer, 2022, 'US: Russia to buy rockets, artillery shells from North Korea', *AP News*, 7 September.
- McCurry, Justin, 2022a, 'North Korean labour could be sent to rebuild Donbas, Russian ambassador says', *The Guardian*, 19 July.
- McCurry, Justin, 2022b, 'South Korean president accused of avoiding Nancy Pelosi in bid to placate China', *The Guardian*, 4 August.
- [MFA DPRK 2022a] '숨길수 없는 평화파괴자의 추악한 정체' (Foul Nature of Disturber of Peace Cannot Be Hidden), 1 February 2022 (<http://www.mfa.gov.kp/view/article/14131>).
- [MFA DPRK 2022b] '조선민주주의인민공화국 외무성 대변인대답' (Answer of Spokesperson for Ministry of Foreign Affairs of DPRK), 28 February 2022 (<http://www.mfa.gov.kp/view/article/14457>).
- [MFA DPRK 2022c] '외무성 유럽1국 국장이 로씨야러방 특명전권대사를 만났다' (Director-General of the DPRK Foreign Ministry Meets Russian Ambassador), 4 March 2022 (<http://mfa.gov.kp/view/article/14477>).
- [MFA DPRK 2022d] '조선민주주의인민공화국이 도네츠크인민공화국과 루간스크인민공화국을 공식인정' (DPRK Officially Recognizes Donetsk and Lugansk), 14 July 2022 (<http://www.mfa.gov.kp/view/article/15441>).
- [MFA PRC 2022a] 'President Xi Jinping Speaks with ROK President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol on the Phone', 25 March 2022 ([https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/wshd\\_665389/202203/t20220325\\_10655756.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/202203/t20220325_10655756.html)).
- [MFA PRC 2022b] 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on April 29, 2022', 29 April 2022 ([https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/202204/t20220429\\_10680765.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202204/t20220429_10680765.html)).
- Milani, Marco, 2018, 'Korean peninsula 2018: The calm after the storm', *Asia Maior*, XXIX: 69-100.
- Milani, Marco, 2020, 'Korean peninsula 2020: Overcoming the challenges of COVID-19', *Asia Maior*, XXXI: 71-101.
- Milani, Marco, 2021, 'Korean peninsula 2021: Managing the crisis and adapting to the new situation', *Asia Maior*, XXXII: 95-124.
- Milani, Marco & Antonio Fiori, 2019, 'The impact of political alternation on South Korea's foreign policy', in Marco Milani, Antonio Fiori & Matteo Dian (eds.), *The Korean Paradox: Domestic political divide and foreign policy in South Korea*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 30-53.
- [MOFA Japan 2022] 'Japan-ROK Summit Meeting', 13 November 2022 ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/na/kr/page1e\\_000531.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page1e_000531.html)).
- Nichols, Michelle, 2022a, 'China, Russia veto U.S. push for more U.N. sanctions on North Korea', *Reuters*, 26 May.
- Nichols, Michelle, 2022b, 'U.S. accuses China, Russia of enabling North Korea's Kim Jong Un', *Reuters*, 6 October.
- Onchi, Yosuke, 2021, 'South Korean presidential hopeful looks to improve ties with Japan', *Nikkei Asia*, 23 September.
- Panda, A., 2021, 'A Call to Arms: Kim Jong Un and the Tactical Bomb', *The Washington Quarterly*, 44(3): 7-24.
- Park, Boram, 2022a, 'Ex-defense minister released after arrest in fisheries official death case', *Yonhap News Agency*, 8 November.
- Park, Boram, 2022b, 'Striking cargo truckers vote to end weeklong walkout', *Yonhap News Agency*, 9 December.

- Peri, Dinakar, 2022, 'South Korea to examine joining Quad grouping', *The Hindu*, 26 April.
- Rashid, Raphael, 2022, '«How could this happen?»: Seoul in disbelief after fatal Halloween crush', *The Guardian*, 30 October.
- Reuters, 2022, June 1, 'Covid in North Korea is likely «getting worse, not better»: WHO'.
- Shim, Woo-hyun, 2022, 'COVID curfew extended to 10 p.m. from Saturday', *The Korea Herald*, 18 February.
- Shim, Wu-sam, 2022, 'Former presidential hopeful Lee Jae-myung wins control of Democratic Party of Korea', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 29 August.
- Shin, Hyonhee, 2022, 'S.Korean voters hold noses as rivals land low blows in «unlikeable» election', *Reuters*, 3 February.
- Shin, Hyonhee & Josh Smith, 2022, 'North Korea declares victory over COVID, suggests leader Kim had it', *Reuters*, 11 August.
- Shin, Ji-hye, 2022, 'Moon, Yoon to hold first meeting. Are they ready to cooperate?', *The Korea Herald*, 27 March.
- Shin, Mitch, 2022a, 'North Korea Confirms Test of Its New Hwasong-17 ICBM', *The Diplomat*, 25 March.
- Shin, Mitch, 2022b, 'South Koreans Question President Yoon's Decision to Skip Meeting with Pelosi', *The Diplomat*, 4 August.
- Shin, Munkyoung & Seyoon Jung, 2022, 'Country Report: South Korea (October 2022)', *The Asan Forum*, 1 November.
- Smith, Josh, 2022a, 'S.Korea extends social distancing rules as Omicron cases spike', *Reuters*, 4 February.
- Smith, Josh, 2022b, 'North Korea says it conducted second «important» spy satellite test', *Reuters*, 5 March.
- Smith, Josh, 2022c, 'Putin says Russia and North Korea will expand bilateral relations, KCNA reports', *Reuters*, 15 August.
- Stent, Dylan, 2022, 'Yoon Suk-yeol Maintains the Status Quo on North Korea', *The Diplomat*, 24 August.
- The Government of the Republic of Korea, 2022, 'Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region', December (<https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/viewer/skin/doc.html?fn=20230106093833927.pdf&rs=/viewer/result/202302>).
- U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, 'Pentagon Press Secretary Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder Holds an On-Camera Press Briefing', 6 September (<https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3149972/pentagon-press-secretary-air-force-brig-gen-pat-ryder-holds-an-on-camera-press/>).
- United Nations, 2014, 'General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling upon States Not to Recognize Changes in Status of Crimea Region', GA/11493, 27 March.
- United Nations, 2022, 'Security Council Fails to Adopt Resolution Tightening Sanctions Regime in Democratic People's Republic of Korea, as Two Members Wield Veto', SC/14911, 26 May.
- White House, 2022a, 'United States-Republic of Korea Leaders' Joint Statement', 21 May (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/21/united-states-republic-of-korea-leaders-joint-statement/>).
- White House, 2022b, 'Remarks by President Biden, President Yoon Suk Yeol of the Republic of Korea, and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan Before Trilateral Meeting', 29 June (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/06/29/remarks-by-president-biden-president-yoon->

- suk-yeol-of-the-republic-of-korea-and-prime-minister-kishida-fumio-of-japan-before-trilateral-meeting/).
- Williams, Martyn, & Peter Makowsky, 2022, 'Freight Unloading Operations Begin at Uiju Airfield', *38North*, 21 January.
- Wright, Timothy, 2022, 'North Korea's missile testing reaches monthly apogee', *Military Balance Blog IISS*, 17 February.
- Yi, Wonju, 2022, 'N. Korea sends letter to China slamming Pelosi's Taiwan trip', *Yonhap News Agency*, 10 August.
- Yonhap News Agency*, 2022a, 13 February, 'Ahn officially proposes merging candidacies with main opposition candidate Yoon'.
- Yonhap News Agency*, 2022b, 19 February, 'S.Korea reports more than 100,000 COVID-19 cases for 2nd day amid omicron spread'.
- Yonhap News Agency*, 2022c, 10 May, 'Full text of President Yoon's inaugural address'.
- Yonhap News Agency*, 2022d, 2 July, 'Umbrella union stages massive rallies in Seoul amid scorching heat'.
- Yonhap News Agency*, 2022e, 22 July, 'Deal reached to end Daewoo shipyard strike'.
- Yonhap News Agency*, 2022f, 15 August, 'Full text of Yoon's Liberation Day speech'.
- Yonhap News Agency*, 2022g, 22 August, 'S. Korea, U.S. kick off combined Ulchi Freedom Shield exercise'.
- Yoon, Suk-yeol, 2022, 'South Korea Needs to Step Up: The Country's Next President on His Foreign Policy Vision', *Foreign Affairs*, 8 February.
- Zwirko, Colin, 2022a, 'North Korea hints at 'resuming' long-range weapons tests after new US sanctions', *NK News*, 20 January.
- Zwirko, Colin, 2022b, 'North Korea begins demolishing \$75 million South Korean golf resort: Imagery', *NK News*, 11 April.





JAPAN 2022: PUTIN AND ABE SHOCKS THWART KISHIDA'S ENJOYMENT  
OF THREE GOLDEN YEARS DESPITE MAJOR DEFENCE OVERHAUL

Corey Wallace

and

Giulio Pugliese

Kanagawa University  
wallace@kanagawa-u.ac.jp

University of Oxford  
and European University Institute  
giulio.pugliese@nissan.ox.ac.uk

*Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the assassination of record-setting former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō impacted heavily on Japan's domestic politics and international relations. Diplomatically, Tokyo forcefully aligned with its Western partners against Russia's aggression while making progress in enhancing awareness that the European and Indo-Pacific strategic theatres are politically intertwined. In addition to doubling down on its alignment with the more combative approach to China of the United States, Japan continued to diversify its bilateral and mini-lateral strategic partnerships as Tokyo's Indo-Pacific framing of regional geopolitical dynamics gained even greater global salience. In the future, Japan's strategic outreach should be backed by a more potent Japanese defence force as Prime Minister Kishida Fumio adopted plans to substantially enhance Japan's warfighting capabilities in late-2022 after a year-long review of defence settings. Such plans could also put Tokyo on the path to wield the Self-Defense Forces with greater autonomy in the 2030s and, if required, impose substantial military costs on its adversaries. Domestically, Japanese politics was tragically overshadowed by the assassination of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō. The political fallout had unanticipated negative consequences for Prime Minister Kishida as issues surrounding Mr. Abe's state funeral and ruling party connections to the Unification Church destroyed his administration's popularity in the second half of 2022. By the end of 2022, there was no sign of Kishida's «three golden years» of domestic political peace as scandals involving cabinet ministers and controversy over tax rises to fund Japan's defence build-up confounded Mr. Kishida's ability to exert control over his own party.*

KEYWORDS – Japan-Ukraine relations; minilateralism; 2022 upper house elections; Abe Shinzō's assassination; Japan's security policy.

## 1. Introduction

Japan's international and domestic political trajectories were dramatically altered in 2022 by two major shocks. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine had multifaceted impacts. First, it gave Prime Minister Kishida Fumio the opportunity to ditch Tokyo's balancing act vis-à-vis Moscow as the Japanese government joined its G7 partners in imposing tough sanctions

on Russia. Strengthening Japan's alignment with American global strategy, Tokyo also bridged the gap between «like-minded» players across the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres with its enhanced strategic outreach to Europe. Russia's actions further compounded ongoing Sino-US hegemonic rivalry while preventing any improvement in Sino-Japanese relations. Second, Kishida took advantage of Moscow-induced inflation, specifically energy shortages and import price rises, to reverse Tokyo's post-3/11 «nuclear zero» policy of gradually phasing out Japan's nuclear reactors. Nuclear energy is now back as a legitimate part of Japan's overall energy mix and decarbonization agenda. Finally, Moscow's aggression of Ukraine hastened the most significant overhaul of Japanese defence policy in almost four decades. Backed by the rapidly accelerated procurement of stand-off capabilities [Pugliese and Maslow 2020; Wallace and Pugliese 2021], Tokyo's plans – if implemented – point to enhanced Japanese power projection capabilities as well as a future Self-Defense Force (SDF) capable of both generating and sustaining force during high-end combat. Such plans could put Tokyo on the path to wield the SDF with greater autonomy in the 2030s to thwart the regional military activities of Japan's adversaries and impose substantial military costs. In a similar vein, the government also enhanced its attempts to sharpen its economic security tools throughout 2022, building on changes stretching back to the Abe administration [*Japan News* 2020, 4 January].

Domestically, Japanese politics was tragically overshadowed by another shock – the assassination of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō during the 2022 House of Councillors electoral campaign. Mr. Abe's record-setting tenure as prime minister and his reputation as a globe-trotting statesman meant world leaders also reacted with shock to Mr. Abe's murder. The political fallout had unanticipated negative consequences for Prime Minister Kishida as issues surrounding Mr. Abe's state funeral and ruling party connections to the Unification Church destroyed his administration's popularity in the second half of 2022. With Mr. Abe expected to be a major operator behind the scenes for years – if not decades – internal Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) machinations to fill the political vacuum were also on display. Scandals involving cabinet ministers, and Mr. Kishida's missteps on the issue of raising taxes to fund Japan's defence build-up, resulted in support for the Kishida administration continuing to languish. Entering 2023, Mr. Kishida had only tenuous control over his own party.

## *2. Japan responds to Russia's war: Strong solidarity with Ukraine with an eye on China*

Japan's complex international situation only became more complicated during 2022. Russian president Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine on 24 February elicited fear and all-round condemnation in Tokyo as they did

in many other global capitals. Mr. Kishida himself was unequivocally critical as local media outlets and eminent personalities unified across the Japanese political spectrum to call out Russia's naked aggression [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022a]. Faced with Russia's blatant violation of international law and the increasing prominence of raw power politics in international relations, Japan forcefully aligned itself with its G7 counterparts.

Tokyo therefore ditched its balancing act vis-à-vis Moscow prominent during the Abe administration. On 1 March, Japan's House of Representatives overwhelmingly condemned Russia's action as «unacceptable» and a «serious violation of international law» that «could shake the very foundations of the international order, including that of Asia» [*Asahi Shinbun* 2022a, 2 March]. Putin's geopolitical adventurism compounded already negative perceptions of Russia in Japan stemming from unresolved territorial disputes and historical grievances dating back to World War II [Muminov 2022]. In one poll, 61% of respondents were in favour of strict sanctions on Russia in lockstep with Japan's Western partners.

This is a much higher level of support compared to the 2014 Ukraine crisis and the Russian occupation of Crimea when Tokyo adopted tepid sanctions [*Nikkei Asia* 2022, 28 February]. Since Abe Shinzō's return to power in late 2012, Tokyo's efforts to find a solution over the disputed Southern Kurils/Northern Territories accelerated, albeit to no avail. While based on a heavy dose of wishful thinking [Brown 2017; Richardson 2018], the Abe administration believed that a deal on the territorial dispute would have also allowed Tokyo to reorient its military forces towards its south-western maritime domain to counter China. Such rapprochement between Moscow and Tokyo would have also enabled greater Japanese investment in Siberia to reduce Russian dependence on Chinese capital along the Sino-Russian border.

During the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea, Japan sided with American sanctions policy, but only with limited enthusiasm. The door was left open for talks with Russia and Abe personally engaged Vladimir Putin on the basis of cool-headed calculations premised on the assumption of Moscow's shrinking strategic horizons [Brown 2018; Brown 2019; Dian & Kireeva 2021]. According to a former high-ranking government official, administration officials anticipated that the Russian government would eventually respond positively to Japan's overtures to avoid over-reliance on China [Interview 2019a]. Russia's strengthening of its already rather solid hold over the Southern Kurils—notably through new clauses in Russia's revised constitution in 2020 that banned territorial concessions—should have dashed the hopes of most Japanese policymakers.

Yet, the Kishida government initially remained open to dialogue with Moscow in light of geo-strategic, economic, and energy considerations and out of consideration for Mr. Abe, who was instrumental in bringing Kishida to power. With Putin's actions Tokyo committed to tougher global sanctions

in 2022. It froze all yen-denominated assets held by Russia's Central Bank, banned swapping Russian sovereign debt, and targeted Russian financial institutions and leaders, including President Putin, with restrictions on their activity. Tokyo also joined Western efforts to block certain Russian banks from accessing the SWIFT international payment system and announced a series of strict export controls on semiconductors amongst other technology goods. Finally, Tokyo also drew up a list of Russian military and security entities banned from accessing any Japanese exports [Brown & Sposato 2022, 2 March; Johnson 2022, 1 March; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022b].

Tokyo – and Japan as a whole – were also eager to assist Ukraine. Japanese defence officials surprised European counterparts when they immediately agreed to sending non-lethal military aid to Ukraine. This included helmets, bullet-proof jackets, and controversially (for Japan), civilian drones [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2022, 7 May; Johnson 2022]. By the end of 2022, Tokyo had sent Ukraine and neighbouring countries roughly US\$700 million in humanitarian assistance and US\$600 million in financial assistance [Prime Minister's Office of Japan 2022]. Direct testimonies from Japan's counterparts in Europe suggest it was a welcome change from past practice where Japan was often a diplomatic laggard [Interview 2022a]. This was helped by well-established consultations among G7 member states, and in 2022 the growing political interlinkage between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific strategic theatres continued to grow. This is in no small part an outgrowth of Tokyo's diplomatic efforts (see below), not unlike the governments of Japan, Australia and the United States' geographic re-packaging of the Asia-Pacific region into the new geopolitics of the «Indo-Pacific» (Pelaggi & Termine 2023).

Russian aggression also impacted Japanese civil society. Donations supporting Ukraine surged and volunteers (mostly former SDF officers) enlisted in the «international brigade» set up by Kiev to help fight against the Russian invaders [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2022a, 1 March; *Mainichi Shinbun* 2022, 1 March; *Nippon.com* 2022, 2 March]. The LDP's Director of the National Defense Division of the Policy Research Council voiced support for these volunteers [*Asahi Shinbun* 2022a, 3 March]. The Japanese government also found uncharacteristically strong public support for the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees [*Mainichi Shinbun* 2022, 26 April]. At first, Tokyo allowed roughly 120 Japan-based Ukrainian citizens with temporary visas to extend their stay in Japan and then moved to allow Ukrainian refugees, starting with spouses and relatives of Japanese expatriates as well as «friends and relatives of people living in Japan» [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2022b, 1 March; *Nippon.com (Jiji Press)* 2022, 2 March]. As of writing, Tokyo had accepted and supported about 2230 refugees, despite Japan usually taking fewer than 100 in any given year [Immigration Services Agency 2023; *Kyodo News* 2022, 13

May; *Nippon.com* 2022, 27 December; *NPR* 2022, 29 October].<sup>1</sup> These have gone hand-in-hand with efforts from non-governmental organizations, such as universities, which have opened their doors to Ukrainian students and scholars [Support Measures for Ukrainian Students by Japanese Universities and Japanese Language Institutes 2022].

Japan's alignment with the West in condemning and sanctioning Russia's unprovoked act of aggression has likely put an end to Tokyo's balancing act towards Moscow. For the sake of preserving «the international rules-based order», the Kishida administration also worked hard on the diplomatic front (or, at the very least, proactively communicated its efforts) to convince as many Southeast Asian states and, without success, India to condemn Russia's war of aggression [Itō 2022]. Japanese policymakers likely reasoned that Russia's aggression required a strong economic and normative reaction. An aging and shrinking Japan would be particularly troubled by the emergence of an international order increasingly defined by the logic of «might equals right».

### *3. Putin facilitates a Japanese energy reversal*

Putin's actions also put on hold Japanese public and private sector ambitions to diversify energy sources from the Middle East through the purchase of Russian hydrocarbons. Since the mid-2000s, Japanese businesses have injected capital and technology into joint ventures with Russian companies. Thus, Western sanctions, such as Shell's decision to divest from the Sakhalin-II LNG pipeline project connecting Russia with Japan, were a hard act to follow for Japanese businesses. In fact, most of the Sakhalin project's gas was exported to energy-poor Japan and it was concurrently the fastest way to get hydrocarbon resources into the country; moreover, Mitsui and Mitsubishi retained a 22.5% stake of the project. Walking out was going to result in major sunk costs while allowing China to reap the benefits of cheap Russian gas and Chinese firms were in talks with Russian counterparts to buy up Shell's stakes [Brown and Sposato 2022; *Nikkei Asia* 2022, 23 April]. Following its invasion, Russia retaliated by seizing control of the project, ensuring that international energy companies could not extract financial compensation following their exit; similar dynamics and considerations were at play with the Sakhalin I Oil and Gas Development, where Japanese energy companies kept their stakes in Russian hydrocarbon projects anticipating future post-Putin changes in Russia's attitudes to

1. The overwhelming majority of these refugees were provided with «designated activities» visas. Japan's Ministry of Justice officially labelled them as «evacuees» (避難民) rather than «refugees» (難民), however, implying an expectation that these people will return to their home country if hostilities abate – notwithstanding the desire of one in four refugees to stay.

cooperation [*Asahi Shinbun* 2022b, 2 March; *Bloomberg* 2022, 1 September; Rao 2023, 13 January].

Despite this nascent energy cooperation, Japan's overall bilateral energy dependency on Russia is not as deep as Europe's – energy imports from Russia came to just 6.5% of total imports in 2022 [Kumagai and Gordon 2021, 24 February]. Nevertheless, Japan's increased reliance on fossil fuels (close to 90%) following the triple disaster in Tōhoku in 2011, and the food and energy shortages and price rises precipitated by Russia's actions, resulted in a major turnaround in Japan's energy policy unthinkable even five years ago. Only seven nuclear reactors were in operation in Japan in early 2022 [*Reuters* 2022, 24 February]. By the end of 2022, ten reactors were operating with another seven having passed safety checks. Demonstrating that necessity has been the mother of invention, in the final weeks of 2022 Tokyo committed to a new plan to restart and/or extend the lifespan of as many of its 33 existing operable nuclear reactors as possible. To meet its goal of 22% nuclear generation by 2030 and further its decarbonization goals, the government went as far as publicly announcing the construction of new next generation reactors – all with grudging public acceptance [Arai 2022, 23 December; Kawasaki & Take 2022, 29 November; Reynolds & Umekawa 2022, 22 December; Yamaguchi 2022, 22 December].

The fears elicited in Japan by Russian aggression were, however, not just about Russia throwing around its geopolitical weight. One February survey found 77% of Japanese respondents were concerned about the Ukraine conflict spilling over to Asia and impacting the volatile Taiwan situation. China remains, after all, Japan's most pressing security challenge [Nemoto 2022, 28 February]. As speculation over the relative decline of the United States precipitates questions about its security guarantees, Tokyo was clearly viewing the tragic events in Ukraine with an eye on its military and economic balancing act vis-à-vis China. The concern was that a tepid global response would embolden its influential Asian neighbour to assert itself in the region to an even greater extent. While North Korea launched a record number of ballistic missiles in 2022, China's regional assertiveness and Cross-Strait tensions worried Japanese officials and public opinion the most.

#### *4. Japan-PRC relations at fifty: No time for celebrations*

The year under review marked fifty years since President Richard Nixon's historic visit to China and the landmark Shanghai Communiqué negotiated with Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong. It also marked fifty years since the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations and Tokyo's concomitant severance of diplomatic ties with the Republic of China (Taiwan). Politicians and bureaucrats in Japan were caught by surprise by the announcement of Nixon's July 1971 trip to Beijing. However, it was Tokyo that more proactively

engaged Beijing up until the mid-1990s. Fifty years since the momentous events of 1972, the Japanese government was now working more closely with the United States government on China policy – to confront, deter, and in some cases, contain a China led by its strongest political leader since Mao. Tokyo also worked with the United States to further open up diplomatic space for engagement with democratic Taiwan. Russia's war in Ukraine and potential parallels drawn between Ukraine and Taiwan in Japan and the United States, meant that 2022 was no time for celebrations in Japan-China relations.

Even before Russia's initiation of war with Ukraine, foreign minister Hayashi Yoshimasa highlighted in an interview that «the pace of change of the international situation is incredibly rapid. In short, I strongly feel that we are living in epoch-making times» [Yoshimasa & Tanaka 2022]. He further touched upon how Tokyo needed to be frank with Beijing and uphold a resolute stance with China in line with Prime Minister Kishida's «Three Resolutions» policy: the resolution to uphold universal values; to defend Japan's peace and stability; and to contribute to mankind through a multilateral approach that takes into account international society. The foreign minister recognized deep economic links between China and Japan in both the trade and investment and that some tensions were a given; he also stated clearly that there are issues on which Japan cannot make concessions—notably China's murky military build-up and Beijing's willingness to change the status quo through coercion in the East and South China Seas. Asked about China's White Paper on democratic values, he stated that what needs to be said will be said on Hong Kong, Tibet, Xinjiang but also that Japan would cooperate with China whenever possible [Yoshimasa & Tanaka 2022].<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, following Russia's invasion Japanese policymakers wasted little time explicitly linking Russia's aggression against Ukraine with China's more assertive foreign and security policy. Narratives that linked Xi Jinping's one-man rule with Vladimir Putin's were also fruitful and heightened public attention to the dangers of military contingencies across the Taiwan Strait and military security in general [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2022, 9 September; Kiyofumi and Sadamasa 2022; Sadamasa 2022, 5 August]. Authoritative China and Taiwan Studies specialists lamented the excessive attention to that comparison by underlining that China's policy had *not* changed and was still focused on so-called «peaceful unification» without ruling out force to prevent independence [Matsuda 2022: 1]. At the same time, Chinese decision-makers projected strength and engaged in assertive, if not aggressive, behaviour, with the goal of deterring moves towards *de*

2. There was scant proof throughout 2022 that human rights considerations drove the management of bilateral relations, so much so that the Prime Minister's special advisor on international human rights, Nakatani Gen, hardly made the news. This is despite the dynamics identified in our 2021 *Asia Major* contribution.



*jure* and/or *de facto* independence [Insisa 2021b]. Thus, Cross-Strait relations continued to showcase action-reaction dynamics typical of a security dilemma in 2022 [Insisa 2021a].

Taiwan is also a key area of growing alignment between the United States and Japanese governments. Both nations have increasingly supported efforts to increase Taiwan's international space and to deter Chinese aggression. Tokyo stressed in the 2022 Defense White Paper that: «The stability of the situation surrounding Taiwan is also critical for Japan's security and must be closely monitored with a sense of urgency while cooperating with the international community, based on the recognition that changes to the status quo by coercion are globally shared challenges» [Ministry of Defense of Japan 2023a]. Along with European, American and Canadian parliamentary visits to the island, Japanese lawmakers stepped up their own engagement with Taiwan throughout 2022 [*Bloomberg* 2022, 22 August; Executive Yuan 2022; *Taiwan Today* 2022, 28 July; *Taiwan Today* 2022, 11 October], showcasing support for a democratic Taiwanese state under constant military, diplomatic and hybrid pressure [Congiu and Onnis 2022; Insisa 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022; West & Insisa forthcoming].

At the same time, the visit by the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, compounded the aforementioned action-reaction dynamics. Shortly ahead of Pelosi's visit, Taiwan's «China Times» unionist newspaper published a background story based on testimonies and leaked Taiwanese diplomatic cables on quiet moral suasion efforts back in Washington DC designed to prevent the Speaker's visit. According to the article, the White House and the Pentagon tried to dissuade Pelosi from visiting Taiwan and Taipei even quietly withdrew Pelosi's invitation. The cables were probably leaked by the Taiwanese government to showcase the administration's restraint to local public opinion, and possibly also as a gesture of goodwill to Beijing, which aggressively lobbied and sent veiled threats to policymakers in Washington to deter the visit – to no avail [*China Times* 2022, 2 August].

All sides ultimately had little choice but to react strongly to Pelosi's decision to visit Taiwan, constituting an apt window to worrisome regional dynamics.<sup>3</sup> As Biden and Xi respectively faced the American mid-term elections and the Chinese Communist Party National Congress, neither government could be seen to back down. This was especially true for China, where Taiwan was a non-negotiable issue for local nationalism, a growingly commodified phenomenon that was not necessarily under party-state control [Gries and Wang 2021; Wang and Chew 2021]. Therefore, on August 2, China announced a set of military exercises across the Strait. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) coordinated a massive show of force that mimicked

3. The visit was not comparable to the earlier one by then Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich in 1997, not least because he had visited China beforehand and spent less than three hours in Taiwan.

a blockade while demonstrating coordination among different branches of the military. Live ammunition drills accompanied high-precision ballistic missiles launches within designated splash areas around Taiwan. PRC aircraft also trespassed the median line. In addition, China engaged in grey zone coercion that resembled Beijing's reaction to the 2010 and 2012 crises around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Informal sanctions, such as embargoes of Taiwanese exports to the mainland, went along cyber operations aimed at public infrastructure and even convenience stores.

Thus, the visit by the US government's third highest-ranking political representative shook the fragile cross-Straits status quo and risked opening a major international crisis – despite the ongoing war ravaging Ukraine, a global energy and food crisis, and the spectre of European stagnation. The drills also had cognitive warfare goals since the splash areas encircled Taiwan and suggested that China was willing and able to cut Japan's air and sea supply lines, especially from US and Japanese military bases in Okinawa Prefecture. They were also aimed at impressing on Chinese and international audiences that the Chinese military forces had come a long way since the 1995-1996 missile crises across the Taiwan Strait [Hass 2022, 16 August].

Beijing's heavy-handed response saved face for Xi and may well have established a new normal across the Taiwan Strait. For instance, in August 2022, PLA aircraft trespassed the median line every single day. This is a worrying development because the median line was implicitly acknowledged by both sides until recently as a buffer zone [Insisa 2019].<sup>4</sup> Pelosi's visit ignited China's «reactive aggressiveness», which may have also been calculated, and most regional players' immediate official statements acknowledged the need for restraint, de-escalation and dialogue on all sides; by one count, most regional actors opted for a neutral position [Tiezzi 2022, 13 August].

Yet, the G7 foreign ministers' joint statement on 3 August tilted towards a more combative stance [Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy 2022]. The language criticized China's coercive measures against the island while downplaying the destabilizing impact of Nancy Pelosi's visit. The statement was particularly significant in demonstrating that Europe and the European Union as a whole became more adversarial towards Beijing in 2022. The main reasons have much to do with the crescendo of China crises that garnered attention in Europe: the COVID-19 pandemic, the suppression of human rights in Xinjiang, and the national security law's death-knell for Hong Kong's autonomy. These events raised serious concerns surrounding China's future behaviour, since the Hong Kong case demonstrated Beijing's willingness to renege on pledges made in an international treaty (the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration). Those actions, along with the Chinese government's coercive overreach against

4. In 2019, China started performing incursions, but only in the low single digits.

European sanctions on human rights abuses in Xinjiang, its economic bullying of Lithuania and, in Spring 2022, China's ambiguous positioning on the Ukraine War, directly affected European interests and crystallized Europe's adversarial posture vis-à-vis Beijing – including in Mario Draghi's Italy [Andornino 2023; *Financial Times* 2022, 17 October].

The Japanese government's position on China remained strongly aligned with Washington's throughout 2022. A joint communique with Australia and the United States on 5 August emphasized «concern about [China's] recent actions that gravely affect international peace and stability» [U.S. Department of State 2022a]. Significantly, within the G7 Japan's position was the toughest in openly questioning the applicability (or not!) of the members' «respective One-China policy» [Interview, 2022b; Liff 2022].<sup>5</sup> In connection with this, China's Minister of Foreign Affairs staged a walk-out during Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi's speech at the ASEAN Regional Forum on 5 August. Wang Yi fumed that: «I am afraid the Japanese side should think about whether they have done something very wrong to China» [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2022, 6 August]. The Japanese government also lamented China's launch of ballistic missiles; five out of nine missiles fell into Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), northeast of Taiwan (although it should be noted that the EEZ is disputed with the Republic of China, Taiwan). Analysis and first-hand reporting suggested that the PLA had prepared less provocative options for Xi as the leader of China's Central Military Commission, but China's core leader decided otherwise [Nakazawa 2022, 25 August]. China's show of force was clearly aimed at showcasing its ability to target precision ballistic missiles towards key strategic areas through which American and Japanese frontline forces and logistical support would transit in a hypothetical Taiwan contingency scenario.

Kishida's willingness to meet and greet the US Speaker of the House in Japan following her visit to Taiwan was also significant together with the warm words exchanged that emphasized the need for the United States and Japan to «work closely together to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait». Tokyo's condemnation of Chinese sabre-rattling testified to the substantial strength in Japan-Taiwan relations and, conversely, to the wobbling state of Sino-Japanese relations [Pugliese and Wallace 2022; Zakowski 2023]. In the authors' view, the government of Japan and senior military figures from its military establishment actively capitalized on Rus-

5. See the aforementioned G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement. On Japan's One-China policy, refer to Liff (2022), with the caveat that the otherwise robust analysis mythologizes the Japanese government's stance as uniquely nuanced. In fact, Tokyo took wording contained in the normalization of diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and France, and also Canada and Italy. As our analyses throughout the years have demonstrated, the Japanese government's position on Taiwan has quietly shifted, especially since the mid-2000s.

sia's war in Ukraine and Chinese shadow boxing across the Strait to legitimize a defence overhaul that was a long time in the making, and to raise the security awareness of Japanese public opinion. A high-ranking Taiwanese government officer testified to this logic: «Taiwan is on the same page with Japan concerning its 'propaganda', because both need something to rouse the population from their security slumber»; and specific to the security overhauls of both Taiwan and Japan, «how we invest today, is what we garner tomorrow» (sic) [Interview 2023]. In fact, Japan was quietly investing in its defense links with Taiwan as demonstrated by the decision to post an active duty high-ranking Ministry of Defense official, rather than a retired uniformed officer and actually in addition to it, to Japan's *de facto* embassy in Taipei [Taipei Times, 2022, 5 June; Kotani 2022].

At the end of 2022 when Japan published the new National Security Strategy, it described «China's current external stance, military activities and other activities [as] a matter of serious concern for Japan and the international community» that were «unprecedented» in posing the «greatest strategic challenge in ensuring the peace and security of Japan and the peace and stability of the international community» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022c]. Notwithstanding the Komeito's last-minute intervention to soften the rhetoric [Nikkei Asia 2022, 15 December], Tokyo effectively picked up Washington's language register when recrafting its National Security Strategy. While the National Security Strategy highlighted the North Korean threat and Russia's external and military activities, balancing China across the military, diplomatic, and techno-economic chessboards remained central to Japanese (and American) foreign policy. Tokyo remained committed to tackling China's «incremental revisionism» in the region and beyond [Natalizia & Termine 2021].

##### *5. Japan's mini-lateral diplomacy: Convergence with «Like-Minded» countries on techno-economic competition with China*

The year under review testified to convergence between Europe and Japan. The war in Ukraine led to comparisons between neo-authoritarian Russia's imperialist appetite in Ukraine with China's coercion of democratic Taiwan, if not hasty conclusions concerning an indissoluble Moscow-Beijing axis also in Europe. Indicative of growing polarization surrounding China, the joint statement of the EU-Japan bilateral in May 2022 emphasised «cooperation for a free and open Indo-Pacific» (in line with Japan's preferred language) and lauded Tokyo's support of Ukraine – it also echoed Tokyo's language in condemning unilateral attempts at changing the status quo around the «Senkaku islands» – *not* the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands [European Council 2022]. Similarly, a convergence of interests across the Atlantic and Pacific quadrant was evident in the new NATO Strategic Concept and the

Madrid summit with the participation of Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea as Indo-Pacific partners. The time was ripe for EU-Japan and NATO-Japan cooperation in domains as diverse as maritime security, cyber security, and maritime domain awareness and the exchange of best practices [Ozawa 2022; Shelter-Jones 2022; Zappa 2022]. This embrace was a long time in the making and promised new important developments in the years to come [Glosserman 2022].

Moreover, in 2022 Japan acted in coordination with other regional players – notably Australia, the United States, and France – to promote greater military presence of European actors to buttress the so-called «rules-based international order» and to foster joint military technological innovation, such as the Japan-UK-Italy Global Combat Air Program to develop a sixth-generation fighter.

Under President Yoon Suk-yeol, who began his presidential term in May 2022, Japan and South Korea also significantly improved relations. The timid reset was helped by North Korea's missile breakout, more intense threat perception vis-à-vis China, and domestic political change in both Japan and South Korea – the latter aspect often strongly associated with foreign policy reformulation in both countries [Milani et alia 2019]. Said détente included the resumption of trilateral military exercises with the United States after a five-year hiatus [*Kyodo News* 2022, 26 October]. The two governments also discussed directly connecting their radar infrastructure, something which the United States currently facilitates as an intermediary. Faced with the DPRK's highest ever number of ballistic missile launches, the two countries vowed by year end to share military intelligence in real time [*Yonhap News* 2023, January 1]. The new heads of government in Seoul and Tokyo met with American counterparts on the fringes of the Madrid NATO summit to reprise dialogue at the summit level [Lim 2023, 6 January].

2022 also saw increased space being given to Japan's economic security agenda in its diplomacy as its own domestic economic security legislation came into effect [*Nippon.com* 2022, 1 August]. Based on this agenda, the Japanese government wanted to position itself as a rule-maker with «like-minded partners» on new technology standards, while pushing for «strategic indispensability» in global technology chains and securing itself «strategic autonomy» through access to key technologies and materials. Said strategic autonomy would be achieved through so-called «friend-shoring».

Japan's diplomatic touchstone for overseas cooperation on economic security is of course the United States. Under President Biden, the American government assessment on China has proceeded in line with the Trump administration's rhetoric: «The PRC is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it. Beijing has ambitions to create an enhanced sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become

the world's leading power» [The White House 2022c].<sup>6</sup> Washington made increasing use of the U.S. Department of Commerce's Entity List during the Trump administration to restrict trade with certain persons, corporations, or governments. The number of Chinese individuals and legal entities blacklisted grew from 11 in 2018, to 42 in 2019, and to 108 in 2020 [Department of Commerce]. The Biden administration ripened those fruits and in October 2022 the Department of Commerce embargoed exports of advanced semiconductors, including relevant machinery, know-how and human capital to the whole of China. This was a watershed moment exemplifying the United States' willingness to take advantage of its pervasive centrality in global technological nodes to wield it as a weapon for both security and protectionist goals [Bureau of Industry and Security 2022; Farrell and Newman 2019].

Tokyo and Washington sought to take advantage of mini-lateral cooperation to blunt China's attempt to create «an enhanced sphere of influence». Proactive Japanese diplomacy at the «mini-lateral» level on functional security and economic issues therefore stood out in 2022. In particular, Tokyo bridged the gap between so-called «like-minded» players across the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres. These initiatives fell squarely in line with Washington's pronounced tendency to bypass the dysfunctionality of the multilateral system and cement *ad hoc* coalitions among democratic allies, as exemplified by AUKUS, the Quad, the Partnership for the Blue Pacific, and cooperation among G-7 partners – with the occasional addition of India, Australia and South Korea (also known as Democratic10, D-10). Effective multilateralism had already suffered because of great power competition and the pluralization of global governance of the 2010s, thus mini-lateral cooperation became more widespread in the 2020s [Caffarena and Gabusi 2021; Dian and Menegazzi 2018]. Aside from hastening the balkanization of global governance, long-standing regional multilateral fora such as the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Pacific Islands' Pacific Islands Forum have felt the heat from these competing mini-laterals, if not from China itself. In fact, and notwithstanding rhetorical pledges to ASEAN centrality, traditional functionalist organizations such as ASEAN may be side-lined and lose relevance due to the mushrooming of competing mini-laterals.

The China-Japan-South Korea mini-lateral, however, was in far worse shape. According to a high-ranking Korean diplomat who knows its inner workings well, there was scarce political will and small bureaucratic capacity to allow it to work, notwithstanding its scope was already limited to «small issues that interested all parties» [Interview 2022c]. The last trilateral summit was in December 2019 and even then, frictions emerged within the

6. See, for comparisons, the assessment in the Indo-Pacific Strategic Framework from the Trump administration [US National Security Council 2018], a declassified document that prioritizes the denial of a Chinese sphere of influence.

limited functionalist scope set by the three governments. The Trilateral's technical dialogues on nuclear safety, for instance, reached an impasse as Japan's neighbours reacted angrily against Tokyo's decision to dispose filtered nuclear water into the Pacific. Still, Japan and South Korean officials in 2022 at the bilateral level attempted to mend ties on tricky issues such as the issue of nuclear wastewater [*Xinhua News* 2022, 2 June]. South Korea's response to Japan's security overhaul was also relatively positive (see below).

Further reflective of techno-economic competition was the May 2022 Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) summit held in Tokyo testified to the expanding remit of what was originally a maritime security dialogue. It now includes the provision of international public goods, such as vaccines, quality infrastructure, and maritime domain awareness (see below). It also focused on concerns over illegal fishing, cybersecurity, and critical supply chains. Similarly, on the technological and economic front, the United States continued to constrain China's technological catch-up and prevent it from setting global standards through its industrial champions. At the same time, however, these goals were parallel to, and often ran into tension with, Washington's (especially National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's) stated «foreign policy for the middle class», effectively a paradigmatic shift in economic philosophy to favour economic redistribution, industrial policy and industrial reshoring. It could also be viewed as a means to soothe the brewing tensions between labour and (global) capital, not just to address «predatory» exploitation by China [Small 2022: 191-4]. This paradigmatic shift was already evident under Trump, and the Biden administration did not repeal most of the previous government's tariffs on Chinese goods and services.

Biden's Secretary of Commerce openly stated that the US needed to «slow down China's rate of innovation» in coordination with US allies [*CNBC* 2021, 28 September]. For that very purpose, the US government set up a Trade and Technology Council (TTC) with the European Union. The EU and key member states' over-reliance on Russia's gas worked as a cautionary tale of the dangers of dependence on critical supply chains in East Asia, from semiconductors to key commodities. That, along with the EU's ambition to level the economic playing field vis-à-vis China, infused the US-EU TTC with momentum, although European officials balked at American counterparts' sole emphasis on China, not to mention simmering competitive Transatlantic dynamics [*Internationale Politik Quarterly* 2022, 1 December].

In comparison, the deep net of US-Japan consultative and coordination avenues in the technology, economic and connectivity agendas symbolized much closer affinity and cooperation on substance. The Japan-U.S. Commercial and Industrial Partnership (JUCIP) was a key inter-governmental platform, and a springboard for the newly-inaugurated US-Japan Economic Security 2+2 meetings (between the U.S. Departments of Commerce and State along with Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Indus-

try and Ministry of Foreign Affairs), that provided substance to the US-Japan Competitiveness and Resilience (CoRe) Partnership launched in 2021 [The White House 2022a]. Japan and the EU announced a «Digital Partnership» in 2022 for the purpose of underwriting the EU's data protection GDPR standards and Japan's «data free flow with trust» principles [Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry 2022]. The partnership, however, lacked clear deliverables and in some ways resembled the 2021 EU-Japan «Green Alliance» and the 2019 EU-Japan connectivity partnership; it sounded like politics by sloganeering. Japan was, after all, a champion of infrastructure diplomacy, but its interests didn't easily align with European players and the EU [Murashkin and Varpahovskis 2022], which was also marred by bureaucratic in-fighting. Nevertheless, these forums do establish a set of framework agreements that could facilitate future collaboration—the 2019 connectivity partnership, for example, finally appears to be moving with a modicum of coordinated activities planned for South-East Asia in 2023.

Much more substantial cooperation and coordination was taking place between Japan, the United States and Australia in the South Pacific, to deny a Chinese sphere of influence while propping up Australia's own influence – not all together unlike Japan's efforts in India's neighbourhood [Insisa & Pugliese 2022]. Through old and newly inaugurated investment and infrastructure ententes, the three states' policy banks propped up Australia's financing of Digicel Pacific, «the telecommunications operator in the Pacific, with over 2.5 million subscribers in Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Vanuatu, Samoa, Tonga and Nauru» [The White House 2022d]. Through the Trilateral Infrastructure Partnership, the three players also showed support for important infrastructure in the region, including the East Micronesia Cable and an undersea cable for Palau. The partnership aimed at targeting projects where joint investment would have provided alternatives to Beijing's capital and influence. This was not limited to the Western Pacific, because the three players were showing an expansive remit in South-East Asia, all the way to Vietnam [Japan Bank for International Cooperation 2021]. South-East Asia remained Japan's key destination for connectivity and infrastructure diplomacy, because it was at the crucible of economic, political and strategic considerations [Wallace 2013; Yoshimatsu 2017; Zappa 2021].

Moreover, the United States and Australia agreed to increase the rotation of US military assets through military bases «Down Under» while inviting Japan to participate in «Force Postures Initiatives in Australia» [U.S. Department of State 2022b]. Indeed, following Beijing's announcement in Spring 2022 that it would dock ships and allow security forces to be deployed in the Solomon Islands, the United States and like-minded players inaugurated a Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative with Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom to thwart Chinese activity in the region [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022c]. This was yet another new mini-lateral coalition. China was the *de facto* elephant in the room.



How did Japan's business sector respond to US-China tech and economic rivalry? While public commentaries in Japan expressed concern about the repercussions for Japan's economic competitiveness due to Japan's technology powerhouses' exposure to the Chinese market [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2022, 27 October], first-hand interviews in Tokyo suggested that Japanese policymakers agreed with the logic behind the US government's decision and were effectively onboard, although they wouldn't like Japanese companies to be caught in the crossfire [Interviews 2022d]. Preliminary reports suggest that Japan's manufacturers of advanced electrical machinery suffered from lower Chinese demand due to export controls as well as Chinese indigenization and import substitution [*Nikkei Asia* 2021, 31 August]. Japan External Trade Organization statistics, however, showed that Japanese direct investment in China increased between 2021 and 2022, although recent figures pale in comparison with those dating back only ten years ago [Japan External Trade Organization 2022].

The American approach clashes with a set of competing economic and political interests. As a consequence, close coordination among «techno-democracies [to] pass the tech test together [and] pushback against the horrors of techno-autocracies», in Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's own words [Blinken 2021], will be stunted. Firstly, American multinational enterprises and the rest of the world will likely continue doing business with China. Secondly, Washington's techno-economic initiatives have clearly moved towards wielding negative incentives and embryonic forms of mini-lateral cooperation that have yet to reveal their true potential. Thirdly, under both Trump and Biden administrations, the US government altogether abandoned its traditional trade liberalization agenda, one that had allowed for access to the rich American market *and* for US global influence since the end of World War II. Yet given the degree of interdependence, it is still difficult to foresee Washington's being able to contain China's economic expansion and, especially, its technological development in any way like it did the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

More importantly, unilateral initiatives and industrial policies, such as those embedded in the Inflation Reduction Act, the Chips Act, and the US-led ICT consortium based on Open-Radio Access Network technology, suggest that protectionism was a constant. Europe is also not exempt from similar industrial policies (e.g., the EU's Chips Act) or unilateralist and protectionist proposals.<sup>7</sup>

Echoing such global trends was Japan's insistence on «strategic autonomy» and «strategic indispensability» in its economic security efforts, which include the importance of secret Japan-registered patents, massive

7. One example is the European Commission's initiative for rules requiring companies to respect human rights and the environment in global value chains with potentially hefty turnover penalties for multinationals operating on EU soil and found to be in breach [Council of the EU 2022].

state incentives and a further tightening of investment screening and export controls. It would thus be mistaken to see China's «dual circulation» in a vacuum – in fact, from Beijing's point of view, its own initiatives were aimed at «levelling the playing field» by emulation and a tighter embrace of *dirigisme*. It remains to be seen how such competitive and protectionist winds would fare vis-à-vis Japan's multilateral trade agenda, notable through its efforts within the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) as well as the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Still, experts agreed that it was a dire time for international trade: public announcements aside, the 2022 World Trade Organization Ministerial Meeting witnessed a complete deadlock. The Japanese government even signalled its low expectation of success by sending a lesser delegation to this meeting, thereby prioritizing the upper house elections.

While the Japanese government was reportedly unhappy with the underwhelming US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework presented during the May 2022 Quad Summit in Tokyo [The White House 2022b], there were some notable security-related developments. The newly unveiled Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) initiative was aimed at illegal fishing, although it essentially meant monitoring China's naval and para-military activities, a mission and discourse that gained new saliency in recent years [Dell'Era 2022]. The initiative will facilitate the sharing of information, hardware and software among littoral states interested in enhancing their maritime domain awareness [FNN 2022, 26 May]. This represents a new front for Quad members to coordinate their development aid and consequently challenge China's sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The deepening of economic, technological and governance cooperation, coupled with the prospect of involving non-Quad countries such as South Korea or European players in these areas of collaboration, suggested that the Quad had evolved markedly as the mini-lateral tendency gained further steam in 2022.

## 6. *Japan's most substantive defence overhaul since the 1980s*

Around the world, political actors prepared for an even more unstable future by enhancing their national security and defence strategies. For example, the European Union and NATO respectively embraced a Strategic Compass and a new Strategic Concept in 2022, and Germany was reportedly considering its first-ever post-war National Security Strategy [European Union External Action 2022; Federal Foreign Office 2022; North Atlantic Treaty Organization 2022]. Tokyo followed suit by revising three major security documents and announcing a new budget in late-2022 that collectively portend more robust internal balancing efforts.

Prime Minister Kishida announced in late-2021 that he would spend his political capital in 2022 on revising Japan's three key national security documents with a view to «fundamentally bolstering» Japan's defence capabilities to supplement enhancements of Japan's external balancing shepherded through during the Abe administration [Sugiyama 2021, 6 December]. Given Kishida's commitments to both internal party supporters and Japan's alliance partner, there was considerable pressure on the prime minister to realize more than incremental changes in Japan's internal balancing approach. During the year-long process of reviewing Japan's basic defence settings, the prime minister was, however, greatly assisted by events in Ukraine and surrounding Taiwan. Sentiment regarding Japan's defence posture changed considerably in response to Putin's war, as the Japanese public became more permissive on issues of long-standing controversy such as counterattack capabilities and increasing the defence budget (see below). In mid-December, Prime Minister Kishida delivered what *potentially* could be the most substantive overhaul of Japan's defence capabilities since the 1980s with the publication of new priorities – and identification of resources to fund them – in three key documents summarized below.

Japan's first ever revision to the National Security Strategy (NSS) painted an even darker picture of regional developments than did the original NSS produced under former Prime Minister Abe [Ministry of Defense of Japan 2022a and 2022b; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022d]. The 2022 NSS dispenses with scaffolding in the first few pages of the 2013 NSS that emphasized the continued importance of Japan's «Proactive Contribution to Peace» for Japan's diplomacy. The 2022 iteration straightforwardly starts off by stating that Japan is «surrounded by an increasingly severe security environment and confronted by complex and grave national security challenges» [Government of Japan 2013]. In the same first paragraph the NSS continues that «We are reminded once again that globalization and interdependence alone cannot serve as a guarantor for peace and development across the globe» and that «confrontation and cooperation are intricately intertwined in international relations» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022d; Wallace 2021a].<sup>8</sup> While the NSS refers to the «opportunities and benefits» of wide-ranging global engagement and inherits language from the 2013 document regarding the increasing importance of the Indo-Pacific region as the «center of gravity of global power», it also notes that currently unfolding geopolitical changes will «carry on over the medium-to-long term and [...] have historical consequences that will transform the nature of the international community».

8. Tokyo's new language reflects the darkening outlook of some other Japanese partners in the «Asia-Pacific» who had previously retained an optimistic stance to international cooperation and multilateralism but have subsequently adopted Japan's more pessimistic «Indo-Pacific» mini-lateral framing in their national security strategies.

China, North Korea, and Russia are all unsurprisingly identified as presenting even greater challenges than they did in 2013 [*Jiji News* 2022, 16 December]. At the same time, the 2022 NSS laments the weakness of two key pillars of the post-WWII order. Regarding the United States, the 2013 NSS notes that «though its relative influence in the international community is changing», the United States retained commitment and strength as exemplified by its national security and economic policy shift «towards the Asia-Pacific region (the ‘rebalance’ policy)» [Government of Japan 2013].<sup>9</sup> The 2022 NSS, however, notes in its first mention of American foreign policy (not until page 5) that «it is becoming increasingly difficult for the United States...to manage risks in the international community and to maintain and develop a free and open international order» [The White House 2022c].<sup>10</sup>

In the next sentence, the NSS then expresses a profound lack of confidence in the second pillar – the United Nations (UN). It laments that the UN «should embody the will of the international community at large» but has been undermined by some of its foundational members and «thus has not fully lived up fulfilling its function» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022d: 4, 15, 28]. While the UN featured significantly in the 2013 NSS, it is barely mentioned in the 2022 NSS.<sup>11</sup> While doubts about the United States’ ability to ensure Japanese and regional security are not new [Samuels & Wallace 2018], the language pertaining to the UN is noteworthy. Japan’s own post-war «peace constitution» symbolically reflects the language and ideals of the United Nations Charter as the recovering nation placed its «trust in the justice and faith of the peace-loving peoples of the world» in order to achieve its security [Constitution of Japan]. The UN also featured prominently in Japan’s initial post-war «Basic Defence Policy» in 1957. Adopted by the National Defense Council and the Cabinet on May 20, 1957, the policy outlines four essential components of Japan’s national defence. The first includes «supporting the activities of the United Nations, promoting international collaboration, and thereby, making a commitment to the realization of world peace». The fourth component was «dealing with exter-

9. On page 6, the 2013 NSS also shared that the «U.S. remains the country that has the world’s largest power as a whole, composed of its soft power originating from its values and culture, on top of its military and economic power».

10. While framed differently, this evaluation appears to be shared by the United States itself given the opening words of its own principal strategic document: «We are now in the early years of a decisive decade for America and the world».

11. Significantly, the 2022 NSS does not contain a stand-alone section to Japan’s «proactive contribution to international efforts for peace and stability of the international community» which started by situating the importance of «strengthening diplomacy at the United Nations» as the 2013 NSS did. Instead, the 2022 NSS lists strengthening the Japan-US alliance as the first item in its proactive peace diplomacy efforts with cooperation with «like-minded countries» that support a «free and open international order» listed second.

nal aggression based on the security arrangements with the U.S. until the United Nations will be able to fulfil its function in stopping such aggression effectively in the future» [Ministry of Defense of Japan 2023b]. This UN-centrism faded somewhat during the Cold War but enjoyed a revival in the mid-1990s and early 2000s among some politicians and norm entrepreneurs in Japan. Japan's endeavours to join the UN Security Council as a permanent member also featured as an important part of Japan's post-war national identity as a country that sought to make a peaceful «international contribution» [Yasui 2010]. Therefore, Tokyo's forthright expression of its concerns about the UN in addition to unease about the United States is indicative of a much more pessimistic Japan «finding itself in the midst of the most severe and complex security environment since the end of WWII» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022c].

The renaming of the National Defence Program Guidelines (NDPG) also reflected Tokyo's geopolitical apprehensions and was also symbolic in its own right – the NDPG was effectively transformed into Japan's first ever «National Defense Strategy» (NDS). The NDPG was originally formulated in 1976, but its role was «not to clarify defense strategy» so much as to provide guidelines about the kind of defence force Japan would furnish itself with within the limits placed on «defense capabilities amid the Detente situation during the Cold War» [Ogi 2022, 20 December]. Ogi, a former high ranking Japanese defence official, further notes that while the 2013 NSS identified the direction for Japan's national security strategy, «it kept silent on crystallizing a defense strategy» [*Ibid.*]. However, Ogi expects the NDS «to guide and integrate specific defense build-up plans with a clear defense strategy that Japan must aim for».

The NDS also represented the final decisive break from the defence logic that animated the first NDPG. The 1976 NDPG was formulated based on the «Basic Defense Force Concept» that envisioned Japan retaining a static defence force configured to «repel limited and small-scale aggression» while waiting for external assistance to deal with a wider conflict. As such, Japan's defence capabilities did not need to directly mirror the capabilities of potential adversaries or seek to deal with specific threats that adversary capabilities posed – a notion described as «Beyond-the-Threat theory» (*dai-su-kyoi-ron* or 脱脅威論). Essentially, the regional military balance did not directly guide Japan's defence planning as it remained firmly ensconced and subordinate within the US-Japan alliance framework and Japanese planners painstakingly avoided stoking a regional security dilemma along «defensive realist» principles [Midford 2010]. The NDS itself on page 9 states that Japan's defence objectives after 1976 were primarily not to «counter specific threats, [but] to avoid Japan becoming a destabilizing factor in the region by creating a power vacuum».

The 2010 NDPG was the first to openly question the validity of this idea in the changing geopolitical environment as it signalled the begin-

ning of Japan's movement to «dynamic deterrence, which takes into account [...] the operational use of the defense forces» [Government of Japan 2010]. The NDS, however, is rhetorically explicit in making the case for Japan's defence capability planning to return to the «Required Defence Force Concept» of the pre-1976 period [Chijiwa 2016a]. This concept was based on «counter-threat theory» harkening back to the early Meiji era «where Japan determines the level of its defence force according to the strength of a [potential] enemy» [*Ibid.* p. 85]. Taking into account the rapidity and substance of change in the international environment, Japan's new NDS makes it clear that «Japan's future defense capability will focus on such opponent's capabilities and way of warfare and will be fundamentally reinforced to defend itself more than ever» [Ministry of Defense of Japan 2022a: 9].

Following suit, the Medium-Term Defence Plan was also renamed – becoming the «Defense Build-up Program» (DBP).<sup>12</sup> This language also echoed the pre-1976 period when Japan used five-year defence «build-up» plans to expand the SDF's quantitative size in addition to its qualitative capabilities [Chijiwa 2016a: 86]. In 1970, Japan published its first ever defence white paper as then defence chief Nakasone Yasuhiro proposed a further doubling of real defence spending (as the third DBP had achieved) for the fourth DBP. This would push Japan's defence spending back over 1 percent of GDP and Japan further along in building an «autonomous defence» (*jishu bōei*) capability. Nakasone's «grand design» envisioned Japan becoming primarily responsible for its own defence and able to secure air and sea superiority around Japan. At the same time, this vision would relegate the alliance to a secondary role for Japan's defence even as the United States retained primary responsibility for regional security and deterrence by punishment [Envall 2008].<sup>13</sup> The final of four build-up plans was, however, almost immediately abandoned in 1972 as Japan's engagement with China deepened following Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei's visit to Beijing, facilitated by broader US-China détente and the quiet enlisting of China against the Soviet Union. Thus, in 1976, the build-up approach was substituted with a more incremental annual approach to defence spending that would ensure expenditure remained under 1 percent of GDP for the purpose of maintaining a «peacetime defence force» capable of full surveillance and «coping effectively with situations *up to the point* of limited and small-scale aggression» (authors' emphasis) [Chijiwa 2016b: 133; Cho 2021; Green & Murata 1998].<sup>14</sup>

12. The official English translation is Defence Build-up Program while the Japanese name for this document is similar to «Defence Capability Enhancement Program». See here for comparison: <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/policy/agenda/guideline/index.html>.

13. Nakasone had become more alliance-centric by the time he ascended to the premiership in the 1980s.

14. The 1 percent cap on GDP was formalized in 1976 with a cabinet decision.

### 7. *Japan's fifth Defence Build-up Program*

The new DBP together with Japan's draft 2023 defence budget made it clear that Japan is embarking on a «Fifth DBP» after a 50-year hiatus that planners hope will ensure Japan can do more than just repel small-scale aggression on its own. Despite incremental increases in the defence budget during the Abe administration, major external and internal pressures on Japan's defence budget resulted in military experts and even Japan's strategic partners asking questions about the long-term effectiveness of the SDF as a warfighting force [*Asia Times* 2020, 30 June; Center for Security Policy 2022; Newsham 2020, 30 June]. External pressures include the enhancement of Chinese and North Korean capabilities and increasing willingness to demonstrate – and perhaps use – these capabilities; the quickly evolving nature of modern military technology (described as «new ways of warfare» in the NDS); and the increase in operational tempo forced on the SDF due to various overseas commitments made by the government and increasing military activity around Japan. The 2022 crisis in Ukraine therefore only added to the sense that external developments will increasingly burden the SDF. Many internal pressures, such as increasing maintenance costs, foreign military hardware purchases, and the weak yen, also weighed on the effectively stagnant defence budget, meaning that it actually purchased less warfighting capacity over time [Wallace 2020]. Without a robust increase in expenditure in various areas, Japan's actual military capability and capacity would decrease over time despite incremental nominal spending increases and high-tech weapon purchases.

Signs of gathering political momentum to address such problems were detectable during the 2021 LDP leadership race [Wallace 2021b and 2021c]. However, it became clear in mid-2022 that the 2023 budget would not be business as usual. The *honebuto no hōshin* (fiscal policy guidelines) not only referenced the 2% of GDP military spending target recommended for NATO nations, but it also included unprecedented language that committed the government to a «drastic strengthening of defense capabilities within the next five years». Importantly, this language was only included due to significant pressure from LDP parliamentarians who were dissatisfied with an earlier draft that did not mention a specific time frame [Fee & Johnson 2022, 7 June]. Kishida was also aware of external expectations from its strategic partners to make substantive increases in spending. The Japanese public also seemed open to the idea of substantive changes. Throughout 2022, 32 media agency surveys touched upon this topic: 21 surveys showed majority support for robust defence spending increase, six showed plurality support, and only five showed opposition [Wallace 2023].

With this tailwind, on December 23 the Japanese Ministry of Defense (MOD) released a draft overview of the fiscal 2023 Budget subtitled «The First Year of the Fundamental Reinforcement of Japan's Defence Capabili-

ties» [Ministry of Defense of Japan 2022c]. Including supplementary budgets, defence spending will rise from JP¥5.8 trillion in 2022 to JP¥6.8 trillion in 2023 – an increase of 17% – the highest year-on-year nominal increase since 1974. By 2027, Tokyo plans to spend JP¥8.9 trillion annually on defence – 53% higher than the 2022 level. By 2027, Japan's defence spending will increase from 1.09% of GDP in 2022 to between 1.5% and 1.6% of GDP using the government's traditional method of calculating defence-related expenditure. This is the highest level since the 1950s. Using the NATO calculation method, which includes spending such as coast guard expenditure and contributions to the United Nations Peacekeeping budget, Japan's «security-related» spending will increase from 1.24% of GDP in 2021 to between 1.8% and 2% of GDP in 2027. Defence spending as a proportion of government spending will pass 6% for the first time since the early 2000s and eventually reach 7.5% by 2027 – the highest level since the late-1960s.<sup>15</sup> As a total pool of money, the expected appropriations for the MOD based on the 5<sup>th</sup> DBP for 2023-2027 will reach JP¥43.5 trillion, an increase of 58% compared to the 2018-2022 period under the previous Medium Term Defense Plan.

This collectively reflects Tokyo's most substantive fiscal commitment to Japan's defence in 40 years. Beyond the headline numbers, Tokyo signalled it would increase the amount dedicated to maintenance costs by 86% while more than doubling spending on ammunition replenishment, defence-specific research and development, defence industry strengthening measures, SDF infrastructure (including base hardening), and measures to enhance the working conditions of recruits [Ministry of Finance of Japan 2022]. It appears that Tokyo politicians have heeded expert critiques of SDF force readiness and «combat sustainability» [*Reuters* 2022, 16 December].

Ultimately, however, one element stood out above the others in media commentary: Tokyo's explicit acknowledgement of the need for a foreign territory strike capability. After almost two decades of discussion about whether to embrace this agenda, the rapid pace of missile testing and acquisition over the last five years in East Asia accelerated the Japanese policy debate. The embrace of foreign territory strike capabilities through the acquisition of stand-off weapons, therefore, was not a sudden development [Pugliese and Maslow 2020; Wallace 2021d]. Rather than Chinese or North Korean actions, however, it was Russia's naked aggression in Ukraine that paved the way for smooth public acceptance of this «policy option» despite prior preferences for restraint. Out of the 28 opinion polls taken by media agencies during 2022, 20 found a majority in favour of some kind of foreign territory strike capability if framed as a self-defence «counterattack» to an already initiated attack [Wallace 2023].

15. All calculations were made by the authors based on documents from the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Finance of Japan.



Labelled «counterattack» capabilities in Japan's new security documentation, the government identified plans to accelerate the acquisition of various types of stand-off weapons that could provide the SDF with options to strike foreign military installations as a complement to BMD systems [Wallace 2021d].<sup>16</sup> The documents are careful to rule out pre-emptive use by explicitly limiting attacks in an «opponent's area» (*aite no ryōiki ni* 相手の領域に) to «restrict opponent's missile launches» after an attack has already initiated [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022d: 19]. Nevertheless, these capabilities in the future could allow Japan to «target military facilities deep in an adversary's territory, reinforcing deterrence by raising the cost of aggression against Japan» and potentially force Pyongyang and Beijing to redirect investment into their own defences [Hornung & Johnstone 2023].

Unsurprising given their long-held symbolic significance in conservative Japanese political circles [Wallace 2021d], the DBP proposes acquiring Tomahawks cruise missiles to fill the short-term void in Japan's stand-off capabilities. Tokyo will also accelerate range extension of Japan's own domestically produced anti-ship missiles to beyond 1000 kilometres, essentially meaning that Japan will possess «indigenous Tomahawks» in the future [*Sankei Shinbun* 2020, 29 December]. The currently truck-launched Type-12 anti-ship missile will be extended and also launchable from ships, aircraft, as well as from submarines. The submarine option is arguably the most potent platform for implementing foreign territory strike given the advantages of concealment, and the Japanese government plans to install Vertical Launching System modules on Japan's «Reiwa Submarines» to greatly enhance the firepower and range for both counterattack and traditional anti-ship operations [*Mainichi Shinbun* 2022a, 13 December]. Tokyo also accelerated its investment in the development of indigenous hypersonic «elemental technologies» such as SCRAM-jet propulsion for hypersonic missiles and hard-to-intercept hyper velocity boost-glide vehicles (ostensibly for «island defence») that will mature in the 2030s.

To be sure, the possession of stand-off capabilities is not necessarily synonymous with a primary operational focus on striking an enemy's territory. In the «Key Capabilities for Reinforcement» section of the NDS, stand-off capabilities are mentioned first. However, the whole section is dedicated to outlining the primary and immediate value of stand-off capabilities for dealing with «vessels and landing forces invading Japan» [Ministry of Defense of Japan 2022a: 23]. Noting that Japan's significant maritime and aerial domain spans 3,000 kilometres in all directions, extended range provides greater tactical options for defence or denial in depth in addition to foreign territory strike applications focused on missile defence [*Ibid.*]. Enhanced range will, after all, provide options for deploying diversified launch sys-

16. Stand-off missiles can strike distant targets and are launched from air, sea, subsurface or land-based platforms outside the range of close-in air defences.

tems throughout the first and second island chains to frustrate PRC attempts to achieve sea control and hold land taken from Japan, especially as other locations in Japan offer greater opportunities for concealment and system mobility than Okinawa. Even the extended Type-12's primary function will for the time being remain as an anti-ship missile for raising the costs of military adventurism at «Japan's forefront line of defense» around Miyakojima [Fujiwara 2019, 30 April]. At least for the 2020s, Japan's stand-off weapons will remain primarily of significance for maritime denial as a valuable component of Japan's «version of the A2/AD» while providing more options for defence-in-depth [Jimbo 2023, 26 January; Murakami 2023, 31 January].

There is also significant potential for delay and the timetable for development, deployment, and authorization of the use of these weapons even in a semi-autonomous capacity could lengthen into the 2030s. In addition to technical communications issues already identified around the Type-12, there is the need to create new command systems. In the past, the three services of the SDF could get away with operating in essentially different geographic realms. This was already sub-optimal, but with enhanced power projection capabilities, the potential for overlapping use of airspace, target redundancy, operational interference, and even friendly fire incidents (within the SDF and when operating with American forces) are going to become even more critical issues for Tokyo to solve if stand-off weapons are to have deterrent value intended [Sakaguchi 2022, 19 December]. Japan's problems with jointness, bureaucratic stove-piping, inter-service communications, and the lack of a permanent joint command during peacetime to ensure the SDF can operate effectively during a contingency are already well-known [*Ibid.*; Makino 2022b, 27 April; Mulloy 2021; Ogi 2022]. Integration of stand-off missiles and ISR capabilities together with planned new SDF capabilities in the space, cyber, and the electromagnetic realms will require the integration of joint operations to an even higher level of sophistication [Ogi 2023]. While Japan has announced an intention to create a joint command, it is unclear whether it will also result in an overhaul of the SDF services themselves to streamline them for communications and command purposes. Even then, the standing up of a joint command is expected to take five years to complete. It is expected to mature in 2027 when Japan will establish a rapid-response system with a focus on responding to a potential Taiwan contingency [Miki 2022, October 29; Nemoto 2022, September 29]. In the meantime, the various services will continue to proliferate units with parallel responsibilities [Nemoto 2022, 13 December], and the so-called «kill chain» for strike capabilities will be distributed across each of the services before the joint command institution is fully fleshed out. There is still no evidence of integrated operations being the focus from the outset of force planning and posture design and this likely means a substantial increase in complexity when the SDF was already struggling with joint operations.

Mr. Kishida must also progress the 2023 budget and legislative change to the SDF Law in order to implement some of the planned changes. For streamlining and centralizing organizational command structures, substantial changes to the SDF Law will be required even before looking at legal changes to enable foreign territory strike missions. Counterattack capabilities could still become politically problematic despite seeming public acceptance of the framing that they are a supplement to BMD and not for pre-emptive purposes. In the 8 of the 28 surveys mentioned above where only a plurality favoured a strike capability or respondents were opposed, the wording was more generic and focused on «enemy base attack». This suggests that parliamentary deliberation in the future could still agitate the public if a strong connection is made between this capability and pre-emptive strike, if the opposition interrogates the government on whether the new mission would allow the SDF to strike Chinese command centres and military bases in the event of a Taiwan conflict, and/or if the new power projection capabilities raises collective self-defence issues as Japanese and American naval and aerial units increasingly integrate on-board systems and fire control through «Cooperative Engagement Capability» enhancement [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022d: 20; Wallace 2021d].<sup>17</sup> Public opinion, especially if Kishida struggles to become a long-term prime minister, could still intervene to complicate the implementation of Japan's ambitious defence overhaul.

### 8. *A nuclear next step?*

Nevertheless, these new weapons afford Japan increasing strategic flexibility should Tokyo desire greater «strategic independence» in the future [Honrada 2023, 28 January; Samuels & Wallace 2018]. Perhaps the ultimate symbol of strategic independence would be an evolution in Japan's approach to nuclear weapons. Various analysts have argued that, given the overwhelming conventional and nuclear strength of Japan's adversaries in the region, the only true option for deterrence by punishment is the acquisition of nuclear weapons [Makino 2022b]. Japanese media reports in 2022 noted that in South Korea opinion towards Seoul's possession of nuclear weapons had turned decidedly more positive as North Korea's own nuclear

17. To this end, the 2022 NSS (p.20) acknowledges that Japan's new weaponry will allow the SDF to deepen its regional cooperation on the counterattack elements of Integrated Air and Missile Defence with the United States much in the same way it has with on interceptor-focused BMD. It is careful, however, to assert that the basic division of roles between the United States and Japan will remain unchanged (for now) in terms of overall disposition and responsibility for regional security—the United States leading from the front with the ability to inflict considerable punishment with Japan providing point defence and support.

potential became clear [BBC News 2022, 9 September; Borowiec 2022, 29 November; Dalton *et al.* 2022; Makino 2022a]. While moving straight towards independent acquisition of nuclear weapons is unrealistic for Tokyo, not for the first time in Japan's post-war history Japanese commentators and politicians mulled the possibility of Japan hosting nuclear weapons to deter potential Chinese coercion as an intermediate move [Wallace 2021d: 49-52]. In 2022, former Prime Minister Abe, LDP policy chief Takaichi Sanae, and Ishin no Kai party leaders called for a debate on nuclear sharing and/or allowing the United States to station nuclear warheads in Japan [Asahi Shinbun 2022b, 3 March; Nikkei Asia 2022, 3 March; Sankei Shinbun 2022, 2 March; Wingfield-Hayes 2022, 26 March].<sup>18</sup>

This is a particularly tricky issue for Kishida given his family history, electoral constituency in Hiroshima and his self-representation as a pacifist with particular emphasis on non-proliferation and support for a ban on nuclear weapons [Nippon.com 2023, 4 January; Tokyo Shinbun 2022, 28 February]. In August 2022, Kishida became the first Japanese prime minister to address the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference to «highlight his enthusiastic commitment to nuclear issues». Kishida also plans to use the 2023 G7 summit to showcase his anti-nuclear credentials by agitating for a «world without nuclear weapons» while connecting this agenda to Russia's aggression, implied threats to use nuclear weapons, and «attempts to overthrow the international order» [Kaiya 2022, 23 July].

Therefore, the Kishida administration quickly swatted away the suggestion of a change in Japan's nuclear posture. Prime Minister Kishida noted that it would violate the 1955 Basic Atomic Energy Law, Japan's 1967 three Non-Nuclear Principles, and international law (the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty) [Mainichi Shinbun 2022, 25 February].<sup>19</sup> Nuclear sharing was also likely to be opposed by Japanese citizens [Sankei Shinbun 2022, 21 March]. Despite expectations that the nuclear allergy would weaken over time, there has been very little movement in terms of public opinion towards embracing such an option since the 1960s when the issue was raised following China's 1964 detonation of a nuclear bomb [Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament (JPAND) 2018, 13 July]. Indeed, an authoritative voice from Japan's national security establishment, one that was an early proponent of endowing Japan with strike capabilities, lamented hawkish calls for a debate on nuclear sharing in the aftermath of war in Ukraine, calling them a fantasy of «utopian realists» [Interview 2022c].

There also appeared to be a misunderstanding of what nuclear sharing in the NATO context actually is. Rather than the sharing of strategic

18. Prominent LDP politician Takaichi Sanae even argued that Japan could not be defended unless the United States was allowed to transport nuclear weapons through Japanese territory.

19. The three non-nuclear principles commit Japan to «not manufacture or possess nuclear weapons or allow their introduction into the country».

arsenals that would allow a country to deter through punishment, NATO sharing is predicated on deterrence by denial where American allies participate in the use of weapons to stop Soviet/Russian advancement into Europe itself, thereby sharing the «responsibilities and risks» [‘NATO’s Nuclear Sharing Arrangements’ 2022]. In the context of Japan’s geography, this would mean Japanese participation in the decision to use nuclear weapons on or around Japanese territory to destroy an invading force [Kuniichi 2022, 6 June].<sup>20</sup> As NATO headquarters itself makes clear: «NATO’s nuclear sharing is the sharing of the Alliance’s nuclear deterrence mission and the related political responsibilities and decision-making. It is not the sharing of nuclear weapons». Unsurprisingly therefore, this iteration of the «nuclear debate» quickly vanished from public discourse. Nevertheless, the possibility of nuclear weapons use, which was implied by statements from President Putin in early 2022, raised concerns in Japan to the point that prominent politicians such as former defence minister Ishiba Shigeru raised the need to proliferate nuclear shelters—something Japan lacks «compared to the North America and Europe» as Japan can only accommodate 0.02% of its population in these shelters [FNN Premium Online, 2022, 1 May; Kitamura 2022, 11 September].

### 9. *Regional reactions to Japan’s defence changes*

The most vociferous regional reaction to the three new security documents and the prominence of counterattack operations in these documents came from North Korea. Pyongyang described Japan’s new defence direction as a «wrong and dangerous choice» that constituted a «new aggression policy» and would fundamentally change East Asia’s security environment. North Korea also warned against Japan’s designs on «re-invasion» [Choi 2022, 20 December]. North Korea then tested missiles five times in the first two weeks after the release of the new documents. However, given that North Korea tested over 95 missiles on 35 different days during 2022, it is hard to ascribe these tests to Japan’s revised security documents and Tokyo’s embrace of stand-off capabilities.

In Beijing, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson unsurprisingly expressed displeasure at Japan’s description of China as Japan’s «biggest strategic challenge» in the NSS. Wang Wenbin lamented Japan deviating «from its commitment to China-Japan relations and the common understandings between the two countries» [*Mainichi Shinbun* 2022, 17 Decem-

20. Takahashi Sugio makes this point clear: «The nuclear sharing framework was therefore formed to allow the use of tactical nuclear weapons against invading forces to ‘offset’ the advantage possessed by Soviet forces, thereby deterring invasion in the first place. The framework essentially made European allies partially responsible for the use of nuclear weapons on European soil».

ber]. The PRC embassy in Tokyo lodged a diplomatic protest condemning Tokyo for «stirring up tension and confrontation in the region» [Kyodo News 2022, 17 and 27 December]. On December 27, «scheduling difficulties» forced the postponement of an anticipated meeting between the foreign ministers of both countries. However, it is also worth acknowledging that December 27 was the same day that Japan announced new restrictions on the entry of visitors from China into Japan, which also invited major Chinese criticism. Together with China's struggles with keeping COVID-19 under control after the abrupt cessation of its «Zero-COVID» policy in response to domestic discontent, it is likely that other developments factored in the cancellation [Johnson 2023, 29 January]. After all, a long meeting was held in August between National Security Secretariat Director Akiba Takeo and then State Councillor Yang Jiechi (who outranked the then-Foreign Minister Wang Yi) on Japan-China security issues [Nakazawa 2022, 25 August]. This likely involved Akiba appraising Yang of the content of the draft versions of the three security documents. Subsequent to this, Prime Minister Kishida and President Xi Jinping still met in Bangkok in November on the side-lines of APEC.

Probably the most surprising response came from Seoul. Following a meeting in October, top foreign affairs officials from South Korea, Japan, and the United States agreed to «strengthen deterrence in reining in the North Korean military threat» [Kyodo News 2022, 26 October]. In November, President Yoon then indicated that South Korea would be somewhat accepting of Japan's defence reforms when he suggested that changes in Japan's defence policy were an understandable response to the North Korean threat [Nakamura 2022, 30 December], a sentiment he later repeated after the publication of the three security documents [Kim 2023, 12 January]. South Korea also announced that it would take part in MSDF fleet review to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the MSDF despite protests from domestic politicians against the continued use of the «rising sun» ensign on MSDF vessels that had prevented both countries' navies from participating at their previous respective fleet reviews [The Asahi Shimbun 2022, 28 October]. Immediately following the release of the documents, South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that it was watching Japan's defence spending debate and did not object to Japan possessing counter-strike capabilities other than to insist that Tokyo consult with Seoul before using such capabilities on the Korean Peninsula; lack of said consultations may hypothetically entrap South Korea in military escalations of Tokyo's making, although the prospect is rather distant given Japan's dependence on American logistical support for targeting purposes.

On December 28, the ROK government also announced its own Indo-Pacific strategy. The use of the Indo-Pacific nomenclature reflected the diplomatic language of Abe Shinzō, but it is worth noting that President Yoon Suk-yeol commissioned the document from the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs' North America Affairs Bureau, thus denoting the US link. Still, the document contained a number of positive references to cooperation «with our closest neighbor, Japan». Desiring «a forward-looking partnership that supports our common interests and values», Seoul notes that «Improved relations with Japan is essential for fostering cooperation and solidarity among like-minded Indo-Pacific nations; we are thus continuing our diplomatic efforts to restore mutual trust and advance relations» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea 2022]. Finally, on December 30 in Seoul, President Yoon met with Yamaguchi Natsuo, the leader of Komeito, a member of the ruling coalition, to discuss Japan-South Korea relations. At the meeting, the South Korean President urged closer security cooperation between South Korea and Japan [Nakamura 2022, 30 December].

Unsurprisingly, the United States welcomed Japan's new National Security Strategy and commitment to regional security. The almost contemporaneous release of these strategic documents suggested strong coordination between the Transpacific allies, especially within the context of the Japan-US Security Consultative Committee (aka Japan-US 2+2). This was in line with the Biden administration's emphasis on so-called «integrated deterrence». This concept encompassed jointness across the different military services, joint warfighting across domains, intra-agency coordination for «whole of government» responses and «seamless» cooperation, including joint strategic planning and military operations with allies [U.S. Department of Defense 2022]. According to Jimbo, this approach combines «deterrence by denial, deterrence by resilience and deterrence by direct and collective cost imposition» that represents «a structural shift» in emphasis from a singular focus on «deterrence by punishment» at least for conventional warfare [Jimbo 2023, 26 January]. Punishment will remain the ultimate option but the defence strategy documents of both Japan and the United States place a greater emphasis on being able to asymmetrically undermine China's operational capacity in the region during conflict by targeting its vulnerabilities rather than focusing on «overpowering China with sea and air superiority». While not immediately required, a logical next step will be the revision of the US-Japan Defense Guidelines for only the third time since 1978 [Kyodo News 2022, 16 December].

While countries in Southeast Asia remained silent likely in consideration of not alienating either Japan or China, a number of other countries explicitly added welcoming voices in support of Japan's new security and defence strategies, including quasi-allies Australia and the United Kingdom, and India and Taiwan. Defence dialogues and cooperation continued without disruption and Japan continued to upgrade defence partnerships with Sweden, Italy, Israel, and Greece following the announcement [Associated Press 2023, 31 January; Kyodo News 2023, 11 January; *Mainichi Shinbun* 2022, 21 December; Martin 2023, 11 January]. The regional and global reaction would seem to validate Tokyo's belief outlined in the NDS

that «others also expect Japan to play a role commensurate to its national strength» [Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2022a: 3].

## 10. *Japan's domestic politics in 2022*

Prime Minister Kishida Fumio entered 2022 riding high after victories in the LDP presidential election and House of Representatives election in late-2021. Domestically, Prime Minister Kishida experienced starkly different fortunes in the two halves of 2022. The first half was characterized by radically improving political fortunes. Despite coming out on top in the LDP presidential race and leading the LDP to a better-than-expected result in the 2021 House of Representatives election, expectations were not high for Kishida entering 2022. Compared to his predecessor, Suga Yoshihide, Kishida registered 14 percentage points on average less in net approval on becoming prime minister and registered less than 50 percent support in 5 out of 9 of the initial media survey polls [Wallace 2021c]. However, helped by the fiscal stimulus pushed through at the end of 2021, Kishida begun a turnaround in political fortunes somewhat reminiscent of Kaifu and Obuchi in the 1990s who began with lacklustre approval ratings but battled back to respectable numbers. Assisted greatly by his robust response to the Ukraine crisis, by May 2022 the mean net support rate for the Kishida cabinet rose 12 percentage points higher compared to the inauguration of his cabinet [Wallace 2023]. This bucked the trend of new prime ministers starting with high expectations and quickly failing to meet them. The prime minister was therefore well positioned to face the public in the 2022 House of Councillors election. This would put an end to speculation that Kishida would be another one-year prime minister after Suga's downfall suggested that Abe's almost eight-year tenure was an aberration in the revolving door of Japanese prime ministers.

### 10.1 *2022 Upper House election*

On 10 July, 545 candidates competed for 125 seats in the 2022 House of Councillors election (hereafter, the upper house). Recent adjustments to electoral districts meant the ruling coalition needed to secure a majority of 125 seats (out of 248) to ensure legislation passes the upper house. Upper house elections have traditionally been challenging for the LDP, and no party had possessed a singular majority since 1986 [Nakayama & Odake 2022, 24 June]. Unlike the lower house, where more than 60% of seats are single member districts (SMDs) requiring only a plurality for victory, only 25% of upper house seats are SMDs, with the rest of the seats distributed through proportional representation or through multi-member electoral districts. With only half of the upper house's seats contested every three



years, the Japanese public has also traditionally been more willing to punish the main governing party in upper house elections [George Mulgan 2019, 17 July]. Furthermore, following its success in the 2021 lower house election, *Ishin no Kai* (hereafter Ishin) only increased its national prominence in 2022 and tried to outflank the government by strongly calling for tax cuts for small households and business owners to address the issue of rising costs [Tobita 2022, 18 June]. Ishin was expected to dominate in Osaka in the upper house election and pick up floating voters in the national proportional representation bloc. Together with the weak yen, COVID-19 and Ukraine war-related supply chain disruptions driving up imported food and energy inputs and domestic costs, [Maeda *et al.* 2022, 12 June], a repeat of the coordination of left-leaning candidates in the critical SMDs, which hurt the Abe administration in the previous upper house elections in 2016 and 2019, could have precipitated the LDP faltering and Kishida limping out of the election mortally wounded.

In the end, however, the LDP secured almost 90 percent of the SMD seats and increased the party's overall seat allotment by eight from the 2016 election when these seats were last contested. Kishida's LDP took 63 seats of the 125 seats on offer, the best result since the 2013 election under Abe. While the LDP was not able to secure an outright majority, it finished with 119 seats in total, the second highest total the LDP has had since 1986.

A number of factors meant that Kishida improved on the results of the 2016 and 2019 election. First, trade deals like the TPP no longer had the salience that they did in the rural SMD districts in the previous two elections when the LDP suffered notable losses [*Japan Times* 2019, 21 July]. Second, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio maintained high popularity ratings right up until the election. While LDP supporters were less enthusiastic about Kishida than Abe when Abe first returned to the premiership in 2012, Kishida was significantly more popular amongst unaffiliated voters and even opposition voters compared to both Abe and his predecessor Suga [*Asahi Shinbun* 2022, 10 June]. Kishida's messaging on redistribution also appeared to appeal to older voters, who are the larger and more political committed electorate in Japan [Miyasaka *et al.* 2022, 26 June]. Third, while Ishin did pick up some seats as expected [*Japan News* 2022, 28 August], the government was spared having to worry about the left-leaning opposition. In the two previous upper house elections a coordinated centre-left opposition performed above expectations to deprive the LDP of around one-third of the 32 SMD seats. The opposition was, however, less united in 2022, and even less popular than usual [Wallace 2023].

This owed to Kishida implementing a strategy to undercut the centre-left opposition while differentiating himself from Abe. In 2022, Kishida emphasized redistribution, wage increases for workers (including the minimum wage), and more proactively courted labour unions, including Japan's largest trade union confederation, Rengo. Rengo has been a major support-

er of the CDPJ following its precipitous drop in popular trust and popularity post-2012. However, Rengo's first female president, Yoshino Tomoko, immediately criticized the CDPJ for its proactive and failed cooperation with the Japan Communist Party in the 2021 lower house election after her appointment, calling it «ridiculous» [*Jiji News* 2021, 28 November]. The LDP wasted little time in pouncing on this sign of discord. Kishida met the labour union group early in 2022, the first time for a prime minister in almost a decade [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2022, 6 January]. Ms. Yoshino was also appointed to sit on a panel headed by Kishida to flesh out his idea of «a new form of capitalism» [*Ibid.*]. The Rengo head then attended a rare meeting at the LDP to discuss social security in April prior to the election [Johnston 2022, 12 May; *Kyodo News* 2022, 18 April]. The LDP under Kishida also noted in its upper house manifesto that it would commit to continuing dialogue with Rengo and other «friendly» labour unions.

Even after his victory in the upper house election, Kishida continued his outreach to Japanese workers by making it clear he would focus on realizing «substantive wage increases over inflation levels» that Japan was uncharacteristically experiencing [*Japan News* 2022, 16 September; Sugiyama 2022, 18 March]<sup>21</sup> as the prime minister eyed the 2023 annual *shuntō* talks. He also said he would undertake labour market reforms to address the conditions of non-regular workers and facilitate reskilling of workers. Interestingly, Rengo, Keidanren (Japan's most prominent business federation), and the government appeared to be on the same page at the end of 2022 regarding the need to secure a good outcome for Japanese workers after years of friction and hectoring by Japanese leaders [*Kyodo News* 2022, 4 October; Miura & Aota 2022, 21 October; Okabe 2022, 3 November].

However, any public opinion bounce from this will not be realized until 2023, and despite Kishida's triumph at the polls at the upper house election, the second half of 2022 was a political disaster for the prime minister. The modest but still notable increase in the LDP's upper house majority should have consolidated Mr Kishida's authority within the LDP after the ruling party also performed better than expected in the 2021 lower house election. Mr Kishida did not have to contest another national election for three years, with the next election of importance for him – the LDP's presidential race – not for more than two more years. The Japanese media began to talk about «three golden years» where Kishida could deal with a variety of difficult issues such as inflation, energy, and defence [Akiyama 2022, 12 July]. This should have given the prime minister some leverage to push forward on policies that might otherwise have upset one faction or another in the LDP. However, the fallout from Abe's assassination dragged Kishida's popularity down in some unexpected ways.

21. The Rengo chief then decided to attend the funeral of Abe Shinzo despite the CDPJ's own refusal.

11. *Abe Shinzō's assassination*

On 8 July, the life of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō was snuffed out by a lone wolf carrying a home-made gun. The killer shot at Mr. Abe during a rally in support of an LDP candidate for the upper house election. While Mr. Abe was rushed to hospital, he was announced dead later that day [NHK 2022, 10 July]. The murderer was immediately arrested and interrogated. Shock was felt by many in Japan where gun violence is rare, especially outside of the realms of organized crime. Due to Mr. Abe's record setting tenure as prime minister, global leaders also reacted with disbelief at the brutal attack [Dominguez 2022, 8 July].

Once the dust settled, it became clear that the gunman was motivated by personal enmity towards the former prime minister. Early reports suggested that he held «grudges against a religious organization...and Abe's closeness to it, not Abe's political beliefs» [*Asahi Shinbun* 2022, 8 July]. The murderer's familial history emerged, bringing to light that his mother had donated JP¥100 million in donations two decades ago to the Unification Church (officially known as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification), plunging their family into poverty. The accused later confirmed that he targeted Abe because «he believed he was a supporter of the church, which he blamed for bankrupting his family» [McCurry 2022, 22 November].

A close look at the assassin's archived Tweets (before the account was suspended) suggested deep depression and societal estrangement.<sup>22</sup> His very first Tweet in 2019 (14 October) made the connection between Abe and the Unification Church – 14 October 2019: «The only thing I hate is the Unification Church. I don't care what happens to the Abe administration as a result». According to two 26 June tweets, he outlined his favourite phrase: «He has been dead for a long time. What we have now is a stone by the side of the road, full of disgust. The stone will not move until the heart deep within cries out in lamentation». Moreover, tweets revealed his fixation with the Unification Church and its ties with the LDP. Finally, a hint at his homicidal intentions came on June 23, when he vented that «I believe that Asahara style (terrorist gas sarin attacks) will come back sooner or later. If it is the way to settle this uncontrollable world, it may not be wrong. Ultimately, people can only learn from what they've tasted». In one instance, he also mentioned Sakakibara child murders incidents as a model [Twitter 2022]. Even the account name *silent hill 333*, a name borrowed from a popular video-game revolving around the lonely fight against monsters created by an evil cult, hints at his mission.

The media soon followed up on the link between Mr. Abe and the Unification Church, originally founded in South Korea in 1954. It was al-

22. Archived Twitter Handle of Abe Shinzō's murderer: [https://web.archive.org/web/20220717073227/https://twitter.com/333\\_hill/](https://web.archive.org/web/20220717073227/https://twitter.com/333_hill/)

ready an open secret that Abe's grandfather, post-war prime minister Kishi Nobusuke, helped the Unification Church establish a presence in Japan based on Kishi's and the Church's strongly shared anti-communism [*Nikkei Asia* 2022, 31 August]. The organization was rather too successful in its spiritual sales tactics, however, and in the 1980s it was reported that the Japanese branch of the organization was sending tens of billions of yen back to Korea where the Church was originally founded [*Ibid.*]. In response to the outrage over these revelations, the LDP distanced itself from the Church until it was dumped out of government at the 2009 election and the LDP became desperate for votes.

Abe did not attempt to hide some degree of connection to the Church, and a video soon surfaced of Abe sending a congratulatory video message to a Church-affiliated event in 2021, praising the group for its emphasis on «family values» [McCurry 2022, 22 November]. Abe's brother Kishi Nobuo, then defence minister, admitted his support for the church soon after the assassination [Kobayashi 2022, 30 July]. This set off a media frenzy, and while LDP Secretary-General Motegi Toshimitsu insisted that there was no institutional relationship between the LDP and the Church, the circumstances were too explosive for this to go away without a fuller investigation. An internal LDP investigation soon revealed just under one-half of the party's lawmakers had associated with the organisation in some way or form [McCurry 2022, 1 August]. While there was no evidence of major donations being made to Japanese politicians, the vote-gathering power offered by the Church's members in Japan was seemingly difficult for LDP politicians to turn down given Japan's restrictive Public Offices Electoral Law [*Nikkei Asia*, 2022, 31 August]. Mr. Kishida apologised for his own party's involvement and asked LDP lawmakers to cut all ties with the Church [Mao 2022, 17 October]. He also relented on holding an official government investigation into the Church, saying that he took seriously accusations that the Church had ruined families and exploited followers. The government proceeded to investigate the Church's finances and practices, with a view to potentially stripping it of its legal status and eligibility for tax exemptions [McCurry 2022, 22 November]. Kishida in fact announced in August a cabinet reshuffle with seven ministers who had indicated connections to the Church being moved out of the cabinet [Yamaguchi 2022, 10 August].

In the background of the Unification Church furore also bubbled controversy over Abe's funeral. Kishida somewhat hastily declared a state funeral would be held for Abe but was immediately faced with questions about appropriateness and cost [Iizuka 2022, 27 September; Wingfield-Hayes 2022, 26 September]. It was soon pointed out that state funerals are rare in Japan. Only one state funeral has been held in the post-war period for someone outside of the imperial family – for Yoshida Shigeru in 1967. Yoshida's funeral was in turn the first non-royal state funeral since 1943 when Yamamoto Isoroku, the commander in chief of the Combined Fleet,

died in action during the Pacific War [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2022, 21 July]. In contrast to the funeral for Queen Elizabeth II held at around the same time, Kishida was forced to scale back the degree of ceremony while continually exposed to public antagonism from the dual fallout from Abe's assassination. This was despite the prime minister's lack of personal connections to the group and the fact that his own faction was not as strongly implicated as Mr. Abe's [Mao 2022, 17 October; *Nikkei Asia* 2022, 31 August].

## 12. *Funding Kishida's Reiwa era defence build-up*

While in the first half of 2022 the Japanese public seemed forgiving of inflationary pressures precipitated by the war in Ukraine, in the second half the public grew frustrated with the Kishida cabinet's failure to address problems brought up by Abe's murder and other political missteps. Just as Kishida looked to be extracting himself from the quagmire of the political fallout from Abe's assassination, his problems were further compounded by resignations by his own cabinet ministers. In the space of one month between October and November, three ministers resigned due to political gaffes, funding scandals, and failure to disclose connections to the Unification Church [*Kyodo News* 2022, 11 November]. A fourth minister resigned only a week before the end of 2022 [*Japan News* 2022, 26 December].

Kishida then added to his woes with his insistence that Japan's otherwise well supported defence build-up might need to be funded by a tax increase. This strangled any chance he had to recover his popularity as the prime minister at the end of 2022. Public resistance to tax increases was in fact much higher than opposition to defence spending increases. The public also appeared to be generally split on whether to fund the defence increase from bond issuance, taxation, or from cuts to other budget priorities [*Japan News* 2022, 5 December; *Mainichi Shimbun* 2022, 18 December].

Not only was the tax increase proposal unpopular with the public, many of the same people in the LDP who supported defence spending rise turned out to be the most reluctant to entertain tax increases. In mid-December, representatives of the LDP and Komeito were close to finalizing a tax reform plan to accompany to the release of the new security documents and draft budget. According to the original plan, about JP¥1.1 trillion annually of new funding for defence priorities would come from tax measures. These tax measures would be supplemented by a combination of construction bond issuance, the creation of a «Defence Reinforcement Fund» to gather non-tax revenues (such as government sales of property), expenditure reforms, and the requisitioning of surplus funds from other government accounts (coming to JP¥2.6 trillion annually). Mr. Kishida appeared to forcefully intervene in the process to ensure tax rises remained an option based on his own convictions that he would not issue government

bonds specifically for defence equipment purchase. Kishida continued to insist that defence should be supported by a more «responsible» form of funding that makes «each and every citizen is aware of the need to protect the country» [Imao 2022, 14 December].

As soon as the tax plan became publicly known, it prompted backlash from the wider LDP and even some cabinet ministers. Kishida's rival from the 2021 LDP election and cabinet minister, Takaichi Sanae, tweeted that she «cannot understand the prime minister's intentions in making comments at this point that discourage wage growth» [Imao 2022, 14 December]. When questioned later, she said she would accept being dismissed from cabinet for expressing caution about tax increases [*Japan News* 2022, 18 December; *Mainichi Shinbun* 2022b, 13 December]. Hagiuda Koichi, of the LDP's Policy Research Council and the coordinator of the party's policy, indicated that he preferred the use of government bonds and that there was a «difference in temperature» between him and the prime minister on this matter. Former Prime Minister Suga also openly complained about «insufficient discussion» on the policy of raising taxes to strengthen defence capabilities [*NHK* 2023, 23 January].

This forced Mr. Kishida to delay the introduction of these measures. On December 27, Mr. Kishida noted that he would hold an election before raising the taxes and that they should be raised at «an appropriate time between 2024 and 2027» [*Mainichi Shinbun* 2022, 28 December]. This internal conflict in the LDP took place against the background of a struggle for control both within the Abe faction and between the various LDP factions as various players started to more explicitly position themselves to fill the vacuum left by Abe's death [*NHK* 2023, 23 January]. In particular, those in favour of fiscal consolidation are using this opportunity to reassert themselves after being marginalized somewhat during the Abe administration [Imao 2022, 14 December]. While the ruling coalition «adopted» the tax guidelines noted above, the plan is effectively on hold as Kishida attempted to subdue party resistance by promising to continue talks and not submit the new tax program during the current Diet session. It has also deprived Kishida of a future tool – one of the sources of non-tax money for the new defence budget was a pool of surplus money from the settlement of various special accounts that were previously used for supplementary budgets. If supplementary budgets are to be used in the future, then even larger government bonds issuance will be essential [*Asahi Shinbun* 2022, 16 and 17 December].

### 13. *Conclusions: Kishida's three golden years vanish*

At the end of 2022, Prime Minister Kishida took care of his promise to Abe and his supporters and ushered through potentially the most consequential

changes to Japan's defence posture since the 1980s *with* public support. For good measure, Kishida also effected a reversal in Japan's nuclear zero energy policy – another policy goal of Abe – in similar fashion. As a consequence, Prime Minister Kishida should have been set up to enjoy three golden years of political stability where he could commit political capital to long delayed policies focused on addressing Japan's distributional and demographic issues and instituting his own signature «new form of capitalism» agenda. However, the prime minister starts 2023 in a precarious position having seen his net approval rating decrease by over 40 percentage points compared to his inauguration [Wallace 2023]. Members of his own party and his cabinet – including former supporters of Abe tied to the Unification Church scandals – are willing to defy him publicly. Even the LDP's normally quiet coalition partner Komeito who originally gave its assent to the new security documentation has subsequently questioned Kishida's abilities to implement his bold defence plans together with securing the necessary fiscal resources [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 23 January]. Given substantially raised international expectations of Japan to play an increased military role, failure to follow through will have major domestic and international repercussions. Kishida will hope that the anticipated «pay rises above price rises» policy of Japan's major companies will come to fruition and Mr. Kishida can craft a narrative of being able to deliver on his promises following a difficult 2022.

One of the key lessons that Kishida can take from the Abe administration, however, is that being in the international limelight can help burnish a prime minister credentials as a statesperson and offset troubles on the domestic front. Diplomatic tailwinds could assist Mr. Kishida as Japan begins its two-year term as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council on January 1 and also assumes the presidency of the UNSC at the same time [*Japan Times* 2023, 2 January]. As Japan will also chair the G7 in 2023 and host the G7 summit in Kishida's hometown of Hiroshima [Takahata 2023, 26 January], the prime minister will look forward to the G7 summit to recapture some political capital. If he can do that, then he may be in a strong enough position in late-2023 to call a snap election to «renew» his mandate without the LDP suffering substantial losses and thus gain back control of backbenchers within the main ruling party. However, as 2022 demonstrated, the international situation remains turbulent for Japan, providing both opportunities and challenges for enterprising leaders.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Akiyama, Hiroyuki, 2022, 'Japan PM has «3 golden years» to deal with inflation, energy, defense', *Nikkei Asia*, 12 July.  
 Andornino, Giovanni, 2023, 'Continuity and Change in Italy-China Relations: From Economic Pragmatism to Selective Followership and Back'. In Simona Grano,

- and David Wei Feng Huang (eds), *China-US Competition: Impact on Small and Medium Powers' Strategic Choices*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 133-57.
- Arai, Juntaro, 2022, 23 December, 'Japan reverts to wider nuclear power use in net-zero emissions push', *Nikkei Asia*.
- Asahi Shinbun*, 2022a, 2 March, '「最も強い言葉で非難」 対ロシア決議、衆院が採択 (House of Representatives Adopts Resolution Condemning Russia in the Strongest Terms)', (<https://www.asahi.com/articles/DA3S15220014.html>).
- Asahi Shinbun*, 2022b, 2 March, 'ウクライナ侵攻と日本(財) 日本総合研究所会長・多摩大学学長、寺島実郎さん (Aggression in Ukraine and Japan: Terashima Jitsurō, President of the Japan Research Institute and Dean of Tama University)', (<https://www.asahi.com/articles/DA3S15219954.html>).
- Asahi Shinbun*, 2022a, 3 March, '志願兵、自民国防部会長「止めるべきではない」 林外相は「渡航やめて」 ウクライナ侵攻 (Regarding Volunteer Soldiers going to Ukraine, LDP Defense Committee Chairman: «We should not stop them»; Foreign Minister Hayashi: «Don't Go»)', (<https://www.asahi.com/articles/DA3S15221231.html>).
- Asahi Shinbun*, 2022b, 3 March, '維新、「核共有」の議論要求 非核三原則見直しも 政府に提言へ (Ishin calls for discussion of nuclear sharing and a review of the three non-nuclear principles)', (<https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASQ316CTSQ31UTFK016.html>).
- Asahi Shinbun*, 2022, 10 June, '岸田内閣支持、「最高」のワケは (The Reason Why Kishida's Support is at an All-time High)', (<https://www.asahi.com/articles/DA3S15321285.html>).
- Asahi Shinbun*, 2022, 8 July, '「特定の宗教団体に恨み。近い安倍元首相を狙った」 容疑者が供述 (The Suspect Recounts: «Grudge Against a Specific Religious Organization. I Aimed at Former Premier Abe because He was Close to it»)', (<https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASQ786SN4Q78UTIL04V.html>).
- Asahi Shinbun*, 2022, 16 December, '防衛増税、拙速のツケ 首相、表明1週間後妥協 来年国会提出せず (PM Pays Price of Poor Management and Compromises on Defense Tax Hike One Week after Announcing; Won't Submit to Next Year's Diet)', (<https://www.asahi.com/articles/DA3S15503326.html>).
- Asahi Shinbun*, 2022, 17 December, '骨抜き専守防衛 安保3文書決定 (Deboned Exclusively Defensive Defense; Cabinet Decision is Made on 3 Security Documents)', (<https://www.asahi.com/articles/DA3S15504390.html>).
- Asahi Shinbun*, 2023, 23 January, '公明・山口代表「安保議論が届いてない」 首相に丁寧な説明求める (Komeito's Yamaguchi: PM Needs to Explain More Carefully to Win the Public Over on the Security Debate)', (<https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASR1R65P5R1RUTFK00Y.html>).
- Asia Times*, 2020, 13 October, 'Time to be honest about Japan's defense deficiency'.
- Associated Press, 2023, 'Japan, Greece step up security ties as strategic partners', *The Asahi Shinbun*, 31 January.
- BBC News*, 2022, 9 September, 'North Korea declares itself a nuclear weapons state'.
- [Blinken 2021], 'Secretary Antony J. Blinken at the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence's (NSCAI) Global Emerging Technology Summit', *U.S. Department of State*, 13 July 2021.
- Bloomberg*, 2022, 22 August, 'Japan Lawmakers Join US in Defying China With Taiwan Visit'.
- Bloomberg*, 2022, 1 September, 'Shell Walks Away from Major Russian LNG Project With Nothing'.



- Borowiec, Steven, 2022, 'South Korea's nuclear option: Calls grow for weapon development', *Nikkei Asia*, 29 November.
- Brown, James D. J., 2017, *Japan, Russia and their Territorial Dispute: The Northern Delusion*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Brown, James D. J., 2018, 'Japan's security cooperation with Russia: neutralizing the threat of a China–Russia united front', *International Affairs*, 94(4): 861–882.
- Brown, James D. J., 2019, 'Abe's Russia Policy: All Cultivation and No Fruit', *Asia Policy*, National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), 14(1): 148–55.
- Brown, James & William Sposato, 2022, 'Japan Steps Up on Ukraine', *Foreign Policy*, 2 March.
- Bureau of Industry and Security, 2022, *Commerce Implements New Export Controls on Advanced Computing and Semiconductor Manufacturing Items to the People's Republic of China (PRC)*, 7 October, (<https://www.bis.doc.gov/index.php/documents/about-bis/newsroom/press-releases/3158-2022-10-07-bis-press-release-advanced-computing-and-semiconductor-manufacturing-controls-final/file>).
- Caffarena, Anna, & Giovanni Gabusi, 2021, 'Europe-China and the Third Way: Steering Order in Times of Change. Evidence from the AIIB and WTO Reform', in Li Xing (ed.), *China-EU Relations in a New Era of Global Transformation*, Routledge, pp. 19–36.
- Center for Security Policy, 2022, 'Is Japan Ready for War? Not Yet', 22 August.
- Chijiwa, Yasuaki, 2016a, 'Unfinished «Beyond-the-Threat Theory»—Japan's «Basic Defense Force Concept» Revisited', *NIDS Journal of Defense and Security*, 17: 83–102.
- Chijiwa, Yasuaki, 2016b, 'Japan–United States Alliance and Japan's Defense Concept', *16th International Forum on War History*, July, (<http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/event/forum/pdf/2016/08.pdf>).
- China Times*, 2022, 2 August, '裴洛西質疑我撤邀 仍堅持訪台 (Pelosi questioned withdrawal of invitation and still insisted on visiting Taiwan)'.
- Cho, Heeyong, 2021, 'Continuity and Change in Japan's Security Policy: Challenges, Constraints, and Options (1)', *Ritsumeikan University International Studies*, 34(2): 173–204.
- Choi, Soo-hang, 2022, 'Kim regime warns Japan over «dangerous» security strategy', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 December.
- CNBC, 2021, 28 September, 'U.S. needs to work with Europe to slow China's innovation rate, Raimondo says'.
- Congiu, Francesca, & Barbara Onnis, 2022, *Fino all'ultimo stato* (Until the Last State), Roma: Carocci.
- Constitution of Japan, ([https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution\\_and\\_government\\_of\\_japan/constitution\\_e.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html)).
- Council of the EU, 2022, *Council adopts position on due diligence rules for large companies*, 1 December, (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/12/01/council-adopts-position-on-due-diligence-rules-for-large-companies/>).
- Dalton, Toby, Karl Friedhoff & Lami Kim, 2022, 'Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons', *Global Affairs*, February (<https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Korea%20Nuclear%20Report%20PDF.pdf>).
- Department of Commerce (Bureau of Industry and Security), *Entity List*, (<https://www.bis.doc.gov/index.php/policy-guidance/lists-of-parties-of-concern/entity-list>).
- Dell'Era, Alice, 2022, 'Securitizing Beijing through the maritime commons: the «China threat» and Japan's security discourse in the Abe era', *The Pacific Review*, DOI: 10.1080/09512748.2022.2137569

- Dian, Matteo, & Anna Kireeva, 2021, 'Wedge strategies in Russia-Japan relations', *The Pacific Review*, 35(2): 853-883.
- Dian, Matteo & Silvia Menegazzi, 2018, *New Regional Initiatives in China's Foreign Policy: The Incoming Pluralism of Global Governance*, Heidelberg: Springer.
- Dominguez, Gabriel, 2022, 'Shock, anger and grief reverberate across world after Abe's assassination', *Japan Times*, 8 July.
- Envall, H.D.P, 2008, 'Transforming Security Politics: Koizumi Jun'ichiro and the Gaullist Tradition in Japan', *Electronic Journal of Japanese Studies*, July, (<http://japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/2008/Envall.html>).
- European Council, 2022, *Joint Statement EU-Japan Summit 2022*, 12 May, (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/05/12/joint-statement-eu-japan-summit-2022/>).
- European Union External Action, 2022, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, 24 March, ([https://www.ecas.europa.eu/ecas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-0\\_en](https://www.ecas.europa.eu/ecas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-0_en)).
- Executive Yuan (Taiwan), 2022, *Premier receives Japanese parliamentary delegation of LDP lawmakers*, 26 December, (<https://english.ey.gov.tw/Page/61BF20C3E89B856/de99337a-8128-49c6-9f3b-227f66aabc3e>).
- Farrell, Henry, & Abraham L. Newman, 2019, 'Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion', *International Security*, 44(1): 42-79.
- Federal Foreign Office, 2022, 'Towards the National Security Strategy - the process', 26 July, (<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/themen/nationale-sicherheitsstrategie>).
- Fee, Will, & Jesse Johnson, 2022, 'Japanese government coy on specifics as five-year plan to strengthen defense confirmed', *Japan Times*, 7 June.
- Financial Times*, 2022, 17 October, 'EU ministers advised to take tougher line on China'.
- FNN, 2022, 26 May, '異論を唱える各国を押し切ったアメリカの焦り「IPMDA」で台湾有事は未然に防げるのか? (America's impatience overrides various countries' objections – will the IPMDA be able to prevent a Taiwan crisis?)', (<https://www.fnn.jp/articles/-/365541>).
- FNN Premium Online, 2022, 1 May, '石破氏、「国家情報局」設置は急務 (Ishiba: Establishment of «National Intelligence Agency» is Urgent)', (<https://www.fnn.jp/articles/-/354822>).
- Fujiwara, Shinichi, 2019, 'Japan deploying longer-range missiles to counter China', *The Asahi Shimbun*, 30 April.
- George Mulgan, Aurelia, 2019, 'Is there a crisis of Japanese democracy?', *East Asia Forum*, 17 July.
- Glosserman, Brad, 2022, 'Japan and Europe: A Marriage of Convenience Matures', *The Asan Forum*, Nov-Dec. (<https://theasanforum.org/japan-and-europe-a-marriage-of-convenience-matures/>).
- Government of Japan, 2010, *National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2011 and beyond*, 17 December ([https://japan.kantei.go.jp/kakugikettei/2010/ndpg\\_e.pdf](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/kakugikettei/2010/ndpg_e.pdf)).
- Government of Japan, 2013, *National Security Strategy of Japan 2013*, 17 December, (<https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryoku/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>).
- Green, Michael, & Koji Murata, 1998, 'The 1978 Guidelines for the U.S.- Japan Defense Cooperation: Process and the Historical Impact', *The National Security Archive US-Japan Project*, Working Paper 17, (<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/japan/GreenMurataWP.htm>).

- Gries, Peter H., & Yi Wang, 2021, 'Proscribing the "Spiritually Japanese": Nationalist Indignation, Authoritarian Responsiveness and Regime Legitimation in China Today', *China Quarterly*, 245:122-141.
- Hass, Ryan, 2022, 'The Upside of Pelosi's Unwise Taiwan Visit', *Foreign Affairs*, 16 August.
- Honrada, Gabriel, 2023, 'Japan gunning for strategic independence from US', *Asia Times*, 28 January.
- Horning, Jeffrey, & Christopher Johnstone, 2023, 'Japan's Strategic Shift is Significant, But Implementation Hurdles Await', *War on the Rocks*, 27 January.
- Iizuka, Satoshi, 2022, 'Kishida may face political headwinds after controversial Abe state funeral', *Japan Times*, 27 September.
- Imao, Ryuto, 2022, 'Japan PM faces cabinet rebellion over tax hikes for defense', *Nikkei Asia*, 14 December.
- Immigration Services Agency, 2023, 'ウクライナ避難民に関する情報 (Information Concerning Evacuees from Ukraine)', January, ([https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/publications/materials/01\\_00234.html](https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/publications/materials/01_00234.html)).
- Insisa, Aurelio, 2019, 'Taiwan 2018: Heavy Setbacks for the Tsai Administration', *Asia Maior*, XXIX/2018: 133-8.
- Insisa, Aurelio, 2021a, 'Taiwan 2020: Crossroads of COVID-19 international politics', *Asia Maior*, XXXI/2020: 181-204.
- Insisa, Aurelio, 2021b, 'No Consensus Across the Strait: Chinese and Taiwanese Strategic Communications in a Contested Regional Order', *Asian Perspective*, 45(3): 503-31.
- Insisa, Aurelio, 2022, 'China's Discourse on Strategic Communications: Insights into PRC External Propaganda', *Defence Strategic Communications*, 10(10): 111-152.
- Insisa, Aurelio, & Giulio Pugliese, 2022, 'The free and open Indo-Pacific versus the belt and road: spheres of influence and Sino-Japanese relations', *The Pacific Review*, 35(3): 557-85.
- Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 2022, 1 December, 'The EU-US Trade and Technology Council Reaches a Crossroads', (<https://ip-quarterly.com/en/eu-us-trade-and-technology-council-reaches-crossroads>).
- Interview, 2019a, A high-ranking Japanese government official. Conducted by Giulio Pugliese in Tokyo, 20 December.
- Interview, 2022a, A European diplomat. Conducted by Giulio Pugliese in Tokyo, December 2022.
- Interview, 2022b, Japanese academics and foreign diplomats. Conducted by Giulio Pugliese in Tokyo, December 2022.
- Interview, 2022c, A former high-ranking Korean diplomat. Conducted in Florence, May 2022.
- Interviews, 2022d, A former Ministry of Finance of Japan official and a former official in international trade organization. Conducted by Giulio Pugliese in Tokyo, December 2022.
- Interview, 2022e, A former high-ranking Japanese security practitioner. Conducted by Giulio Pugliese in Tokyo, December 2022.
- Interview, 2023, A high-ranking Taiwanese government official. Conducted by Giulio Pugliese in Taipei, February 2022.
- Itō Tōru, 2022, '選択を避けるインドの展望 (Prospects of an India that Avoids Making a Choice)', *Tōa*, October, 10-17.
- Japan Bank for International Cooperation, 2021, *Trilateral Infrastructure Partnership Meets with Communist Party of Vietnam Central Economic Commission and*

- Relevant Ministry*, February, (<https://www.jbic.go.jp/en/information/topics/topics-2021/0202-015853.html>).
- Japan External Trade Organization, 2022, 中国側統計、2021年の日本の対中投資実行額は前年比16.0%増 (*Chinese Statistics: Japan's 2021 FDI to China Grows by 16% Compared to Previous Year*), 13 July, (<https://www.jetro.go.jp/biznews/2022/07/583e14a329ccaa8b.html>).
- Japan News*, 2020, 4 January, 'Japan likely to draw up economic security strategy in 2020'.
- Japan News*, 2022, 28 August, 'Can Baba transform the party into a national force?'.
- Japan News*, 2022, 16 September, 'CDPJ to be absent from Abe's state funeral'.
- Japan News*, 2022, 5 December, 'Government bonds top choice to fund defense spending hike'.
- Japan News*, 2022, 18 December, 'Uniting Japan's Liberal Democratic Party a tricky matter for prime minister Kishida'.
- Japan News*, 2022, 26 December, '4th minister set to resign from Japan Cabinet'.
- Japan Times*, 2019, 21 July, 'Japan's opposition parties score upset in Akita but lose in Fukushima'.
- Japan Times*, 2023, 2 January, 'Japan to be tested as nonpermanent U.N. Security Council member'.
- Jiji News*, 2021, 28 November, 'Rengo Head Blasts CDP-JCP Alliance as «Ridiculous»'.
- Jiji News*, 2022, 16 December, '反撃能力保有、トマホーク配備へ 中朝を警戒、安保政策大転換－3 文書改定・政府 (Wary of China and North Korea, in major security policy shift government revises three key security documents, announces acquisition of counterattack capability, Tomahawks)'.
- Jimbo, Ken, 2023, 'Japan's future security lies in a 'denial and competition' strategy', *Japan Times*, 26 January.
- Johnson, Jesse, 2022, 'Japan joins West in unleashing «powerful» economic measures against Russia', *Japan Times*, 1 March.
- Johnson, Jesse, 2023, 'China resumes issuing visas for Japanese after dispute over border measures', *Japan Times*, 29 January.
- Johnston, Eric, 2022, 'Following Ukraine invasion, Japan takes much tougher line on Russia', *Japan Times*, 28 February.
- Johnston, Eric, 2022, 'Japan's main labor group is drawing closer to the LDP. Some say too close', *Japan Times*, 12 May.
- Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament (JPAND)*, 2018, 13 July, '「核の傘」の実効性、日米で検証を：石破茂・衆議院議員インタビュー (The effectiveness of the US «nuclear umbrella» should be investigated by Japan: Interview with Ishiba Shigeru, Member of the House of Representatives)', (<http://www.lb.nagasaki-u.ac.jp/j-pand/pdf/ishiba.pdf>).
- Kaiya, Michitaka, 2022, 'Is there a path to Kishida's vision of a world free of nuclear weapons?', *Japan News*, 23 July.
- Kawasaki, Natsumi, & Sayumi Take, 2022, 29 November, 'Japan gears up for next-generation nuclear tech: 4 things to know', *Nikkei Asia*.
- Kim, Mi-Na, 2023, 'S. Korean president raises eyebrows with seeming approval of Japan's security strategy', *Hankyoreh*, 12 January.
- Kitamura, Taisuke, 2022, '核シェルターはなぜ日本で普及しないのか？ 石破茂氏が東京大空襲時の教訓を指摘、地下鉄駅は対応不可？' (Why are nuclear shelters not widely used in Japan? Shigeru Ishiba points out lessons learned from the Tokyo Air Raid; Can Subway Stations Cope?), *Yorozoo News*, 11 September, (<https://yorozoonews.jp/article/14715033>).

- Kiyofumi, Iwata, & Ōe Sadamasa, 2022, '台湾危機と令和の国防 (Taiwan Crisis and Reiwa Japan's Defense)', *Will*, October, 198-213.
- Kobayashi, Erika, 2022, 'Abe's death spotlights Unification Church links to Japan's LDP', *Nikkei Asia*, 30 July.
- Kotani, Tetsuo, 2022, 'Japan to Upgrade Defense Ties with Taipei by Dispatching a MOD Official', *The Prospect Foundation*, 4 August.
- Kumagai, Takeo, & Megan Gordon, 2021, February 24, 'Japan does not see sanctions on Russia causing major energy supply disruption', *S&P Global*.
- Kuniichi, Tanida, 2022, 'Next Steps in Japan's Nuclear Sharing Debate', *Nippon.com*, 6 June, (<https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00809/>).
- Kyodo News*, 2022, 13 May, 'Japan accepted 74 refugees in 2021, highest on record'.
- Kyodo News*, 2022, 26 October, 'Japan, U.S., South Korea agree to beef up deterrence against North Korea'.
- Kyodo News*, 2022, 'As election nears, Rengo chief makes rare appearance at LDP meeting', *Japan Times*, 18 April.
- Kyodo News*, 2022, 4 October, 'Japan PM asks firms to match pay hikes to inflation'.
- Kyodo News*, 2022, 11 November, 'Japan's justice minister dismissed over gaffes about death penalty'.
- Kyodo News*, 2022, 'Japan considers broaching revision of defense guidelines with U.S.', *Japan Times*, 16 December.
- Kyodo News*, 2022, 'China says Japan's defense shift provokes «regional tension»', *Japan Times*, 17 December.
- Kyodo News*, 2022, 'Foreign minister postpones China visit this year due to scheduling conflict', *Japan Times*, 27 December.
- Kyodo News*, 2023, 'Japan and Italy to launch talks to boost security ties', *Japan Times*, 11 January.
- Liff, Adam P., 2022, 'Japan, Taiwan and the One China Framework after 50 Years', *China Quarterly*, 252: 1066-1093.
- Lim, Tachun, 2023, 'NATO's opportunity in the Indo-Pacific', *IPS Journal*, 6 January, (<https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/natos-opportunity-in-the-indo-pacific-6422>).
- Maeda, Takayuki, Hideki Shinohara, & Momoka Matsumoto, 2022, 'Japan bleeds \$85bn from costly commodities and weak yen' *Nikkei Asia*, 12 June.
- Mainichi Shinbun*, 2022, 25 February, 'PM Kishida rules out Japan's possession of nuclear weapons'.
- Mainichi Shinbun*, 2022, 1 March, 'ウクライナ「義勇兵」に日本人70人が志願 50人が元自衛官 (70 Japanese Volunteered for Ukraine's «Volunteer Corps»; 50 are former Self-Defense Force officers)', (<https://mainichi.jp/articles/20220301/k00/00m/030/165000c>).
- Mainichi Shinbun*, 2022, 26 April, '69% in Japan call for country to accept more Ukrainian evacuees: Mainichi poll', (<https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20220426/p2a/00m/0na/009000c>).
- Mainichi Shinbun*, 2022a, 13 December, '政府、ミサイル垂直発射型の潜水艦整備へ 海中からの反撃能力行使も (Government to Develop Submarines with VLS systems for Launching Counterattacks)', (<https://mainichi.jp/articles/20221213/k00/00m/010/185000c>).
- Mainichi Shinbun*, 2022b, 13 December, 'Japan to boost defense spending to 6.5 tril. yen in FY 2023'.

- Mainichi Shinbun*, 2022, 17 December, 'China sends ships into Pacific amid Japan security moves'.
- Mainichi Shinbun*, 2022, 18 December, '64% disapprove tax hikes to cover Japan's rising defense budget: poll'
- Mainichi Shinbun*, 2022, 21 December, 'Japan, Sweden sign defense equipment transfer pact amid Ukraine war'.
- Mainichi Shinbun*, 2022, 28 December, 'Kishida hints at general election before tax hikes for defense'.
- Mao, Frances, 2022, 'Unification Church: Japan to investigate religious group after Abe killing', *BBC News*, 17 October.
- Makino, Aihiro, 2022a, '韓国人の7割が核保有を望むのはなぜか 韓国の世論調査を読み解く (Why 70% of South Koreans Want to Possess Nuclear Weapons: Deciphering South Korean Public Opinion Polls)', *The Asahi Shimbun Globe*, 12 January, (<https://globe.asahi.com/article/14519370>).
- Makino, Aihiro, 2022b, '石破茂「反撃能力」とは、つまりどんな能力なのか、専守防衛との関係は (Ishiba Shigeru: What Kind of Capabilities are Counterattack Capabilities? What is the Relationship to Exclusively Defensive Defense?)', *The Asahi Shimbun Globe*, 27 April, (<https://globe.asahi.com/article/14607114>).
- Martin, Tim, 2023, 'UK and Japan sign landmark defense pact in bid to counter China', *Breaking Defense*, 11 January.
- Matsuda, Yasuhiro, 2022, '台湾有事の「虚実」と「文脈」(The «context» and «veracity» surrounding a Taiwan conflict)', *Tōa*, September, 1.
- McCurry, Justin, 2022, 'Revelations since Shinzo Abe death shed light on Moonies' influence', *Guardian*, 1 August.
- McCurry, Justin, 2022, 'Japan begins inquiry into Unification church in wake of Shinzo Abe killing', *Guardian*, 22 November.
- Midford, Paul, 2010, 'The Logic of Reassurance and Japan's Grand Strategy', *Security Studies*, 11:3, 1-43.
- Miki, Ricko, 2022, 'Japan to establish Self-Defense Forces 'joint command' in 2024', *Nikkei Asia*, 29 October.
- Milani, Marco, Antonio Fiori & Matteo Dian [eds.], 2019, *The Korean Paradox: Domestic Political Divide and Foreign Policy in South Korea*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2022a, *National Defense Strategy of Japan*, 16 December, ([https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/strategy/pdf/strategy\\_en.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/strategy/pdf/strategy_en.pdf)).
- Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2022b, '防衛力整備計画について (National Defense Capabilities Enhancement Plan)', 16 December, (<https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/plan/pdf/plan.pdf>).
- Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2022c, '我が国の防衛と予算（案）(Defense Programs and Budget of Japan—Draft)', 23 December, ([https://www.mod.go.jp/j/yosan/yosan\\_gaiyo/2023/yosan\\_20221223.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/yosan/yosan_gaiyo/2023/yosan_20221223.pdf)).
- Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2023a, *Defense of Japan 2022*, Tokyo, p. 11.
- Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2023b, *Overview and Fundamental Concepts of National Defense* ([https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d\\_act/d\\_policy/index.html](https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/d_policy/index.html)).
- Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry, 2022, *The Launch of the Japan-EU Digital Partnership*, 12 May ([https://www.meti.go.jp/english/press/2022/0512\\_004.html](https://www.meti.go.jp/english/press/2022/0512_004.html)).

- Ministry of Finance of Japan, 2022, ‘令和 5 年度防衛関係予算のポイント (*Fiscal 2023 Defense-related Budget Main Points*)’, 16 December ([https://www.mof.go.jp/policy/budget/budger\\_workflow/budget/fy2023/seifuan2023/19.pdf](https://www.mof.go.jp/policy/budget/budger_workflow/budget/fy2023/seifuan2023/19.pdf)).
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy, 2022, *G7 Foreign Ministers’ Statement on Preserving Peace and Stability Across the Taiwan Strait*, 3 August.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2021, *Press Conference by Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa*, 11 November ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kai-ken24e\\_000075.html#topic7](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kai-ken24e_000075.html#topic7)).
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022a, *Press Conference by Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa*, 25 February ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kai-ken24e\\_000105.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kai-ken24e_000105.html)).
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022b, ‘ウクライナ情勢に関する外国為替及び外国貿易法に基づく措置について (*Measures under the Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Law Concerning the Situation in Ukraine*)’, 1 March, ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/release/press4\\_009282.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/release/press4_009282.html)).
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022, *The Partners in the Blue Pacific Ministerial Meeting on Cooperation with Pacific Island Countries*, 22 September, ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/ocn/shin4e\\_000049.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/ocn/shin4e_000049.html)).
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022d, *National Security Strategy of Japan*, 16 December, (<https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>).
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022e, *Adoption of the new «National Security Strategy» (NSS)*, 16 December, ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e\\_003192.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_003192.html)).
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2022, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson’s Remarks on Japanese Lawmaker’s Visit to Taiwan*, 23 August, ([https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2535\\_665405/202208/t20220823\\_10749428.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/202208/t20220823_10749428.html)).
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, 2022, *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region*, 28 December, ([https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5676/view.do?seq=322133](https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133)).
- Miura, Jumpei, & Hideki Aota, 2022, ‘Rengo sets high 5% pay-scale raise goal for spring «shunto»’, *The Asahi Shimbun*, 21 October.
- Miyasaka, Shotaro, Hiroshi Asahina, and Masayuki Kubota, 2022, ‘Boon or bane? Japan’s LDP boosts support among older voters’, *Nikkei Asia*, 26 June.
- Mulloy, Garren, 2021, *Defenders of Japan: The Post-Imperial Armed Forces 1946–2016*, C. Hurst & Co. Ltd.
- Muminov, Sherzod, 2022, in *Eleven Winters of Discontent: The Siberian Internment and the Making of a New Japan*, Cambridge (Ma): Harvard University Press.
- Murakami, Kenta, 2023, ‘反撃能力の可能性と限界 (Counterattack Capabilities: Possibilities and Limitations)’, *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 31 January, (<https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/choken/kijironko/ckworld/20230125-OYT8T50066/>).
- Murashkin, Nikolay, & Eriks Varpahovskis, 2022, ‘The role of development models in Japan’s and Korea’s relations with Central Asia: Discourses and practices’, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 13(2): 180–99.
- Nakamura, Yuki, 2022, ‘South Korea’s Yoon shows support for defense cooperation with Japan’, *Nikkei Asia*, 30 December.
- Nakayama, Jun, & Jumpei Odake, 2022, ‘Key numbers in the upcoming Japanese upper house election’, *Japan News*, 24 June.



- Nakazawa, Katsuji, 2022, 'Analysis: Xi ditched milder options in sending missiles toward Japan', *Nikkei Asia*, 25 August.
- Natalizia, Gabriele & Lorenzo Termine, 2021, 'Tracing the modes of China's revisionism in the Indo-Pacific: A comparison with pre-1941 Shōwa Japan', *Italian Political Science Review / Rivista Italiana Di Scienza Politica*, 51(1), 83-99.
- 'NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements', 2022, *NATO Website*, February, ([https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/2/pdf/220204-factsheet-nuclear-sharing-arrange.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/2/pdf/220204-factsheet-nuclear-sharing-arrange.pdf)).
- Nemoto, Ryo, 2022, 28 February, 'Ukraine conflict: 77% in Japan fear Taiwan spillover', *Nikkei Asia*.
- Nemoto, Ryo, 2022, 29 September, 'Lack of NATO-style command in focus as Japan reviews security strategy', *Nikkei Asia*.
- Nemoto, Ryo, 2022, 13 December, 'Japan to reorganize Self-Defense Forces under joint command', *Nikkei Asia*.
- Newsham, Grant, 2020, 'Abe's Aegis Ashore cancellation doesn't add up', *Asia Times*, 30 June.
- NHK, 2022, 10 July, '「安倍元首相銃撃 “宗教団体の関連施設で試し撃ち”」' (Shooting of Abe Shinzō: 'Test shooting at a building affiliated with a religious organization'), (<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20220708/k10013707601000.html>).
- NHK, 2023, 23 January, '通常国会召集 防衛力の抜本的な強化 焦点と各党の立場は (Convocation of the Ordinary Diet Session: Fundamental Reinforcement of Defense Capabilities: Focus and Position of each Party?)', (<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20230123/k10013958311000.html>).
- Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 2022, 9 September, '台湾有事に備えは十分か 政治家に覚悟迫る演習 (Are we prepared for a Taiwan contingency? Table-Top Exercises Test Politicians' Readiness)'.
- Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 2022, 27 October, '米半導体規制の波及に備えを (Prepare for Repercussions of the US Restrictions on Semiconductors)'.
- Nikkei Asia*, 2021, 31 August, 'Chinese components double to 60% in new Huawei smartphone'.
- Nikkei Asia*, 2022, 28 February, 'Ukraine conflict: 77% in Japan fear Taiwan spillover'.
- Nikkei Asia*, 2022, 3 March, 'Abe reiterates nuclear-sharing discussion is necessary'.
- Nikkei Asia*, 2022, 23 April, 'Japan fears China-Russia LNG alliance after Shell exits Sakhalin-2'.
- Nikkei Asia*, 2022, 31 August, 'Unification Church: How Japan politicians counted on members' votes'.
- Nikkei Asia*, 2022, 15 December, 'Japan ruling bloc split over China «threat» in defense policy review'.
- Nippon.com*, 2022, 2 March, 'Donations for Ukrainians Increasing Rapidly in Japan', (<https://www.nippon.com/en/news/yjj2022030200258/>).
- Nippon.com (Jiji Press)*, 2022, 2 March, 'Japan to Accept Ukrainian Refugees', (<https://www.nippon.com/en/news/yjj2022030201346/>).
- Nippon.com*, 2022, 1 August, 'Japan's economic security law takes effect amid regional tensions', (<https://www.nippon.com/en/news/kd926768643481010176/>).
- Nippon.com*, 2022, 27 December, 'Survey Finds One in Four Ukrainian Refugees Want to Settle in Japan', (<https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h01534/>).
- Nippon.com*, 2023, 4 January, '岸田首相「核共有を考えるつもりはない」 (Premier Kishida: 'I don't intend to consider nuclear sharing')', (<https://www.nippon.com/ja/news/fnn20230104466627/>).



- North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2022, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, 29 June, ([https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf)).
- NPR, 2022, 29 October, 'Japan has taken in hundreds of Ukrainians. The welcome for others has been less warm'.
- Ogi, Hirohito, 2022, 'In dealing with Beijing, Tokyo must adopt a strong security front', *Japan Times*, 20 December.
- Ogi, Hirohito, 2023, '自衛隊「常設統合司令部」は「屋上屋」か? (上) スタンド・オフ防衛能力の統合運用から考える (Is the SDF's Joint Command Going to be Building a Roof on Top of a Roof? Thinking about Stand-off Capabilities from the Viewpoint of Integrated Operations—Part One)', *Foresight*, 12 January (<https://www.fsight.jp/articles/-/49473>).
- Okabe, Takanori, 2022, 'Japan's top business lobby to back pay hikes for inflation-hit workers', *Nikkei Asia*, 3 November.
- Ozawa, Marc, 2022, 'Towards a deeper NATO-Japan cooperation', *NDC Policy Brief*, No. 19-22, December: 1-4.
- Pelaggi, Stefano & Lorenzo Termini, 2023, 'Understanding the Indo-Pacific: Geopolitical context', in *Handbook of Indo-Pacific Studies*, Barbara Kratiuk, Jeroen Van den Bosch, Aleksandra Jaskólska, Yoichiro Sato [eds.], Abingdon: Routledge.
- Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2022, *Japan Stands With Ukraine*, 14 December, ([https://japan.kantei.go.jp/ongoingtopics/pdf/jp\\_stands\\_with\\_ukraine\\_eng.pdf](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/ongoingtopics/pdf/jp_stands_with_ukraine_eng.pdf)).
- Pugliese, Giulio, and Sebastian Maslow, 2020, 'Japan 2019: Inaugurating a New Era?', *Asia Maior*, XXX/2019: 125-62.
- Pugliese, Giulio, and Corey Wallace, 2022, 'Japan 2021: The Liberal Democratic Party Emerges Stronger Despite Domestic Tumult', *Asia Maior*, XXXII/2021: 63-93.
- Rao, Swasti, 2023, 13 January, 'Japan, the only country merging two security theatres in Europe and Indo-Pacific', *The Print*.
- Reuters, 2022, 24 February, 'Japan nuclear reactor operations: Kyushu Electric shuts Sendai No. 2 reactor'.
- Reuters, 2022, 16 December, '防衛費5年間で43兆円、現行計画の1.6倍 戦闘継続能力を強化 (To enhance combat sustainability, 43 trillion yen over 5 years for defense spending—1.6 times the previous plan), (<https://jp.reuters.com/article/japan-government-1216-idJPKBN2T00L1>).
- Reynolds, Isabel, & Takashi Umekawa, 2022, December 22, 'Japanese panel approves return to nuclear power as disaster memories fade', *Japan Times*.
- Richardson, Paul B., 2018, *At the Edge of the Nation: The Southern Kurils and the Search for Russia's National Identity*, Manoa: Hawaii University Press.
- Sadamasa, Ōe, 2022, 'ミサイル発射は「海上封鎖の予行演習」元空将が考える中国の思惑 (China's Missile Launches were «exercises aimed at a maritime blockade»; Former Air Self-Defense General Analyzes China's Intentions)', *Asahi Shinbun*, 5 August.
- Sakaguchi, Yukihiro, 2022, 'Japan's top defense challenge «is joint air, land and sea power»', *Nikkei Asia*, 19 December.
- Samuels, Richard, & Corey Wallace, 2018, 'Introduction: Japan's pivot in Asia', *International Affairs*, 94(4): 703-710.
- Sankei Shinbun, 2020, 29 December, '「国産トマホーク」開発へ 射程2千キロの新型対艦弾 12式は1500キロに延伸 (Japan to Develop «Indigenous Tomahawk» By Extending Range of Anti-Ship Missile to 2000kms, Type-12 range to 1500kms), (<https://www.sankei.com/article/20201229-IJSI3I2G35P-KXLKSEGF4FR76JA/>).

- Sankei Shinbun*, 2022, 2 March, '高市氏、有事には核持ち込み容認を「日本守れない」 (Takaichi Says Japan Cannot be Defended unless Nuclear Weapons are Brought into Japan during a Contingency)', (<https://www.sankei.com/article/20220302-2ATKCDY6ABOHJAY4DGNFFTW6YY/>).
- Sankei Shinbun*, 2022, 21 March, '自民、維新支持層「核共有」の議論求める傾向(LDP and Ishin supporters eager for discussion of «nuclear sharing»)', (<https://www.sankei.com/article/20220321-HCS4IPTQKFJBDV44EXPKSBZ-TE/?569248>).
- Shetler-Jones, Philip, 2022, 'Europe's Area of Maritime Interest in Northeast Asia', *IAI Papers*, 22(33): 1-13.
- Small, Andrew, 2022, *The Rupture*, London: Hurst.
- Sugiura, Eri, 2022, 18 March, 'Japan's top companies raise wages as inflation hits workers', *Financial Times*.
- Sugiyama, Satoshi, 2021, 6 December, 'In speech, Kishida lays out bold plans for health, economic and defense policies', *Japan Times*.
- Support Measures for Ukrainian Students by Japanese Universities and Japanese Language Institutes, 2022, 20 December, (<https://www.studyinjapan.go.jp/en/other/news/000165.html>).
- Taipei Times*, 2022, 5 June, 'Experts praise posting of Japan military officer'
- Taiwan Today*, 2022, 28 July, 'Japan parliamentary delegation starts Taiwan visit'.
- Taiwan Today*, 2022, 11 October, 'Tsai receives Japan parliamentary delegation'.
- Takahata, Akio, 2023, '日米同盟の現代化: 安保協力の重層化と反撃能力の確立を急げ' (Modernizing the US-Japan Alliance: Counterattack Capabilities and Layered Security Cooperation), *Nippon.com*, 26 January, (<https://www.nippon.com/ja/in-depth/d00881/>).
- The Asahi Shimbun*, 2022, 6 January, 'Kishida attends key labor group event to split opposition bloc'.
- The Asahi Shimbun*, 2022a, 1 March, 'Rakuten CEO Mikitani to donate 1 billion yen to Ukraine'.
- The Asahi Shimbun*, 2022b, 1 March, '在留邦人のウクライナ人配偶者ら、日本受け入れ検討へ (Ukrainian Spouses of Japanese Residents to be Considered for Acceptance in Japan)', (<https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASQ315T87Q31UTFK00X.html>).
- The Asahi Shimbun*, 2022, 7 May, 'Japan's dispatch of defense items to Ukraine seen as murky area'.
- The Asahi Shimbun*, 2022, 21 July, 'Vox Populi: State funeral for Abe will only serve to extol his actions in life'.
- The Asahi Shimbun*, 2022, 6 August, 'Taiwan flare-up clouds Asia ministerial gathering'.
- The Asahi Shimbun*, 2022, 28 October, 'S. Korea to take part in Japan's MSDF fleet review'.
- The White House, 2022a, *FACT SHEET: The U.S.-Japan Competitiveness and Resilience (CoRe) Partnership*, 23 May.
- The White House 2022b, *FACT SHEET: Quad Leaders' Tokyo Summit 2022*, 23 May, (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/fact-sheet-quad-leaders-tokyo-summit-2022/>).
- The White House, 2022c, *US National Security Strategy*, October, (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>).

- The White House, 2022d, *United States-Australia-Japan Joint Statement on Cooperation on Telecommunications Financing*, 15 November, (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/15/united-states-australia-japan-joint-statement-on-cooperation-on-telecommunications-financing/>).
- Tiezzi, Shannon, 2022, 13 August, 'Which Asian Countries Support China in the Taiwan Strait Crisis – and Which Don't?', *The Diplomat*.
- Tobita, Rintaro, 2022, 18 June, 'With prices rising, Japanese parties promise wage hikes to voters', *Nikkei Asia*.
- Tokyo Shinbun, 2022, 28 February, '岸田首相が「核共有」を否定 安倍元首相が議論提起も「非核三原則」から認めず (Abe Raises Nuclear Sharing, PM Kishida Nixes the Idea, Revising the 3NNP)', (<https://www.tokyo-np.co.jp/article/162849>).
- Twitter, 2022, Archived Twitter Handle of Abe Shinzō's murderer: ([https://web.archive.org/web/20220717073227/https://twitter.com/333\\_hill/](https://web.archive.org/web/20220717073227/https://twitter.com/333_hill/)).
- U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, 'Generals Say Integrated Deterrence Is Key to Protecting U.S., Allies, Partners', 3 March, (<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2954457/generals-say-integrated-deterrence-is-key-to-protecting-us-allies-partners/>).
- U.S. Department of State, 2022a, *U.S.-Australia-Japan Trilateral Strategic Dialogue*, 5 August.
- U.S. Department of State, 2022b, *Joint Statement on Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN)* 2022, 6 December, (<https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-australia-u-s-ministerial-consultations-ausmin-2022/>).
- U.S. National Security Council, 2018, *US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific*, 15 February, (<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>).
- Wallace, Corey, 2013, 'Japan's strategic pivot south: diversifying the dual hedge', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 13(3): 479–517.
- Wallace, Corey, 2020, 'The Future of Japan's Defense Is More Complicated than it Looks', *Tokyo Review*, 14 September.
- Wallace, Corey, 2021a, 'Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand's Layering of Strategic Communications (2016–2020)', *Asian Perspective*, 45(3): 587–620.
- Wallace, Corey, 2021b, 'Three Hawks and a Dove: Defense Issues and the 2021 LDP Election', *9DashLine*, 27 October.
- Wallace, Corey, 2021c, 'Kishida's opportunity to shake up Japanese defence policy', *East Asia Forum*, 11 November.
- Wallace, Corey, 2021d, 'Japan and Foreign Territory Strike: Debate, Deterrence, and Defense Strength', *Journal Of Global Strategic Studies*, 1(2): 30–77.
- Wallace, Corey, 2021e, 'Figure 2: Comparison of Suga, Kishida and Abe's Initial Cabinet Approval (Disapproval) Ratings', *Sigma1*, 18 October, (<https://sigma1.wordpress.com/2021/10/18/pre-election-key-indicators/>).
- Wallace, Corey, 2023, 'Political Survey Data Points for 2022', *Sigma1*, 10 February, (<https://sigma1.wordpress.com/2023/02/10/political-survey-data-points-for-2022/>).
- Wallace, Corey, and Giulio Pugliese, 2021, 'Japan 2020: Abe's Well-Laid Plans Go Awry', *Asia Major*, XXXI/2020: 103–47.
- Wang, Yi, and Matthew M. Chew, 2021, 'State, market, and the manufacturing of war memory: China's television dramas on the War of Resistance against Japan', *Memory Studies*, 14(4): 877–91.

- West, Michael J., & Aurelio Insisa, forthcoming, '«Reunifying» Taiwan through Hybrid Influencing: Cross-Strait Lawfare', *China Quarterly*.
- Wingfield-Hayes, Rupert, 2022, 26 March, 'Will Ukraine invasion push Japan to go nuclear?', *BBC News*.
- Wingfield-Hayes, Rupert, 2022, 26 September, 'Shinzo Abe: Why a state funeral for slain ex-PM is controversial', *BBC News*.
- Xinhua News*, 2022, 2 June, 'S. Korea, Japan hold talks on survey near disputed islets, dumping of nuclear wastewater'.
- Yamaguchi, Mari, 2022, 10 August, 'Japan's leader names new Cabinet to distance his administration from Unification Church', *Los Angeles Times*.
- Yamaguchi, Mari, 2022, 22 December, 'Japan adopts plan to maximize nuclear energy, in major shift', *Associated Press*.
- Yasui, Hiroshi, 2010, *UN Centricism in Japan: Understanding the Background of the Political and Social Movements Supporting the United Nations*, The University of Birmingham, (<https://theses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/1060/1/Yasui10PhD.pdf>).
- Yonhap News*, 2023, 1 January, 'S. Korea, Japan considering sharing radar information on N.K. missiles in real time'.
- Yoshimasa, Hayashi, & Akihiko Tanaka, 2022, '経済安全保障に不可欠な同志国とのハーモナイゼーション (Harmonization with like-minded countries essential for economic security)', *GAIKO*, 71, Jan./Feb.: 8.
- Yoshimatsu, Hidetaka, 2017, 'Japan's export of infrastructure systems: pursuing twin goals through developmental means', *The Pacific Review*, 30(4): 494-512.
- Zakowski K., 2023, 'A neoclassical-realist analysis of Japan's stance on cross-strait relations [version 2; peer review: 2 approved]', *StoMiedIntRelat* 2023, 2(25), (<https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17590.2>).
- Zappa, Marco, 2021, 'Japan's «Last Hope»: Myanmar as an Arena for Sino-Japanese Competition, Coordination and Global Standardization', *Journal of Contemporary Eastern Asia*, 20(2): 278-97.
- Zappa, Marco, 2022, 'Towards European «Smart Communities»? The EU's Energy Preoccupations and the Lesson of Post-Fukushima Japan', *IAI Papers*, 22(32): 1-13.



*Aurelio Insisa*

The University of Hong Kong  
insisa@hku.hk

*Tensions between Beijing and Taipei in 2022 reached their heights since the 1995-1996 Third Strait Crisis. The decision by the outgoing Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi to visit Taiwan in August, few months prior to the momentous 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, was immediately followed by an unprecedented display of military capabilities by the People's Liberation Army in the waters and airspace surrounding Taiwan. Forceful assertions of sovereignty over the island by Beijing, and explicit declarations of support in case of a Chinese attempt at a military takeover by President Biden preceded and followed the events that occurred in August, only to partially wane by the end of the year following the Xi-Biden G20 meeting in Bali. With no open route to improve cross-Strait relations, the Tsai administration further deepened relations with the US and expanded unofficial engagement with Washington's East Asian allies and the European Union and its member states. Shared support for Ukraine against Russia's aggression and growing synergies in industrial policy related to the semiconductor sector drove this engagement, without however producing meaningful results in trade policy. In November, the Kuomintang obtained a sweeping victory in the local «nine-in-one» elections. The result showed the party's continuing competitiveness in local elections, but the slow-down of the Taiwanese economy, rising inflationary trends, and declining popular support for the Tsai administration complicated the ruling Democratic Progressive Party's prospects for the 2024 general elections.*

KEYWORDS – Taiwan; China; Cross-Strait relations; geo-economics.

## 1. Introduction

This study reviews the major political and economic events occurring in Taiwan in 2022 by exploring developments in the field of cross-Strait relations, international politics, and domestic politics and economics. The essay consists of six sections in addition to this introduction. The first section covers the most relevant events that occurred during the year in review: the visit

\* Given the lack of a standardised system for the Romanisation of proper nouns in Taiwan, people's names and place names are transliterated either in Wade-Giles or Gwoyeu Romatzyh, following their most common usage. Proper nouns from China are Romanized in Hanyu Pinyin.

by then-U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan, the military response to this visit by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and Taiwan's countermeasures to Beijing's actions. The second section examines, from a broader perspective, the issue of Taiwan's security through the prism of the Beijing-Taipei-Washington triangular relation. The third section assesses the impact and implications of the Russian aggression of Ukraine for Taiwan. The fourth section further investigates Taiwan's position in global politics through the lenses of geo-economics, with a focus on the impact of U.S. industrial policy. The fifth section, instead, covers domestic politics and economics. The first segment discusses the results of the local elections held in November 2022, while the second segment provides an overview of the performance of the Taiwanese economy throughout the year in exam. The essay ends with conclusions summing up the main findings.

## *2. A dangerous August: The Pelosi visit, Beijing's response, and Taipei's countermeasures*

Between 2 and 3 August 2022, the then-US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's decided to lead a Congress delegation visit to Taipei, notwithstanding warnings by Beijing, concerns by the Biden administration, and - at least according to pro-China Taiwanese media - an attempt by the Tsai administration to withdraw the invitation [Zhou, Wang and Wu 2022]. The visit resulted in a critical deterioration of the security environment in the Taiwan Strait. Pelosi became the first House Speaker to visit the island following Newt Gingrich, who visited Taipei for a few hours in April 1997. During her stay, Pelosi visited the Legislative Yuan (LY) and met with the Republic of China (ROC) President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文). On the same day of Pelosi's arrival, the Eastern Theatre Command of the PLA issued a statement announcing «a series of joint operations» to be conducted «on the periphery of the island of Taiwan» from that day to 10 August. The PLA statement presented the operation as a «stern deterrence» against Washington and a «serious warning» against the Tsai administration [‘Dongbu zhanqu’ 2022]. A separate official Chinese statement, also issued on 2 August, announced the establishment of six «closure areas» for live drills surrounding Taiwan's territorial sea [PRC MND 2022], leading to a virtual blockade of the island. Two of these closure areas overlapped with Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) [Yu, Wang & Lin 2022]. On 4 August, the day after Pelosi's departure, the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) launched from the Mainland 11 ballistic missiles in four of the six closure areas. Four missiles reportedly crossed the island of Taiwan at an exoatmospheric altitude, thus without technically entering its airspace. Five missiles landed in Japan's EEZ [Shu 2022].

Starting on 2 August, aircrafts from the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and the PLA Navy (PLAN) conducted sorties within Taiwan's Air Defense Identi-

fication Zone (ADIZ) at an unprecedented scale and tempo, well beyond the supposed end of the «joint operations» on 10 August. Between 2 August and 2 September, PLAAF and PLAN aircrafts totalled 458 sorties, compared to the 625 sorties conducted between 1 January and 1 August 2022, and the 972 sorties conducted throughout 2021. By the end of 2022, the total number amounted to 1737, in contrast with the 1382 that occurred between 2019 and 2021 [Brown & Lewis]. Moreover, starting on 3 August, PLAAF and PLAN aircrafts began to systematically cross the so-called «median line» of the Taiwan Strait.<sup>1</sup> Previously, the median line had been crossed only on five occasions: in 1999, 2011, 2019, 2020 [Pedrozo 2020], and in May 2022. Following the beginning of the joint operations, 302 crossings occurred only in August. By the end of 2022, the total number of crossings was 564 [Brown & Lewis]. Conversely, the information provided by the ROC Ministry of National Defense (MND) on the activities of PLAN vessels in the waters of Taiwan's «surrounding region» were much less detailed. The number of vessels identified oscillated between 10 and 14 in the period from 5 August to 10 August. PLAN vessels, however, continued to maintain a constant presence in the «surrounding region» even after the official end of the joint operations [MND]. The two PLAN air carriers, however, were not deployed during the joint operations. Similarly, no meaningful activities from the PLA ground forces were reported – most likely a way to allay potential concerns over an actual amphibious invasion of Taiwan.

Well into late August, Beijing also used civilian unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs, «drones») to enter the airspace of the ROC-controlled Kinmen Islands facing the shores of Fujian. The repeated incursions and the harassment of ROC Armed Forces troops stationed there were systematically disseminated on Chinese social media. President Tsai eventually issued a presidential order calling for the adoption of «necessary and strong countermeasures» [ROCOP 2022b], and the troops reportedly shot down a Chinese UAV for the first time in late August [Yeh 2022]. These actions led Fujian authorities to strictly regulate the use of UAVs [Feng 2022].<sup>2</sup> In the wake of these developments, the ROC Ministry of Defense Chiu Kuo-cheng (邱國正) announced that any Chinese incursion in the Taiwanese airspace or in the territorial waters would be now considered a «first strike» [Hung 2022].

1. The «median line» of the Taiwan Strait is «a line of demarcation with five coordinates stretching from North Latitude 23' to 27' and East Longitude from 119' to 123'» established in 1955 by US military officers in 1955. Beijing had implicitly acknowledged its existence in the past by signing air transport agreements with the Ma administration in Taiwan [Lin 2022]. Weeks before Pelosi's arrival to Taipei, however, a Taiwan Affairs Office spokesperson publicly stated that the median line does not exist [TAO 2022].

2. All UAVs entering Kinmen County's airspace were civilian. This allowed Beijing to preserve a modicum of plausible deniability.



The PLA demonstrated its ability to impose a potentially devastating blockade over Taiwan, highlighting the stark shift in the regional military balance in the region that occurred since the 1995-1996 Third Strait Crisis. Chinese external and internal propaganda focused on this point, presenting the PLA's operations as acts of «encirclement» and «blockade and control» of the island [Liu 2022; Fan & Chen 2022]. The response to Pelosi's visit paved the way then for a dangerous «new normal» in the Taiwan Strait security environment, featuring a sustained increase in the number of PLA aircrafts and vessels in Taiwan's ADIZ and surrounding waters, and the effective erasure of the «median line».

Against this backdrop, it is difficult to paint Pelosi's visit in a positive light. Pelosi arguably prioritised her legacy and political calculations related to the U.S. midterm elections in November over Washington's and Taipei's long-term security interests. Her supporters may point to a couple of welcomed developments. First, an increased awareness of the existential threat that Taiwanese liberal democratic institutions face among the global and in particular Western public opinion. Second, the statements issued by G7 Foreign Ministers on 3 August, which called on «the PRC not to unilaterally change the status quo by force in the region, and to resolve cross-Strait differences by peaceful means» [U.S. Department of State 2022a], as well as those by the European Union (EU) High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell [EETOT 2022]. These statements were demonstrations of unity among major liberal democracies over the Taiwan issue hard to fathom during the Trump presidency. Third, the resilience of the Taiwanese economy, which was barely affected by the events surrounding Pelosi's visit [Blanchette et al. 2022]. Yet, these developments hardly balanced the deterioration of the security environment, because Beijing's reaction has substantially eroded its room for future escalation if a new flash-point emerges. In addition, with the exception of Japan and Australia, the reactions of regional state actors, while not overly sympathetic to Beijing, remained generally frosty to Washington [Zheng & Heijmans 2022; Kim 2022]. Arguably, the visit bolstered Beijing's narratives about the origins of current tensions on the Strait, which present Washington and Taipei as the two sides actually responsible for the disruption of Asia-Pacific's stability.

### *3. The Beijing-Washington relation and Taiwan: Trapped in an action-reaction dynamic*

Notwithstanding Pelosi's direct responsibilities, the deterioration of cross-Strait security should be seen as a new stage within an action-reaction cycle that has been characterising the relation between Beijing, Washington and Taipei since the second half of the 2010s. The origins of this dynamic trace back to: (1) China's decision, matured between 2014 and 2017, to abandon

its previous «strategic patience» over the Taiwan issue; (2) the emergence of full-fledged Sino-American competition under the Trump administration in 2018 – and the fundamental continuity (notwithstanding glaring differences in style) in the China policy of the Biden administration; and (3) the Tsai's administration eagerness to internationalise cross-Straits tensions and to deepen relations with Washington, and other major liberal democracies, in response to Beijing's actions [Insisa 2021].

In the months prior to the August crisis, Beijing's messaging – amplified by continuing presence in Taiwan's ADIZ and surrounding waters – insisted in condemning «foreign forces' interference and «Taiwan-independence' splittists' plots», while attempting to project a cognitive climate of inevitability over unification [‘2022 nian dui Tai’ 2022]. A key component of Chinese messaging in this stage was the focus of domestic propaganda and propaganda targeting Taiwan on the «Party's Comprehensive Plan for Resolving the Taiwan Issue in the New Era», originally introduced in the Communist Party of China's (CPC) 2021 Third Historical Resolution [‘Zhonggong zhongyang’ 2021; ‘2022 nian dui Tai’ 2022]. In line with past analyses of the nexus between propaganda and policy-making in the People's Republic of China (PRC) [Ohlberg 2013], the «Comprehensive Plan» was at the same time ubiquitous in official statements over the island *and* never clearly articulated, if not as a vague summation of Xi Jinping's (习近平) previous statements on Taiwan. Given the black-box nature of China's Leninist politics, it is possible that the Comprehensive Plan is an actual roadmap for unification, but its ubiquity may have simply reflected two necessities for the Party-centre. First, to present Xi as the actor in the controlling seat in the period leading up to the CPC 20th Congress eventually held in October. Second, the need to mask the atrophy of Beijing's Taiwan policy, which is stuck to a narrow interpretation of the «one country, two systems» framework, notwithstanding its rejection by the Taiwanese people.

The Biden administration, in turn, framed Beijing's message as evidence of an escalation geared toward a military invasion of the island, rather than as a Chinese attempt to signal concern over Washington's efforts to deepen cooperation with Taipei and internationalise cross-Straits tensions. Answering a reporter's question during his visit in Tokyo for the Quad Summit in May, Biden stated that the U.S. had to honour its «commitment» made to Taiwan to use military force if China invades [Sevastopulo, Inagaki & Hille 2022]. His answer provided further clarity to the President's position, after in 2021 he had first mentioned an unspecified «agreement» over Taiwan with Beijing, then mentioned American «commitment» to the defence of the island, and finally stated that Taiwan «is independent, it makes its own decisions» [Insisa 2022, p. 133]. Exemplifying the action-reaction dynamic sketched above, China not only used extremely assertive language to defend its sovereignty claims at the Shangri-La Dialogue held in June [IISS Shangri-La 2022], but it also launched an external propaganda cam-

paign using state officials and state media to deny the status of the Taiwan Strait as «international waters» [MFA 2022a; Kong 2022], pushing both Washington and Taipei to forcefully reject these claims [MOFA 2022a].

The rhetorical escalation continued after Pelosi's visit. On 10 August, Beijing issued the first white paper on the Taiwan issue under Xi's leadership. This document provided no new insights, but attempted to project a climate of inevitability over unification [SCIO 2022a]. A month later, Biden reiterated its administration's commitment to defend Taiwan in case of an «unprecedented military attack» [‘Biden tells 60 Minutes’ 2022]. The next week, the then-Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi (王毅) warned that «any move to obstruct China's cause of unification is bound to be crushed by the wheels of history» [MFA 2022b]. The same metaphor appeared also in the report delivered by Xi during the CPC's 20th Congress in October, together with customary vows to «never promise to renounce the use of military force» to achieve unification [SCIO 2022a]. Days later, both U.S. and ROC officials sounded the alarm of a potential use of military force by Beijing to change the status quo as soon as 2023-2024 [Marlow 2022; Chau 2022], in contrast with the previous forecast suggested identifying 2027 as the most likely period of «maximum danger» for the island, a talking point introduced by the then-exiting Commander of the U.S. Armed Forces Indo-Pacific Command, Philip Davidson, in 2021 [Sugeno & Nagasawa 2022]. Secretary of State Antony Blinken would further argue that Beijing decided that the «status quo was no longer acceptable ... they wanted to speed up the process by which they would pursue reunification» [Pamuk, Martina & Lewis 2022], forcing Chinese officials to deny such a shift [Zheng 2022]. Arguably, these statements are not realistic, because there is no indication of an imminent Chinese invasion. The composition of the new CPC Central Military Commission that emerged from the 20th Congress features neither officials possessing deep operational expertise on Taiwan, nor the composite configuration between PLA branches that would reflect the requirements of a massive joint operation such a military invasion [Wuthnow 2022]. Furthermore, any attempt at a military takeover of the island would require logistic, financial, and social preparations to such a scale that maintaining an element of surprise would be simply impossible [Culver 2002].

After the meeting held in November between Biden and Xi at the G20 Summit in Bali, widely seen as a joint attempt to establish a «floor» to a bilateral relation in free fall [Bose & Widiyanto 2022], the rhetorical escalation between China and the U.S. relatively waned. Indeed, immediately after the meeting with Xi, Biden himself declared «I do not think there's any imminent attempt on the part of China to invade Taiwan» [Moriyasu 2022]. Yet, the same action-reaction dynamic remained at play. President Biden's signature of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for the fiscal year 2023, which included in the new Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act (TERA) US\$ 2 billion in financing of military sales for Taiwan and

up to US\$2 billion a year in grant assistance for the island through 2027 [U.S. Congress 2022], was followed two days later, on Christmas day, by the second largest display of aircrafts and vessels into a single day joint patrol operation [Everington 2022].

The account provided above highlights one issue that deserves further examination: the significance of Biden's statements over an American «commitment» to defend Taiwan. Arguably, the statements in May and September are based on the U.S. President's interpretation of the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act as a legal tool committing the U.S. to defend the island in case of a Chinese military takeover. Furthermore, this interpretation is not seen in contradiction with Washington's own «one China policy», according to which – contra Beijing's interpretation – the U.S. recognises the PRC as the legitimate government of China but, crucially, stays mum over its sovereignty claims over Taiwan [Bush 2017].<sup>3</sup> This position, in turn, explains the efforts by White House officials and by Blinken to reassure Beijing – and the other actors in the Asia-Pacific – that the President's words do not affect the country's «one China policy» [White House 2022a; U.S. Department of State 2022b]. This approach, however, can be criticised as a convoluted attempt to deter Beijing that could in fact lead to the very same scenario that it tries to avoid – especially if the Xi administration misperceives its design and concludes that all remaining avenues for unification are closed.

The last segment of this section concerns defence cooperation between Washington and Taipei, and the Tsai administration's defence policy. The year in review saw one meaningful development in security cooperation: the announcement of cooperation between the ROC armed forces and the U.S. National Guard announced by President Tsai in May. It also saw the continuing routinisation of U.S. sales of weapons systems to Taiwan. Yet tensions between Washington and Taipei over the strategy underlying the ROC Armed Forces' military build-up continued. Both sides share a rhetorical commitment to a concept of asymmetrical defence that aims at leveraging Taiwan's advantages against a PLA amphibious invasion [U.S. DoD 2022a, p. 17]. Yet, the U.S. politico-military establishment continues to perceive Taiwanese resistance to this qualitative transformation of the ROC Armed Forces, given their continuing request for «expensive legacy systems» to counter the PLA in the air and sea domains [Timbie & Ellis, Jr. 2021]. Thus, the Pentagon blocked the sale of anti-submarine helicopters and tactical airborne early warning aircrafts, in the attempt to nudge Taipei toward its preferred acquisitions [Hille & Sevastopulo 2022]. Further tension over defence cooperation with Taiwan also emerged within the U.S. Congress. The TERA introduced in the 2023 NDAA, in fact, saw a drastic reduction of proposed American support for the Taiwanese military build-up, as the

3. Authoritative scholarship in international law has pointed out that Washington's normalisation of relations with Beijing in 1979 implies, in fact, the US recognition of Beijing's sovereignty over Taiwan [Crawford, 2006, pp. 206-221].

US\$ 10 bn, 5-year package built around grants originally proposed in the Senate was reduced to a US\$ 2 bn loan for one fiscal year – as discussed above [Wise & Hutzler 2022]. Concerns among the most vocal supporters of Taiwan in the U.S. policy environments were amplified by the reduction of naval activity across the Taiwan Strait throughout 2022 to nine transits, in contrast with the 10, 13, and 12 transits performed in the previous three years [Lindberg 2022].

In regard to Taiwan's defence policy, the MND proposed a record US\$ 18.3 bn defence budget for 2023 (13.9% higher than the 2022 budget), primarily focused on personnel and logistics and maintenance, with only about US\$ 0.8 billion destined to the purchase of new weapon systems [Hung & Yeh 2022]. Moreover, on 27 December President Tsai announced the extension of conscription, from the current four months to one year, starting from 2024. The reform aims at better addressing the threat of a Chinese invasion by improving the quality of training, preparedness, and size of troops. TVBS polls stated that 71% of Taiwanese people endorsed these changes ['Bingyi yanchang' 2023].

#### *4. Taiwan and the war in Ukraine: Sanctioning Moscow, supporting Kyiv, engaging EU countries*

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine that started on 24 February 2022 showed Taiwan's increasingly relevant role in international politics, as well as the width and scope of its expanding ties with EU member states. During a public event in Tainan on 25 February, President Tsai argued against comparisons between Ukraine and Taiwan, implicitly reflecting the then widely shared belief of Kyiv's rapid capitulation. She emphasised the Taiwan Strait's function as a natural barrier, the geostrategic position of the island, the resolve of the ROC armed forces, and the international (another word for «American») support that it enjoyed [ROCOP 2022a]. Following the success of the Ukrainian resistance and its international resonance, the Tsai administration's messaging over the war pivoted toward that very same comparison that it had initially avoided. The ideational contours of the conflict in Ukraine, in particular, enabled Taipei to further lean into the strategic narrative of a global confrontation between democracies and autocracies – a mainstay of Taiwanese political communication in the Tsai era [Insisa 2021].

Thus, Taipei firmly supported Ukraine via official statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MOFA 2022b], from the TECRO representative in Washington Hsiao Bi-Khim (蕭美琴) [Hsiao 2022], and from the President herself [ROCOP 2022c]. The support for Kyiv was not only rhetorical. Taipei immediately joined the U.S., the majority of American allies within and without NATO, and the member states of the EU in imposing sanctions against Moscow. By blocking the near totality of exports of semi-

conductors produced on the island towards the Russian Federation [MOEA 2022a; MOEA 2022b],<sup>4</sup> the Tsai administration provided a concrete contribution to the international efforts to hit the Russian domestic economy [Sonnenfeld et al. 2022, p. 49; Kofinan et al. 2022, p. 5], even though by the end of 2022 the country's industrial military complex had secured access to chips via Turkey, the UAE and China [Nardelli 2023; Taplin 2023]. Sanctions against Russia were also coupled with the delivery of material support for Ukraine, an effort primarily driven in the first months of the conflict by Taiwanese private businesses and citizens. Drones, ammunition, and sanitary equipment worth US\$ 45 million reached Ukraine from Taiwan in the first months of the conflict ['A kindred spirit' 2022]. Additional funding for US\$ 56 million were promised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu Jaushieh (吳釗燮) at the end of October [MOFA 2022c].

Given the minimal scope of bilateral relations between Moscow and Taipei, the Kremlin's response was limited to the inclusion of Taiwan in its list of «hostile countries». This was in fact a diplomatic *faux pas*, given Moscow's strict adherence to Beijing's «One China policy». Yet, as in the case of other countries aligning with the U.S.-led regime sanctions, Taiwan too saw, counterintuitively, a significant increase in imports of energy resources from Russia. Even before the beginning of the conflict, Russia played an important role in energy imports, being the third provider of both liquefied natural gas (LNG) (9.7% of the total) and coal (14.6%) to Taiwan [Myllyvirta et al. 2022]. The first five months of the war saw a significant increase in imports of energy resources from Russia, as Taiwan became the fifth coal-importer and the eighth LNG-importer in absolute terms [Myllyvirta et al. 2022]. The war, however, also established a new baseline for unofficial relations with Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> The «no-limit partnership» signed between Moscow and Beijing twenty days before the beginning of the invasion, and the consequent pro-Russian neutrality showed by the Xi administration [Chestnut Greitens 2022], damaged China's standing in Ukraine and sparked a new interest for Taiwan. In late August, a pro-Taiwan caucus was established in the Verkhovna Rada [Yang 2022], with a delegation eventually visiting Taipei and meeting with President Tsai in October ['President Tsai Receives' 2022]. Yet these developments did not signal a «pivot to Taipei» by the Zelensky administration. Kyiv instead repeatedly appealed to China to play a role in negotiations to end the conflict, without addressing Beijing's pro-Russian neutrality [Chew 2022]. President Volodymyr Zelensky himself re-

4. Only semiconductors whose technological standards date back to the period prior to the signature of the Wassenaar Agreement on Export Controls for Conventional Arms and Dual-Use Goods and Technologies in 1996 have been left out from ROC Ministry of Economic Affairs' export control list for Strategic High-Tech Commodities.

5. On the history of unofficial relations between independent Ukraine and Taiwan, see: Tubilewicz 2007, pp. 41-42; 156-158.

fused to explicitly criticise Beijing when asked about cross-Strait tensions by a reporter after his remotely-delivered speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June [Harrison 2022]. Arguably, more than fear of Chinese military support to the Kremlin, an unlikely scenario given Beijing's need to avoid secondary sanctions, the real constraints against an actual Ukrainian pivot to Taipei along the lines established by Lithuania rest upon Beijing's votes in future resolutions on the end of the conflict in the United Nations, and, above all, on the hopes of Chinese investments in the future reconstruction of the country after the war.

Against the backdrop of the Chinese refusal to press Russia to end its invasion, Taiwan's support to Ukraine also facilitated its engagement with EU countries, especially with those member states in Central and Eastern Europe who have strongly supported Ukraine and had already experienced a profound re-evaluation of their relations with China [Insisa 2022]. Evidence of this linkage is the fact that the Ukrainian parliamentary delegation that visited Taipei did so together with a counterpart from Lithuania, the Baltic country embroiled in a trade dispute with China due to its decision to deepen unofficial relations with Taiwan. Other parliamentary delegations to Taiwan arrived from Poland, Slovakia, Czechia, France, Germany, the European Parliament (headed by Vice-President Nicola Beer), and the international Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China.

Did the conflict in Europe, and Ukrainian resistance to Russia, impact the resolve of the Taiwanese population? A TVBS poll conducted in March showed that 52% of Taiwanese were favourable to sanctions against Russia, while 27% opposed them. Furthermore, 57% did not consider a Chinese invasion of the island to be more likely because of the war, against a 37% who believed so; 44% were confident that the ROC Armed Forces can defend Taiwan from a Chinese invasion, against an opposing 48%; 62% stated to be ready to defend the island, while 26% were opposed to armed resistance. Yet, at the same time, only 30% believed in an American military intervention in support of the island in case of a Chinese invasion, against 55% who were sceptical. This data point is particularly relevant, as in 2011, the percentages were almost perfectly inverted: 57% trusted an American intervention, while 27% were dubious about it ['E-Wu zhanzheng' 2022]. This shows how Washington's tacit acknowledgement of Putin's nuclear blackmail at the beginning of the invasion [Lewis 2022] has affected American credibility on the island, at least in the short term.

Even though the Taiwanese public showed a relative *nonchalance*, the war in Ukraine arguably also had an impact on the prospects for a conflict with China. As Saunders and Wuthnow argue, rather than dissuading Beijing, «[t]he operational challenges the Russian military encountered in its invasion of Ukraine and the political and economic sanctions imposed on Moscow ... will likely cause Chinese leaders to increase their estimates of the possible costs and risks of taking military action against Taiwan» [2022, p.

24]. In particular, Russia's litany of failures on the battlegrounds of Ukraine likely pushed the PLA to (1) re-evaluate plans for joint operations across the Strait; (2) re-consider the efficacy of both made-in-Russia weapons systems and of indigenous weapon-systems based on Russian models at its disposal; (3) re-examine those elements of the Russian military reforms that the PLA embraced in the past decade [Sacks 2022]. A far more consequential effect of the war in Ukraine for Taiwan in the short-term was the considerable delay in the delivery of US weapon systems redirected to the Eastern European country. By late 2022, the delay in deliveries resulted in a US\$ 19 billion-worth backlog [Lubold, Cameron & Youssef 2022].

##### *5. Taiwan's external relations and the geo-economic arena: The opportunities and challenges of other developed economies' «reshoring»*

Throughout 2022, the assertive industrial policy of the Biden administration reshaped the landscape of a global economy facing the challenges of a major war in Europe – with its impact on energy and food markets, climate change and energy transition, and the long aftershock of the COVID-19 pandemic. It did so primarily via two legal tools focusing on the critical semiconductors industry. First, the CHIPS and Science Act signed in August, which provided US\$ 52.7 bn in subsidies for «reshoring» semiconductor manufacturing in the country. Second, the U.S. Department of Commerce's export controls targeting the Chinese semiconductors industry, and thus PLA modernization, imposed in October. While trade data continue to contradict predictions of a Sino-American economic «decoupling» [Flatley 2022], Washington's re-orientation toward industrial reshoring has spurred similar adjustments among other critical actors in the global economy with complex relations with China: the two US allies in East Asia, Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the European Union (EU) and its member states, with the G7 and to a lesser extent NATO functioning as connecting tissues between these multiple actors [U.S. DoS 2022a; Terry & Orta 2022; Ozawa 2022]. The result has been the proliferation of multiple geo-economic dynamics across Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific that imbue trade relations with hard security.<sup>6</sup> Taiwan has played an increasingly relevant role in these dynamics, given the devastating consequences for the global economy of a «Taiwan contingency» caused by a Chinese attempt to coercively change the status quo, especially in light of the Taiwanese companies' dominance in the most critical sector of the contemporary global economy, the semiconductor industry. For this reason, this section examines U.S.-Taiwan

6. Geo-economics is «[t]he use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests, and to produce beneficial geopolitical results; and the effects of other nations' economic actions on a country's geopolitical goals» [Blackwill & Harris 2016, p. 20].



relations, U.S.-ROK-Japan-Taiwan relations, and Taiwan-EU-U.S. relations from a geo-economic perspective.

In regards to the U.S.-Taiwan relation, both the CHIPS and Science Act and the export controls targeting China directly impacted the Taiwanese semiconductor industry because of its dominant position in the global foundry market; its reliance on US companies' semiconductor-design; and the diminished but still relevant role of the Chinese market for its industry [Kamasa 2021]. Taiwanese officials rapidly signalled the island's company compliance to the new US export controls [Blanchard 2022]. The critical actor in this shifting geo-economic context was Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), the public company (of which the National Development Fund controls 6%) that exercises a near-monopoly on logic semiconductors below 10 nanometres (nm). TSMC inaugurated the establishment of its first plant in the U.S., in Phoenix, Arizona, in December, and announced the establishment of a second plant in the same state to produce 3 nm chips in the wake of the new American subsidies – as it did another Taiwanese major player in the industry, Global Wafer, which announced the establishment of a new plant in Sherman, Texas. TSMC also obtained a waiver to keep ordering American equipment for the production of 16 nm chips in its Nanjing plant that opened in 2021 [Cheng 2022a]. The company appeared however committed to maintaining its most cutting-edge foundries within Taiwan, given the announcement of a new plant for 1 nm chips within the Hsinchu Science Park on the island [Chang, Cheng & Huang 2022].

Yet, the vocal criticism by TSMC founder, Morris Chang (張忠謀), against the economic logic of American reshoring and the «death» of globalisation [Magnier 2022; Cheng 2022b] reveals the company's discomfort for the erosion of Asia-Pacific-centred global supply chains that had been crucial to its rise. The political aftershocks of American reshoring on Taiwan were also evident in the Kuomintang's (KMT, 國民黨) willingness to attack the Tsai administration, accusing it of «gifting» the company to Washington and of hollowing out the core sector of Taiwan's national economy [Pan 2022]. The Tsai administration in fact responded by introducing a new tax incentive bill to boost research and development on semiconductors on the island. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨) majority in the LY consequently approved the bill on 3 January 2023 [Yang 2023]. Underlying tensions between Washington and Taipei were in fact discernible in the trade relations. Notwithstanding a public appeal by the Ministry-without-Portfolio John Deng Chen-chung (鄧振中) [‘Tai-Mei’ 2022], Taiwan was in fact excluded from the launching of the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) in Tokyo in May. This decision was likely influenced by the looming spectre of Chinese reactions targeting the other members of this new – and vaguely defined – multilateral architecture. Washington steered Taipei toward a separate framework, the U.S.-Taiwan 21st-Century

Trade Initiative (USTTI), with the first round of consultations concluded in November [U.S. EOP 2022]. Broadly mirroring the IPEF agenda, the USTTI appears also to overlap another bilateral platform, the Technology Trade and Investment Collaboration framework launched in 2021, which delivered new agreements spanning the renewable energy, 5G, and health-care sectors between American and Taiwanese companies [U.S. Department of Commerce 2022]. These developments, however, only partially masked the lack of progress in the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) talks officially resumed in 2021, a stalling that reflects the protectionist headwinds in force both in Washington and Taipei.

The launching of another «minilateral» platform, the so-called «Chips 4» working group including Japan and South Korea, is further evidence of the Biden administration's geo-economic designs. The new working group, inaugurated in Taipei in September, nominally aims at strengthening semiconductor supply chain resiliency and cooperation. Yet, it is clear how the «techno-democratic» alignment targets China and, at the same time, aspires at integrating Taiwan, as a *de facto* state, within a U.S.-led geo-economic order – exactly the type of moves that Beijing frames as a hollowing out of its «one China policy». It is unsurprising then that Seoul, the American ally traditionally most wary of Beijing in the Asia-Pacific, has raised doubts on this platform [Davis et al. 2022], even as the newly elected conservative Yoon cabinet signalled a renewed willingness to engage Washington and Tokyo. The Biden administration's aspirations to integrate Taiwan through trade and security can be evinced also from the Joint Press Statement issued after the U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral Ministerial Meeting in June, which emphasised «the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait» and «shared concerns on activities that are inconsistent with the international rules-based order and stressed the importance of freedom of navigation and overflight» [U.S. DoD 2022b]. The statement, in fact, was later echoed in the first ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy issued in November [Government of ROK 2022, p. 28].

Much more than Seoul's timid re-assessment of its China policy, however, it was Japan's momentous shift in defence posture that dramatically changed the broader Asia-Pacific security environment. Spearheaded by the release of three critical documents in December, the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS), and the Defense Buildup Program – Tokyo's new approach aims at raising defence spending to NATO-level, acquire counterstrike missile capabilities, and overcome the civil-military divide in defence matters [Koshino 2022]. As Pugliese argues in this volume, the Kishida administration capitalised on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and on Beijing's response to the Pelosi visit in order to implement a *Zeitenwende* that was long in the making and that traces back to the transformational premiership of the late Abe Shinzō [Pugliese 2023]. Indeed, both the NSS and the NDS directly mentioned China's launch-

ing of ballistic missiles that landed in the Japanese EEZ during the August events [Cabinet Secretariat of Japan 2022, p.8; Japan MOD 2022, p. 6]. Immediate decisions following this shift involved the decision to install a surface-to-air guided missile unit and an electronic warfare unit on Yonaguni island, Japan's closest territory to Taiwan as part of a wider expansion of missile deployments across the Ryukyu Arc ['Japan to deploy' 2022], as well as the announcement of an upgrade of the military capabilities of the Marine Corp unit based in Okinawa, which will eventually be provided with anti-ship missiles by 2025 [U.S. DoD 2023].

Tokyo's new posture will obviously affect Beijing's calculus over a potential attempt at a military takeover of Taiwan. Furthermore, Japan's emphasis on economic and technological «capabilities» as «main elements» of the wider strategic toolkit to guarantee national security and regional stability [Cabinet Secretariat of Japan 2022, p.12] has the potential to create broader geo-economic synergies between Tokyo and Taipei – a development that was not unnoticed by President Tsai, who called for deepening ties in trade, tourism *and* security immediately after the release of the three strategic documents [ROCOP 2022d]. Yet, throughout 2022, Taipei and Tokyo failed to achieve any meaningful progress on the most pressing file, Taiwan's access to the Japan-led Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) free trade agreement (FTA). As in the cases of the stalling TIFA talks with the US and of the failed access to the IPEF, this phase of stalling reflects both major challenges in further liberalising the Taiwanese economy against the desires of the local public opinion, and China's capabilities to obstruct Taipei's agency in trade policy [Walsh 2022].

The layered nature of such geo-economic dynamics is evident also in the triangular relation between Taiwan, the U.S. and the EU. Brussels has stepped up its political, military, and economic presence in the Indo-Pacific in recent years [Pugliese 2022]. At the same time, it has also moved toward industrial reshoring in the semiconductor sector, introducing its own Chips Act [European Commission 2022a]. A consequence of this shift has been the EU's need to engage Taipei in order to achieve «technological sovereignty», while balancing opposed pressures from both Beijing and Washington. On the one hand, the Von der Leyen Commission decided to shelve plans to establish a trade- and technology-focused framework with Taiwan due to concerns over China's reaction in 2021 [Birmingham 2021]. On the other hand, the National Security Strategy issued by the Biden administration in October 2022 stated that «U.S. interests are best served when our European allies and partners play an active role in the Indo-Pacific, including in supporting freedom of navigation and maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait» [White House 2022b, p. 17].

Within the complex institutional architecture of the EU, the most vocal actor pushing the envelope of politico-economic engagement with Taiwan was the European Parliament (EP). The EP adopted multiple reports

favouring closer relations and cooperation with Taiwan and supporting its participation in international organisations. In particular, the EP adopted reports condemning Chinese military activities on the Strait – recognised as violations of the Taiwanese ADIZ [EP 2022a], and calling for the establishment of a bilateral investment agreement [‘MOFA welcomes’ 2022]. More in detail, the EP’s Indo-Pacific Strategy in the Area of Investment and Trade adopted in July urged the EU «to launch a structured dialogue with Taiwan on cooperating in green technology and the digital economy, including the semiconductor industry, with a view to signing a memorandum of understanding that benefits both the EU and Taiwan» [EP 2022b]. The Von der Leyen Commission eventually received these inputs, as it greenlighted the ministerial upgrade of trade talks with Taipei, which were held for the first time in Geneva [TW WTO 2022]. Both the launching of the EU Anti-Coercion Instrument [Duchâtel 2022], and the request of establishing a WTO panel to resolve the dispute with China over Beijing’s economic coercion against Lithuania [European Commission 2022b] are also welcomed developments for the Tsai administration’s aspirations to expand engagement with Europe.

Against the backdrop of engagement with Brussels, Taipei’s relations with Europe also developed through relations with EU member states, and through relations between Taiwanese and European tech companies. As in 2021, Lithuania played a critical role in expanding the space of Taiwan’s diplomatic engagement, given Vilnius’ decision to open mutual representative offices notwithstanding Beijing’s economic reprisal [Insisa 2022, pp. 145-146]. After rumours of a delay in promised investments from Taiwan, the Lithuanian Trade Investment Office, the counterpart of the Taiwan Representative Office established in 2021, was officially opened in November. The event followed multiple talks conducted in both polities, the opening of the Taiwan and Lithuania Center for Semiconductors and Materials Science in Vilnius, and the launching of the Central and Eastern European Investment Fund (CEEIF), sustained by the Taiwanese government-participated venture capital firm Taiwania and also involving Czechia and Slovakia. Moreover, after having repeatedly denied plans to establish a chip plant in Europe, it was reported that TSMC had begun negotiations for the opening of its first plant in the EU in Dresden, Germany [Li and Fang 2022]. The plant would focus on chips in the 22 nm 28 nm nodes and open in 2024 [‘TSMC-Pläne’ 2022]. At the same time, another major player in the industry, the Dutch company ASML, the monopolist in EUV lithography machines critical for chip-making, announced its largest ever investment in Taiwan with the construction, planned to start in July 2023, of a new factory in the Linkou Industrial Park of New Taipei [‘Aisimo’er’ 2022].

Two related developments that emerged by the end of 2022, however, could create obstacles to the best scenario for Taipei, which is the emergence of a wider front including both European and Asia-Pacific’s allies of

the U.S., that is willing to support Taiwan, to deepen its integration in a techno-democratic, geo-economic order, *and* to deter Beijing from using military force to change the status quo. The first development was the re-emergence of trans-Atlantic tensions, after the show of unity over Ukraine, on the impact of US subsidies on European business following the US Inflation Reduction Act. The second development was China's tactical charm offensive toward Europe which coincided with the country's reopening after the hasty abandonment of COVID-zero policies.

*6. Domestic politics and economics: The KMT sweeps the field in the «nine-in-one» elections, the economy slows down*

The most important event in Taiwanese domestic politics in 2022 was the so-called «nine-in-one» elections held on 26 November concerning mayors, councillors, and chiefs-of-villages across 6 first-level administrative divisions and 16 second-level administrative divisions. The elections saw a resounding victory of the KMT against the DPP, as in the previous electoral round held in 2018. The major opposition party in the LY won 14 local government seats. It held 11 seats, gained 3 seats – including for the first time since 2010 the mayoralty of Taipei with the victory of Wayne Chiang Wan-an (蔣萬安) – and lost 3 seats. Conversely the DPP held 4 seats, won 1, and lost 3, namely the mayoralties of Taoyuan, Keelung and Hsinchu. The personalist populist Taiwan People's Party of the outgoing Taipei mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲), instead, solidified its position as third party in the domestic electoral landscape, gaining the Hsinchu mayoralty from the DPP [CEC]. On the same day of this electoral round, a constitutional referendum regarding a proposed amendment to the Additional Articles of the Constitution to lower voting age from 20 to 18 and minimum age for candidacy from 23 to 18 was held. The votes in favour were 5.6 million, well below the 9.6 million votes threshold required to pass the amendment [CEC].

The KMT's victory strengthened the party leadership of the Chairperson and former Presidential candidate Eric Chu Li-lun (朱立倫), who had been challenged by the «deep-blue», pro-unification wing of the party at the beginning of the year [‘Zhang Yazhong’ 2022]. Conversely, the DPP's defeat resulted in Tsai Ing-wen's resignation from the Chairpersonship of the party. Yet the electoral result does not provide decisive indications for the next presidential and legislative elections to be held in January 2024. The KMT's victory reflects the party's staying power in local elections, which traces back to the construction of effective patron-client relations on the island throughout its decades of authoritarian rule, and their survival after democratisation [Fell 2018, pp. 132-149]. Notwithstanding a history of electoral competitiveness at the local level, the KMT has not appeared in fact capable of overcoming the «China cleavage» in Taiwanese politics, namely

the salience that the issues of Taiwanese identity, of political autonomy from Beijing, and of opposition to Chinese unification maintain in presidential and legislative elections [Batto 2018]. Polls from the authoritative Election Study Center of the National Chengchi University showed that only 14.4% of the Taiwanese identify in the KMT, the lowest data ever recorded, against the 30.8% of the DPP and the 8.4% of a surging TPP [ESC 2023]. Given the 45.6% of independent and undecided recorded on the poll [ESC 2023], it is possible to see a path for the KMT's return to power if it could engage swing voters. Yet the party – first under the short-tenured chairmanship of Johnny Chiang Chi-chen (江啟臣), and then under Chu's leadership – has failed to design a vision of the future of cross-Strait relations that is appealing to the Taiwanese electorate. Rocked by factional divisions and an electoral base detached from mainstream public opinion, the KMT has remained anchored to its «one China, multiple interpretations» version of the so-called 1992 Consensus.<sup>7</sup> Insisting on such formula, successful under the presidency of Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) between 2008 and 2016, fails however to recognise the gradual *glissement* of its meaning for Beijing that has occurred in Tsai era, as the Xi administration came to equate endorsement of the «Consensus» with bilateral commitment to unification under the «one country, two systems» framework [Insisa 2021].

This essay concludes with a brief outline of the major economic indicators during the year in review and its impact on the prospects of the major parties gearing toward the 2024 elections. Taiwan's GDP growth slowed down to 2.43% GDP compared to 6.53% the year prior, reflecting the island economy's dependence on the export sector as the global economy experiences profound uncertainty. In particular, in the fourth quarter of 2022 the economy shrank by 0.86% [ROCNS]. This was the first time that the economy shrank on a quarterly basis since 2016 and the worst data recorded since the Great Financial Crisis [Hou & Yung 2023]. By November 2022, industrial production, which had risen 9.98% in 2021, shrunk by 4.9% on a yearly basis, with manufacturing declining 5.3% [ROCNS]. Total exports reached however a new historical high, totalling US\$ 479 bn, growing 7.4 % on a yearly basis, but imports totalled US\$ 427 bn, growing 11.8% compared to 2021. As a result, the trade balance recorded a US\$ 12.3 bn surplus, a minus 19% compared to the trade surplus of the previous year. Exports to Mainland China and Hong Kong counted for 38.7%, compared to the 42.3% of the total in 2021, reaching US\$ 185.9 bn, while combined imports from the same two areas stood at 19.9% of the total, compared with 21.1 the year prior and amounting to US\$ 85.4 bn. By comparison, exports to the U.S. and Japan counted for 15.6% and 7% of the total, namely US\$ 75 bn and US\$ 33.6 bn, while imports from these two countries amounted to 10.6%

7. The KMT's version of the 1992 Consensus is an agreement with Beijing over the fact that Taiwan and Mainland China belong to «one China», but considers the ROC as the legitimate Chinese state [Insisa 2021].

(US\$ 45.4 bn) and 12.7% (US\$ 54.5 bn) [BFT]. Foreign direct investments (FDI) to Taiwan between January and November 2022 reached US\$ 12.4 bn for 2307 cases, a decrease of 5.7% decrease in the number of cases, but an increase of 84.7% in FDI amount compared to the same period of 2021 [MOEA 2022c]. Unemployment rate stood at 3.51% at the end of 2022, the lowest recorded since January 2001 [ROCNS]. Yet, increases in the prices of food, rent and fuel – caused by the long aftershock of pandemic-era fiscal policies, cost of energy transition in developed economies, and the war in Ukraine – led to a comprehensive 2.95% rise of the consumer price index on a yearly basis, the highest since 2008 [ROCNS].

While consistently low when compared to other developed economies, the rise of the consumer price index, occurring against the backdrop of historically depressed wages, has resulted in a perceived cost of living crisis. A slowing economy and continuing concerns over cost of living, in turn, constitute the main hope for the KMT to regain the presidency and the majority in the LY, because these trends have the potential to de-emphasise concerns toward Beijing's plans for unification and the polity's security. Against this backdrop, initial speculations over the next presidential elections sketched on an uncertain three-side race involving the new DPP Chairman and ROC Vice-President William Lai Ching-te (賴清德), the newly re-elected mayor of New Taipei Hou Yu-ih (侯友宜) for the KMT, and the TPP's Ko Wen-je ['2024 zongtong' 2023].

## 7. Conclusions

Nancy Pelosi's decision to visit Taiwan in August 2022 severely affected Taiwanese and regional security. The PLA's effective erasure of the so-called median line of the Taiwan Strait as an «unspoken» buffer zone between Beijing and Taipei, in particular, in particular, raises the risk of incidents and reduces room for further escalatory manoeuvres by China. This deterioration of cross-Strait security, however, was ultimately the result of deeply ingrained dynamics in the triangular relation between Beijing, Washington and Taipei. In detail, the two superpowers remain locked into an action-reaction pattern.; the tenets of Beijing's Taiwan policy remain unacceptable to the great majority of the Taiwanese electorate; and Taipei remains determined to shore up its fledgling security by further deepening relations with the U.S. and other major liberal democratic actors – an engagement facilitated by the support for the Western response to the war in Ukraine. This growing alignment with other liberal democracies, in turn, has been particularly visible in tech policy and growing coordination with Western and Japanese plans for industrial reshoring focusing on the semiconductor sector, but it failed to translate into concrete deliverables over access to new FTAs, a critical issue in Taiwan-EU engagement. The long-term viability of

this approach, centred on building-up resilience vis-à-vis Chinese plans for unification while aligning with Western and regional liberal democracies, will be tested in the January 2024 general elections. In fact, at a domestic level, the year in review also saw a relative weakening of the outgoing Tsai administration and of the DPP ruling DPP majority in the LY. More than the KMT's sweeping victory in the «nine-in-one» elections in the November 2022 – which was the result of deeply rooted local electoral dynamics – a decline of support for the DPP is rooted in the stuttering performance of the island's economy after the extraordinary results achieved during the high tide of the COVID-19 pandemic era, and in the persistence of structural socio-economic woes on the island.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [‘2022 nian dui Tai’ 2022] ‘2022年对台工作会议在京召开 汪洋出席并讲话’ (The 2022 Taiwan Work Conference opened in Beijing, Wang Yang attended it and delivered a speech), *Xinhua*, 25 January ([http://www.news.cn/politics/leaders/2022-01/25/c\\_1128299769.htm](http://www.news.cn/politics/leaders/2022-01/25/c_1128299769.htm)).
- [‘2024 zongtong’ 2023] ‘2024總統可能人選支持度民調’ (Opinion poll on the support for possible candidates for the 2024 presidential elections), *TVBS Poll Center*, 16 January ([https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll\\_center/2023/20230117/8e4be1105ab9f8817bba7535abcc8522.pdf](https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll_center/2023/20230117/8e4be1105ab9f8817bba7535abcc8522.pdf)).
- ‘A kindred spirit: Taiwan’s aid to war-Torn Ukraine’, 2022, *Oryx*, 10 August.
- [‘Aisimo’er’ 2022] ‘艾司摩爾不只建新廠 沈榮津：歐洲供應鏈擬在台落地’ (ASML will not just build a new plant. Shen Jong-chin: European supply chains plan to land in Taiwan), 中央通訊社 (CNA), 16 November (<https://www.cna.com.tw/news/afe/202212060095.aspx>).
- Batto, Natan F., 2019, ‘Cleavage Structure and the Demise of a Dominant Party: The Role of National Identity in the Fall of the KMT in Taiwan’, *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 4(1): 81-101.
- Bermingham, Finbar, 2021, ‘EU shelves Taiwan trade upgrade amid high-wire balancing act on China’, *South China Morning Post*, 17 November.
- [BFT] Republic of China (Taiwan), Ministry of Economic Affairs, Bureau of Foreign Trade, *Trade Statistics* (<https://cuswebo.trade.gov.tw/FSCE010F/FSCE010F/>).
- ‘Biden tells 60 Minutes U.S. troops would defend Taiwan, but White House says this is not official U.S. policy’, 2022, *CBS News*, 19 September.
- [‘Bingyi yanchang’ 2023] ‘兵役延長與蔡英文總統滿意度民調’ (Opinion poll on approval for the extension of conscription and President Tsai Ing-wen), *TVBS Poll Center*, 4 January ([https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll\\_center/2023/20230106/c6f12f98ade5bbfe4e808f3559053369.pdf](https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll_center/2023/20230106/c6f12f98ade5bbfe4e808f3559053369.pdf)).
- Blackwill, Robert D., & Jennifer M. Harris, 2016, *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft*, Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Blanchard, Ben, 2022, ‘Taiwan signals its chip firms will follow new U.S. rules on China’, *Reuters*, 8 October.



- Blanchette, Jude, et al., 2022, 'Speaker Pelosi's Taiwan visit: Implications for the Indo-Pacific', *CSIS*, 15 August.
- Bose, Nandita & Stanley Widiyanto, 2022, 'Biden and Xi clash over Taiwan in Bali but Cold War fears cool', *Reuters*, 15 November.
- Brown, Gerald C., & Ben Lewis, 'Taiwan ADIZ violations' (<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qbYF0VgDBJoFZN5elpZwNTiKZ4nvUCu5a7oYwm52g/htmview#>). Database compiled from official sources issued by the ROC Ministry of National and Japan Ministry of Defense.
- Bush, Richard C., 2017, *A One-China Policy Primer*, Center East Asia Policy Studies at Brookings.
- Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, 2022, *National Security Strategy of Japan*, December (<https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryoku/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>).
- [CEC] Republic of China, Central Electoral Commission, 選舉及公投資料庫 (*Elections and Referenda Database*) (<https://db.ccc.gov.tw/ElecTable/Election?type=Mayor>).
- Chang, Chien-chung, Cheng Hung-ta & Frances Huang, 2022, 'TSMC to build 1nm fab in Longtan: Hsinchu Science Park Bureau', *Focus Taiwan*, 6 December.
- Chau, Thompson, 2022, 'China could threaten war in 2023 to force talks: Taiwan official', *Nikkei Asia*, 20 October.
- Cheng, Ting-fang, 2022a, 'TSMC gets 1-year U.S. license for China chip expansion', *Nikkei Asia*, 13 October.
- Cheng, Ting-fang, 2022b, 'TSMC founder Morris Chang says globalization «almost dead»', *Nikkei Asia*, 7 December.
- Chestnut Greitens, Sheena, 2022, 'China's Response to the War in Ukraine', *Asian Survey*, 62(4-5): 751-781.
- Chew, Amy, 2022, 'Exclusive: Volodymyr Zelensky seeking «direct talks» with China's Xi Jinping to help end Russia's invasion of Ukraine', *South China Morning Post*, 4 August.
- Crawford, James R., 2006, *The Creation of States in International Law*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Culver, John, 2022, 'How we would know when China is preparing to invade Taiwan', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 3 October.
- Davis, Christian, Song Jung-a, Kana Inagaki & Richard Waters, 2022, 'US struggles to mobilise its East Asian «Chips 4» alliance', *Financial Times*, 12 September.
- ['Dongbu zhanqu' 2022] '东部战区将在台岛周边开展一系列联合军事行动' (The Eastern Theatre Command will launch a series of joint military operations at the periphery of the island of Taiwan), *Xinhua*, 2 August 2022 ([http://www.news.cn/2022-08/02/c\\_1128885615.htm](http://www.news.cn/2022-08/02/c_1128885615.htm)).
- Duchâtel, Mathieu, 2022, 'Effective deterrence? The coming European Anti-Coercion Instrument', *Institut Montaigne*, 2 December.
- ['E-Wu zhanzheng' 2022] '俄烏戰爭與兩岸議題民調' (Opinion poll on the Russo-Ukrainian War and cross-Straits issues), *TVBS Poll Center*, 17 March 2022 ([https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll\\_center/2022/20220323/5bd86644d5f540d742fd0fa580d3c0d.pdf](https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll_center/2022/20220323/5bd86644d5f540d742fd0fa580d3c0d.pdf)).
- [EETOT 2022] European Economic and Trade Office in Taiwan, *Taiwan: Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EP Debate on the Recent Developments*, 13 September 2022.
- [EP 2022a] European Parliament, *The EU and the Security Challenges in the Indo-Pacific*, 7 June ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0224\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0224_EN.html)).

- [EP 2022b] —, *Indo-Pacific Strategy in the Area of Trade and Investment*, 5 July ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0276\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0276_EN.html)).
- [ESC 2023] Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, 'Trends of core political attitudes', 13 January (<https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/eng/PageDoc?fid=7424>).
- European Commission, 2022, *A Chips Act for Europe*, 8 February (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0045&from=EN>).
- European Commission, 2022, *EU Requests Two WTO Panels against China: Trade Restrictions on Lithuania and High-Tech Patents*, 7 December ([https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_22\\_7528](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_7528)).
- Everington, Keoni, 2022, 'Video shows China's «strike drills» around Taiwan on Christmas Day', 26 December.
- Fan, Bin, & Chen Li, 2022, '东部战区继续开展联合演训 锤炼提升海空联合封控能力' (The Eastern Theatre continues to conduct the joint operations, refines and improves blockade and control capabilities), 中国军网 (*China Military*), 8 August ([http://www.81.cn/yw/2022-08/10/content\\_10177138.htm](http://www.81.cn/yw/2022-08/10/content_10177138.htm)).
- Fell, Dafydd, 2018, *Government and Politics in Taiwan*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Feng, John, 2022, 'China clamps down on civilian drones near Taiwan's islands', *Newsweek*, 22 September.
- Flatley, Daniel, 2022, 'US-China trade is close to a record, defying talk of decoupling', *Bloomberg*, 17 January.
- Gady, Franz-Stefan, 2022, '6 wrong lessons for Taiwan from the war in Ukraine', *Foreign Policy*, 2 November.
- Government of the Republic of Korea, 2022, *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific*, 28 December.
- Harrison, Mark, 2022, 'Taiwan a major topic of discussion at Shangri-La security summit', *ASPI – The Strategist*, 17 June.
- Hille, Kathrin, & Demetri Sevastopulo, 2022a, 'US accused of undermining Taiwan defences by focusing on «D-day» scenario', *Financial Times*, 17 May.
- Hou, Betty, & Chester Yung, 'Taiwan's economy shrinks by most since global financial crisis', *Bloomberg*, 18 January 2023.
- Hsiao, Bi-Khim, 2022, 'Ukraine has inspired Taiwan. We must stand against authoritarianism', *The Washington Post*, 24 March.
- Huang, Novia, & Joseph Yeh, 2022, 'In Taiwan's 2023 defense budget, biggest chunk to go to personnel', *Focus Taiwan*, 17 October.
- Hung, Tsi-cheng, 2022, '防長邱國正坦承海峽現狀已回不去 國軍改變第一擊設定' (The Ministry of National Defense Chiu Kuo-cheng admitted that the cross-strait status quo has collapsed, the ROC Army changed the definition of first strike), 聯合新聞網 (*United Daily News*), 5 October (<https://udn.com/news/story/10930/6663118>).
- 'IISS Shangri-La Dialogue 2022: China's vision for regional order', *IISS* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91mfXWBgKL4>).
- Insisia, Aurelio, 2021, 'No Consensus across the Strait: Chinese and Taiwanese Strategic Communications in a Contested Regional Order', *Asian Perspective*, 45(3): 503-531.
- Insisia, Aurelio, 2022, 'Taiwan 2021: Heightened Geo-Economic Relevance Amid Rising Cross-Strait Tensions', *Asia Maior*, XXXII: 125-151.
- [Japan MOD 2022] Japan Ministry of Defense, *National Defense Strategy*, 16 December.

- 'Japan to deploy missile unit on island near Taiwan', *The Japan Times*, 27 December.
- Kamasa, Julian, 2021, 'Microchips: Small and in Demand', *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* 295.
- Kim, Arin, 2022, 'Was Pelosi «snubbed» in South Korea?', *The Korea Herald*, 8 August.
- Kofinan, Michael, Richard Connolly, Jeffrey Edmonds, Andrea Kendall-Taylor, & Samuel Bendett, 2022, *Assessing Russia State Capacity to Develop and Deploy Advanced Military Technology*. CNAS.
- Kong, Qingjiang, 2022, 'Why is the Taiwan Straits not «international waters»?', *CGTN*, 17 June.
- Koshino, Yuka, 2022, 'Japan's transformational national-security documents', *IJSS*, 21 December.
- Lewis, Patricia, 2022, 'How likely is the use of nuclear weapons by Russia?', *Chatham House*, 23 September.
- Li, Lauly, & Cheng-Ting Fang, 2022, 'TSMC in talks to build first Europe chip plant in Germany', *Nikkei Asia*, 23 December.
- Lin, Cheng-yi, 2022, 'The Principle of «Estoppel» and Beijing's Sovereignty Claims over the Taiwan Strait', *Global Taiwan Brief*, 7(14): 7-10.
- Lindberg, Kari Soo, 2023, 'US cuts Taiwan transits even as China steps up military pressure', *Bloomberg*, 9 January.
- Liu, Xuanzun, 2022, 'PLA extends «Taiwan encirclement» exercises with anti-submarine warfare, showcases unrivaled area denial capability; «drills will not stop until reunification»', *Global Times*, 8 August.
- Lubold, Gordon, Doug Cameron & Nancy A. Youssef, 2022, 'U.S. effort to arm Taiwan faces new challenge with Ukraine conflict', *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 November.
- Marlow, Ian, 2022, 'Blinken says China wants to seize Taiwan on «much faster timeline»', *Bloomberg*, 17 October.
- [MFA 2022a] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on June 13, 2022*, 13 June.
- [MFA 2022b] —, 王毅: 任何阻挡中国统一大业的行径必将被历史车轮碾碎 (*Wang Yi: Any Move to Obstruct China's Cause of Unification Is Bound to Be Crushed by the Wheels of History*) 25 September ([https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbzhdt/202209/t20220925\\_10771180.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbzhdt/202209/t20220925_10771180.shtml)).
- [MND] Republic of China (Taiwan), Ministry of National Defense (<https://twitter.com/MoNDefense>).
- [MOEA 2022a] Republic of China (Taiwan), Ministry of Economic Affairs, *MOEA Reminds Exporters to Beware of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict and Business Risk*, 1 March ([https://www.trade.gov.tw/english/Pages/Detail.aspx?nodeID=86&pid=740252&dl\\_DateRange=all&txt\\_SD=&txt\\_ED=&txt\\_Keyword=&pageIndex=17&history=](https://www.trade.gov.tw/english/Pages/Detail.aspx?nodeID=86&pid=740252&dl_DateRange=all&txt_SD=&txt_ED=&txt_Keyword=&pageIndex=17&history=))).
- [MOEA 2022b] —, *High-Tech Commodities List for Exportation to Russia and Belarus Table of Contents*, 1 June (<https://www.trade.gov.tw/Files/PageFile/742117/High-Tech%20Commodities%20List%20for%20Exportation%20to%20Russia%20and%20Belarus.pdf>).
- [MOEA 2022c] —, *Taiwan FDI Statistics Summary Analysis November 2022*, 20 December.
- [MOFA 2022a] Republic of China (Taiwan), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *MOFA Solennly Reiterates That the Taiwan Strait Constitutes International Waters, Refuting False Claims Made by Chinese Officials during Recent Meetings with the US*, 14 June.

- [MOFA 2022b] —, *The Republic of China (Taiwan) Government Strongly Condemns Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in Violation of the UN Charter, Joins International Sanctions against Russia*, 25 February.
- [MOFA 2022c] —, *Remarks by Minister Jaushieh Joseph Wu at the 26th Forum 2000 Conference – Defending Taiwan after the Invasion of Ukraine*, 22 September.
- 'MOFA welcomes EP policy reports supporting Taiwan', 2022, *Taiwan Today*, 18 February.
- Moriyasu, Ken, 2022, 'Biden, Xi lay out red lines on Taiwan to avoid misunderstanding', *Nikkei Asia*, 14 November.
- Myllyvirta, Lauri, Hubert Thieriot, Ronja Borgmästars, Vera Tattari, & Andrei Ilas, 2022, 'Fossil fuel imports from Russia to South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan in the first five months of the invasion of Ukraine', *Center for Research on Energy and Clean Air*, 18 August.
- Nardelli, Alberto, 2023, 'Russia is getting around sanctions to secure supply of key chips for war', *Bloomberg*, 4 March.
- Ohlberg, Mareike, 2013, *Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment: External Propaganda (Duiwai Xuanchuan) as a Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics*, PhD diss., Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, 2013.
- Ozawa, Marc, 2022, 'Toward a Deeper NATO-Japan Cooperation', *NDC Policy Brief* 2022/19.
- Pamuk, Humeyra, Michael Martina & Simon Lewis, 2022, 'Blinken says China rejects status quo of Taiwan situation', *Reuters*, 27 October.
- Pan, Jason, 2022, 'KMT accuses government of «gifting» TSMC to US, warns of economic doom', *Taipei Times*, 28 December.
- Pedrozo, Raul, 2020, 'China's threat of force in the Taiwan Strait', *Lawfare*, 29 September.
- 'President Tsai receives Lithuanian, Ukrainian parliamentarians', 2022, *Taiwan Today*, 28 October.
- Pugliese, Giulio, 2022, 'The European Union's Security Intervention in the Indo-Pacific: Between Multilateralism and Mercantile Interests', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2022.2118425>.
- Pugliese, Giulio, 2023, 'Japan 2022', *Asia Maior*, XXXIII.
- [ROCNS] Republic of China (Taiwan), National Statistics, *Key Economic and Social Indicators* (<https://eng.dgbas.gov.tw/cl.aspx?n=4149>).
- [ROCOP 2022a] Republic of China (Taiwan), Office of the President, 總統: 臺灣捍衛主權及守護民主自由的決心 絕不會因為壓力和恫嚇而退縮 (*President: Taiwan Is Determined to Defend Its Sovereignty and Protect Its Democracy. It Will Never Shrink Back Because of Pressure and Intimidations*), 8 August (<https://www.president.gov.tw/News/26925>).
- [ROCOP 2022b] —, *President Tsai Responds to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, Attends Groundbreaking of Expanded Shipbuilding Facility*, 25 February.
- [ROCOP 2022c] —, *President Tsai Responds to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine*, 25 February 2022.
- [ROCOP 2022d] —, *President Tsai meets delegation led by Japanese House of Councillors member Seko Hiroshige*, 28 December.
- Sacks, David, 2022, 'What is China learning from Russia's War in Ukraine?', *Foreign Affairs*, 16 May.
- Saunders, Phillip C., & Joel Wuthnow, 2022, 'Crossing the Strait: PLA Modernization and Taiwan', in Joel Wuthnow, Derek Grossman, Phillip C. Saunders, Andrew

- Scobell, & Andrew N.D. Yang (eds.), *Crossing the Strait: China's Military Prepares for War with Taiwan*, Washington, D.C.: NDU Press, pp. 1-31.
- [SCIO 2022a] People's Republic of China, State Council Information Office, 台湾问题与新时代中国统一事业 (*The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era*), 10 August ([http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2022-08/10/content\\_5704839.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2022-08/10/content_5704839.htm)).
- [SCIO 2022b] —, 习近平: 高举中国特色社会主义伟大旗帜 为全面建设社会主义现代化国家而团结奋斗——在中国共产党第二十次全国代表大会上的报告 (*Xi Jinping: Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects - Report to the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party*), 16 October ([http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/25/content\\_5721685.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/25/content_5721685.htm)).
- Sevastopulo, Demetri, Kana Inagaki & Kathrin Hille, 2022, 'Joe Biden pledges to defend Taiwan militarily if China invades', *Financial Times*, 23 May.
- Shu, Shiaw-Hwang, 2022, '由中共軍演檢視其飛彈打擊能力' (Examining China's strike capabilities on the basis of its military exercises), 國防安全研究院 (Institute for National Defence and Security), 18 August (<https://indsr.org.tw/focus?typeid=25&uid=11&pid=427>).
- Sonnenfeld, Jeffrey, Steven Tian, Franek Sokolowski, Michal Wyrebkowski, & Mateusz Kasproicz, 2022, 'Business Retreats and Sanctions Are Crippling the Russian Economy', Preprint available at SSRN ([https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4167193](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4167193)).
- Sugeno, Mikio, & Tsuyoshi Nagasawa, 2021, 'Xi's potential 2027 transition poses threat to Taiwan: Davidson', *Nikkei Asia*, 18 September.
- ['Tai-Mei' 2022] '台美相互需要 鄧振中盼台灣加入美國印太經濟架構' (Taiwan and the US need each other, John Deng hopes that Taiwan will join the US IPEF), 2022, *CNA*, 9 March (<https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aip/202203090434.aspx>).
- Taplin, Nathaniel, 2023, 'How Russia supplies its war machine', *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 March.
- [TAO 2022] People's Republic of China, Taiwan Affairs Office, '«海巡06»轮列编 国台办: 奉劝民进党当局停止借题发挥' (*The TAO Advises DPP Authorities To Stop Making a Fuss over the Patrols of the Haixun 06*), 13 July ([http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/m/fyrbt/202207/t20220713\\_12452044.htm](http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/m/fyrbt/202207/t20220713_12452044.htm)).
- Terry, Sue Mi, & Kayla Orta, 2022, 'South Korea's Important Achievement at the NATO Summit', *Wilson Center*, 30 June.
- Timbie, James & James O. Ellis, Jr., 2021, 'A Large Number of Small Things: A Porcupine Strategy for Taiwan', *Texas National Security Review* 5(1): 84-93.
- 'TSMC-Pläne für Fabrik in Dresden werden konkreter' (TSMC plans for a fabric in Dresden become more concrete), 2022, *Der Spiegel*, 23 December.
- Tubilewicz, Czeslaw, 2007, *Taiwan and Post-Communist Europe: Shopping for Allies*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- [TW WTO 2022] Permanent Mission of the Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu to the World Trade Organization, *Trade Minister John C.C. Deng Met with the EP Delegation and Discussed the Potential Cooperation*, 14 June.
- U.S. Congress, 2022, *H.R.7776 - James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023*, 23 December.
- U.S. Department of Commerce, 2022, *Commerce Official Celebrates U.S.-Taiwan Trade at Signing Event*, 14 October.

- [U.S. DoD 2022a] U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, 27 October.
- [U.S. DoD 2022b] —, *United States-Japan-Republic of Korea Trilateral Ministerial Meeting (TMM) Joint Press Statement*, 11 June.
- [U.S. DoD 2023] —, *U.S. and Japanese Leaders Chart Path to Strengthen 'Cornerstone' Alliance*, 11 January.
- [U.S. DoS 2022a] U.S. Department of State, *G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement on Preserving Peace and Stability Across the Taiwan Strait*, 3 August.
- [U.S. DoS 2022b] —, *The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China*, 26 May.
- [U.S. EOP 2022] United States, Executive Office of the President, Office of the United States Trade Representative, *United States and Taiwan Conclude Two Days of Productive Meetings Under the U.S.-Taiwan Initiative on 21st-Century Trade*, 9 November.
- Walsh, Henry, 2022, 'Taiwan's Dual Challenges in Joining the CPTPP', *Global Taiwan Brief*, 7(2): 12-15.
- White House, 2022a, *Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan*, 20 September.
- White House, 2022b, *National Security Strategy*, 12 October 2022.
- Wise, Lindsay, & Charles Hutzler, 2022, 'Taiwan, trying to fend off China, to get loans, not grants, to buy U.S. weapons', *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 December.
- Wuthnow, Joel, 2022, 'Xi's New Central Military Commission: A War Council for Taiwan?', *China Leadership Monitor* 74.
- Yang, William, 2022, 'Defying China, Ukraine and Taiwan build ties', *Deutsche Welle*, 30 September.
- Yang, Sophia, 2023, 'Bill for Taiwan's largest R&D tax break passes 3rd reading', *Taiwan News*, 7 January.
- Yeh, Joseph, 2022, 'Taiwan troops on Kinmen shoot down Chinese drone for first time', *Focus Taiwan*, 1 September 2022.
- Yu, Matt, Novia Huang & Sean Lin, 2022, 'Taiwan's silence on China missile paths draws mixed views', *Focus Taiwan*, 5 August.
- ['Zhang Yazhong' 2022] '張亞中：國民黨縣市長選舉若未拿下16席朱立倫應下台' (Chang Ya-chung: Eric Chu should step down if the KMT fails to win 16 seats in the county-level and mayoral elections), 自由時報 (*Liberty Times*), 29 April (<https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/3909494>).
- Zheng, Sarah, 2022, 'China envoy denies US claim of faster timeline for taking Taiwan', *Bloomberg*, 3 November.
- Zheng, Sarah, & Philip Heijmans, 2022, 'Pelosi trip sets back Biden's effort to woo Asia against China', *Bloomberg*, 9 August.
- [Zhonggong zhongyang 2021] '中共中央关于党的百年奋斗重大成就和历史经验的决议' (Third Resolution of the CPC Central Committee on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century), 人民网 (*People's Daily.com*), 16 November (<http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2021/1116/c1001-32284163.html>).
- [Zhou, Wang & Wu 2022] Zhou Zhihao, Wang Jiayuan & Wu Hongxun, 2022, '裴洛西質疑我撤邀 仍堅持訪台' (Pelosi called into question the withdrawal of her invitation to Taiwan, decided to visit anyway), 中國時報 (*China Times*), 2 August (<https://www.chinatimes.com/newspapers/20220802000337-260119?chdtv>).



# HONG KONG 2021-2022: A NEW LIFE IN THE SHADOW OF CHINA

*Claudia Astarita*

Sciences Po  
claudia.astarita@sciencespo.fr

*After the implementation of the National Security Law (NSL) in 2020 the Hong Kong Special Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China (HKSAR) has gone through a period of tremendous changes. This paper argues that the enactment of the NSL has not only imposed a stricter frame on Hong Kong civil society in terms of rule of law and human rights, but it has also created the conditions for implementing new reforms aimed at increasing the Communist Party of China (CPC) leverage on every aspect of the society. A series of political and economic decisions have been taken to facilitate the full integration of Hong Kong into the Chinese system. After discussing the logic behind these evolutions, the article explains to what extent the recent transformation HKSAR has been going through will inevitably erode its reputation as the most relevant financial hub in Asia.*

KEYWORDS - Hong Kong; China; National Security Law; Censorship; Freedom; Direct Rule.

## *1. Introduction*

The essay explores the developments which occurred in the Hong Kong Special Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China (HKSAR) in the fields of politics, media, domestic economy, and international relations in 2021 and 2022. The first section, analyzing the consequences of the implementation of the National Security Law (NSL), untangles the impact of the new legislation on freedom of expression, civil society, education, and the local political system. The second section provides an assessment of the current economic situation, taking into consideration both the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequences of the rapprochement between Hong Kong and Mainland China on HKSAR credibility as an international financial center. The conclusive section situates these developments within a broader perspective of Hong Kong international projection by discussing the recent migration wave HKSAR is experiencing as well as its specific relationship with Taiwan.



## *2. Hong Kong National Security Law: An assessment on a new political equilibrium*

2021 and 2022 have marked for Hong Kong the years of a progressive and inevitable homogenization to mainland China's habits and standards. In June 2020, the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) imposed a new National Security Law (NSL) on Hong Kong implementing major structural changes that significantly reduced the city's autonomy.

The new law has been considered as formally marking the end of the city's «high degree of autonomy», associated with the One Country Two Systems (OCTS) constitutional principle formulated in the early 1980s during negotiations over Hong Kong between China and the United Kingdom [Wong 2020].

Two years after the implementation of this new law, it is important to offer a first assessment on its impact on several domains of the Hong Kong society: Media, civil society, education, and the political system.

### *2.1. The media crackdown*

Between 2021 and 2022, Hong Kong experienced a massive regression in media freedom. On 17 June 2021, Hong Kong police raided for the second time the offices of Apple Daily newspaper [Davidson 2021, June 17]. The editor-in-chief Jimmy Lai and senior executives of the paper's parent company Next Digital were arrested on national security charges and the newspaper's assets frozen. On 23 June, the newspaper announced its closure. Despite attracting international criticism, Lai's sentence to five years and nine months in prison for fraud in December 2022 validated the skepticism expressed by a Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents' Club (FCC) survey released in November 2021 [Lindberg 2021, November 5]. The report claimed that working conditions in HKSAR had significantly deteriorated since the introduction of the National Security Law, with 46% of participating journalists claiming they were considering leaving the island.

Because of this report, the FCC has been accused by the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC in Hong Kong of sowing discord, abandoning its professional ethics, and using press freedom to interfere in local governance. Just a few months later, in April 2022, the FCC suspended its annual Human Rights Press Awards, explaining that «new red lines» and «significant areas of uncertainty» in Hong Kong could have put the Club in a position of «unintentionally violate the law» by continuing to endorse its 25 years old practice. This statement pushed eight members of the club's press freedom committee to resign. From 2023, the awards will be hosted by Arizona State University in the United States [Pomfret 2022, April 25].

The Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) had also been targeted with fierce criticism from Chinese state media. On 13 August 2021, PRC

party-state media outlet Wen Wei Po labeled HKJA an «anti-government political organization». On 14 September, Secretary for Security Chris Tang Ping-keung accused the association of infiltrating schools to recruit students [Cheng 2021, September 15].

On 9 August, Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced that public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) would develop a long-term partnership with state-owned China Central Television (CCTV) and China National Radio, to air more programs and «nurture a stronger sense of patriotism» in Hong Kong. After that many long-running public discussion programs were taken off air, on 29 September, RTHK formally issued its new editorial guidelines, emphasizing its commitment to prevent and suppress acts potentially endangering national security and to remind staff to limit, if not completely avoid, any contact with foreign Governments and political organizations [Lam 2021, September 29].

On 29 December 2021, about 200 National Security Police officers raided the offices of pro-democracy online news outlet Stand News, arresting six senior staff members for allegedly conspiring to publish seditious publications. The action forced Stand News to cease all operations and dismiss all staff with immediate effect.

In addition to local media, the presence of foreign journalists and news outlets in Hong Kong has also been negatively impacted by the NSL over the last two years. In November 2021 the Economist editor-in-chief Zanny Minton Beddoes stated that the Hong Kong immigration authorities had declined to renew the employment visa of the magazine's correspondent, Sue-lin Wong, without providing any explanations. Right after the incident, Chief Executive Carrie Lam noted during a press conference that issuing visas is at the total discretion of the Government [Rai 2021, November 13].

After these incidents, several high-profile journalists, commentators, and broadcasters ceased their programs or departed from Hong Kong, while for those who decided to remain in the Special Administrative Region self-censorship became more widespread, anticipating a progressive and substantial erosion of freedom of expression in the region.

## 2.2. *The decay of local civil society*

All along 2021, all major civil society organizations that were not pro-establishment were closed. Activists justified their choice by fearing threats to personal safety, to the organization and to the people directly or indirectly working with the latter.

A total of 50 organizations have officially disappeared, including both solid institutions such as the Civil Human Rights Front, the China Human Rights Lawyers Concern Group, the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, the Democratic Alliance, the local chapter of Amnesty International, and less structured groups such as

student unions, trade unions, media groups, and church-related groups. Despite the disbandment, many leaders of these groups have been arrested.

To make sure that particularly obstinate chiefs would not reorganize themselves into a new group, Hong Kong tax code was revised to stipulate that any group supporting, promoting, or engaging in activities detrimental to national security would not be recognized as a charitable organization. Therefore, Hong Kong civil society was pushed to adopt the same codes that have characterized China civil society over the last few years, that is accepting to operate only within the fields that the government considers as non-sensitive [Poon 2022, July 24].

In October 2021, Chief Executive Carrie Lam confirmed in her last annual Policy Address that a «new era» had started for Hong Kong under the Beijing-drafted NSL [Kwan 2021, October 6]. During this occasion, the need to strengthen law enforcement to tackle perceived threats was emphasized. To achieve this goal, the Chief Executive proposed new initiatives to thwart supposed threats to national security, including terrorism, cyber and data security. The Home Affairs Department was charged to discuss new measures to formally criminalize fake news, hate speech, and insults to public officers, and the Security Bureau to reform police counter-terrorism capabilities through better training, more efficient infrastructure, and massive spread of the use of new technologies.

After blaming the «incessant and gross interference in Hong Kong affairs by external forces» as the «invisible hands» behind 2019 demonstrations, Lam emphasized that to better protect the Hong Kong society, a Film Censorship Bill and amendments to the Regional Flag and Emblem Ordinance in accordance with the National Flag and Emblem Ordinance would have been considered. The former was enacted at the end of October 2021, guaranteeing to the chief secretary – the second-most powerful figure in Hong Kong administration – the power to revoke a film's license if it is found to «endorse, support, glorify, encourage and incite activities that might endanger national security» [BBC News 2021, October 27]. Similarly, the latter was amended to outlaw acts including the desecration of the Chinese national flag and national emblem on the internet [Chau 2022, October 19]. Public libraries were also asked to remove around seventy «dangerous» titles.

Since June 2020, around 162 individuals including former pro-democracy activists, opposition lawmakers, journalists and academics have been arrested under the NSL and other related legislation. 99 of them have been charged, and around thirty activists located overseas have been disclosed by a specific wanted list.

It is important to remember that the possibility of granting a bail has been regarded as an exception in the NSL spectrum. In the case of the 47 pro-democracy activists prosecuted in relation to the primary elections, only 14 secured bails as of the end of 2021, transforming pretrial detentions into another source of concern. In December 2021, the Court of Final Appeal

confirmed that the standard for granting bail to national security suspects could also apply to those charged under other laws, if the alleged acts were seen as endangering national security. These could include offenses listed in Article 23 of the Basic Law.

The formal sentencing for the first conviction of a case under the NSL took place in July 2021. The court handed down a nine-year sentence to Tong Ying-kit, a 25-year-old Hongkonger, for «incitement to secession» and «engaging in terrorist activities». The young man had been arrested on 1 July 2020, for driving his motorcycle around a Hong Kong neighborhood with a protest banner and colliding with police officers who tried to stop him, injuring three of them.

### 2.3. *External reactions*

In July 2022, the UN Human Rights Committee circulated a report formalizing its findings on Hong Kong-China, Macao-China, and other four countries to express its concerns and recommendations on the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights [UNHCR 2022].

Regarding Hong Kong, the Committee emphasized its concern about the «overly broad interpretation of Hong Kong's NSL, which was passed by the National People's Congress of China without consultation with the Hong Kong public». The report reminded that since its enactment in 2020, the NSL led to the arrests of over 200 people, including twelve children. The lack of clarity on the concept of «national security» and the possibility of transferring cases from Hong Kong to mainland China, which is not a State party to the Covenant, for investigation, prosecution, trial and execution of penalties, were identified as important shortcomings that required a formal and urgent adjustment, inviting the local government to temporarily freeze the application of the NSL while waiting for requested modification to be implemented.

The Committee also raised specific concern about the important number of civil society organizations, including trade and student unions, which have relocated or ceased to operate since the enactment of the NSL. For this reason, the Committee explicitly requested that «Hong Kong refrain from taking any action that could curb the freedom of association and ensure that members of civil society will not be prosecuted under the NSL for their participation in the current review».

With similar tones, concern was expressed about the fact that, in Macao, several peaceful assemblies had been banned by the authorities because they were deemed to be promoting «purposes contrary to the law». «The Committee also questioned the use of recording devices by the police during other demonstrations and the risk of those recordings being misused. It asked Macao to ensure that any restrictions imposed on assemblies should comply with the strict requirements set out in the Covenant and clarify the definition of for purposes contrary to the law» [UNHCR 2022].

#### 2.4. *Reorganizing Hong Kong education system*

The National Security Law affected the Hong Kong education system at all levels. In October 2021, the Education Bureau released a circular providing national security guidelines for school administration to help schools to implement new measures «to maintain a safe and orderly learning environment in schools and promote national security education».

Several months before the issuing of this circular, rumors started spreading about new measures forcing local universities to film newly established «national security education» classes to monitor students' reactions to them. Although these classes were meant at informing students about which sorts of behaviors could constitute a breach of the law, concerned students reported that both materials and in-class discussions were also emphasizing patriotism to reinforce a new understanding of Chinese identity among Hong Kong residents [Cheng & Chung 2021, November 8].

In August 2022, this practice was further formalized, with Hong Kong universities announcing to their undergraduate cohorts that the completion of a non-credit online course on the Hong Kong Constitution, the Basic Law and the National Security Law would have become compulsory for graduation. At the same time, the Hong Kong Education Bureau announced that copies of a speech made by Chinese President Xi Jinping during his visit to the city in July would have been distributed to local schools and kindergartens, for teachers to contribute to the studying and spreading of its key messages. This initiative marked the very first time for the government to impose a Chinese leader's speech in the broad educational system for studying [Leung 2022, August 17].

The Education Bureau informed educators that they were expected to «accurately comprehend the constitutional order under 'one country, two systems', deepen their awareness of the trends in both the country and the world, and understand the importance of Hong Kong's integration» into China [Ng 2022, August 15].

In an environment that had already become particularly constrained, the removal in December 2021 of «The Pillar of Shame», a sculpture created by Danish artist Jens Galschiøt to commemorate the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, which had been on the University of Hong Kong (HKU) campus since 1997, did not surprise HKSAR observers. The university explained its decision was based on potential safety issues and legal risks.

A few months earlier, on 2 June, the Hong Kong Alliance shut down its museum dedicated to remembering the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. On 27 July the association pleaded guilty to operating the museum without a public entertainment license. On 9 September, National Security Police raided the museum to collect «suspicious items» for investigation. An online-only museum dedicated to remembering the Tiananmen Square massacre opened on 4 August, but internet access to the website was blocked from 29 September.

### 2.5. *New rules for a new government*

In March 2021, China's National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) amended the annexes of the Basic Law to alter Hong Kong's electoral system. The new system was meant at guaranteeing to Beijing the right to directly vet candidates for the Legislative Council (LegCo) and the Election Committee that selects the Chief Executive, offering to the Communist Party of China (CPC) a near-total control over all levels of Hong Kong authorities: the Government, the LegCo and the Election Committee.

The Election Committee was enlarged from 1200 to 1500 members. Aiming at facilitating the installment of an entirely pro-establishment corp, its composition and role were altered. After the elimination of its traditional 117 seats reserved for District Councilors, new seats for members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and Hong Kong members of selected national organizations were added. The Election Committee was given new powers of scrutiny in the process of LegCo's members selection.

In terms of LegCo size and composition, the total number of seats grew from 70 to 90, with only twenty secured through direct elections (geographical constituencies). While thirty seats were maintained as functional constituencies and filled by pro-establishment figures, the remaining forty seats were filled by the Election Committee. The reform made it illegal to call on people to cast blank votes and supported the creation of a Candidate Eligibility Review Committee to disqualify contenders identified as «unpatriotic» in the Election Committee, the LegCo and the Chief Executive elections. The new legislation also specified that decisions arrived after consultation with the National Security Committee would not be subject to judicial challenges.

Before proceeding with the formal approval of the previously mentioned amendment, on 23 February 2021 the Hong Kong government introduced the Public Offices Bill 2021 to facilitate the transition to the new system. The new ordinance with retroactive character formally requested current and future members of district councils to take an oath when assuming office. The government also specified that disqualified members would have been asked to return their salaries and allowances.

In July 2021, 214 district councilors decided to resign autonomously. Two months later, 49 more pro-democracy district councilors were formally disqualified for upholding «non genuine» oaths [Shing 2021, July 15]. The decision was taken after an in-depth exam of opinions all LegCo members had previously expressed.

To further formalize the new centralized control over local elections, in July 2021 the Candidate Eligibility Review Committee (CERC) was charged with the screening of election candidates, precising that its decisions could not be challenged in the courts. Under this new system, candidates were meant to undergo a first check coordinated by National Security

Police, and then face the CERC's assessment. The seven members of the committee were chosen on 6 July<sup>1</sup>, and the following day CERC chairman John Lee Ka-chiu specified the screening criteria endorsed by the committee: «truly upholding the Basic Law» and «truly bearing allegiance to the Hong Kong SAR». All candidates that were not responding to these criteria would have been labeled as «fake patriots». In addition, each candidate had to secure the support of at least two members of each of the five sectors in the reformed Election Committee, offering the government a further means to block the candidature of undesirable figures.

On 26 August, the CERC, following the advice of the Committee for Safeguarding National Security of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, disqualified incumbent legislator Cheng Chung-tai from taking part in the December legislative elections, deciding that the candidate did not fulfill the requirements to uphold the Basic Law [Cheung 2021, August 26]. Cheng's disqualification left only one non pro-establishment politician in the legislature.

All these initiatives have been meant at paving the way for the success of a new electoral system aimed at marginalizing any sort of pro-democratic and pro-reform voice in Hong Kong. This evolution marks a significant and apparently irreversible change when compared with November 2019 district council elections, in which pro-democracy candidates secured over 80% of the seats and gained absolute majorities in 17 of the 18 district councils [Graham-Harrison 2019, November 25].

## 2.6. *An electoral year ending with a new government with no opposition*

LegCo elections eventually took place in December 2021, offering voters a pool of overwhelmingly pro-Beijing candidates vetted for compliance with a «patriots only» policy. Numerous major pro-democracy candidates arrested for involvement in the 2020 primary remained in jail. The pro-Beijing camp won all but one seat, and turnout was a record low of 30 percent. In 2016, 74.3 percent of eligible voters had gone to the polls. Historically, low turnouts in Hong Kong have occurred in the constituencies with the largest number of potential pro-democracy voters. In December 2021, staying away from the polls was considered as the last possible way to protest the Basic Law amendment.

The perspective of a significant portion of Hong Kong population was not shared in Mainland China. Right after the elections, China's State

1. CERC composition is as follows: Chief Secretary for Administration, John Lee Ka-chiu; Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs, Erick Tsang Kwok-wai; Secretary for Security, Chris Tang Ping-keung; Secretary for Home Affairs, Caspar Tsui Ying-wai; Elsie Leung Oi-sie, former deputy director of the NPCSC's Hong Kong Basic Law Committee and former Secretary for Justice; Rita Fan Hsu Lai-tai, former NPCSC member and former LegCo president; and Lawrence Lau Juen-ye, former vice-chancellor of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Council released a White Paper on «democratic progress in Hong Kong». The document described the 2021 LegCo elections as « open, fair, secure and clean» and the result of China's successful effort to «establish a model of democracy with Chinese characteristics» [Martin 2022, February 2].

Originally scheduled for 27 March 2022, the elections for the new Chief Executive of Hong Kong were further postponed to 8 May. Chief Secretary for Administration of the Hong Kong SAR Government John Lee Ka-chiu emerged as the Central Government's preferred candidate. On 18 April he was confirmed as the only candidate for the position.

His electoral manifesto, published on 29 April 22, promised to strengthen governance, provide more housing, enhance competitiveness, and increase upward mobility for youth. On 8 May, John Lee Ka-chiu was named the fifth Chief Executive of the HKSAR with the support of 1,416 votes of the 1,461 Election Committee. Eight members voted against, four cast blank ballots, and 33 did not vote. The CPC welcomed the result as a proof of the superiority of the new electoral system marking another step towards the idea of allowing «patriots» to govern Hong Kong.

2021 put to a formal end the system of political opposition that Hong Kong tried to nurture and protect since the 1997 handover. Although the Democratic Party, the Civic Party and a few other parties continued to be part of the public sphere, their position became increasingly weak, as their mere existence started to be questioned in case they might decide not to play the role of «loyal opposition». Other parties such as Civic Passion, The Alliance for True Democracy and NeoDemocrats got disbanded between June and September. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising to observe that none of these parties presented any candidates for the LegCo elections, or that most leading democratic politicians were formally barred from running for election. In June 2022, President Xi Jinping arrived in Hong Kong to mark 25 years since the former British colony returned to Beijing's rule and to celebrate the success of the NSL in terms of guaranteeing security and creating the best possible environment for local economy to continue to flourish.

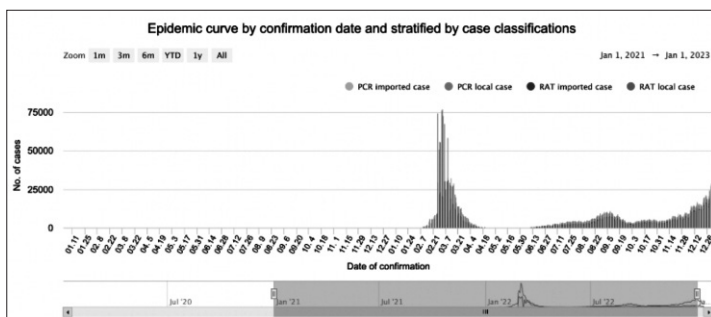
### *3. The urgency of saving Hong Kong economy*

It is still too early to understand whether Hong Kong will maintain in the medium, long-term its image as most prestigious financial hub in Asia. The COVID-19 pandemic on the one hand and the consequences of the NSL in terms of CPC increased leverage over the society have raised tremendous skepticism about HKSAR economic future. This section aims at analyzing all these dynamics in details to better understand the direction the territory is taking.



### 3.1. Dealing with COVID-19 pandemic

Following Beijing's steps, Hong Kong has adopted a zero-COVID strategy since the beginning of the pandemic. Anti-epidemic measures including social distancing, compulsory quarantine, restrictions on gatherings, temporary closure of non-essential venues, and tracing close contacts have been announced and eased during the 3-year outbreak. Yet, the low vaccination rate, especially among the vulnerable population, is one of the major setbacks of the policy. The stringent policies that protect most of the residents from infection created few incentives for the population to be vaccinated. Indeed, in July 2022, only 59% of the population aged 70 to 79 was immunized, a quota going down to 38% for those aged 80 and older.



Source: Hong Kong University School of Public Health

Campaigns have been launched to boost the vaccination rate of the population, including the introduction of the Vaccine Pass on 24 February 2022, which requires people entering or remaining on specified premises to comply with the COVID-19 vaccination regulations [Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(a)].

The commitment to zero-COVID was proven to be too ambitious facing the fifth wave of the pandemic dominated by the more contagious variant Omicron, and Hong Kong endured a tragic loss of its elderly population. On 14 March 2022, Hong Kong reported a record-high 7-day rolling average of new deaths attributed to COVID-19 of 38 per million people since the outbreak, in contrast to 1.52 in Singapore, 2.61 in the EU, and 3.52 in the U.S. [Mathieu *et al.* 2020]. People in the age groups of 60-69, 70-79, and >80 contributed to 13.5%, 20.9%, and 51.4% of hospitalized cases, respectively, and 8.4%, 16.6%, and 70.8% of deaths in the fifth wave [Cheung *et al.* 2022].

Hong Kong has been facing a dilemma between zero-Covid and reopening policies. Maintaining mobility between Hong Kong and mainland China was seen as crucial to the livelihood of the residents who regularly travel across borders for work, schooling, and family reunions. The success-

ful implementation of zero-COVID policy would have allowed Hong Kong to resume quarantine-free cross-border traveling with China, as Macau managed to achieve in October 2021.

From a political perspective, Chinese president Xi Jinping personally urged the Hong Kong government to «assume its primary responsibility in the epidemic control work, mobilize all available resources, and take all necessary measures to ensure the safety and health of the Hong Kong people and the overall stability of Hong Kong society» [Ia Kung Pao 2022, February 16], as a showcase of Beijing's strengthened authority and political ability to interfere with Hong Kong's affairs.

From another perspective, the adherence to zero-COVID led to a progressive deterioration of Hong Kong relations with the rest of the world. Restrictive sanitary measures, together with internal political tensions, prompted the migration of the workforce and relocation of multinational companies in a wide range of sectors to leave for places with less stringent restrictions, resulting in a worrying brain drain.

From mid-2021 to mid-2022, the Census and Statistics Department recorded a net outflow of 95,000 persons [Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(b)]. The Chief Executive's 2022 Policy Address also highlighted the alarming situation emphasizing that the local workforce shrank by about 140,000 units over the previous two years [Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(c)]. According to a survey published on local enterprises conducted by the European Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong in March 2022, 49% of the respondent companies considered relocating their offices fully or partially in the following 12 months because of Hong Kong's strict sanitary policy [European Chambers of Commerce 2022].

Alarms have been raised about the long-term and even permanent damage of this attitude to Hong Kong's economy, which finds its strength in the free flow of capital and talent.

### *3.2. Mixed feelings on tourism-led economic recovery*

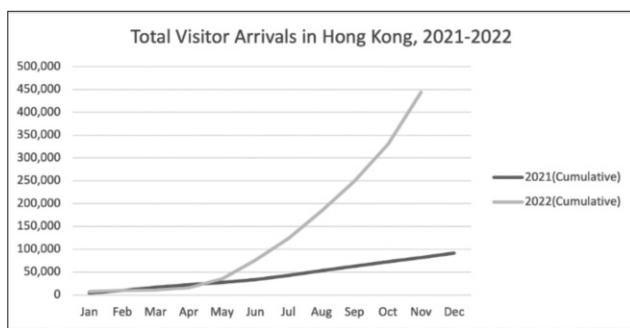
Hong Kong's GDP rebounded from US\$344.9 billion to 369.2 billion from 2020 to 2022 [World Bank 2022]. In the third quarter of 2022, real GDP fell by 4.5% from a year earlier, and the government forecasted that the real GDP growth of 2022 will be down to -3.2%. ['Latest Developments' 2023].

According to the Census and Statistics Department of Hong Kong, financial services, tourism, trading and logistics, and professional and producer services are the traditional «Four Key Industries» in Hong Kong. Among these four industries, tourism suffered the most severe damage during the pandemic. The latest statistics show that the share of tourism in Hong Kong's GDP dropped from 3.6% in 2019 to 0.1% in 2021, representing a decrease of HK\$ 96 billion [Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(g)].

The government's decision to shorten the mandatory quarantine period for inbound travelers in April 2022 marked a subtle shift towards Hong

Kong's attempt to restore its position as an attractive international business hub. A new softening of Hong Kong zero-COVID policy was announced in July 2022. Five months later the government eventually confirmed that most of sanitary restrictive measures would have been removed, including quarantine orders, the Vaccine Pass requirement, and social distancing measures [Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(h)].

Although it is too early to assess whether Hong Kong will be able to retrieve its economic vibrancy, statistics have shown significant growth in visitor arrivals since April 2022. In November 2022, the number of visitors was about five times higher compared to November 2021. Yet, the gap with 2019 data (55.91 million visitors) remains large. However, the gap of inbound tourism can be partly explained by the very limited flows of mainland tourists, which accounted for 78% of the total arrivals according to 2019 statistics [Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2021].



Source: The Hong Kong Tourism Board

### 3.3. *Hong Kong and China: A new equilibrium in the making*

Although Hong Kong has always been praised for its unique position as a gateway to China, it is important to remember that the 2019 social unrest where not just a mere manifestation of identity juxtaposition between Beijing and Hong Kong, but also a direct consequence of a broader awareness of increasing class inequalities compromising Hong Kong sense of social justice. Surprisingly, the growing sense of discontent about Hong Kong's social inequalities linked to what was perceived as an increasingly unfair redistribution of economic performance outputs has not given rise to concrete demands related to economic or welfare policies among the protesters. However, class grievances were embedded in the movement despite the fact they were channelled towards issues directly related to civil liberties and political rights [Fung 2019, September 24].

The political restructuring that followed this period had a significant negative impact on HKSAR long term economic performance and reputation as a free and safe environment for foreign investors as well as on in-

ternal frustration related to the assessment that the original causes of social distress would have not been addressed by the local government.

Despite continuing to organize global events assembling both Chinese and foreign economic operators to emphasize the advantages of Hong Kong as a financial and service-oriented hub, such as the one convened in November 2022 by Hong Kong Monetary Authority [‘Hong Kong Monetary Authority 2022], gathering hundreds of both Chinese and foreign key financial figures, international observers continue to be skeptical about Hong Kong capacity to maintain its economic freedom and independence.

Hong Kong integration with the CPC Dual Circulation strategy is a serious matter of concern. China’s Dual Circulation strategy was first proposed at a meeting of the Politburo’s Standing Committee in May 2020 and then incorporated into China’s 14th Five-Year Plan in 2021. The strategy emphasizes the need to strengthen internal circulation by driving up domestic demand and building an endogenous self-sufficient industry facing geopolitical uncertainties. The goal of international circulation is to reposit China as an exporter of high value-added products and, therefore, favor the rise of new financial hubs in mainland China.

If, on the one hand, China is pushing Hong Kong to reposition itself into the mainland financial market not to suffer from an inevitable competition, this possibility is, from another perspective, nurturing the fear that Hong Kong will never be able to secure its pre-2019 economic freedom, convincing its traditional global partners to move away from HKSAR.

Liu Hong, Senior Economist at Hong Kong Financial Research Institute of Bank of China, is persuaded that Hong Kong could easily integrate itself into the blueprint of Dual Circulation by assisting the CPC on three levels [Liu 2020]. First, to address China’s domestic demand, Hong Kong could «seize this most potential market by expanding the domestic sales of Hong Kong enterprises’ superior products, expanding import distribution business, and promoting the improvement of consumer protection in the mainland». Second, Hong Kong could capitalize on its science and innovation advantage to boost Beijing industrial upgrading. Third, it could strengthen its role as a gateway for «international circulation», expanding China’s opening process while enhancing its status as an international financial center.

If the rule of law has always been considered the «cornerstone of Hong Kong’s success as a leading international commercial and financial center, providing a secure environment for individuals and organizations and a level playing field for business» [‘The Legal System’], the progressive erosion of democratic institutions experienced since 2019 has dramatically impacted HKSAR business confidence.

According to the World Justice Project, Hong Kong’s Rule of Law index declined from 0.77 in 2019 to 0.73 in 2022, ranked from the 16th to 22nd across 140 countries [World Justice Project 2022]. Although the local

government has tried to justify this negative evolution as a «slight adjustment...possibly due to the lack of an accurate and overall understanding of the real situation of the city» [Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(d)], fears on HKSAR effective autonomy continue to rise.

In July 2020, a survey from the American Chamber of Commerce showed that 76% of affiliated companies were «concerned about the sweeping measures barring subversion, secession, terrorism, and foreign collusion, with most being ‘extremely concerned’». [Marlow 2020, July 13].

#### 3.4. *Hong Kong and Singapore: The contemporary race for Asia’s top finance center*

Hong Kong has automatically transformed Singapore into a desirable alternative for foreign companies and expatriates. The Global Financial Centres Index (GFCI) released in September 2022 saw Singapore gaining the third position, replacing Hong Kong as Asia’s top finance center [*Forbes India* 2022, September 23].

The number of regional headquarters in Hong Kong declined from 1541 in 2019 to 1411 in 2022 [Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(f)]. Private wealth also flowed away due to the concerns on the safety of assets in Hong Kong [*Bloomberg News* 2019, July 15].

Singapore has been able to transform this exodus into an opportunity, approving new visa schemes such as the Overseas Network & Expertise Pass to gather regional elite and attract top talents in all sectors. In order not to lose its advantage over Singapore, Hong Kong has also relaunched the fight for talents by finalizing its own pass scheme targeting both high income professionals and young graduates from top universities [Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(i)].

Another area where Hong Kong does not want to lose its competitive edge over Singapore is FinTech. On 31 October 2022 the Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau of Hong Kong released a new Policy Statement on Development of Virtual Assets (VA) aimed at facilitating the installment of a suitable environment to promote sustainable and responsible development of the VA sector” [Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(e)].

#### 3.5. *International perspectives: New routes of migration*

Against the background of rising political uncertainties, outgoing migration from Hong Kong has significantly increased over the last two years. Official figures released in August 2021 by the Statistics Department showed a net outflow of around 89,200 residents since mid-2020. One year later, updated data confirmed 113,200 residents left between mid-2021 and mid-2022, marking a further 1.3 per cent increase in the number of yearly departures [Lau 2023, January 2].

Although Hong Kong residents are uncomfortable with the idea of associating their departure to the progressive deterioration of the local politi-

cal environment, it is a matter of fact that in the aftermath of 2019 social unrest several countries including the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada opened new visa pathways for Hong Kongers willing to leave. On 31 January 2021, for example, the United Kingdom launched a new visa route, the Hong Kong British National (Overseas) visa, to provide a path to citizenship for people from Hong Kong who have British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) status and their close family members [UK Parliament 2021]. According to UK official statistics, 88,900 British National (Overseas) visa applications were made between 31 January and 30 August 2021 – not taking student visas into account. During the same year, 10,143 Hong Kong residents and British Nationals Overseas obtained a Canadian work permit, marking a major increase compared to the 931 people that got work permits in 2019.

### 3.6. *Hong Kong-Taiwan: A complex relationship*

Since the explosion of 2019 social unrest, both in Taipei and abroad, Hong Kong has often been mentioned as the perfect case study to offer precise risk analysis assessments of the Taiwan Strait situation [Kwok & Patterson 2022]. Although recognizing the profound differences between the situations in Taiwan and in Hong Kong, the comparison has mainly been based on the idea that Hong Kong could provide key insights to analyze the CPC attitude towards Taiwan. Among them, the emulation of United Front tactics and the political polarization that occurred in Hong Kong and the progressive increase of Mainland capital into Hong Kong aimed at changing its nature of business and financial center.

However, this apparent connection hides a more complex bilateral relation. Over the last few years, trade between Taiwan and Hong Kong has increased, transforming the former into Hong Kong's second largest trading partner after China and before the United States in 2021. Hong Kong ranks third among Taiwan's trading partners, after China and the US and before Japan, Singapore, and South Korea.

It is important to highlight that the 37 percent growth registered in 2021 is not necessarily the consequence of a strengthening of commercial synergies, rather the result of the decision of Taiwanese companies, and especially those working in the hardware technology industry, to relocate to Taiwan. Also, the uncertainties linked to the evolution of the political situation in Hong Kong have further contributed to a more general change of Taiwan's image in the region as an alternative commercial hub to Hong Kong. Rather than illustrating a rapprochement between the two territories, both dynamics seem depicting an increasing detachment.

The difficulties that the Taiwanese government experienced in granting Hong Kong refugees asylum is further confirming the increasing aloofness between the two territories. Taipei's reluctance has been justified with two main arguments: Republic of China (ROC)'s constitution and Taiwan's fragile international situation. The ROC constitution requires asylum seek-

ers' requests to be processed through a system grounded on state-to-state interactions. Accordingly, Hong Kong people cannot seek political asylum in Taiwan legally as Hong Kong is not considered an autonomous sovereign country. Also, Taipei has admitted its wariness in showing explicit support to Hong Kong to avoid offering the CPC an excuse to justify new aggressive actions against the island.

If, on the one hand, over the last two years, the Taipei government has changed its Hong Kong immigration policy to loosen immigration for middle-class professionals and regulations to allow more college and graduate students to move to Taiwan, on the other hand investment immigration and the existing political review of applicants' China connections have been tightened. In May 2022, a new regulation aimed at allowing Hong Kong and Macao citizens to obtain permanent residency after five years in Taiwan on work permits was delayed as a group of lawmakers started emphasizing that this move could potentially open the door to influence CPC campaigns and agents trying to infiltrate the Taiwan territory to undermine the local democratic system [Kuo & Chen 2022, May 31]. According to numbers released by the National Immigration Agency in Taipei, about 11,173 Hong Kongers received permits last year to live in Taiwan in 2021, up 3.3% from 2020. However, the same authority also confirmed that only about 3,200 applicants have been granted permanent residency in 2020 and 2021 [Wang 2022, January 27].

#### *4. Conclusion*

Although before and during the pandemic it was still somehow legitimate to take into consideration the possibility that Hong Kong would have retained a minimum of autonomy despite the implementation of the National Security Law, today the fate of the former British colony seems to have been definitively sealed.

Not only has every form of debate been canceled forever. Today, it is not even possible to speak about self-censorship anymore. Schools, libraries, media, civil society groups, arts and sports associations, government: within all these groups, the spaces for those who would have enjoyed advancing an alternative opinion have been erased. And those who might still be brave enough to find a way to express themselves on issues and using tones that do not correspond to those that China would consider legitimate will from now on have to choose between remaining silent, moving abroad, or ending up in prison.

There is no form of pressure, whether internal or international, that will ever be able to break the shield based on surveillance and fear that the Communist Party of China has managed to impose on its southwestern region.

Even the space for retrieving its “economic ambiguity” has evaporated. Chief executive John Lee’s most recent economic choices have further confirmed that Hong Kong is certainly determined to maintain its competitiveness, but it is also persuaded that this competitiveness must be put to the service of China. Once Hong Kong will emerge as the new engine of Xi Jinping’s New Silk Road as well as a financial platform committed at facilitating the emergence of Chinese companies on the international financial market, the transformation activated by the implementation of the NSL would be considered complete.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BBC News, 2021, 27 October, ‘Hong Kong passes new film censorship law’.
- Bloomberg News, 2019, 15 July, ‘Nervous Hong Kong millionaires move cash to Singapore’.
- Chau, Candice, 2022, ‘Hong Kong Policy Address: Laws against insulting regional flag to be aligned with national flag legislation’, *Hong Kong Free Press*, 19 October.
- Cheng, Sara, 2021, ‘Hong Kong security chief steps up pressure on city’s main press group’, *Reuters*, 15 September.
- Cheung, P. H., Chan, C. P., & Jin, D. Y., 2022, ‘Lessons learned from the fifth wave of COVID-19 in Hong Kong in early 2022’, *Emerging microbes & infections*, 11(1):1072–1078.
- Cheung, Tony & Ng Kang-chung, 2021, ‘Hong Kong localist lawmaker Cheng Chung-tai removed from Legislative Council seat’, *South China Morning Post*, 26 August.
- Cheng, Yut Yiu & Raymond Chung, 2021, ‘Hong Kong universities film classes amid rollout of ‘national security education’’, *Radio Free Asia*, 8 November.
- Davidson, Helen, 2021, ‘Hong Kong police arrest editor-in-chief of Apple Daily newspaper in raids’, *The Guardian*, 17 June.
- European Chambers of Commerce, 2022, *EuroCham Survey on the impact of Covid-19 on the business community*, 24 March.
- Forbes India, 2022, September 23, ‘Global Financial Centres Index (GFCI) rankings: Hong Kong replaced by Singapore as Asia’s top finance centre’.
- Fung, Charles & Chun-wing Lee, 2019, ‘Hong Kong protesters don’t identify as Chinese amid anger at inequality – survey suggests’, *The Conversation*, 24 September.
- Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2021, The Government of Hong Kong S.A.R., Tourism Commission, 2021, *Tourism Fact Sheets*, 28 July.
- Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(a), The Government of Hong Kong S.A.R., 2022, *Government announces implementation arrangements for Vaccine Pass*, 21 February.
- Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(b), The Government of Hong Kong S.A.R., Census and Statistics Department, 2022, *Mid-year population for 2022*, 11 August.



- Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(c), The Government of Hong Kong S.A.R., Chief Executive's Office, 2022, 'The Chief Executive's 2022 Policy Address', 19 October.
- Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(d), The Government of Hong Kong S.A.R., 2022, *HKSAR Government's response to 2022 World Justice Project Rule of Law Index*, 26 October.
- Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(e), The Government of Hong Kong S.A.R., e Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau, 2022, *Policy Statement on Development of Virtual Assets in Hong Kong*, 31 October.
- Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(f), The Government of Hong Kong S.A.R., Census and Statistics Department, 2022, *Number of Regional Headquarters in Hong Kong by Country/Territory where the Parent Company was Located*, 24 November.
- Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(g), The Government of Hong Kong S.A.R., Census and Statistics Department, 2022, *The Four Key Industries and Other Selected Industries*, 15 December.
- Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(h), The Government of Hong Kong S.A.R., 2022, *Government adjusts local anti-epidemic measures*, 28 December.
- Government of Hong Kong S.A.R. 2022(i), The Government of Hong Kong S.A.R., Immigration Department, 2022, *Top Talent Pass Scheme*, 28 December.
- Graham-Harrison, Emma, 2019, 'Hong Kong voters deliver landslide victory for pro-democracy campaigners', *The Guardian*, 25 November.
- Hong Kong Monetary Authority, 2022, 'Global Financial Leaders' Investment Summit', 10 November.
- Kuo, Lily & Alicia Chen, 2022, 'Taiwan offered hope after they fled Hong Kong. Now, they're leaving again', *Washington Post*, 31 May.
- Kwan, Rhoda, 2021, 'Hong Kong Policy Address: Emotional Carrie Lam hails 'new era', vows to bolster national security measures', *Hong Kong Free Press*, 6 October.
- Kwok, Dennis W.H. & Johnny Patterson, 2022, 'Taiwan: A Risk Analysis through the Lens of Hong Kong', *Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government*, May.
- Lam, Jeffie & Denise Tsang, 2021, 'Hong Kong journalists at public broadcaster RTHK told they must uphold 'constitutional order' in new set of editorial guidelines', *South China Morning Post*, 29 September.
- 'Latest Developments', 2023, *Hong Kong Economy*, 14 January.
- Lau, Chris, 2023, 'A political recap of Hong Kong in 2022: 5 events that will shape city governance for years', *South China Morning Post*, 2 January.
- Leung, Mimi, 2022, 'National security education compulsory for undergraduates', *University World News*, 17 August.
- Lindberg, Kari Soo, 2021, 'Nearly Half of Hong Kong's Reporters Considering Leaving, Survey Finds', *Bloomberg*, 5 November.
- Liu, Hong, 2020, 'New Development Pattern of "Dual Circulation" in Mainland China and Hong Kong's Role', *Bank of China Economic Review Monthly*, August.
- Marlow, Iain, 2020, '76% of U.S. Companies in Hong Kong Are Worried About Security Law, Chamber of Commerce Survey Finds', *Time*, 13 July.
- Martin, Michael, 2022, 'Hong Kong in 2022', *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2 February.

- Mathieu, Edouard, Hannah Ritchie, Lucas Rod  s-Guirao, Cameron Appel, Charlie Giattino, Joe Hasell, Bobbie Macdonald, Saloni Dattani, Diana Beltekian, Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser, 2020, 'Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19)', *Our World in Data*.
- Ng, Kang-chung, 2022, 'Hong Kong authorities to send copies of Xi speech to schools and kindergartens', *South China Morning Post*, 15 August.
- Pomfret, James, 2022, 'Hong Kong's Foreign Correspondents' Club suspends top Asian human rights awards', *Reuters*, 25 April.
- Poon, Patrick, 2022, 'The crushing of Hong Kong's civil society will be felt by all', *Nikkei Asia*, 24 July.
- Rai, Arpan, 2021, 'Hong Kong denies visa to Economist journalist in latest blow to press freedom', *The Independent*, 13 November.
- Shing, Tai Hing, 2021, 'Hong Kongers losing their voice as district councillors quit?', *ThinkChina*, 15 July.
- [Ta Kung Pao 2022] '习近平：把尽快控疫作为当前压倒一切的任务 中央全力挺港' (Xi Jinping: Take Epidemic Control as Soon as Possible as the Overriding Task at Present, the Central Government Fully Supports Hong Kong), 16 February 2022 (<http://www.takungpao.com/news/232109/2022/0216/689588.html>).
- 'The Legal System', *info.gov.hk*, [https://www.info.gov.hk/info/sar5/elaw\\_1.htm](https://www.info.gov.hk/info/sar5/elaw_1.htm).
- UK Parliament, 2021, 'Hong Kong British National (Overseas) visa', 6 May.
- UNHCR, 2022, *UN Human Rights Committee issues findings on Hong Kong, Macao, Georgia, Ireland, Luxembourg and Uruguay*, 27 July.
- Wang, Cindy, 2022, 'Number of Hong Kongers Moving to Taiwan Hits a Record', *Bloomberg*, 27 January.
- Wong, Sheldon, 2020, 'Hong Kong 2020: The downfall of «one country two systems»', *Asia Major*, XXXI:148-80.
- World Bank, 2022, 'GDP (current US\$) - Hong Kong SAR, China'.
- World Justice Project, 'Hong Kong SAR, China'.



INDONESIA 2019-2022: THE AUTHORITARIAN TURN AS LEITMOTIF OF  
PRESIDENT JOKOWI'S SECOND TERM

Riwanto Tirtosudarmo

and

Peter B.R. Carey

Independent social researcher,  
formerly at the Research Center  
for Society and Culture, the  
Indonesian Institute of Sciences  
(PMB-LIPI).  
tirtosudarmo@yahoo.com

Emeritus Fellow Trinity  
College, Oxford, UK  
and Adjunct (Visiting)  
Professor, Department of  
Humanities, University  
of Indonesia  
peterbrcarey@hotmail.com

*Now approaching the last year of his second and last presidential term (2019-2024) Indonesia's businessman president, Joko Widodo (Jokowi), is becoming increasingly pragmatic in his political objectives. His goal of achieving high economic growth has led him to adopt policies that sacrifice democratic principles for immediate financial gain. At the same time, his cooptation of his main political rival during the 2019 presidential election, former general Prabowo Subianto, as his defense minister has deflected potential opposition and increased Jokowi's political power. Such successful cooptation has also brought the Indonesian parliament under Jokowi's full control thus enabling him to push through national laws which support his economic agenda. Here the goal of attracting foreign direct investment looms large and recent legislative initiatives such as the revision of the Indonesian criminal code and the new omnibus law on job creation have highlighted these priorities. The President's harsh reaction to the criticisms articulated by civil society organizations and student activists reflects a deepening authoritarian tendency, already highlighted by observers of Indonesian politics at the end of Jokowi's first presidential term in 2018-19. The present article considers the validity of this analysis, in part by setting Indonesia's authoritarian «turn» in a broader historical context. We ask fundamental questions about the viability of democracy and liberalism within the underlying political processes at work in the post-independence Indonesia. We look in particular at the making and unmaking of western political initiatives aimed at transforming the country into a functioning democracy following the fall of the former dictator, Suharto, in May 1998. Finally, we consider the increasingly desperate moves by Jokowi as his presidency draws to its close to ensure the continuation of his political legacy and pragmatic policies under his elected successor.*

KEYWORDS – Indonesia; Jokowi; authoritarian democracy; liberalism; pragmatism.

## 1. Introduction

Indonesia's seventh president, Jokowi (Joko Widodo, born Surakarta 1961) is now coming to the end of his second five-year presidential term (2019-24).<sup>1</sup> However, instead of cruising to a triumphal conclusion of his ten-year incumbency, a number of events have recently occurred which have shed a troubling light on his leadership, management style and the inner workings of his administration. Two events in particular, both involving the notoriously corrupt Indonesian National Police (*Kepolisian Negara Republik Indonesia*), reflect the fragility of law enforcement and said National Police's lack of a duty of care for ordinary citizens.

The first is a murder case. It involves a high-ranking police officer, Inspector-General Ferdy Sambo (born 1973). He is accused of murdering his 27-year-old adjutant, Police Brigadier Nofriansyah Yosua Hutabarat (born 1994), in the Inspector-General's own residence in East Jakarta on 8 July 2022. At first blush, this seems a simple murder case. But the assassination of the young Yosua Hutabarat has wide ramifications. In the first instance, it blew the lid on a complex corruption scandal. This involves the very highest echelons of the Indonesian National Police and the wildly popular online betting business of which sections of the police force are implicated. The scandal also brings the whole institution of the national police and its corrupt practices into public view. What has been revealed to date is very damaging [*Tempo* 2022, 28 August pp. 62-66].

The second event, which also involved the country's police force, was the Kanjuruhan Football Stadium disaster in Malang, East Java, on 1 October 2022. In the second worst football tragedy ever,<sup>2</sup> 135 people, many of them women and children, lost their lives, and 583 others were injured, when pandemonium broke out, in the packed spectator stands, after police fired multiple rounds of teargas into the overcapacity crowd (42,000 had crowded into stands built to hold just 38,000). The incident happened just after 3,000 angry local supporters of the losing home team, *Arema*, had swarmed onto the pitch to chase after players and officials from the opposing *Persibaya* (Surabaya) side, whose 3-2 match win had been deemed to have been fixed by a sporting mafia in which the Indonesian National Police are heavily involved [*Tempo* 2022, 16 October, pp. 59-61].

1. The possibility that the Indonesian constitution might be changed to allow Jokowi to contest elections for a third time is discussed below in Section 3.3. Changes to Indonesia's constitutional charter are rare with the last made in 2002. This included capping the presidential limits at two terms to prevent a repeat of President Suharto's rule when he remained in office for 32 years. See further Moktar 2022.

2. The worst was at the National Stadium (Estadio Nacional) in Lima, Peru, on 24 May 1964, when 328 died and 500 were injured after police fired teargas into the crowd following an on-pitch invasion by aggrieved home fans.

The combination of these two tragic events, coming so close together, casts a poor light on the integrity of a key national institution – the national police force. But they also raise serious questions about the sincerity of Jokowi's 2019 campaign pledge to reform Indonesia's security apparatus and strengthen his administration's grip on domestic protection.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, for those outside Indonesia who watched the almost impeccable Indonesian hosting of the 15-16 November 2022 G-20 Summit in Bali, and the seamless security provided by Indonesian police and associated paramilitary units for the world leaders at the Nusa Dua Bali Beach Resort, the irony was inescapable. How come these leaders were so efficiently guarded, when the self-same state police force, which had ensured their round-the-clock protection, had so singularly failed to protect the 42,000 ordinary citizens of Indonesia who had gathered at the Kanjuruhan Stadium to watch a football match just six weeks earlier? There seemed to be two weights and two measures at work here.

This seemingly contradictory picture of Jokowi's leadership reminds us of the complex and volatile nature of politics in Indonesia. The present article takes this volatility and complexity as its starting point and provides a review of the first three years of Jokowi's second presidential term (2019-24), covering the period from 20 October 2019 to 31 December 2022. It looks at Jokowi's successes and failures in leading the nation through the many challenges of these three years, starting with the ever-changing currents of domestic politics. It then considers the unexpected economic impact of COVID-19, the global uncertainties caused by Russia's 24 February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the unfolding cataclysm of climate change.

Given that previous scholars such as David Bouchier [2015], Elena Valdameri [2017, 2018] and Vedi Hadiz [2017] have all argued that Indonesia has been drifting toward authoritarianism for the best part of a decade since 2014, this article will take their argument as its starting point. However, we need to enter a caveat. While we (the present authors) are minded to confirm this tendency, we argue that Indonesia's authoritarian turn can only be understood by delving deeper into the complex historical roots which have fed this rightward drift and understand some of the key drivers at work in Indonesian politics and society today. Jokowi's second term in office cannot be seen in isolation. The wider historical context must constantly be kept in mind.

The present article is divided into three parts, the first part is an analysis of internal policy, followed by a second and third part which consider the impact of economic and foreign policies respectively. A concluding section looks at Indonesia's political prospects as the country prepares to enter the decisive presidential election year of 2024.

3. Strengthening of the rule of law ('ensuring security and justice for all'), and police reform ('to [re]gain public trust') were put forward as the sixth and seventh of nine 'missions' for Jokowi's 2019 presidential poll. See Heriyanto 2018.

## 2. *Internal policy*

### 2.1 *The pragmatist president*

The coming to power of Jokowi as president in 2014 sparked new hope amongst millions across the nation that under his leadership they would see an improvement in their lives. Such hopes were fed by portrayals of the new President in social media as a «man of the people» – down-to-earth, simple, hard-working and close to ordinary folk. Born into a family of very modest means in the ancient royal capital city of Surakarta, Jokowi was perceived as a leader who got things done. This was evidenced, his supporters pointed out, in his successful implementation of wide-ranging infrastructural improvements which have transformed the cityscape of his native Surakarta during his period as mayor between 2005-2012. At the time of his move to Jakarta in October 2012, his achievement had earned him the title of Third Best Mayor – after Bilbao (Spain) and Perth (Western Australia) – in the 2012 World Mayor competition, the official citation praising his achievement in Surakarta for combatting corruption and turning what had been a crime-infested city into a regional centre of art and culture [Can 2013]. In September 2012, with his running mate and successor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok, in post, 2014-2017), he won the Jakarta governorship, where he served just two years (2012-2014) before becoming President in October 2014. In Indonesia's sprawling capital city, home to over 10 million people, many of whom live in squalid slum conditions, Jokowi made his mark as a hands-on governor. Eschewing the privileges of office, he made it his habit to get out of his air-conditioned office and go into the poorest urban communities (*kampung*) to see and experience at first hand the living conditions of the capital city's slum dwellers, albeit always accompanied by a team of photographers and sympathetic journalists. As an outward mark of his commitment as a people's governor, he swapped his epauletted governor's uniform for a simple white shirt with rolled up sleeves, drill trousers and sneakers. This Harun al-Rashid<sup>4</sup> technique of appearing incognito in the most unexpected places, referred to in Javanese as «blusukan» (going into small and narrow streets), became Jokowi's hallmark as Jakarta governor.

Jokowi's image was also greatly enhanced by his skilful use of the social media (*sosmed*), through media savvy supporters known as «buzzers». They amplify his messages and celebrate his achievements. His popularity as a hands-on governor and now president rests heavily on his buzzers' social

4. Fifth Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad (r. 786-809), who inaugurated what is known as the 'Islamic Golden Age'. As Caliph, he became famous for his incognito appearances in Baghdad which enabled him to witness at first hand his subjects' living conditions.

media feeds. A modern version of Vance Packard's *Hidden Persuaders* [1957]<sup>5</sup> the *sosmed* industry has perfected the art of manipulating popular perceptions and capturing the imagination of the masses. In the past two decades, it has become a massively important platform for communication in Indonesia and around the world. Jokowi's popularity and high public profile are both dependent on it. His image as a leader for the common people and his performance as a hands-on mayor and governor, both helped him win the presidency by a slim majority as a candidate of the people in 2014 and 2019. He even captured the imagination of those versed in Javanese folklore as a *satrio piningit* or «hidden knight».

Jokowi's first period as the president (2014-2019) was marked by his ambitious agenda to develop the nation's infrastructure – in particular highways and rail links – to connect and integrate his country. His achievement in linking Java's two main cities by toll road mirrored that of the first great highway builder, Marshal Herman Willem Daendels (Governor-General 1808-1811), Napoleon's appointee, whose trans-Java post road (*postweg*), stretching nearly 1,000 kilometres from Merak in the Sunda Strait to Panarukan in Java's Eastern Salient, created a new infrastructural backbone for Indonesia's central island [Carey 2013]. Jokowi also initially prioritized what he labelled the «poros maritim» (maritime pivot), namely the revival of Indonesia's past glory as a major maritime state based on trading connections between the ports and harbour towns of the principal islands encircling the shallow and navigable Java Sea. Unfortunately, Jokowi lacked the capital resources to implement this grand design and it was gradually abandoned. The same fate threatens another mega project – the high-speed «bullet train» covering the 142 kilometres between the capital Jakarta and Bandung, the administrative hub of West Java. 40% financed by China, it was started in January 2016 and was originally due to open in early 2019, but is now US\$ 3 billion over budget and four years behind schedule. Ironically, its economic rationale has been destroyed by another of Jokowi's ambitious mega projects: the move of the Indonesian capital from Jakarta to East Kalimantan [Strangio 2022]. But he did fulfil one of his other promises. This was his completion of the 800-kilometre Jakarta-Surabaya toll road in December 2018. Long planned by previous presidents since the fall of Suharto in May 1998, the project had never been properly implemented until Jokowi's first term.

Popularly known as the reformation era or *reformasi*, the period following the fall of the Suharto dictatorship began with high expectations that a more democratic Indonesia might be realised. Although brief, the seventeen months of Ir B.J. Habibie's (21 May 1998-20 October 1999) transitional government was crucial here. It ushered in a number of important political

5. Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* is a classic examination of the psychoanalytical techniques employed by the advertising industry in manipulating the thoughts and feelings of the masses.



changes, three of which were especially important. The first was the freedom to form political parties, albeit one which did not include reviving the long banned Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). This immediately turned Indonesia into a multiparty political system. But one with shallow democratic foundations given that the new parties were not based on ideologies and electoral programs but rather on personalities and transactional – money – politics. The second was the granting of autonomy to district-level governments or *kabupaten*. This reform dismantled the highly centralised system of government inherited from the Dutch colonial state or Netherlands Indies (1816-1942) and honed during the 32 years of Suharto's dictatorship (1966-98). The third was the ratification of international labour conventions, the most important of which was the 1948 Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention (ratified on 9 June 1998), which opened the door to the establishment of free trades unions [ILO 2024].

Reformists also began to amend the constitution. Salient here was the placing of a limit of two five-year terms on the tenure of a president, ending the possibility that presidents could extend their rule indefinitely, which had occurred under both Sukarno (in office 1945-67) and Suharto (in office 1967-98). This reform was further enhanced in 2004 when the president, vice-president and all other political-cum-administrative offices (mayor, district [*bupati*] and subdistrict heads [*camat*]) were made elective. In 2004, a former general, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (born 1949; in office 2004-14), became the first directly elected president. Vital government institutions were also created to support democracy and human rights, such as the Constitutional Court, and the Corruption Eradication Commission (*Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi* or KPK), both established in 2003.<sup>6</sup>

B.J. Habibie's short, but legislatively productive, tenure as president was followed by another brief incumbency. This, however, was altogether more tumultuous. The presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009; in office 1999-2001), or Gus Dur, as he was popularly known,<sup>7</sup> brought to power a public intellectual and Islamic pluralist extraordinary. Even today, Wahid is still celebrated as the liberator of Indonesia's minorities, especially the economically powerful Chinese community. But he was an erratic president suffering from serious ill-health due to a stroke in the early 1990s. This had left him almost blind and confined to a wheelchair. Although leader of the country's largest grassroots Muslim Organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the Renaissance of the Ulama (founded 1926), Gus Dur was ultimately brought down by his own reformist colleagues, notably his Vice-President, Megawati Soekarnoputri and the Speaker of the People's Consultative

6. The Constitutional Court on 13 August 2003 and the KPK on 29 December 2003.

7. «Gus» is an abbreviation for the title «Bagus», roughly equivalent to the English title «Sir» or «Honourable», used to address male children of respectable and well-born families in Java.

Assembly (Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat, MPR), Amien Rais (in office 1999-2004). His political demise reflected the schism and fragmentation of Indonesia's political elites in the post-Suharto era. Gus Dur's replacement was his Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri. She served out the remainder of his five-year term, namely, the years 2001-2004. A politician forged in the brutalities of the late New Order period (1966-98), Megawati had held out courageously as head of her Indonesian Democratic Party (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia)<sup>8</sup> against the pressures of Suharto's dictatorial rule. This had enhanced her political standing originally based on her father-daughter relationship with Indonesia's founder-president, Sukarno (1901-1970). Unfortunately, her three-year administration saw a democratic 'recession' with the intensification of the Indonesian government's struggle against the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) in Aceh, and a spike in the number of political prisoners accused of «insulting» the President. But a number of reforms were passed during her presidency. The most salient of these, as we have seen, was the new direct election law of 2004 for office holders.

In this relatively short six-year period (1998-2004), when Indonesia transited from autocracy to democracy, a number of international agencies provided financial support and technical assistance to state and non-state actors. The focus was on creating institutions which could enhance democracy and human rights, both conceived along Western lines. Paradoxically, these reflected the values of Europe not Indonesia's own pre-colonial feudal past, still less the egalitarian and democratic values of Indonesia's early 20<sup>th</sup>-century anti-colonial movement. The euphoria of a successful popular movement-cum-mass mobilization, which had toppled an authoritarian government, was strongly embedded in the minds of civil society leaders and activists. Yet, what these leaders and activists imagined as real political reform was far removed from actuality. The role of international agencies in providing assistance in creating new democratic institutions during the political transition was instrumental here. Looked at from today's vantage point, there is a feeling amongst those civil society activists who helped Jokowi win the presidency twice that something of great value has been lost.<sup>9</sup> It is as though authoritarianism and illiberalism

8. Post-15 February 1999, Partai Demokrasi-Perjuangan, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle.

9. Exactly what this is tends to be harder to quantify since it has to do with a perceived connection between Indonesia and the 18<sup>th</sup>-century European enlightenment. That there was once such a connection is indisputable: the British interim administration's (1811-16) abolition of judicial torture and 'cruel and unusual punishments', in particular mutilation (the amputation of arms under Islamic law) and the pitting of suspected criminals against wild animals (tigers) is a case in point, see Carey 1980:99; 2014:149-50; 2022: xxii-xxiii. But whether these enlightenment reforms established an enduring legacy of respect for human rights is moot given the horrors of the 1965-66 anti-communist massacres and their aftermath.

really are the Indonesian default setting and the bedrock of its core values and traditions. But are they?

The truth is that genuine reform and democratic consolidation proved to be an impossible achievement in the period following the demise of Suharto and his oppressive New Order (1966-98). As Haryadi and Peter Carey have written:

Although the watchword of the 1999 and 2004 elections was «reform» – a term that gave its name to the whole post-Suharto transition period in Indonesia – none of the leading contenders for the presidency was a reformer at heart. The drastic political events which culminated in Suharto's May 1998 downfall and the country's first free elections in forty-four years [the last had been in 1955] were anchored in a huge national movement born out of decades of frustration and bitterness. No one leader could lay claim to this emotional charge [Haryadi and Carey 2014, p. 146].

While the so-called reformists assumed democratic consolidation would be achieved, this was a chimera: as early as 2004 two leading scholars, Richard Robison and Vedi Hadiz, had already pointed out that Indonesian democracy had been hijacked by the «bad guys», capitalists, corruptors, gang bosses and political fixers, with a pervasive politico-business oligarchy controlling Indonesian democratic processes. Robison and Hadiz meticulously showed the intricate processes of the reconstitution and reorganisation of predatory forms of power in co-opting new governance and forging new alliances [Robison and Hadiz 2004, especially chs. 8 and 9, pp. 187-252]. There was also intense infighting amongst members of the Indonesian elite and their supposedly «reformist» political parties. Nowhere was this more evident than in the fractured relationship between Megawati and her former Coordinating Minister of Politics and Security Affairs turned political rival, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY). His newly formed personal party, Partai Demokrat (Democratic Party, founded in 2001), later riven by corruption scandals, went head-to-head with Megawati's likewise corrupt, Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan (PDI-P, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle), the largest vote winner at the polls during the 2004 election. This left a legacy of bitterness, which took years to dissipate. However, both Megawati and SBY were soon eclipsed by the rising star of the former Surakarta mayor, Jokowi.

Whereas neither Megawati nor SBY could be described as hands-on presidents, still less social media sensations, Jokowi's rising popularity, as we have seen, owed much to popular perceptions that he could make real changes to people's lives. A latter-day *Ratu Adil*, a «Just King» of Javanese prophetic legend, as mayor of Surakarta Jokowi created a city which was not only more liveable for the middle class, but also for lower social strata such as bank clerks, market women, street-food sellers and day labourers.

Jokowi was seen as a leader for the common people or «*wong cilik*», a Javanese term which refers to Indonesian citizens of distinctly modest means. The standard measurement of poverty, however, is nearly always based on incomplete statistical data due to widespread under-reporting of household incomes. The number of people officially classified as living under the poverty line is therefore understandably a compromise magic number which hides the real economic conditions of the rural and urban poor. In March 2022, for example, it was reported that the number of people living under the United Nations absolute poverty line of US\$ 1.90 a day had decreased to 9.54% (26.16 million people). The report, however, indicated that while the number of people living in absolute poverty had dropped under Jokowi, income inequality remained stubbornly high [*The Jakarta Post* 2022, 19 July]. There is a paradox here. Since Suharto's New Order (1966-98), when economic growth became the government's primary goal, eradicating poverty was always the policy planners' main concern, while the widening income distribution gap between socio-economic classes was deemed irrelevant and never seriously addressed.

As a cadre of Megawati's PDI-P, a political party seen by its leadership as a «reform» party representing a nationalist and secular ideology, Jokowi was expected to uplift the condition of the Indonesian working class or proletariat. But in Indonesia, that class has a special name – *Marhaen*. Pak [«Father»] Marhaen was the eponymous subsistence farmer whom Sukarno, Indonesia's founding president, met on his tiny third-of-a-hectare rice field plot just outside Bandung in the early 1920s when he was studying at the Institut Teknologi Bandung (Bandung Technical Institute, ITB). In Sukarno's view, Pak Marhaen represented the majority of Indonesians who eked out a bare subsistence on a small parcel of land with a hoe (*cangkul*) to produce sufficient agricultural product to support their marginal life [Giebels 2021].<sup>10</sup> Megawati as current PDI-P head and Sukarno's daughter, portrays her political grouping as a party of the *wong cilik* with *Marhaenism* as its political ideology [Aditya 2020].

10. Lambert Giebels, in his *Soekarno: Biografi 1901-1950* (Jakarta: Grasindo, 2001), p. 59, recounts that Sukarno supposedly conversed with Pak Marhaen as follows: «Who owns this field that is being worked on by the farmer? The farmer answers that it is his own land, as well as the hoe he uses, the rice he harvests later and the simple hut on the side of the rice field. He did not hire anyone, said the farmer, and he did not work for anyone. Soekarno [Sukarno] realized that this small farmer, although very poor, could be considered as an independent businessman and this also applies to the satay [kebab] seller, the fishermen, the person who carried the goods to the dock, and many more. He asked the name of the farmer. 'Marhaen', he answered. Thus, at that time the name was born for a theory which always inspired Soekarno [Sukarno's] political ideology which he would convincingly submit: 'Our tens of thousands of workers don't work for others and other people don't work for them [...] Marhaenism is Indonesian socialism in practice'».

However, this vision of the relationship between the political elite and the masses so carefully crafted by Sukarno in his books and speeches, like *Marhaen and Proletariat*, which he delivered to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his Partai Nasional Indonesia on 3 July 1957, has long been a fiction. Suharto's repressive New Order regime finally buried it. The elite and the masses are now living in parallel universes in Indonesia. Mass organizations as a bridge between the elites and the masses were liquidated by Suharto in 1965. They were seen as part of the *onderbouw* (support base) of the Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia* or PKI), along with other left-ist parties like Tan Malaka's (1897-1949) Partai Murba (Partai Musyawarah Rakyat Banyak, 1948-77), and were destroyed. Since 1965, the Indonesian national economy has been transformed and is now increasingly dominated by foreign and domestically owned capital. Many of these are multinational companies involved in highly polluting extractive industries such as mining and palm-oil plantations where most of the value-added activities in terms of processing and refining is done outside Indonesia – a throwback to the late Dutch colonial period (1816-1942), when a brief spurt of industrialization during the blockade years of the First World War (1914-18) had been speedily reversed at the onset of peace [Booth 1998, pp. 34-44, 148-53]. The result of this corporatization of the Indonesian economy has been a widening income gap between the rich few and the economically struggling masses. In 2019, Indonesia's Gini Coefficient rating (61.8), which measures income inequality, is in the lowest 70<sup>th</sup> percentile (70 most unequal countries) in the world just ahead of Russia [World Economics 2019].

During Jokowi's 2014 presidential campaign one of his key straplines was the so-called *Revolusi Mental* (Mental Revolution). This was used as shorthand to describe a revolutionary change in people's mindsets, which was deemed to be a *sine qua non* for creating a just and prosperous new Indonesian society – a Pancasila society. Pancasila are the five philosophical principles of the Indonesian nation, namely: (1) Belief in the One and Only God; (2) Just and civilized humanity; (3) The unity of Indonesia, (4) Democracy guided by the inner wisdom in the unanimity arising out of deliberations amongst representatives, (5) Social justice for all of the people of Indonesia.

Jokowi, who was born in 1961 and thus still a child when Suharto came to power in 1965-66, is often described as the first Indonesian president without political connections to Suharto's New Order. That may be, but if there is a quality specifically associated with Jokowi it is perhaps his experience as a businessman. The owner of a successful furniture company in his native Surakarta, his business career may have given him the ability to calculate politics on a cost-benefit analysis. In his view, politics is no different from doing business. Negotiations and transactions are the basic building blocks. The logic of any given political act must stem from rational choices and be firmly rooted in the ideology of pragmatism. Jokowi is a no-nonsense pragmatist president.

## 2.2. *The threat of Islamic politics*

In the aftermath of Ahok (Basuki Tjahaja Purnama's) defeat in the highly divisive final round of the Jakarta gubernatorial election in April 2017, Jokowi realized that religion, specifically the strident Islamicism or political Islam aimed at prioritising the rights of the Muslim majority and the establishment of a *syariah* (Islamic law) state in Indonesia, is now a crucial component of Indonesian politics. Religious sentiments of the Islamic right were successfully mobilized by Anies Baswedan's (born 1969) camp to secure crucial votes on that decisive gubernatorial election day in April 2017. Using his cost-benefit analysis, in the view of the present authors, Jokowi calculated that the influence of religious sentiments on Islamic voters should be accommodated when he made his run for his second term in 2019. The strength of Islamic mobilization in the so-called 212 movement, which took its name from the mass turn out for the *Aksi Damai Bela Islam* (Action for the Peaceful Defence of Islam) demonstration in downtown Jakarta on 2 December 2016, convinced Jokowi that he would have to take the Islamic lobby on board. This was one of the reasons why Jokowi chose the conservative Islamic cleric (*alim*), Ma'ruf Amin (born 1943), as his running mate in 2019.

Then there is the stormy petrel, Habib Muhammad Riziek bin Hussein Shihab (born 1965). Usually referred to as «Habib Riziek»,<sup>11</sup> he is a cleric of Arab descent who created (1998) and headed up the Islamic Defenders Front (*Front Pembela Islam*, FPI) until its 2019 dissolution by the Jokowi government. A notorious Islamic paramilitary group created as a political device during the early Reform period and strongly associated with Wahhabism, FPI brought home to Jokowi the dangers posed by the Islamicist mobilization during his second-term presidential candidacy. The rising influence of political Islam also resulted from the elimination of the left and the rise of secular politics after 1965. This had opened the door to the politics of cultural and ethnic identity following the banning of class-based politics grounded on Marxist-Leninist ideology. Since 1965, the nascent middle class in Indonesia, at that time still small and still largely defined by its bureaucratic office-holding status as latter-day *priyayi* (civil servants/government employees), developed its sense of identity in a cultural rather than a political context. This was often expressed as a politics of identity.

Jokowi's decision to take Ma'ruf Amin, a conservative Muslim *alim* and head of the Indonesian Ulema Council (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI) (in office, 2015-19),<sup>12</sup> as his running mate during his second term reflected his pragmatist politics. While the Islamic political parties traditionally per-

11. In Bahasa Indonesia, «Habib» is an honorific to address a Muslim scholar of a Sayyid (descendant of the Prophet Muhammad) family.

12. Established on 25 July 1975, MUI is an umbrella organization of Islamic clergy created by Suharto to co-opt Islamic leaders and involve them as supporters of his New Order (1966-98) regime.

formed badly as vote winners in general elections, Islamic vigilante groups like the FPI and conservative organizations like MUI provided space for non-political party Islamic voters to be mobilized ahead of elections. This opened the door for more radical Islamicist political agendas and resulted in mass support being thrown behind presidential candidates, like former General Prabowo Subianto, Jokowi's main opponent in the April 2019 presidential election, who was deemed more sympathetic to the Islamicist cause. Jokowi's decision to go with the MUI head as vice-president headed off this challenge. As such it could be seen as a master stroke. Yet, in the same breath, Jokowi clearly disappointed the civil society groups who had previously supported him. They now perceived him as a turncoat, willing to embrace the politics of identity as his strategy to win the 2019 presidential election. In the run-up to the election, some reformist activist remnants, critical academics, and intellectuals with close links to civil society movements began to abandon his cause. Jokowi was now perceived by such civil society critics to be no longer a representative of the ordinary people [Baker 2016].

### *2.3. The reform of Indonesia's criminal code, 6 December 2022*

This perception has been seemingly confirmed by the deeply illiberal and repressive reform of Indonesia's criminal code which was passed in Indonesia's parliament on 6 December 2022, with Jokowi's approval.

Indonesia inherited its legal system from Dutch colonial rule, and successive governments have wanted to reform it and make it more relevant to today's Indonesia. Indeed, the current draft was presented to the parliament three years ago in September 2019, but it provoked such widespread protests that it was shelved on the advice of Jokowi. The committee charged with redrafting gave out that the revised code has been altered to take into account some public concerns. At the same time, they stressed that the new law would not take effect for three years. Although, in principle, challenges can be mounted in the constitutional court, this is questioned by Eva Kusuma Sundari (born 1965). A former member of the Indonesian parliament and board member for ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, Sundari was dismissive of this claim. She stated:

We have made great strides towards democracy since the downfall of Suharto's dictatorship, and the new criminal code threatens to reverse that progress, [...] the government and House [of Representatives] claim to have opened room for input from civil society, but that was evidently just for the sake of appearances, as they have largely ignored objections from academics, experts and human rights defenders [Sundari, as quoted in Head 2022].

Overseas, the new law has been labelled tongue-in-cheek the «Bali Bonking Ban» because those accused of having extra-marital relations face up to a year in jail if caught having sex or cohabiting with someone they

are not married to. But the «sex ban» is not the most disturbing change for many Indonesians. They rightly point out that, although foreigners are bound by the law as much as Indonesians, the stipulation that you cannot be prosecuted for extramarital sex or cohabitation unless a complaint is filed by a child, parent or spouse of the accused makes it highly unlikely that tourists will be affected. Instead, it is of far greater significance to Indonesia's LGBTQ+ community, who cannot marry, and fear the law will be used against them. Others have highlighted the risk that this provision will be abused in personal vendettas against estranged family members, or by people with ultra-conservative or religious beliefs, who cannot accept the lifestyle preferences of their children.

But it is the other provisions of the new code which really alarm those concerned with civil liberties. The new code, for example, makes it a crime punishable by up to three years in prison to insult the president or vice-president if the two top office-holders file a complaint. It also criminalises holding protests without permission. At the same time, human rights groups have identified 17 articles which they believe threaten the freedoms won since the return to democratic rule in the 1990s. Evi Mariani Sofian, (born 1976) of the public journalism group Project Multatuli, has voiced her concern about the threat to journalists from article 263 of the new code. This stipulates a four-year prison sentence for anyone found guilty of spreading news which is suspected of being false and causing public disturbances. This is similar to the «hate-sowing articles (*haatzaai-artikelen*)» of the old Dutch Penal Code (*Wetboek van Strafrecht*, articles 153 bis and 161) which ensnared many Indonesian nationalists, including Sukarno, in criminal proceedings during the period when Indonesia was still a Dutch colony [Paget 1975, pp.3, 71, 102]. Mariani described the code as «a siege against freedom of expression», and said that now «every avenue of dissent has criminal charges lurking» [Mariani as quoted in Head 2022].

For others, the inclusion of what is called «living law» gives greatest concern. This originated in the idea that customary law, known as *adat*, which still governs some aspects of life in rural areas of Indonesia, should be incorporated to prevent conflicts between it and the official criminal code. This, in the view of Andreas Harsono (born 1965), Indonesia's leading researcher for Human Rights Watch, is the most dangerous part of the new criminal code. It did not exist in the old code. He fears that this «living law» could be used to implement narrow religious or customary practices such as female genital mutilation, child marriage, mandatory hijab rules or polygamy [Harsono, as quoted in Head 2022]. It could also be used for land grabbing. Indonesia's largest indigenous peoples' coalition, the Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (AMAN), is protesting against this article because they see it as taking away their own traditional dispute mechanisms [AMAN, as quoted in Head 2022]. Finally, the influence of conservative Islamic groups is evident in the widening of the blasphemy



provisions in the code from one to six and the outlawing of both apostasy (i.e. the abandonment of the Islamic faith) and activities aimed at conversion from one faith to another (i.e. Islam to Christianity).

#### 2.4. *The historical context*

If Jokowi's sanctioning of such an illiberal code puts a question mark on his integrity what does this tell us about his statesmanship and image as president of modern Indonesia? A detour back in time to the moment when the republic was created in 1945 may help shed light on the roots of Indonesia's predicament as a «half-finished nation» [Lane 2008].

The Indonesian Republic was created in an emergency situation. The days prior to the proclamation of *merdeka* (independence) on 17 August 1945 were nail-bitingly tense. Moreover, the abrupt changes, which followed the sudden Japanese surrender (15 August 1945), created a political vacuum. This provided room for a group of young revolutionary nationalists or *pemuda* (youth activists) to demand an immediate declaration of independence. The way in which these youth leaders acted during the days of crisis which followed Japan's capitulation, their 24-hour kidnapping of Sukarno and Hatta and their successful pressuring of these leaders into making an immediate independence proclamation has passed into legend.

Over the months preceding the declaration of independence, the older generation nationalist leaders – representing different political factions – conducted a series of meetings to prepare a state constitution for their imagined nation. These deliberations, which took place under the auspices of the Japanese military occupation government (*Gunseikan*), were both intense and contentious. But there was no meeting of minds on the ideological foundations of the new state. Then the Japanese suddenly surrendered, bringing the preparatory meetings to a shuddering halt, with the draft constitution still unfinished. It was agreed in the final meeting that the constitution – known as the UUD (*Undang-Undang Dasar* or Basic Constitutional Law) of 1945 – would be temporary and would later be revised. The UUD 1945 is therefore an unfinished constitution and leaves many important issues unresolved.

The constitution opens with a preamble that elaborates the five principles (*Pancasila*). Here the notion of *persatuan* rather than *kesatuan* is incorporated. Both words derive from the Indonesian *satu*, meaning «one». But, while *persatuan* means the process of *becoming* one, *kesatuan* means the condition of *being* one. Put another way, *persatuan* emphasizes the process of unification (of a highly diverse nation), whereas *kesatuan* emphasizes homogeneity (a done deal). While *persatuan* implies the importance of differences and heterogeneity, *kesatuan* highlights the concepts of oneness and uniformity, leaving little room for dissent.

The engagement of the first generation of nationalist leaders with civic nationalism rather than ethnic nationalism underscores their commit-

ment to the enhancement of political diversity rather than uniformity. Such nationalist feelings imply an appreciation of the *federal idea* as the basis for state formation, despite the state's unitary structures.<sup>13</sup> The political abruptness surrounding the birth of the Indonesian state heavily influenced the provisional character of the Indonesian constitution.<sup>14</sup> Although the Dutch were successful in reclaiming a large part of the territory through military action during the period 1947-49, they failed to establish a federal state. Their attempts to do so triggered a strong reaction from the masses. This expressed itself as a commitment to unity and unitarism – the political doctrine advocating the creation of a unitary state. This was the beginning of a majority view that Indonesia had to be formed as a unitary state (*Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia*, NKRI) rather than as a federal entity which its size and diversity might suggest would be more appropriate.

A fragile political agreement between a strong nationalist group (the Republicans) and those advocating federalism (Federalists) was temporarily formed. The Republicans asserted that the formation of a federal state was only a Dutch strategy to weaken the nationalist movement. This argument was used to explain their rejection of a federal state format for the young republic. An uprising of Royal Dutch Netherlands Indies army (KNIL) forces in Makassar in April 1950 [Kahin 1952, p. 457] and sporadic pro-Dutch protests in Medan led to the collapse of the agreement. On 17 August 1950, the deal between the Republicans and the so-called Federalists ended. The nationalist leaders had decided unilaterally to form a unitary state rather than continue with the federal constitution.

The perception among Indonesian nationalist leaders that the Federal State of Indonesia had been a ruse by the Dutch to recolonize the country brought the notion of a federal Indonesia into disrepute. The strong negative impression lingered long after the last Dutch colonial official had departed. This negativity presents major difficulties for those who advocate the federal state format in Indonesia today.<sup>15</sup>

The idea of *persatuan* implied in the preamble of the constitution subsequently shifted towards the idea of *kesatuan*, in which the notion of

13. The term «federal idea» is borrowed from Robert Rae (2003). Rae argues that the «federal idea» provides more room for discussion while the «ism» in federalism has a way of limiting debate and understanding.

14. According to the study by Schiller (1955), the process of formation of Indonesia's federal state, the first constitution of the Republic of Indonesia was based on the federal constitution of the United States of America.

15. See the comprehensive study by A. Arthur Schiller [1955], especially its epilogue (pp 337-342), which deals with the Indonesian experiment with federalism in 1947-50. On the rejection of the federal idea, an analysis by Hans Antlöv [2000, pp 263-284] is particularly interesting. Antlöv persuasively argues that the failure of federalism in Indonesia has little to do with the qualities of the federal idea as such, but rather «because it was a colonial scheme supported by an outdated local aristocracy, and because it was enmeshed in Cold War considerations» [*Ibid.*, pp. 279-280].

unity is underscored and differences avoided. The format of the Indonesian state moved from the Republic of Indonesia (1945-1946) to the Federal State of Indonesia (1947-1949) and finally to the Unitary State of Indonesia (*Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia*, NKRI, 1950-present). 17 August 1950 was thus a defining moment in the history of state formation in Indonesia.

In 1955, a decade after its hasty declaration of independence, Indonesia's first general election was held. This was to elect peoples' representatives to the new parliament whose most important task was to draft a new constitution. However, the long process of political debate and deliberation among MPs, combined with the pressure of regional rebellions, created feelings of distrust towards civilian politicians amongst the military elite. This, in turn, pushed the President to issue a decree on 5 July 1959, abolishing parliament and returning to the first constitution of Indonesia [Ricklefs 1981, especially ch. 18].

Indonesia then entered its long period of authoritarian government which only ended with the fall of Suharto on 21 May 1998.<sup>16</sup> In those years military influence over the nation became ubiquitous. This remains the case to this day when the «territorial» structure of the military command, which enables the army to shadow the civilian administration from the most highly placed provincial governor down the lowliest village head, has yet to be fully dismantled. This shadow military administration concept had its origins in the doctrine of *dwifungsi* (dual function) during Suharto's New Order, when the Indonesian armed forces (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia*, TNI) were deemed to have both military and civilian responsibilities [Crouch 1978; Haryadi and Carey 2014, p.147].

The tensions between the military and the Communist Party of Indonesia (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) resulted in the tragic loss of life following the failed «coup» of 1 October 1965. Blamed on the PKI, this resulted in an anti-communist bloodbath orchestrated by the Indonesian army in which perhaps as many as a million died and a further 500-750,000 were imprisoned, many for lengthy periods. This forced then-President Sukarno into a corner and opened the door for Suharto to become the new president. With the 1945 constitution still in place, Suharto's authoritarian regime rapidly established itself. Based on a strong centralist bureaucratic polity, economic developmentalism, technocracy and military leadership, the new regime intensified the unitary state format.

The young Republic, born out of a strong spirit of civic nationalism, which had promised to enhance plurality and accommodate ethnic and re-

16. A polemic between Herbert Feith (1965) and Harry Benda (1964) on the «decline» of constitutional democracy in Indonesia is revealing. Their academic debate on Indonesian politics in the late 1950s is still very relevant today (2022), even though the political constellations are completely different and infinitely more complex.

ligious diversity, now confronted fatal new challenges to realise its ideals. As successive governments have discovered after the demise of Suharto's authoritarian regime, national unity is continuously compromised by the fragmentation of the Indonesian elite. Given the failure to root Pancasila deeply enough as the state ideology, only Islam would seem to offer a credible alternative with sufficient contending power and ideology to bind the nation. But this would likely spell national disintegration.

### 2.5. *The disillusionment of democratic politics*

Indonesian politics in the post-Suharto era, turbocharged by interim President B.J. Habibie's decentralization law of April 1999, have given birth to a different order in which local citizens and regions can articulate their political aspirations with greater freedom than ever before. State authority is no longer in the hands of a dictator-president, still less an omniscient central government. Instead, it has been dispersed into diverse political organizations, most notably the regional parliaments (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah*, DPRD) and local governments or *Pemerintah Daerah* (Pemda) based on districts (*kabupaten*) rather than whole provinces.

A series of amendments to the state constitution (UUD) have recently been ratified. These provide the basis for the creation of a new political system, which, in theory, should have a better chance of accommodating people's needs rather than just serving the priorities of the ruling elites. The new political system is influenced by a strong drive for regional decentralization which began with Habibie's April 1999 reforms. This has quickened local enthusiasms for greater decentralization, a process witnessed by the creation of a number of new districts and even provinces since 1999,<sup>17</sup> a development not properly foreseen by the principal designer of the new law, Regional Autonomy Minister (*Menteri Negara Otonomi Daerah*, 1999-2000), Professor Dr M. Ryaas Rasyid (born 1949) [Rasyid 2010]. But there is also a downside to these new regional autonomy laws as the drawing of new territorial boundaries can be seen as a process of nation-state fragmentation. In this process of «disintegration from within», the ethno-religio-demographic dynamic has become a crucial driver [Tirtosudarmo 2021, pp. 207-218]. The potential for political manipulation is also very considerable.

Following the collapse of Suharto's New Order regime in 1998, the urge to form social and political organizations arose amongst the educated indigenous population. These new organizations were often based on

17. The new provinces created since 1999 are North Maluku (1999). Banten (2000), Bangka-Belitung Islands (2000), Gorontalo (2000), Riau Islands (2002), West Papua (2003), West Sulawesi (2004), North Kalimantan (2012), and the four new provinces hewn out of West Papua in 2022: namely, Central Papua, Highland Papua, South Papua and Southwest Papua.

identity politics. For long a contending source of political power since colonial times, the resurgence of Islamic grassroots organizations like the Tarbiyah (literally the «education and upbringing of the people») discussion groups [Fuad 2021, pp. pp.187-207] challenged the civic principles of the nation-state. Indonesian Islam, once described by sociologist Wim Wertheim [1980], as a majority religion with a minority complex, now began to shed this complex and flex its majoritarian muscles. This phenomenon was already evident in the New Order period following the annihilation of the PKI and its roughly 20 million supporters. In recent years, mass grassroots mobilization led by small but fanatical Muslim groups, most notably the FPI (Front Pembela Islam or Islamic Defenders Front), have notched up a number of successes. In April 2017, during the second round of the Jakarta gubernatorial election, they were instrumental in the defeat of the Chinese Christian Jakarta Governor, Ahok, at the hands of Anies Baswedan, an Indonesian Muslim of Hadhrami Arab descent. A similar strategy was attempted, but failed, in the 2019 presidential election when Jokowi's main contender, former general Prabowo Subianto, attempted to mobilise the Islamic vote against the sitting President.

The recent mobilization of Islam to serve populist politics points to an inherent contradiction in the position of Indonesia as a nation with a common – non-ethnic and non-religious – Pancasila self. Furthermore, its encroachment into various state institutions like the state intelligence agency, the *Badan Intelijen Negara* (BIN), and the Public Prosecution Service (*Kejaksaan Republik Indonesia*) highlights the dangers of political Islam expanding its control into the social and institutional fabric of the nation. The resurgence of Islam as the embodiment of a majority religion in a country, Indonesia, with substantial non-Muslim minorities, most notably the 10.72% (28.6 million) Christian population,<sup>18</sup> has the potential to rupture the nation-state. As we have seen, the re-election of Jokowi in 2019 was bought at high cost because he had to take a conservative Muslim cleric as his running mate. This created a paradox, whereby Jokowi's re-election relied on a profoundly illiberal strategy to confront illiberalism [Hadiz 2017]. This is seen by the President's critics as a sign of increasing authoritarianism. But such an explanation is too glib. It misses the dimension of discontinuities and ruptures in the construction of nation-state. If unchecked, Islamic mobilization could lead to a major political schism in Indonesia's modern history in the near future.

18. In 2021, an estimated 7.60% of Indonesia's 276.4 million population were classified as Protestant (20.25 million) and 3.12% Catholic (8.33 million), the latter mainly situated in Eastern Indonesia, in particular the province of Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT) and Maluku Utara, where the Iberian (Portuguese and Spanish) missionaries had left a strong legacy. Indonesia has the fourth largest Christian population in Asia after China, the Philippines, and India.

Ruth McVey, in her passionate obituary of her long-time colleague, Ben Anderson (1936-2015), reflected on Ben's famous book *Imagined Communities* [1983], noting that:

[...] there was a fundamental conflict between these two concepts. 'Nation' meant community, a sense of togetherness, a striving towards the realization of a common self. 'State', however, was about control and the entrenchment of a hierarchy. In the nation-state that replaced royal dominion as the legitimate source of rule, the state seized the collective dreams of community [...] and pressed them into slogans legitimizing its power. [McVey 2016, p. 19].

Contemplating this tension between nation and state we can discern at least four political discontinuities and ruptures which shaped Indonesia as a nation-state since 1945. These forced the young Republic to reinvent itself at four key junctures. The first was Indonesia's proclamation as an independent country from Western colonization in 1945 and the removal of the Dutch following Indonesia's War of Independence (1945-49); the second was the shift from parliamentary to Guided Democracy in 1957-59 under Sukarno; the third was the brutal transition to the army-dominated New Order regime in 1966; the last came after the fall of Suharto on 21 May 1998 when autocracy was replaced by *Reformasi*. In each case the future represented a sharp break with the past. All were draining and painful episodes for the young nation [Haryadi and Carey 2014, p. 152]. The tragic events of 1965 were especially heart-wrenching, marking as they did the beginning of a long period of authoritarianism, state-sanctioned violence and the rise of so-called «repressive developmentalist» regimes. After more than two decades have passed since the outwardly tumultuous but internally smooth (palace politics) transfer of power from Suharto to his Vice-President, B.J. Habibie, on 21 May 1998, we are only now beginning to realise what really happened: May 1998 was not a democratic revolution in the true sense of the term but the continuation of political control by other means. Power remained firmly in the hands of the old-established elites. Today, as we come to the end of Jokowi's second and final presidential term a widespread disillusionment with democracy seems to have set in. A feeling of *déjà vu* hangs heavy in the air.

### 3. *Economic policy*

#### 3.1. *All the President's men (and some women)*

As a businessman Jokowi knows full well the strong connection of economy and politics. Brought up in a secular nationalistic political milieu (his family were PNI and then post-1973 PDI-P supporters), the future president was strongly inspired by the first Indonesian president, Sukarno. As mayor,

governor and president, Jokowi has been a workaholic with an obsession for turning abstract plans into concrete realities. He is also a master of the art of how to get things done by working with other people. While none of the previous Indonesian presidents had business backgrounds, President Jokowi is a stand-out. For him, business and the economy are what makes the world go round. In his view, Indonesia is a giant corporation with the president as its CEO. Economic policy is thus key to achieving his ambitious political agenda of turning Indonesia into an economic and political global power.

The appointment of Sri Mulyani Indrawati (born 1962) as Minister of Finance in July 2016, half way through Jokowi's first term (2014-19), tells us much about his priorities. It shows the trust Jokowi places in Sri Mulyani – who was ranked best Finance Minister in the Asia Pacific by *FinanceAsia* magazine in 2019 [Fitriyanti 2019]<sup>19</sup> – as the only person who can manage the economy and preserve the nation's financial stability. This, Jokowi rightly sees, is the backbone for the realization of his political agenda. A graduate of the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign) and Visiting Professor at the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies at Georgia State University (2000-2002), Sri Mulyani served as Minister of Finance under SBY (in office, 2005-10) and spent many years with the World Bank where she rose to become the Bank's Managing Director (in office, 2010-2016).<sup>20</sup> This has given her an unparalleled knowledge of managing both Indonesia's domestic economy and international finance, making her a very suitable partner for Jokowi to implement his economic policies.

Another cabinet post crucial for Jokowi's plan for turning Indonesia into a global player is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Here Jokowi appointed a career diplomat, Retno Marsudi (born 1962), as minister (2014-to present). A contemporary of Jokowi, both graduating in the same year (1985) from Gajah Mada University (Jokowi in Forestry Engineering, Retno in International Relations), Retno went on to earn an MA in International Law and Policy from The Hague University of Applied Science, then serving as Indonesia's ambassador to Norway (2005-8) and the Netherlands (2011-14). When Jokowi appointed her Indonesia's first female Foreign Minister in October 2014, he was well aware of the importance of international diplomacy given the manifold links which bound Indonesia's economy to the global market.<sup>21</sup>

19. She was also ranked 37<sup>th</sup> in the Forbes 100 Most Powerful Women List in the year of her appointment (2016) [Coconuts Jakarta, 2016, June 7].

20. Her full title was Managing Director of the World Bank Group, which put her in the no. 2 spot after the World Bank President, Robert Zoellick (in office, 2007-2012) and Jim Yong Kim (in office 2012-2019).

21. A business colleague of Jokowi in Solo told the principal author of this article, Riwanto Tirtosudarmo, about Jokowi's habit of participating in international furniture expos in Europe. As the owner of a leading furniture company in Surakarta, he needed to secure orders from European suppliers for his products. This helps to explain his knowledge and experience of international business practices.

After Sri Mulyani's appointment to the Finance Ministry in 2016, Retno worked closely with her. Two examples from the beginning and end of the COVID-19 crisis (2020-2022) are relevant here. The first was the need for Indonesia to negotiate with major international vaccine producers to secure a sufficient stock of vaccine to inoculate Indonesia's 183 million adults (citizens over 18 years of age). Here Sri Mulyani and Retno Marsudi proved to be instrumental in the success of Indonesia's vaccination programme. They made sure that supplies reached Indonesia from China (Sinovac/Sinopharm), UK (AstraZeneca) and US (Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna),<sup>22</sup> with 62.3% of the population fully vaccinated (two doses) by the end of the first year of the nationwide programme in March 2022. The second example was working for the success of Indonesia's G-20 presidency. This was a major opportunity for Indonesia when it came out of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022. Culminating in the G-20 leaders' summit in Bali on 15-16 November 2022, once again the Ministries of Finance and Foreign Affairs were to the fore in ensuring Indonesia's widely praised performance as summit host.

A third cabinet post vital for Jokowi is the Ministry of Public Works, which he entrusted to Basuki Hadimuljono (born 1954). A career bureaucrat with a doctorate in civil engineering from Colorado State University (1980), Hadimuljono is Jokowi's point man for handling his mega infrastructure projects, which Jokowi sees as the foundation for the country's future. The President's hugely ambitious idea of building a new national capital outside Java should be understood in this light. By siting the new capital in East Kalimantan (Borneo) – a geographical choice long cogitated – Jokowi aims to distribute resources more evenly, thus devolving government from what he regards as an overly Java-centric polity. This is part of his strategy of ensuring a more balanced and integrated nation with equal access for the outer islands to national investment and knowledge-production. This geographical shift, in Jokowi's view, will correct the imbalance between the politically predominant Javanese centre and the outer island periphery, which has traditionally generated the lion's share of foreign earnings from mining, hydrocarbons (oil and Liquefied Natural Gas, LNG) and cash-crop exports, but which has enjoyed few of the state investment benefits.

Jokowi's economic policy in his second presidential term is a continuation of what he embarked on in his first. The triad of infrastructural development, foreign investment and high economic growth are still the main drivers. As a businessman Jokowi is only too keenly aware that Indonesian government bureaucracy is riddled with systemic and structural corruption. This constrains its ability to respond to the requirements of foreign investors. Jokowi is also of the view that many government departments and institutions are now redundant and should be abolished to make savings to

22. By 11 July 2021, Indonesia had received 122,735,260 million doses of vaccine, the vast majority (108.5 million doses), Sinovac from China, see Setkab 2021.



the government budget. Another problem is the malfunction of many laws and regulations. These hinder the effectiveness of both the bureaucracy and the civil administration. Reforms are needed in both areas to speed up the process of foreign investment.

With an eye to pushing through these reforms, Jokowi appointed former four-star general, Luhut Binsar Panjaitan (born 1947), as Coordinating Minister of Maritime and Investment Affairs at the beginning of his second term in October 2019.<sup>23</sup> Luhut, a special forces officer with long experience in Indonesian-occupied East Timor (1975-99), where he served four tours of duty, has been supportive of Jokowi since his first successful presidential bid in April-July 2014. He is also seen as Jokowi's man in ensuring the President's smooth relationship with the military. But Luhut has his own agenda. Known for his business and political activities since Suharto's New Order, in the early Reformasi period (1998-present) he set up his own conglomerate, Toba Sejahtera Group (2004), with interests in natural resources (oil, gas and mining), electricity generation (coal, gas and geothermal) and agriculture (palm-oil).

Alongside Luhut, as coordinating minister for Political, Security and Legal Affairs, Jokowi appointed Mahfud MD (born 1957, in office 2019 to present), a law professor from Sampang in West Madura. Mahfud's strong Islamic credentials through his membership of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest grassroots Islamic organization in Indonesia, enabled him to protect Jokowi from the potential use of Islam as a mobilizing force, as had happened with the Christian Chinese Jakarta Governor, Ahok. Under Mahfud's watch, the firebrand Habib Rizieq has been brought to trial and sentenced to a four-year imprisonment for infringing the COVID-19 protocols and for inciting unrest. As a legal expert, Mahfud MD has also been instrumental in tweaking laws and regulations to smooth the process of foreign investment.<sup>24</sup>

In his second presidential term, Jokowi designated former Chief of National Police (2016-2019) General Tito Karnavian (born 1964), to be his minister of Home Affairs (2019 to present), a cabinet post vital to the management of Indonesian domestic politics. This includes sensitive areas such as managing political parties and conducting general elections. Before becoming Indonesian Police Chief, Tito was head of police in Papua (2012-2015). This makes him Jokowi's point man to oversee the political situation in Papua. A region of vast natural resources – the US mining firm Freeport McMoRan is the largest taxpayer in Indonesia thanks to its Grasberg mine which has an estimated US\$ 100 billion of copper and gold reserves

23. Luhut was previously Jokowi's Chief of Staff (2014-15) and Coordinating Minister for Political, Security and Legal Affairs (2015-2016).

24. On the selection of the new cabinet at the start of Jokowi's second term, see 'Kabinet Anti-Radikalisme [Anti radicalism cabinet]', *Tempo*, 28 October-3 November 2019.

[Shulman 2016] – Papua has seen protracted military conflict between the Indonesian army and the Free Papua Movement (Organisasi Papua Merdeka, OPM) since 1969 UN referendum – known locally as the «Act of No Choice» [Saltford 2003]. As Home Affairs Minister Tito has recently (2022) attempted to address the underlying legal and political problems in the vast half island by establishing four new provinces in Papua (footnote 17). These, along with the original province of West Papua, effectively split Papua into five separate administrative regions, which the national government argues ensures a better distribution of public services to the remoter highland areas and isolated communities. Critics, however, see this as a political strategy to weaken the Papuan resistance movement, which wins increasing recruits even as the Indonesian military ramps up its repression.

Since his first presidential term Jokowi has restructured his cabinet and created a new Presidential Staff Office (*Kantor Staf Presiden*). Tasked with supporting cabinet ministers, its main responsibility is to iron out miscommunication between ministries and government agencies, thus speeding up the execution of strategic national policies [*Tempo* 2019, 28 October, pp. 32-38]. Initially headed up by Jokowi's ally, Luhut, who served for just nine months in 2014-15, the post was then entrusted to Teten Masduki (born 1963, in office 2015-18), a former NGO activist close to Jokowi. In the period under review, it was filled by Moeldoko (born 1957), a former four star general and commander (*panglima*) of the Indonesian army (in post, 2013-15). He acted as one of the President's key advisers on internal military affairs. Another figure in Jokowi's close political circle is Police General Budi Gunawan (born 1959), the current head of the National Intelligence Agency, BIN (*Badan Intelijen Negara*). A close confidant and long-serving adjutant (1999-2004) of Jokowi's political boss, Megawati Sukarno Putri, Gunawan's rapid promotion as the youngest Police general ever (2008) has not been without controversy given his links with the former president and speedy net wealth accumulation.

Another important economic cabinet post is the Ministry of State-Owned Enterprises or BUMN (*Badan Usaha Milik Negara*). Its current incumbent is Erick Thohir (born 1970). One of Indonesia's most successful young businessmen, whose US\$157 million net wealth places him amongst the top 20 richest government officials in contemporary Indonesia, he was the manager of Jokowi's successful second presidential campaign in March-April 2019. As we have seen, Jokowi has appointed many able non-party members to strategic ministerial cabinet positions like Finance, Foreign Affairs and Home Affairs, as well as to his key Coordinating Ministries (Luhut, Mahfud, etc.). By contrast, his choice for less strategic portfolios has fallen largely on political party coalition members who are currently supporting his presidency. Here Jokowi has shown himself to be very skilled in his approach to political party leaders. Not only does this bring them within his fold politically, but also guarantees their parliamentary support for his eco-

conomic policy agendas. Since Indonesia adopted a direct presidential election format in 2004, it is still not clear what political system has been chosen – is it presidential or parliamentary? For Jokowi, however, the nature of the political system is simply not his concern. As a pragmatist he can live with any political system. Indeed, if required, he can engineer it to achieve his economic and political ends. Jokowi is a man who sees every challenge as an opportunity.

### 3.2. *Engineering the national laws*

After winning the 2019 presidential election, Jokowi showed Machiavellian genius when he approached his former presidential rival, Prabowo, to join his cabinet (August 2019). This was part of Jokowi's strategy of minimizing the possibilities of resistance to his economic and political agendas in parliament. Prabowo agreed and was given the Defence Ministry, a post entirely in line with his military background. The former general's inclusion in Jokowi's cabinet has strengthened the political party coalition which supports the President in parliament. Now, only former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's deeply corrupt Democratic Party (Partai Demokrat) and the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS)<sup>25</sup> are not in the coalition supporting the President. Together they amount to an insignificant minority group, and do not constitute an effective parliamentary opposition.

Seen in terms of Jokowi's immediate policy goals this balance of power may appear a highly favourable one. But, if one looks ahead to Indonesia's democratic future, it may not be such a healthy situation. The dangers of autocracy and oligarchy loom. This can be seen most recently in the illiberal revision of Indonesia's criminal code (6 December 2022). It would be much less of a danger if there was an effective parliamentary opposition along the lines of «His Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition» in the UK [Hutt 2017]. The case of the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) in Malaysia may also be relevant here.<sup>26</sup>

Jokowi's parliamentary majority has enabled him to propose a new national law intended to enhance foreign investment and create jobs. The

25. The PKS, founded in 1998, was originally influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood Movement in Egypt and is seen as an Islamist party because of its calls for Islam to play a more central role in Indonesian public life. It provided political support for the 212 Movement and the Islamic Defenders' Front (FPI), before the latter's banning in 2019.

26. In 2018 and 2022, the DAP and its allies dealt the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) two stunning general election reverses. The first even toppled the now imprisoned former prime minister, Najib Razak (born 1953; in office 2009-18), who had diverted US\$700 million into his private account from the state's 1MDB (1-Malaysian Development Berhad) Fund in the «largest kleptocracy case on record» [Teoh 2022].

proposed law merges many laws that are now considered redundant. These have been brought under a single umbrella legislation designed to boost economic growth by attracting foreign capital. Jokowi's obsession with turning Indonesia into a developed country through investment in mega infrastructure projects has also shaped his view of the role of science and technology. Scientific research has to be developed, in Jokowi's estimation, to make innovative scientific and technological products. His first visit to what was then the Indonesian Academy of Sciences (*Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia*, LIPI) shortly after his election as president in 2014 was telling. Addressing the gathered scientists, he asked them in all seriousness whether their collective research could at a stroke double the height and yield of a rice stalk.<sup>27</sup> In 2019, Law no 11 on the National System of Science and Technology, was enacted. It prioritised the role of education and research institutions in supporting government policies aimed at achieving high economic growth and realizing Indonesia's «Sustainable Development Goals» (SDGs).

The new law on science and technology has restructured national research institutions into a single body. Previously divided into separate government research agencies, the National Research and Innovation Agency (*Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional*, BRIN) was inaugurated under Presidential Regulation (*Peraturan Presiden or Perpres*) No. 33 of 2021. As a new national research body its task is to integrate all the state's research institutions into one umbrella organization [*Tempo* 2022, 23 January, pp. 90-95]. Critics see BRIN as a threat to that academic freedom which, in their view, is a *sine qua non* for the development of a healthy science and technology sector. With the strong backing of parliament, in particular from Megawati's PDI-P, the BRIN juggernaut proved unstoppable and the objections of the critics were swept aside. Megawati herself, who has zero academic qualifications apart from her ten honorary degrees – she never finished her undergraduate degrees in agriculture in Bandung and psychology at the University of Indonesia (1970-72) – was appointed Head of the BRIN Steering Committee.

### 3.3. COVID-19 and associated events

COVID-19, whose first transmission was reported in Jakarta on 2 March 2020, was perhaps the most challenging economic problem the country faced in Jokowi's second term. With over six million reported cases and 160,398 official deaths (figures which health experts consider substantially underreported), Indonesia had the seventh highest mortality in the world

27. The first author of this article, Riwanto Tirtosudarmo, was among the four LIPI researchers who met with President Jokowi at the State Palace (*Istana Negara*) and invited him to give a public lecture at LIPI on 16 September 2014, when Jokowi's talk was recorded in the author's personal notes.

per head of population.<sup>28</sup> The very considerable numbers infected by COVID-19, especially during the epidemic's second surge in July 2021, when the Delta variant was at its height, overwhelmed hospitals and quarantine shelters. A study by the SMERU Research Institute on the socio-economic impact of Covid-19 on household incomes in 2020-2021 shows that:

Given the fragile state of households throughout the survey period, it is reasonable to expect that the key socioeconomic indicators tracked by these surveys – job, income, food security, learning constraints, access to health services – have [all] deteriorated during the second surge, though more data and evidence are required to determine the true extent. As the COVID-19 situation remains uncertain, households and children will require ongoing assistance to avoid long-term scarring [SMERU 2021].

The unexpected economic impact of Covid-19 stretched national and local budgets. Although income inequality between the rich and poor remained stubbornly high, the percentage (10.1%) of the Indonesian population living below the absolute poverty line of one US dollar a day steadily declined during Jokowi's first presidential term (2014-2019) [Tjoe 2018]. But, as COVID-19 began to spread from early March 2020, Jokowi's government had to rethink its economic strategy in double quick time. Tackling the impact of this unprecedentedly deadly virus required the President and his key economic advisers to think out of the box. This was especially urgent when statistics showed that the livelihoods of households with less than US\$ 1.90 a day in the period 2017-20 were negatively impacted by the pandemic. Sharp increases in income inequality occurred within individual provinces, with a widening gap between urban and rural areas. At the same time, income disparities between provinces appear to have decreased [Novianti and Panjaitan 2022, pp. 29-37].

The economic downturn resulting from COVID-19 led to a delay in the implementation of planned mega-infrastructure projects. One casualty here was the development of a new national capital in East Kalimantan. But, despite delays, Jokowi determined to push ahead. The first step here was to make the necessary changes to laws and regulations thus straightening the path to project implementation. On 15 February 2022, after several delays caused by popular protests, the Indonesian parliament, at Jokowi's urging, hastily passed a new national law on the National Capital (*Undang-Undang tentang Ibu Kota Negara*, IKN). This legislation was put in place to ensure that the creation of the new national capital would have a watertight legal

28. Statistics from <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>; for adjusted mortality statistics from Johns Hopkins University's Coronavirus Resource Centre, which places Indonesia immediately after Peru (4.3 percent) as the country with the most deaths proportionally (2.4 percent) to their reported Covid-19 cases, see <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>.

basis. But it attracted criticism from civil society organisations who saw Jokowi's persistence as an outcome of his unhealthy alliance with big corporations controlled by super-rich Indonesian oligarchs.<sup>29</sup>

The high public expectations that Jokowi's administration would begin to realise the promises of President Sukarno's 1 July 1945 Pancasila speech regarding the creation of a just and prosperous society in Indonesia [Meirizka 2009], were dashed. Instead of moving in the direction of a more just and equitable society, all the indications were that Jokowi's administration was becoming less democratic and less egalitarian. Many saw in his creation of the new omnibus law on job creation (*Undang-Undang-Cipta Kerja*, UUCK) in October 2020 and his revision of the regulation on the State Corruption Eradication Commission (*Undang-Undang Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi*, UUKPK), a concerted move to reduce the power of organised labour in Indonesia and clip the wings of the Corruption Commission. At one level, this was a way of reassuring foreign investors that they would not have to confront demanding labour unions while doing business in Indonesia. At another, it involved a trade-off between the President and the Indonesian *classe politique* in which the latter agreed to pass the omnibus law (UUCK) in return for the emasculation of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), thus ensuring that it would no longer have the power to investigate systemic corruption of the political elite as hitherto [Valdameri 2017, 2018]. Both steps were seen as a necessary compromise by Jokowi to achieve high economic growth. But Jokowi did not stop there. Under his watch, parliament also revised the state implementation law on mining (*Pelaksanaan Kegiatan Usaha Pertambangan Mineral dan Batu Bara*, PP no.96 2021) and information technology (*Undang-Undang Transaksi Elektronik*, UU no.19 2016), both legislative initiatives seen as favouring big corporations and their oligarch owners.<sup>30</sup>

In the same breath, as we have seen (section 2.3), another highly contentious issue was the revision of the Indonesian Penal Code (*Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana*, KUHP). Intentionally postponed until after the completion of the G-20 meeting in Bali on 17 November, both the government and parliament speeded up the finalization of the draft, ratifying it just 20 days after the Bali meeting (6 December 2022).

Jokowi's second presidential term has been marked by his legislative agenda. This has resulted in new laws and regulations perceived as friendly to big corporations and local oligarchs. Meanwhile, civil society groups, earlier supportive of Jokowi's 2014 presidential bid, have been given short shrift. Freedom of expression has been stifled and political opposition suppressed in the interest of securing high capital investment and economic growth.

29. For a clear and comprehensive analysis of the role of oligarchy in the making of the national law, see Winters 2021.

30. For a critical assessment of Jokowi's last three years in power (2019-2022), see Pabottingi 2022, pp. 34-35.

In early 2022, public controversy flared briefly after a group of Jokowi supporters, coordinated by Luhut, proposed that his presidency should be extended to an unprecedented third five-year term [*Tempo* 2022, 13 March, pp. 22-27; 10 April, pp. 24-29]. Civil society organizations immediately declared this to be unconstitutional. But, while Jokowi himself initially rejected the idea, he hedged his refusal by saying that as a democrat he was only adhering to the constitution. This indicated that he would be open to the idea of a third term if the constitution allowed it. As a pragmatist, Jokowi is prepared to use any strategy to achieve his goals. In this sense Jokowi is a Machiavellian.

The impact of Jokowi's development agenda, however, comes at a heavy environmental cost. His emphasis on mega infrastructural construction projects to support the expansion of extractive industries and cash-crop production raises a question mark about Indonesia's ecological future. This can be seen most clearly in Indonesia's loss of rainforest habitats (72% destroyed as of 2019) and carbon-rich peatlands which act as carbon sinks absorbing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Indonesian Borneo (Kalimantan) is especially badly affected. Both here and in neighbouring Sumatra, 15 million hectares of land have been licensed for palm oil development. The livelihoods of indigenous communities, who inhabit hitherto afforested areas and live symbiotically with the rain forest, have been especially badly affected [Greenpeace USA 2018]. Protests orchestrated by civil society organizations in alliance with local indigenous communities have led to flare ups across the country. Meanwhile, the drive for expansive extractive industries, backed up by newly drafted government laws and regulations, has accelerated.

#### 4. *Foreign policy*

##### 4.1. *ASEAN and the G-20*

Jokowi's foreign policy during his second administration has been strongly linked to his domestic economic agenda. Boosting foreign investment to achieve high economic growth is the touchstone here. Apart from business as usual as an ASEAN member state, Jokowi's diplomacy continues to implement the «free and active foreign policy (*politik bebas aktif*)» first enunciated in Indonesia's Basic Law (*Undang-Undang Dasar*, UUD) of 1945. Used to good effect during Indonesia's war of independence (Revolution) against the Dutch (1945-49) and often referred to by Vice-President Muhammad Hatta (in office, 1945-56) [Kusno 2014], it was further developed during the Cold War (1947-91). It was not the same as neutrality since it involved ensuring Indonesia's ability to manoeuvre skilfully between the superpowers, first the USA and the USSR, and then (post-1991) between China and the United States. In the 1999 revision of the Basic Law (UU 37 Article 3), Indonesia's «free and active» foreign policy was defined as main-

taining the freedom to determine the country's policy response towards international problems without being bound by a priori agreements with any single power.<sup>31</sup>

While China is currently expanding its global diplomatic presence through its Belt and Road Initiative (2013-49),<sup>32</sup> Jokowi has made no secret of his wish to get closer to Beijing. Indeed, his pragmatism makes him better able to deal with China than the United States, where policy initiatives often involve tricky issues like human rights, which Jokowi sees as a distraction from his main goal of attracting more foreign direct investment (FDI). That said, Chinese investment in high profile projects like Indonesia's high-speed «bullet train» between Jakarta and Bandung is not without its problems. Given shifting government policy priorities – in this case Jokowi's commitment to building a new national capital in East Kalimantan – the original economic rationale for the «bullet train» has been largely compromised (see Section I Part I).

In 2022, as we have seen, Indonesia served as president of the G-20. This group comprises the 19 countries in the world with the largest economies plus the European Union. Spain attends as a regular guest,<sup>33</sup> along with various intergovernmental organizations.<sup>34</sup> The G-20 group accounts for nearly 90% of the world's gross national product (GNP), 80% of total world trade and two thirds of the world's population. So, a lot was riding on the successful hosting of this meeting as far as Jokowi was concerned. The result appears to have exceeded even his expectations. The flawless hosting of the G-20 leaders' meeting in Bali on 15-16 November 2022 and the resulting G-20 leaders' declaration were widely praised. The declaration announced agreement on three issues, all proposed by Indonesia, namely: (1) global health architecture, (2) digital transformations and (3) sustainable energy transitions.

31. Cited at <https://www.sman2-tp.sch.id/read/giatinfo/947/lahirnya-politik-luarnegeri-bebas-aktif>. The Indonesian text reads: «Indonesia bebas menentukan sikap dan kebijaksanaan terhadap permasalahan internasional serta tidak mengikatkan diri secara a priori kepada kekuatan dunia manapun».

32. This seeks to replicate the old Silk Road (in fact Silk Routes) which linked China with Europe from the first century BC, ending in the early fifteenth century when Admiral Zheng He (Chêng-ho's, 1371-1433) seven «treasure voyages» to South-east Asia, South Asia, West Asia and East Africa came to a close with his death (1433), see WH McNeill, *A World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.165; Edward L. Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405-1433* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007).

33. Although now ranked 16th in terms of the size of its economy, Spain did not have a large enough economy to join the grouping in 1999 when it was originally formed.

34. These include the chairs of ASEAN and the African Union, as well as a representative of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). A neighbouring country is always invited by the host. In 2022 it was Thailand.



#### 4.2. *COVID-19 and the global economy*

As COVID-19 began to spread throughout Indonesia in March 2020 Jokowi's economic agenda had to be rapidly adjusted to deal with the pandemic's unexpected impact. COVID-19 was a global phenomenon. It changed diplomatic relationships and altered foreign policy. Indonesia was no exception. Indeed, Jokowi's second presidential term has been largely shaped by the impact of COVID-19. It had important economic and foreign policy ramifications. Originating in Wuhan, in Central China's Hubei Province, the first confirmed case can be dated back to 17 November 2019. But Chinese doctors only understood that they were dealing with a novel Corona virus disease in late December 2019 [Ma 2020]. A fortnight later, on 14 January 2020, the first COVID-19 case outside China was confirmed in Thailand. The rapid spread of COVID-19 to other countries around the world through international travel and migration created tensions. Nations tried to protect their citizens by controlling the movement of people. National borders were closed or greatly restricted, except for returning citizens. In Indonesia, apart from managing the movement of foreigners, particular problems arose as many Indonesian migrant workers, mostly domestic workers, were living in the Middle East, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. Some, who had finished their work contracts, found themselves stranded in their host countries. A recent study has shown that this situation greatly increased the vulnerability of migrant workers to COVID-19. The longer the migration process, the greater the dangers [Anaf et.al. 2022].

After vaccines began to be produced in sufficient quantities in early 2021, the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs under Retno Marsudi lobbied vaccine producing countries, in particular China, UK and the USA, to allow Indonesia to obtain sufficient numbers of vaccine doses to inoculate its population. Despite all the problems, especially when patient numbers began to exceed the capacity of medical facilities during the pandemic peaks in April-May 2020 and July 2021, Indonesia seems to have carried out a rather successful vaccination programme – 62% of the population inoculated with two doses by March 2022. As the world's fourth most populous country (280.5 million as of December 2022), Indonesia faced a big challenge to protect its citizens from such a deadly virus. Foreign diplomacy was clearly crucial here. It enabled Indonesia to negotiate with vaccine producing countries to make sure sufficient doses were available for nationwide distribution. In this regard, Indonesia appears to have done a good job at managing its public health policy to curb the worst impacts of the pandemic [Bisara 2022].

#### 4.3. *The internationalization of the Papua issue*

Another critical foreign policy issue for Indonesia concerns Papua. Political disputes have recently multiplied in the vast half island due to

the heavy-handed and repressive behaviour of the Indonesian army. As repression has deepened, so demands have grown to resolve the Papua issue. There is now a growing number of ethnic Papuans who support the province's separation from Indonesia and the establishment of an independent West Papuan state, perhaps through a referendum similar to that which took place in Indonesian-occupied East Timor (post-2002, Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste) on 30 August 1999. That led to the former Portuguese colony regaining its independence. The problem for Indonesia is that Papua is no longer just a domestic issue, but one with an increasingly high international profile.<sup>35</sup>

On 17 August 2019, there was an incident in a dormitory used by Papuan students in Surabaya. The students were accused of destroying an Indonesian national flag during the independence-day celebrations. The local security apparatus and civilian mass organizations surrounded the dormitory, and in the ensuing crackdown racist chants were shouted at the Papuan students. The following month in response to further racist assaults on Papuan students in several cities across Java, a riot occurred in Wamena in Papua's Central Highlands where a building was attacked and several people were killed.

In 2020, there were at least 65 violent incidents in Papua linked to racist actions by Indonesian migrants and security forces. One of the most serious was the killing of a 67-year-old Christian pastor, Pendeta Yeremia Zanambani (circa 1952/53-2020), in Intan Jaya District (Central Papua). The Nabire-born pastor, who was widely respected by the local population in his home province of Central Papua, was reported to have been specifically targeted by the Indonesian army (TNI) because of his outspoken sermons and public comments regarding the conduct of the Indonesian troops [Briantika 2020; Strangio 2021]. In 2021, several armed stand-offs occurred between the Indonesian security forces, local civilians and combatants of the armed wing of the Free Papua Organization (OPM). These resulted in fatalities on both sides.

The killing of the head of Indonesian National Intelligence (BIN) in Papua, Brigadier General I Gusti Putu Danny Nugraha Karya (1969-2021), in an ambush by OPM's West Papua National Liberation Army (*Tentara Pembebasan Nasional Papua Barat*, TPNPB-OPM) on 25 April 2021 [*Tempo*

35. Regarding the controversy surrounding the so-called «Act of Free Choice» in May 1969, namely the UN-supervised referendum by which a carefully selected group of West Papuan leaders were browbeaten into joining Indonesia, see the forthcoming article by Greg Poulgrain, 'The Undeclared, Declassified: West New Guinea and the 1969 Act of Free Choice', *Masyarakat Indonesia*, published by the Indonesian Academy of Sciences (LIPI, now BRIN). In this lengthy article, Poulgrain makes a detailed analysis of the recently declassified cables between the US Embassy in Jakarta and Washington DC, which show clearly how the referendum was manipulated in favour of Indonesia.

2021, 16 May, pp. 40-41],<sup>36</sup> was the turning point here. This led to Jokowi's Coordinating Minister for Politics, Law and Security, Mahfud MD, declaring that the TPNPB-OPM and its armed affiliates in West Papua a terrorist organization (29 April 2021). Indeed, Mahfud's decision had already been prefigured in Jokowi's speech delivered shortly after Brigadier Karya's demise, where he stressed that there was «no place for criminal armed groups in Papua just as there was not in other places in Indonesia». Just before Indonesia's decision to label them a terrorist group, the principal spokesperson of the TPNPB-OPM, Sebby Sambom (born 1975), put out a press release stating said that: «We are ready to use UN legal mechanisms if Indonesia calls us a terrorist group», thus further internationalizing the issue [Mawei 2021].

Since the beginning of his presidency, Jokowi has been very active in his attempt to win the hearts and minds of the Papuan population. He is all too well aware that the problem will not be solved solely by using the security approach. Instead, he has tried to win the Papuans over by making frequent visits to the territory and facilitating major infrastructural projects such as the construction of the Trans-Papua Highway, as well as the expansion of airports and harbours. At the same time, he has announced plans to construct a new presidential palace in Papua to add to those in Jakarta, Bogor, Cipanas, Yogyakarta and Bali, as well as allocating more Special Autonomy Funds to the territory. These funds have recently helped to create four new provinces (footnote 17) [*Tempo* 2021, 16 May, pp. 40-41]. But money and mega projects will only go so far. Indonesia's egregious human rights record in Papua continue to attract global attention: in a UN Periodic Review (UPR) meeting in New York on 9 November 2022, the Indonesian Minister of Law and Human Rights, Yasonna Laoly (born 1953; in office, 2014-2019, 2019 to present), the first ethnic Nias to hold a cabinet post, was roundly criticized by representatives of eight countries, including the USA, for Indonesia's widespread human rights abuses in Papua [Tapol 2022].<sup>37</sup>

Papua's international profile will likely increase as a result of the continuing conflict between the Indonesian security apparatus and armed resistance groups. These latter represent diverse groupings of freedom fighters under the loose umbrella of the Free Papua Organization (*Organisasi Papua Merdeka*, OPM). Social media and information technology have helped to internationalise the issue. News reports about alleged human right abuses by the Indonesian military and police against the indigenous Papuan people now reach an ever-larger global audience [Lantang and

36. Brigadier Karya's rank was raised posthumously to Major-General.

37. The eight countries who made critical statements were: Australia, Canada, Marshall Islands, Netherlands, New Zealand, Slovenia, USA and Vanuatu.

Tambunan 2020, pp. 41-59]. The increasing global awareness of the Papua issue through social media has prompted a change in Indonesian foreign policy. This is now focused on neighbouring countries like Vanuatu and the Marshall Islands in the South Pacific who are supportive of the Papuan independence struggle. Indonesia is very concerned about the use of social media by Papuan and non-Papuan pro-independence activists and their ability to influence these neighbouring countries. But recent research shows that Indonesian diplomatic initiatives have failed to reverse the internationalization of the Papua issue [Lantang and Tambunan 2020].

## 5. *Conclusions*

Jokowi's drift towards authoritarian government in his second administration has to be located in a wider perspective. This has both domestic and global dimensions. While his authoritarianism is shaped by domestic politics, it has an international context. In fact, globally, Jokowi's political agenda is unexceptionable. Authoritarian tendencies during Jokowi's second term are part of a global phenomenon: neo-liberal ideologies have been in the ascendant worldwide since at least the end of the Cold War (1947-91). The overlap between global and local realities has been accelerated by COVID-19 (2020-22). As the pandemic spread around the world, so international collaboration between nations to curb the disease rose to the top of the agenda. Jokowi's achievement in securing sufficient vaccines to inoculate over 60% of Indonesia's population, and his success in organizing the 15-16 November 2022 G-20 leader's meeting in Bali, both reflect his standing as a global leader. But these successes cannot excuse his failures in upholding democracy and the rule of law as epitomized by the Ferdy Sambo murder case and the Kanjuruhan Stadium tragedy. Both involved the deeply corrupt Indonesian state police force and show the distance Indonesia still has to travel before becoming an established rule-of-law state (*rechtstaat*).

Leaving aside the ongoing state-sponsored violence, persecution and human rights violations in Papua, such egregious infringements of democratic principles and individual liberties are the direct result of various national laws and regulations passed by the second Jokowi administration. These are mostly designed to boost foreign investment and economic growth. Despite the economic downturn caused COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine, Jokowi has been able to survive. Yet the cost has been high – namely an ever-shrinking space for freedom of expression. As several big projects, such as the Jakarta-Bandung bullet train and the development of a new national capital, currently hang in the balance, Jokowi has to find increas-

ingly drastic ways to ensure their success.<sup>38</sup> While the controversial idea of extending his tenure to a currently unconstitutional third presidential term has been shelved for now, the only alternative is securing the election of a successor president, such as his Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto, who might ensure the longevity of these projects. For Jokowi, the 2024 presidential race is crucial. Although he will likely no longer himself be a contender, its outcome will determine the nature of his political legacy. As Indonesia's first and only businessman president, the last entry in his accounts' ledger has yet to be written.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aditya, Gregorius, 2020, *Marhaenisme Soekarno, Marxisme ala Indonesia?*, MA Thesis, History, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, 2020 ([https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342436915\\_MARHAENISME\\_SOEKARNO\\_MARXISME\\_ALA\\_INDONESIA](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342436915_MARHAENISME_SOEKARNO_MARXISME_ALA_INDONESIA)).
- Anaf, Aswatini et al., 2022, 'Indonesian Migrant Workers: The Migration Process and Vulnerability to COVID-19', *Journal of Environmental and Public Health*, Volume 2022 | Article ID 2563684 | <https://doi.org/10.1155/2022/2563684>.
- Anderson, B.R.O'G., 1983, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London & New York: Verso.
- Antlöv, Hans, 2001, 'Federations-of-Intent in Indonesia, 1945-1949', in R. William Liddle (ed.) *Crafting Indonesian Democracy*, Jakarta: PPW-LIPI, Ford Foundation and Mizan Pustaka.
- Baker, Jacqui, 2016, 'The Middle Class President', *New Mandala*, 5 August.
- Benda, Harry J., 1964, 'Review: Democracy in Indonesia', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3, May, pp 449-456.
- Bisara, Dion, 2022, 'Indonesia in Much Better Place to Face the Perfect Storm', *The Jakarta Globe*, 12 October.

38. On 20 December 2022, in an apparently desperate move to regain the political initiative following the postponement of the Omnibus Law (UUCK) by the Constitutional Court, President Jokowi used his emergency powers by creating a Regulation in lieu of Law or PERPU (*Peraturan Pemerintah Pengganti Undang-Undang*) to bypass the Constitutional Court. Within a calendar month, on 11 January 2023, in another hasty initiative, Jokowi attempted to crash the gears regarding the long overdue review of past gross human rights violations involving the Government. After a quick overview by his presidential team, tasked with reconsidering these serial violations, the President expressed his «deep regret». But observers saw this move as too little and too late. This was especially so as the cases involved no less than twelve serious episodes, inter alia the mass killings of 1965-1966 in which perhaps as many as a million Indonesians died. These two desperate moves, which occurred in quick succession, show once again how the President, through his loyal aides, is now trying to come up with seemingly radical policies to try to save his political legacy as his Presidency enters its last eighteen months.

- Booth, Anne, 1998, *The Indonesian economy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: A history of missed opportunities*, London: Macmillan Press.
- Bourchier, David, 2015, *Illiberal Democracy in Indonesia: The Ideology of the Family State*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Briantika, Adi, 2020, 'Cerita Anak Pendeta Yeremia, Rode Zanam bani: Duka di Rumah Nabire', *tirto.id*, 12 November (<https://amp.tirto.id/cerita-anak-pendeta-yeremia-rode-zanam-bani-duka-di-rumah-nabire-f6XI>).
- Can, Edy, 2013, 'Jokowi named world's 3<sup>rd</sup> best mayor 2012', *Kontan.co.id*.
- Carey, Peter, 1980, *The Archive of Yogyakarta. Volume I: Documents relating to Politics and Internal Court Affairs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy.
- Carey, Peter, 2013, *Daendels and the Sacred Space of Java, 1808-1811: Political Relations, Uniforms and the Postweg*, Nijmegen: Vantilt.
- Carey, Peter, 2014, *Destiny: The Life of Prince Diponegoro of Yogyakarta, 1785-1855*. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Carey, Peter, 2022, 'Prolog: Memanusiakan Manusia', in Riwanto Tirtosudarmo, *Mencari Indonesia 4: Dari Raden Saleh Sampai Ayu Utami*, pp. xix-xxvi. Jakarta: BRIN.
- Crouch, Harold, 1978, *The army and politics in Indonesia*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Dreyer, Edward L., 2007, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405-1433*, New York: Pearson Longman.
- Feith, Herbert, 1965, 'History, Theory, and Indonesian Politics: A Reply to Harry J. Benda', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2, February, pp. 305-312.
- Feith, Herbert, 1982, 'Repressive-Developmentalist Regimes in Asia', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* Vol. 7, Issue 4, October, pp.491-506 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/030437548200700406>).
- Fitriyanti, Azizah, 2019, 'Sri Mulyani wins award as best finance minister in Asia Pacific region', *Antara News*, 4 April.
- Fuad, Ai Fatimah Nur, 2021, 'Female Religious Authority among Tarbiyah Communities in Contemporary Indonesia', *Archipel* 102, pp.187-207.
- Giebels, Lambert, 2001, *Soekarno: Biografi 1901-1950*, Jakarta: Grasindo.
- Greenpeace USA, 2018, 'Indonesia Forests: Defending the Paradise Forest from paper and palm oil companies' (<https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/forests/Indonesia>).
- Hadiz, Vedi, 2017, 'Behind Indonesia's illiberal turn', *New Mandala*, 20 October.
- Haryadi, Suhardiyoto and Peter Carey, 2014, 'Indonesia's quest for a democratic culture: pluralism, tolerance and the rule of law, 1998-2013', in Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao (ed.), *Democracy or Alternative Political Systems in Asia: After the strongmen*, London: Routledge, pp.137-56.
- Head, Jonathan, 2022, 'Indonesia «sex ban»; Criminal code changes threaten other freedoms', *BBC World News Report*, 8 December.
- Heriyanto, Devina 2018, 'Here are Jokowi-Ma'ruf's nine "missions" for 2019's presidential poll', *Jakarta Post*, 5 December.
- Hutt, David, 2017, 'Where are Southeast Asia's Loyal Oppositions?', *The Diplomat*, 22 December.
- [ILO 2024] International Labour Organization (ILO), 'Ratifications for Indonesia', 12 June 1950-23 December 2024 ([https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NOR-MALEXPUB:11200:0::NO::P11200\\_COUNTRY\\_ID:102938](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NOR-MALEXPUB:11200:0::NO::P11200_COUNTRY_ID:102938)).
- Kahin, George McTurnan, 1952, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

- Kusno, Malikul, 2014, 'Bung Hatta dan Politik Bebas Aktif Indonesia', *Konfrontasi: Jurnal Kultur, Ekonomi dan Perubahan Sosial*, Vol. 3, part 1, January, pp.12-25 (<http://download.garuda.kemendikbud.go.id/article.php?article=1464370&val=17712&title=Bung%20Hatta%20Politik%20Bebas%20Aktif%20Indonesia>).
- Lane, Max, 2008, *Unfinished Nation: Indonesia Before and After Suharto*, London & New York: Verso Books.
- Lantang, Floranesia, and Edwin M.B. Tambunan, 2020, 'The Internationalization of «West Papua» Issue and Its Impact on Indonesia's Policy to the South Pacific Region', *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 41-59.
- Liddle, William R. (ed.), 2001, *Crafting Indonesian Democracy*, Jakarta: PPW-LIPI, Ford Foundation and Mizan Pustaka.
- Ma, Josephine 2020, 'Coronavirus: China's first confirmed Covid-19 case traced back to November 17', *South China Morning Post*, 13 March.
- Mawei, Benny, 2021, 'Who's the real terrorist in Papua? Indonesian govt wants to call TPNB [a] terrorist group', *West Papua Daily*, West Papua No.1 News Portal/Jubi, 25 March (<https://en.jubi.co.id/indonesia-government-tpnpb-terrorist-group/>).
- McNeill, William H., 1967, *A World History*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- McVey, Ruth, 2016, 'Ben Anderson and the Imagining of Indonesia', *Indonesia*, No. 101, April, pp. 15-20.
- Meirizka, A., 2009, *The Use of Cohesive Devices in Sukarno's Speech 'Pancasila'*, MA Thesis, History, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya (<https://repository.unair.ac.id/116456/>).
- Moktar, Faris, 2022, 'Here Are Jokowi's Options for Retaining Power After Indonesia Term Ends', Bloomberg, 23 September.
- Novianti, T., and D.V. Panjaitan, 2022, 'Income inequality in Indonesia: Before and during the Covid-19 Pandemic'. *Economic Journal of Economic and Financial Issues*, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 29-37.
- Pabottingi, Mochtar, 2022, 'Eskalasi Nasiosida' (Nationcide Escalation), *Tempo*, 10 April, pp. 34-35.
- Packard, Vance, 1957, *The Hidden Persuaders*, London: Longmans, Green & Co.
- Paget, Roger K. (ed.), 1975. *Indonesia Accuses! Soekarno's Defence Oration in the Political Trial of 1930*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press [Oxford in Asia Historical Memoirs].
- Poulgrain, Greg, forthcoming, 'The Undeclared, Declassified: West New Guinea and the 1969 Act of Free Choice', *Masyarakat Indonesia*, published by the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI, now BRIN).
- Rae, Robert, 2003, 'The Federal Idea and Secession', Paper given at the Bandaranaike Peace Institute, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 27 July. (<http://www.forumfed.org/libdocs/SriLanka02/946-SLMG0307-Rae.pdf>).
- Rasyid, M. Ryaas, 2010, Personal communication to Riwanto Tirtosudarmo on 23 March 2010, Jakarta.
- Ricklefs, Merle, 1981, *A History of Indonesia since c. 1200*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Robison, Richard, and Vedi R. Hadiz, 2004, *Reorganising Power in Indonesia: The politics of Oligarchy in an age of markets*, London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Saltford, John, 2003, *The United Nations and the Indonesian Takeover of West Papua, 1962-1969. The Anatomy of Betrayal*, London: RoutledgeCurzon.

- Schiller, Arthur A., 1955, *The Formation of Federal Indonesia*, The Hague: W. van Hoeve.
- Setkab, 2021, 'Indonesia Receives 3 Million Doses of Moderna Vaccine from United States', Office of Assistant to Deputy Cabinet Secretary for State Documents and Translation, Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 11 July (<https://setkab.go.id/en/indonesia-receives-3-million-doses-of-moderna-vaccine-from-united-states/>).
- Shulman, Susan, 2016, 'The \$100bn gold mine and the West Papuans who say they are counting the cost', *The Guardian*, 1 November.
- SMERU, 2021. *Socioeconomic impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Households in Indonesia: Three Rounds of Monitoring Surveys*. Jakarta: UNICEF, UNDP, PROSPERA, The SMERU Research Institute.
- Strangio, Sebastian, 2021, 'Amid Crackdown, Indonesia Arrests Papuan Independence Leader', *The Diplomat*, 11 May.
- Strangio, Sebastian, 2022, 'Indonesian Capital Plan Throws China-Backed Rail Link into Disarray', *The Diplomat*, 9 February.
- [Tapol 2022] '8 Countries Call out Indonesia's Actions in West Papua at UPR [Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council]', *Tapol Bulletin*, 15 November.
- Tempo* (Indonesian weekly magazine published in Bahasa Indonesia in Jakarta since March 1971 and also in English since September 2000. The quotations are from the Bahasa Indonesia version).
- Teoh, Shannon, 2022, 'Malaysia election: Four years after shock loss, Umno has been battered like never before', *The Straits Times*, 20 November.
- The Jakarta Post* (Indonesian daily in the English language, published in Jakarta, founded in April 1983).
- Tirtosudarmo, Riwanto, 2021, *From Colonization to Nation-State: The Political Demography of Indonesia*, Singapore: Springer.
- Tjoe, Yenny, 2018, 'Two decades of economic growth benefited only the richest 20%. How severe is inequality in Indonesia?', *The Conversation*, 28 August.
- Valdameri, Elena, 2017, 'Indonesia 2016: A Difficult Equilibrium amid Global Anxiety', *Asia Maior* XXVII/2016, pp. 176-177.
- Valdameri, Elena, 2018, 'Indonesia 2017: Towards Illiberal Democracy?', *Asia Maior* XXVIII/2017, pp. 165-190.
- Wertheim, Willem Frederik, 1980, *Moslems in Indonesia: Majority with a Minority Mentality*, Townsville, Qld.: James Cook University, South East Asian Studies Committee, 1980.
- Winters, Jeffrey A, 2021, 'Reflections on Oligarchy, Democracy, and the Rule of Law in Indonesia', Public Lecture, Faculty of Law, University of Gajah Mada, 17 February.
- World Economics, 'Indonesia's Gini Coefficient', 2019 (<https://worldeconomics.com/Inequality/Gini-Coefficient/Indonesia.aspx>).





## TIMOR-LESTE 2021-2022: ELECTORAL CHANGE AND ECONOMIC RESET

Geoffrey C. Gunn

Centre for Macau Studies, University of Macau  
geoffreycgunn@hotmail.com

*The years under review have seen an important political shift stemming from the victory in presidential elections in April 2022 of renown diplomat José Ramos-Horta, himself backed by another veteran, the former guerrilla hero of the resistance, José «Xanana» Gusmão. Coming out of a well-managed yet constricting COVID-19 crisis abetted by highly damaging floods in the capital city, Dili, expectations ran high during the electoral campaigns as to a new turn in leadership. With Ramos-Horta sworn in on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of East Timor's formal independence, the change of leadership also brought into focus the prospect of parliamentary elections in 2023. Significant issues include whether Timor-Leste should pursue big infrastructure projects given diminishing revenues generated by oil and gas, or whether to prioritize job creation and rural extension in a low-income nation with major social and health issues as increasingly urged by the World Bank and other interested parties. Internationally, the change in leadership also came at a time when three important foreign policy developments were occurring. China was extending its diplomatic outreach to South Pacific nations, East Timor included. Timor-Leste's relations with its largest donor country and near neighbour, Australia, were sometimes difficult. Finally, Timor-Leste's candidature for ASEAN membership was still pending.*

KEYWORDS – Timor-Leste; COVID-19; Political Alliances; Presidential Elections; Economic Performance; International Relations.

### 1. Introduction

While the 2021-2022 period saw no repeat of the political instability of recent years, East Timor witnessed a virtual isolation from the outside world as it struggled with some success to mitigate the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The period also coincided with floods in April 2021 creating misery for large numbers of people including in the capital, Dili. With the local economy flagging, and COVID-related restrictions in place, struggle appeared to be the lot of most [Gunn 2020; Gunn 2021a]. Thus while a surface stability returned to East Timor in the period under review, politically the cohabitation between the presidency and the parliament dominated by a coalition government under incumbent Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak remained tense [Feijó 2020]. Undoubtedly the major event bringing East Timor into the international news in 2022 was the presiden-

tial contest pitting a candidate backed by resistance hero José «Xanana» Gusmão and his Congresso Nacional de Reconstrução de Timor (National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction) or CNRT, and the incumbent Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente (Revolutionary Front of Independent Timor-Leste) or FRETILIN-backed president, Francisco “Lu Olo” Guterres. In this contest, the veteran diplomat José Ramos-Horta emerged victorious and was sworn in as the nation’s president for a term of five years coinciding with the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the nation’s independence on 20 May.

## *2. Dealing with national disasters*

### *2.1. Containing the COVID-19 pandemic*

It no doubt helped in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic that the half-island nation could mostly seal its border with neighbouring Indonesian West Timor. Yet isolation had its downside disrupting cross-border trade, the embryonic tourism industry, and the dispatch of workers overseas, just to mention a few of the issues. It mattered as well that just as Timor-Leste sought to strengthen its badly stretched health sector, it gained the critical assistance of the World Health Organization (WHO) along with an Australian medical centre and, at a later stage, Chinese medical supply deliveries. With a state of emergency first declared for 30 days beginning on March 28, 2020, monthly extensions continued to be endorsed by presidential decree throughout the year and beyond [Gunn 2021a]. As the Dili-based NGO, La’o Hamutuk reported, when COVID-19 cases increased rapidly in February and March 2021, Timor-Leste introduced stricter prevention and control measures, including compulsory home confinement [La’o Hamutuk 2021].

In March, the Council of Ministers proposed a revision to the 2021 budget to fund economic measures to alleviate some of the impacts of the lockdown. Shortly after the revised law was submitted to Parliament, heavy rains, and flooding from Cyclone Seroja inundated Dili and surrounding areas, causing widespread damage. Dili was hit particularly hard, with at least 48 deaths and thousands of people rendered homeless. Nationally more than 30,000 households were impacted and more than 2,000 hectares of agricultural land damaged. On 4 May the government intervened with US\$ 135 million in additional expenditure and by shifting money from other appropriations. Management of the COVID-19 pandemic went through various phases, including compulsory home confinement, at least until temporarily suspended in mid-2021. This, in turn, was followed by another reversal later in the year as new daily cases peaked at over 350 in August 2021 and with Timor-Leste having suffered 122 deaths and 19,839 cumulative cases of COVID-19 by the end of the year. Even so, thanks to international assistance and actions on the part of the local health authorities more

than 60% of the population had been double-vaccinated by December. In February 2022, Timor-Leste experienced another COVID wave peaking at some 175 cases a day, albeit declining to near zero by March [La'o Hamutuk 2022].

## 2.2. *Coping with the food problem*

Owing to multiple shocks in 2021 linked with the COVID-19 pandemic and Cyclone Seroja, the food security situation deteriorated. According to the 2021 Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of COVID-19 published in January 2022, 40% of the total population (about 500,000 people) were estimated to be moderately or severely food insecure in 2021 (a figure consistent with the previous year). The number of food insecure people further increased in 2022, because of the elevated international prices of energy, fuel, and food, which have been transmitted to the domestic markets. Prices of important food items such as oil and fats, fruit, and vegetables, were at record or near record levels in April 2022, marking a 6.8% increase in the Consumer Price Index between September 2021-September 2022, seriously limiting households' access to food. Since the start of the war in Ukraine at end of February 2022, fuel prices started to increase leading to increased agricultural production costs. [Reliefweb 2022, 7 June; Reliefweb, 2022, 16 November].

Responding to the food security situation in Timor-Leste, in March 2022, the UN Sustainable Development Goals Fund awarded the country a US\$ 1 million contribution, enabling the World Food Programme (WFP), the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), and WHO to continue strengthening national food systems and implementing disaster risk reduction activities in partnership with the Timor-Leste Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Ministry of Health. As signalled by the UN report, with one-third of the country's total population chronically food insecure, Timor-Leste had one of the highest rates of food vulnerability in the South-east Asia region. Hence the urgency to empower the most vulnerable producers and consumers, including women and girls. As the report pointed out, the subsistence agricultural production, being the backbone of Timor-Leste's non-oil economy, employed 70% of the Timorese working population (and this is a far cry from the early World Bank thrust of triumphing market-oriented policies) [Gunn 2003]. Still, as pointed out, the country remained a food deficit country, and 40% of its food needs had to be met through imports. Although not mentioned in the report, changes in diet and consumption away from traditional food crops as with corn and tubers to a rice-based diet along with the consumption of imported noodles from Indonesia abets this problem, as does rural-urban drift.]. Noting as well that a significant amount of the country's food production is lost through post-harvest loss and waste before it reaches consumers, FAO pledged to provide technologies and capacity-strengthening activities to deal with

those problems. On its part, WHO sought to introduce healthy eating habits through consumer education and nutrition-sensitive behaviour change programmes. Its avowed goal was «breaking the inter-generational cycle of malnutrition, particularly for vulnerable groups, including women and children» [Reliefweb 2022, 31 March].

### *3. Governance: Ushering in the Eighth Constitutional Government*

Reaching back to 2020 the seeds of political crisis emerging around budget issues led to the collapse of Gusmão's three-party coalition, the *Aliança de Mudança para o Progresso* (Alliance for Change and Progress). At the same time CNRT refused to back a national budget proposed by its coalition partner, that of the *Partidu Libertasaun Popular* (People's Liberation Party) or PLP, headed by Ruak. This led Ruak to tender his resignation in February that year, albeit agreeing to stay on until a new government was formed.

The following month, Gusmão informed Timor-Leste President Francisco "Lu-Olo" Guterres that he (Gusmão) was prepared to form a six-party coalition government controlling 34 of Parliament's 65 seats. However, in March 2020, as the pandemic raised its head, Ruak reversed his resignation pledge saying he would stay in power to oversee the looming health crisis and, at the same time, to gain government approval for a special US\$ 250-million fund to fight it. The following month, Ruak nominated five FRETILIN members and one from the *Partido Democrático* (Democratic Party) to fill long-vacant positions including portfolios in the government's Council of Ministers. However, Ruak left FRETILIN founding chairman, Mari Alkatiri, out of office. Unexpectedly breaking ranks with Gusmão and the CNRT, the youth-oriented *Kmanek Haburas Unidade Nasional Timor Oan* (Enrich the National Unity of the Sons of Timor) or KHUNTO threw its support behind the fledgling PLP-FRETILIN alliance, thus giving Ruak a mandate to govern until 2023 [Rahmani 2020]. By June the new coalition government or Eighth Constitutional Government, as the current administration is formally known, was in place (with a parliamentary majority and with presidential support). Significantly, on 23 October, the Council of Ministers endorsed the 2020 General State Budget, thus breaking an impasse that had stymied the work of the previous government [Gunn 2021a]. More generally, through 2021 down until the time when these lines are written (mid-January 2023), the Ruak government restored a sense of both stability and continuity, yet not without challenge, as faced by severe social problems.

#### *3.1. Presidential elections*

In March-April 2022 Timor-Leste staged the country's fifth presidential elections since the recovery of independence in 2002. Coming under a semi-presidential and unicameral political system, the position of president

in Timor-Leste is more than ceremonial as it enjoys considerable powers in vetoing ministerial appointments and calling for parliamentary elections. More generally, Timor-Leste has won plaudits for staging peaceful elections, giving it a reputation as one of the most democratic nations in a region dominated by authoritarian regimes [V-Dem Institute 2022]. It also has a record of demonstrated competence in running elections without international assistance while at the same time inviting international election monitors, a practice commenced under UN rule. Out of an estimated 860,000 eligible voters, some 200,000 of them, all born after independence, were eligible to vote for the first time.

The 19 March presidential election, the fifth since independence in 2002, featured more candidates than ever before: sixteen in total, including four women. This reflected the emergence of young leaders as well as the generational divide between resistance leaders of 1975 and their successors. As well noted by Li-Li Chen, compared to previous elections, the field in 2022 was more diverse. It included a number of male leaders from the older generation, such as the ex-general of Timor-Leste Defence Force, Lere Aman Timur, Rogério Lobato (a founding member of FRETILIN), the former president, Ramos-Horta, representing CNRT, the current President Francisco “Lu Olo” Guterres of FRETILIN, and Mariano Assanami Sabino of the Democratic Party. But it also included quite a few independent candidates, among whom four women, five former youth and student resistance leaders, and one former Catholic priest [Chen 2022a]. Besides Pires, younger candidates included former resistance youth leader and academic, Antero Benedito da Silva, and Mariano Sabino Lopes, a former cabinet minister. The elections also raised expectations of a political transition from the revolutionary generation to the youth generation, including a wider presence of women candidates [Chen 2022b]. In this context we should not ignore the ascendancy of a younger generation of FRETILIN leaders emerging out of a party congress held in September 2022, namely Rui Maria de Araujo and José Agostinho Sequeira, also known by the pseudonym Somotxo, used during the war of liberation, possibly adding new blood in legislative elections scheduled for 2023 [Feijó 2022].

### 3.2. *The run-off results*

In the first round of the elections held on 19 March, Ramos-Horta finished on top with about 46% of the vote, with incumbent Francisco Lu Olo Guterres coming second with about 22%. Because neither obtained the majority of the votes, a second-round runoff ballot was held on 19 April. No other candidate gained more than 9% in the first round: Armanda Berta dos Santos (8.7%), Lere Anan Timur (7.6%) and Mariano Assanami Sabino (7.3%). All others received 2% or less.

In the 19 April presidential run-off Ramos-Horta outvoted the incumbent, Francisco «Lu-Olo» Guterres, by a 24% margin, winning in 11 of 13 mu-

nicipalities. Ramos-Horta, having earlier serving as president of Timor-Leste (2007 to 2012), and prime minister (2006 to 2007), was no stranger to high office. This time, as alluded, support from Gusmão, the country's first president, iconic resistance figure and the current leader of CNRT, was crucial.

As reported on 9 June, Timorese Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak expressed deep appreciation for the public statement made by the new President, a day earlier, that he would not dissolve the national parliament to avert worsening the political situation in the country. Citing the need for political stability and stable governance in order to accelerate national development, Ramos-Horta also took note of the negative impact of Timor-Leste's political impasse in 2017 and 2018 setting back progress and economic growth. As Ruak generously responded: «President Horta has always reiterated his idea of having a national dialogue with other State Organs, including the Government, and National Parliament. And we are deeply grateful for such commitment» [Martins 2022c].

#### *4. The macro economy*

##### *4.1. Evaluating the Petroleum Fund*

Timor-Leste's most crucial economic policy concerns the management of the Petroleum Fund, a National Investment Endowment Fund based on the model employed by Norway. The management of the fund is governed by the Petroleum Fund Act, established in 2005, which aims to mitigate negative impacts associated with the exploitation of natural resources. The balance of the Fund is determined by inflows from petroleum revenues, investment returns, and outflows from Government withdrawals. Unfortunately, the less than sizable petroleum revenues and meagre investment returns are offset by substantial withdrawals. While the unsustainability of the Fund has long been criticized by civil society groups, it is only in the present conjuncture that the World Bank and other international agencies have belatedly added their concerns [La'o Hamutuk 2022].

The unsustainability of the Fund has been worsened by the collapse in the oil price. Moreover, according to a Portuguese news agency report of 27 March 2020, citing Timor-Leste's Central Bank spokespersons, the Fund lost almost US\$ 1.8 billion in value due to volatility of the stock markets. The situation continued to worsen with the fall in international stock exchanges and the price of oil during 2020 [Lusa, 2020, March 27]. In July the changed circumstances also promoted the newly sworn-in Ruak government to approve the dismissal of Francisco da Costa Monteiro, the founding chief executive of the national oil company (TimorGAP), along with Alfredo Pires, the long-standing minister for petroleum and mining. The latter was replaced by Victor Conceição Soares [Evans 2020]. In this context we should not ignore the role of Gusmão who hitherto took a lead role in negotiations

over maritime boundaries with Australia in the Timor Sea such as settled in a ruling delivered at The Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in March 2018. While technically out of office, as discussed below, this reshuffle of personnel was by no means an abandonment on the part of Gusmão of his vision to develop oil-related infrastructure project on the island's south coast, only a re-set.

According to La'o Hamutuk, despite the positive return on the Petroleum Fund's investments in 2021, which boosted its balance to US\$18.9 billion at the end of the year, deposits into the Fund were projected to fall. Of concern was also the end of production in the not-too-distant future at the Bayu-Undan field, the sole in operation. As no alternative fields have been shown to be commercially viable, this increased the urgency to optimize state spending for maximum long-term benefits, and to identify and develop sustainable, non-oil, local economic activities.

In October 2021 the Government presented a US\$ 1,675 million budget for 2022 to Parliament which included projections for future spending that cannot be deemed sustainable. Projected Petroleum Fund withdrawals and Infrastructure Fund spending in 2023-2025 are several times higher than current levels. Nonetheless, oil revenues will have disappeared during that time frame and domestic revenues will be insufficient to cover the gap. In late December 2021, Parliament passed the 2022 State Budget, having approved amendments increasing its outlay to US\$ 1.95 billion. Yet withdrawals from the Petroleum Fund above the Estimated Sustainable Income will increase from US\$ 488 million to US\$ 757 million to pay for the increased spending, leaving a rapidly declining Petroleum Fund Balance [La'o Hamutuk 2021, p.2].

According to a World Bank Group source, the balance of the Fund at the end of Q1 2022 increased by less than 1% year on year. Since Q1 2021, higher hydrocarbon prices have driven petroleum revenues and contributed US\$ 1.2 billion to the Fund. However, close to US\$ 1.1 billion was transferred out to the state budget and to remunerate the management of the Fund. It is also worth noting that the Fund recorded more than US\$ 900 million in losses during Q1 2022 because of weak investment returns. Conversely, investment return was just US\$ 44 million. The Petroleum Fund was expected to fall in value unless there were inflows from a new hydrocarbon production field or unless there was a considerable change in the government's fiscal policy.

Despite adopting a permanent fund framework, a further depletion of the Fund was seemingly inevitable due to a number of challenges. These included excess withdrawals from the Fund. In particular, withdrawals from the Fund since 2009 exceeded the 3% limit of total Petroleum Wealth rule.<sup>1</sup>

1. Petroleum Wealth comprises the balance of the Petroleum Fund and the Net Present Value of expected future petroleum revenue.



Also, as noted, reserves in the Bayu-Undan hydrocarbon field were nearly fully exhausted, yielding negligible revenue during 2022. Added to that, future investment returns are expected to be lower because of the post-COVID-19 crisis and other factors. As the report summed up, overall, the value of the Petroleum Fund is projected to continuously decline, leading to a «fiscal cliff» that may force an abrupt reduction of the fiscal deficit and hence stop the provision of basic public services [World Bank, Timor-Leste Economic Report, 2022].

As of October 2022, the picture appeared even bleaker and with reported losses to Petroleum Fund investments of US\$ 1.4 billion in 2022, attributed by the Timor-Leste finance ministry to increases in interest rates by central banks around the world leading to both equities and bonds falling in value this year. As the ministry predicted, the balance at the end of the year would likely have fallen to US\$ 16.225.1 billion, or 17% less than the balance at the beginning of 2022 (when it was US\$ 19.565 billion). In the case of withdrawals from the Fund, that figure included US\$1 billion for the national liberation fighters fund (FCLN) – an amount not formally disaggregated from the Petroleum Fund – along with withdrawals to the Treasury account to fund the 2022 state budget. As noted, in line with the current spending trend, the Petroleum Fund was expected to be exhausted by the end of 2034 [Lusa, 2022, October 5]. Taking measure of the drastic situation, on 15 December 2022 and with the endorsement of the Court of Appeal, the president sought fit to revise the General State Budget for fiscal 2023 downwards from US\$ 3 billion to US\$ 1 billion by removing the FCLN allocation as earlier approved by the National Parliament [Martins 2022f]. With provision for funding 49 programs, the president's action thus brought the budget back in line with the nation's strategic development framework.

#### *4.2. TimorGAP and South coast development*

It is logical then that Timor-Leste should seek to exploit new oilfields. In fact, seven companies bid for nine blocks in the Bid Submission for the Timor-Leste Second Licensing Round period 2019/2022. Timor-Leste had offered 18 blocks in total, 7 of which are onshore, and eleven offshore [OE Digital Another Oil Discovery, 2022, 16 March]. Still the question remained as to whether, under pressure from Gusmão and CNRT, Timor-Leste would seek restitution of its grandiose albeit stalled plans to build petroleum processing infrastructure on East Timor's south coast. Also known locally as the Tasi Mane project, certain of the infrastructure has already been constructed as with an airport and a east-west road but the total plan also envisages a corridor of projects at three sites including a refinery and petrochemical project. The key to Timor-Leste's development plans is the exploitation of the Greater Sunrise gas fields, located in a maritime jurisdiction jointly administered by Australia and East Timor. Located about 150 kilometres

south of the East Timor coastline, the Greater Sunrise fields are much closer to Timor-Leste, than Darwin, 450 kilometres distant in northern Australia. However, the Greater Sunrise gas fields are split from the Timor-Leste coast by the 3,300-metre-deep Timor Trench, thus complicating efforts to pipe the gas there. While such a solution is technically feasible, Woodside Energy, the Australian corporate giant seeking to exploit the gas fields, has so far insisted that piping the gas to a liquefied natural gas processing plant in Darwin was the only commercially viable option [Knaus 2022]. To the present, the commercial risk argument presented by Woodside Energy brings the developer into sharp conflict with the aspirations of the Timor-Leste government. Dili has already invested some US\$ 1 billion in south coast infrastructure and wishes to pursue this option practically as a nation building project. Should East Timor go for this option it is understood that the costs of constructing the onshore export facility and pipelines would stand at an additional US\$ 14 billion.

President and CEO of the state oil company, TimorGAP, António de Sousa, assumed his role at a crucial time in mid-2020. the Timor-Leste government had then entered into negotiations on the Greater Sunrise Special Regime Legal Framework with Australia. These negotiations led to the formation of a joint venture to govern the development of the Greater Sunrise Field's resources, currently estimated to have recoverable reserves of 5.1 trillion Cubic Feet (TCF) of natural gas and 226 million barrels of condensate. TimorGAP owns a 56.56% interest in that joint venture, with Australia-based Woodside Energy owning 33.44% and serving as operator. The remaining 10% are owned by Japan-based Osaka Gas. In an interview, de Sousa detailed TimorGAP's plans to create an onshore Timor-Leste LNG export facility for part of the gas, as well as plans to use a large share of the gas to reduce emissions in the island's power generation. He also discussed plans for a carbon capture and storage project targeting another field called the Bayu-Undan, soon to be decommissioned. «The commitment by all parties to the (joint venture) agreement to protecting the environment is clear», he said. Another key aspect of Timor-Leste's energy future is that the Greater Sunrise Field is far from being the only area with a significant oil and gas potential. As de Sousa revealed, TimorGAP is currently conducting seismic surveys and evaluations in several other areas, both offshore and onshore, that they believe have potential for future natural gas and liquids development [Blackmon 2022, May 10].

In mid-August 2022, a first shot was fired by Timor-Leste petroleum minister, Vítor da Conceição Soares, who warned Woodside Energy and the incoming Labor government in Australia that offshore gas located between the two countries must be piped to East Timor and that other Asian countries are circling to develop the potential US\$ 50 billion energy resource. Also entering the fray at this moment through media interviews, including a high-profile interview on the Australian broadcaster ABC, President Ramos-

Horta issued a virtual public ultimatum to Woodside Energy and the Canberra government to either endorse the Timor-Leste plan or face the new reality, moulded by the presence of China or other players, capable and willing to cooperate with Dili in developing its energy potential [Knaus 2022].

At this writing, negotiations between Woodside and the Timor-Leste government had reached a critical and somewhat acrimonious stage. After a long period of hesitation, Woodside Energy was considering both development options for the Sunrise gas project in the Timor Sea, namely: a) to pipe the gas to East Timor's southern coastline or b) to pipe over longer distance to the established LNG facility in Australia's Northern Territory. In a major rethink in November 2022 Woodside chief executive officer Meg O'Neill asserted:

We also recognise that East Timor see Sunrise as an important project for their economy, and they also have a lot of international friends that would like to see a downstream LNG plant built on East Timor and so that has caused us to reconsider Sunrise's development concepts [Morrison 2022].

She also noted that technological developments in the industry also worked in favour of building a liquefaction plant in East Timor [ibid.]. Still, at this writing no announcements had been made as to a final decision.

#### 4.3. *The local economy*

According to a World Bank report of 16 December 2021, after the dual shocks of COVID-19 and natural disasters, Timor-Leste's economy recorded some signs of recovery, with real GDP growth expected to improve to 1.9% in 2021. According to Bernard Harborne, World Bank Country Representative for Timor-Leste, «The COVID-19 crisis came on top of a period of low growth, suggesting deeper structural problems in the economy». He projected the economy to expand further to 2.4% in 2022, driven by more manageable COVID-19 infections, and less restrictive public health measures (other estimates place this figure at 3%, an increase of 1.5 percentage points compared to the figure for 2021). On the demand side, a gradual rebound in private consumption (2.9%) was predicted to drive economic growth in 2022. Private investment was likely to remain low while global trade was expected to pick up further, positively affecting both exports and imports. The report recommended collecting more revenue by introducing value-added taxes and increasing income and excise tax rates to match regional norms [World Bank press release, 2021, 15 December].

As the price of fuel increased substantially heading into 2022, an upward trend in food prices was observed across Timor-Leste in March that year compared to the previous month – reflective of the global trends. An uptick in local rice price by 6% compared to previous month, was attributed to tight supply conditions pending the next harvest. A fuel increase was an

added burden. An increase in imported rice price mirrored the continued uptick in the FAO rice price index in the first quarter of 2022. Price of non-cereals had mixed reaction, as wheat and eggs exhibited significant increase on the back of supply chain disruptions on the global market while salt and sugar remained subdued [Reliefweb, 2022, 12 April]. Nevertheless, amid the surge in food and fuel prices throughout 2022, the consumer price index rate was stable in Q3 [Reliefweb 2022, 16 November].

#### *4.4. The impending crisis of human capital*

Striking a note of urgency, as a World Bank report of June 2022 cautioned, Timor-Leste faced a crisis of human capital and needs to improve the efficiency, equity, and sustainability of its investments, especially in child nutrition and education, to have a hope of reaping any demographic dividend from its young population and to avoid the situation worsening still further. The report also stated: «Timor-Leste faces multiple human capital challenges», noting as well that: «A child born in Timor-Leste today will only be 45 percent as productive as an adult as she could be if she enjoyed complete education and full health». As the report further explained, this was lower than the global and regional average and that without «urgent transformative action, things could get worse». With respect to education, and notwithstanding advances, «learning outcomes are poor and disparate», with a high failure rate. As the report stressed, there was an absolute need to «put the fiscal position on a sustainable basis» flagging the stark facts that, minus drawdowns of the petroleum fund, the Timorese population «will now, more than ever, have to be the driver of the country's income growth» [Agence France Presse, 2022].

#### *4.5. Overseas worker remittances*

The East Timorese diaspora continues to expand, even apart from the earlier wave of migration to Indonesia and even Malaysia. Basically, out-migration takes two forms. One is private or spontaneous, as with those Timorese who have made their way to the United Kingdom or other destinations in Europe, Portugal especially. The other is government sponsored as with seasonal worker programs engaging Australia or contract labour dispatched to South Korea. As revealed in June 2022 by Prime Minister Ruak, the government sought to explore more opportunities for overseas Timorese workers, not only in the traditional destination countries for Timorese emigration, such as South Korea and Australia, but also in other states as, for example, Ireland and Japan. Later in the year it was revealed that Japan, Israel, and Brunei Darussalam had entered into negotiations in this area. In view of the fact that job creation was difficult in Timor-Leste, sending workers overseas was viewed favourably by both the government and the beneficiaries of worker remittances sent home. Significantly, Ruak described the Timorese

emigrants remitting money to their homeland as «our new heroes» [Martins 2022a, 1 May].

As Ruak revealed, in 2021 Timorese workers overseas contributed more than US\$ 120 million to Timor-Leste's economy and so helping the nation combat poverty while, on their part, gaining valuable experiences and earning money to continue their studies. It is estimated that up to 30,000 East Timorese are currently residing in the UK. Likewise, many thousands of East Timorese have availed themselves of the Australian Seasonal Worker Program, basically employed as fruit-pickers. With more than 3,000 Timorese workers still currently working in South Korea mostly as unskilled laborers, as Ruak explained, «Since 2009, Timorese workers in South Korea have contributed more than US\$ 39 million to the country», namely a much more conspicuous sum than the US\$ 11 million that the government had invested in promoting emigration [Martins, 2022b].

It might also be said that East Timor migrant workers both male and female – as with a group lured by human traffickers to a Middle Eastern destination in 2022 – are potentially subject to discrimination or abuse, frequently exploited and lacking labour rights according to their respective destinations, a subject that merits much closer documentation and study. Additionally, as exposed in late 2022, many hundreds of East Timorese were found in destitute condition in Portugal prior to state intervention, namely face-to-face dialogue between Ramos-Horta and Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo da Sousa in Lisbon on 3 November 2022 [Martins 2022e].

## 5. *International relations*

Given its location and size, Timor-Leste has much incentive to hedge in its international relations posture. Such a balancing act became all the more obvious in the 2022 election campaign and its aftermath. Preeminent on the radar screen was how to manage relations with ASEAN, China, as well as such donor countries and agencies as Australia, the largest donor to Timor-Leste (with US\$ 105.7 million budgeted for 2022-23), followed by Japan, itself exceeding the US, European Union, along with the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank.

### 5.1. *Australia*

Besides China, Australia was the main overseas player in the country's COVID-19 recovery, gifting more than 1 million vaccine doses. Although recalled locally for its peacekeeping activities in 1999 and again in 2006, the Canberra government still has an image problem with its near neighbour just 500 kilometres away across the Timor Sea. These difficulties stem from historical issues relating to boundaries, and as discussed, Timor Sea petro-

leum exploitation. The latter problem was complicated even by the spying tactics used by the Australian authorities in an attempt to gain benefit in negotiations. Australia's complicity with Indonesia in the invasion of the former Portuguese colony and cover up of intelligence relating to genocidal activities is not forgotten by an older generation in East Timor today, but they also look to the future [Gunn 2005].

The problem of the oil and gas pipeline route to connect the Greater Sunrise oil and gas field to either Timor Leste or Australia remained open. In an interview with *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Ramos-Horta signalled the resumption of the push for a pipeline directly connecting the Greater Sunrise oil and gas field to East Timor. While calling for increased economic support from Australia, Ramos-Horta claimed that that was «not only a one-way street in terms of only benefiting Timor». In fact, in Ramos-Horta's opinion: «to see a pro-Australia, pro-Western values Timor-Leste on Australia's doorstep» was in Australia's interest. [Barrett, 2022].

Following on closely the visit to Timor-Leste by Australian foreign minister Penny Wong in early September, Ramos-Horta launched his own 6-day visit to Australia. With development of the Greater Sunrise field at the top of his agenda, also calling for Australian support for economic diversification, he gained no specific committal for his vision of building a liquified natural gas plant in East Timor. Australia did agree, however, to appoint a special representative to Dili to continue negotiations on how to best develop the gas field. On her part, Wong had used her visit to Dili to publicly chide Ramos-Horta from seeking to exploit Australian media on the issue. Pointedly, however, Ramos-Horta chose Indonesia as his first overseas visit since his inauguration. Arriving in Jakarta for a one-week visit on 18 July, besides talking up ASEAN membership with the Indonesian president, officials, and business leaders, he also drummed up mutual interest in creating a free trade zone to service local cross-border Timor-Leste-Indonesia trade.

## 5.2. China

When it comes to international relations, China is never quite out of the picture, whether as donor, not excluding military aid, or interested partner in infrastructure. Moreover, from mid-2020 through 2021, Beijing sent charter flights to Dili, loaded with medical supplies in support of containing the COVID-19 crisis.

China's footprint over East Timor is not without significance, especially as it fits in with China's economic statecraft as well as its vision of the Belt and Road strategy. China also won kudos from the Timor-Leste political elite for its early backing for independence and support for UN initiatives in 1999. Beijing also went on to participate in UN missions and contribute to infrastructure construction, particularly public buildings, electricity generation and infrastructures around roads and ports [Gunn 2021b].

Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Timor-Leste counterpart, President Ramos-Horta, exchanged congratulatory messages to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Timor-Leste's restoration of independence and the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries. As Xi pointed out, «since the establishment of diplomatic ties 20 years ago, the two sides have steadily deepened political mutual trust, made solid progress in practical cooperation and witnessed ever closer people-to-people and cultural exchanges». Stressing that he attached great importance to the development of China-Timor-Leste relations, the Chinese president said he is ready to work with his Timor-Leste counterpart to bring their «comprehensive cooperative partnership» to a new level. As Ramos-Horta replied, Timor-Leste appreciated China's key role in promoting regional and world peace and stability, as well as its strong support for his country's national development process [Lusa 2022, May 5]. On the same day, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang exchanged congratulatory messages with Prime Minister Ruak. As Ruak responded, Timor-Leste and China shared a «long-standing brotherly friendship and fruitful bilateral cooperation». He looked forward to further strengthening cooperation between the two sides to jointly address the challenges of post-pandemic recovery [*Xinhua*, 2022, June 20].

Of course, the Timorese decision-makers were aware that the increasingly tight and cordial relations with China were viewed with preoccupation by Australia. However, in the already quoted interview with *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Ramos-Horta made no apologies for fostering stronger ties with China. That position was in line with Ramos-Horta's desire, already made public when he had been sworn in as president, to broaden links with Beijing in areas such as trade, renewable energy, digitisation, artificial intelligence and urban and rural infrastructure. In the interview, Ramos-Horta pointed out that, while he did have a good relationship with China, he was not aprioristically pro-Chinese. Simply, he declared: «It would be a total mistake not to have a good relationship with China» [Barrett, 2022].

In September 2022, Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Timor-Leste counterpart, Adaljiza Magno, agreed that the two countries should strengthen cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (albeit with no other committals). As Wang made known, China was willing to continue to offer assistance in enhancing Timor-Leste's public health capacity. Wang also stated that China was willing to «inject impetus to the post-pandemic recovery of Timor-Leste through jointly building the Belt and Road». He also expressed hope that personnel exchanges between the two countries could be expedited «to ensure the smooth advancement of major cooperation projects and the resumption of work and production» [*Xinhua* 2020, 21 September]. Neither did the Chinese foreign minister neglect meeting with FRETILIN chairman, Mari Alkatiri, talking up historic ties on the part of the lead pro-independence party.

### 5.3. *ASEAN*

Between 19-21 July 2022, ASEAN conducted a fact-finding mission in Dili aimed to ascertain that Timor-Leste's low economic and skill base did not become a liability, once Timor adhered to ASEAN. As announced on 12 August by Timor-Leste Foreign Minister Adaljiza Magno, Timor-Leste had met all the conditions for ASEAN membership [Martins, 2022d]. As further announced during an ASEAN summit under the chairmanship of Cambodia, Timor-Leste was granted observer status to all ASEAN meetings until full membership was achieved. As the year 2022 progressed, the Timor-Leste leadership appeared convinced that membership was a formality that would be consummated at the 42nd ASEAN Summit of 2023 chaired by Indonesia. Still, Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN depends upon the political will of Indonesia in line with the consensus of the ASEAN Coordinating Council.

### 6. *Conclusion*

Given its location, size, and asymmetric status with respect to neighbouring countries, Timor-Leste has much incentive to hedge in its international relations. As highlighted in this article, the imperative to balance these relationships became even more obvious in the 2022 election campaign and aftermath with Australia, China, distant Portugal, Indonesia, and ASEAN membership all on the radar screen. Undoubtedly the victory of Ramos-Horta in the presidential elections restored a figure with a huge reservoir of international admiration for his diplomatic skills and energy. Such was on full display in the latter half of 2020 with the new President's proactive diplomatic forays to, respectively, Indonesia, Australia, Cambodia, Portugal, Singapore, Malaysia, Brazil (on 1 January 2023, to attend the inauguration of Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva as president), and to Davos later in the month to attend the World Economic Forum. Even so, as this essay has pointed out, Ramos-Horta's domestic support cannot entirely be separated from popular adulation of the national hero and elder statesman, «Xanana» Gusmão. How far Ramos-Horta will go to follow Gusmão's lead and ambitions in parliamentary elections slated for 2023 remains to be seen especially with a reinvigorated FRETILIN following its September 2022 congress. But also, Ramos-Horta assumed his new office at a time when critical decisions must be definitively made as to pursuing costly – possibly ruinous – major infrastructure planning versus addressing critical social needs.



# BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agence France Presse, 2022, 'Timor-Leste: World Bank warns of «crisis of human capital», need to invest', *Macau Business*, 30 June.
- Barrett, Chris, 2022, '«In their strategic interest»: Ramos-Horta calls on Australia to spend big in East Timor', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 May.
- Blackmon, David, 2022, 'Timor Leste's Energy Ambitions Could Make It The «Next Guyana»', *Forbes*, 10 May.
- Chen Li-Li, 2022a, 'Does Timor-Leste's Upcoming Election Herald a More Inclusive and Progressive Democracy?', *The Diplomat*, 11 March.
- Chen, Li-Li, 2022b, 'Observations From the First Round of Timor-Leste's Presidential Election', *The Diplomat*, 23 March.
- Evans, Damon, 2020, 'Sunset at East Timor's Greater Sunrise LNG after Woodside write-down', *Energy Voice*, 22 July.
- Feijó, Rui Graça, 2021, 'Timor-Leste in 2020: Containing the pandemic in a changing political environment', *Asia Maior*, XXXI/2020, pp.223-240.
- Feijó, Rui Graça, 2022, 'Timor-Leste's track back to normality', *East Asia Forum*, 28 December.
- Gunn, Geoffrey C., 2003, 'Rebuilding agriculture in post conflict Timor-Leste: A critique of the World Bank role', *Portuguese Studies Review*, 11(1): 187–205.
- Gunn, Geoffrey C., 2005, *Complicity in Genocide: Report to the East Timor "Truth Commission" on International Actors*, Southeast Asia Study Series, No. 38, Faculty of Economics, Nagasaki University.
- Gunn, Geoffrey C., 2020, 'Timor-Leste in 2019: Going for broke', *Asian Survey*, 60(1): 161–162.
- Gunn, Geoffrey C., 2021a, 'Timor-Leste in 2020: Counting the costs of Coronavirus', *Asian Survey*, 61(1): 155–159.
- Gunn, Geoffrey C., 2021b, 'Chinese economic statecraft in Indonesia/East Timor: A historical and regional perspective', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 3(3): 317-338.
- Kehoe, John, 2022, 'Leaked report backs East Timor for Woodside's Sunrise gas project', *The Australian Financial Review*, 1 August.
- Knaus, Christopher, 2022, 'Timor-Leste warns it will work with China if Australia insists on pumping Timor Sea gas to Darwin', *The Guardian*, 18 August.
- La'o Hamutuk, 2021, *Annual Report*, January-December.
- La'o Hamutuk, 2022, *Rights and Sustainability in Timor-Leste's Development*, October.
- Lusa, 2020, 'East Timor: Petroleum Fund loses US\$1.8bln due to Covid-19', *Macau Business*, 27 March.
- Lusa, 2022, 'Timor-Leste: China's Xi congratulates Ramos-Horta on election, wants closer ties', *Xinhua*, 5 May.
- Lusa, 2022, 'Timor-Leste: Government estimates petroleum fund will lose US\$1.4B in 2022', 5 October.
- Martins, Filomeno, 2022a, "'Workers are TL's New Heroes'", Ruak Says', *Tatoli* (Agência Noticiosa de Timor-Leste), 1 May.
- Martins, Filomeno, 2022b, 'Ruak pledges to explore more opportunities in other countries for Timorese workers', *Tatoli* (Agência Noticiosa de Timor-Leste), 9 June.
- Martins, Filomeno, 2022c, 'Prime Minister Ruak appreciates Horta's commitment to not dissolving parliament', *Tatoli* (Agência Noticiosa de Timor-Leste), 9 July.

- Martins, Filomeno, 2022d, 'MNEK, TL meets all membership criteria to join ASEAN in 2023', *Tatoli* (Agência Noticiosa de Timor-Leste), 10 August.
- Martins, Filomeno, 2022e, 'Horta and Rebelo held a dialogue with Timorese migrants in Portugal,' *Tatoli* (Agência Noticiosa de Timor-Leste), 3 November.
- Martins, Filomeno, 2022f, 'President Horta promulgates the 2023 State Budget Bill,' *Tatoli* (Agência Noticiosa de Timor-Leste), 15 December.
- Morrison, Kevin, 'Australia's Woodside mulling both Sunrise gas options', *Argus Media*, 1 December 2022.
- OE Digital News*, 2022, 'Another oil discovery: onshore excitement in Timor-Leste: Second of a multi-well exploration campaign brings encouragement', 16 March.
- Rahmani, Bardia, 2020, 'Timor-Leste's New Kingmakers How an outlawed martial arts group facilitated a critical shift in Timor-Leste's political scene', *The Diplomat*, 1 June.
- Reliefweb*, 2022, 'United Nations joint SDG fund contributes US\$ 1 million to strengthen national food systems and promote disaster risk reduction activities in Timor-Leste', 31 March.
- Reliefweb*, 2022, 12 April, 'Market Monitor Report: Timor-Leste (April)'.
- Reliefweb*, 2022, 7 June, 'GIEWS Country Brief: Timor-Leste 07-June-2022'.
- Reliefweb*, 2022, 16 November, 'Market Monitor Report: Timor-Leste (Q3)'.
- Reuters*, 2022, 19 July, 'East Timor hopes to join ASEAN under Indonesia presidency next year'.
- V-Dem Institute, 2022, Democracy Report 2022: Autocratization Changing Nature?
- World Bank, 2021, Press release, 'Timor-Leste: Economy Showing Signs of Recovery as COVID-19 Cases Drop', 15 December.
- World Bank Group, 2022, Timor-Leste Economic Report: 'Investing in the Next Generation', June.
- Xinhua*, 2020, 21 September, 'China, Timor-Leste to strengthen B&R cooperation, jointly uphold multilateralism'.
- Xinhua*, 2022, 20 June, 'Chinese, Timor-Leste's presidents exchange congratulations on 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic ties.'



MALAYSIA 2022: 15<sup>TH</sup> GENERAL ELECTIONS AND DEEPENING  
POLITICAL POLARISATION

*Saleena Saleem*

Boston University, Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies  
Institute on Culture, Religion & World Affairs (CURA)  
sbsaleem@bu.edu

*None of the three main political coalitions in the 15<sup>th</sup> Malaysian General Elections in 2022 was able to win a simple majority to form the next government. The hung parliament situation ended after the Malaysian King appointed Anwar Ibrahim as prime minister to lead a unity government including Pakatan Harapan (PH), the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), and several smaller parties. The election results indicated several key developments in Malaysian politics: (1) deepening political polarisation along racial lines – most non-Malays voted for PH and a significant number of Malays voted for Perikatan Nasional (PN); (2) PN's component parties, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) won a majority of the Malay vote share, overtaking UMNO as the parties to champion for Malay and Muslim rights and (3); the Islamist party PAS won the largest number of seats, indicating that the strategy of emphasising its religious credentials promoted trust among Malay voters seeking clean governance. Meanwhile, the Russia-Ukraine war resulted in inflationary pressures, food shortages and price hikes that the Malaysian government struggled to manage. On the foreign relations front, the Malaysian Foreign Minister adopted a critical stance towards the Myanmar military regime, even as the government deported thousands of Myanmar refugees despite mounting international criticism.*

KEYWORDS – General elections; political polarisation; Anwar Ibrahim; Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS); United Malays National Organisation (UMNO); Pakatan Harapan (PH); Perikatan Nasional (PN); Malaysia

### *1. Introduction*

On 24 November 2022, Anwar Ibrahim – the leader of Malaysia's multi-ethnic political coalition, Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, PH) – was sworn in as the country's 10<sup>th</sup> prime minister. Anwar's ascension to the premiership was by no means a certain outcome. The 15<sup>th</sup> Malaysian General Elections (GE-15) held five days prior had resulted in a hung parliament with no single political coalition able to win the simple majority of 112 parliamentary seats required to form the government. The PH coalition, comprised of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party, PKR) and Democratic Action Party (DAP) with other smaller parties, won the largest

number of seats at 81 followed closely by the Malay-centric Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance, PN) comprised of Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Malaysian United Indigenous Party, Bersatu) and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Islamic Party of Malaysia, PAS), which won 74 seats. The political impasse ended after Malaysia's constitutional monarch, King Al-Sultan Abdullah, intervened. He selected Anwar over Muhyiddin Yassin, the leader of the PN, to form a unity government. For Anwar, this was the culmination of a 24-year-long tumultuous journey to the country's top political position. Having been fired as deputy prime minister in 1998 and imprisoned twice on politically motivated charges of sodomy and corruption, Anwar was finally in a position to embark on his long-stated goal to implement good governance reforms.

However, as a consequence of the deepening polarisation in Malaysian politics and the challenges that laid ahead for him, Anwar had to include political foes from the corruption-tainted Malay nationalist party, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in his unity government. In the 2018 general elections, the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN) coalition, which had governed the country uninterrupted since 1957, suffered a shocking defeat at the hands of PH. Nonetheless, by 2020, UMNO had successfully manoeuvred itself back into the folds of governmental power through backdoor dealings with Bersatu and a split away faction from Anwar's PKR [Saleem 2021]. The backdoor dealings led to the collapse of the PH coalition government in February 2020 and paved way for the PN coalition government helmed by Muhyiddin and supported by three Malay parties – Bersatu, UMNO and PAS. The PN coalition though proved to be highly unstable as it struggled to manage waves of COVID-19 infections amid rising public discontent over the pandemic's socio-economic impact. The power struggles between the component parties in the PN coalition resulted in yet another change of prime minister in August 2021 – Muhyiddin was forced to resign after UNMO withdrew its support for the PN government and Ismail Sabri from UMNO took over as prime minister [Mangiarotti 2022].

The remainder of this article analyses the major developments in 2022 that culminated with the appointment of Anwar as prime minister toward the year's end. Section 2 explores the decision-making of the three major political coalitions as each jockeyed to position themselves as front-runners in the lead-up to GE-15. Section 3 analyses the election results and considers the reasons for the unexpectedly strong electoral performance of the Islamist party PAS. Section 4 analyses the government's attempt to mitigate inflationary pressures in 2022 as the world was struck by price hikes and supply chain disruptions caused partly by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Section 5 examines the government's foreign diplomacy in relation to the Myanmar crisis as it attempted to manage growing xenophobic sentiments over refugees and migrant workers in some segments of Malaysian society.

## *2. Three political coalitions in competition*

The three main political coalition contenders vying for power in GE-15 were BN, PN and PH. Although the UMNO-led BN government under Ismail assumed power in 2021, its hold was tenuous because it needed support from PN and a Sarawak-based party, the Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS). In 2022, BN held 41 seats compared to PN, which held 49 seats, and GPS, with 18 seats; on its part, PH had 90. GPS had been a component party of BN until BN's historic loss in the 2018 general elections. Subsequently, GPS, in spite of the limited number of its legislators, played a kingmaker role by shifting its support to different coalitions. For BN and PN, both of which depended heavily on the Malay vote, the competition between them was thought to be almost evenly matched while a majority of non-Malay support went to PH [Ariffin and Koh 2022].

This deeply divided and crowded political landscape contributed to induce the three main political coalitions to support two important constitutional amendments that would weigh heavily on future general elections. They were: (1) the Constitutional Amendment Act 2019 (CA2019), which lowered the voting age to 18 and created automatic voting registration, and (2) the Constitutional (Amendment) (No. 3) Act 2022, an «anti-hopping» law that prevented members of parliament (MPs) elected under one party from defecting to another party, under pain of losing their seat, which would be reassigned following a by-election. Although for different reasons, each of the three coalitions hoped that the amendments would help them attain an electoral advantage over their competitors.

CA2019 passed in late 2019. It was originally tabled by the then-PH government, which sought to benefit from the urban youth voters' preference for its reformist outlook. BN and PAS supported the amendment in exchange for automatic voter registration. Both believed that they would benefit from removing the logistical barriers related to the previous self-registration requirement for their rural supporters [Chai 2022]. Consequently, the size of the national electorate significantly increased from 15.22 million in 2018 to 21.02 million in 2022 general elections [Chai 2022].

The second constitutional amendment on the anti-hopping law, took effect in October 2022, just five days before Ismail dissolved parliament and called for elections. The anti-hopping law was a key condition in the confidence and supply agreement signed by the Ismail government and the PH opposition in 2021. It had provided Ismail with the opposition's support to pass key legislations and the government's agreement for the implementation of the anti-party hopping law.

The rationale for the anti-party hopping law was ostensibly to improve political stability by limiting party defections by individual MPs, which has been rampant in Malaysian politics. For example, the dramatic 2020 defections by MPs from the ruling PH coalition led to its collapse,

which effectively reversed the outcome of the electoral mandate [Ng 2022]. Party hopping also affected the balance of power in the state governments. When the PH government fell in 2020, lawmakers in four states defected to PN, which caused PH to lose control of those states [Yeoh 2020]. Such political manoeuvrers only widened the trust deficit between elected politicians and the people, which undermined the legitimacy of the government. The anti-hopping law was meant to restore public confidence in the political system. Therefore, bipartisan agreement on the law was arguably a step in a positive direction.

Yet the law, having been designed by politicians with their own vested interests, also had clear limitations. First, the law permitted a sitting MP to join another political party if that MP has been expelled from his own party [Ng 2022]. In the case of the vote of confidence for the incumbent government, an event that had occurred several times since 2018, it was possible that a sitting MP might choose not to vote as directed by her own party, without defecting from it. In such a case, the party-hopping effect could still occur, shifting the balance of power. The dissident MP could be later expelled from her party but suffer no penalty of losing her seat under the anti-hopping law. Political parties may attempt to limit such occurrences by amending their party constitutions to effectively constrain the independence of party members elected to public office [Ng 2022]. For instance, in September 2022, the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) passed an amendment that required its party members elected to public office to follow party directives or else be expelled from the party [Ng 2022].

Second, the anti-hopping law did not prevent parties from exiting political coalitions. Therefore, a party might contest an election under the banner of a coalition yet exit and join another afterwards. Such manoeuvres could have similar deleterious effects as party hopping by individual MPs, only on a larger scale.

### 2.1. *Barisan Nasional*

Of the 41 parliamentary seats held by the BN coalition going into GE-15, only three seats were held by BN's race-based component parties – the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA, 2 seats) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC, 1 seat). Since the 2008 general elections, both MCA and MIC steadily lost their support from Chinese and Indian voters who shifted allegiance to PH. As such, BN's political survivability was heavily dependent on UMNO's ability to draw in Malay support as it had done for decades prior to the 2018 general elections. UMNO's main competitor for the Malay vote was Bersatu, predominantly comprised by former UMNO members. Both parties share similar political ideologies, centred on upholding Malay rights and Islamic values. Both also effectively competed for the same type of Malay voters. Unsurprisingly then, the de facto bipartisan political system, dominated by PH and PN-BN, which had characterised politics in 2020, be-

came unsustainable due to the escalating power struggles between UMNO and Bersatu. By late 2021, it was evident that BN did not want to form an electoral pact with PN prior to GE-15. BN took this route even though political analysts, including veteran politicians and former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, warned that no one party would be strong enough to garner a simple majority on its own [Povera 2022].

BN's stance was due to its electoral successes in preceding state elections. In November 2021, BN won 21 out of 28 seats in the Melaka state elections. Since Melaka's racial and urban-rural makeup resembles that of national averages, these elections were closely watched as a bellwether for GE-15 [Rodzi 2021]. In the Melaka state elections, Anwar's PKR lost the three seats it had won in 2018; meanwhile Bersatu lost its two seats from 2018 but managed to take two new seats from BN and PH. Even though PAS, which was part of PN, did not win any seats, its percentage vote tally improved considerably. In one closely fought seat, PAS lost to UMNO by only 79 votes.

The Melaka results indicated that PN was gaining ground as a credible alternative to BN, particularly in the Malay-majority districts [Zhang and Wan 2021]. Still UMNO was buoyed by the success of GPS (a party that was previously aligned with BN), which won 92% of the seats in the Sarawak state elections in December 2021 [Chin 2023].

UMNO's confidence was further boosted by its win in the Johor state elections in March 2022, another state with similar racial and urban-rural makeup as national averages. BN took 40 out of 56 seats compared to the 19 seats it had won in the 2018 elections.

Despite BN's impressive win, analysts highlighted that it had only marginally increased its vote share compared to the 2018 general elections [Ong 2022]. As such, BN's win could not be read as an indisputable «change in the voting preferences of the electorate» or as an «increase in the effectiveness of the party's political campaigning» [Ong 2022]. BN's win could be attributed more to both the opposition's failures and fortuitous events. In particular, there had been higher voter turnout in the Malay-majority areas that supported BN compared to the lower voter turnout in the racially mixed areas that had supported PH in the 2018 general elections. PH's inability to boost voter turnout had translated into less support for it at the polls [Zhang and Hutchinson 2022]. Also, PH had failed to present a united front, which voters already weary of political instability frowned upon. Illustratively, PKR, a PH coalition member, used its own party logo to campaign in Johor instead of the PH logo. On the contrary, the other PH component parties – DAP and Amanah – had made it a point to use the PH logo [Jaafar 2022]. This suggested to voters that there might be friction between the component parties in PH, which could not but have adverse effect on the popular support for PH.

Soon after UMNO's win in Johor, the party held its general assembly in mid-March. UMNO president, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, announced that



party elections, which had been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, would only be held after GE-15. Zahid knew that Ismail's position as prime minister of the UMNO-led government was tenuous at best. In UMNO's tradition, the party president was also the prime ministerial candidate in the general elections. Zahid could not take the prime minister's role in 2021 due to internal dissent over his pending corruption cases. By delaying the overdue party elections, Zahid was clearly gunning for the prime ministership in GE-15. By remaining as party president in the lead up to the elections, Zahid had also secured his position to determine the candidates for GE-15 [Saat 2022]. During the party's general assembly, Zahid pushed Ismail to call the general elections that year when they were only due in mid-2023. Although the UMNO leadership presented a united front at the assembly, speeches by several top UMNO leaders pointed to the presence of internal factions. Zahid alluded to «traitors» who sought to threaten his position while Khairy Jamaluddin, the then health minister, argued that the general elections should only be held after the COVID-19 situation had stabilised [Mohsen 2022].

Speculation that UMNO was divided into Zahid and Ismail factions was confirmed in June 2022 after UMNO MP Tajuddin Abdul Rahman was sacked from his position as member of the UMNO supreme council. In a press conference, an aggrieved Tajuddin revealed that key UMNO leaders had held meetings to discuss methods to force Zahid to step down as party president [Zulkifli 2022].

Concerns had been brewing among some UMNO leaders about the impact of Zahid's ongoing corruption cases on UMNO's ability to repair its image. Tajuddin also claimed that Zahid had urged UMNO MPs to support Anwar's bid for prime minister in 2020, after the PH government had collapsed [Salleh 2022]. As part of its pro-Malay ideology, UMNO had long drilled the message to its grassroots supporters that cooperation with Anwar's PH was impossible because of its close association with the Chinese-dominated DAP. This kind of inflammatory rhetoric by UMNO politicians had contributed to Anwar's de-legitimisation as a «liberal» Muslim [Saleem 2021]. As UMNO had consistently labelled DAP and by extension PH as a threat to Malay interests, Tajuddin's charge was particularly stinging, and it was strongly denied by Zahid. Yet Tajuddin's allegation appeared to be in line with the content of a leaked friendly phone call between Zahid and Anwar in 2021, discussing Zahid's bid to withdraw support from the PN government [Hutchinson and Zhang 2021]. While at the time both Zahid and Anwar had denied the phone call, the subsequent cooperation between the two to form the unity government in 2022 was suggestive of an ongoing backdoor dialogue.

By May 2022, Zahid had consolidated his position with an amendment to UMNO's party constitution to permit party elections to be delayed for up to 18 months from a full 3-year term or 6 months after a general elec-

tion. Zahid and his supporters then pushed Ismail to call for GE-15, arguing that BN should leverage the momentum from its recent wins in Melaka and Johor. Zahid may also have wanted to win decisively in the general elections before his corruption cases, which were still in their initial stages, progressed further in the courts [Hutchinson 2022]. Zahid's urgency appeared to accelerate after former prime minister Najib Razak lost his final appeals in the courts in late August and was imprisoned to serve a 12-year sentence for corruption over the 1MDB scandal. By October, Ismail succumbed to UMNO pressure and dissolved parliament.

BN's election campaign focused on the theme of «political stability and prosperity» and promised to return stability to Malaysia. BN rationalised that this message would resonate with an electorate fed up with the constant politicking and changes in government since 2018 [Chin 2023]. In BN's estimation, it was the only coalition that had the proven track record to achieve national stability [Chin 2023].

## 2.2. *Perikatan Nasional*

Compared to BN and PH, the PN coalition was new, but comprised of veteran politicians. It was created after the 2020 collapse of the PH government. The primary component parties were Bersatu led by Muhyiddin and PAS. For much of 2022, PN was on the defensive, fending off public attacks from UMNO. When PN contested all seats in the Johor state elections and only managed to capture two seats, UMNO taunted Bersatu. UMNO argued that the Bersatu should step down from the UMNO-led government because of its poor showing [Irisha 2022]. By throwing jibes at PN, UMNO wanted to precipitate the collapse of the government to force early elections.

However, PN had other ideas. It criticised Ismail's decision to dissolve parliament because that meant conducting the elections in November during the height of the monsoon season. The country had been hit by heavy flooding the previous December, so PN's concerns were also echoed by civil society and national agencies like the Malaysian Meteorological Department, as well as the PH coalition [Bernama 2022]. Bersatu portrayed UMNO's insistence as evidence that the party prioritised its own needs over those of the people [Palansamy 2022].

Leading up to GE-15, Bersatu and PAS highlighted UMNO-linked corruption cases to differentiate themselves as clean parties. Muhyiddin reinforced the message that his forced resignation the previous year was orchestrated by UMNO leaders, including Zahid, because he had refused to interfere with the judiciary process in relation to their legal troubles [*Free Malaysia Today* 2022]. Bersatu's campaign tagline, *Prihatin, Bersih dan Stabil* (Concerned, Clean and Stable), emphasised its clean image.

During the campaign, PN relied on social media such as short videos on the TikTok platform to connect with younger voters on its key ideological principles about Malay rights and Islamic values [Tan, C.K., 2022]. Toward

the campaign's tail end, Muhyiddin's comments on Jews and Christians supporting PH to Christianise Malaysia went viral. In defending himself, Muhyiddin maintained that his comments were selectively cropped from a longer speech about unity among the races [Zolkepli 2022]. In the aftermath of the elections, with no clear winner, Muhyiddin's comments were circulated among non-Malay groups as proof that a PN-led and Malay-centric government was undesirable as it would discriminate against non-Malays [Tapsell 2022]. Such worries convinced many PH supporters, who were highly suspicious of UMNO, to grudgingly accept BN in the PH-led unity government.

### 2.3. *Pakatan Harapan*

Since its win in the 2018 general elections, the PH coalition had steadily lost Malay support. It had to constantly fend off accusations from UMNO and PAS that it would erode Malay special rights and undermine Islam. In fact, Bersatu's growing concerns about its political future within PH motivated its exit in 2020, upon which the PH government collapsed shortly thereafter [Saleem 2020].

PH's attempts to position Anwar as prime minister during the 2020-2021 political crisis also periodically sparked criticism that the opposition coalition was not focused enough on leadership renewal and did not allow the flowering of the younger generation of party members [Straits Times 2021]. Worse, the ongoing political instability and the changes in government had resulted in voter fatigue. The lower voter turnout in the state elections was especially unhelpful to PH. Recognising this, in the wake of the Johor losses, two younger PKR leaders, Anwar's daughter Nurul Izzah and Rafizi Ramli, launched the *Ayuh Malaysia* («come on Malaysia») initiative in March 2022 to re-inspire reform-minded Malaysians to get out and vote at the next general elections [Ganesh 2022].

The PH coalition struggled to work together cohesively as its electoral losses in state elections mounted. For instance, frustrations surfaced after PKR lost all the seats it contested in the Melaka state elections. Some DAP lawmakers openly suggested that Anwar should quit as the PH coalition leader [*Malaysia Now* 2021]. DAP leader Lim Guan Eng laid blame on the coalition's disunity, pointedly alluding to PKR's decision to campaign using its own logo [Tan, Vincent, 2022].

In addition, divisions within PKR emerged during the party's elections in May 2022. The contest for the deputy president position between the party's secretary-general Saifuddin Nasution Ismail and Rafizi Ramli was largely viewed as a contest over the party's direction for the GE-15. Saifuddin favoured a «big tent» strategy wherein PH would keep open channels of negotiations with other opposition parties, ostensibly even with parties not aligned with its political ideology such as PN, in order to prevent BN from winning [The Vibes 2022]. Rafizi was critical of Saifuddin's strategy to retake federal power by working with other coalitions such as PN. Instead, Rafizi

preferred to take a longer approach by rebuilding the party and by winning over undecided voters. Rafizi's message resonated with party members, and he won by a substantial margin. Clearly, most PKR members were not comfortable with working with ideological opponents such as Bersatu and PAS.

PH's 2022 election campaign did not deviate substantially from its core positions on good governance, anti-corruption reforms and needs-based assistance. Its election manifesto also maintained its position on the elimination of discrimination between the races in Malaysia, even though this stance had in the past opened PH to increased scrutiny over fears that the longstanding preferential policies for Malays would be dismantled [Lee 2022].

### *3. Election results*

UMNO's push for early elections backfired. BN performed the worst of the three main coalitions, winning only 30 seats – UMNO with 26 seats and the other BN component parties with 4. The top performing coalition was PH with 81 seats – 40, going to DAP and 31 more to PKR. PN finished closely behind with 74 seats – Bersatu with 25 seats, PAS 49. In terms of the popular vote, PH obtained 38%, PN 30% and BN 23%. Initially, the King of Malaysia indicated that PH and PN should both form a unity government. However, PN's leader Muhyiddin rejected this as he scrambled to form a PN-led government in alliance with Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) and Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) along with some independent elected politicians [Anand and Teoh 2022]. However, GPS announced that it would support a unity government led by Anwar's PH instead. The King, after meeting with Anwar and Muhyiddin, determined that Anwar had the support of the majority of the elected MPs, and appointed him as prime minister.

There were also other unexpected results in GE-15. Former two-time prime minister, Mahathir Mohamed, who led PH to victory in 2018, had contested GE-15 under a new political party he had formed. He shockingly lost his seat to a candidate from Bersatu-PN, in what was his first electoral defeat in 53 years. Mahathir was walloped: He won 6.8% of the vote compared to the Bersatu candidate who garnered 38.1%. Unceremoniously, the electorate had chosen to retire the 97-year-old grand master of Malaysian politics.

Other shock defeats included the defeat of Anwar's daughter, Nurul Izzah. Her loss to a PAS candidate signalled the inroads made by that party into the urban strongholds of PH; the Permatang Pauh seat in the Penang state that Izzah lost had been a stronghold for PKR since 2004.

Another notable loss was Khairy Jamaluddin, who was long seen as a rising star within UMNO. Khairy had openly locked horns with Zahid by calling for him to step down as party president. He then lost to Zahid for

party president in 2018, only to announce that he would try again during UMNO's next party elections. As a result, Zahid sought to neutralise Khairy by shifting him to contest GE-15 in a district known to be partial to PH. While Khairy lost (and later was expelled from UMNO by Zahid in early 2023), his contest was close – he garnered 30.5% of the votes compared to the winner from PKR-PH who garnered 32.2%. The close race indicated that Khairy could have easily won a seat for UMNO, if he had been placed in a strategic district.

Overall, the election results indicated two key developments that will likely continue to be relevant factors in Malaysian politics. First, the results highlighted a deepening political polarisation along racial lines – DAP benefitted from non-Malay support while most Malay voters supported PN. Second, PAS, the largest party in parliament, indicated that the party had managed to successfully appeal to the Malay electorate in ways that it could not previously. By comparison, in the 2018 general elections, PAS had only won 18 seats. The following sub-sections analyses these two developments.

### 3.1. *Political polarisation along racial lines*

Election analyses indicated that Malaysians are more divided electorally along racial lines than before. In GE-15, non-Malays overwhelmingly supported PH – about 94% of Chinese voters and 83% of Indian voters [Welsh 2022]. This was a continuing trend from the 2008 general elections, when PH's emphasis on equality for all races increasingly appealed to Chinese and Indian voters, increasingly dissatisfied with the exclusive pro-Malay ethno-religious rhetoric and unequal race-based policies espoused by the then UMNO-led government. This shift of the non-Malay vote to PH became significant in the 2013 general elections when the BN government lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority for the first time. UMNO leaders referred to it as the «Chinese tsunami» [BBC 2013]. DAP's win of 40 seats in GE-15 was comparable to the 42 seats it won in 2018, which indicated that the shift of non-Malay vote to the party has been consolidated. The non-Malay vote shift to PH has been largely consistent at the federal level. Therefore, BN's recent wins during the Melaka and Johor state elections do not correspond with voting patterns at the federal level. This is because the ability of Malay-centric coalitions such as BN to attract non-Malay voters at the state level depend more on local factors and the appeal of individual BN politicians rather than disagreement over political ideologies. This was true in the Tanjung Piai (Johor state) by-elections in 2019, which BN won with significant Chinese support because of the connections forged by the BN candidate from the component party, Malaysian Chinese Association [Kassim 2019].

Conversely, the Malay vote in GE-15 was split among the three main coalitions – PN was estimated to have garnered 54% of the Malay vote, BN 33%, and PH 11% [Welsh 2022]. Former BN Malay voters shifted their

support to either Bersatu or PAS in the PN coalition instead of PH. Several reasons could account for this shift. First, PN had successfully differentiated itself from BN by emphasising that the coalition was «clean». During the campaign, Muhyiddin from Bersatu highlighted that no PN politician had pending corruption charges compared to other politicians – UMNO-BN had several as with DAP-PH's leader Lim Guan Eng. PAS also played up its religious credentials to convince voters that it was religiously opposed to corruption and hence trustworthy. PN thus appealed to Malay voters who were disillusioned with BN but not prepared to consider PH because of its ideological stance. Second, PN benefitted from the negative publicity about UMNO. For example, an online clip of Zahid claiming that BN had to win GE-15 to prevent selective acts of prosecution went viral. The clip suggested that Zahid's primary motivation to call for early elections was to avoid prosecution for corruption, which corresponded with the anti-Zahid narrative forwarded by PN [Tapsell 2022]. Third, UMNO's claim to champion Malay rights lost credibility because of the public infighting among party members. In a bid to strengthen his position within UMNO, Zahid attacked his critics within the party. For example, as noted above, he forced Khairy to contest another seat in GE-15. Zahid also dropped Shahidan Kassim, a veteran UMNO MP in Perlis state from defending his seat in GE-15 on the pretext of introducing younger candidates. An angered Shahidan then contested against UMNO on the PN-PAS ticket and overwhelmingly won. Such decisions at the leadership level cost UMNO its much-needed grassroots support during its surprisingly unorganised election campaign.

The GE-15 election results indicated that PN had overtaken UMNO as the credible coalition to champion Malay rights. Overall, the results confirmed deepening political polarisation along racial lines. Although PN had fielded a few non-Malay candidates in the elections, all of its elected MPs were Malay. Meanwhile, non-Malay support was solidly behind PH, with some level of urban Malay support.

### 3.2. *The rising appeal of PAS*

The improved electoral performance of PAS was unexpected – PAS had more than doubled its parliamentary seats in GE-15. PAS also won 24 more than Bersatu, making it the stronger party within PN. There were several possible reasons for this outcome. First was an element of protest vote. A segment of Malay voters perceived that UMNO had utterly failed them by its inability to confront systemic problems within the party, evidenced by the public infighting among key leaders. These voters switched to the two other Malay-centric parties that claimed to fight endemic corruption, PAS and Bersatu.

Second, recent surveys indicate that religion continues to be central to Malay identity [Merdeka Center 2022]. This had previously benefitted PAS

most in the rural communities. In a context of pronounced political instability, for a number of Muslims trust is more easily conferred upon politicians perceived to be religious because they are supposed to hold themselves accountable to a higher divine power and hence less likely to engage in corrupt activities. This type of belief, where trust and respect are conferred upon religious teachers, is cultivated in the network of Islamic schools run by PAS in its rural strongholds and in some urban areas habited by Malays [Hamid and Razali 2022]. Notably, in GE-15, PAS made inroads into some urban areas suggesting that the religious credentials of PAS politicians, many of whom were religious teachers appealed not only to rural Malay voters but also to urban Malay voters.

Third, PAS managed to moderate its hard-line Islamist image while it was a part of the PN government in 2020-21. While in office, PAS downplayed its past agenda of implementing *hudud* punishments (harsh penalties such as amputation of limbs, flogging, or death for certain crimes). Instead, PAS emphasised a comparatively more benign form of public Islam, advocating for conservative Muslim dress code and railing against alcohol sales in public places. This approach appealed to the Malays who desired more Islamic values in the public sphere but who were not keen on the implementation of *hudud* punishments. This strategy allowed PAS to make inroads into urban areas as young professional Malays increasingly favoured a public Islam that was in accordance with their vision of an ideal Islamic democracy, which some Malays believed PAS could achieve. In reality, PAS never did renounce its Islamic state and *hudud* implementation agendas. This situation likely contributed to PKR Nurul Izzah's loss in the urban seat of Permatang Pauh in Penang to a PAS candidate who was a religious teacher.

Fourth, in the aftermath of the 2018 shock defeat of the UMNO-led government, UMNO had cultivated a close relationship with PAS based on the pursuit of Malay unity. On the back of a rise in ethno-religious fear-mongering over the purported subordination of Malays under a PH-led government, a subsequent political pact between the two parties facilitated electoral wins in several by-elections in 2019. Some Malays supported the cooperation as they desired strong political leadership to defend Malay and Muslim rights. When UMNO forged its own way in the lead-up to GE-15, some Malays turned to PAS which had stayed consistent over its stance on Malay unity by cooperating closely with Bersatu in the PN coalition.

Lastly, PAS used social media to effectively connect with younger voters, thus benefiting from the CA2019 constitutional amendment which lowered the voting age to 18 years old [Hamid and Razali 2022]. Younger Malay voters also appeared more inclined to vote in line with their parents, some of whom favoured PAS for the reasons discussed above.

#### *4. Responding to supply chain disruptions*

The Russia-Ukraine war which started in February 2022 affected the global economic sphere by disrupting supply chain networks. Malaysia adopted an official policy of neutrality over the war. Nevertheless, it voted in favour of the United Nations General Assembly resolution in March against the aggression against Ukraine. While Malaysia did not issue sanctions against Russia for its invasion, it prevented a US-sanctioned Russian oil tanker from docking locally [Mustafa, Zulkarnain, and Lingan 2022].

Malaysia initially assured its citizens that the local impact of the war would be minimal because trade with both Russia and Ukraine stood at 0.5% of Malaysia's total global trade volume [Jaafar 2022]. However, the war contributed to global food shortages and massive price hikes that ultimately impacted Malaysia's cost of living. For example, Ukraine accounted for 31% of the world's sunflower oil production [Ates and Bukowski 2022]. The war caused a disruption in Ukraine's sunflower production. This resulted in shortages in the global supply chain and an increased demand for other oils such as palm oil.

Indonesia and Malaysia are the top two producers of palm oil. The increased global demand for palm oil created shortages and price hikes in both countries. While Indonesia resorted to a protectionist policy of banning palm oil exports for a period of time, Malaysia insisted that it had enough subsidised cooking oil supplies to meet domestic needs. Yet prices for cooking oil in Malaysia doubled in 2022, along with steep increases in food prices. Despite the growing public dissatisfaction with cost-of-living issues, the government took steps to remove subsidies for cooking oil and other crucial goods in July, which accounted for 9% of the country's GDP. However, by September, the government was forced to back away from the plan due to public backlash [Ghani 2022].

The Russia-Ukraine war also caused price spikes in essential crops such as corn, which ultimately affected Malaysia in its chicken supply. The country's chicken farmers had to import corn feed for the chicken at much higher prices in 2022 than previous years. For many chicken farmers already struggling with a reduced chicken production output due to labour shortage issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and weather-related setbacks, the price hike in chicken feed forced a further reduction in chicken production [Paulo and Dom 2022]. The reduction in domestic chicken supplies and increased prices fuelled public discontent over food price inflation. The UMNO-led government then implemented a temporary ban on chicken exports in June to stabilise domestic chicken supplies. The ban was later lifted in October after pressure from the chicken farmers. By year's end, there were sky-high public expectations on Anwar's newly minted unity government to stem the country's inflation which had risen to 7% in December 2022.



### 5. *Myanmar refugee crisis*

On the foreign relations front, international human rights organisations and Malaysian activists criticised the Malaysian government for deporting at-risk Myanmar refugees to Myanmar. Malaysia has a large number of refugees from Myanmar, most of whom are Muslim Rohingya who fled violence and killings by the Burmese military. After the military coup that deposed the democratically elected government under Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) in 2021, members of other Myanmar minorities fled to Malaysia.

Prior to the pandemic, refugees were generally tolerated as part of Malaysian society. In fact, in 2016, UMNO and PAS politicians, who were long-time political foes, used the Rohingya cause to rally Malays under the banner of *ummah* (Muslim community) to protest the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya from Myanmar. Malaysians were generally sympathetic to the plight of the refugees within their midst. However, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 sparked off a wave of xenophobic sentiments as more people struggled to make ends meet. The rise in anti-refugee sentiments likely contributed to the tough stance adopted by the Malaysian Home Affairs Ministry in 2022. In 2022, Malaysia returned more than 2000 Myanmar refugees, although human rights activists warned that their lives would be at risk under the Myanmar military regime [Head 2022].

On the regional stage, however, the Malaysian Foreign Minister, Saifuddin Abdullah from Bersatu, was aligned with his fellow ASEAN counterparts on pushing for the ASEAN-backed Myanmar Peace Plan. Saifuddin took a step further by publicly meeting with members of the National Unity Government (NUG) of Myanmar, which the international community regarded as the country's legitimate government, and by advocating for a tougher stance against the military regime. In this regard, Saifuddin became the most vocal critic of the military regime among the ASEAN members.

### 6. *Concluding remarks*

GE-15 marked an important turn in Malaysian politics in which voters signalled that they would no longer vote out of loyalty to tradition but would be ready to switch support to the party that they believed would best uphold their ideals. The dramatic decline of the grand old Malay party, UMNO, since the 2018 general elections is evidence of this change in mindset. The GE-15 results also indicated that the domination of a single political party or coalition in Malaysian politics is likely a thing of the past. While this may bode well for progressive democratisation in Malaysia, the voting patterns indicated a deepening political polarisation along racial lines that may be destabilising. As the frequent changes of

government over the past five years had shown, politicians are not above instrumentalising race and religion for political gains. If Anwar is to serve as prime minister to the full five-year term, he will have to build trust and successfully manage the competing interests of the different parties within his unity government.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anand, Ram, and Shannon Teoh, 2022, 'Muhyiddin rejects Malaysian King's call for unity government,' *The Straits Times*, 23 November.
- Ariffin, Afifah, & Fabian Koh, 2022, 'Courting the Malay vote: Race-based politics still centre stage in Malaysian politics,' *Channel News Asia*, 16 November.
- Ates, Aaron M, and Maria Bukowski, 'Oil Crops Outlook: April 2022,' *United States Department of Agriculture*, 12 April.
- BBC, 2013, 'Malaysia Vote: PM Najib Razak's Barisan Nasional Wins,' May 6.
- Bernama, 2022, 'Year-end not the right time for GE15, say experts,' 30 September.
- Chai, James, 2022, 'New battle lines appear in the wake of Malaysia's historic enfranchisement bill,' *ISEAS Perspective*, 82, 16 September.
- Chin, J., 2023, 'Anwar's long walk to power: the 2022 Malaysian general elections,' *The Round Table*, 112(1): 1-13.
- Free Malaysia Today*, 2022, 'Zahid says has no choice but to take religious oath,' 22 February.
- Ganesh, V. Shanker, 2022, 'PKR leaders launch 'Ayuh Malaysia' campaign to draw fence-sitters for GE15,' *New Straits Times*, 27 March.
- Ghani, Jamil A., 2022, 'What it takes to remove subsidies,' *The Edge Malaysia*, 2 September.
- Hamid, Ahmad Fauzi Abdul, and Che Hamdan Che Mohd Razali, 2022, 'Understanding Malay-Muslim voting trends and the rise of PAS,' *Today*, December 8.
- Head, Jonathan, 2022, 'Why is Malaysia deporting Myanmar asylum seekers?' *BBC*, 25 October.
- Hutchinson, Francis, and Kevin Zhang, 2021, 'Anwar Ibrahim and Zahid Hamidi – Forbidden Phone Friends?' *Fulcrum*, 16 April.
- Jaafar, Fayyadh, 2022, 'Amanah, DAP to use PH logo in Johor election as sign of unity,' *The Malaysian Reserve*, 28 January.
- Kassim, Yang Razali, 2019, 'Pakatan's Tanjung Piai Trashing: Beginning of the End?' *RSIS Commentary No. 240*, 26 November.
- Lee, Hwon Aun, 2022, 'Malaysia's GE-15 Manifestos: Wading Through a Flood of Offerings,' *ISEAS Perspective 113*, 15 November.
- Malaysia Now*, 2021, 'PKR youth leader slams DAP rep for telling Anwar to step down after Melaka defeat,' 22 November.
- Mangiarotti, Emanuela, 2022. 'Malaysia 2021: A widening political legitimacy crisis,' *Asia Maior*, XXXII/2021: 221-35.
- Merdeka Center, 2022, 'Muslim youth outlook increasingly pessimistic amidst strong retention of Islamic idealism,' 16 June.
- Mohsen, Amar Shah, 2022, 'Umno knows when to fall in line: Khairy,' *The Vibes*, 18 March.

- Mustafa, Muzliza, Iskandar Zulkarnain and Suganya Lingam, 2022, 'Malaysia will not allow US-sanctioned Russian tanker to dock at its ports,' *Benar News*, 1 March.
- Ng, Sze Fung, 2022, 'Malaysia's anti-hopping law: Some loopholes to mull over,' *Fulcrum*, 19 October.
- Ong, Elvin, 2022, 'Lessons from BN's win in Johor for Malaysia's next general election,' *The Straits Times*, 17 March.
- Palansamy, Yiswaree, 2022, 'Wan Fayhsal calls Zahid Hamidi 'lunatic' for insisting on GE15 during monsoon season,' *Malay Mail*, 2 October.
- Paulo, Derrick A, and Hernani Dom, 2022, 'The real reasons behind Malaysia's chicken shortage and farmers' woes,' *Channel News Asia*, 17 July.
- Povera, Adib, 2022, 'No single party will win 50 per cent of seats in GE15, says Dr Mahathir,' *New Straits Times*, 27 August.
- Saleem, S., 2021, 'Constructing the 'Liberal' Muslim Other: Ethnic Politics, Competition, and Polarisation in Malaysia,' *Religion, State and Society*, 49(2):109-125.
- Saleem, Saleena, 2021, 'Malaysia 2020: Democratic backsliding amid the COVID-19 pandemic,' *Asia Maior*, XXXI/2020: 241-58.
- Salleh, Nur Hasliza Mohd, 2022, 'Tajuddin tells how Zahid campaigned to make Anwar PM,' *Malaysia Now*, 22 June.
- Straits Times*, 2021, 'Several PH leaders defend Anwar amid calls to step down after loss in Melaka polls,' 28 November.
- Tan, CK, 2022, 'TikTok-mad Malaysian voters push Islamic politics to the fore,' *Nikkei Asia*, 21 November.
- Tan, Vincent, 2022, 'Lack of unity among opposition main reason for poor Johor showing; no use blaming voter turnout, says DAP,' *Channel News Asia*, 14 March.
- Tapsell, Ross, 2022, 'How video campaigning shaped Malaysia's election,' *RSIS Commentary CO22123*, 28 November.
- The Vibes, 2022, 'Rafizi to run for PKR deputy president, says PH agrees to discuss collab with PN,' 15 March.
- Trisha, N., 2022, 'Do the honourable thing and leave govt, Puad tells Bersatu after Johor polls performance,' *The Star*, 14 March.
- Welsh, Bridget, 2022, 'A Divided Electorate: Preliminary Analysis on Ethnic Voting,' 25 November.
- Yeoh, Tricia, 2020, 'The rise and fall of state governments in Malaysia: Institutions, constitutions and political alignment,' *ISEAS Perspective 103*, 11 September.
- Zhang, Kevin, and Francis Hutchinson, 2022, 'The Johor vote – The impact of ethnicity, turnout and age on voter preferences,' *ISEAS Perspective 114*, 16 November.
- Zhang, Kevin, and Joshua Wan, 2021, 'Silver linings for Perikatan Nasional after its Melaka election loss,' *East Asia Forum*, 14 December.
- Zolkepli, Farik, 2022, 'GE15: Muhyiddin claims viral video of speech on Jews, Christians taken out of context,' *The Star*, 18 November.
- Zulkifli, Ahmad Mustakim, 2022, 'In tell-all, Tajuddin reveals plots, back-stabbing in Umno,' *Malaysia Now*, 27 June.

# THAILAND 2022: THE «POST-PANDEMIC» ERA

Edoardo Siani

Ca' Foscari University of Venice  
edoardo.siani@unive.it

*In 2022, Thailand entered a period labelled by state agents as «post-pandemic». Citizens resumed their lives as normal, but discontents for a stagnant political environment and a slow economic recovery intensified. In particular, civil society expressed frustration toward the Constitutional Court for allowing PM Prayuth Chan-ocha to remain in office despite the alleged legal expiry of his mandate. The Prayuth Government's continued cordiality to China and the Burmese junta also generated criticism. As pandemic-related restrictions were lifted, and the country re-opened to international tourists, the economy improved slightly. Global economic trends, aggravated by the Government's withdrawal of the relief packages of the previous year; however, affected less privileged constituencies. Even the generally conservative and financially stable Bangkok residents elected a City Governor deemed progressive, suggesting new political sensitivities. The waning popularity of the Prayuth Administration is significant as the kingdom prepares for a general election in 2023.*

**KEYWORDS** – Prayuth Chan-ocha; COVID-19 Thailand; Bangkok Governor elections; Thailand-China relations; Thailand-Saudi Arabia relations; Thailand-Myanmar relations; Thailand-U.S. relations; Thailand-Russia relations; Thailand economy.

## 1. Introduction

Throughout 2020-2021, the Thai Government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic caused much dissatisfaction, with critics accusing the Prayuth Administration of generating unnecessary health hazards and economic hardship [Siani 2021, pp. 237-246]. In 2022, the pandemic faded out as the COVID-19 variant most common in the kingdom, Omicron BA.2.75, was mild. The Ministry of Public Health declared that, on 1 July, Thailand entered a «post-pandemic» stage [*Hfocus* 2022, 9 March], and that, on 1 October, COVID-19 had become endemic [Royal Thai Government 2022]. Discontents with the Prayuth Government's *modus operandi* in domestic and international politics, however, remained, and the economy, while improving, continued to let down less privileged constituencies.

This essay explores «post-pandemic» 2022 Thailand in relation to domestic politics, international policy, and economy. Moving chronologically, the first four sections focus, respectively, on the election of the Bangkok

Governor (2.1); the controversy surrounding the tenure of PM Prayuth, deemed expired by the opposition (2.2); the tragic slaughter of nursery children at the hands of a member of the armed forces (2.3); and the contestations to the Prayuth Government by young activists during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum of November (3.3). The next two sections, dedicated to foreign policy, address Thailand's managements of relations with the United States, the authoritarian Governments of China, Russia and Myanmar (3.1) as well as the historic re-establishment of relations with Saudi Arabia, severed since 1990 (3.2). The final section turns to the economy, and highlighting successes and failures as Thailand attempted to leave behind the hardship caused by the pandemic (4.1).

## 2. *Domestic politics*

### 2.1. *The election of the Bangkok Governor*

On 22 May 2022, residents of Bangkok voted for the new City Governor for the first time in nine years [*The Standard* 2022, 14 March]. The election winner, Chadchart Sittipunt, was an independent candidate, previously associated to the Phueu Thai Party, and known for his relatively progressive views and open criticism of the Military. His victory displayed impressive figures, having gained over 1.3 million votes *vis-à-vis* the 250,000 of his most popular rivals, Suchatvee Suwansawat of the Democrat Party and Wiroj Lakkhanaadisorn of the Move Forward Party [*BBC Thai* 2022, 29 May]. Chadchart is additionally the first Bangkok Governor in history to have gained a majority of votes in all the 50 districts (*khet*) of the capital [*BBC Thai* 2022, 30 May].

Treating the election results as symptomatic of changing political attitudes, analysts suggested that the event might indicate novel trends in view of the national election which is expected to take place in 2023 [*Thairath* 2022, 22 May]. The Bangkok electorate has been generally conservative for the past twenty years, dominated by vocal supporters of the Monarchy-Military axis. The previous election, held in 2013, saw the victory of Sukhumbhand Paribatra of the Democrat Party, hostile to the democratically elected Governments of Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra that were overthrown, respectively, with a coup in 2006 and one in 2014 [*The Standard* 2022, 14 March]. In 2016, Sukhumbhand was replaced by Assawin Kwanmuang, a bureau commissioner of the Metropolitan Police appointed directly by the military junta of Prayuth Chan-ocha [*The Standard* 2022, 14 March].

Stunned by the results of the 2022 elections, a conservative political activist, Srisuwan Janya, filed a complaint to the Election Commission in which he accused the governor-elect of having «bought votes» as he enabled supporters to profiteer by means of recycling his campaign posters into items including bags and aprons [*BBC Thai* 2022, 30 May]. The activist also

attacked Chadchart for critiquing the bureaucracy [*BBC Thai* 2022, May 30]. As they considered the complaint, the Election Commission delayed the endorsement of the results [*BBC Thai* 2022, May 30], sparking a backlash on media and social media [*Manager Online* 2022, June 1]. They eventually dismissed the accusations on 31 May, thereby declaring Chadchart Sittipunt the 17<sup>th</sup> Bangkok Governor [*BBC Thai* 2022, May 30].

## 2.2. *Controversy over the tenure of PM Prayuth Chan-ocha*

On 17 August, opposition parties filed a petition for the removal of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, the mandate of whom they claimed to be about to legally expire [*BBC Thai* 2022, 15 September]. According to the 2017 constitution, a prime minister cannot be in office for longer than eight years. Prayuth had first installed himself premier, as the head of a military government, on 24 August 2014, after staging a coup d'état; he was next confirmed premier for a second mandate as the leader of a civil government following the victory of the military-backed party, Phalang Pracharat, at the general election of 2019. Counting both tenures, the opposition argued that Prayuth had been in power altogether for eight years [*iLaw* 2022, 11 August].

The Constitutional Court suspended Prayuth from office until they made a decision [*BBC Thai* 2022, 15 September]. Meanwhile, they allowed Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan, another retired Army general with longstanding links to Prayuth, to act as Caretaker Premier [*Thairath* 2022, 24 August; *BBC Thai* 2022, 29 September]. They additionally let Prayuth attend cabinet meetings in his capacity of the Minister of Defence [*Thairath* 2022, 24 August]. Their ruling, on Friday 30 September, established that Prayuth had not exceeded the maximum term of eight years in office, thus enabling him to resume his premiership the next Monday, on 1 October [*BBC Thai* 2022, 3 October]. Controversially, the Court explained that Prayuth's tenure should be counted beginning in 2017, the year when his government promulgated the current constitution after the former was abrogated by the coup [*Thai Post* 2022, 2 October].

## 2.3. *The nursery attack*

On 6 October, Panya Kamrab, a former policeman aged 34, killed thirty-six people, including numerous children, in the province of Nong Bua Lam Phu, in North-eastern Thailand [*BBC Thai* 2022, 7 October(a)]. The man first opened fire in a nursery [*Komchadluek* 2022, 6 October], and, upon fleeing, stabbed and fired at passers-by [*BBC Thai* 2022, 7 October(a)]. Back home, he killed his wife and child, and committed suicide. The officer had been dismissed from service the previous June for possession of narcotics [*BBC Thai* 2022, 7 October(a)]. An autopsy ruled that he was not under the influence of drugs when he committed the murders [*BBC Thai* 2022, 7 October(a)].

Reacting to the news, the public called out a toxic culture of violence, corruption and patriarchy allegedly promoted by key state institutions [*Bangkok Post* 2022, 8 October]. The slaughter became especially controversial as the gun used for the murders was registered legally for Panya Kamrab's personal use, law enforcement officers enjoying legal concessions regarding the license for firearms [*BBC Thai* 2022, 6 November]. Only two years before, in 2020 [*BBC Thai* 2022, 7 October(a)], a soldier of the Royal Thai Army opened fire at a mall in the nearby province of Nakhon Ratchasima, killing twenty-nine people [*Matichon* 2022, 6 October]. Contributing to widespread discontents, authorities rolled out a red carpet at the nursery—only hours after the incident—for welcoming an official visit by King Vajiralongkorn and Queen Suthida [*Manager Online* 2022, 8 October]. The carpet was removed quickly amid online criticism, and the royal couple paid a visit to the injured at Nong Bua Lam Phu Hospital and Udon Thani Hospital instead [*BBC Thai* 2022, 7 October(b)].

#### 2.4. *Protesting the Government at APEC 2022*

On 18-19 November, Thailand hosted the 2022 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum at Bangkok's Queen Sirikit National Convention Center, named after the queen mother. Held under the slogan of «Open, Connect, Balance», the Forum emphasized the need of a post-pandemic recovery that is inclusive and ecologically sustainable [APEC 2022a]. In particular, it proposed «Bio-Circular Green» as an economic strategy «where technology and innovation are used to create value, reduce waste, advance resource efficiency, and promote sustainable business models» [APEC 2022b].

On 15 November, three days before the meeting, a small group of activists that called themselves «Citizens Stop APEC 2022» protested in the major northern city of Chiang Mai [*Prachathai* 2022, 15 November]. Donning the masks of Guy Fawkes, they rallied against the proposed Bio-Circular Green strategy, deemed favourable only to state agents and big corporations, as well as against the leadership of PM Prayuth [*Prachathai* 2022, 29 November]. The activists demanded the stepdown of the Premier as Chairman of the meeting, the dissolution of Parliament and the rewriting of a new, «truly democratic» constitution. Written in English, presumably for an international audience, one protest sign read: «FUCK APEC 2022» [*Prachathai* 2022, 15 November]. Activists of the same group marched to the venue where the summit was being held in Bangkok on 18 November [*BBC Thai* 2022, 18 November]. Stating that they aimed to take advantage of the presence of world leaders [*BBC Thai* 2022, 17 November], they repeated their three demands to the Prayuth Government [*BBC Thai* 2022, November 17]. The rally was dispersed as police shot rubber bullets and tear gas, resulting in 3 injured [*BBC Thai* 2022, 18 November].

### 3. *Foreign policy*

#### 3.1. *Continued complicity with regimes, and the United States*

Throughout 2022, Thailand maintained warm relations with the authoritarian Governments of China, Russia and Myanmar, with Washington seeking to strengthen their position in the face of increased competition from Beijing. According to some analysts, in the first half of 2022, Thailand's perceived increased proximity with China was causing concern in Washington [Detsch 2022, 17 June]. In a twofold effort to strengthen relations with Thailand, in June, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Lloyd J. Austin III, travelled to the country to meet with PM Prayuth and the Minister of Defense [U.S. Department of Defense 2022], while, in July, the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken paid a second visit. According to Sebastian Strangio, the latter «reflects the palpable warming of relations between Washington and Bangkok, as the U.S. Government learns to live with Prayut, who led the 2014 coup, and Thai policymakers begin to chafe at China's increasing economic and strategic inroads in the country» [Strangio 2022, 14 June]. For the scholar Tyrell Haberkorn, things are less straightforward, however. She asserts that «(i)f the Prayuth government remains in power, greater authoritarianism and a further lean towards China are very likely» [Detsch 2022, 17 June].

In Thai civil society, suspicions toward the Government's warming up with China are especially prevalent among the young and the more progressive. In November, President Xi Jinping met PM Prayuth at the 2022 APEC Forum, from which US President Joe Biden was absent, substituted by his Vice, Kamala Harris [McCarthy 2022, 23 November]. A video clip released by the Thai Government shows Xi Jinping celebrating his wife's birthday along with Prayuth and his spouse—a «very unusual» display of affection by the Chinese leader, according to an analyst [*Bangkok Post* 2022, 23 November]. Following the visit, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of both countries issued a statement claiming that Thailand and China are «as close as one family» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022]. Three days before the Forum, a small group of protesters named «Sai Iiw», one of the characters who brought the teachings of the Buddha to China in the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, marched along the streets of Yaowarat, Bangkok's Chinatown, to protest against the «One China principle» that they argued was upheld by the summit [*Prachathai* 2022, 15 November]. They additionally manifested against the «dictatorial leaders» present at the meeting [*Prachathai* 2022, 15 November].

Conveying a lack of interest in following the line dictated by the United States was Thailand's ambiguous positioning toward Russia. Having failed to criticize the invasion of Ukraine [Strangio 2022, 23 February], in March, Thailand voted in favour of a UN's resolution demanding Moscow



to «withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders» [Tiezzi 2022, 3 March]. On 12 October, however, the kingdom abstained as the United Nation General Assembly voted for a reverse of Russia's declared of annexation of four Ukrainian provinces, arguing that the measure could jeopardize the «chance for crisis diplomacy to bring about a peaceful and practical negotiated resolution to the conflict» [Strangio 2022, 13 October]. Tita Sanglee [2022, 6 October] advanced that Thailand may have been cautious in the hopes that Putin might join the APEC Summit, thereby adding prestige to the event (he eventually did not [Hutt 2022, 18 November]). Disagreeing, Thitinan Pong-sudhirak [2022, 28 October] described Putin's attendance as «problematic for the host as other leaders may boycott due to sanctions against Russia's invasion»; he suggested that the Prayuth Government's Russian agenda remains undisclosed to the public.

In 2022, the Government of Prayuth Chan-ocha likewise demonstrated a willingness to continuing cooperating with the Burmese junta, despite renewed pressures from the international community to take a stance against the regime [U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Thailand 2022]. As of April 2022, human rights experts and aid groups claimed that Thailand was sending Burmese refugees back into Myanmar every time there was a pause in fights, potentially putting their lives at risk [VOA 2022, 7 April]. In July, a delegation of senior Thai military men travelled to the Burmese capital, Naypyidaw, to pay an official visit to the ruling generals for purpose of «enhancing the existing friendship and cooperation between defense forces of the two countries» including «stability in the border area» [*The Global New Light of Myanmar* 2022, 30 June].

In September, Thailand prevented Han Lay, a Burmese model and a contestant for the title of Miss Grand International, critical of the Burmese coup of 2021, from entering the kingdom where she was seeking asylum [Reuters 2022, 22 September]. «Han Lay was the victim of a deliberate political act by the junta to make her stateless» commented Phil Robertson, Asia deputy director of Human Rights Watch [Olarn and Chern 2022, 28 September]. Stopped at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport, she resorted to flying off for Canada [Olarn and Chern 2022, 28 September]. *Par contre*, in December, Thailand welcomed members of the Burmese junta for a talk organized to discuss the very Myanmar crisis. Key figures from the Governments of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam joined the meetings, while Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Singapore, the most outspoken critics of the Burmese junta within ASEAN, refused to send delegations [Reuters 2022, 23 December]. According to Reuters [2022, 23 December], «(n)o concrete results were reported from the discussions». These different approaches within ASEAN reveal significant splits as the military-run Burmese Government, very much like its Thai counterpart, prepares for a general election in 2023.

### 3.2. *Saudi Arabia: New openings*

On 25 January, PM Prayuth paid an official visit to Saudi Arabia on the invitation of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman [*BBC Thai* 2022, 26 January]. The visit is historic as Thailand has not entertained diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia for over 30 years [*BBC Thai* 2022, 26 January]. The relationship between the two countries deteriorated after the import into Thailand of jewels that were stolen from the Saudi royalty by Kriengkrai Techamong, a locally employed Thai janitor, in 1989 [Sarawut, no date]. Four Saudi diplomats who travelled to Thailand to recover the valuables were killed in separate incidents, and a member of the Saudi royal family who vowed to investigate disappeared the next year, never to be found [*The Momentum* 2021, 26 August]. The Thai police arrested Kriengkrai Techamong in 1990 [*The Momentum* 2021, 26 August], but the Saudis were returned only part of the booty, replete with fakes and short of a highly prized blue diamond [Sarawut, no date]. After the incidents, in addition to severing diplomatic relations, Saudi Arabia banned its citizens from travelling to Thailand, and imposed limitations to the numbers of Thais who may work in Saudi Arabia [*The Standard* 2022, 25 January]. The new openings, which are imputable to the modernization pushes of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, serve economic interests on both sides, especially in the fields of tourism, labour, energy and food security [Sanglee 2022, 8 September].

## 4. *The economy*

### 4.1. *Economic successes and failures*

According to the World Bank, in 2022, «(e)conomic growth accelerated to 4.5% in the third quarter (...) fuelled by resurgent private consumption and strong tourism inflows» [World Bank 2022]. One among the industries that were most gravely affected by the COVID-19, tourism proved crucial to recovery [Strangio 2022, 25 January]. The National Economic and Social Development Council explains that, in addition to helping the gross domestic product, it “gave a big boost to personal consumption» [Apornrath 2022, 21 November]. In 2022, foreigners were allowed to enter the kingdom via different programs that required either a mandatory quarantine, one or more negative tests, or a period of stay in a designated «sandbox» area such as the islands of Phuket and Samui. Many among these programs were first introduced in late 2021, with the requisites for entry being progressively eased. Beginning on 1 October, as COVID-19 was declared endemic, Thailand lifted all regulations for incoming tourists [Royal Thai Embassy in France 2022]. Altogether, over 11 million foreigners, mainly from Asia, visited the kingdom in 2022, compared to the 428,000 of the previous year, exceeding Government's expectations [Orathai and Kitiphong 2022, 29

December]. Paired with the weakening of the US Dollar, the tourism industry also provided a boost to the Thai national currency, the Baht [Thanaphum 2023, 6 January].

At the same time, however, other factors impacted negatively the Thai economy. 2022 opened with a sudden spike in the selling price of pork, a key and affordable staple in Thai diet. In January, the retail price amounted to 215 baht per kilogram, compared to 150 baht per kilogram in the first quarter of 2021 [Thairath 2022, 21 January]. Reasons for the spike varied from a deliberate decrease in production in response to a lower demand in the years of the pandemic to the outbreaks of PRRS (Porcine Reproductive and Respiratory Syndrome) [BBC Thai 2021, 31 December] and AFS (African Swine Fever) [Thairath 2022, 21 January], which decimated live stocks [BBC Thai, 26 January]. Former-PM Thaksin Shinawatra, a major critic of the Military since he was ousted in a coup in 2006, claimed that some corporations were additionally withholding their supplies in an attempt to inflate prices [Amarin TV 2022, 19 January]. In early February, the Prayuth Government identified eight companies that were refusing to release altogether twenty-four million kilograms of pork meat on the market—an unsanitary practice, which contravened existing regulations [Thansettakij 2022, 21 January]. The Government filed lawsuits against such companies under the Epidemic Act and the Animal Slaughter Control Act, thereby stabilizing the retail price at a rather high 198-208 baht per kilogram: [Thairath 2022, 6 February].

Global trends, including those set into motion by war in Ukraine, further penalized recovery. In March 2022, the U.S. Department of Agriculture predicted that Thailand's reliance on imported feed grains would affect livestock production as well as, indirectly, fertilizer prices and ultimately field crops as «(p)rices of feed ingredients increased by 18-20 percent in February 2022 after the surge in prices of feed-quality wheat from the Black Sea, including Ukraine» [United States Department of Agriculture 2022]. The *World Bank* additionally reports «a significant slowdown in exports growth like other ASEAN peers, reflecting the impact of the global economic slowdown» [World Bank 2022]. These factors impacted less privileged constituencies, contributing to the scarring of the COVID-19 period. In fact, even the official end of pandemic did not bring about only positive change. As the Prayuth Government discontinued the relief measures offered to citizens the previous year [Siani 2021, p. 255], poverty is «projected to rise to 6.6 percent in 2022 from 6.3 percent in 2021» [World Bank 2022].

## 5. Conclusion

In 2022, while officially entering a «post-pandemic» stage, Thailand continued to display political and economic grievances associated to the CO-

VID-19 crisis. The Government's handling of domestic and international politics alimented existing discontent, while its perceived economic incompetency took the centre stage in public debates as the year came to a closure. While street politics paled in comparison to the youth-led rallies of 2020, the dissatisfaction remained palpable. Responding to the waning of Prayuth's popularity, in December, Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan anticipated that his longstanding associate will leave Palang Pracharath, the very military-backed party that named him premier, seeking to further his career by joining another party for the general election of 2023 [Wassana 2022, 13 December].

The year closed with an event that may have significant repercussions. On 15 December, the Bureau of the Royal Household announced that Princess Bajrakitiyabha, the first child of King Maha Vajiralongkorn, collapsed the night before because of a heart-related condition while she was training her pet dogs in the Nakhorn Ratchasima Province. Flown urgently to Bangkok, she was admitted at Chulalongkorn Hospital [Royal Office of Thailand 2022], where she remains as of mid-March 2023. Analysts claim that the 44-year-old princess is a key asset for the Court, some identifying her as a likely heir to the throne [BBC 2022, 15 December].

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Amarin TV*, 2022, 19 January, 'ทักษิณ แฉแนวแก๊ทหมูแพง ยินดีให้ ประยุทธ์ ปรีกษา แฉมรยาใหญ่กักตุนหมู (Thaksin Would Happily Offer Advice to Prayuth on the Pork Crisis, Indicates that Large Corporations Are Withholding the Meat)'.
- APEC 2022b, *Bangkok Goals on Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) Economy*, no date.
- APEC, 2022a, การประชุมผู้นำเขตเศรษฐกิจเอเปค ครั้งที่ ๒๙ ระหว่างวันที่ ๑๘ – ๑๙ พฤศจิกายน ๒๕๖๕ ณ ศูนย์การประชุมแห่งชาติสิริกิติ์ กรุงเทพฯ (*The 29th APEC Meeting of 18-19 November at Queen Sirikit National Convention Center*), 19 November.
- Apornrath Phoonphongphiphat, 2022, 'Thailand GDP expands 4.5% in Q3, buoyed by tourism', *Asia Nikkei*, 21 November.
- Bangkok Post*, 2022, 8 October, 'Deadly mix of guns, drugs and domestic violence'.
- Bangkok Post*, 2022, 23 November, 'Xi Jinping's "unscripted" moments at G20, Apec'.
- BBC*, 2022, 15 December, 'Thai princess collapses from heart condition, palace says'.
- BBC Thai*, 2022, 6 January, 'หมูแพง ส่อเคັดตั้งแต่เมื่อไร รัฐไทยทำอะไรบ้าง (Since When Has Pork Been Expensive? What is the Thai Government Doing about it?)'.
- BBC Thai*, 2022, 26 January, 'ซาอุดีอาระเบีย: ประยุทธ์ ชู "โอกาสใหม่มากมายมหาศาล" หลัง «เสียใจยิ่งต่อ โศกนาฏกรรม» ในอดีต (Saudi Arabia: Prayuth Sees "a Great New Opportunity" after "the Great Sadness for the Tragedy" of the Past)'.
- BBC Thai*, 2022, 29 May, 'ชัชชาติ สิทธิพันธุ์: ผู้ว่าฯ กทม. ผู้คาดว่าจะชนะเลือกตั้งสูงสุดในประวัติศาสตร์ (Chadchart Sittipunt, the Bangkok Governor with the Highest Number of Votes in History)'.

- BBC Thai*, 2022, 30 May, ‘ชัชชาติ ลิทธิพันธุ์: กต. รับรองผู้ว่าฯ กทม. คนใหม่ แล้ว (Chadchart Sittipunt, Confirmed by the Office of the Election Commission of Thailand as the New Bangkok Governor)’.
- BBC Thai*, 2022, 15 September, ‘เส้นทางคดี “นายกฯ 8 ปี” ก่อนศาลรัฐธรรมนูญนัดชี้ชะตา พล.อ. ประยุทธ์ 30 ก.ย. (The Case of the 8 Years Term of the Prime Minister in View of the Constitutional Court’s Decision over the Fate of Prayuth on 30 September)’.
- BBC Thai*, 2022, 29 September, ‘8 ปี ประยุทธ์: ที่มาคำวินิจฉัยศาลรัฐธรรมนูญ 30 ก.ย. หลังนายกฯ ได้ไปต่อ (The 8 Years of Prayuth: What Lies behind the Decision of the Constitutional Court of 30 September for Prayuth to Resume Office)’.
- BBC Thai*, 2022, 3 October, ‘พล.อ. ประยุทธ์ ปฏิบัติภารกิจนายกฯ เต็มตัว หลังหลุดคดี “นายกฯ 8 ปี” (Gen. Prayuth Returns to his Duties as Prime Minister after Leaving Behind the Case of the 8 Years)’.
- BBC Thai*, 2022, 7 October(a), ‘กราดยิงหนองบัวลำภู: อดีตตำรวจกราดยิงศูนย์เด็กเล็ก สังหาร 36 ชีวิต ตำรวจชี้แรงจูงใจมาจากเครียดสะสมและทะเลาะภรรยา (The Shootout of Bua Lam Phu: A Former Policeman Opens Fire in Nursery Killing 36, Police Point Out Causes as Stress and Family Problems)’.
- BBC Thai*, 2022, 7 October(b), ‘ในหลวงและพระราชินีเสด็จเยี่ยมเหยื่อกราดยิงหนองบัวลำภู (The King and the Queen Pay Official Visit to the Victims of the Nong Bua Lam Phu Shootout)’.
- BBC Thai*, 2022, 6 November ‘กราดยิงหนองบัวลำภู: ครบรอบ 1 เดือน รัฐออกมาทำอะไรแล้วบ้าง (Shootout in Nong Bua Lam Phu: What Measures Has the Government Taken After One Month?)’.
- BBC Thai*, 2022, 17 November, ‘เอเปค: กลุ่ม “ราษฎร” ประกาศเคลื่อนขบวนไปไกลกว่าที่ประชุม 18 พ.ย. พร้อมขับไล่ พล.อ. ประยุทธ์ (APEC: Group of “The People” Announce they Will Move the Rallies Closer to the Forum on 18 November to Remove Gen. Prayuth)’.
- BBC Thai*, 2022, 18 November, ‘เอเปค: เปิดประชุมสุดยอดผู้นำ 21 เขตเศรษฐกิจ ท่ามกลางประท้วงในกรุงเทป-เกาหลีเหนือยิงขีปนาวุธ (APEC: The Summit Opens with Leaders of 21 Economic Powers among Protests in Bangkok-North Korea Fires a Missile)’.
- BBC Thai*, 2021, 3 December, ‘จับตาค่าครองชีพปี 2565 เริ่มต้นด้วยหมูราคาแพง ร้านอาหารทยอยปรับราคา (Observing the Costs of Living in 2022, Beginning from the Spike in the Price of Pork Restaurants Adjust their Price Lists)’.
- Detsch, Jack, 2022, ‘Washington Worries China Is Winning Over Thailand’, *Foreign Policy*, 17 June.
- Hfocus*, 2022, 9 March, ‘สร.เปิดแผน 1 ก.ค.65 โค้วีตออกจากโรคระบาด เข้าสู่โรคประจำถิ่น (Ministry of Public Health Plans that COVID-19 Will Become Endemic on 1 July 2022)’.
- Hutt, David, 2022, ‘Thailand: Russia-Ukraine Tensions Spill Over to APEC’, *DW*, 18 November.
- iLaw*, 2022, 11 August, ‘วาระนายกฯ 8 ปี ของ พล.อ.ประยุทธ์ บทพิสูจน์รัฐธรรมนูญปราบโกง (The 8 Years Term of Prayuth: Evidence as to Whether the Constitution Really Punishes Dishonesty)’.
- Komchadluek*, 2022, 6 October, ‘อดีต ตร. “กราดยิงหนองบัวลำภู” ยิงตัวเองตาย พร้อมลูกเมีย หนีคดี «สังหารหมู่» (Former Policeman of the “Nong Bua Lam Phu Shootout” Killed Himself Along with Child and Wife after the “Massacre”)’.
- Manager Online*, 2022, 1 June, ‘“ผมจะเป็นผู้ว่าฯ กทม.ของทุกคน” เจาะปรากฏการณ์ “ชัชชาติ” ผู้ว่าฯ คนใหม่ ปลุกความหวังคนกรุง (“I Will Be Everyone’s Bangkok Governor”: In-depth Analysis of Chadchart, the New Governor Who Gives Hope to the People of the Capital)’.
- Manager Online*, 2022, 8 October, ‘“เอ็ดดี้-อัษฎางค์” แบนคนจิตใจหายช้า.. “ฟังเสียงหัวใจของในหลวง” #แบนมิลลิ “สามก๊ับ-สลิม” ทางโครทางมัน (Eddie Atsadang Tells Malicious Individuals to “Listen to the Heart of the King”)’.

- Matichon, 2022, 6 October, ‘ช็อกโลก! สื่อนอกตีข่าวเหตุกราดยิงศูนย์เด็กเล็กหนองบัวลำภู ดับหลายสิบ (The World in Shock: International Media Report that Tens Have Died in the Nong Bua Lam Phu Shootout)’.
- McCarthy, Simone, 2022, ‘With Biden and Putin absent from APEC, China’s Xi takes centre stage’, *CNN*, 17 November.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand, 2022, *Joint Statement between the Kingdom of Thailand and the People’s Republic of China on Working towards a Thailand - China Community with a Shared Future for Enhanced Stability, Prosperity and Sustainability*, 19 November.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2022, *President Xi Jinping Holds Talks with Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha*, 19 November.
- Olarn, Kocha, and Chen, Heather, 2022, ‘Myanmar beauty queen facing junta threat leaves Thailand for Canada’, *CNN*, 28 September.
- Orathai Sriring and Kitiphong Thaichareon, 2022, ‘Thai economy recovers, tourism to see upside from China’s reopening – c. bank’, *Reuters*, 29 December.
- Prachathai, 2022, 15 November, “‘ไออีวจะลุยเอเปค’ กลุ่มนักกิจกรรมประท้วงบรรดาผู้นำเผด็จการจากเขาวราชกิจศูนย์สิริกิติ์ (Sai Iiw Against APEC: Group of Activists Protest against the Dictatorial Leaders from Yaowarat to the Queen Sirikit National Convention Center)’.
- Prachathai, 2022, 29 November, ‘ราษฎรหยุด APEC 2022’ เขียนใหม่ ยื่นหนังสือถึง ‘ทูตสหรัฐฯ’ เรียกร้อง ตำรวจ ‘รับผิดชอบ’ สลายม็อบเอเปค (“Citizens Stop APEC 2022” in Chiang Mai Petition American Ambassador Asking that Police Takes Responsibility For Crack-down on Protests’).
- Reuters, 2022, 22 September, ‘Thailand denies entry to model who denounced Myanmar junta in pageant speech’.
- Reuters, 2022, 23 December, ‘Thailand hosts Myanmar junta figures in talks, key ASEAN nations skip’.
- Royal Office Thailand, 2022, แถลงการณ์สำนักพระราชวัง สมเด็จพระเจ้าลูกเธอ เจ้าฟ้าพัชรกิติยาภา นเรนทิราเทพยวดี กรมหลวงราชสาริณีสิริพัชร มหาวัชรราชธิดา ทรงพระประชวร’ (*Statement of the Bureau of the Royal Household on Princess Bajrakitiyabha’s health*), 15 December.
- Royal Thai Embassy in France, 2022, คนไทยเข้าประเทศไทยช่วงโควิด (*Thai People Re-entering the Country during COVID-19*), 30 September.
- Royal Thai Government, 2022, สธ.แถลงแผนบริหารจัดการ “โควิด” หลังยุบ ศบค. และปรับเป็นโรคติดต่อที่ต้องเฝ้าระวัง 1 ต.ค.นี้ (*Ministry of Public Health Declares Management of COVID-19 After the Disband of the COVID-19 Centre and the Identification as a Communicable Disease to be Kept under Surveillance*), 26 September.
- Sanglee, Tita, 2002, ‘Thai-Saudi Relations: Eight Months After Rapprochement’, *The Diplomat*, 8 September.
- Sanglee, Tita, 2022, 3, *The Diplomat*, 6 October.
- Sarawut Ari, no date, ‘ไทย-ซาอุดีอาระเบีย: จากสัมพันธ์แตกร้างสู่ก้าวขยับแห่ง “มิตรภาพใหม่” (Thailand-Saudi Arabia: From Severed Relationship to a “New Friendship”’, *Institute of Asian Studies*, Chulalongkorn University, (<http://www.ias.chula.ac.th/article/ไทย-ซาอุดีอาระเบีย-จากส/>).
- Siani, Edoardo, 2021, ‘Thailand 2019-2021: Military, monarchy, protests’, *Asia Maior*, XXXII/2021: 237-257.
- Strangio, Sebastian, 2022, ‘Thai Tourism recovery On track as International Arrivals Jump’, *The Diplomat*, 25 January.
- Strangio, Sebastian, 2022, ‘Why Have Southeast Asian Governments Stayed Silent Over Ukraine?’, *The Diplomat*, 23 February.

- Strangio, Sebastian, 2022, 'Thai PM Meets US Defense Secretary in a Bid to Advance Security Ties', *The Diplomat*, 14 June.
- Strangio, Sebastian, 2022, 'Why Did Thailand Abstain on This Week's UN Vote on Ukraine?', *The Diplomat*, 13 October.
- Thai Post, 2022, 2 October, 'ประยุทธ์รอด(ค)คำพิพากษา กับกระดานอำนาจ 3ป.? (Prayuth Survives the Court Decision)'.
- Thairath, 2022, 21 January, 'วิกฤติหมูแพง ลากยาวเป็นปี กระทบคนไทยถ้วนหน้า จนลงทั้งแผ่นดิน (The Crisis of Pork Meat Price has a History of One Year, Affects All Thais, All Are Poorer)'.
- Thairath, 2022, 6 February, 'ตรวจห้องเย็นสต็อกเนื้อหมูต่อเนื่อง เอาผิด 17 ราย อายัด 1.07 ล้านกิโลกรัม (Checks on Refrigerating Facilities: 17 Individuals Found Guilty for Withholding 1.07 Million Kilograms of Pork)'.
- Thairath, 2022, 22 May, 'ปรากฏการณ์ "ซัซชาติ" ชนะเลือกตั้งผู้ว่าฯ กทม. ถล่มหลาย ปิดฉากปึกแผ่นรักษานิยม (Chad-chart Wins the Election for the Bangkok Governor on a Landslide, Shattering Hopes for the Conservatives)'.
- Thairath, 2022, 24 August, "'มิกปอม" ขึ้นนั่งรักษาการนายกฯ แทน "มิกตู" หลังศาลให้หยุดปฏิบัติหน้าที่ (Prawit Will Act as Caretaker Premier instead of Prayuth after the Constitutional Court Orders his Suspension)'.
- Thanaphum Charensombatpanich, 2023, 'Thai Baht set to continue strengthening as Asian economies to benefit from China's reopening', *Thai Enquirer*, 6 January.
- Thansettakij, 2022, 21 January, 'พาณิชย์สั่งผู้เลี้ยง-ห้องเย็นต้องแจ้งสต็อกหมู ไม่แจ้งส่งดำเนินคดีทันที (Ministry of Commerce Orders that Pig Farmers to Declare their Stocks Lest Being Charged)'.
- The Global New Light of Myanmar, 2022, 30 June, 'State Administration Council Chairman Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing receives Thai delegation headed by Lt-Gen Apichet Suesat of Royal Thai Army'.
- The Momentum, 2021, 26 August, 'อัมฆ่าแม่-ลูก 'ศรีธนะขัณห์' เสียชีวิตจากคดี 'เพชรซาอุ' ประวัติศาสตร์อัปยศของตำรวจไทย (The Kidnap and Murder of a Mother and a Child: Srithanakhon, a Part of the "Saudi Blue Diamond Affair": Shameful Story of the Thai Police)'.
- The Standard, 2022, 25 January, 'ทำไมไทย-ซาอุ คืนสัมพันธ์หลังราวฉาวจากปมเพชรซาอุ (Why Thailand and Saudi Arabia Restored their Relationships after the Blue Diamond Affair)'.
- The Standard, 2022, 14 March, '9 เรื่องต้องรู้ เลือกผู้ว่าฯ กทม. คนใหม่ ในรอบ 9 ปี (9 Things You Need to Know About the First Election for the Bangkok Governor in 9 Years)'.
- Thitinan Pongsudhirak, 2022, 'Thai Sovereignty Is Not for Abuse', *Bangkok Post*, 28 October.
- Tiezzi, Shannon, 2022, 'How Did Asian Countries Vote on the UN's Ukraine Resolution?', *The Diplomat*, 3 March.
- U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, *Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Meeting with Thailand Prime Minister and Minister of Defence Prayut Chan-o-cha*, 13 June.
- U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Thailand, 2022, *Joint Statement on the Situation in Myanmar*, 1 February.
- United States Department of Agriculture, 2022, *The Impact of Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Thai Agricultural Sector*, 10 March.
- VOA, 2022, April 7, 'Despite Risk of Death, Thailand Sends Myanmar Refugees Back'.
- Wassana Nanuam, 2022, 'Prawit admits Prayut likely to join another party', *Bangkok Post*, 13 December.
- World Bank, 2022, *Thailand's Economy Remains Resilient amid Global Headwinds*, 14 December.

# MYANMAR 2022: FRAGMENTED SOVEREIGNTIES AND THE ESCALATION OF VIOLENCE IN MULTIPLE WARSCAPES

Matteo Fumagalli

University of St Andrews, Scotland  
mf29@st-andrews.ac.uk

*The events that followed the military coup of February 2021, and the violence that ensued throughout 2022 serve as stark reminders that any notion that Myanmar is and operates as a single polity are a fiction, and one that neither captures the complex reality on the ground nor serves to guide policy to contain violence and assist the population on the ground.*

*Instead, Myanmar is currently home to a variety of constantly evolving geographies of war ('warscapes'), each distinctive in terms of actors involved and outcomes. An analysis of the political dynamics in these warscapes, the economic situation therein, and the degree of transnational ties and involvement suggests the emergence of a condition of fragmented sovereignty across the territory of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.*

*Just like in the pre-2011 period, when the prevailing narrative was one of Myanmar's international isolation, the regime actually entertains a wide range of relations with countries both close and afar. Russia, in particular, has emerged as the junta's strongest backer. The military regime is among the staunchest supporters of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.*

*The economy and the livelihoods of millions have been devastated by the violence. Western investors have mostly retreated. The economy barely functions. Aid supply has become difficult to provide due to increasing regulation and restrictions.*

*No side was able to prevail in 2022, with multiple conflicts protracted, when not intractable, and violence escalating.*

KEYWORDS – warscapes; fragmented sovereignties; Russia; aid; sanctions.

## 1. Introduction

Armed conflicts escalated in 2022. Myanmar's military continued to be at war with the population, escalating its brutality across a variety of arenas (the battlefield, the digital world, finance, international fora) and deploying diverse tools of repression, from artillery shelling, to arson, rapes and executions [Gabusi & Neironi 2022; Kaung Sett Wai 2022; Min Thang 2022]. Stability and retaining any form of control have remained largely out of reach for the armed forces. At the same time, the opposition did not coalesce around a single agenda or leadership, limiting its impact, despite the damage it can inflict locally on the military and its affiliates.



The events that followed the military coup of February 2021, and the violence that ensued throughout 2022, serve as stark reminders that any notion that Myanmar is and operates as a single polity is a fiction, and a dangerously useless one, as it neither captures the complex reality on the ground nor serves to guide policy to contain violence and assist the population. In fact, this article – as it builds on and expands the argument made elsewhere about the multi-cornered nature of the Myanmar conflict [Fumagalli 2022a], argues that it is incorrect to refer to the events and violence unfolding in the country (and at times beyond it, across its borders) as being part of a single conflict. Instead, Myanmar is currently home to a variety of constantly evolving geographies of war, or warsapes, a notion applied to Myanmar's conflicts by Shona Loong in a series of recent publications<sup>1</sup>. Warsapes, Nordstrom contends, are «sites of a complex and multidimensional agenda of social struggles and life projects» [Nordstrom 1997]. To be clear, the condition of such political landscapes is neither one of «chaos in all places at all times» [Korf, Engeler & Hagman 2010, p. 385] nor one of «chaos in all places at all times» [Lund 2011, p. 888]. Rather, warsapes are «not per se socially unstable places, but differentiated arenas, networks and connections of relational spaces in which distinct human trajectories exist» [Korf, Engeler & Hagman 2010, p. 386], but with rather contingent efforts unfolding to make disparate fragments cohere [Lund 2011]. As Loong contends, these warsapes are «largely different from each other in terms of actors involved, local alliances, agendas and outcomes» [Loong 2022b]. Taken together, all these environments do not constitute a single indistinguishable violent chaos, but different, complex sets of orders and diverse hybrid governance arrangements. The concept of fragmented sovereignty is thus relevant here, as this «reflects the power struggles that involve a range of competing institutions, endowed with different resources» [Su 2021, p. 23]. In other words, fragmented sovereignty is conceived of as «multiple localised autonomous cores of power» instead of an all-encompassing structural and centralised modality of control [Lund 2011, p. 887]. This condition is clearly applicable to the case of Myanmar.

The military does not control people and territory, but the extent to which this is the case and the kind of alternative governance arrangements in its lieu instead vary considerably across the territory of the administrative unit. It is only the statist bias of the current international system that obstinately reinforces the fiction of a united polity. This is no longer the case, and in fact it never was. The 2021 coup and the violence that followed have redrawn the contours of old conflict dynamics while drawing new ones, for example in the areas around the Sagaing

1. Loong's assessment of the six distinct warsapes is available here: <https://myanmar.iiss.org/analysis>.

and Magway regions, Chin State and the Dry Zone along the Ayeyarwady river, previously relatively unaffected by the cycles of wars that persisted in the borderlands for decades.

Before proceeding further, a few notes on the terminology used in this article are in order. In these pages I refrain from referring to the Myanmar military as «Tatmadaw» (တပ်မတော်), responding to the call by the resistance movement to deprive the institution of the honorifics that accompany its self-appellation in the Burmese language (the suffix and royal particle ‘-taw/-daw’/ တေ) [Aung Kaung Myat 2022]. The People’s Defence Force (PDF) fighting the State Administration Council (SAC, as the junta calls itself) is called *pyithu kakweyay tatmataw* (ပျဉ်းသူကာကွယ်ရေးတပ်မတော်), adding to the confusion. This inevitably raised the question of what to call this institution, with the expression «sit-tat» (စစ်တပ်) seemingly finding growing favour both inside and outside the country [Aung Kaung Myat, 2022; Buscemi 2022]. The issue I have with this proposition, though, is that «sit-tat» simply means military, not a specific institution, thus making the entity perpetrating crimes against its own people indistinguishable from other armed forces. For these reasons, I prefer to use the expression «Myanmar Armed Forces» (MAF). I also acknowledge that the anti-military resistance consists of both anti-coup forces and anti-military organisations whose existence predates the 2021 coup and whose agenda does not necessarily dovetail with that of the anti-coup movement. Hence, although I tend to use the term «Spring Revolution» (*Nway Oo Tarwihlanyay*, နွေဦးတော်လှန်ရေး) to refer to the broad social and political opposition to the military coup, I neither imply or suggest that all these forces coalesced in a coherent movement. While many may share the goal of dismantling the current structures and hegemonic control of the MAF, and this in itself is a ‘revolutionary’ goal, the actions, agenda, interests and alliances vary extensively on the ground. Overall, what was new in 2022 compared to the previous year was an intensification of the armed conflicts and a more prominent role of Russia through extensive economic and military linkages with the junta in Myanmar.

The article is structured as follows. In the section below, I review the condition of the fragmented sovereignties that have emerged across Myanmar’s different warscapes. Drawing on the work of Shona Loong [Loong 2022b], I sketch out the different coalitions that constitute the main conflicting parties (the military; the anti-coup resistance; the ethnic armed organisations, EAOs) in each of the main settings. Next, the article details how the economy and the livelihoods of millions have been devastated by the violence. Western investors have mostly retreated. The economy barely functions. Aid supply has become difficult to provide due to increasing regulation and restrictions. Lastly, while the anti-military resistance groups cannot rely on international support, the armed forces have been able to count on Russia’s active political, economic and security

support, and China's more muted, even ambivalent, position. Just like in the pre-2011 period, while the prevailing narrative is one of Myanmar's international isolation, the regime actually entertains a wide range of relations with countries close and less proximate. Russia has emerged as the junta's strongest backer. The junta in Nay Pyi Taw, in turn, is among the staunchest supporters of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

## 2. *Domestic policy*

Armed conflicts escalated throughout the whole year. Neither the junta-affiliated forces nor the opposing sides were able to assert control over either people or territory.<sup>2</sup> Instead, different areas – and the peoples inhabiting them – remained subject to a variety of complex and evolving governance arrangements, with perhaps the single common thread being that in no instance the junta (State Administration Council, or SAC, as the military regime has renamed itself) and the National Unity Government (NUG)<sup>3</sup> forces co-existed. Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing's persistence in ensuring that his nemesis Aung San Suu Kyi would never again pose a threat to his political ambition translated into more sentences in the sham trials that followed her forced removal from office on 1 February 2021. The military court delivered more sentences from April through December. Eventually, former *de facto* leader Suu Kyi was jailed for a total of 26 years [Nikkei Asia 2022b, 7 April; Peck 2022, 12 October; Ratcliffe 2022; Reuters 2022b, 2 September; Root 2022]. The military also carried out its first executions in decades, killing four democracy activists in July 2022 [Nikkei Asia 2022i, 25 July]. Yet, the regime's terror campaign was far from an intra-elite affair. Neither was it targeted at dissidents only.

As Loong notes, almost all of Myanmar's 330 townships were affected by war [Loong 2022b]. Yet, war affected the country and its population unevenly. The conflict dynamics differed as the specificities of each conflict were «layered over struggles that predated the coup» [Loong 2022b].

2. The Assistance Associations for Political Prisoners (Burma) estimated that around 3,000 people were killed by the military regime and that around 20,000 are detained as political prisoners as of February 2023 (<https://aappb.org>).

3. To be clear the NUG and the ethnic armed organisations do not always share the same goals or have the same stance towards the junta, as shown later in this article. Further, and following from this, the forces that identify with the NUG and the broader anti-coup and anti-military groups are not the same. For a broader discussion of the NUG and the multi-cornered nature of Myanmar's conflicts see Fumagalli, 2022a.

Myanmar's geographies of war tended to involve three different set of actors:

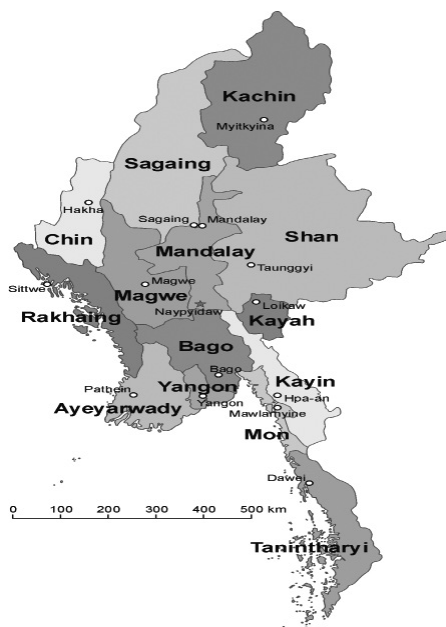
- The State Administration Council (SAC, the junta) and its affiliates. These include the MAF proper, as well as its de facto political wing, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, some hardline Buddhist nationalist organisations, the Border Guard Forces, and the «pyusawhti», the loosely connected village-level networks of pro-junta civilians who receive weapons from the military [International Crisis Group 2022b]. Because the central areas of Myanmar have experienced little armed conflict for decades, the MAF lacks bases, intelligence and supply networks there, hence the value of informers and the pyusawhti.
- The anti-SAC forces. The shared goals of these various groups lie in toppling the military regime. These include the National Unity Government, the People's Defence Forces (PDF) and the Local Defence Forces, as well as some defectors [Charney 2022; Kyed 2022]. Primarily based in the Bamar-majority areas, these groupings tend to cooperate with each other, although the extent to which this is done varies locally.
- The ethnic armed organisations (EAOs). Claiming to represent the ethnic minority groups especially in the borderlands, the EAOs have in many cases been fighting for decades, in a long struggle against Myanmar's central government. The response of the EAOs varied [International Crisis Group, 2022a]. Some were vocal and well organised opponents of the coup, such as the Kachin Independence Organisation and the Karen National Union. Others such as the Wa State Army appeared to acquiesce to the coup; others equivocated, keeping distance from the NUG without openly condemning the coup, before taking up arms again against the MAF, such as the Arakan Army.

Although wordcount constraints do not allow a further unpacking of each of the conflicting parties, it suffices here to say that considerable heterogeneity marks each of them and that all are, effectively, moving targets in terms of how their agenda and compositions evolved over time.<sup>4</sup>

4. All actors experienced splits and defections. The defections from the MAF received greater attention [Ye Myo Hein 2022; Charney 2022; Frontier Myanmar 202c, 3 December; Kyed 2022; Thinzar Sunheli Yi 2022], although in reality the Armed Forces have a long history of factionalism (as well as purges, factional and ideological divisions), questioning the myth of the MAF's alleged monolithic nature [Moeller 2022; Selth 2022]. There were also attempts by the military to foment defections from the NLD [The Irrawaddy 202e, 26 December] and there were splits within the Karen movement too [Loong 2022a; Gray 2022].

Based on a fine-grained examination of the conflict<sup>5</sup>, Loong identifies six warscapes in the Dry zone, Rakhine State, the Northwest, the Southwest, the Northeast and lower Myanmar.

Map 1. Myanmar Political Map



Source: *Myanmar Divisions and States*, available at [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/bc/Burma\\_en.png/800px-Burma\\_en.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/bc/Burma_en.png/800px-Burma_en.png)

Conflicts in the *Dry Zone* of central Myanmar show how the coup and anti-military opposition managed to mobilise people previously untouched by the armed insurgencies. In this warscape, the key actors are the SAC-allied pyusawhti militia and the anti-SAC PDFs, both of which comprise Bamar-Buddhist civilians without prior combat experience. The forces were unevenly matched in 2022, as the MAF reinforced the pyusawhti with heavy weaponry and small arms. Just like the Dry Zone, the *Northwest* had been spared much of the post-independence and pre-coup violence. The main ethnic organization there, the Chin National Front (CNF), commanded considerable support among the local population, but no armed conflict

5. See the conflict map and databases on the IISS website (<https://myanmar.iiss.org>).

had taken place in the region. After the coup, the CNF has emerged as an important force and the local PDFs have been organised under the new military player, the Chinland Defense Force. *Lower Myanmar*, around the Aye-yarwady delta and Yangon, had similarly experienced little violence before, but this is where urban warfare was concentrated over the past year. In the *Southeast*, the conflict opposed some old EAOs such as the Karen National Union and the Karenni National Progressive Party, and some NUG-aligned PDFs, to the MAF. Home to so much violence and destruction in recent years [Fumagalli, 2018], *Rakhine State* has thus far been an outlier to the violence engulfing so much of the country. This was the result of an informal ceasefire between the Arakan Army (AA, which has emerged as one of the strongest and better organised EAOs in recent years, operating well beyond the administrative boundaries of Rakhine State [Mizzima 2022b, July 21]) and the MAF in November 2020, after two years of harsh fighting. This led to a lull in violence, though clashes reignited in summer 2022 [Kyaw Hsan Hlaing 2022; Yuzana 2022], until a new temporary ceasefire was agreed in the autumn. Although it advocates an anti-military agenda («sovereignty for Arakan», the old name for Rakhine, [Kyaw Lynn 2022; Aung Tun 2022]), the AA has resisted aligning itself with the NUG. Overall, the conflict is at its most complex in the *Northeast*, where the opposition is not just between the MAF and the main EAOs (the Kachin Independence Organisation, the Restoration Council of Shan State, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Shan State Progress Party), but also among the EAOs themselves.

Taken together, these six warzones show how the structure of the conflict varies significantly across Myanmar, which is now made of moving maps of new actors, tenuous coalitions and new frontlines [Ye Myo Hein 2022]. In sum, Loong argues, Myanmar's war «cannot be reduced to a binary contest between those supporting the coup and those opposing it» [Loong 2022b]. The country is indeed the sum of many moving parts.

### 2.1. *Digital authoritarianism*

Beyond the bloody repression in the form of killings, arson, shelling through artillery, arrests, beatings and rape, the military regime deployed other tools in its efforts to coerce the population into submission. The most notable one is the resort to digital authoritarianism. This refers to the use of digital information technology by authoritarian regimes to surveil, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations.<sup>6</sup> In practice, this includes attempts to seal the internet in a given country from the rest of the world through – among others – IP address blocking, the filtering of words and banning the use of VPNs, the reliance on CCTV across the country

6. Of course such tools can be and are used by democratic regimes against their societies too.

(e.g. smart city and crime-controlling technology), government crowd control and dispersion, facial recognition software, and geolocation tracking, overall amounting to a complex surveillance ecosystem.

Over the short span of a decade, Myanmar has rapidly morphed from being one of Southeast Asia's most isolated countries in terms of Information and Communication Technology development and connectivity to one where both the authorities and the population rely on a variety of digital technologies for both preserving power and challenging it. Myanmar was a latecomer to cyberspace. Its Telecommunications industry in the 1990s and 2000s was extremely limited and highly regulated. Only a narrow circle of senior army officers were given preferential rates for purchasing mobile phones and SIM cards in the 2000s, with business people having to buy them for around US \$ 7,5000 [Simpson 2022]. Only one per cent of the population had internet access in the 2000s, and Facebook was largely unknown till the mid-2010s. Gmail was blocked. The liberalisation and privatisation of the TLC sector from 2021 onwards significantly reduced the price of SIM cards down to US \$ 1.50 in 2014, with mobile subscription skyrocketing from 2% in 2011 to 113% in 2018. Internet penetration went from 0.024% in 2003 to 4% in 2012, 8% in 2013 and 30% in 2017 [Simpson 2022a]. While the time when the NLD tenure was in office was far from unproblematic, it was after the coup that the authorities unleashed the full potential of surveillance technology. In a short span of time, Myanmar has emerged, as McDermott aptly puts it, as «the leading edge of digital authoritarianism in Southeast Asia» [McDermott 2022]. In the immediate aftermath of its takeover, the junta banned Whatsapp and Facebook, which were used to organise anti-coup demonstrations. The Facebook app was removed from use in the country. The junta also blocked over 200 websites under section 77 of the TLC law as part of the campaign against «misinformation». Censorship intensified. Internet shutdowns were deployed regularly. At the same time, and consistently with the fragmented sovereignties framework adopted in this article, Myanmar's territory is not evenly subject to the same policies. For example, Chin and Rakhine States, as well as Sagaing and Magway Regions are more extensively targeted through internet restrictions.<sup>7</sup>

In its efforts to place the entire TLC sector under its control, the junta relied on a set of state and non-state partners in repression. In the years preceding the coup, the authorities (then the NLD government) employed two rather well-known private surveillance firms to monitor regime opponents (also during the pandemic), namely the German firm Finfisher and Israel's Cellebrite [Simpson 2022a]. In recent years, China sent experts to the country to create a new firewall to deliver sophisticated surveillance equipment to suppress online dissent and control the narrative surrounding the coup [McDermott 2022]. Russia helped out too, as it exported its digital surveil-

7. I am grateful to one of the reviewers for emphasizing this point.

lance and filtering technology through its state agency Roskomnadzor. In the months following the coup the junta exerted pressure on the companies (mostly foreign), such as Norway's Telenor and Qatar's Ooredoo, who were ordered to hand over their customer data to the junta. This ultimately led these companies to withdraw from the country. Telenor sold its operations to the Lebanese M1 group, which in turn sold it to military-linked firm Shwe Byain Phyu.

### 2.1.1. *Legislative initiatives: The draft cyber security law*

Soon after the 1 February 2021 takeover, the junta introduced a draft bill of a cyber security law [Myanmar Now, 2022a, 25 January]. The discussions have dragged on, with a first draft produced in February 2021 and another one in January 2022, facing significant opposition from business and banks. The drafts circulated have widely illustrated the wide-ranging intentions of the military regime and its interference in the digital realm.<sup>8</sup> The overarching aim of the proposed law is to introduce a digital firewall similar to China's. If approved, the law would allow SAC to access user data, block websites, make ad hoc decisions and penalties, and prosecute critics with little legal recourse. It would also criminalise the use of VPNs, abolish the need for objective proof during trials and require online service providers to block or remove criticism of SAC members [Access Now 2022; Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business 2022].

## 3. *Economic policy*

The coup caused unspeakable damage to the country's economy and the livelihoods of millions. The SAC struggled to keep the economy afloat, and resorted to extreme measures to that end. In the spring of 2022, as many (predominantly western) companies exited the country and foreign investment dried up [Nikkei Asia 2022h, 24 July], the junta abruptly introduced foreign currency restrictions, according to which all foreign earnings would need to be converted to the official exchange rate set by the Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM) and cash earned in foreign currency would also need to be deposited into the CBM at the same fixed exchange rate. Initially foreign

8. At the same time a new cyber security law has been in development under the NLD government which was itself not really committed to media freedom and users' digital rights [Brooten, McElhone & Venkiteswaran 2019]. The 2013 Telecommunications law was one of the NLD's preferred tools to stifle dissent by criminalising defamation, particularly through its Article 66(d), as well as Art 505b of the Penal Code, but also colonial-era legislation such as the Official Secrets Act. Subsequently, Covid provided the state with a new opportunity for collecting mass data concerning citizens and their movements. The application, Saw Saw Shar, acquired data such as GPS location, photos, videos, files and other data.



companies investing in the country were exempt from these new regulations [Nikkei Asia 2022e, 8 June], although a few weeks later the regime reversed the move [Nikkei Asia 2022f, 15 July]. The SAC also tried to block the import of foreign cars and luxury imports as it struggled with a shortage of dollars [Nikkei Asia 2022d, 23 June and Nikkei Asia 2022m, 8 September].

The regime focused primarily on survival, not reviving the economy. As it did so, it also sought to reduce its import dependence and rebalance the trade deficit, in a move that was reminiscent of earlier military administrations [Frontier Myanmar 2022b, 23 November]. While junta leader Min Aung Hlaing «trumpeted» the US\$ 600 million trade surplus in the 2020–21 fiscal year, this was actually due to the collapse of imports and not a surge in exports. Strict capital controls were introduced. While these notes reflect country-wide assessment as provided by the country's authorities and international organisations, the reality on the ground varied considerably, consistently with the flourishing of war economies (for example around rare earths, jade, and gold) in the borderlands.

### 3.1. *Sanctions and financial blacklisting*

The country was the target of additional rounds of western sanctions. The EU imposed several rounds of sanctions – the latest in November 2022 [Council of the EU 2022] – on the junta leader, the MAF leadership, and the military-controlled conglomerates which provide the military with revenues it needs to maintain itself and carry out its crimes. The UK and the US also announced further rounds of sanctions [Strangio 2022f, 7 October]. Towards the end of 2022, the US Congress approved its latest signature policy on Myanmar, the BURMA Act (2022), where BURMA stands for «Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act» [US Senate 2022].

While it stops short of providing lethal aid support to Myanmar's opposition forces, the document lays out the US policy approach to the country, opening up the prospect of direct negotiations with groups opposing the junta. The BURMA Act also makes a call to «impose targeted restrictions aimed at military, military-owned or controlled enterprises, empower and provide assistance to the NUG, the Civil Disobedience Movement and deny legitimacy to the junta» [US Congress 2022].

Further to this, in October 2022 Myanmar was blacklisted again by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the Paris-based inter-governmental body that sets global standards for curbing terrorist financing and money laundering [Chau and Oo 2022b, 7 September and Chau and Oo 2022c, 25 September; Kucik 2022]. For investors and aid organisations willing to operate legally and in the interests of the population, the FATF's decision to blacklist Myanmar increased the cost of doing business due to enhanced due diligence, raising questions about the feasibility of those organisations retaining their support and funding.

### 3.2. *Investors go for the exit?*

Yet, many foreign investors exited the country as they sought to avoid the reputational damage and sanctions that would have come had they stayed in the country. However, doing so was far from straightforward, as demonstrated by the challenges faced by Norway's Telenor and Qatar's Ooredoo, the two leading telecoms investors and providers, which only managed to exit the Myanmar market after incurring considerable losses and writing off the investment [Nikkei Asia 2022l, 3 September]. The situation was somewhat different for non-western investors. The considerable ambivalence (and diversity in responses) shown by Japanese companies illustrates such dilemmas and hesitations well. Kirin's beer-making company, previously partnered with Myanmar military-owned Myanmar Beer holding [Fumagalli 2022b; Taguchi and Henmi 2022; Nikkei Asia 2022n, 21 September], ended its joint venture after an acrimonious year in which both sides sued each other, and eventually exited the country. Similarly, Suzuki halted its car assembly factory operations [Nikkei Asia 2022e, 8 July]. By contrast, Toyota, very controversially opted for staying the course [Nikkei Asia 2022o, 11 October and Nikkei Asia 2022p, 23 November 23] and so did garment company Honeys [Oguchi 2022].

Similarly the energy sector faced similar ambivalence and even unintended consequences. Pressure from the opposition within the country (and advocacy groups outside) led French company TotalEnergies to quickly withdraw from its investment in the Yadana gas field. This backfired spectacularly, as the junta found itself with a large revenue-generating project essentially for free, in light of Total's poorly planned and conceived exit plan [Chau 2022; Strangio 2022e, 26 August].

Attracting new investment proved challenging to some degree, but investors from China, India, Thailand and Russia did not appear to be put off by the very challenging business environment. Russian companies were especially active, building on existing ties with the military over the previous two decades, and keen on capitalising on the mutual support between the two countries after the invasion of Ukraine and the 2021 coup [International Crisis Group, 2022c]. Russian companies were especially active in the oil and nuclear energy sectors [Reuters 2022a, 18 August; Hein Htoo Zan 2022], with deals signed by Rosatom (Russia's Atomic Energy Agency) [The Irrawaddy 2022d, 13 December], and additional pledges of a feasibility study on building small modular nuclear reactors. Representatives from Russian company Tyazhpromexports (the country's overseas trade organization) met with junta leaders to discuss Russian technical assistance for developing iron and steel production in Myanmar.

### 3.3. *Humanitarian catastrophe*

The scale of the humanitarian catastrophe was enormous. According to OCHA (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), Myan-

mar is home to over 1.5 million internally displaced people, 1.1 million of these since the coup, with some areas such as Magway, Sagaing disproportionately more affected than others.<sup>9</sup> This is double the number compared to the previous year [OCHA 2022a and 2022b]. The IDPs are living in desperate conditions, in hard-to-reach locations, crippling economic crisis, and amid hostilities. The UN agency reported that of the estimated US\$ 826 million needed for humanitarian relief, only 35% had been funded (US\$ 290 million) [OCHA 2022b].

The aid sector was a clear victim of the junta's actions. Most aid-funded infrastructure projects were suspended. Earlier patterns were reversed in what emerged as a series of paradigm shifts in aid provision: out was development assistance, channeled by the government setting its own priorities, and in (or back) was humanitarian aid, especially in the borderlands, and deployed in cooperation with local NGOs and civil society organisations [Fumagalli 2022b; Fumagalli & Kemmerling 2022]. While doing so, both international and local organisations could rely on pre-existing and tested channels and modes of operations, but the regime repeatedly resorted to aid blockages by restricting access and the distribution of humanitarian aid. As has been the case for decades, the Thai border remained critical to the provision of aid in border regions (particularly around the city of Mae Sot in Thailand, historically one to a large number of refugees from Myanmar).

In late October the SAC introduced a «Registration of Associations law».<sup>10</sup> The legislation banned any «direct or indirect» contact between aid providers and groups listed by the junta, including organisations that act as gatekeepers to the needy in some areas [Stoakes 2022]. As the law requires international and domestic organisations to have a government-issued registration certificate to work legally with communities in need, this confronted both local aid organisations and international partners with a significant dilemma [Frontier Myanmar 2022d, 14 December], facing them with a stark choice between complying and de facto recognising the junta or exposing themselves to sanctions and punishment by the regime.

According to the new law, failure to register is punishable with up to five years imprisonment and a fine of up to EUR 2,500 [Hutt 2022]. Aid organisations were given sixty days to comply with the new law.

The new piece of legislation is expected to have an impact on how aid is delivered across the country and limits how local associations can work with international partners, forcing repurposing and leading some to withdraw from Myanmar in favour of other areas in need, such as Ukraine [Shine Aung 2022; Salai Za Uk Ling 2022; Sain Wansai 2022].

9. Other areas affected by the post-coup violence include Chin State in the western part of Myanmar, and Shan South, Kayin, Mon, Bago (East), and Thanintharyi in the eastern regions of the country.

10. The law replaces the identically named 2014 bill which was widely praised for fostering the growth of Myanmar civil society and facilitating international cooperation and development assistance and aid provision.

#### 4. *Foreign policy*

In the wake of the 2021 coup, the military's prior hedging in foreign ties and the war in Ukraine (including Myanmar's unequivocal support for Russia's invasion in return for Moscow's support for the coup) shows that, once again, Myanmar does not find itself in a condition of international isolation. China and especially Russia stand out as the regime's key international backers, but the list is actually longer and includes countries the west has been courting in its China containment efforts, such as India.

##### 4.1. *Friends in need*

There is a long-established tendency, in western policy, media and even academic circles, to equate a country's isolation from and frosty relations with the west with that country's international isolation *tout court*. Myanmar's diversified foreign and economic ties challenge this claim. While Nay Pyi Taw's ties with an over-enthusiastic and uncritical west are now back to their pre-2011 lows made of sanctions and divestment, the junta's relations with other partners are not facing similar headwinds [Jibiki 2022]. Adjustments to its official policy of non-alignment, and some hedging [Passeri and Marston 2022] are nothing new in Nay Pyi Taw's foreign policy posture.

The junta has taken delivery of fighter jets from China, from whom it has also received facial recognition systems [The Irrawaddy 2022b, 5 December; Strangio 2022; 5 July and 12 July]. Myanmar managed to hedge its relations with China as a diplomatic ally and arms supplier by forging closer ties with Russia [International Crisis Group 2022c, p. 2; Storey 2022, 5 May; Zeeshan 2022; Mizzima 2022a, 16 July; Strangio 2022d, 5 August]. The Ukraine war and the coup in Myanmar brought these two already close countries even closer together. Moscow threw the MAF a lifeline as this struggled to quash domestic resistance and secure international legitimacy [International Crisis Group 2022c; Storey and Choong 2022; AFP 2022]. Russia's support is diverse and multi-dimensional, with key areas of support including diplomatic protection in international fora such as the United Nations, arms supplies, new sources of foreign investment, the provision of technology to boost import substitution, and support for the oil industry (including additional exploration). As a veto-wielding power in the UN Security Council, Russia's support is truly invaluable for the generals [International Crisis Group 2022c, p. 12]. Myanmar reciprocated the strong support received after the coup by becoming among Russia's staunchest allies in Asia, perhaps beyond only North Korea [International Crisis Group 2022c, p. 14].

Beyond China and Russia, the generals were able to rely on the support of sympathetic governments within ASEAN (Laos, Vietnam), and elsewhere [Mizzima 2022c, 14 December]. Crucially, Modi's India has condemned the violence without explicitly criticising the military regime [Myo

Min 2022; The Irrawaddy 2022b, 5 December]. Just like in the northern regions (e.g. Kachin and Shan States), where China's presence and influence has been strong over the decades, in a stark reminder of how heterogeneity regularly manifests itself across Myanmar's territory, even in the foreign policy domain and cross-border issues. Myanmar's other neighbour to its west, Bangladesh, entered talks with the SAC to manage drugs trafficking and 'terrorism' across the shared border [Rashid 2022], although the repatriation of the Rohingya refugees was not something that resulted from their talks.

#### 4.2. *Selective support from western institutions and ASEAN*

Symbolically the most important international action of the year was the Resolution by the United Nations, noteworthy for being the first resolution passed on the country since the international body voted to approve Burma's membership in the late 1940s [Reuters 2022c, 22 December]. In this document [UNSC 2022], the UN demanded «an end to all forms of violence, urged the Myanmar military to immediately release arbitrarily detained prisoners including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, and acknowledges ASEAN's central role in helping finding a peaceful solution, while also reiterating the necessity of full humanitarian access». Resolution 2669 was drafted by the UK, which acts as the pen-holder for Myanmar-related acts in the UNSC. It was approved with twelve votes in favour and the abstention of Russia, China and India.

The UN Security Council has long been split over how to deal with Myanmar (just like ASEAN, see below).<sup>11</sup> Until 2022, the UNSC members had only been able to agree on «formal statements», which are not binding.

China had wanted, again, a formal statement, not a resolution, whilst Russia does not regard the situation in Myanmar as a threat to international peace and security.

Myanmar's problematic relationship with ASEAN continued for the whole year. ASEAN was seemingly unwilling to budge from its April 2021 5-point consensus. Yet, on the whole, the impression was toothlessness by the regional organisation. Its special envoys to the country in 2022 included Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen (himself not a champion of democracy and human rights), who ended up exasperated by the junta's unwillingness to engage and at least cease the indiscriminate violence. Throughout the year, the usual cracks resurfaced, between members more vocal in their criticism of Myanmar such as Indonesia and Malaysia, and those more pro-junta such as Vietnam, or silent ones (Thailand and Singapore).

Unable to trigger a breakthrough, fraught with internal divisions, ASEAN appeared to treat Myanmar as a «headache» to pass on from one

11. Incidentally, the SAC has thus far been unable to unseat the country's UN Ambassador, who has defected to the NUG [Chau and Oo 2022d, December 14].

special envoy to another [Naw 2022]. The main concrete act entailed ASEAN's refusal to invite the junta leader to the ASEAN summits, thus denying de facto recognition yet failing to translate this into either an expulsion or a temporary suspension.

### 5. *Conclusion*

The post-coup repression has displayed a level and intensity of violence not seen in decades. Likewise, even the anti-military resistance has displayed an unprecedented determination. The junta is effectively at war with its own people. Just as in 2021, throughout 2022 too, a violent impasse remains, as no side was able to prevail [Ye Myo Hein 2022].

The events summarised in the pages above make the case for rethinking the Myanmar state, both as a category of practice (a polity which may not have existed as a single post-colonial political formation) and a category of analysis (does our understanding of the dynamics on the ground benefit from continuing to refer to this as a single unit?). Myanmar never really functioned as a united and coherent polity, as various regions have remained outside the control of the centre since the very day of independence in 1948. Though certainty incomplete thus far, the NUG's efforts to challenge and overcome military rule, may be read as a step in that direction (the unification of territory).

Despite some offers of «peace talks» to the EAOs by the junta [Mathieson 2022; Myanmar Now 2022b; Strangio 2022; The Irrawaddy 2022a, 25 April], neither side has shown any willingness to compromise, or even to negotiate in 2022. Violence was unleashed and wars continued unabated, with no desire on any one side to return to the status quo ante.

Although the significance of resolutions and sanctions, the divestment from investors and global advocacy campaigns should not be downplayed, international support for the people of Myanmar and the anti-coup resistance pales in comparison to western support for Ukraine. Despite the large outcry against the junta's crimes and brutality, the military take-over has prompted none of the mobilisation of funding, arms supplies or even diplomatic engagement that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered. While the NUG has been effective in crowdfunding [International Crisis Group 2022d], the lack of practical and financial support raises the question of how long the opposition can sustain itself [Simpson 2022; Bayoumi 2022; Maung Zarni 2022].

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Access Now, 2022, 27 January, *Analysis: the Myanmar junta's cybersecurity law would be a disaster for human rights*.
- AFP, 2022, 5 November, 'Myanmar takes delivery of Russian fighter jets'.
- Aung Kaung Myat, 2022, 'Sit-tat or Tatmadaw? Debates on what to call the most powerful institution in Burma', *Tea Circle Oxford*, 3 October.
- Aung Tun, The Arakan dream in post-coup Myanmar, *ISEAS Perspective* 71, 14 July 2022.
- Bayoumi, M., 2022, 'They are «civilised» and «look like us»: the racist coverage of Ukraine', *The Guardian*, 2 March.
- Brooten, L., J.M. McElhone and G. Venkiteswaran, 2019. 'Introduction: Myanmar media historically and the challenges of transition', in L. Brooten, J.M. McElhone, and G. Venkiteswaran (eds.), *Myanmar media in transition. Legacies, challenges and change*, Singapore, ISEAS, pp. 1-58.
- Buscemi, F., 2022, 'Weapons and ethnonational geographies in the borderlands: the case of the Ta'ang rebel movements in Myanmar', in Giuseppe Gabusi (ed.), *Myanmar after the coup*, Torino: T.wai, 2022, pp. 82-106.
- Charney, M.W., 2022, 'The rise of the military in Myanmar and what comes next: the decline of a military machine?', *Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship*, 2: 96-112.
- Chau, T., 2022, 'Myanmar military approves Norwegian Telenor exit', *Nikkei Asia*, 18 March.
- Chau, T. and D. Oo, 2022a, 'Myanmar energy crisis deepens as power plant investors balk', *Nikkei Asia*, 5 June.
- Chau, T. and D. Oo, 2022b, 'Myanmar faces blacklisting risk by global financial crime watchdog', *Nikkei Asia*, 7 September.
- Chau, T. and D. Oo, 2022c, 'Myanmar citizens would bear brunt of potential FATF blacklisting', *Nikkei Asia*, 25 September.
- Chau, T. and D. Oo, 2022d, 'Myanmar regime fails to unseat pro-resistance UN Ambassador', *Nikkei Asia*, 14 December.
- Council of the EU*, 2022, November 8, *Myanmar/Burma: EU imposes further restrictive measures on 19 individuals and one entity*. Press release 924/22.
- Frontier Myanmar*, 2022a, November 16, 'Myanmar's FATF blacklisting will do little to unseat the generals'.
- Frontier Myanmar*, 2022b, November 23, 'Min Aung Hlaing follows former dictators down path of economic ruin'.
- Frontier Myanmar*, 2022c, December 3, 'Why military defections still matter to Myanmar's revolution'.
- Frontier Myanmar*, 2022d, December 14, '«We are facing a crisis»: new law puts Myanmar NGOs in «impossible» position'.
- Frontier Myanmar*, 2021, September 16, 'Finding faultlines within the Tatmadaw'.
- Fumagalli, M., 2018, 'Myanmar 2017: The Rohingya crisis between radicalisation and ethnic cleaning', *Asia Maior XXVIII*: 227-244.
- Fumagalli, M. 2022a, 'Myanmar 2021: Repression and resistance in a multi-cornered conflict', *Asia Maior XXXII*: 256-276.
- Fumagalli, M., 2022b, *The next swing of the pendulum? Cross-border aid and shifting aid paradigms in post-coup Myanmar*, Policy Paper, EUI RSC PP 2022/08, August, Florence: EUI.

- Fumagalli, M. and A. Kemmerling, 2022, 'Development aid and domestic regional inequality: the case of Myanmar', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2022.2134167>
- Gray, D.D., 2022, 'No end in sight for Myanmar's Karen insurgency', *Nikkei Asia*, 8 April.
- Hein Htoo Zan, 2022, 'Russia agrees to establish Yangon flights and nuclear energy hub in Myanmar', *The Irrawaddy*, 21 November.
- Hutt, D., 2022, 'New law in Myanmar puts Europe's humanitarian aid at risk', *Deutsche Welle*, 25 November.
- International Crisis Group, 2022a, *Myanmar's coup shakes up its ethnic conflicts*, Asia Report 319, 12 January, Brussels.
- International Crisis Group, 2022b, *Resisting the resistance: Myanmar's pro-military pyu-sawhti militias*, Briefing 171, 6 April, Brussels.
- International Crisis Group, 2022c, *Coming to terms with Myanmar's Russia Embrace*, Briefing No. 173, 4 August, Brussels.
- International Crisis Group, 2022d, *Crowdfunding a war: The money behind Myanmar's resistance*, Briefing No. 328, 20 December, Brussels.
- Jibiki, K., 2022, 'Myanmar's isolation from West opens door for China and Russia,' *Nikkei Asia*, 28 January.
- Kaung Sett Wai, 2022, 'The competing hands behind Myanmar's 2021 democratic movement', in Giuseppe Gabusi and Raimondo Neironi (eds.), *Myanmar after the Coup*. Torino: Twai, pp. 28-39.
- Korf, B., M. Engeler and T. Hagmann, 2010, 'The geography of warscapes', *Third World Quarterly*, 31(3): 385-399.
- Kucik, P., 2022, 'Myanmar's FATF blacklisting will do little to unseat the generals', *Frontier Myanmar*, 16 November.
- Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, 2022, 'Atrocities mount amid the return to war in western Myanmar', *The Diplomat Magazine*, 1 December.
- Kyaw Lynn, 2022, *The dynamics of Arakan politics and the possibility of another war*, Transnational Institute.
- Kyed, H.M., 2022, 'Soldier defections since the 2021 military coup', *Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship*, 2: 1-32.
- Loong, S., 2022a, 'The Karen National Union in post-Coup Myanmar', *Stimson*, 7 April 2022.
- Loong, S., 2022b, 'Post-coup Myanmar in six warscapes', London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 10 June.
- Lund, C., 2011, 'Fragmented sovereignty: land reform and dispossession in Laos', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38(4): 885-905.
- McDermott, G., 2022, 'The spectre of digital authoritarianism for Southeast Asia', *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, 32.
- Mathieson, D.S., 2022, 'Myanmar's peace talks a dangerous diversion', *Asia Times*, 7 July.
- Maung Zarni, 2022, '6 reasons US is not really supporting Myanmar's democratic resistance', *Anadolu Agency TR*, 30 September.
- Min Thang, 2022, 'Unrest in Myanmar after the coup of 2021', in Giuseppe Gabusi and Raimondo Neironi (eds.), *Myanmar after the Coup*. Torino: Twai, pp. 40-53.
- Mizzima, 2022a, 16 July, 'Myanmar junta chief deepens Russian embrace'.
- Mizzima, 2022b, 21 July, 'The rapid rise of the Arakan Army'.
- Mizzima, 2022c, 14 December, 'Countries forging ties with Myanmar junta'.



- Moeller, A.K., 2022, 'Peering under the hood: coup narratives and Tatmadaw factionalism', *Tea Circle Oxford*, 4 April.
- Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business, 2022, February 15, *Update on Draft Cybersecurity Law and its impacts on digital rights and the digital economy*.
- Myanmar Now, 2022a, 25 January, *Junta makes another bid to introduce draconian cyber law*.
- Myanmar Now, 2022b, 28 November, 'Informal ceasefire with Myanmar military 'not permanent' solution, Arakan Army says'.
- Myo Min, 2022, 'India's cautious approach to the military coup in Myanmar', *East Asia Forum*, 22 March.
- Naw, T., 2022, 'ASEAN's Myanmar headache changes hands', *The Diplomat Magazine*, 1 December.
- Nikkei Asia, 2022a, 17 March, 'Asian majors keep Myanmar gas pumping despite EU sanctions'.
- Nikkei Asia, 2022b, 27 April, 'Aung San Suu Kyi gets another five years for corruption'.
- Nikkei Asia, 2022c, 8 June, 'Myanmar to exempt foreign companies from forced currency exchanges'.
- Nikkei Asia, 2022d, 23 June, 'Myanmar blocks car, luxury imports amid foreign currency crunch'.
- Nikkei Asia, 2022e, 8 July, 'Suzuki halts Myanmar assembly stymied by foreign currency curbs'.
- Nikkei Asia, 2022f, 15 July, 'Myanmar revokes foreign company. Exemption from currency rules'.
- Nikkei Asia, 2022g, 22 July, 'Myanmar economy to grow 3% as recovery lags'.
- Nikkei Asia, 2022h, 24 July, 'Myanmar building projects worth 1.3bn frozen since army took power'.
- Nikkei Asia, 2022i, 25 July, 'Myanmar junta executes 4 democracy activists'.
- Nikkei Asia, 2022j, 10 August, 'China and Russia enable Myanmar military's brazen behaviour'.
- Nikkei Asia, 2022k, 15 August, 'Suu Kyi gets six more years in prison bringing total to 17'.
- Nikkei Asia, 2022l, 3 September, 'Myanmar mobile carriers weigh options as military tightens grip'.
- Nikkei Asia, 2022m, 8 September, 'Foreign companies in Myanmar struggle with shortage of dollars'.
- Nikkei Asia, 2022n, 21 September, 'Kirin pulls arbitration request in venture with Myanmar military'.
- Nikkei Asia, 2022o, 11 October, 'Toyota begins auto output in Myanmar'.
- Nikkei Asia, 2022p, 23 November, 'Foreign companies in Myanmar bide their time with eye on long view'.
- Nordstrom, Carolyn, 1997, *A different kind of war story*, Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press.
- OCHA, 2022a, December 3, 'Myanmar. Humanitarian Update No. 24'.
- OCHA, 2022b, December 30, 'Myanmar Humanitarian Update No. 25'.
- Oguchi, M., 2022, 'Myanmar garment industry draws fresh investment from Japan's Honeys', *Nikkei Asia*, 2 August.
- Passeri, A. and H. Marston, 2022, 'The pendulum of non-alignment: charting Myanmar's great power diplomacy (2011-2021)', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 41(2): 188-213.

- Peck, G., 2022, 'Graft convictions extend Aung San Suu Kyi's prison terms to 26 years', *The Diplomat*, 12 October.
- Rashid, M., 2022, 'Bangladesh and Myanmar junta agree to tackle border «terrorism»', *The Irrawaddy*, 30 November.
- Ratcliffe, R., 2022, 'Aung San Suu Kyi faces total of 26 years in prison after latest corruption sentencing', *The Guardian*, 12 October.
- Reuters, 2022a, August 18, 'Myanmar to import Russian oil from September military says'.
- Reuters, 2022b, September 2, 'Myanmar's Suu Kyi gets more jail hard labour for election fraud'.
- Reuters, 2022c, December 22, 'UN security council demands end to MMR violence'.
- Root, R., 2022, 'Myanmar court jails Aung San Suu Kyi for extra seven years in final closed trial', *The Guardian*, 30 December.
- Salai Za Uk Ling, 2022, 'Why it's time to talk about the aid void on the India-Myanmar border', *The Humanitarian*, 22 March.
- Sain Wansai, 2022, 'Cross-border aid: a potential game changer for Myanmar', *Mizzima*, 5 December.
- Selth, A., 2022, *Myanmar's military numbers*, Lowy Institute.
- Shine Aung, 2022, 'How international donors can better offer humanitarian aid to Myanmar', *The Diplomat*, 7 February.
- Simpson, A., 2022a, 'A digital coup under military rule in Myanmar: new online avenues for repression', *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, 32.
- Simpson, A., 2022b, 'Myanmar's genocide overshadowed by Ukraine', *East Asia Forum*, 5 October.
- Stoakes, E., 2022, 'Myanmar could face aid «catastrophe» experts warn, after junta law change', *The Guardian*, 3 November.
- Storey, I., 2022, 'The Russia-Ukraine war and its potential impact on Russia's arms sales to Southeast Asia', *ISEAS Perspective* 47.
- Storey, I. and W. Choong, 2022, 'Russia's invasion of Ukraine: Southeast Asian responses and why the conflict matters to the region', *ISEAS Perspective* 24.
- Strangio, S., 2022a, 'Ethnic armed organisations reject Myanmar junta peace talk bid', *The Diplomat*, 26 April.
- Strangio, S., 2022b, 'Chinese FM pledges «closer» ties with Myanmar military government', *The Diplomat*, 5 July.
- Strangio, S., 2022c, 'Myanmar expanding use of Chinese-made facial recognition systems: report', *The Diplomat*, 12 July.
- Strangio, S., 2022d, 'Pariah Solidarity: Myanmar-Russia relations blossom amid western sanctions', *The Diplomat*, 5 August.
- Strangio, S., 2022e, 'Myanmar junta trumpets continuing flow of natural gas revenues', *The Diplomat*, 26 August.
- Strangio, S., 2022f, 'US announces sanctions on Myanmar military-linked army broker', *The Diplomat*, 7 October.
- Su, X., 2018, 'Fragmented sovereignty and the geopolitics of illicit drugs in northern Burma', *Political Geography*, 63: 20-30.
- Taguchi, S. and J. Henmi, 2022, 'Kirin to sell entire stake in venture with Myanmar military', *Nikkei Asia*, 30 June.
- The Irrawaddy*, 2022a, 25 April, 'Ethnic armed groups reject Myanmar junta chief's peace talks'.
- The Irrawaddy*, 2022b, 5 December, 'India and Myanmar junta using Rakhine truce to finalise trade corridor'.

- The Irrawaddy*, 2022c, 5 December, 'Myanmar junta takes delivery of FTC-2000G fighter jets from China'.
- The Irrawaddy*, 2022d, 13 December, 'Myanmar junta toasts energy deals with Russia's atomic agency'.
- The Irrawaddy*, 2022e, 26 December, 'Recruiting renegade NLD members is Myanmar regime's tactic to divide the party'.
- The Irrawaddy*, 2022f, 20 December, 'Tracing the Myanmar junta's vengeful prosecution of detained leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi'.
- Thinzar Sunheli Yi, 2022, 'Why military defections still matter to Myanmar's revolution', *Frontier Myanmar*, 3 December.
- UNSC 2022, *Resolution 2669 (2022)*, 21 December.
- World Bank, 2022, *Myanmar Economic Monitor*, 20 July.
- Ye Myo Hein, 2022, *One year on: the momentum of Myanmar's armed rebellion*, Washington DC: Wilson Center.
- Yuzana, 2022, 'Rakhine ceasefire puts pressure on other groups battling Myanmar junta', *The Irrawaddy*, 2 December.
- Zeeshan, M., 2022, 'Russia is gaining an Indo-Pacific foothold through Myanmar', *The Diplomat*, 25 July.

## BANGLADESH 2022: CHALLENGING POST-PANDEMIC TIMES

*Silvia Tieri*

King's College London - National University of Singapore  
silvia.tieri@kcl.ac.uk

*In 2022, Bangladesh was criticized at the national and international level due to poor protection of civil and political rights. The country experienced spiking inflation, also due to global post-COVID monetary policies, while floods brought again destruction to the northeastern districts. Russia's invasion of Ukraine contributed to increase the price of certain imports and halted supply chains. Bangladesh's reaction to the war and its internationalization at the UN was cautious, reflecting its traditional tendency to avoid neat alignments. Relations with India were at a high according to official sources, and were indeed characterized by frequent high-level visits and growing partnership in various fields. However, this was insufficient to bring solution to lingering bilateral disputes and halt the rise of anti-India sentiment in the country. Likewise, Dhaka's partnership with Beijing was not free from criticism, while major infrastructure projects aided by Chinese finances were inaugurated. No real progress could be made to ease if not resolve the Rohingya's plight.*

KEYWORDS – Bangladesh; sanctions; inflation; post-COVID; dissent.

### 1. Introduction

This paper reviews the events occurred in Bangladesh in 2022 from the point of view of domestic, economic, and foreign policy. It does so based on data sourced from newspapers, reports and statements published by major government agencies, non-government organizations (NGOs), and inter-governmental institutions. The paper features three sections, each dealing with domestic, economic, and international affairs, respectively. The first section looks at the situation of civil and political rights in the country. It is not new that in the country the space for dissent has been shrinking. However, in 2022 this issue received larger attention internationally due to the sanctions imposed by a U.S. agency on a Bangladeshi para-military force controlled by the Government, on the ground of human rights violations. Besides, the first section briefly reviews important developments concerning the status of Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh; law reforms; and the political situation in the Chittagong Hills Tract (CHT). The second section of the paper looks at the country's economic affairs, thus reviewing GDP growth, trade balance, monetary policy, inflation levels, fiscal policy. The third and last section focuses on foreign policy: it deals with Bangla-

desh's positioning vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine war and salient aspects of its bilateral relations with India, China, and Myanmar.

## 2. *Domestic affairs*

The shrinking of civil and political rights and the deterioration of the rule of law in Bangladesh produced massive activism and journalist reporting both at the national and international level for years, ever since the Government took an authoritarian turn. From this point of view, the year 2022 did not see significant improvements, as reflected in various independent reports. In the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index for the year 2022, Bangladesh's score further decreased to 0.39 from 0.40 of the previous year. Bangladesh thus ranked 124<sup>th</sup> out of 139 countries in the world, and 4<sup>th</sup> out of 6 countries in South Asia ['Bangladesh' 2022a]. The country's score fell also in the *World Press Freedom Index* by Reporters Without Borders (RWB), resulting in 36.63 (50.29 in 2021) and placing Bangladesh 162<sup>th</sup> in the world (152<sup>th</sup> in 2021) ['Bangladesh' 2022b]. In Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 2022* report, Bangladesh remained stable with a score of 39/100, thus qualifying as «partly free», like in the previous two years ['Bangladesh' 2022c]. Bangladesh reportedly underwent a 19-point decline in its aggregate score across the decade, which was one of the most dramatic 10-year declines observed in the Freedom House study [Repucci & Slipowitz 2022].

Through the years, the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Bangladeshi state and the corresponding worsening of human rights in the country became most visible in a number of phenomena, including the silencing of political opponents, first and foremost the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its supporters; the harassment and kidnapping of independent journalists; and the extra judicial killings of those who publicly voice their opposition to the government by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a special paramilitary force. In late 2021, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) had sanctioned the RAB for human rights violation, a move which yielded its effects in 2022. On the one hand, as a consequence of the sanctions, extra-judicial killings and open use of violence in connection to the para-military agency appeared to drop. On the other, the Bangladeshi Government reportedly engaged in a campaign of harassment against dissidents and their family members and supporters. On 14<sup>th</sup> March 2022, a group of UN experts appealed to the Government to stop harassment of activists and family members of forcibly disappeared persons, who were targeted with renewed vehemence by government forces following the sanctions [United Nations 2022a]. However, the Bangladeshi Government rejected the U.S. sanctions. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina discarded the accusations of human rights violations by rewarding two sanctioned RAB officials with medals in January 2022, for the service they ren-

dered to the country in 2021 [Rashid 2022, 24 January]. In October 2022, U.S. Ambassador Peter Haas called for a reform of RAB in order for the sanctions to be lifted. The diplomat's remark met the prompt reply of RAB's new Director General, M. Khurshid Hossain, who maintained that the force does not require reform and that no input to reform it had been signalled from the Government. He added that RAB had provided the U.S. all information necessary to their enquiry [*The Daily Star* 2022g, 2 October].

Reportedly, rallies and events of the BNP (the major opposition party) were systematically obstructed by the police or the Chhatra League, that is the student union affiliated with the Awami League, the incumbent party [Bergman 2022, 17 June]. Cases of violent student activism in major university institutions saw the Chhatra League clashing with other student organizations of opposite political ideology [Rubel 2022, 26 May].

In June, in a letter addressed to the Bangladeshi Minister of Law Anisul Huq, Amnesty International urged the Government to drop the charges it had moved in 2021 against journalist Rozina Islam – 2021 *Free Press Award* awardee for most resilient journalist in 2021 ['Bangladesh: Letter to' 2022].

Another event which placed Bangladesh's freedom of speech under discussion, including on international news outlets, was the PMO's NGO Affairs Bureau's decision to cancel the registration of Odhikar in June. Odhikar is a prominent private Bangladesh-based NGO well-known for its monitoring of human rights violations in the country, including the publishing of open-access term reports. The NGO's application for registration renewal had been pending for years. The Government justified its eventual cancellation citing irregularities in the NGO's activities, discrepancies in the data of its publications, and the anti-national character of some of its undertakings, which it deemed responsible of having tarnished Bangladesh's international reputation [*The Daily Star* 2022c, June 7].

Soon after the de-registration of Odhikar, in August, Bangladesh received Michelle Bachelet, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The official visit spanned over 4 days and took place on the Bangladeshi Government's invitation. The Government's stake in the visit was subject to speculation, and some suggested that the event provided it with an opportunity to whitewash its authoritarian character in the eyes of the international public opinion [*NetraNews* 2022a, June 21]. While in Bangladesh, Bachelet interacted with government officials and civil society, and visited the Rohingya camps of Cox's Bazar in order to discuss and appraise the human rights situation in the country. Bachelet wrapped up her visit with a press conference in Dhaka, during the course of which, while praising Bangladesh for «remarkable economic and social progress», and for providing «refuge to more than 1 million Rohingya refugees», she also stated that Bangladesh «continues to face challenges on the human rights front» [United Nations 2022a]. Among other recommendations, the High Commissioner for Human Rights called on the Government to ratify the

Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance and recommended the repeal and revision of certain provisions of the Digital Security Act [United Nations 2022a].

Having visited the camps of Cox's Bazar in the course of her visit, Bachelet's remarks also touched upon the Rohingya situation. She praised Bangladesh's effort in hosting the refugees and called on the international community to lend the country support in this endeavour. At the same time, she said to be «very worried about increasing anti-Rohingya rhetoric in Bangladesh, stereotyping and scapegoating Rohingyas as the source of crime and other problems» [United Nations 2022a]. In the refugee camps, the murder of popular Rohingya leader and activist Mohib Ullah in Cox's Bazar in September 2021 had been a shocking event for the community. In 2022, the Bangladeshi Government charged 29 Rohingya men for Ullah's murder and arrested some of them [*Aljazeera* 2022a, June 13]. The school Mohib Ullah had founded was among the private schools catering to Rohingya camp-dwelling children which were shut down by the Bangladeshi Government in 2022, on the ground of irregular paperwork [*Aljazeera* 2022b, March 29].

In August 2022, Grameen Telecom – presided by Peace Nobel Prize winner and founder of Grameen Bank, Md Yunus – was subject to investigation for alleged money-laundering by the Bangladesh Anti-Corruption Commission, in what appeared a case of unjustified investigation against individuals seen by the Government as political threats. A new report released in the same month by Netra News, a news outlet banned in Bangladesh, brought to the attention of the public information about a secret detention centre, known as Aynaghar (House of Mirrors), allegedly run by Bangladesh's Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) in the very capital city of Dhaka to detain high-profile dissidents who had been forcefully disappeared [*NetraNews* 2022b, 14 August].

In September, Bangladesh received yet another high-profile UN visit. The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change, Ian Fry, visited the country from 4 to 15 September 2022 [United Nations 2022b]. In the press conference ending his visit, Fry condemned the harassment of climate change activists who oppose climate-unfriendly policies and projects pursued by the Government. He called for a reform of the Digital Security Act (DSA) through which online activists are prosecuted for their views [*Newage Bangladesh* 2022c, 15 September]. In October, the Government presented the draft of the Data Protection Act, 2022, which, according to various commentators, instead of correcting the excesses and ambiguous definitions of the Data Security Act, violates Bangladeshis' rights to free expression and privacy [Rohman 2022, 17 October].

On the other hand, law reform saw an important step forward in gender equality in March, when the cabinet approved in principle the draft 'Ev-

idence (Amendment) Bill, 2022', a bill repealing existing provisions based on which a rape victim's «character» could be subject to questioning during trial [*Newage Bangladesh* 2022a, March 15].

On the front of work-place-related rights and safety, the year 2022 saw both positive and negative developments. On 22 March 2022, Bangladesh ratified the Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), an International Labour Organization (ILO) fundamental convention aimed at the eventual eradication of child labour. So doing, the Bangladeshi Government completed the ratification of all ILO fundamental instruments [International Labour Organization 2022]. The ratification appeared ever more significant as it came in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which pushed children in economically-vulnerable families to drop-off school and enter work to support the household economy.

A couple of months later, however, the country was shaken by a major man-made disaster. In early June a massive explosion followed by a fire, caused by irregular storage of chemicals, in a container depot in Sitakunda upazila near Chittagong, killed at least 49 people and injured 450, sparking criticism about work-place conditions and the frequency of industrial disasters in the country, which are not uncommon due to poor safety measures [*Dhaka Tribune* 2022, 5 June].

Last but not least, in June the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF), a Chittagong Hills Tract (CHT) rebel group, presented a draft peace proposal addressed to the Bangladesh Government via a facilitator [Mahmud 2022, 14 June]. The CHT is a hilly area of Bangladesh, home to many groups which are ethnic minorities in the country [Faiaz 2021, 30 July]. The UPDF was born as an off-shoot of the Parbatya Chattagram Janasanghati Samity (PCJSS) when the latter entered into a peace accord with the Sheikh Hasina Government in the late 1990s to end conflict in the CHT, accord that the UPDF rejected instead. The UPDF offer of talks with the Government was seen as potentially significant to end ethnic strife in the CHT, where the two militant groups had been engaged in an extended turf war and minorities allege abuses from Bengali settlers and the Government.

### 3. *Economic affairs*

In 2022, as economies around the world were recovering to pre-COVID-19 levels, the war in Ukraine introduced strong disruptions to the recovery path. In October 2022, the World Bank revised down the GDP growth forecast of Bangladesh for financial year (FY) 22-23 to 6.1 per cent [*The Business Standard* 2022c, 6 October]. For the FY under discussion, it projected average growth in South Asia at 5.8 per cent, thus placing Bangladesh well above the average, as the third fastest growing country after the Maldives (8.2 per cent) and India (7 per cent). The Bank also found no significant



hurdles for the economy to rebound in the next fiscal year, and projected a 6.2 per cent economic growth for FY 23-24. It is significant to note that this projection is 80 basis points higher than the previous one by the World Bank for the same year. Similarly, the Asia Development Bank (ADB) cut down the growth projections for Bangladesh for FY 23 to 6.6 per cent, as stated in the September 2022 Asia Development Outlook report [Asian Development Bank 2022]. The above projections, however, were short of the Bangladeshi Government set target of 7.5 per cent for the 22-23 fiscal year [Bdnews24.com 2022, 9 June].

As far as trade was concerned, Bangladesh reported a trade deficit of BDT 236.2 billion (US\$ 2.25\$ billion) ['Bangladesh Balance of Trade' 2022] as of October 2022. Petroleum and oil (11 per cent) and food items (11 per cent) being significant components of Bangladeshi imports, elevated crude oil and food prices impacted the country's import bills. This caused Bangladesh's earlier trade deficit of BDT 150 billion (US\$ 1.43 billion) (beginning of 2021) to grow by 50 per cent approximately. Albeit Bangladesh did post outstanding export earnings of US\$ 52.08 billion in 2021-22 fiscal year, way above the target of US\$ 43.5 billion. In November 2022, Bangladesh reported the highest ever single month earnings of US\$ 5.09 billion of which garments contributed US\$ 4.37 billion. Notwithstanding the increasing exports, Bangladesh's trade deficit widened on the account of the inflationary and currency pressures, whose impact was felt globally.

In July 2022, the average retail price of low quality (coarse) rice was Bangladeshi BDT 52 (US\$ 0.56) per kilogram, approximately 13 percent higher than the same period last year [United States Department of Agriculture 2022]. The retail price of high-quality non-aromatic (fine) rice too reached a record high around the same time [United States Department of Agriculture 2022]. On June 23, 2022, the Government of Bangladesh reduced the rice import tariff from 62.5 percent to 25 percent to encourage the private sector to import [The Daily Star 2022d, June 23]. From July 2022, it also imposed a ban on the export of aromatic rice and other key produce to control its price in the local market [The Daily Star 2022f, July 2]. The export ban was akin to measures adopted by other countries in the region, such as India and Afghanistan, in order to control the local prices [Jacob 2022, 19 September].

During the year under review, coincidental with the rising commodity prices, annual inflation rose rapidly, peaking at 9.52 per cent ['Bangladesh Inflation Rate' 2022] in the month of August. In the last 4 months of 2022, overall inflation came off its peak to 8.71 per cent helped by the retrace-ment in the prices of food products. Non-food product inflation remained high at 9.98 per cent in December 2022. The US Dollar Index rose from 95 in January 2022 to 115 in September, finally cooling off to 105 in December 2022 ['United States Dollar' 2022]. In line with the global currencies, also the BDT devalued by more than 25 per cent against the US\$, from 85 in

January 2022 to 103 in December 2022 ['United States Dollar' 2022]. Coupled with inflation, the strengthening of US\$ against the BDT impacted the foreign reserves further and created significant challenges for the country as a net trade importer with bills to pay in US\$.

According to the data by the Central Bank, depreciating currency and increasing current account deficit caused the Forex reserves to dwindle to US\$ 35 billion by November 2022, as compared to US\$ 46 billion of one year before [*Newage Bangladesh* 2022d, 23 October]. As a result, Bangladesh requested an IMF loan to curtail the situation, which was provisionally agreed upon at US\$ 4.5 billion [International Monetary Fund 2022]. The IMF reported that a «staff-level agreement» was reached for US\$ 3.2 billion from its Extended Credit Facility (ECF) and Extended Fund Facility (EFF), and approximately US\$ 1.3 billion from the new Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF) [International Monetary Fund 2022]. Bangladesh became the third South-Asian country after Pakistan and Sri Lanka to receive loans from the IMF in 2022 [*Reuters* 2022, 10 November].

In July 2022, Bangladesh Bank (the central bank of Bangladesh) revealed its monetary policy aimed at curbing inflation and generating employment and GDP growth. The Monetary Policy statement (MPS) set the inflation rate target to 5.6 percent in FY 22-23. This estimate was less than the average inflation rate of 8.7 percent for the emerging and developing countries, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In the monetary policy, the Bangladesh Bank increased its policy rate – i.e. the repurchase agreement (repo) rate – by 50 basis points, from 5 to 5.5 percent [Zamir Uddin 2022, 21 June]. This was in line with the measures adopted by banks worldwide grappling with the same issue, and resulted in an increase in the lending rates. Bangladeshi policy makers, other than increasing the repo rate, also had the option of increasing the lending rate cap currently set at 9 per cent or making it flexible. However, they choose not to exercise that option in their current set of measures. Given the domestic inflationary pressures and foreign reserve pressures due to the strengthening US\$, the national banks worldwide faced an extremely challenging year in 2022, faced by the major challenge of the well-known «unholy trinity» [Boughton 2003, pp. 1-3] or the «impossible trinity» of fixed currency exchange, free capital flow and a sovereign monetary policy.

The national budget of Bangladesh was announced on June 2022 by Minister of Finance AHM Mustafa Kamal for the fiscal year beginning on 1 July 2022 and ending on 30 June 2023. The total expenditure for the budget was US\$ 72 billion, an increase of US\$ 7.9 billion or 12.32 per cent from the previous fiscal year [*The Daily Star* 2022c, 30 June]. The deficit was US\$ 26 billion equivalent to 5.5 % of the GDP, 6.2 % lower than the deficit of FY 2021-2022 [*The Business Standard* 2022b, 9 June]. The Finance Minister identified the top five priorities of the budget as containment of the inflation caused by the COVID-19 fallout and the Russia-Ukraine crisis; support

to the agriculture sector; development of human resource; promotion of domestic investment and augmentation of exports value; job creation and rural development. In March 2022, the cabinet approved the draft export policy 2021-2024 with the aim of doubling Bangladesh's export earnings from US\$ 45 billion to US\$ 80 billion within the period by facilitating shipments of diversified, non-traditional goods and labour-based products [*The Daily Star* 2022a, 1 March].

The stimulus packages initiated by the government in the pandemic years saw fresh injections, the largest chunk of which was allocated to provide working capital to large industries and service sector firms (30,000 crore; US\$ 2.7 billion) and cottage, micro, small, and medium enterprises (CMSMEs) (20,000 crore; US\$ 1.8 billion) [*Newage Bangladesh*, 2022b, 28 July]. These two stimulus packages provided capital to the borrowing companies at 4.5 % interest rate, while the rest 4.5 % was to be borne by the government as a subsidy. However, fund disbursement appeared to be slow. Officials reported that till the end of 2022 the stimulus package received a tepid response from applicants since many borrowers, especially large industries, failed to repay previous loans thus did not qualify for new ones [Byron & Mahmud, 2023, 9 January].

While large borrowers not being able to repay loans is a frequent occurrence, a number of “loan scams” involving large private banks came to the surface in 2022. The highest profile case involved Social Islami Bank Ltd. (SIBL), which incurred in US\$ 1.6 billion loss after allowing two companies to import goods for years using letters of credit (LCs) that were defaulted [Taleb 2022, 28 November]. Gazipur Blithe Fashions Ltd and Sharp Knitting used SIBL-issued LCs to import raw materials for a total of BDT 165.72 billion (US\$ 1.65 billion) which they failed to repay, thus making SIBL liable. A letter of credit is issued by the bank to the companies importing raw material as a guarantee on behalf of the buyer company to the seller. The importer is then supposed to process the raw material into the final product, export it and repay the borrowed amount to the bank from the export proceeds. Investigations revealed that Sharp Knitting did not renew the licence of its bonded warehouse (production site) for years and yet was allowed to renew its LCs repeatedly. Bangladesh Bank found that SIBL allowed the company to open 889 back-to-back LCs over a period of 7 years without making any payment for them. Blithe Fashions Ltd did not even have a bonded warehouse. Islami Bank Bangladesh Ltd (IBBL), the largest private sector bank of the country, also came under great scrutiny for alleged “loan scams” [Taiyeb 2022, 6 December].

Last but not least, India and Bangladesh received heavier monsoon showers in 2022, resulting in overflowing of the river system [‘Satellite Detected Water’, 2022]. In the beginning of May and throughout June, deadly floods hit the northeastern part of India and Bangladesh affecting over 9 million people and killing around 300 people [‘Bangladesh: Key Immedi-

ate Need' 2022]. The floods submerged over 53,000 hectares of agricultural land in Bangladesh, caused issues of food security by damaging the crops and contributed to increasing inflation. Millions found themselves in urgent need of food and medical supplies ['Bangladesh: Joint Press' 2022]. In FY 2021-2022, Bangladesh had established a fund called 'Fund for Managing the Shocks of Natural Disasters' to provide emergency financial assistance to the low-income people. In the FY 2022-2023, it continued the program and allocated for it additional funds (US\$ 475 million approximately) [*The Business Standard*, 2022a, 9 June].

Overall, for the calendar year 2022, Bangladesh's economy performed well achieving a relatively higher real GDP growth while traversing a challenging period marked by supply chain disruptions caused by the Russia-Ukraine war, soaring inflation, and difficulty with foreign reserves. At the same time, it is also important to look beyond the headline GDP number and consider growth's inclusiveness and its impact on the life quality of the average Bangladeshi citizen since these did not necessarily grow along with GDP figures.

#### 4. *Foreign policy*

While Bangladesh pursues an active foreign policy both within the region and beyond it, including through multilateral mechanisms, relations with India, China, and Myanmar remain particularly important to contemporary Bangladeshi foreign affairs. In the international relations system of South Asia, Bangladesh is a smaller country with traditionally close ties with India, a giant and immediate neighbour. Thus, maintaining positive relations with New Delhi remains Bangladesh's number one imperative. At the same time, Bangladesh forged with China an important economic partnership extending from trade (see Section 3) to development finance. Given India's uneasiness to growing Chinese presence in South Asia, Bangladesh finds itself at the centre of the India-China rivalry in the region and is faced with the task of balancing relations with both powers. The Naypidaw government, on the other hand, is Dhaka's main interlocutor (along with the United Nations) in dealing with the Rohingya crisis. Bangladesh, as the host-country of most of the Myanmar-origin refugees, has high stakes in their definitive repatriation, which have not been matched by Naypidaw's commitment. Thus, this third and last section dealing with Bangladesh's foreign policy reviews its relations with India, China, and Myanmar. Before doing so, it looks at Bangladesh's stance on the war in Ukraine, 2022's most critical international politics event.

From the point of view of Euro-Asian international relations, the war in Ukraine was the most significant event of 2022. Bangladesh's reaction was a balancing act, in line with the approach it typically adopted for navi-

gating other thorny super-power confrontations, like that between India and China in the South Asian region. Following the beginning of the war, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) convened in an emergency special session and adopted a resolution condemning Russia's aggression of Ukraine for violation of Article 2 (4) of the United Nations Charter and demanding immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine. One hundred forty-one countries supported the resolution, Russia and 4 others voted against it, and 35 abstained. Bangladesh was among the latter group [Shovon 2022, 15 March]. In July, Sheikh Hasina urged the US to withdraw the sanctions imposed on Russia on the grounds of the cost they are imposing on all countries, especially developing ones like Bangladesh, by disrupting trade and put upward pressures on imports' prices [Prothomalo 2022, 7 July]. Bangladesh is traditionally close to India, a country that has similarly avoided to openly condemn the war. In recent times, New Delhi in turn moved closer to US through mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), aimed at maintaining the status-quo in the Indo-Pacific and curb Chinese expansion – although India's decision not to openly condemn Russia following the invasion of Ukraine underlined an important divergence between New Delhi and Moscow. At the same time, Bangladesh has in China, a supporter of Russia against the US, an important economic partner and weapon supplier. Additionally, Bangladesh is suffering from trade disruption caused by anti-Russia sanctions, as Russia is for Bangladesh one of the destination markets of its large ready-made garments (RMG) industry, as well as a source of wheat and maize imports, and a development partner [Khatun 2022, 16 May]. As a consequence, Bangladesh has an interest in having the anti-Russia sanctions revoked and might find problematic to openly take sides in the conflict in a decided pro-US (vote in favour) or pro-Russia (vote against) sense. In light of this, Bangladesh's abstention can be read as an attempt to stand midway between the two positions.

Relations with India were characterised by frequent high-level visits and expanding economic partnership, but saw no significant progress in the resolution of long-standing bilateral issues such as water sharing and border management.

The bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh increased to US\$ 18.2 billion (US\$ 16.2 billion in exports and US\$ 2 billion in imports) in FY 2022, against US\$ 10.8 billion in FY 2021 [Bhardwaj 2022, 26 December]. Thus, Bangladesh remained India's largest South Asian trade partner, and India Bangladesh's second-largest trade partner, accounting for 12 percent of total trade.

River water sharing remained a major field of cooperation as well as contrast in Indo-Bangladeshi relations. On 25<sup>th</sup> August 2022, the two countries held the 38<sup>th</sup> Meeting of Ministerial level Joint Rivers Commission in New Delhi. The Indian delegation was led by Shri Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, Union Minister for Jal Shakti. The Bangladesh delegation was

led by Mr. Zaheed Farooque, State Minister for Water Resources [Government of India 2022a]. The meeting's main outcomes were the finalized text for an MoU on Interim Water Sharing of the Kushiara river; further progress in the implementation of the 2019 India-Bangladesh MoU on the Feni river water sharing; India's extension of the time period of sharing of flood-related data to the benefit of Bangladesh [Government of India 2022a]. On the other hand, during the year under review, the major water dispute concerning the Teesta river saw little progress. The Teesta River dispute involves the Rangpur region of Bangladesh, whose complaint is that it receives an unfair share of the water from the river, which originates in India. Since water is a state subject in India, the problem remained the lack of agreement between Delhi's central Government and the state Government of West Bengal (India), from which the Teesta enters Bangladeshi territory. By the end of 2022, no treaty was signed to resolve it.

The Bangladesh Government was reportedly negotiating a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with India, as well as other major trading partners. CEPAs would help Bangladesh cope with the loss of duty benefit which would follow its upcoming Least Developed Country (LDC) graduation [Cyrill 2022, 27 July]. The two countries already had a goods agreement in place under the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), within whose framework New Delhi granted Bangladesh duty-free, quota-free access on all items except for alcohol and tobacco. A CEPA would introduce agreements on service trade and investment. On the other hand, the CEPA could double India's exports to neighbouring Bangladesh and boost trade dynamism in the Northeast region. In addition to this, in December 2022, the two countries declared they would enter negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA), as well as explore the possibility of settling trade balances in Indian rupees as an alternative to US\$ and other major currencies [Roy 2022, 7 September].

S. Jaishankar's visit to Bangladesh in April saw the Indian External Affairs Minister interacting with his counterpart A. K. Abdul Momen and calling on Prime Minister Hasina. Following the visit, Momen declared to have requested India's cooperation in getting the U.S. sanctions against the RAB lifted [Bhattacharjee 2022, 28 April]. Jaishankar commented on the visit in positive terms, tweeting that the two countries' «neighbourly partnership is progressing steadily» [‘Positive discussions’ 2022].

Similarly, in occasion of Hasina's visit to India in September 2022, both parties qualified the state of Indo-Bangla ties in very positive terms. The joint statement published by the Indian PMO, reported that «The two Leaders expressed satisfaction at the excellent state of bilateral relations... which is reflected in an all-encompassing bilateral partnership» [Government of India 2022b]. The talks covered all aspects of the partnership, including security cooperation, investment, enhanced trade relations, power and energy sector cooperation, water sharing of common rivers, water

resources management, border management, and combating drug smuggling and human trafficking. During the visit, seven Memorandums were signed in the areas of railways, science and technology, space technology and broadcasting among others [Sabarwal 2022, 6 September].

However, in between the two high-level visits, in the month of June, a new peak of anti-Indian sentiment was registered in Bangladesh. Following some derogatory remarks about prophet Muhammad by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) representatives, protestors took to the streets in Dhaka, urging Muslim countries to boycott India. Amidst the controversy, and to the dismay of Bangladeshi Islamists, the Bangladeshi Government refrained from taking a stance on the issue [Shafi 2022a, 17 June]. Popular perception of India as anti-Muslim was not new in Bangladesh where in 2021 Prime Minister Modi's official visit was met with mass protests incited by discontent with the citizenship policy pursued by its government back home, which are largely perceived as Islamophobic [Shafi 2022a, 17 June].

In December, Bangladesh and India held the 18<sup>th</sup> Joint Working Group (JWG) on Security and Border Management. The two delegations were led by additional secretaries from the Ministry of Home Affairs [Government of India 2022c]. According to the Bangladesh-based NGO Ain-O-Sailash Kendra, between January and December 2022 there were 23 documented deaths (by shooting; by torture) at the border, 15 cases of injuries, and 11 abductions ['Border Violence by BSF' 2023].

China remained Bangladesh main trade partner (see section 3, "Economic affairs") as well as an important development partner (Bangladesh is a signatory country of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)). In March, Prime Minister Hasina inaugurated the Payra coal-fired power plant, which was built by a Bangladeshi-Chinese joint venture with a China's Exim Bank's loan and had already started commercial operations in 2020 [*The Daily Star* 2022b, 21 March]. The power-plant was a main project within China's and Bangladesh's BRI partnership. The Prime Minister claimed that, with the Payra plant, Bangladesh achieved for the first time 100 per cent electricity coverage, i.e. electricity became available in every home in the country [*The Daily Star* 2022b, 21 March; Mortaza 2022, 16 September].

Another important China-funded project (Exim Bank loan of US\$ 5 billion at a 2 per cent interest rate) which saw developments in 2022 was the Karnaphuli underwater tunnel, whose status appeared to be nearing completion as the year turned to an end [*The Business Standard* 2023, 1 January]. Officially named Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel, this underwater tunnel is being built to connect the two sides of the Karnaphuli river in the port city of Chittagong, which is Bangladesh's commercial hub along with the capital city Dhaka.

Yet another memorable official inauguration was that of the bridge over the mighty Padma river. The bridge construction was sustained entirely by the Bangladeshi Government amidst technical challenges and

funding setbacks, thus Hasina's inauguration saluted the bridge as a success-against-all-odds, a proud moment and a demonstration of Bangladesh's coming of age. In this way, the completed bridge became an important symbol of Bangladesh's development «success story», so important to the AL government legitimacy. It might be worth noting that the Government had to work with fully local funding after the World Bank had pulled out of the project due to alleged corruption. The bridge linked the south-west of the country, which is comparatively less developed, with the north and the east, including Dhaka, and was projected to improve road connectivity considerably and produce important dividends for the country's GDP. Chinese contractor firms contributed to the implementation of the project, but its funds – as highlighted by the Prime Minister – were sourced locally. Indeed, following the inauguration, the Bangladesh Ministry of External Affairs reacted to allegations that Padma was a China-backed project with a press release in which it “categorically asserts that the Padma Multipurpose Bridge has been entirely funded by the GoB”, thus shall not be considered a BRI project [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh 2022].

It is to be noted that in November, on East Turkestan Day, in different cities of Bangladesh different groups took to the street to protest the violation of Uyghurs' human rights perpetrated by the Chinese Government [Aninews 2022, 12 November]. These were not mass gatherings, but rather small affairs when compared to the average turn-out for a protest in the country, but were nonetheless significant as they involved citizens from various walks of life and were staged in different locations across the country.

Bangladesh's relations with Myanmar remained complicated and the Rohingya repatriation plan to which the two countries had earlier committed saw no breakthrough. In September 2022, it was reported that an escalation of armed clashes took place in the Myanmar areas nearing the border. As a consequence of it, shelling fired from Myanmar kept on falling on Bangladeshi territory for a number of days, causing injuries among dwellers living on the Bangladeshi side of the border. Among them, a Rohingya boy succumbed to injuries. The Bangladeshi Government's adopted a diplomatic response, seeking to prevent ties with Myanmar from further deteriorating as working relations with the Southeast Asian neighbour are fundamental for making the Rohingyas' repatriation possible. Myanmar's ambassador in Dhaka Aung Kyaw Moe maintained that the shelling was caused by the Arakan Army, which is active near the border and in conflict with Myanmar's regular army [Shafi 2022b, 21 September 21]. As far as the long-dragged question of repatriation was concerned, the year did not see any concrete progress. Following her visit to Bangladesh, Bachelet had concluded that regretfully the conditions for a safe and sustainable return of the Rohingyas to Myanmar had not materialized yet. After meeting the Chinese Ambassador Li Jining in Dhaka in October, Momen shared with



the media that Myanmar, as per information received via the Ambassador, said to be willing to take back the refugees upon verification [*NewsOnAir* 2022, 21 October].

## 5. Conclusion

In 2022 Bangladesh was faced with considerable challenges coming from different quarters. The destructive floods highlighted once again Bangladesh's vulnerability to natural catastrophes and the urgency of tackling climate change – a huge task ahead of the Bay of Bengal nation and the international community as a whole. Spiking inflation in the price of primary food items weighted heavy on common people. Although the Government showed goodwill in welcoming high-profile UN representatives to discuss the country's human right situation, state-led repression of dissent continued. As far as international affairs were concerned, the Rohingya dilemma saw no positive developments. Partnership with China and India were stable and sustained by frequent visits and progress in multiple joint projects, but not free from criticism. With its two giant neighbours, as vis-à-vis the invasion of Ukraine, Bangladesh kept engaging in a balancing act.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aljazeera*, 2022a, 29 March, 'Bangladesh shuts school in Rohingya camp set up by slain leader'.
- Aljazeera*, 2022b, 13 June, 'Bangladesh charges 29 Rohingya over murdered activist Mohib Ullah'.
- Aninews*, 2022, 12 November, 'East Turkestan Day: Protests erupt in Bangladesh against Chinese oppression of Uyghur Muslims'.
- Asian Development Bank, 2022, *Asian Development Outlook*, 7 December.
- ['Bangladesh' 2022a] 'Bangladesh', *World Justice Project Website*, 2022.
- ['Bangladesh' 2022b] 'Bangladesh', *RSF Website*, 2022.
- ['Bangladesh 2022c], 'Bangladesh', *Freedom House Website*, 2022.
- 'Bangladesh Balance of Trade', 2022, *Trading Economics Website*.
- Bangladesh Bank, 2022, *Balance of payments*, December.
- 'Bangladesh Inflation Rate', 2022, *Trading Economics Website*.
- 'Bangladesh: Joint Press Statement on Flash Flood - July 2022', 2022, *Reliefweb*, 7 July.
- 'Bangladesh: Key Immediate Need and Preliminary Impact Assessment North Eastern Flash Flood, May-June 2022 (version 02 as of 17th June 2022)', 2022, *Reliefweb*, 18 June.
- 'Bangladesh: Letter to Bangladesh's law minister: end reprisals against journalist Rozina Islam', 2022, *Amnesty Org Website*, 21 June.

- Bdnews24.com*, 2022, 9 June, 'Bangladesh targets 7.5 % GDP growth in FY23'.
- Bergman, David, 2022, 'Stopping the opposition opposing', *NetraNews*, 17 June.
- Bhardwaj, Naina, 2022, 'India, Bangladesh Consider Trade Settlement in Rupee; To Begin CEPA Talks Soon', *India Briefing*, 26 December.
- Bhattacharjee, Kallol, 2022, 'India, Bangladesh discuss high-level visits', *The Hindu*, 28 April.
- 'Border Violence by BSF', 2023, *Ain O Salish Kendra*, 3 January.
- Boughton, James M., 2003, 'On the Origins of the Fleming-Mundell Model', *IMF Staff Papers*, 50 (1): 1–3.
- Byron, Rejaul Karim & Jamil Mahmud, 2023, 'Stimulus for large, small industries: Tk 50,000cr fresh funds see tepid disbursement', *The Daily Star*, 9 January.
- Cyrrill, Melissa, 2022, 'Bangladesh Keen to Accelerate CEPA Talks with India as it Confronts Economic Headwinds', *India Briefing*, 27 July.
- Dhaka Tribune*, 2022, 5 June, 'The worst industrial disasters in Bangladesh since 2005'.
- Faiaz, Zarif, 2021, 'Attacks, land grabs leave Bangladesh's Indigenous groups on edge', *Aljazeera*, 30 July.
- [Government of India 2022 (a)] Government of India, Ministry of Jal Shakti 2022, *38th Meeting of Ministerial level Joint Rivers Commission of India and Bangladesh held at New Delhi*, 26 August.
- [Government of India 2022 (b)] Government of India, 2022, *India – Bangladesh Joint Statement during the State Visit of Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India*, 7 September.
- [Government of India 2022 (c)] Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs 2022, *18th Meeting of the Joint Working Group (JWG) on Security and Border Management between India and Bangladesh held*, 6 December.
- International Labour Organization, 2022, *Bangladesh ratifies the Minimum Age Convention*, 22 March.
- International Monetary Fund, 2022, *IMF Staff Reaches Staff-Level Agreement with Bangladesh on the Extended Credit Facility/Extended Fund Facility and the Resilience and Sustainability Facility*, 9 November.
- Jacob, Charmaine, 2022, 'India's rice export ban: The Asian countries set to be hit hard — and those that'll profit', *CNBC*, 19 September.
- Khatun, Fahmida, 2022, 'What the Russia-Ukraine war means for Bangladesh's economy', *Southern Voice*, 16 May.
- Mahmud, Faisal, 2022, 'Bangladesh rebel group's offer of peace talks with gov't welcomed', *Aljazeera*, 14 June.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh, 2022, *Press Release*, 17 June.
- Mortoza, Golam, 2022, 'Where logic ends, our electricity policy begins', *The Daily Star*, 16 September.
- NetraNews*, 2022a, 21 June, 'Another Bachelet blunder in the offing?'.
- NetraNews*, 2022b, 14 August, 'Secret prisoners of Dhaka'.
- Newage Bangladesh*, 2022a, 15 March, 'Rape victim's character not to be questioned'.
- Newage Bangladesh*, 2022b, 28 July, 'BB launches third stimulus package worth Tk 30,000cr for large cos'.
- Newage Bangladesh* 2022c, 15 September, 'Climate activists not terrorists: UN expert'.
- Newage Bangladesh*, 2022d, 23 October, 'Experts share 3 reasons behind falling Bangladesh's forex reserve'.
- NewsOnAir*, 2022, 21 October, 'Myanmar military authority informed Beijing they are willing to take back Rohingyas after verification- Bangladesh Foreign Minister'.

- 'Positive discussions with Bangladesh FM Dr. A.K. Abdul Momen.', 2022, *Twitter*, 28 April.
- Prothomalo*, 2022, 7 July, 'PM Hasina urges the US to lift sanctions against Russia'.
- Rashid, Muktadir, 2022, '2 RAB officials sanctioned by US get police medals', *Newage Bangladesh*, 24 January.
- Repucci, Sarah & Amy Slipowitz, 2022, *The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule*, Freedom House Organization.
- Reuters*, 2022, 10 November, 'IMF agrees \$4.5 billion Bangladesh support programme'.
- Rohoman, Md Harisur, 2022, 'Data Protection Act 2022: More questions than answers', *Dhaka Tribune*, 17 October.
- Roy, Shubhajit, 2022, 'India-Bangla trade, now set for CEPA boost', *The Indian Express*, 7 September.
- Rubel, Sirajul Islam, 2022, 'Attack on JCD: BCL men brag on Facebook', *The Daily Star*, 26 May.
- Sabarwal, Harshit, 2022, 'On Sheikh Hasina's India visit, Delhi and Dhaka sign 7 MoUs. Details here', *Hindustan Times*, 6 September.
- 'Satellite detected water extent over Sylhet, Mymensingh, Dhaka, and Chattogram Divisions, Bangladesh as of 19 June 2022 - Imagery Analysis: 19/06/2022 Published: 20/06/2022 V1', 2022, *Reliefweb*, 20 June.
- Shafi, Md Mostofa, 2022a, 'Another Anti-India Wave Sweeps Bangladesh', *The Diplomat*, 17 June.
- Shafi Md Mostofa, 2022b, 'Tensions Escalate Along Bangladesh-Myanmar Border', *The Diplomat*, 21 September.
- Shovon, Hassan Ahmed, 2022, 'Decoding Bangladesh's Response to the Ukraine Crisis', *The Diplomat*, 15 March.
- Taleb, Sheikh Abu, 2022, '\$1.6bn vanishes from Social Islami Bank through rogue LCs', *Bdnews24.com*, 28 November.
- Taiyeb, Faiz Ahmad, 2022, 'The rise and fall of Islami Bank', *The Daily Star*, 6 December.
- The Business Standard*, 2022a, 9 June, 'Stimulus programmes will continue in the coming fiscal year: Finance minister'.
- The Business Standard*, 2022b, 9 June, 'Budget deficit to decrease 9 June 2022'.
- The Business Standard*, 2022c, 6 October, 'World Bank cuts Bangladesh GDP growth forecast to 6.1 % for FY22-23'.
- The Business Standard*, 2023, 1 January, 'Motorcycles, three-wheelers not allowed in Bangabandhu Tunnel'.
- The Daily Star*, 2022a, 1 March, 'Export policy order for 2021-24 gets nod'.
- The Daily Star*, 2022b, 21 March, 'PM opens Payra power plant, says Bangladesh now under 100 % power coverage'.
- The Daily Star*, 2022c, 7 June, 'Govt scraps Odhikar's registration'.
- The Daily Star*, 2022d, 23 June, 'Bangladesh slashes rice import tariffs to 25 percent'.
- The Daily Star*, 2022e, 30 June, 'Tk 678,064cr national budget for FY 2022-23 passed in parliament'.
- The Daily Star*, 2022f, 2 July, 'Bangladesh bans aromatic rice export'.
- The Daily Star*, 2022g, 2 October, 'Sanctions on RAB: We do not need reform'.
- [United Nations 2022a] United Nations, 2022, *UN experts urge Bangladesh to end reprisals against human rights defenders and relatives of the disappeared*, 14 March.

- [United Nations 2022b] United Nations, 2022, *Bangladesh: First visit by UN human rights expert on climate change*, 29 August.
- United States Department of Agriculture, 2022, *Bangladesh: Grain and Feed Annual*, 5 April.
- 'United States Dollar', *Trading Economics Website*, 2022.
- Zamir Uddin, AKM, 2022, 'Fighting inflation: BB treads a tight rope', *The Daily Star*, 21 June.



# INDIA 2022: POLITICAL REALIGNMENTS IN A BJP-DOMINATED SYSTEM

Diego Maiorano

University of Naples «L'Orientale»  
and National University of Singapore  
dmaiorano@unior.it

*During 2022 there were three main political developments in India. First, state elections were held in seven states and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won in five of these, confirming its enduring popularity and dominance over the country's political system. Second, several political parties started to manoeuvre in light of the 2024 general elections. The BJP restructured its executive bodies, strengthening the grip on the party apparatus by the Shah-Modi duo. The Congress sought to rejuvenate itself through a country-wide march aimed at promoting unity and against the BJP's divisive politics. And several regional parties reoriented their alliances (particularly in Bihar), in order to better their odds at surviving in a BJP-dominated system. Third, the process of involution of India's democracy continued, particularly in terms of threats to freedom of expression and minorities' rights. The economy seems to have recovered fully from the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and adapted well to the new geopolitical scenario triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, social tensions remain visible, in particular because of the economy's inability to create enough jobs.*

KEYWORDS – India; local elections; democracy; opposition.

## 1. Introduction

Over the course of 2022, India entered into general election mood. Several parties started manoeuvres in light of the 2024 elections. This included the BJP, the Congress and several regional parties. Meanwhile, the political landscape continued to be marked by the BJP's dominance of the political system and its repercussions, particularly in terms of the party's ability to win state elections (despite some drawbacks) and the government's enduring pursue of a Hinduisation of society and public sphere and the erosion of the country's institutions.

The economy seems to be back on its feet after the severe contraction in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Growth rates rebounded to very high levels and inflation, despite the geopolitical crisis triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, remained under control. However, structural problems of India's development model remain unsolved, particularly in terms of job creation.

This article deals with political developments first, in section 2, which will analyse the results of state elections held in 2022 (Goa, Manipur, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh), the strategies that political parties adopted over the course of the year to prepare for the 2024 general elections, and the ongoing crisis of India's democracy. In section 3, the article will look at India's economic performance and discuss the job crisis, epitomized by some large scale «job riots», which took place during 2022.

## *2. Domestic politics*

The political landscape of India during 2022 was dominated by three main developments. First, there were elections in seven states, two of which were particularly important: Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh. There were also the elections for the Municipal Council of Delhi. Second, some political parties started manoeuvring in preparation for the electoral campaign which will take most of 2023, as the general elections are due by mid-2024. Third, in continuity with previous trends, the process of democratic erosion deepened, particularly in terms of minority rights. These three developments are discussed in this section.

### *2.1. Elections in the states and the enduring dominance of the BJP*

The 2022 state elections were held in two rounds, the first one in February-March (Goa, Manipur, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh), and the second one in December (Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh). The BJP was the incumbent party in six of the seven states that went to polls and managed to retain five of them. Table 1 summarizes the results across the states, whereas the tables in the appendix provide the detailed state-by-state results.

Overall, the results confirm the enduring dominance of the BJP. While it is true that the performance of the party at the state level is much less impressive than at the national level, it remains that, at the time of writing in December 2022, the saffron party is ruling (either on its own or in coalition) in 16 out of 30 local governments.<sup>1</sup> Nearly half of the population (48.7%) is ruled by a BJP government [Poddar 2022b, 9 December].

1. 28 States and 2 Union Territories which have an assembly.

Table 1 – Summary of the 2022 state elections

State	Incumbent	Largest Party after the 2022 elections
Goa	BJP	BJP
Manipur	BJP	BJP
Punjab	INC	AAP
Uttarakhand	BJP	BJP
Uttar Pradesh	BJP	BJP
Gujarat	BJP	BJP
Himachal Pradesh	BJP	INC
BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; INC = Indian National Congress; AAP = Aam Admi Party		

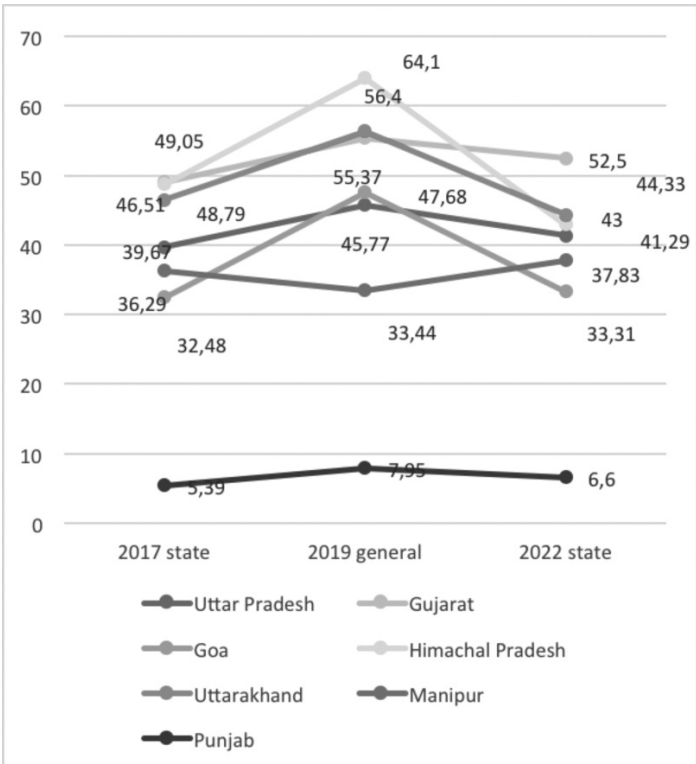
The BJP's dominance at the state level should be qualified somewhat, however. First, the «iron law of state politics» post-2014 [Maiorano 2021a] was confirmed in this round of elections, whereby the BJP's performance in the states is significantly poorer than its performance in the national elections (Figure 1).

Except for Manipur, the curve of the BJP's performance has an inverted «V» shape, reflecting its higher electoral appeal in the general vis-à-vis the state elections. In most states, moreover, the BJP remains vulnerable, and elections are competitive. For instance, in 2022, the BJP not only lost Himachal Pradesh to the Congress; it was also replaced by the AAP as the leading party in the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, after three terms in power. Second, in six of the states where the BJP currently governs (Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Goa, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Maharashtra), the party was actually defeated at the polls, but managed to form the government after it engineered defections from other parties [Outlook 2022b, 13 July]. The ability of the BJP to engineer defections is however a reflection of its dominance at the national level, as the party has access to a disproportionate amount of funds as well as to enforcement agencies that are directed against opposition politicians to convince them to jump ship [Maiorano 2022a].

Having said that, the BJP's performance in 2022 remains impressive, as it came on the backdrop of the economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and, in the case of Gujarat, the inflation spike in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The BJP's ability to fend off anti-incumbency feelings was in fact nothing short of spectacular in Uttar Pradesh, where no party had been voted back to power since the 1980s – and no chief minister re-elected after serving a full term since 1957; and in Gujarat, where the BJP won its seventh consecutive election with the largest vote share any party achieved since the Congress in 1985 and the largest majority in the history of the state (156 seats, out of a total of 182).



Figure 1 – BJP's performance (vote share) 2017-2022 in selected states



Source: Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University

The big prize of 2022 was, needless to say, Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath could not bank on a particularly impressive economic performance. While during the previous Samajwadi Party government from 2012 to 2017 the economy had grown at an average of nearly 7%, during Yogi's tenure, thanks also to the pandemic, growth plummeted to an average of 2% per year. Per capita income growth, on the other hand, crashed to 0.43% per annum [Singh, Ajit Kumar 2021]. Moreover, employment rates fell sharply and the agricultural sector showed ample signs of distress [Jabob 2022, 31 January], not only with the farmers' protests of 2021, but also as a consequence of the government's policies aiming at banning beef, which caused a widespread stray cattle problem, which devastated crops [Maiorano 2022b].

Nevertheless, and mirroring the national electoral landscape, none of these signs of economic malady seems to have had any major impact

on voters' mind, as the BJP was returned to power with a comfortable, albeit reduced, majority (255 seats out of 403). The saffron party, while losing 57 seats as compared to 2017, in fact increased its vote share by 1.62 percentage points (to 41.29%). Significantly, the Samajwadi Party (SP), which achieved one of its best performances ever (32.06% of vote share, an increase of over 10 percentage points), won less than half the seats of the BJP (111, or 164 including its allies). This was significant as what had traditionally been a triangular (or even quadrangular) contest in the past, in 2022 turned into a bipolar contest between the BJP and the SP, as the two other poles (the Congress and the BSP), collapsed. The former's vote share reduced to 2.33% and two seats. The BSP, on the other hand, lost nearly 10 percentage points (to a vote share of 12.88%) and won only 1 seat. However, the collapse of the two previously crucial political parties of UP did not add sufficiently to the SP's vote and seat share to challenge the dominance of the BJP. In fact, ten years before, the SP had won a comfortable majority with just 29% of the popular vote, in what was a triangular contest [Sen 2022]. But the BJP's dominance and the coming into being of a bipolar party system increased dramatically the share of the votes that are needed to win a majority. At this stage, only the BJP is able to mobilize such a large segment of the electorate.

In fact, the social coalition strategy of the saffron party is the key to its dominance. The BJP's social base of support in UP was built as a local variant of the national strategy, based on winning the vote of every community except the Muslims [Chhibber & Verma 2019]. In UP, however, two other communities have strong ties to other parties and were therefore thought to be unlikely BJP voters: the Yadavs, a large middle caste strongly associated with the SP; and the Jatavs, a large Dalit caste, which formed the main support base of the BSP. Post poll-data show that the BJP's strategy worked. In fact, it worked even better than expected [Beg *et al.* 2022, 12 March]. First, the saffron party consolidated and increased its support among the upper castes, winning over 80% of their vote. Second, the BJP's support among the non-Yadav Other Backward Classes (OBCs) ranged between 54 and 66%, registering major increases since 2017 among most caste groups. Third, among non-Jatav Dalits, the BJP won about 44% of the votes (up from 32% in 2017). Furthermore, Yogi's party nearly tripled its support among the Jatavs (from 8 to 21%), on the one hand contributing in no small measure to the collapse of the BSP and, on the other hand, furthering the process of «proletarianisation» of the party [Maiorano 2019].

The SP, which had tried during the electoral campaign to dilute its image as the party of the Yadavs, succeeded only to a limited extent. In fact, it increased its support among its core supporters (Yadavs' support increased from 68 to 83%) and made some gains among other OBCs and Dalit castes (including the Jatavs). More importantly, the SP was chosen by the great majority of Muslims (from 46% in 2017 to 79%), clearly a result

of strategic voting by the community and strong sign of strong polarization along religious lines.

Overall, the results in UP offer some insights into both state and national politics. First, it seems that the social engineering strategy that successfully displaced the Congress and gave a spotlight to the BSP and the SP might not be working anymore [Verniers 2022, 5 April]. This strategy was designed to work in a multi-polar context, where winning over a large, core community and co-opting selected local elites from other castes was enough to win a sizable share of the seats. The big loser of the 2022 elections, the BSP, was relying exactly on this model, which however cannot be sufficient in a context where there is a dominant party winning nearly half of the votes. In such a context, strategic voting assumes more significance and directs votes towards the most credible alternative to the dominant party – in the 2022 elections, the SP. The latter, however, was also largely relying on a core and co-option strategy, rather than horizontal mobilization of all caste groups (like the BJP did). The SP did bank on strategic voting, but this helped only so much as to arrive a distant second.

Second, UP is perhaps the state where the parallels between the local and the national strategy of the BJP are more apparent. As at the national level, economic conditions on the ground do not appear to matter much in determining electoral outcomes. Rather, voters seem to be increasingly attracted by the BJP multi-pronged strategy based on personalized campaigns, strongman politics, welfare delivery, and Hindutva. It is likely that a similar strategy will be at the centre of the BJP's electoral campaign for the 2024 general elections.

The second particularly important electoral contest of 2022 was Gujarat, Narendra Modi's home state. While the BJP's victory was widely expected – so much so that Hardik Patel, President of the Gujarat Pradesh Congress Committee, quit the party and joined the BJP shortly before the elections – the extent of its dominance over the state's politics was truly spectacular. The saffron party won over half of the popular vote (52.5%) resulting in the largest seat share any party ever secured (156 out of 182 seats). One obvious factor playing in favour of the BJP was the good performance of the AAP (12.92% of vote share), which transformed a bipolar party system into a triangular contest. In fact, the Congress, which had won 41% of the vote in 2017, lost nearly 15 percentage points (mostly in favour of the AAP). However, the BJP's dominance was such that in a great majority of seats, the division of the opposition hardly made a difference. In fact, the sum of the Congress and the AAP's votes surpasses the BJP in only 51 seats, indicating that opposition fragmentation enhanced the BJP's victory, but did not determine it. Another indication of the BJP's spectacular performance was the enormous margin with which the BJP won in each seat: more than 25 per centage points, on average, on the runner up [Saikia 2022, 8 December].

Overall, the Gujarat results are in line with those of UP. The winning formula relied heavily on Modi's personality – in the absence of popular state-level leaders – Hindutva and welfare delivery. This again suggests that, at least in the BJP's core regions (in the North and West of the country), this might be the message that the party will present to voters in 2024. There is another message that the Gujarat verdict offered. This is the obvious fact that, in the absence of multiple, state-level, unified anti-BJP fronts, it will be difficult to dislodge Modi's party from its dominant position in India's electoral landscape. However, as Gujarat shows, opposition parties have incentives not to unite and to fight for the second spot instead, as the AAP and the Congress did.

## 2.2. *Political adjustments with an eye to 2024*

Several political parties seemed to be starting preparations for the electoral campaign that is expected to kickstart in early 2023. The strategies varied significantly. Starting from the ruling party, in August 2022, the BJP reshuffled the Parliamentary Board (PB) and the Central Election Committee (CEC), the highest decision-making bodies of the party. The re-organisation resulted in the top echelons of the party being even more tightly controlled by the Modi-Shah duo than before, thus furthering the centralization of the party. In fact, the change in the composition of the two bodies dealt a blow to potential rival sources of power to the Prime Minister and his right (and left) hand, Amit Shah. First, Nitin Gadkari, former president of the BJP and one of the party's senior members that the RSS had been nurturing for leadership, was dropped from both the PB and the CEC. Moreover, Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis, and Gadkari's arch-rival from his natal Nagpur, found a spot in the CEC. While both members of the RSS, Gadkari's exclusion was seen both as yet another blow by Modi and Shah to one of the few independent voices within the party and, perhaps more importantly, a blow to the RSS and its attempts to exert its dominance over the BJP [Deshpande 2022, 21 August]. Another prominent leader who lost its spot in the top bodies was Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan (also an RSS favourite). While the reasons for its exclusion remain unclear, the effect has been to remove one of the few leaders with an independent base of support, thus tightening Modi-Shah's control over the party. It might also be that Modi and Shah killed two birds with one stone as, by dropping Chauhan, they could argue that no sitting chief minister was part of the PB, thus justifying another notable exclusion, that of UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath [Mahajan 2022, 18 August].

Less directly related to the forthcoming general elections – but certainly helping the BJP to be in a better position – was the shadowy manoeuvring, which led to the collapse of the Shiv Sena-Nationalist Congress Party-Indian National Congress coalition government in Maharashtra. In 2019, the BJP and the Shiv Sena had formed an electoral alliance, which,

however, fell apart shortly after the declaration of the results, paving the way for the somewhat eclectic alliance between former adversaries, the Congress, the Congress Nationalist party and the Shiv Sena itself. While inherently fragile, the coalition muddled through for two and a half years, until a group of Shiv Sena MLAs and Ministers, led by Eknath Shinde, rebelled against their leader and Chief Minister, Uddhav Thackeray. Political drama followed, with MLAs from both camps being secluded in hotels in Mumbai (Thackeray's faction) and BJP-ruled Gujarat and Assam (Shinde's faction), until, on 29 June, Thackeray threw the towel and resigned. Shinde became the chief minister, while BJP's leader Fadnis became his deputy. Most of the rebel Shiv Sena MLAs found a place in the new Cabinet. Undoubtedly, the BJP «went all out to cultivate the rebels, protect them, and win them a few more by employing investigating agencies and bringing about pressure besides allurements» [Palshikar 2022a]. Be as it may, the BJP will face the 2024 general election from a position of strength in India's second most populous state.

Finally, in September 2022, the government took over the presidency of the G20 from Indonesia. India was supposed to chair the G20 earlier on, but it first swapped with Italy, in order to make it coincide with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence in 2022 and then swapped it again with Indonesia. While no official reason was given, it is likely that the government thought of using the international spotlight with an eye to the 2024 elections. Between January and September 2023, India will host over 200 meetings scattered through many locations across the country, where giant billboard will show the Prime Minister's picture alongside the Indian G20 presidency's logo, which is a lotus flower (the same as the BJP).

Turning to the opposition side, clearly things could be better. The dominance of the BJP – as in any dominant party system – constrains and limits what the opposition can achieve, especially since the saffron party does not restrain from using investigative agencies, its control over the economy and its influence over the media to further its dominance and crash the opposition. However, as Asim Ali proposed, it is possible to clearly divide opposition parties in two camps: on the one hand, crisis-ridden political parties; and, on the other hand, parties whose prospects are much brighter [Ali 2022a]. The former includes the Congress, the Left and the large «Mandal» parties of UP and Bihar. In the latter group, we find regional parties from the East and South of the country which have, so far, fended off the BJP's attempts to invade their turfs (e.g., the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal; the Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu; the Telugu parties in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana; the Biju Janata Dal in Odisha; etc.) and the AAP, which appears to be on an expansion sprout.

The Congress party best exemplifies the crisis of the opposition, as it is arguably the party which has most suffered from the BJP's expansion. The Grand Old Party lost 40 of the 50 elections it contested since 2014 and suffered from a haemorrhage of leaders who joined other parties (mostly

the BJP) [Mishra 2022, 27 March]. At the time of writing, the Congress rules in only two states (as many as the AAP). Yet, any attempt to limit the dominance of the BJP will necessarily have to pass through the Congress. Not only does the party still commands about 20% of the national vote – long distancing any other opposition party – but there are a very high number of Lok Sabha seats where the contest is between the Congress and the BJP. In 2019, there were 186 such seats.

During 2022, there were two attempts to invert course, both of which had mixed results. First, in September 2022, the party elected a new president, the first non-Gandhi since the 1990s. The new president, 80-year-old Mallikarjun Kharge, however, can hardly be seen as a sign of deep renovation that could turn the fortune of the party. On the one hand, Kharge is widely seen as an emanation of the Gandhi family. On the other hand, his age and that of the majority of the Party Steering Committee, show how the gerontocratic structure of the party keeps exerting its influence. In fact, 75% of the members are over 60 years old and most of them either did not contest or lost their seat at the 2014 and 2019 general elections.<sup>2</sup> It is hard to imagine how the reorganization of the Congress party might boost the morale of the party workers or spark off the political imagination of (mostly young) voters.

The second noteworthy initiative of the party – or, perhaps more precisely, of Rahul Gandhi – is a country-wide march (the *Bharat Jodo Yatra*, or Unite India March), from Kanyakumari on the southern tip of India, to Jammu and Kashmir, over a period of 150 days. The initiative is significant for several reasons. First, it is the first major political initiative to specifically counter the BJP's divisive politics. Second, the march has focused on substantive issues like unemployment and growing inequalities, themes which are grounded on very bread-and-butter issues, which should resonate with many voters. Third, despite a very inhospitable media environment, which has at first largely ignored the march, it has successfully grasped attention and political rallies along the route are very well attended. Fourth, the march as a means to reach political objectives has a long pedigree in India, from Mahatma Gandhi during the freedom movement to some national politicians of the past, such as Chandra Sekhar, to numberless state level initiatives in recent times, often coronated by success. Fifth, the march's stops have become gathering points for civil society organizations which have taken the opportunity to forge alliances.

However, the yatra might fall short of rejuvenating the Congress and project a new image of the party ahead of the 2024 general elections. First, as noted by Suhas Palshikar, the Congress party organisation remained largely dormant except on the exact route of the yatra. If there were hopes that the yatra could galvanize Congress workers in the states where the

2. Rahul Verma, ISAS Panel Discussion, 4 November 2022, Singapore.

march passed, this has just not happened. «There is, on the one hand, a careful show of strength on the route of the Yatra and a deafening silence elsewhere» [Palshikar 2022b, 22 December]. Second, while the yatra focused on substantive issues and took on the Hinduization of India pursued by the BJP, it has hardly proposed an alternative vision to Modi's Hindutva-cum-welfare agenda, which, as we saw, is popular and successful. Third, the yatra is largely a one person show – Rahul Gandhi's. Whether the initiative will be sufficient to shake off Gandhi's image as a predestined politician coming from the family accused day in day out (justly or otherwise) of being responsible for much of India's maladies, is a big question mark. In other words, in a way the yatra tries to challenge Modi on the terrain where he is more comfortable, that of a battle between personalities. And Modi has no rival in terms of popularity, resources and ability to speak to the heart and belly of the voters. Moreover, the yatra was thought to resemble more a social movement than a political one, with the result that the party seems to «speak to citizens, but not to voters, and bypasses political questions, electoral or otherwise» [Mehta 2022, 24 December].

Finally, conversations<sup>3</sup> by this writer with people who work for political consultancies hired by the Congress party, reveal that the yatra put the party's finances under stress. According to these sources, in some states the party will not reimburse air travel to party workers anymore and only 3AC class rail fares will be booked. This, according to these sources (whose claims however could not be verified), signals deep financial distress, especially when compared to the flourishing budget of the BJP.

Other parties seem to be better placed. A first group includes regional parties in the East and South of the country. Some of these – like the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, the Biju Janata Dal in Odisha, the Tamil and the Telugu Parties – seem to have found a potent formula to contrast BJP's Hindutva in ethno-linguistic mobilization [Ali 2022a]. In a way, the core political strategy of this party is a local variation of the BJP's national platform: by substituting religion with language, an emphasis on welfare schemes and strong (if very centralized) party organisations, these parties have been able to resist the dominance of the BJP. In fact, the saffron parties in at least some of these states (like West Bengal, Odisha and Telangana) have successfully taken on the role of main opposition party, replacing the Congress, but it has been unable to mount a serious challenge to ruling parties.

Two further parties have begun noteworthy manoeuvres in sight of the 2024 general elections. The first one is the AAP, currently in power in Delhi (where, as mentioned, it also replaced the BJP at the Municipal Corporation level) and in Punjab. As noted above, the party also performed very well in the Gujarat state elections and won over 6% of the votes (and 2 seats) in Goa in 2022, which should lead to the recognition as a national

3. New Delhi, 1-3 February 2023.

party by the Election Commission.<sup>4</sup> Since 2017, the AAP contested the elections in 18 states, although with marginal influence in most of them. What seems to be clear, however, is that the AAP is on an expansion sprout based on three main platforms, which again cannot but remind of the BJP's national strategy. First, the promotion of the «Delhi model of development» (akin to Modi's «Gujarat model»), based on free and relatively high-quality public services. Second, populist appeals, carefully tailored on local conditions. For instance, the AAP defended migrants in Delhi, but promises jobs reservations for locals in Uttarakhand [Ali 2022(a)]. Third, the AAP adopted a soft Hindutva approach, with the objective of forming a social coalition that cut across caste and class – something that the party managed to stitch together in Delhi [Banerji 2022, 11 June]. This strategy on the part of the AAP signals – together with similar flirts with Hindutva by other opposition parties, including the Trinamool Congress and the Congress itself – that the BJP's political project is advancing to the stage of a hegemonic one which will be difficult to eradicate, even in a post-Modi India [Palshikar 2023b, 6 January].

Second, in August 2022 the Janata Dal (United) (JDU), one of the strongest «Mandal» parties, and an ally of the BJP in Bihar, broke off from the saffron party and formed a «grand alliance» with the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). The move by chief minister Nitish Kumar is the latest twist in a convoluted story of alliances and counter alliances which have characterized Bihar's politics since Modi took office as Prime Minister. In 2013, Nitish Kumar left the National Democratic Alliance, after Modi was selected as the prime ministerial candidate, only to join hands again in 2017 [Scroll.in 2022c, 9 August]. The august 2022 decision seem to be dictated by electoral compulsions in sight of the 2024 general elections and the 2025 state elections. The JD(U) was probably feeling the pressure of the BJP, which, at the 2020 state elections, had surpassed the JD(U) as Bihar's largest party. The inclusion of the JD(U) in the «grand alliance» of Bihar makes it significantly «grander» than the coalition that was put together for the last state 2020 elections, which, however impressive on paper, failed to become a significant challenge to the BJP-JD(U) combine. It is rather a replication of the 2015 grand alliance which won the state elections then, only to disintegrate when Nitish Kumar decided to ally with the BJP again in 2017.

The «grand alliance» of Bihar also reminds of a similar coalition between the two Mandal parties of UP, the SP and the BSP, at the 2019 general elections, which hoped to limit the BJP's dominance in the state. In UP, it did not work, but the Bihar's grand coalition might be better placed. First, the coalition is in power, and this naturally gives them an advantage. The BJP, on the other hand, having run the state in coalition for the last five

4. This will give the AAP some benefits like guaranteed space on public TV and radio; membership in consultative committees; relaxation of campaign expenditure rules; etc.



years, will be able to exploit anti-incumbency feelings only to a certain extent. Second, caste arithmetic is more in favour of the JD(U)-RJD alliance than to its counterpart in UP. In both states, the key constituencies are the Other Backward Castes and the Dalits (being the upper caste solidly behind the BJP and the Muslims equally solidly being the grand alliances). In UP, as mentioned above, the BJP was able to make significant inroads among both communities, effectively forming a rainbow coalition which excluded only the Muslims and the core castes of the SP (Yadavs) and the BSP (Jatavs). In Bihar things are different because: a) Dalits have been brought into the fold of Mandal politics to a greater degree; b) while in Bihar too both Mandal parties have a core caste constituency (the Yadavs for the RJD and the Kurmis for the JD(U)), smaller OBCs castes (so called Extremely Backward Castes, or EBCs) have also been brought on board, chiefly through a policy of reservation for these castes, which started when Nitish Kumar first became chief minister in 2005 [Ali 2022b, 22 August]. Finally, Nitish Kumar decided to double down on Mandal politics by launching a caste census, which is scheduled to be completed by May 2023 [Mahaprashasta 2023, 10 January]. The real issue with counting castes is to have a precise estimate of the OBC population and possibly amend the reservation policy accordingly. While this carries risks for the two Mandal parties – it will probably show that Kurmis and Yadavs have acquired a much more dominant position in state's politics and administration than thought – it might also potentially expand the two parties' support base to other OBC groups or at least prevent them from joining the BJP *en masse*, as it happened in UP. There is one potential obstacle to this plan of action. The Supreme Court of India has repeatedly held that reservations cannot exceed 50% of the available spots. However, in November 2022, the Supreme Court upheld the decision by the Union Government to reserve 10% of government jobs and places in educational institutions for the so-called Economically Weaker Sections (EWS). The EWS are defined in economic and not in caste terms. However, two key legislative provisions effectively make the upper caste the real target of the new policy. First, EWS are defined as whoever has a family income of less than 800,000 rupees per year (and excluding big landlords). The income criteria would cover more than 90% of Indians, classifying them as EWS. Second, however, Scheduled Classes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and OBCs are excluded from the EWS category, on the basis that they are already benefiting from reservations. In practice, the EWS quota will give reservations to non-rich upper castes. Legal experts are divided on whether the Supreme Court's upholding of the EWS quota will put into question the 50% ceiling [Poddar 2022a, 20 November]. But what is certain is that it created a political opportunity to at least credibly show voters the willingness to push the reservation ceiling up. Jharkhand, for instance, increased reservations to 77% within days of the Supreme Court judgment. In Bihar, where the only segment of the population that is very unlikely to back the grand alliance is formed by the upper castes,

the political opportunity to play the Mandal card is particularly favourable for the JD(U)-RJD. In short, it seems that the ruling coalition of Bihar is engineering a reversal of the BJP's «all but the Muslim» strategy, but focusing on every segment of the electorate, except the upper castes.

A final point to conclude this brief excursus on the state of the opposition concerns the question of whether these parties will form a united front against the BJP in 2024. For what can be seen at the time of writing, the question is obviously on many party leaders' mind. Small steps such as backing a common Presidential candidate in 2022 were relatively successful, but the stakes were admittedly low, as the BJP and its allies had the number to elect whoever they chose. (Eventually, Droupadi Murmu was elected, the first tribal to become President of the Republic, and a woman). Other than that, some big regional parties (like the RJD, JD(U), and the Trinamool Congress) have started discussions to form a national opposition front. However, the real game will be played in the states, which is where potentially significant alliances are to be formed, if the BJP's dominance is to be seriously challenged. Moreover, as mentioned above, the role of the Congress remains important in a very high number of constituencies, while the temptation for upwardly political parties (like the AAP) to feast on the remains of the Grand Old Party – thus compromising opposition unity – will be hard to resist. The Congress party is at the same time an asset and a liability for regional parties.

### 2.3 *Further democratic erosion*

The erosion of India's democracy is now a medium-term process, which has been widely analysed.<sup>5</sup> In 2022, many of the trends and policies adopted by the Indian government in recent years continued. These included the usage of investigative agencies to target journalists, opposition members and civil society leaders [Tiwari 2022, 21 September; *Outlook* 2022c, 13 October]; the erosion of institutions, including attempts by the government to have a greater say in the appointment of Supreme and High Court judges [Jain & Chaturvedi 2023, 19 January] – reminiscent of Indira Gandhi's quest for a «committed judiciary» [Maiorano 2015]; and threats to freedom of expression [Reed 2022, 10 October], such as the arrest of Mohammed Zubair, founder of AltNews, a fact-checking website. Zubair was arrested in June 2022 on the basis of some 4-year-old tweets and kept in jail for almost a month, until the Supreme Court eventually granted him bail, noting that the UP government had effectively «trapped [him] in a vicious cycle of criminal process where the process itself has become the punishment» [Anand 2022, 26 July].

5. In previous Asia Maior issues the topic was discussed in Maiorano, 2022a; 2022b; 2021b; Torri & Maiorano 2018; Torri 2021. See also, among many others, Mukherjee 2020; Jaffrelot 2021; Kholsa & Vaishnav 2021.

In short, India's democratic erosion continues in parallel with the BJP's deepening of its dominance over the political system, so much so that one of the country's leading analysts started questioning if «*irrespective of electoral outcomes*», we are bound to witness a further weakening of the liberal norm» in the future, as an authoritarian and majoritarian form of governance that root in the minds of the voters [Palshikar 2023a, 1 January].

In this article, I will just briefly mention two somewhat new developments that have taken place during 2022 and that concern the Indian state's ongoing alienation of the Muslim minority. The first one is the spat of demolitions of Muslim homes and properties across a number of BJP-ruled states. This is not entirely new. During the emergency (1975-77), for instance, many buildings and homes were demolished as part of the «*beautification*» of (predominantly Muslim) Old Delhi. Another instance was the demolition of slums in numerous states throughout the year, to make space for urban development, which at times resulted in Muslims being displaced and struggled to find alternative accommodation because of their identity [Lobo 2015]. What seems to be new, however, is the reason why homes were demolished, that is as a form of extra-legal punishment for alleged violations of law and order.

The events in Jahangirpuri in Delhi in April 2022 are illustrative. On 16 April a procession to celebrate Hanuman Jayanti passed through the mainly Muslim area. Violence erupted. The Muslim community maintained that some Hindus tried to enter the local Mosque with a flag reciting «Jai Shri Ram»; the Hindus on the other hand blamed the Muslims for the violence. Be as it may, a local BJP leader, Adesh Gupta, wrote a letter to the Municipal Corporation (ruled by the BJP) asking to demolish the homes of «*anti-social elements*». The municipal authorities immediately sent bulldozers and the police to demolish – without giving notice to the residents, as per the law – «*illegal encroachments*». The Supreme Court halted the demolitions, but the bulldozers did not stop until over one hour after the Court had issued its order, despite the presence of the Mayor on site and news organisations having reported about the Court's stay [Scroll.in 2022a, 20 April]. Shops, homes and the entry gate to the Mosque were demolished. The Jahangirpuri facts were not isolated. Similar instances had occurred in BJP-ruled UP [Outlook 2022a, 12 June], Madhya Pradesh [BBC News 2022a, 15 April], and Gujarat [Scroll.in 2022b, 2 May]. The demolitions were called by three United Nations Special Rapporteurs (for Housing, Minority Issues and Freedom of Religion) a form of «*collective punishment*».<sup>6</sup>

The second (also not entirely new) development was an acceleration on the cultural project of the current establishment to demonize the Muslim community. The cultural demonization of the Muslim community is a

6. The full text of the letter is available here: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27324>

multi-pronged strategy by Hindutva-affiliated groups and has a long history. During the yatras demanding the demolition of the Babri Masjid in the 1980s and 1990s, for instance, Hindutva groups had circulated videos and recordings. More recently, music producers created hundreds of songs with incendiary lyrics, at times blasted through loudspeakers at processions passing through Muslim areas and shared millions of times via social media [BBC News 2022b, 8 August]. There have also been several instances of political speeches explicitly calling for the killing of the Muslims [Al-Jazeera 2021, 24 December].

In 2022, this strategy was somewhat brought to a higher level through a film, *The Kashmir Files*, directed by Vivek Agnihotri. The film claims to be telling «the truth» about the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits in the 1990s, as the insurgency broke out in the Valley. The film is historically inaccurate and single-mindedly aimed at demonizing Muslims: men are shown lusting Hindu women and betraying their neighbours to support terrorism, while children are depicted branding automatic weapons and insulting Hindu Gods [Ayyub 2022, 29 March]. The film has been a record-breaking hit, also thanks to the government's tax concessions (reducing the tickets' price) and Modi's invitation to watch the film [Chowdhury 2022, 30 March]. The prime minister even congratulated the film crew in person [Hindustan Times 2022b, 13 March]. In theatres, the audience chanted nationalistic slogans and abuses to the Muslim community and triggered calls for the boycott of Muslims economic activities [The Quint 2022, 21 March].

The film is but the last example of the ongoing Hinduisation of India's public sphere, though the promotion to leading position in academia and research centres of Hindu extremists and sympathizers; the renaming of street and cities to delete India's Muslim past; the re-writing of history textbooks; or the construction of a grandiose system of temples in Varanasi – one of Modi's pet projects in his constituency – aimed at undermining the city's syncretic past [Maiorano 2022c].

### 3. *The economic situation*

The Indian economy continued to present contradictory trends. On the one hand, India recovered from the pandemic-induced recession. On the other hand, the job situation continued to remain dire. Starting with the good news, during the year ending in quarter 2 (Q2) of the financial year 2022/23 (July-September 2022), real GDP grew by 6.3% (year-on-year), one of the fastest among emerging market economies [The World Bank 2022]. This robust growth is remarkable, given the economic pain through which India's major trading partners (the US, UK, China) went through in 2022, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the ongoing global supply chains disruptions, inflationary pressures, high energy costs and higher rates of

interests. The two main drivers of growth were private consumption and investments. The former was led by upper income consumer goods (like automobiles and air travel), while the latter was sustained by government's capital expenditure (part of Modi's infrastructure push). Conversely, private investments played a minor role, as India Inc. remains cautious, given the uncertain geopolitical landscape and the Reserve Bank of India's decision to increase interest rates by 35 basis points to 6.50% [*Business Standard* 2022, 1 December]. The two major constraints on growth were government final expenditure (whose decline is almost entirely attributable to the progressive rolling out of the pandemic-related relief measures) and the sharp increase in imports (not matched by the increase in exports). On this note, while the overall balance of payment situation remains sustainable, also thanks to very florid reserves of foreign currency, trade balance with China deteriorated further, which is a source of concern more for geopolitical reasons than for economic ones. According to the latest data released by the Chinese customs, overall trade between the two countries reached US\$ 136 billion, of which US\$ 118.5 billion were Chinese exports to India.

Inflation increased in 2022, following the global trend. While this was understandably a cause for concern for the Indian government as the Consumer Price Index (CPI) remained above the RBI's upper limit of 6% for most of the year (averaging at 6.7%), in the last part of 2022 it eased down significantly and trended downward.

Finally, the rupees weakened significantly against the dollar, as did most currencies in the world. While this contributed to a higher import bill (and lower GDP growth) and depleted foreign reserves, it also sustained exports. Probably the most significant implication of a weak rupee was the (albeit small) political repercussions, as Modi had vehemently attacked the government back in 2013 when the rupee had fallen below 64 to the dollar [*The Indian Express* 2022, 17 July]. At the time of writing in January 2023, the exchange rate was about 81 to the dollar.

Looking beyond standard macroeconomic indicators, 2022 signalled the enduring difficulties of the Indian economy to create enough jobs for what is one of the fastest-growing working age population in the world. In January, riots broke out in UP and Bihar, which were described as the country's first «large scale unemployment riots» [*Hindustan Times* 2022a, 28 January]. The railways had announced some 40,000 non-technical jobs in the two states, for which over 10 million candidates applied to. When the railways announced that a second exams would be introduced to reduce the number of candidates, riots broke off, as people attacked and burned trains and other railways properties.

A few months later, India witnessed another series of unemployment riots, when the government announced a reform of the recruiting system for the army. In June, the central government announced that the «Agnipath» (Tour of Duty) will be the only way into the three wings of the Indian army.

Selected recruits will have a service tenure of four years, after which 25% of them will be permanently enlisted. None of the «Agniveers» will be entitled to a gratuity or pension [Rai 2022]. The stated objective is to lower the average age of serving soldiers, although experts questioned the limit of four years as too short to optimally utilize a soldier. A key reason, however, was probably to save money. The pension bill in 2022/23 ate up almost a quarter of the entire budgetary allocation to the Defence Ministry (and another quarter went for salaries). These figures have increased sharply since 2015, when the government implemented both the One Rank One Pension reform, and, the following year, the recommendations of the Seventh Pay Commission [Singh, Sushant 2022, 13 July]. The reform sparked off violent protests across the country. Many aspiring soldiers feared being left unemployable after four years of service [Singh, Karan Deep & Kumar 2022, 17 June]. Perhaps more importantly, the reform closed yet another source to the Holy Grail of formal employment, seen by many as the only true avenue to upward social mobility. The private sector has been unable to create stable, formal jobs, making it «hardly surprising that government jobs are a loud political demand» [Aiyar 2022, 20 June].

In fact, India's employment problem is huge and not getting better. The gravity of the situation can be seen from two angles. First, the youth's labour market; and, second, the overall participation to the labour force. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO)'s estimates, India's youth (aged 15-24) unemployment was 28.3% in 2021, up from 22.7 in 2019.<sup>7</sup> The corresponding figures for other countries are much lower: Pakistan, 9.4%; China, 11.4%; Bangladesh, 14.7%; Indonesia, 16%. The average for Lower Middle-Income Countries (to which India belongs, according to the World Bank's classification) is 18.5%. Data from the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy (CMIE) are even worse. In April 2022, the CMIE's data showed that the unemployment rate in the 20-24 age bracket was 42%. Unemployed people aged 20-29 represent 80% of the total unemployed. Moreover, official data (from 2017/18) show that unemployment rates are higher among the most educated, feeding frustration and, occasionally, violence [Iyer 2022, 13 May].

The second factor, India's low participation to the labour force, is equally worrying. Total labour force participation rate (LFPR) (of people aged 15 and above) declined from 58.3 in 1990 to 45.6.<sup>8</sup> Of course, part of the decline is due to the increased number of students. But this is a very partial explanation at best, as shown by comparing India's LFPR with that of other countries when they had a GDP per capita similar to India's today (US\$ 1937)<sup>9</sup>. Economist Vivek Kaul [Kaul 2023] made the comparison, which is reproduced in the table 2.

7. Data retrieved from the World Bank's website.

8. Data in this paragraph are taken from [Kaul 2023].

9. In constant 2015 US\$.

Table 2 – India’s Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) compared with other countries.	
Country	LFPR
India	45.6
China (1998)	77.3
Vietnam (2009)	76
Indonesia (2002)	66
Source: Kaul 2023. In brackets the year when the country had a GDP per capita comparable to India’s in 2021.	

The gap is almost entirely explained by India’s extremely low Female LFPR, which, in 2021, was just 19%, as compared to 35% in Bangladesh, 49% in Brazil, 53% in South Korea, 54% in Indonesia, 62% in China and 70% in Vietnam. Even Saudi Arabia has a higher FLFPR (31%). Furthermore, the trend is negative, as India’s FLFPR was 30.4 in 1990. Again, part of the explanation is increased educational opportunities for Indian women. But Mody notes that a majority of women who withdraw from the labour force are over 25 and come from low-income family, pointing at a lack of job opportunities and patriarchal social norms as the best explanation [Desai & Joshi 2019; Mody 2023].

In short, India’s labour force is shrinking, despite the fact that the country is in the midst of a demographic dividend, whereby the working age population is expanding rapidly. This means that India is only very partially exploiting the window of opportunity that its demographic structure currently offers.

#### 4. *Conclusions*

The political developments of 2022 signalled that, as the country prepares for the 2024 general elections, the ruling BJP appears to be steadily in control of the situation. Despite some setbacks at the state level, the dominance of Modi’s party over India’s political system remains solid. Above all, the resounding victory of the party in UP – India’s most populous state and the key to rule the country – confirmed the trend of the last few years: the BJP is largely immune to economic setbacks and mismanagement.

The BJP, along with opposition parties, started preparations for the general elections, which took different forms. The BJP went through a rather profound re-organisation of the top echelons of party, which crystallized Modi and Shah’s control over the apparatus, largely at the expense of locally powerful party leaders and the RSS. The government also

engineered defections in key states (above all, Maharashtra), which will help the party in 2024.

The opposition parties also re-aligned themselves with an eye to 2024. The Congress's first family left the presidency of the party, while Rahul Gandhi embarked on a country-wide yatra. Both moves aimed at rejuvenating the party and both had limited success (the yatra more than the change of leadership). Some regional parties started a dialogue among themselves to form localized anti-BJP alliances, but it remains to be seen how far these will go. The past record is not promising. Still other parties went onto an expansion spree, chiefly among them the AAP, which won the elections in Punjab and performed very well in Gujarat. The latter elections, however, also showed the incentives for opposition parties to fight for the second spot, in a BJP-dominated political system.

India's democracy continued to suffer. The institutional erosion proceeded, as did the threat to freedom of expression. In this article, I focused in particular on the ongoing Hinduisation of the state and the deepening of the majoritarianism. The Muslim minority continues to be at the receiving end of the government's construction of a Hindu state.

Finally, the article has analysed the economic situation from two angles. First, the overall good performance of the economy, despite the difficult geopolitical environment. However, and second, the article has also showed the underlying socio-economic tension over an economic model that concentrates wealth creation at the top and does not generate enough jobs.



## APPENDIX

Detailed results of seven state elections held in 2022. All data are taken from the website of the Election Commission of India. The acronyms of the alliances and parties followed by the full names are given after the last table.

Table A* – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Goa 2022			
Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2017)	Vote share (difference from 2017)
NDA	BJP	20 (+7)	33.33 (+0.8)
UPA	INC	11 (-6)	23.5(-4.9)
	GFP	1(-2)	1.8 (-1.7)
	Total	12	
AAP	AAP	2 (+2)	6.8 (+0.5)
AITC+	AITC	0 (-)	5.2 (+5.2)
	MGP	2(-1)	7.6 (-3.7)
	Total	2	
NCP+	NCP	0 (-1)	1.1 (-1.2)
	SS	0 (-)	0.2 (0.1)
	Total	0	
RGP	RGP	1 (1)	9.45 (+9.45)
None	IND	3	-
*Note: BJP won 20 seats and got the support of MGP to form government; AITC and SS didn't contest previous election.			

Table B – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Manipur 2022			
Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2017)	Vote share (difference from 2017)
NDA	BJP	32 (+11)	37.83 (+2.73)
MPSA	INC (incumbent)	5 (-23)	16.83 (-18.57)
	CPI	0 (-)	0.06 (-0.68)
	Total	5	
None	JDU	6 (-)	10.77(-)
	NPF	5 (+1)	8.09 (+0.89)
	NPP	7(3)	17.29 (+12.19)
	KPA	2(2)	7.53
	IND	3(2)	

Table C – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Punjab 2022			
Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2017)	Vote share (difference from 2017)
None	AAP	92 (+72)	42.01(+18.31)
UPA	INC (incumbent)	18 (-59)	22.98 (-15.52)
SAD+	SAD	3 (-12)	18.38 (-6.82)
	BSP	1(+1)	1.77 (+0.27)
	Total	4	
NDA+	BJP	2 (-1)	6.6 (+1.2)
	PLC	0(-)	0.5 (-)
	SAD (S)	0(-)	0.6 (-)
	Total	2	
None	SAD (A)	0	2.5 (+2.2)
	LIP	0	0.3 (-0.9)
	CPI	0	0.05 (-0.15)
	IND	1 (1)	3.0 (0.9)
	Others	0 (-2)	-
*PLC & SAD (Sankyt) are new contestants.			

Table D – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Uttar Pradesh 2022			
Alliance	Party	Seats (difference from 2017)	Share (difference from 2017)
NDA (incumbent)	BJP	255 (-57)	41.29 (+1.62)
	AD (S)	12 (+3)	1.62 (+0.64)
	NISHAD Party	6 (+5)	0.91 (+0.29)
	Total	273	
SP+	SP	111 (+64)	32.06 (+10.24)
	RLD	8 (+7)	2.85 (+1.78)
	SBSP	6 (+2)	1.36 (+0.66)
	NCP	0 (-)	0.05 (-)
	Total	125	
UPA	INC	2 (-5)	2.33 (-3.92)
BPM	AIMM	0 (-)	0.49 (+0.25)
None	BSP	1 (-18)	12.88 (-9.35)
	JD (L)	2 (+2)	0.21 (+0.21)
	AAP	0 (-)	0.38 (+0.38)
	CIP	0 (-)	0.07 (-0.09)
	SS	0 (-)	0.02 (-0.08)
	IND	0 (-3)	1.11 (-1.46)

Table E – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Uttarakhand 2022			
Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2017)	Vote share (difference from 2017)
None	BJP (incumbent)	47 (-10)	44.33 (-2.17)
	INC	19 (+8)	37.91 (+4.39)
	BSP	2 (2)	4.82(-2.18)
	AAP	0 (-)	3.3% (-)
	UKD	0 (-)	1.1 (+0.40)
	CIP	0 (-)	0.04
	AIMM	0 (-)	0.03 (-)
	IND	2 (-)	-

Table F – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Himachal Pradesh 2022			
Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2017)	Vote share (difference from 2017)
UPA	INC	40 (+19)	43.90 (+2.22)
NDA	BJP (incumbent)	25 (-19)	43.00 (-5.79)
LF	CIP (M)	0 (-1)	0.66 (-0.81)
	CIP	0 (-)	0.01 (-0.03)
	Total	0	
None	AAP	0 (-)	1.10 (+1.10)
	BSP	0 (-)	0.35 (-0.2)
	RDP	0 (-)	10.39
	IND	3 (1)	
	Others		

Table G – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Gujarat 2022			
Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2017)	Vote share (difference from 2017)
NDA (incumbent)	BJP	156 (+57)	52.50 (+3.45)
UPA	INC	17 (-60)	27.28 (-14.16)
	NCP	0 (-1)	0.24 (-0.36)
	Total	17	
None	AAM	5 (+5)	12.92 (+12.82)
	BTP	0 (-2)	-
	AIMM	0 (-)	0.29 (+0.29)
	CIP (M)	0 (-)	0.03 (+0.01)
	BSP	0 (-)	0.50 (-0.10)
	SP	1 (+12.1)	(0.29) (+0.28)
	IND	3	-

LEGEND

AAP = Aam Aadmi Party  
AD (S) = Apna Dal (Sonelal)  
AIMM = All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen  
AITC = All India Trinamool Congress  
BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party  
BPM = Bhagidari Parivartan Morcha  
BSP = Bahujan Samaj Party  
BTP = Bharatiya Tribal Party  
CIP (M) = Communist Party of India (Marxist)  
CPI = Communist Party of India  
GFP = Goa Forward Party  
INC = Indian National Congress  
IND = Independents  
JD (L) = Jansatta Dal (Loktantrik)  
JDU = Janata Dal United  
KPA = Kuki People's Alliance  
LF = Left Front  
LIP = Lok Insaaf Party  
MGP = Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party  
MPSA = Manipur Progressive Secular Alliance;  
NCP = Nationalist Congress Party  
NDA = National Democratic Alliance  
NISHAD Party = Nirbal Indian Shoshit Hamara Aam Dal  
NPF = Naga People's Front  
NPP = National People's Party  
PLC = Punjab Lok Congress  
RDP = Rashtriya Devbhumi Party  
RGP = Revolutionary Goans Party  
RLD = Rashtriya Lok Dal  
SAD (A) = Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar)  
SAD (S) = Shiromani Akali Dal (Sanyukt)  
SAD = Shiromani Akali Dal  
SBSP = Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party  
SP = Samajwadi Party  
SS = Shiv Sena  
UKD = Uttarakhand Kranti Dal  
UPA = United Progressive Alliance

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aiyar, Yamini, 2022, 'Understanding the Agnipath protests', *Hindustan Times*, 20 June.
- Ali, Asim, 2022a, 'The Opposition Space in Contemporary Indian Politics', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Ali, Asim, 2022b, 'Bihar and the evolution of Mandal politics', *The Hindu*, 22 August.
- Al-Jazeera*, 2021, 24 December, 'India: Hindu event calling for genocide of Muslims sparks outrage'.
- Anand, Utkarsh, 2022, 'Process itself become the punishment: SC on Zubair', *Hindustan Times*, 26 July.
- Ayyub, Rana, 2022, 'I tried watching "The Kashmir Files." I left the theater to screams of "Go to Pakistan."', *The Washington Post*, 29 March.
- Banerji, Anuttama, 2022, 'Bharat Jodo Yatra: A journey in search of a destination', *The Diplomat*, 11 June.
- BBC News* 2022a, 15 April, 'Madhya Pradesh: Why an Indian state is demolishing Muslim homes'.
- BBC News* 2022b, 8 August, 'The rise and rise of anti-Muslim hate music in India'.
- Beg, Mirza Asmer, Shashikant Pandey & Shreays Sardesai, 2022, 'The BJP'S rock solid social coalition', *The Hindu*, 12 March.
- Business Standard* 2022, 1 December, 'Private consumption edges up in Q2; infra investment almost flat'.
- Chhibber, Pradeep & Rahul Verma, 2019, 'The Rise of the Second Dominant Party System in India: BJP's New Social Coalition in 2019', *Studies in Indian Politics*, 7(2): 131-148.
- Chowdhury, Debasish Roy, 2022, 'The Kashmir Files: How a New Bollywood Film Marks India's Further Descent Into Bigotry', *Time*, 30 March.
- Desai, Sonalde, & Omkar Joshi 2019, 'The Paradox of Declining Female Work Participation in an Era of Economic Growth', *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 62:55-71.
- Deshpande, Vivek, 2022, 'BJP's organisational reshuffle shows that Modi has effectively pushed the RSS to the background', *Scroll.in*, 21 August.
- Hindustan Times* 2022a, 28 January, 'Protests over railway jobs are a grim reminder of the state of India's job market'.
- Hindustan Times* 2022b, 13 March, 'The Kashmir Files' Vivek Agnihotri, Pallavi Joshi meet PM Narendra Modi, producer thanks him for 'noble words'.
- Iyer, Kavitha, 2022, 'India's Unemployment Crisis: The Distress Is Worse Than The Data Suggest', *Article14*, 13 May.
- Jabob, Nidhi, 2022, 'Employment rate has fallen in UP, Uttarakhand, Goa and Punjab since the last polls', *Scroll.in*, 31 January.
- Jaffrelet, Christophe, 2021, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jain, Rupam, & Arpan Chaturvedi, [2023], 'Indian judges concerned as government seeks bigger role in judicial appointments', *Reuters*, 19 January.
- Kaul, Vivek, 2023, 'One Factor Holding Back India's Long-Term Growth Potential', *Mint*, 25 January.
- Kholsa, Madhav & Milan Vaishnav, 2021, 'The Three Faces of the Indian State', *Journal of Democracy*, 32(1): 111-25.
- Lobo, Lancy, 2015, 'What Vadodara's Slum Displacement Reveals', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 50(36).

- Mahajan, Anilesh, 2022, 'What BJP's restructuring of top decision-making bodies means', *India Today*, 18 August.
- Mahaprashasta, Ajoy Ashirwad, 2023, 'Bihar's Caste Census Is a Bold Move Sure to Have Implications Beyond the State', *The Wire*, 10 January.
- Maiorano, Diego, 2015, *Autumn of the Matriarch – Indira Gandhi's Final Term in Office*, London: Hurst&Co.
- Maiorano, Diego, 2019, 'The 2019 Indian Elections and the Ruralization of the BJP', *Studies in Indian Politics*, 7(2): 176-190.
- Maiorano, Diego, 2021a, 'India's State Election Results: Implications for the BJP', *ISAS Insights*, No. 664, 14 May.
- Maiorano, Diego, 2021b, 'India 2020: Under the COVID hammer', *Asia Maior*, XXXI/2020: 305-330.
- Maiorano, Diego, 2022a, 'Democratic backsliding amid the COVID-19 pandemic in India', *Asia Maior*, Special Issue No. 2: 101-116.
- Maiorano, Diego, 2022b, 'India 2021: Politics amid the pandemic', *Asia Maior*, XXXII/2021: 297-328.
- Maiorano, Diego, 2022c, 'India as an Ethnocracy', *Il Politico*, 256(2): 59-75.
- Mehta, Pratap Bhanu, 2022, 'Bharat Jodo Yatra: A journey in search of a destination', *The Indian Express*, 24 December.
- Mishra, Soni, 2022, 'Congress: The grand old mess', *The Week*, 27 March.
- Mody, Ashoka, 2023, *India is Broken*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Mukherjee, Rahul, 2020, 'Covid vs. Democracy: India's Illiberal Remedy', *Journal of Democracy*, 31(4): 91-105.
- Outlook, 2022a, 12 June, 'Uttar Pradesh Government Demolishes «illegal» House Of Prayagraj Violence Accused'.
- Outlook, 2022b, 13 July, 'Battleground Defection: It's Congress Versus BJP In The Last Eight Years'.
- Outlook, 2022c, 13 October, 'ED Files Chargesheet Against Journalist Rana Ayyub In Alleged Money Laundering Case'.
- Palshikar, Suhas, 2022a, 'Loss of Majority and Loss of Principles', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 57(26-27): 8.
- Palshikar, Suhas, 2022b, 'One hundred days of Bharat Jodo', *The Indian Express*, 22 December.
- Palshikar, Suhas, 2023b, 'BJP's re-election in 2024 may consolidate an idea of India that is inherently un-democratic', *The Indian Express*, 6 January.
- Palshikar, Suhas, 2023a, 'What will India's collective self look like in the near future? Answer lies in the fate of one-party dominance', *The Indian Express*, 1 January.
- Poddar, Umang, 2022a, 'Does the EWS judgment remove the 50% cap on reservations?', *Scroll.in*, 20 November.
- Poddar, Umang, 2022b, 'Election results: The BJP is hegemonic at the national level – but weak in the states', *Scroll.in*, 9 December.
- Rai, Vinod, 2022, 'Agnipath: The Scheme and its Issues', *ISAS Insights* No. 724, 19 July.
- Reed, John, 2022, 'Crackdowns, lawsuits and intimidation: the threat to freedom of expression in India', *Financial Times*, 10 October.
- Saikia, Arunabh, 2022, 'Three factors behind the BJP's record-breaking victory in Gujarat', *Scroll.in*, 8 December.
- Scroll.in, 2022a, 20 April, 'Demolition drive stops in violence-hit Jahangirpuri over an hour after Supreme Court stay'.

- Scroll.in*, 2022b, 2 May, 'Weeks after Ram Navami clashes, demolitions of Muslim properties continue in Gujarat's Khambhat'.
- Scroll.in*, 2022c, August 9, 'Nitish Kumar rejoins Grand Alliance in Bihar after quitting NDA for the second time'.
- Sen, Ronojoy, 2022, 'Why the BJP Won Uttar Pradesh', *ISAS Briefs* No. 915, 22 March.
- Singh, Ajit Kumar, 'Economic Growth in Uttar Pradesh in Recent Years', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 56(50): 10-12.
- Singh, Sushant 2022, 'The Message from Agnipath: India Can't Afford the Military it Needs', *The India Forum*, 13 July.
- Singh, Karan Deep, & Hari Kumar 2022, 'Torched Trains and Burning Tires: India's New Military Recruitment Plan Fuels Angry Protests', *The New York Times*, 17 June.
- The Indian Express*, 2022, 17 July, 'Why is Modi, vocal during UPA rule, 'silent' on Rupee fall now, asks Oppn'.
- The Quint* 2022, 21 March, 'The Kashmir Files: Videos of Anti-Muslim Hate, Slogans in Theatres Go Viral'.
- The World Bank 2022, *India Development Update*, Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- Torri, Michelguglielmo, & Diego Maiorano, 2018, 'India 2017: Narendra Modi's continuing hegemony and his challenge to China', *Asia Maior*, XXVIII/2017: 267-291.
- Torri, Michelguglielmo, 2021, 'India 2020: The deepening crisis of democracy', *Asia Maior*, XXXI/2020: 331-376.
- Tiwari, Deeptiman, 2022, 'From 60% in UPA to 95% in NDA: A surge in share of Opposition leaders in CBI net', *The Indian Express*, 21 September.
- Verniers, Gilles, 2022, 'The End of a Political Model in Uttar Pradesh', *The India Forum*, 5 April.





## INDIA 2021-2022: PLAYING AGAINST CHINA ON DIFFERENT CHESSBOARDS

Michelguglielmo Torri

University of Turin  
mg.torri@gmail.com

*This article focusses on the five major developments which characterized Indian international relations in 2021 and 2022. The first of them was the gradual disengagement between Indian and Chinese military forces along the Himalayan undefined border. The second was the launching of an ambitious «vaccine diplomacy» aimed mainly to strengthen India's influence world-wide, but more specifically in Asia. The third was India's role in the Quad. The fourth was joining Israel, the UAE and the US in a new quadrilateral entente. The fifth was India's reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.*

*Concerning the first development, this article analyses the peculiar and undefined nature of the Himalayan border, highlighting the fact that in large areas it exists only on the drawing boards of India's and China's military staffs and leading political circles. This situation – which, by itself, makes incidents bound to happen – is of no easy solution, even if the two parties involved were characterised by a sincere desire to resolve the issue, which does not seem to be the case. In fact, as this article points out, in spite of the process of disengagement along the Himalaya, anti-Chinese feelings remained dominant among Indian politicians and public opinion. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that, as this article shows, India's «vaccine diplomacy» (which, after a promising start, failed spectacularly), her participation in both the Quad proper and the new quadrilateral entente (whose official name became I2U2), and her highly ambiguous policy of neutrality on the Russian invasions of Ukraine (in spite of India's close connection with the US) had all as a main aim confronting and containing China.*

**KEYWORDS** – India-China relations; India-China border; vaccine diplomacy; Quad; I2U2; India's Russian policy.

### 1. Introduction

The year 2020 had witnessed the worst situation of tension on the India-China border since at least 1987, when the two countries had found themselves on the brink of war. The years under review, however, saw the gradual and concerted – although admittedly halting – disengagement of the two countries' armed forces at the points of greatest tension. This, nonetheless, did not translate into any improvement of the deeply antagonistic view of China entertained in India by the whole political class, most analysts and large sections of the public opinion.

In the final analysis, therefore, tension with China mixed with deeply rooted suspicions on the alleged anti-India goals of Beijing's foreign policy remained the backdrop and ultimate driving force of India's foreign policy during the period under review. Not surprisingly, the other main developments of India's foreign policy in the years here analysed were managed by the Indian government with the need to confront China in mind as well, or perhaps above all.

The first of these developments, which was preeminent in 2021, was the attempt to transform the world-wide COVID-19-induced health crisis into an opportunity for India. The aim was to build up India's influence world-wide, but particularly in Asia, with the view to counterbalance China's own influence. After a promising start, nonetheless, New Delhi's attempt ended in failure, mainly as a consequence of the Indian government's mismanagement of the COVID-19 crisis at home.

New Delhi, however, remained in the international limelight because of her role in two minilateral alliances. The first was the Quad, namely an entente between Australia, India, Japan and the US. Relaunched in 2017, after a period of hiatus, the Quad became particularly active in the two years under review. The second minilateral alliance was another four-country entente, which came into being in the closing months of 2021 and, beside India, included Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the US.

A main, although undeclared, finality of the Quad remained – in this period as in the years before – the containment of Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific. In the other quadrilateral entente, also, which had mainly economic finalities, the anti-China dimension was not absent. Either preventing or slowing down Chinese economic expansion in West Asia was among the finalities pursued by the sponsor of the entente, namely the US. This, no doubt, was a goal unambiguously shared by India.

The final development that India had to cope with in the period under review was the need to manage the international fall-out of Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. During the previous years, the India-US military connection had become so close as to constitute – according to some analysts, including the author of these lines – a *de facto* alliance. Whether or not the India-US military closeness was a *de facto* fully-fledged alliance, Washington and its allies expected India to side with them against Russia. Nonetheless, India took an ambiguous neutral standing, refusing to publicly condemn the Russian invasion and not hesitating to profit from the possibility of buying oil and other Russian goods at discounted prices. Contrary to the expectations of many, however, the US and its closest allies, instead of sanctioning India, fairly quickly accepted its highly ambiguous position. Behind their reaction there was the fact that, while the US was engaged in facing down Russia in Europe, it saw as its main and most dangerous challenge a rising China. Whereas India's support in tackling the Russian aggression in Europe would have been welcome but far from

decisive, its role in the US-sponsored anti-Chinese arc of containment in the Indo-Pacific was crucial. As that was a role which, indeed, New Delhi was happy to play, India could count on the indulgence of the US and its allies as far as her hedging on the Ukraine question was concerned.

In the next sections, India's foreign policy in the years 2021 and 2022 is analysed by focussing on the key points just highlighted.

## 2. *The border problem with China*

### 2.1. *The India-China disengagement process along the Himalayan border: A timeline*

As noted above, the year 2020 had seen the most dramatic increase in tension along the Sino-Indian Himalayan border since 1987. As discussed elsewhere [Torri 2021], at the closing of that year, in spite of attempts at negotiation, which had been haltingly going on since summer, no concrete step forward on the path towards de-escalation had been taken [Torri 2021]. As a result, during the winter months, the substantial and enhanced number of troops which had been deployed by both China and India along or in proximity to the disputed parts of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), namely the supposed provisional Sino-Indian border,<sup>1</sup> maintained their forward position, braving «the deadly risk brought about by the extreme weather conditions of the Himalaya in Winter time» [Bedi 2021]. Eventually, possibly also as a consequence of «the attrition both armies had suffered during their LAC deployments in intense cold, October onwards» [ibid.], a first disengagement agreement was reached and announced on 10 February 2021 by China and a day later by India [ibid.].

The agreement, which was the result of the 9<sup>th</sup> round of talks at the level of the commanders of the two opposing armies,<sup>2</sup> saw the complete withdrawal of troops from the contested Pangong Tso area by 19 February

1. Why, according to this author, the LAC is a «supposed» provisional border is explained below, in section 2.3.

2. Corps Commander-level talks as a way to solve the tensions along the Sino-Indian border, which became first apparent following the clashes on 5-6 May 2020 on the northern bank of Pangong Lake (or Pangong Tso), started on 6 June 2020. The situation on the ground, however, far from improving worsened, reaching its nadir with the clash in Galwan Valley (15-16 June), which caused losses of human lives for the first time since 1975. A second round of talks was held on 22 June 2020, which led to Indian and Chinese military commanders reaching a «mutual consensus to disengage» from all «friction areas» along the contested Line of Actual Control (LAC)» [*Hindustan Times* 2020, 24 June]. However, this decision was not followed by any concrete step. The first was taken on 10 February 2021 (see below). Between 30 June 2020 and the end of the year 2022, a further 14 rounds of talk were held, the latest one (the 17<sup>th</sup>) on 20 December 2020.

and its transformation in a buffer zone. This was followed by the setting up on 25 February 2021 of a hotline connecting the Indian and Chinese foreign ministers.

In the following months of 2021, the rounds of talks at corps commanders level went on and resulted, on 31 July 2021, in the agreement for a further disengagement at Patrolling Post 17A, near Gogra Post in Eastern Ladakh [Kaushik 2021]. However, in the following months, the further corps commanders' meetings did not result in any additional disengagement. Some eight months later, namely by March 2022, it had become clear that disengagement in Hot Springs, Depsang and Demchok – namely contested areas considered of high strategic relevance – was too important a question to be reached at the level of corps commanders and had to be made at the highest political level [Ramachandran 2022, 15 March].

In this situation, on 25 March 2022, there was a surprise passage to Delhi on the part of Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who met both his Indian counterpart, Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, and India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval. Wang appeared less interested in breaking the border stalemate than in de-emphasizing the importance of the border problems. Following what had become the traditional Chinese approach to the relation with India, Wang stressed the interests shared by both China and India at world level, in the attempt to relaunch some kind of bilateral cooperation [MFA-PRC 2022a].

Indian reaction to Wang's approach was negative. As cogently summed up by India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar: «The frictions and tensions that arise from China's deployment since April 2020 cannot be reconciled with a normal relationship between the two neighbours» [Al Jazeera 2022, 26 March].

Wang and Jaishankar met again on 7 July 2022, on the side-lines of the Group of Twenty (G20) Foreign Ministers meeting in Bali. In the interval between the two meetings, Beijing strived to mollify New Delhi's hostility by supporting India's role as the rotating chair of the SCO, which India would assume in September of that same year, and of the G20, due in September 2023 in New Delhi.

Beijing's strategy was not totally devoid of results, as made clear by the Indian Foreign Minister's thanks to China for its support, given by Jaishankar on the side-lines of the Bali meeting [MFA-PRC 2022b].

This more relaxed situation possibly explains why, on 17 July 2022, the 16<sup>th</sup> India-China Corp Commanders level talks resulted in the agreement to disengage from Gogra Hot Spring Area, which was carried out by 13 September 2022 [News On Air 2022, 16 September; Jash 2022].

The concluding months of the year 2022 did not see any further disengagement. Between 15 November and 2 December, *Yudh Abhyas*, a joint military exercise involving India's 9<sup>th</sup> Assam Regiment and the US 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division was carried out in Auli, just 100 kilometres from the LAC's

central sector in Uttarakhand. Not surprisingly, the joint exercise provoked China's protest that the exercise violated the India-China agreements of 1993 and 1996. [Ramachandran 2022, 13 December].

The situation seemed to further worsen when, on 9 December 2022, Indian and Chinese troops clashed at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Arunachal Pradesh. Nevertheless, the clash was a minor one, causing «minor injuries to a few personnel from both sides». Besides, after the clash, the two sides «immediately disengaged from the area» [The Wire 2022, 22 December].

On 20 December 2022, a fresh round of high-level military talks was held, «with a focus on resolving the remaining issues in Eastern Ladakh». Although the «frank<sup>3</sup> and in-depth discussion» between the two parties did not lead to any further disengagement, at least the two parties «agreed to maintain the security and stability on the ground in the Western sector». They also agreed «to stay in close contact and maintain dialogue through military and diplomatic channels and work out a mutually acceptable resolution of the remaining issues at the earliest» [The Wire 2022, 22 December].

## *2.2. The lack of positive repercussions of the disengagement process on Indian public opinion*

Summing up, the years 2021 and 2022 saw a slow, even haltingly, but nevertheless substantial process of disengagement along the LAC. This, however, did not improve the deeply negative view of China entertained by India's political class, most Indian analysts and the quasi-totality of Indian public opinion. As noted by former ambassador M. K. Bhadrakumar, the «break-through» at Pangong Tso of February 2021 «was a good thing to happen», and was to be «savoured as a net gain on the road to peace». «Curiously», however, noted the former ambassador,

... the opposite seems to be happening. The reduction of military tensions in Pangong Tso has become a matter of heartburn for sections of the media and the fraternity of India's 'China hands' – and possibly, hawkish elements within the establishment – who scoff at the very notion of peaceful resolution of territorial differences with China now or ever [Bhadrakumar 2021].

The same attitude continued to be preminent for the whole period under examination. Accordingly, for example, as noted by a well-known Indian senior journalist, Prem Shankar Jha, in March 2021 «Beijing emphatic assertion that India should host the BRICS summit in the latter part of the year despite the confrontation in Ladakh has been greeted with suspicion by the media» [Jha 2021b].

3. In diplomatic jargon a «frank» discussion is a discussion characterized by open disagreement.

In fact, most Indian analysts dismissed the positive political value of any disengagement as either the consequence of the caving in by Indian negotiators under Chinese pressure or due to the fact that China had adapted to accept Indian requests because forced by its own internal problems. So, for example, according to Colonel Ajai Shukla, the Pangong Tso disengagement had resulted in the Indian army giving up the possibility to enter an area which India had patrolled since the 1962 Sino-Indian war [Shukla 2021, 12 Febbraio; Singh, Sushant, 2020b]. On her part, Professor Amrita Jash, in an otherwise appreciable analysis of the India-China boundary dispute, while commenting the completion of the September 2022 disengagement in the Gogra-Hot Spring area, reached the conclusion that it did not signal any real progress on the path to effective de-escalation. In her opinion, China – as well as India herself – had been forced to disengage by the necessity to improve the diplomatic atmosphere prior to the SCO summit due on 15-16 September 2022. Also, the need for Chinese President Xi Jinping to maintain internal and external stability in view of the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, due in October 2022, had played a role. Her conclusion was that:

If one appreciates these two factors, the recent disengagement process in eastern Ladakh tends to appear more as a temporary adjustment, or tactical manoeuvring, rather than a genuine push to resolve the dispute. Lasting de-escalation therefore remains elusive [Jash 2022].

Even more pessimistic was the conclusion reached by noted analyst Harsh V. Pant. Pant observed that «India tried to forge a partnership with China based on shared global outlooks», in the belief that «this global convergence would eventually lead to a bilateral convergence», namely to a solution of the border problems. However, in Pant's evaluation, such a belief was nothing different from a «mythology». Indian foreign policy decision-makers had continued to perpetuate it «till it was once and, hopefully, forever shattered by the bloody clashes of June 2020 in the Galwan Valley, leading to the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers» [Pant 2022].

### 2.3. *Where on earth is located the LAC?*

Summing up, most Indian analysts shared a deeply pessimistic outlook concerning India's relation with China. This pessimistic outlook descended from the view, entertained not only by most of them, but also by the bulk of Indian politicians and public opinion, that China, through the use of a complex and varied set of political, economic and military strategies, was bent on surrounding, choking and subordinating India, while nibbling away at her northernmost national territory.

Discussing the features of India's negative outlook of China and the reasons which explain them is a quite complex subject, which cannot be satisfactorily discussed here and, anyway, exceeds the thematic limits of

this article. In order to remain inside them, it suffices to focus on the fact that, in the period under review, the pre-existing negative outlook related to China was reposed and strengthened chiefly on the basis of analyses which focussed mainly on the border situation, whose unsettled state was explained as a result of China's allegedly unrelenting pressure. This pressure was read as aimed at expanding China's control over Indian territory by making use of what – with a successful metaphor – has been described as «salami slicing» strategy. According to well-known Indian analyst Brahma Chellaney, this strategy «centers on a steady progression of small actions, none of which serves as a *casus belli* by itself, yet which over time lead cumulatively to a strategic transformation in China's favor» [Chellaney 2013].

This kind of analysis, although superficially convincing and in line with the evaluations by most Western analysts, has, nonetheless, a crucial drawback. This is the unstated assumption that the LAC – exactly as the Line Of Control (LOC) dividing India from Pakistan in Kashmir – although not an official border, is, at the very least, a well-defined provisional border, whose layoff is clear to both parties and acknowledged by both of them. Or, to put it in the words of a well-known Indian weekly [India Today, 2015, 11 June] «a demarcation reflecting territories that are at present under both side's control, pending a resolution of the boundary». Reality, however, was strikingly different.

As already explained elsewhere [Torri 2021], a well-defined and mutually acknowledged, although unofficial, dividing line separating China-controlled from India-controlled territories *does not exist* along most of the Himalayan border. What does exist is a series of permanently or semi-permanently occupied posts, controlled by either India or China, sprinkled along the Himalaya. These bases are in the middle of territories which are de facto «no man lands» and have never or only fitfully been patrolled by either military (or, in some cases, by both, although at different times of the year). The posts effectively held by either China or India are *notionally* connected by lines which have never been mutually demarcated on the ground. In some cases, these lines are *notionally* drawn along areas where the military of the nation claiming them as part of its own territory has never set foot, or, at the most, has done so only temporarily, or only recently.

The bases permanently or semi-permanently manned by either militaries and the lines notionally connecting them make up the LAC. Here a first main problem is that the LAC according to India and the LAC according to China are massively divergent, as shown by the fact that the Indian LAC is 3,488 kilometres long, whereas the Chinese LAC is only around 2,000 kilometres long [e.g., Singh, Sushant, 2020a].

This state of affairs, although crucially important, is usually overlooked by politicians and analysts, *both Indian and Chinese*. Nonetheless, the peculiar nature of the Indian and Chinese systems of control in the Himala-



yas and the fact that the two states have such wildly different ideas about the length of the provisional border entail at least three notable consequences.

The first is that, in practice, there is not one LAC, but, rather, two; and, as already noted, widely divergent at that.

The second consequence is that these two widely divergent LACs, along much of their respective courses, have a kind of phantasmatic existence: they concretely exist only on the drawing boards and in the operational plans of the militaries of either India or China. Quite simply, they do not exist on the ground along large tracts of their respective courses.

The third consequence is that, particularly where the LACs only exist on the official or semi-official maps of one of the two states, they sometimes coincide, but, more often, they do not. While sometimes they are divided by a «no man» land, sometimes they overlap.<sup>4</sup> And, very often, they overlap in areas which are usually seen as strategically important. This is the necessary consequence of the fact that both India and China, in unilaterally drawing (on their maps) their respective LACs, have arbitrarily inserted as part of the territories that each nation claims as its own as many areas as possible that are considered strategically important. It goes without saying that, in most cases, these are areas which have never been permanently occupied and only in some cases have been or are fitfully patrolled – and sometimes, as already noted, by the militaries of both nations, although during different periods of the year.

In the final analysis, no internationally valid border divides India from China, as an internationally valid border must first be jointly agreed by the two nations involved and then jointly demarcated on the ground. This problem, however, is compounded by the peculiarity that along much of the territory where an Indian-China official border should lie, *not even a provisional border exists*, but only a series of permanently or semi-permanently manned bases, separated by wide stretches of what it is, to all effects, no man land.

This is a kind of situation that, in spite of its many ambiguities, would not be dangerous per se. The problem is that both China and India have been moving forward, advancing deeper and deeper into unoccupied territories and sometimes even into territories that have been briefly or fitfully occupied by the other side.

When these forward moves occur, two outcomes are possible. If side A realizes that side B is entering a no-man area, trying to assume its de facto control, side A counter-moves, entering the same area and confronting the other side, in the attempt to put an end to the actual occupation of what

4. Overlapping «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». Conversely, «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» [Torri 2021].

is invariably claimed as territory belonging to side A. This countermove is usually carried out through a mixture of psychological pressures – for example showing boards with writings asking the opposite party to retire – and manoeuvring aimed at assuring a tactically dominant position. Most times the ongoing incident is resolved in just one day, with both sides retreating to their starting points. Historically, only in few cases these confrontations have continued for longer periods, and in even fewer have resulted in violent confrontations [Bhonsale 2018, particularly Table 4]. Unfortunately, as already remembered, in 2020 these confrontations escalated from non-violent to violent and, although without the use of firearms, caused human losses and triggered such a rise in tension to apparently push the two countries on the verge of war.

The second possible outcome occurs when one of the two sides establishes a permanent or semi-permanent basis in the formerly no-man land, without the opposite side realizing it, if not at a later date. When the realization that the opposite party has silently extended its *de facto* control on previously unoccupied land occurs, the aggrieved party reacts in different ways, depending on its nationality. If it is Indian, a massive number of indignant analyses appear on the traditional and new media, decrying the fact that more or less large tracts of the sacred and inviolable soil of the motherland have treacherously been annexed by China. These analyses usually end up with stern criticism of the incumbent government, which is accused of ineptitude, weakness, guilty complacency and many other rather despicable shortcomings. Often, these accusations are taken up by the opposition in parliament. Conversely, if the aggrieved party is China, the reaction is not so immediate and vocal. When, however, the same process occurs in reverse, the Chinese media does not fail to justify the action of its armed forces by presenting it as a reaction to previous Indian encroachments.

While the Indian press highlights and emphasizes China's transgressions on alleged Indian soil, it is usually silent when the opposite happens. As a result, if one uncritically relies on Indian press reports, the impression is inescapable that transgressing the phantasmatic provisional Himalayan border is a one-way Chinese affair; Indians are never guilty of it. This powerfully contributes to strengthen the prevailing impression, entertained by Indian public opinion, that China is steadily implementing an aggressive and treacherous «salami slicing» strategy, aimed at nibbling away Indian territory. Only rarely what has become India's «common wisdom» on China is challenged by statements from representatives of the dominant political and military circles. One of these rare statements was authored by the Indian Minister of State for Road Transport and Highways and former army chief, General V. K. Singh, on 7 February 2021. Singh, a well-known hawk on China, while speaking to the Indian media, flatly stated:

...none of you come to know how many times we have transgressed as per our perception. We don't announce it. Chinese media does not

cover it... Let me assure you, if China has transgressed 10 times, we must have done it at least 50 times, as per our perception [The Hindu 2021, 7 February].

#### 2.4. *Viewing the LAC from the other side of the border*

In China, although analyses and debates on the situation of the Himalaya have much less prominence than in India, they are not totally absent. It is therefore of interest to see how Chinese analysts view the problem.

What immediately stands out is that, apparently, the Chinese approach to the problem is a mirror image of the Indian one. Like their Indian counterparts, most Chinese analysts, when discussing the situation along the Himalaya, appear convinced of the existence of a well-defined LAC. Of course, the difference is that the LAC they refer to is the one conceived by China.

This perception explains how the criticism made by Chinese analysts is mirror-like to that made by Indian analysts. This mirror-like symmetry goes to the point that two influential Chinese analysts, Hu Shisheng and Wang Jue [2020], while discussing «India's tough foreign policy towards China», make use of the term «sausage slicing» to describe what they see as «a never-ending assertion of territorial rights via aggressive patrolling» on the part of India along the undefined Himalayan border [see also, Jha 2021].

#### 2.5. *What implies the existence of an undefined and non-demarcated border*

At this point, before moving forward, it is imperative to assess the meaning of what has been argued so far. An internationally acknowledged Sino-Indian border does not exist and a continuous provisional border does not exist either, while extensive tracts of the territory between China and India are simply no-man land. Also, in most cases incidents along the phantasmatic Sino-Indian border have historically occurred in what is, to all effects, no-man land. In the final analysis the only fact which is clear and indisputable is that both China and India claim certain borders that extend on territory that they do not control and, anyway, whose control is not acknowledged by the counterpart. It is also worth stressing that both sides have been quite outspoken in claiming areas that are under the control of the other side. China, after tacitly accepting for decades the McMahon line, namely the highest crest of the Himalaya, as the de facto Sino-Indian border in the Eastern sector, beginning in 2006<sup>5</sup> has started to vocally and publicly claim what it calls Southern Tibet – namely the present-day Indian state

5. With the interview granted on 13 November 2006 by China's ambassador in New Delhi, Sun Yuxi, on a private Indian television channel. E.g., *Hindustan Times* 2006.

of Arunachal Pradesh – as historically part of its own national territory [Torri 2022: 126-130]. On its part, India has never given up its claims on Aksai Chin, that is a territory never controlled by Delhi and largely under Chinese sway since the 1950s. India's claims were reiterated and strengthened in 2019 by the number 2 in the Indian government, Home Minister Amit Shah. Shah publicly claimed the entire Aksai Chin as Indian territory in two separate speeches in parliament, declaring that regaining control of it was «worth dying for» [Business Standard 2019, 22 November and 5 December].

Allocating responsibility for «transgressions» taking place beyond a boundary which legally does not exist and whose de facto lay is a matter of dispute is objectively difficult. Nevertheless, undeterred by this difficulty, most Indian and Western analysts seem to have very clear ideas about what is happening in the Himalayas and which party is transgressing on land which is not inside its national borders. So, for example, a learned reader of the first draft of this article has flatly stated that, after the incidents in 2020,

the PLA [the Chinese army] remains in control of a sizable – exactly how large is unclear – area in Ladakh that India considers its own. It has not withdrawn since it took those areas in early 2020 and although New Delhi is reluctant to discuss it, China is effectively occupying significant territory – perhaps 38,000 square kms [...] So, while there has been some tactical disengagement, the strategic gains made by China in 2020 remain, and that needs to be recognized [...].

This claim is grounded by its author on «extensive media reporting», exemplified, in his/her considered opinion, by an article published in the prestigious French daily *Le Monde* [2022, 9 August]. This article, however, is squarely based on two arbitrary and one-sided assumptions. The first is that the international Sino-Indian border is the border claimed by India since the 1950s – namely a territory that India never controlled and which was never assigned to India by an international treaty. The second is that the LAC lies exactly where India claims it lies.

The argument that the PLA has occupied extensive tracts of Indian territory in the Himalaya has been supported by one of the editors of this journal, who has brought to this writer's attention some reports in the Indian press, discussing a paper stating that in 2020 India lost control of 26 of the 65 Patrolling Points in Ladakh, as result of «[r]estrictive or no patrolling by Indian Security Forces (ISFs)» [The Wire 2023, 25 January; *The Economic Times* 2023]. In other words, the argument made by these Indian press reports and the paper they discuss is that China had occupied Himalayan territory which India claimed as its own on the (tenuous) basis that it had previously patrolled it. Nevertheless, even this tenuous basis of legitimacy for India's claims had been nullified by the simple fact that India, for reasons better known to her political and military leaders, had

*voluntarily* stopped patrolling those particular areas. This, read together with the fact that no legal border exists in the region, is far from proving that China has occupied *Indian* territory.

What it proves – and its relevance should not be underestimated – is that Indian public opinion is convinced that China has illegally occupied Indian territory. This may well be a wrong perception; however, as stated by a well-known sociological law, what is held to be true – never mind that it actually is – becomes true in its consequences. This is exactly what has happened in this case. The fact that Indian public opinion has become convinced that China is illegally occupying Indian territory cannot but have consequences. The most dangerous one is that any solution of the Sino-Indian ongoing tensions has been made both extremely difficult and improbable.

## 2.6. *Why Western analysts share the Indian view of the India-China border problem*

Western analysts have the tendency to accept the Indian view concerning the Himalayan border problem as the correct one because it nicely dovetails with the currently dominant China-related narrative in the West. This narrative is based on the idea that the world crisis triggered by the Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy of 15 September 2008 was read by China as signalling the visible decline of Western – and, more specifically, US – power. This perception encouraged Beijing to develop an increasingly aggressive foreign policy towards its neighbours, evidently on the basis of the idea that the capability on the part of Washington to protect its allies was diminishing. This new aggressive policy really took off in or around 2012, with Xi Jinping's ascent to power.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, as stressed by Indian analysts themselves – e.g., former Indian national security adviser Shivshankar Menon [2022] – China's aggressiveness along the Himalaya is part and parcel of a more general Chinese new approach to foreign policy, fully visible in the East China and South China seas.

This analysis does not take into account two elements. The first is that the problems between China and India did not start either in 2008 or 2012, but in the 1950s. The second element is that, between 1988 and 2005-2006, the India-China relations went through a phase of visible improvement. This positive trend, however, was reversed in 2005-2006, namely *before* the start of the new phase of China's foreign policy. Without dwelling on the causes of this somersault (which this author has discussed elsewhere in some detail [Torri 2020]), what is important to stress here is that the tensions between, on the one hand, China and her Eastern and South-eastern neigh-

6. The bibliography on China's «new aggressiveness» is too wide to be given here with any degree of completeness. In any case, see, e.g., Chen *et al.* 2013/14; Johnston 2013; Friedberg 2014; Jerdén 2014; Mastro 2014; Yan 2014; Hoo 2017; Chang Liao 2018.

bours and, on the other, China and India do not have the same origins and causes. Considering the two sets of tensions as the two faces of the same coin can only cloud our ability to arrive at a full understanding of the problem we want to explain.

A heuristically sounder way to put the causes of the tensions along the Himalaya into perspective is to reflect on the fact that the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) has had problems in settling its land borders with no less than 14 neighbouring countries. In some cases, these problems, particularly those with the URSS and Vietnam, have been so difficult to solve to cause major military clashes. Nonetheless, it is a fact that only the land problems with India and Bhutan – the latter a state which is little different from an Indian protectorate – remain unresolved.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, a comparative study of the reasons why the land border problems between China and its neighbours have been solved in 12 cases but not in the case of India and a state that is India's de facto satellite, although no doubt useful, is beyond the scope of this article. Here the problem has been recalled only as a caveat against the unthinking acceptance of the thesis that the assertive turn taken by Xi Jinping's China in the Indo-Pacific and its launching of projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) do account for the dramatic worsening in India-China relations and India's growing wariness about Beijing's intentions. This, of course, is what has been argued by the bulk of the literature on the topic with such a consistency to transform the «newly aggressive Xi Jinping's China foreign policy» thesis into something akin to the «common wisdom» on this topic.

Without venturing into the ongoing debate on how aggressive and truly new China's «new aggressive foreign policy» really is, this author's contention is that India-China relations were already conspicuously deteriorating before Xi's rise to power and for reasons that had nothing to do with it [Torri 2020]. Which means that China's supposed new aggressiveness against India might have been a contributing factor to the deterioration of India-China relations, but certainly not its causal factor. Not taking into account the past of China-India relations can only distort any analysis aimed at identifying the root causes that continue to make India-China relations difficult.

### *2.7. Some concluding reflections on the India-China border situation at the end of the period under review*

At the end of the period under review, two contradictory elements characterized the situation along the undefined and not-demarcated India-China border. One, scarcely noted by the Indian and Western press, pointed to an improvement of the situation; another, on which Indian and Western me-

7. Problems concerning the sea borders separating China from her neighbours appear to be considerably more difficult to solve and, in fact, in most cases, have not been solved.

dia focussed, pointed to a situation of increasing danger of all-out military confrontation.

### 2.7.1. *The coming into being of a more tranquil situation*

As discussed above, during the period under review, the danger of war gradually receded and, eventually, on 10/11 February 2020, a first disengagement agreement was reached. Of course, the agreement was important by itself and also as a potential first substantial step forward on the path to peace and tranquillity along the border. What, however, potentially made it a turning point in the long-drawn India-China border dispute was another development, firstly highlighted by senior Indian journalist Prem Shankar Jha. In Jha's words:

To say that this [the agreement leading to the 10/11 February disengagement] has been a crucial breakthrough in the longstanding border dispute would be an understatement. For the agreement is not only an explicit acknowledgement that a 'Grey Area' or 'No Man's Land' has existed between the two countries' conflicting definitions of the LAC, but also marks a formal elevation of this area to the status of a 'buffer zone' [Jha 2021a].

In fact, the creation of buffer zones separating the India-claimed Himalayan areas from those claimed by China continued in occasion of the further disengagements, contributing to highlight the existence of two LACs divided by a «no man» zone.

Admittedly, the meaning of this quite important development, went lost to most Indian analysts, as shown by the fact that whereas some of them claimed that the disengagement had been a victory for India, inasmuch additional territory had been included in the Indian side of the LAC [Pant and Joshi 2021], others claimed the exact opposite, pointing out that India had lost to China areas previously part of the territory on the Indian side of the LAC [Shukla 2021; Sawhney 2021]. Also, when reporting the establishment of a buffer zone as result of the second main disengagement (agreed on 31 July 2022), the Indian defence establishment and the Indian press, rather than admitting that the mutual acknowledgement of the existence of two LACs, separated by a buffer zone, was underway, preferred to claim that «a *temporary* no-patrolling zone on either side of the LAC» was established [Kaushik 2021; emphasis added]. Others, implied that the buffer zone had been created on areas previously controlled by India [Khan 2022]<sup>8</sup>

In sum, most Indian analysts appeared either unable or unwilling to comprehend the potential political meaning of the ongoing disengagement process.

8. Khan, Wajahat S., 2022, 'In the world's highest battlefield, China has the advantage over India', *Gzero*, 18 December.

### 2.7.2 *The coming into being of a more tense and dangerous situation*

Both China and India had started to expand and improve their military infrastructures along the Himalaya well before the 2020 clash. Beginning in 2020, not only there was an acceleration in the building of military infrastructures on both sides of the uncertain dividing line, but also a re-deployment of both Indian and Chinese troops, with the dual objective of strengthening the respective defensive positions and enhancing their capability to launch offensive strikes. Both armies built or modernized new airports and heliports, completed with hardened shelters, sometimes supposedly nuclear-proof, for aircrafts, unmanned aerial vehicles and long-range surface-to-air missiles. Both armies built new strategic roads, integrated on the Indian side by the building of new bridges, tunnels and heated accommodations for Indian troops. India was also planning the construction of two strategic railway lines in the Northeast and an additional one in Ladakh.

The number of the troops deployed behind the respective sides of the LAC dramatically increased, their striking power enhanced by the induction of vehicle-mounted howitzers, light tanks and main battle tanks; their mobility by the deployment of helicopters capable of ferrying both soldiers and artillery. At the same time, both India and China strengthened the respective air forces deployed at striking distance from the adversarial side.

In building up their military forces and logistic infrastructures, India and China had to cope with different challenges, created by the different configuration of the terrain in the two countries. Behind China's forces deployed on the Himalaya, there is an extensive high plateau, quite distant from the Chinese heartland. This means that the Chinese have to negotiate very long supply lines. The situation on the Indian side is quite different, with shortened supply lines. However, the Chinese supply lines are a comparatively dense network of all-weather roads, which could be disrupted by India only with difficulty. Conversely, at least a part of the most recent road connections on the Indian side are dirt tracks, which not only could easily be disrupted by Chinese attacks, but are already being damaged by the inclemency of the weather.

The different configuration of the terrain plays a role also as far as the offensive capabilities of the two air forces are concerned. As pointed out by Manoj Joshi: «Operating from the high Tibetan plateau, Chinese aircraft pay a weight penalty and cannot carry a full war load. Besides, Indian radar systems located high in the Himalaya pick them up as they take off. Indian fighters [...] can take up full war loads and pop up over the Himalaya to strike» [Joshi 2023].

If it is clear that the armed forces of both countries have been going through a dramatic increase in men and means, it is more difficult to assess the exact consistency and power of the two military apparatuses, and,



more importantly, if one of the two is in a position of superiority vis-à-vis the other.<sup>9</sup>

Judging also from the «cautiously worded statement» by Indian Army chief General Manoj Pande on 15 January 2023 [Sagar 2023], the impression of this writer is that Chinese and Indian forces had reached, at that point in time, a situation of substantial parity along the Himalayan undefined border.

In the absence of either a mutually agreed provisional border or code of conduct, military power parity is a deterrent as good as any against imprudent and risky military adventures. Nonetheless, according to a confidential research paper by the Ladakh Police, made public by Reuters in mid-January 2023 – and already alluded to in section 2.5. – the situation remained dangerous. The paper, based on intelligence gathered in the border areas, interpreted in the light of a study of the pattern of India-China military tensions over the years, came to the conclusion that new clashes between Indian and Chinese troops along their contested frontier could not be ruled out [Reuters 2023].

Summing up, the situation along the contested Himalayan border remained contradictory. Disengagement and the building of buffer zones appeared to point towards an improvement of the situation of tension along the Himalaya. The profoundly antagonistic view of China on the part of Indian public opinion and the confidential report of the Ladakh police pointed in the opposite direction.

### *3. India's vaccine diplomacy and its failure*

In the years under review India's confrontation with China was not limited to the Himalayan heights. Confronting China's influence was indeed also a key objective of the «vaccine diplomacy» launched by Narendra Modi on 19 January 2021, while the COVID-19 pandemic was in full swing. On that day, the Indian Prime Minister announced that the first shipments of India-produced vaccine doses to neighbouring countries would begin the following day [Magee 2021].

There is little doubt that Modi saw the pandemic as a crisis that had to be turned into an opportunity, in order to prop up India's international standing as a major world power and confront and diminish China's in-

9. The rather impressionistic analysis of the situation of increasing militarization ongoing on the Himalaya is based on Indian or international press reports, which, in turn, are based on news from Indian or US official circles, open-source intelligence and studies by independent research groups, which base their assessments also on satellite photographs. See, e.g., De Silva and Jones 2021; Detsch 2021; Dutton 2021; NDTV 2022; Roy 2021; Bagchi 2022; Khan 2022; Saballa 2022. Of particular interest is the analysis carried out by Manoj Joshi [2023], a well-known authority on the Sino-Indian border.

fluence in South Asia and elsewhere. These were objectives that could be reached if India succeeded in playing the role of defender of the health interests of weaker nations and leveraging her strength as the largest world producer of generic medicines.<sup>10</sup>

This strategy started to be implemented already in 2020, and became even more incisive once the anti-COVID vaccines became available in December of that year. In January 2021, India launched a veritable international vaccine campaign, making massive doses of anti-COVID vaccines available first to neighbouring countries and then world-wide. By the end of March 2021, however, the brutality and negligence with which the Indian government had managed the pandemic domestically came home to roost [Maiorano 2022]. As soon as the second and devastating COVID wave hit India in mid-March 2021,<sup>11</sup> the Indian government was forced to put an end to anti-COVID vaccine exports. Limited exports were restarted several months later, in mid-October 2021, but it was only at the end of November that they resumed at full speed. By that time the good will and influence gained by India up to mid-March 2021 had been largely squandered.

### 3.1. *From success to disaster*

When, in December 2020, the mass production of SARS-CoV-2 vaccines became possible, India, because of its solid pharmaceutical industry, was in pole position to become a main producer world-wide [Madan 2019]. In particular, already in June 2020, the British drug maker Oxford AstraZeneca and Serum Institute of India (SII), India's No. 1 biotechnology company and a foremost one world-wide, had entered an agreement. Under it, SII would produce one billion doses of AstraZeneca's anti-COVID vaccine, to be distributed to low-income countries, including India [Rajagopal 2020]. At the beginning of January 2021, the AstraZeneca vaccine was granted emergency use authorization both in India and in a series of other countries of the Global South<sup>12</sup> [AstraZeneca.com 2021; Pasricha 2021a]. At the same time, other India-produced COVID vaccines appeared to be on the verge of commercialization, in particular the completely indigenous Covaxin, produced by Bharat Biotech in cooperation with the Indian Council of Medical Research and the Pune National Institute of Virology [Pant & Tirkey 2021; Singh, Bawa, *et al.*; Dhar 2021].

10. On the eve of the COVID pandemic, India's pharmaceutical industry ranked the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest world-wide in terms of volume of its products, the 13<sup>th</sup> largest in terms of value. It also occupied the 10<sup>th</sup> rank as an exporter of generic medical drugs. See Madan 2019.

11. According to the medical journal *Cureus*, the second wave hit India between 13 March 2021 and 19 June of the same year [Agarwala *et al.* 2022].

12. Argentina, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Mexico, Morocco, Brazil, South Africa, Saudi Arabia.

In mid-January 2021, once the COVID-19 vaccines had become fully available, India started to massively export them to neighbouring countries. The first consignments went to Bhutan, Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar and Seychelles. Mauritius came soon after. Then, in February, India's vaccine exports went beyond the South Asian/Indian Ocean area, reaching the Caribbeans, Brazil, Algeria, South Africa and Egypt. India also contributed to the COVAX programme,<sup>13</sup> which, in turn, supplied vaccine doses to «nearly 100 countries in the global South by the end of 2021» [Ariyawardana 2022: 153].

The number of vaccine doses exported by India was really remarkable. As on 11 May 2021, it amounted to 66,369,800 vaccine doses sent to 95 nations [Tyagi 2021].<sup>14</sup> Only 16% of the doses exported, namely 10.715.000, had been sent as aid. An additional 30%, namely 19.862.800 vaccine doses, had been donated to the WHO as supplies for the COVAX programme (of which, however, India was also a beneficiary [Gettleman *et al.* 2021]). Finally, something more than half of the vaccine doses, namely some 54% of the total exports, equal to 35.792.000 doses, had been sent as commercial supplies by the two main Indian vaccine manufacturers; SII and Bharat Biotech [Kurup 2021].

This massive programme of exports was presented as the prosecution of India's well-honed tradition of international solidarity. Given India's record in this field,<sup>15</sup> there is no doubt that this explanation is not devoid of truth. Nonetheless it does not represent the whole truth; significantly, not a single dose of vaccine was ever sent to Pakistan, regarded by India as an enemy. Also, as noted above, more than 50% of the doses exported were supplied on commercial bases. But, in truth, not even pro-Modi analysts had any doubt that, together with humanitarian considerations, another – and possibly preeminent aim – of the India-promoted world-wide vaccination campaign was enhancing Indian influence, mainly in order to confront China. The pursuit of this objective was favoured by fact that, in the field of medical supplies, India had «actually a comparative edge and advantage over China» [Pasricha 2021a].<sup>16</sup>

13. COVAX, namely the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access Facility, was introduced by the WHO, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and the Vaccine Alliance to promote the development of COVID-19 vaccines and their equitable distribution throughout the world. See Ariyawardana 2022.

14. China, on the other hand, had sold 80 million doses to 60 nations.

15. In the past, India took in the refugees fleeing Tibet, those fleeing what was then East Pakistan during the brutal repression of the ruling military junta, and Tamils fleeing the civil war in Sri Lanka. India was also in the forefront in launching a relief programme for the countries hit by the tsunami of Christmas 2004. Finally, during the HIV pandemic, India supplied low-cost antiretroviral drugs to African countries. See Ganguly 2021.

16. As claimed by Dr Sreeram Chaulia, dean of the Jindal School of International Affairs.

India's vaccine diplomacy, at first extremely successful and hailed as such by most analysts, had two fatal flaws. The first was the mistaken conviction, which Modi made public in his special address in Davos of 28 January 2021, that India had already won its domestic battle with the pandemic. In fact, the Indian ruling circles were so sure to have defeated the pandemic thanks to the policy of brutal lockdowns which had been implemented in 2020<sup>17</sup> that no preparatory work had been done in order to prepare the country for a possible second wave. Hence, India's pharmaceutical resources had been deployed to promote the international distribution of India-produced vaccine doses. When the second wave struck, it spread death and destruction all over India, forcing the government to halt the export of vaccines, included those which had already been paid or, anyway, promised. It was a decision which came as a rude shock both to countries, such as Nepal, which depended on Indian supplies, and the COVAX programme.

The second fatal flaw of India's vaccine diplomacy was the government's grossly mistaken overevaluation of the capability of Indian pharmaceutical industry to produce COVID vaccines. As shown in a hard-hitting analysis by Indian journalist Neeta Sanghi, in the period under review the generally held belief in India was that her pharmaceutical industry contributed 60% of the world's production of vaccines. Hence the conviction that India was in the position to contribute an equal share of COVID vaccines world-wide.

Unfortunately, these beliefs were mistaken. India did account not for 60% of the total vaccines available world-wide, but, more modestly, «for around 60% of the total vaccines *supplied to UNICEF*» [Sanghi 2021; emphasis in the original]. UNICEF vaccines do not represent the totality of global vaccines and are largely aimed at immunizing children in poor countries. In sum, India-produced vaccines, although being a quite sizeable quota of the world production, were by far less than 60%. More relevant for the present discussion is the fact that the manufacturing strategy behind the production of COVID-related vaccines rested mainly on the transformation of seasonal influenza vaccines. This was a kind of vaccine for which India's pharmaceutical industry had a low production capability, because the market of influenza vaccines is largely restricted to developed countries. In other words, India's pharmaceutical industry had always produced limited quantities of seasonal influenza vaccines and, consequently, had a low capacity for production of anti-COVID vaccines. So, ultimately, the actual COVID-related production capability of vaccines on the part of the Indian pharmaceutical industry, was indeed around 20% (to be exact, according to data of India's Ministry of External Affairs, made public in April 2021, India's contribution to the global volume of doses of COVID-19 vaccines was 21%) [Sanghi 2021].

17. For an in-depth analysis of the Indian Government's anti-pandemic policy and its shortcomings see Maiorano 2021: 309-328, and Maiorano 2022: 298-309.

The government's inability to go beyond its own slogans and acknowledge the limitations of the Indian pharmaceutical industry was then compounded by the short-sighted policy towards both foreign and domestic vaccine manufacturers. Pfizer, which, in the closing months of 2020, had applied for authorization to produce vaccines in India, was openly discouraged by Health Minister Harsh Vardhan and ended up by withdrawing its application in January 2021. But domestic producers fared no better. The government forced the price tag of India produced vaccines below US\$ 3.00, namely below the price considered by COVAX as the minimum viable charge for COVID-19 vaccines. By itself, this move was not necessarily a negative one, had the government intervened to support the domestic producers through financial subsidies and/or advance payments against future supply. But it was only after the second wave struck and vaccine shortages became glaring that the government moved to support domestic producers [Ariyawardana 2022]. In fact, it was only on 19 April 2021, namely more than one month after the stop to vaccine exports, that the government, at long last, agreed to subsidize the enhancing of the vaccine production capacities of the two main Indian vaccine producers – SII and Bharat Biotech – by supplying them with Rs. 30 billion and 15 billion respectively.

By then, government policies had radically shifted from complacency about the existing COVID-19 vaccine production capacity to an activism bordering on recklessness. Already on 12 April 2021, the government had decided to approve foreign vaccines without any further local trials, provided that either they had already been approved for emergency use by the regulatory authorities of some foreign countries (the US, the UK, or Japan), or had been prequalified by World Health Organization (WHO). Also, in the case of the Russia-produced vaccine Sputnik V and the domestically produced Covaxin, the government approved their employment in spite of the fact that both of them had neither received the emergency use authorization by foreign regulators nor concluded the usual clinical trials in India [Thakur 2021].

### 3.2. *Reaping the consequences of failure*

As already stated, a main goal of India's vaccine diplomacy was confronting China. Particularly important was preventing the expansion of Chinese influence in South Asia. Pakistan, because of its solid connection with China, epitomised by the realization of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) [Boni 2019], was considered a lost cause – and, as noted above, no India-produced vaccine dose ever went to Pakistan. But New Delhi was deeply interested both in repairing relations with Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, which for different reasons had deteriorated, and in offsetting Chinese influence over those countries.

Beijing, as soon as Chinese-produced anti-COVID vaccines had become available, had offered them to Dhaka, Thimphu and Colombo. At

first, Beijing's offer had not been taken up, both because of doubts about the efficacy of the Chinese vaccines and the ready availability of India-produced AstraZeneca inoculations. Of course, things changed when, as seen above, in March 2021 India stopped all vaccine exports, including the doses already paid for.

Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka could not but turn to countries other than India to procure the vaccine doses they needed. Then, just a month after India stopped her vaccine exports, namely in April 2021, the WHO granted its approval to Chinese-produced Sinopharm. In the same period, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi offered to set up an emergency reserve of vaccines for the South Asian region [Pasricha 2021b]. Thus, the geopolitical space left vacant by India was soon filled by other countries, in particular China but also Russia [Bose 2021].

In a way, even more galling for New Delhi was China's public offer to help India in fighting the dramatic surge of COVID cases caused by the second pandemic wave. The offer was first made public by a spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Minister on 22 April 2021 [Reuters 2022, 22 April.], and then reiterated by the Chinese Foreign Minister in a phone conversation with his Indian counterpart on 30 April [Xinhua, 2021, 1 May], and, more important, by China's President Xi Jinping in a letter to Modi that same day [The EurAsian Times, 2021, 11 May].

India had been one of the first nations to send medical supplies to Wuhan, once the COVID pandemic first became manifest there. Consequently, New Delhi could have accepted Beijing's offer as a return for the help provided in 2019. But, evidently, even seasoned that way, that was a morsel too bitter to be swallowed whole by India's ruling class. The face-saving solution was found in not giving any official response to the Chinese government's offer, thus silently letting it fall through, but in accepting the assistance of private, non-governmental Chinese agencies, such as the Red Cross Society of China.

Of course, the distinction between help from the Chinese state and help from private, non-governmental Chinese agencies was a rather insubstantial fig leaf. Certainly, it did not prevent Sun Weidong, the Chinese ambassador in New Delhi, from pouring salt on the wound to Indian pride. In a public speech on 8 June 2021, Sun, basing himself on what he termed «incomplete statistics», claimed that, in the first half of May only, China had sent to India more than 100.000 oxygen concentrators, 8,000 ventilators, 90,000 thermometers and over 100 million masks. He also compared Beijing prompt response to India's plight to Washington's evasive answer to India's request for medical help [Roche 2021].

China's help to India, however, was not an isolate case. Even before Beijing's offer of help to New Delhi, India had been reduced – as noted by Neeta Sanghi [2021] – «from being the “pharmacy of the world” to a desperate seeker of imported vaccines». The hard reality of the unfolding

disaster caused by the second wave of the COVID pandemic forced India to put an end to the policy of refusing foreign aid. This policy had been followed since 2004, when then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had refused foreign assistance in dealing with the consequences of the massive tsunami that devastated the coastal areas of the eastern Indian Ocean that year.<sup>18</sup> Now, in 2021, by making use of the flexibilities allowed in the official policy on receiving foreign aids – which had been set out in a position paper in March 2008 – India accepted medical supplies from no less than 25 countries, other than China. Interestingly, among them there was Pakistan [Quinto 2021; Chakraborty 2021].

### 3.3. *Attempting to get back into the game*

By mid-November 2021, the COVID situation in India started to improve. This allowed Modi to relaunch India's vaccine diplomacy. In September, the members of Quad, including India, vowed to deliver over a billion of India-manufactured vaccine doses. In doing that, the Quad nations were promising to finally implement a programme that had originally been announced in March but blocked by India's COVID crisis. The following month, at the G20 summit held in Rome on 30-31 October, Modi boldly offered to deliver five billion doses of anti-COVID vaccine by the end of 2022 [Ganguly 2021].

India's late return to the game of «vaccine diplomacy» and Modi's boast that India would supply five billion vaccine doses by the end of 2022 could not return India to the central position in the fight against COVID-19. As noted by Sumit Ganguly: «Prime Minister Modi's tragic handling of COVID-19 and his uneven policy record at home and abroad [did] not inspire much confidence in his return to the global stage or in India's ability to deliver on the commitments it makes». Also, as again pointed out by Professor Ganguly, while at the beginning of the year only India and China were distributing vaccine doses to the Global South and beyond, by the beginning of December G7 countries, including the US, had «pledged to donate billions of doses by the end of 2022». Their entering the game «meant that India's return to vaccine diplomacy would be additive rather than distinctive». This, by itself, would negate Modi's objective to present India as a key world player in the fight against the COVID pandemic [Ganguly 2021].

When Narendra Modi promised that India would supply 5 billion doses, his offer dwarfed that made by higher-income countries, which had committed to donate no more than 2.74 billion doses [Kiernan *et al.* 2021]. However, once again, Modi's promise turned out to be nothing but an empty boast: data collected by the Launch and Scale Speedometer, updated to

18. For synthetic but useful summing up of the evolution of India's policy on foreign aid see Kumar 2021.

mid-February 2023, show that India-donated vaccine doses were no more than 71 million. India, therefore, had given a minuscule proportion of the quantity promised by Modi and was only 8<sup>th</sup> in the scale of donor countries.<sup>19</sup>

#### *4. The revival of India's foreign policy after the failure of «vaccine diplomacy»*

The period between the failure of India's vaccine diplomacy, signalled by the freeze of COVID vaccine exports in late March 2021, and the beginning of the Ukraine crisis eleven months later saw India's attempt – on the whole successful – to restore her dented prestige at the international level. This objective was reached through a set of different initiatives, in particular the role that India played as non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), her participation in the activities of the Quad and her joining a new US-sponsored quadrilateral entente, the «Western Quad» or «I2U2». Both her participation in the reenergized Quad and her joining the I2U2 represented less the start of new trends in India's foreign policy than the crowning or completion of long-term trends, in most cases ongoing well before Modi's ascent to India's prime ministership.

##### *4.1. India at the UNSC*

On 1 January 2021, India became a non-permanent member of the UNSC, a two-year term office. This was a position which allowed India to promote the pursuit of her long-sought goal of obtaining a permanent UNSC seat. Also, India took over as president of the UNSC in August 2021, namely the same month that saw the Taliban's violent seizure of power in Afghanistan [Boni 2022]. This was a development deeply contrary not only to US and Western interests, but also to those of India, given Indian involvement in supporting the Ghani government. As UNSC president, India chaired the discussions on how to manage the Afghan catastrophe, and played an active role in moulding Resolution 2593. Adopted with 13 votes and two abstentions (China and Russia),<sup>20</sup> Resolution 2593 demanded that Afghan territory not be used to threaten or attack any country, and reiterated the

19. India came not only well behind the US (at the first place with a little less of 800 million doses) and China (at the second place with some 350 million doses), but also behind Germany (a little less than 169 million doses), France (a little more than 127 million doses), Spain (some 107 million doses), Italy (a little more than 106 million doses) and Australia (a little more than 77 million doses). However, India was ahead of Canada and the UK, both with a little less than 61 million doses. See Launch and Scale Speedometer 2023.

20. The resolution was voted by Estonia, France, India, Ireland, Kenya, Mexico, Niger, Norway, St. Vincent-Grenadines, Tunisia, United Kingdom, United States, Vietnam.



importance of combating terrorism in Afghanistan. It also called for enhanced efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan and asked the Taliban to honour their statement of 27 August 2021, in which they had promised that Afghans could leave the country at any time and from any border they wished [United Nations 2021]. The resolution soon came to represent the consensus view of the global community on how to deal with the situation in Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4.2. *India and the Quad*

The period under review saw the rapid and conspicuous growth in relevance of the Quad, namely the quadrilateral entente including Australia, India, Japan and the US. This entente had originally taken shape as a result of the joint efforts of these four nations in providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief following the 2004 Tsunami. After a few years of promising growth, the Quad had come to a sudden end, being disbanded in 2008. However, on 11 November 2017, the quadrilateral entente was resuscitated in a meeting of senior officials belonging to the four nations, held on the side-lines of the ASEAN summit in Manila. Both in its first and second phase, the institutional framework of the Quad had been limited to periodical meetings between representatives of the four member nations. Also, its objectives remained indefinite up to the beginning of its second phase. Nevertheless no one doubted that the Quad was an alliance in progress, whose main – although undeclared – objective was the containment of China.<sup>22</sup>

Adhering to a well-defined anti-China common strategy and implementing it was however made difficult – and had caused the folding up of the Quad in 2008 – by several factors. One was the different economic and military structures of the member states; another, possibly more important, was their different geographical locations. Significantly, during the Quad's first phase, the member states were constantly unable to conclude their meetings with a joint statement. Rather they issued separate statements that, although with several elements in common, were characterized by important differences. Significantly, as noted by some analysts, anti-China positions in the different final statements were spelled out with a clarity and forcefulness which were directly proportional to the geographical distance of the state authoring the statement from China [e.g., Torri 2018: 19–20].

The relaunching of the Quad in November 2017 was mainly the work of the Trump administration. In sponsoring the rebirth of the four-nation

21. For India's Afghan policy, following the Taliban takeover, see Boni 2023b.

22. On the history of the Quad, see Madan 2017; Roy-Chaudhury & Sullivan de Estrada 2018; Buchan & Rimland 2020. On the reason behind the sudden folding up of the first Quad see Rudd 2019.

entente, Washington not only aimed at strengthening the US sponsored anti-China arc of containment, but at transforming the Quad into the nucleus of a NATO-like military organization.

This was a goal made explicit on 31 August 2020 by US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun. Nonetheless, it was a prospect that left India – namely the only Quad member country to have a land border with China, and, as already noted, an extremely long and unsettled one – decidedly cold.

The Quad had a *de facto* military arm, represented by the periodical Malabar Exercise,<sup>23</sup> which had a powerful reach on the Indian and Pacific Oceans; however, the four countries entente did not have a corresponding land-based military organization. This made India the Quad member country by far more exposed to a possible retaliation by China. Hence, New Delhi's continuing reluctance to the Washington sponsored transformation of the Quad into a full-blown military alliance. It was a reluctance which induced then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to define India as the «wild card» in the four-country entente [NDTV 2023]. Significantly, although the rebirth of the Quad had been hailed by a joint communiqué on the part of the member states, each of them accompanied it with its own communiqué. As in the first phase, although the four different communiqués had much in common, they had significant variations as well.

The situation changed when the Biden administration took over (20 January 2020). It soon became clear that the new administration – as the previous one – considered the Quad as a main instrument to wield US influence over the oceans surrounding the Asian continent, and, therefore, to project such influence inside the continent itself. In this project, India could not but play a key role, as, without her, the control of the Indian Ocean – from the east coast of Africa up to the strategically decisive Malacca Straits – would have been extremely difficult if not totally impossible. No doubt, this was something that had been understood by the Trump administration too. Nonetheless, the most that it had done to ally New Delhi's preoccupations had been tightening the bilateral military connection and continuing with the increasingly massive sales of state-of-the-art weapons to India. This strategy, however, had had limited results in dispelling India's doubts about a militarization of the Quad. Very possibly, the perception of both India's importance as a member state of the Quad and the need of ally her fears was at the origin of a radical change of emphasis in the identification of the Quad objectives on the part of the Biden administration.

Since the Biden administration took over, both the number of the Quad meetings and the level of the representatives taking part in them grew spectacularly [see table 1]. At the same time, the Malabar exercise, which af-

23. Exercise Malabar had been born in 1992, namely well before the birth of Quad, as an annual bilateral naval India-US exercise. However, when the Quad was first created, the exercise was spectacularly expanded to include Australia, Japan and Singapore, taking on the appearance of the Quad's military extension.

ter 2007 had been de-escalated to a bilateral India-US exercise, to become a trilateral one (including Japan) in 2014, further expanded. Beginning with its 23<sup>rd</sup> edition, held in November 2020, the Australian navy was included. It is worth stressing that, although Australia had been requesting to re-join<sup>24</sup> the Malabar exercise since 2017, India had hitherto resisted the request.

Not only the importance of the Quad was growing, but Indian attitude towards it had become more welcoming. The turning point in both developments was the first summit of the Quad leaders, which took place in the virtual format (due to the persistence of the COVID pandemic) on 12 March 2021. The meeting concluded with a joint statement, entitled «The Spirit of the Quad». In it, after the habitual rhetoric about «promoting a free, open, rules-based order, rooted in international law», the objectives of the four countries entente were clearly defined. They were the response to the economic and health crisis caused by COVID-19, the combat against climate change, the control of the cyber space, the control of critical technologies, counterterrorism, quality infrastructure investments, humanitarian-assistance, disaster-relief and maritime domains awareness [The White House 2021].

What characterized this programme – which was reiterated in a more detailed form in the joint statement concluding the Quad leaders' meeting 24 May 2022 [The White House, 2022b] – were two elements. The first was the absence of any explicit reference to any present or future military dimension of the entente. The second was that most objectives outlined, and potentially the most relevant among them, had an unmistakably anti-China subtext. The control of the cyberspace aimed at negating it to China; the control of critical technologies was undisguisedly aimed at competing with Huawei, the Chinese leading global provider of information and communications technology (ICT); quality infrastructure investment aimed to compete with China's BRI; even the response to the COVID-19-induced crisis was in competition with China's attempt to promote its influence through its own «vaccine diplomacy».

Indian analysts and political personalities have sometimes claimed, usually in an implicit way, that the metamorphosis of the Quad project from an Asian NATO in the making to an organization which aimed at containing China by making use of non-military means was the result of India's influence. Basing ourselves on the available documentation, however, it is difficult, if not impossible, to decide if metamorphosis of the Quad objectives was autonomously decided by Washington or brought about or at least facilitated by New Delhi's diplomacy. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that it satisfied India's sensitivities and served its interests. Also, the Biden administration-promoted Quad policy was clearly complementary to autonomously sponsored India-promoted foreign policy strategies. Or, reversing the point of observation, some potentially important India-promoted foreign policy

24. Australia had taken part in the 2007 exercise.

strategies might be viewed as complementary to the prosecution and expansion of Quad-promoted strategies.

Table 1 The Quad 2.0: key events 2017-2022	
11 November 2017 (Manila)	The Quad is re-started during a meeting of senior officials from the US, Japan, India, and Australia.
26 September 2019 (New York)	Meeting of the foreign ministers of the Quad member countries.
4 November 2019 (Bangkok)	Meeting of senior officials of the Quad member countries.
6 October 2020 (Tokyo)	Meeting of the Quad foreign ministers.
3-6 and 17-20 November 2020 (First phase in the Bay of Bengal, second phase in the Arabian Sea)	Quad countries hold combined naval exercises, Malabar 2020 (the 23 <sup>rd</sup> edition), with participation of the navies of India, the US, Japan, and, for the first time, Australia.
12 March 2021 (virtual)	First Quad leaders' summit. A final joint communiqué is released, entitled 'The Spirit of the Quad'
26-29 August 2021 (Philippines Sea)	The first phase of the 24 <sup>th</sup> Malabar exercise is conducted by the by the navies of the Quad countries.
24 September 2021 (Washington, DC.)	Second meeting of Quad leaders (the first in-person)
12-15 October 2021 (Bay of Bengal)	Second and concluding phase of the 24 <sup>th</sup> Malabar exercise, conducted by the navies of the Quad countries.
11 February 2022 (Melbourne, Australia)	Fourth Quad foreign ministers meeting.
3 March 2022 (virtual)	Third Quad leaders' summit (the second virtual one). Quad leaders agree Ukraine experience should not be allowed in the Indo-Pacific.
24 May 2022 (Tokyo)	Quad's leaders fourth meeting.
23 September 2022 (New York)	Meeting of the Quad foreign ministers on the sidelines of UNGA.
9-15 November 2022 (off the coast of Japan)z	Malabar Exercise, conducted by the navies of the Quad countries (25 <sup>th</sup> edition).
Compiled by the author on the basis of Australian, Indian, English-language Japanese and US press reports, plus official White House press releases.	

In particular, this was the case with the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). Launched by Narendra Modi at the East Asia summit of 2019,

IPOI aspired to «create partnerships between like-minded states», with the objective «to pool their resources in areas like maritime security, trade, sustainable use of maritime resources under a blue economy, capacity building through the sharing of crucial information and resources, and building maritime infrastructure for connectivity and disaster prevention» [Panda 2023]. Differently put, Quad-promoted and IPOI-sought-after objectives were synergetic.

#### 4.3. *India and the «Western Quad»*

The announcement that, beside the original one, a new quadrilateral entente was in the making, including India, Israel, the UAE and the US, was made on 18 October 2021, while India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar was on an official visit to Israel. The announcement was the result of decisions taken during a part-virtual, part-in person summit between the foreign ministers of the four states [Laskar 2021; Malhotra 2021].

The new grouping was provisionally called International Forum for Economic Cooperation. However, UAE Ambassador in India Ahmed Albanna defined it the «West Asian Quad» [Rossi 2022b]. The label stuck and continued to be used by the media also after the change of the official name of the new entente to I2U2 (the two Is being the initials of India and Israel and the two Us those of the US and the UAE).

The goal of the new entente was openly transactional: ideological considerations were pushed aside in favour of integrated economic cooperation. This was favoured by the complementarities of the economies involved and by the fact that the «Western Quad» was the logical culmination of a series of initiatives already under way.

Concerning the economic complementarities, Israel contributed with technical expertise, the UAE with investments, India with low-cost manpower; on its part the US, which could provide both investments and expertise, also acted as the guarantor of the entente. Looking at things from the vantage point of Indian interest, it is clear that her joining the new entente was the end result of the convergence of two different trends: one was the increasingly close connection with Israel; another was the increasingly close relationship with Arab Western Asia. The eventual harmonization of these hitherto somewhat contradictory trends had been offered by the US-sponsored Abraham Accords. Announced on 13 August 2020 and effective since 15 September of the same year, the Abraham Accords had normalized the relations between Israel and the UAE.<sup>25</sup>

At the time of the signing of the Abrahams Accords, India's connections with both Israel and the UAE were already on a visible upward swing. In 1992, the year when India established diplomatic relations with Israel, bilateral trade between the two countries amounted to a modest US\$ 200 million;

25. Bahrain joined the agreement on 11 September 2020.

from April 2021 to January 2022, however, it had grown to a little less than US\$ 6.3 billion, with the balance of trade in favour of India. This balance left apart the huge arms exports from Israel to India, which, after the normalization of the bilateral relations, had rapidly made of Israel one of the main arm suppliers to India, in direct competition with the US and Russia. Also, numerous strategic partnerships between Israel and India were already on foot in the field of agriculture, climate, water, science and technology, and food [Bhamidipati 2022]. Finally, India and Israel were also united by an intelligence-sharing agreement for counterterrorism purposes [Rossi 2022b].

As far as India's connection with the UAE is concerned, it must be noted that the latter country was host to an Indian expatriate community numbering nearly 9 million people. Their annual economic remittances accounted for some 65% of the total remittances to India, or some 3% of India's GDP. The UAE was also one of India's key suppliers of oil and India's third largest trade partner as well as India's second largest export destination [Suri & Sethi 2023].

The tightening of the relations between India and not only the UAE but Saudi Arabia too had resulted in agreements aimed at countering the economic activities and ensuring the extradition of Indian and Pakistani terrorists based in those Arab countries. Particularly since the visit of Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud to India in 2006, Saudi Arabia and the UAE had been «investing in India's national infrastructure projects, increasing non-oil trade with India and expanding crucial imports from India ranging from vaccines to wheat» [Ganguly and Blarel 2022]. Most specifically, according to Francesco Galietti, CEO of Policy Sonar, a political risk consultancy, the backbone of the economic connection between the UAE and India had become «the manufacturing value chain in food production and processing». In Galietti's evaluation: «The Emiratis use India as an outdoor garden, financing the creation of dedicated infrastructure in the Indian subcontinent and deploying DP World's formidable terminal operators»<sup>26</sup> [Rossi 2022b]. This set of connections had underpinned the India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) signed on 27 March 2021, a few months before the announcement of the creation of the Western Quad.

The 2021 India-UAE CEPA had two main aspects: the first was either the elimination or gradual and substantial reduction of all the tariff and non-tariff barriers in the two-way trade; the second was the equal treatment granted to Emirati companies in the case of their participation in tenders for public contracts in India [GOI 2022; UAE n.d.]. Symptomatic of both

26. Dubai Ports World (DP World), headquartered in Dubai, is the world's third-largest port terminal operator and one of the world's largest providers of supply chain and logistics services, operating in 69 countries. Formed in 2005 from the merger of Dubai Ports Authority and Dubai Ports International, DP World handles 70 million containers transported annually by some 70,000 ships, representing around 10% of global container traffic.

the importance of the UAE-India CEPA and the interest of both parties in concluding it was the fact that the agreement was reached in barely 88 days, namely a really unusual and surprisingly rapid timeframe [Rossi 2022a].<sup>27</sup>

The Western Quad was presented as – and, undoubtedly, at the moment of its launching preeminently was – «an international forum for economic cooperation, with a focus on exploring, emphasizing and ultimately channelizing the unique capabilities of each country into a joint working group» [Sengupta 2021]. Nonetheless, there are few doubts that the initiative had been sponsored by the US as a way to counter and possibly block China's growing economic penetration into Israel and the UAE.

Quite apart from the economic benefits accruing from her participation in the I2U2, this was a political objective that India could not but wholeheartedly share. From this viewpoint, the new quadrilateral entente foreshadowed the coming into being of a sort of eastern wing of an anti-China US-sponsored arc of containment, of which the Quad proper was the eastern wing. In this context, India played the role of connecting link and supporting keystone of the whole system. It is also worth noting that India had another additional political advantage from its participation in I2U2. Being a member of the Western Quad strengthened her attempt to isolate Pakistan from the Gulf countries.<sup>28</sup>

It is significant that, in spite of the tensions caused in the India-US relation by New Delhi's position on the Ukraine crisis (analyzed below), the tightening of the I2U2 grouping progressed rapidly and smoothly. On 14 July 2022 the first (virtual) prime ministerial/presidential meeting of the leaders of the four countries was held and the launching of two important projects, both located in India, was announced. They were a US\$ 2 billion UAE-financed project, aimed to create a series of integrated food parks across India, and a cooperative hybrid renewable energy project in Gujarat, consisting of 300 megawatts of wind and solar capacity complemented by a battery of energy storage system [The White House, 2022c].

### 5. *The Ukraine crisis and India's (ambiguous) neutrality*

On 24 February 2022, Russian armed forces, which had been amassing near the border with Ukraine since October 2021, invaded the neighbouring country. The invasion, baptised by Russian President Vladimir Putin with the Orwellian name of «special military operation», had Ukraine's «demilitarization» (namely the dismantling of Ukraine's armed forces) and «dena-

27. As noted by Rossi: «With the EU, the making of such an agreement has been in the works for 15 years». And, of course, it is far from being completed.

28. On India's attempt to isolate Pakistan from the Gulf countries, see Boni 2023a: 240-242.

zification» (namely regime change and the imposition of a vassal regime in Kyiv) as their declared goals.

In starting the invasion, Vladimir Putin most likely acted under the double delusion that Russian military forces would if not fully conquer, at least come to control the vital ganglia of Ukraine, including its capital city, in a matter of days and that the West would meekly accept the *fait accompli* without any reaction more dangerous than some indignant public censures.

The unexpected and highly effective resistance offered by Ukraine and the rallying behind it of the US and the most important European states transformed what had been planned as an unstoppable, victorious blitzkrieg and a painless political operation into a long-drawn war and the most dangerous and prolonged European-centred crisis since the end of World War II. Its cascading political and economic effects soon began to be felt not only in Europe but in much of the rest of the world.

The Western powers, while providing Ukraine with military and non-military supplies, tried to isolate Russia both politically and economically, by imposing increasingly tighter sanctions on it. In this, however, their success was limited; many countries, particularly in the Global South, hedged their bets choosing some form of neutrality. In some cases, it was a neutrality that bordered on tacit or badly concealed support for Russia.

Among the countries which, since the beginning, espoused a position of alleged neutrality, there was India, which justified her position by claiming that, rather than taking sides, she preferred to work for peace. In fact, since the beginning of the «special military operation», Modi had kept his lines of communication open with both the Russian and Ukraine Presidents, in the alleged effort to favour direct negotiation between the two.

While the Ukraine crisis unfolded, India's position became increasingly nuanced and ambiguous. Her refusal to openly condemn Russia was qualified by a series of official positions which sounded as implicitly critical of Russian behaviour.<sup>29</sup> Also, India kept sending humanitarian help to Ukraine [e.g., Ukrinform.net, 2022; *The Print*, 2022]. Conversely, nonetheless, in spite of the sanctions imposed by the West on Russia, India accepted Russian offer to buy Russian oil at discounted price.

Not surprisingly, India's stance triggered a series of criticisms on the part of Western politicians and media. Rather counterintuitively, however, these criticisms were not accompanied by any sanction on the part of the US and its closer allies. In fact, India's standing on the Ukraine crisis came to be *de facto* accepted by them after a little more than one month since the start of the Russian invasion. By the end of the year, it had become crystal-

29. For example, India's Ambassador to the UN, after abstaining during the February UNSC vote, noted that the global order was anchored in «respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty of all states» [Kirbyjen 2022]. Also, India outrightly denied Putin's statements that Indian students had been taken hostage by the Ukrainians [Ellis-Petersen 2022].



clear that, in spite of India's ambiguity toward Russia, India-US relations remained particularly close and cordial.<sup>30</sup>

### 5.1. *India's policy of ambiguous neutrality: its beginning*

When, on 26 February 2022, only two days after the launching of Russian invasion, the UNSC voted on a resolution demanding the immediate withdrawal of the Russian troops, India was one of the three countries which abstained.<sup>31</sup> India also abstained on a procedural resolution calling for an emergency session of the UN General Assembly [Lukin and Pareek 2022].

On 3 March 2022, at a special Quad meeting, convened by US President Biden specifically to discuss «the war against Ukraine and its implications for the Indo-Pacific», India was the only one among the four members of the entente not to condemn Russia [Jayasekera 2022]. However, no public denunciation or criticism of India's position followed, but only «gentle efforts», made far from the limelight, aimed at convincing India to change her position [Prakash 2022]. In fact, the months from March to May witnessed a «flurry of diplomatic activities», characterized by exceptionally numerous high-level visits to New Delhi on the part of heads of governments, foreign ministers and senior-level officials, together with virtual meetings between Modi and the leaders of countries such as the US and Australia [Venkataramakrishnan 2022].<sup>32</sup>

A fortnight after the Quad special meeting, on 18 March 2022, an Indian government official revealed that India had decided to increase her imports of Russian oil, which was offered with a 20% discount [Al Jazeera 2022, 18 March]. In the following months, India's imports of Russian oil boomed. By September 2022, they had increased 10 times compared to the year before, which had transformed Russia from a marginal player to India's third-biggest oil supplier [Das and Ghosal 2022]. By October, Russia became India's top oil supplier (making up for 22% of India's total crude imports), surpassing her traditional key providers, namely Iraq and Saudi Arabia [The Wire 2022, 6 November]. Also, the value of India's coal imports from Russia significantly increased and, by September 2022, had risen four-fold compared to the previous year [Das and Ghosal 2022].

30. According to Filippo Boni (personal communication, London, 8 January 2023), it is well possible that the influential Indian lobby in the US played a role in facilitating Washington's acceptance of India's «neutrality» on the Ukraine question. On the Indian Lobby and its growing political importance, see, e.g., Sharma 2017; Kumar and Lacy 2020; CEIP.

31. The others were China and the UAE. The latter soon changed its stand and took position against Russia.

32. Among the foreign visitors to New Delhi there were UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Japan Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, European Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen. All of them were trying to convince Modi to abandon his neutrality policy. Their efforts were countered by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, he too on pilgrimage to New Delhi.

### 5.2. *The US' acceptance of India's policy of neutrality*

On 21 March 2022, US President Joe Biden, discussing the Quad position on the Ukraine crisis at a business round table, while stressing that Japan and Australia had been «extremely strong [...] in terms of dealing with Putin's aggression», admitted that India's standing on the matter was «some-what shaky» [Das 2022a].

Counterintuitively, however, ten days later (31 March) both the US and Great Britain signalled their acceptance of India's decision to buy discounted Russian oil. Daleep Singh, US deputy national security adviser for International Economics, declared that the US, although hoping that there would be no rapid growth of Indian oil imports from Russia, was not going to set any «red line», as «[f]riends do not set red lines» [Das 2022b]. On her part, British Foreign Minister Liz Truss stated that her country respected India's decision to buy discounted oil from Russia [Reuters, 2022, 31 March].

On 11 April there was an unplanned virtual meeting between Biden and Modi, requested by the US [The White House 2022a; Pandey 2022]. This was followed by the already planned 2+2 India-US meeting, bringing together the foreign and defence ministers of the two countries. What had been the most significant political result of the 2+2 meeting, anticipated by the bonhomie visible in the bilateral Biden-Modi meeting, was made clear by US Secretary of State Tony Blinken's declarations on 11 April. At the joint press conference which concluded the 2+2 meeting, Blinken stressed the connections existing between the US and India «across virtually every realm: commerce, education and security». With reference to India's purchases of Russian energy resources, the US Secretary of State noted that there were «carve-outs» for them. Which, in plain language, meant that exceptions, although made with some effort or difficulty, could be made. As already signalled by Daleep Singh, Blinken's only caveat was that the US was «looking to allies and partners not to increase their purchases of Russian energy». A statement that, however, was preceded by the caveat that: «Every country is differently situated, has different needs, requirements...», and followed by the acknowledgement that there was «a long history, a long relationship between India and Russia, which was going back to a time when the US was «not able to be a partner of India». Blinken's conclusion was that: «We [the Americans] are now both able and willing to be such a partner; to be a security partner of choice for India» [Business Standard, 2022, 12 April].<sup>33</sup>

Summing up, the bilateral Biden-Modi virtual meeting and the closely following 2+2 ministerial meeting sanctioned the fact that the US and

33. The willingness on the part of Blinken - and thus of the US - to accept that India would continue to purchase ever increasing quantities of Russian oil can also be explained by the fact that – as revealed by *The Wall Street Journal* – India was reselling part of it on the international market [Hirstenstein and Faucon 2022]. In this way, India was helping to maintain oil supplies at levels that did not cause an overall price increase. I am grateful to Diego Maiorano for drawing my attention to this issue.

India had agreed to differ on the Ukraine question, while maintaining and increasing their connections.

### 5.3. *The reasons behind India's neutrality towards Russia*

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion, the US and its most important allies framed the conflict in Ukraine as an all-out fight counterpoising democratic countries to autocratic regimes. Viewed in this perspective, the ambiguous neutrality of India, the world's largest democracy, could not but appear surprising. Of course, here a main problem was that, as documented by analyses in this journal and elsewhere, since Narendra Modi's ascent to the prime ministership India had gone through a severe democratic involution. Hence, when the Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine the political configuration of the «largest world's democracy» – and according to Modi's bizarre claims, the oldest one, together with the US [The White House 2022a], and the «mother of all democracies» [Outlook, 2023, 15 March] – was in an advanced stage of democratic involution. The process, started in 2014 by Modi's ascent to the prime ministership, was transforming India's democracy into a political system much more similar to that of Russia and other authoritarian democracies (such as Hungary and Poland), than to the democratic systems prevailing in the main Western democracies.

However, it goes without saying that the question of democracy had relevance only at the rhetorical level. The policies followed by all the countries affected by the Ukraine war were firmly grounded on *realpolitik*.

In the case of India, its stand on the Ukraine crisis was motivated by the pursuit of two objectives, both ultimately related to the containment of China. This applies even if, rather paradoxically, New Delhi and Beijing found themselves on the same side when (abstaining from) voting on the Ukraine question in the UN.

The first reason behind India's Ukraine policy – so obvious to be immediately individuated and widely commented by analysts and media world-wide – was related to India's still heavy dependence on Russia supplied weapons and weapon systems. Although India, the world's main importer of arms, had been differentiating the sources of its acquisitions during the previous two decades, and, consequently, decreasing the share of Russian arms which she bought [The Economist 2022, 14 April], the facts remains that the Indian armed forces were still predominantly equipped with Russian weapons [Jaffrelot and Sud 2022]. Any sudden and drastic reduction in arm supplies from this source could not fail to reflect negatively and conspicuously on the operational capabilities of the Indian armed forces. In turn, any reduction in these operational capabilities could not but reflect negatively on India's ability to militarily counter China.<sup>34</sup>

34. It is worth stressing that the low level of efficiency shown by the Russian military during the Ukraine invasion had been noted by India's ruling circles. According to some analysts, this was bound to cause an even stronger decline in India's acquisition of Russian arms. See, e.g., Poita 2022.

This kind of constraint was quite evident. But another one was present that, in the evaluation of such a perceptive analyst as Ashley Tellis, was even more important. This was the necessity on the part of India to preserve its friendship with Russia «to prevent deepening Russian ties with China» [Tellis 2022]. A Russia which, put under pressure by the West, could find some sort of support only from China, therefore becoming increasingly closer to it – and, given the hugely different weight of the two countries, increasingly dependent on it – was nothing less than a geopolitical nightmare for India. This explains an Indian «neutral» policy that, in the eyes of Indian strategic elites themselves amounted to «a subtle pro-Moscow position» [Tellis 2022]. The objective of this policy was giving Russia enough political space to prevent or at least slow down too tight an embrace between Moscow and Beijing.

In the final analysis, the reasons behind New Delhi's ambiguous Russian policy, while squarely based on the pursuit of national self-interest, did not clash with the long-term interest of the US itself. Keeping Indian armed forces in good shape, and therefore maintaining India as a credible military counterweight to China, was fully congruent to the US policy in the Indo-Pacific. Likewise, creating a geopolitical space which would allow Russia some freedom to manoeuvre, which, in turn, would prevent its subordination to China from being an inevitable outcome, did not go against Washington's interests. All this goes a long way in explaining Washington's acceptance of New Delhi's stand, particularly if one keeps in mind that the latter's ambiguity on Russia was coupled by the clear-cut alignment with the US position in the Indo-Pacific.

#### *5.4. The US's continuing acceptance of India's neutrality towards Russia*

The April turning point – represented by the bilateral Biden-Modi virtual meeting and the 2+2 ministerial meeting – was confirmed by the decision taken by the US House of Representatives on 14 July 2022. It concerned the vexata quaestio of India's acquisition of Russia-produced, state of the art long-range surface-to-air mobile missile defence system S-400 Triumf.

The Triumf system was generally considered as the most sophisticated air defence platform in existence, with the additional advantage to cost around half of its Western equivalents [Pandey 2021]. Not surprisingly, many countries had shown interest in buying it, including India. However, since 2017, countries which bought from Russia could be targeted by US sanctions, imposed on the basis of the US Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) [Public Law 2017]. CAATSA, which had been signed into law on 2 August 2017, aimed «to counter aggression by the Governments of Iran, the Russian Federation, and North Korea». It made possible to sanction any country, company or individual that had «significant transactions» with any of the three countries in the crosshair of CAATSA. Naturally enough, a major Russian defence hardware as the S-400 system soon became a privileged objective of CAATSA sanctions. Not only

China but also a NATO member-state as Turkey was sanctioned because it had bought Triumph anti-missile platforms.

Among the countries which had decided to buy the S-400 system there was India, which signed a US\$ 5 billion deal with Russia to buy five S-400 platforms in October 2018 and started to induct them in December 2021. Since the signing of the deal, the threat of CAATSA sanctions had hanged on India like a sword of Damocles. On 14 July 2022, nonetheless, the House of Representatives passed a legislative amendment, authored and sponsored by Indian-American Congressman Ro Khanna, urging the Biden administration to waive any possible CAATSA sanction on India. As explicitly stated by Khanna, the House's request aimed at helping India to deter aggressors like China [The EurAsian 2022; The Indian Express 2022].

The amendment still needed the approval of the Senate and the signing of the US President before becoming law. However, the fact that it had been passed in the House of Representatives by a bipartisan vote, meant that its final enactment was little more than a formality [Bedi 2022].

These openings on the part of the US were reciprocated by an enhancement on the part of India of her subtle and mainly indirect criticisms to Russia's aggression. On 16 September 2022, on the side-lines of the annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, there was a bilateral Modi-Putin meeting, the first face-to-face one since the launching of the Russian invasion. In that occasion, the Indian Prime Minister stated: «I know today's era is not [an era] of war», and added that he hoped to discuss «how we can move forward on the road of peace in the coming days» [Laskar 2022].

By making this statement, Modi was not finally distancing India from Russia on the Ukraine war. Rather, he was carrying on the political line constantly followed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine; namely keeping a *de facto* pro-Russia position, made more palatable to the US and other Western countries by some anodyne criticism to Moscow. Significantly, India continued to abstain on the UN votes condemning Russia. Also, India took part to the 2022 edition of the quadrennial Russia's Vostok military exercise, held between 1 and 7 September. India's participation – which was blandly criticized by the US – was nonetheless limited and, in deference to Japan's objections, did not include taking part in the drills in the Sea of Okhotsk and the Sea of Japan [Ollapally 2022; Noll 2022; Ferris and Nouwens 2022]. Conversely, India joined the Quad Malabar exercise off Yokosuka between 8 and 18 November and, as already noted, the *Yudh Abhyas* joint India-US military exercise was carried out in Auli (Uttarakhand), close to the China border, between 15 November and 2 December [Business Standard 2022, 27 October].

Against this backdrop, India-US relations continued to be characterized by cordiality, which was visible during the meeting between India's Foreign Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, on the side-lines of the 77<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly. As stated

by Jaishankar at the joint press conference which he held with Blinken, the India-US alliance was «a very positive experience [...] with a lot of promise», offering the potentiality to jointly «shape the direction of the world» to India and the US [De Silva and Jones 2022].

## 6. Conclusion

During the two years analyzed in this article, the polar star of India's foreign policy appears to have been the need to cope with what New Delhi sees as the Chinese threat. The disengagement along the Himalayan border, which, during the period under review, did take place, was far from bringing about any substantial improvement in the relations between the two Asian giants. With very few exceptions, China continued to be viewed as an existential threat by little less than the totality of Indian politicians, analysts and public opinion. Accordingly, any major Indian foreign policy move made in the period under review appears to have had as a main or, at the very least, a relevant objective either confronting China or self-positioning in view of a future confrontation with it. This remains true in spite of the disengagement along the Himalaya and the curious fact that, immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, New Delhi found itself on the same side as Beijing when voting at the UN on Russia. India's moves concerning «vaccine diplomacy», her proactive participation in the Quad, her joining the I2U2, and keeping a neutral stand as far as Russia's Ukraine war was concerned could be explained – and were explained – with different motivations. Nonetheless, behind or together with any other motivation, the need to confront and face down China either presently or in the future loomed large.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's overriding goal in foreign policy is to have India acknowledged as a major world power. It is clear that, in his opinion – and in that of the bulk of Indian politicians and analysts – the litmus test of India's status as a major world power is reaching a position of parity with China. Given the huge differential in economic power between the two countries – a differential that will hardly be overcome in a foreseeable future – the India-China parity, so eagerly sought after by Modi, can only be reached by firmly positioning India inside the networks of alliances and ententes that nations such as the US and Japan have been building to counter China's rise.

In the final analysis, notwithstanding its many ambiguities and turn-arounds, the basic course of India's foreign policy, far from being erratic, or «reliably unreliable» [The Economist 2022, 24 November], is unmistakably and reliably consistent. Any apparently erratic move is motivated by the urge to confront China.

Only a major rethinking of the relation with China – which at the moment looks highly unlikely – could change it.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [Agarwala *et al.* 2022] Pragya Agarwala, Anudita Bhargava, Dharmendra Kumar Gahwai, Sanjay Singh Negi, Priyanka Shukla, Sonal Daya, 2022, 'Epidemiological Characteristics of the COVID-19 Pandemic During the First and Second Waves in Chhattisgarh, Central India: A Comparative Analysis', *Cureus*, 14(4), 2022, doi: 10.7759/cureus.24131.
- Al Jazeera, 2022, 18 March, 'Russian oil sale to India complicates Biden's efforts'.
- Al Jazeera, 2022, 26 March, 'India says ties with China can't be normal with border tension'.
- Ariyawardana, S.S. Nisayuru, 2022, 'India's Vaccine Diplomacy and Changing Geopolitics in the Global South', *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Review*, 7(3): 142-161.
- AstraZeneca.com, 2021, 'Serum Institute of India obtains emergency use authorisation in India for AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine', 6 January.
- Bagchi, Dishha, 2022, 'New satellite images show major India-China military buildup in Arunachal's Yangtse in past year', *The Print*, 21 December.
- Bedi, Rahul, 2021, 'Harsh Winter Conditions Contributed to India-China Pullback from Pangong Tso', *The Wire*, 15 February.
- Bedi, Rahul, 2022, 'How Does the Sanction Waiver to India Aid US' Strategic Interests?', *The Wire*, 27 July 2022.
- Bhadrakumar, M.K, 2021, 'The Zen of Ladakh disengagement', *Indian Punchline*, 21 February.
- Bhamidipati, Gopi Krishna, 2022, 'India's Shift From Strategic Restraint to Strategic Recalibration in West Asia', *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 9 August.
- Bhonsale, Mihir, 2018, 'Understanding Sino-Indian Border Issues: An Analysis of Incidents Reported in the Indian Media', *ORF Occasional Paper*, No. 143, February.
- Boni, Filippo, 2019, *Sino-Pakistani Relations. Politics, Military and Regional Dynamics*, London: Routledge.
- Boni, Filippo, 2022, 'Afghanistan 2021: The US withdrawal, the Taliban return and regional geopolitics', *Asia Maior* XXXII/2021: 376-391.
- Boni, Filippo, 2023a, 'India's Response to the Belt and Road Initiative: A Case Study of Indo-Pakistani Relations', in Silvio Beretta, Axel Berkofsky, Giuseppe Ianini (eds.), *India's Foreign Policy and Economic Challenges. Friends, Enemies and Controversies*, Cham (Switzerland): Springer.
- Boni, Filippo, 2023b, 'Afghanistan 2022: the first year of Taliban rule', *Asia Maior* XXXIII/2022 [in this same volume].
- Bose, Sohini, (ed.), 2021, 'The Dynamics of Vaccine Diplomacy in India's Neighbourhood', *ORF Special Report* no. 145, June.
- Buchan, Patrick Gerard, & Benjamin Rimland, 2020, 'Defining the Diamond: The Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue', *CSIS Briefs*, March.
- Business Standard, 2019, 22 November, 'PoK, Aksai Chin part of J&K, we are ready to die for the region: Amit Shah'.
- Business Standard, 2019, 5 December, 'PoK, Aksai Chin part of J&K; will give life for it: Amit Shah in Lok Sabha'.
- Business Standard, 2022, 12 April, 'India-Russia ties developed when US was unable to be its partner: Blinken'.

- Business Standard, 2022, 27 October, 'India, US to conduct «Yudh Abhyas» near China border from Nov 15: Report'.
- [CEIP] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Understanding India's Diaspora* (<https://carnegieendowment.org/programs/southasia/understandingindiadiaspora/>).
- Chakraborty, Subhayan, 2021, 'Here is the full list of foreign medical aid to India and where they are headed', *Moneycontrol*, 5 May.
- Chang Liao, Nien-chung, 2018, 'Winds of Change: Assessing China's Assertive Turn in Foreign Policy', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 53 (6): 880-895.
- Chen, Dingding, Xiaoyu Pu and Alastair Iain Johnston, 2013/14, 'Debating China's Assertiveness', *International Security*, 38 (3): 176-183.
- Das, Krishna N., 2022a, 'Biden says India «shaky» in acting against old Cold War ally Russia', *Reuters*, 22 March.
- Das, Krishna N., and Devjyot Ghosal, 2022, 'Analysis: India sharpens stand on Ukraine war but business as usual with Russia', *Reuters*, 28 September.
- Das, Krishna, 2022b, 'US does not want «rapid acceleration» in India energy imports from Russia', *Reuters*, 31 March.
- De Silva, Rohantha, and Keith Jones, 2021, 'In a provocative move, India deploys 50,000 more troops to its disputed border with China', *World Socialist Web Site*, 6 July.
- De Silva, Rohantha, and Keith Jones, 2022, 'India strengthening anti-China alliance with the US as Washington wages war on Russia', *World Socialist Web Site*, 18 October.
- Detsch, Jack, 2021, 'Pentagon Worries About Chinese Buildup Near China', *Foreign Policy*, 15 December.
- Dhar, Biswajit, 2021, 'India's Vaccine Diplomacy', *Pandemic Discourses*, 4 March.
- Dutton, Jack, 2021, 'China and India Move Tens of Thousands of Troops to the Border As Tensions Rise', *Newsweek*, 2 July.
- Ellis-Petersen, Hannah, 2022, 'Narendra Modi walks diplomacy tightrope with Vladimir Putin on Ukraine', *The Guardian*, 10 March.
- Ferris, Emily, and Veerle Nouwens, 2022, *RUSI Commentary*, 15 September.
- Friedberg, Aaron L., 2014, 'The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Explaining Beijing's Assertiveness', *The Washington Quarterly*, 37 (4): 133-150.
- Ganguly, Sumit, 2021, 'The Pandemic and the Future of India's Foreign Policy', *Think Global Health*, 9 November.
- Ganguly, Sumit, and Nicolas Blarel, 2022, 'Modi's Burning Bridge to the Middle East', *Foreign Affairs*, 30 June.
- [Gettleman et al. 2021] Jeffrey Gettleman, Emily Schmall and Mujib Mashal, India Cuts Back on Vaccine Exports as Infection Surge at Home, *The New York Times*, 25 March 2021.
- Global Times, 2021, 11 October, 'India sleepwalks on border issue: Global Times editorial'.
- Global Times, 2022, 15 December, 'China, India should enhance cooperation rather than hinder their relations due to border disputes'.
- [GOI 2022] Government of India, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Department of Commerce, *Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE)*, 27 March 2022.
- Gunasekar, Arvind, 2022, 'On Border Clash, Rare Opposition Unity, Sonia Gandhi Leads Parliament Walkout: 10 Points', *NDTV*, 14 December.



- Harsh V., Pant, 2022, 'Wang visit: Beijing is not reassessing its India policy', *ORF Commentaries*, 31 March.
- Hashmi, Sana, 2015, 'India-China Code of Conduct on Border: The «Paradigm Shift» Challenge', Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS), 15 June.
- Hindustan Times, 2006, 19 November, 'China lays claim to Arunachal'.
- Hindustan Times, 2020, 24 June, 'India, China agree to pull back, reach «mutual consensus to disengage»'.
- Hirtenstein, Anna, and Benoit Faucon, 2022, 'Russian Oil Producers Stay One Step Ahead of Sanctions', *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 June.
- Hoo Tiang Boon, 2017, 'Hardening the Hard, Softening the Soft: Assertiveness and China's Regional Strategy', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 40 (5): 639-662.
- Hussain, Bilal, 2022, 'China Border Resolution Leaves Some in India Unhappy', *VOA*, 25 October.
- India Today, 2015, 11 June, 'It took China just three weeks since PM Modi's visit to snub his efforts to clarify the LAC. The neighbours now face yet another stalemate in resolving the boundary issue'.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe, and Aadil Sud, 2022, 'Indian Military Dependence on Russia', Institut Montaigne, 5 July.
- Jash, Amrita, 2022, 'India-China Boundary Dispute: Progress on Disengagement, but De-escalation Remains Far-fetched', *IAI Commentaries*, October.
- Jayasekera, Deepal, 2022, 'India's refuses to condemn Russia over Ukraine invasion at special Quad summit', *World Socialist Web Site*, 7 March.
- Jerdén, Björn, 2014, 'The Assertive China Narrative: Why It Is Wrong and How So Many Still Bought into It', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 47-88.
- Jha, Prem Shankar, 2021a, 'India and China Are on the Verge of Lasting Peace, if Modi Wants It', *The Wire*, 16 February.
- Jha, Prem Shankar, 2021b, 'Disengagement at LAC a Breakthrough, but What Can India Do To Make It Last?', *The Wire*, 6 March.
- Johnston, Alastair Iain, 2013, 'How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?', *International Security*, spring 2013, 37 (4): 7-48.
- Joshi, Manoj, 2023, 'India and China caught in vicious cycle to secure the Himalayan heights', *ORF Commentaries*, 10 February.
- Kaushik, Krishn, 2021, 'India, China disengage at another friction point, troops return to permanent bases', *The Indian Express*, 7 August.
- Khan, Wajahat S., 2022, 'In the world's highest battlefield, China has the advantage over India', *Gzero*, 18 December.
- [Kiernan *et al.* 2021] Samantha Kiernan, Serena Tohme, Gayeong Song, 'Billions Committed, Millions Delivered', *Think Global Health*, 2 December 2021.
- Kirbyjen, Jean, 2022, 'Why India isn't denouncing Russia's Ukraine war', *Vox.com*, 18 March.
- Kumar, Mohan, 2021, 'The evolution of India's pragmatic policy on foreign aid', *Hindustan Times*, 5 July.
- Kumar, Rashmee, and Akela Lacy, 2020, India Lobbies to Stifle Criticism, Control Messaging in U.S. Congress Amid Rising Anti-Muslim Violence, *The Intercept*, 16 March.
- Kurup, Smriti, 2021, 'Impact of Covid-19 on India's foreign policy: An analysis', *The Daily Guardian*, 6 August.
- Laskar, Rezaul H., 2021, 'Foreign ministers of India, Israel, US and UAE to hold virtual meeting', *Hindustan Times*, 18 October.

- Laskar, Rezaul H., 2022, '«Era is not of war»: Modi publicly asks Putin to end Ukraine war. It is a first', *Hindustan Times*, 16 September.
- Launch and Scale Speedometer, 2023, 'Vaccine donations', Tab. 2.1 (<https://launchandscalefaster.org/covid-19/vaccinedonations>, accessed on 24 February 2023).
- Le Monde, 2022, 9 August, 'Dans l'Himalaya indien, l'implacable grignotage de l'armée chinoise', par Sophie Landrin.
- Lukin, Artyom, and Aditya Pareek, 2022, 'India's aloof response to the Ukraine crisis', *East Asia Forum*, 5 March.
- Madan, Ashok Kumar, 2019, 'Pharma conundrums & «bottles of lies»', *Observer Research Foundation*, 11 June.
- Madan, Tanvi, 2017, 'The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the «Quad»', *War on the Rocks*, 16 November.
- Magee, Zoe, 2021, '«Pharmacy of the World will deliver»: India begins COVID-19 vaccine exports', *ABC News*, 20 January.
- Maiorano, Diego, 2021, 'India 2020: Under the COVID hammer', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020: 305-329.
- Maiorano, Diego, 2022, 'India 2021, 'India 2021: Politics amid the pandemic', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXII/2021: 297-327.
- Malhotra, Jyoti, 2021, 'Why US and India are taking on China with a «Middle Eastern Quad»', *The Print*, 19 October.
- Mastro, Oriana Skylar, 2014, 'Why Chinese Assertiveness is Here to Stay', *The Washington Quarterly*, 37 (4): 151-170.
- Menon, Shivshankar, 2022, 'How India handles China will determine success of foreign policy', *The Week*, 23 October.
- [MFA-PRC 2022a] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Wang Yi: China and India Should Stick to Long-term Perspective, Win-win Mentality and Cooperative Posture', 25 March 2022.
- [MFA-PRC 2022b] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The People's Republic Of China, 'Wang Yi Meets with Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar', 7 July 2022.
- NDTV, 2022, 28 September, 'India Deploys Long-Range Rockets, Artillery Guns Along Border With China: Report';
- NDTV, 2023, 26 January, 'India "Wild Card" In Quad: Ex US Secretary Of State Mike Pompeo In Book'.
- News On Air, 2022, 16 September, 'India-China Disengagement: Unravelling Factors that led to Withdrawal of Troops & the Way Forward'
- Noll, Andreas, 2022, 'Russia Joined by allies in Vostok military drills', *Deutsche Welle*, 1 September.
- Ollapally, Deepa M., 2022, 'India goes its own way on global geopolitics', *East Asia Forum*, 22 September.
- Outlook, 2023, 15 March, 'PM Modi Claims India Is The «Mother Of All Democracies» During Centenary Celebrations Of Bihar Assembly'.
- Panda, Jagannath, 2023, 'India's Quad Calculus and China', *The Asian Forum*, January-February.
- Pandey, Vikas, 2022, '2+2 talks: How India and US agreed to differ on Ukraine war', *BBC News*, 12 April.
- Pant, Harsh V., & Aarshi Turkey, 2021, *India's Vaccine Diplomacy*, ORF Commentaries, 23 January 2021.

- Pant, Harsh V., and Yogesh Joshi, 2021, 'Did India Just Win at the Line of Actual Control?', *Foreign Policy*, 24 February.
- Pasricha, Anjana, 2021a, 'India Launches 'Neighborly Vaccine Diplomacy'', *VOA*, 24 January.
- Pasricha, Anjana, 2021b, 'South Asia Turns to China for COVID Vaccines after India Halts Exports', *VOA*, 28 May.
- Poita, Yurii, 2022, 'Up in Arms: Is Russia Losing the Indian Arms Market?', *Institut Montaigne*, 7 June.
- Prakash, Teesta, 2022, 'China is key to understand India's dilemma over Ukraine', *The Interpreter*, 9 March.
- [Public Law 2017] PUBLIC LAW 115-44—AUG. 2, 2017 (<https://congress.gov/115/plaws/publ44/PLAW-115publ44.pdf>).
- Quinto, Anne, 2021, 'The world is starting to grasp the true toll of India's Covid-19 crisis', *The Quartz*, 25 April.
- Rajagopal, Divya, 2020, 'AstraZeneca 6 Serum Institute of India sign licensing deal for 1 billion doses of Oxford vaccine', *The Economic Times*, 4 June.
- Ramachandran, Sudha, 2022, 13 December, 'India and China Face off Again, This Time at Tawang', *The Diplomat*.
- Ramachandran, Sudha, 2022, 15 March, 'No Breakthrough at 15th Round of China-India Talks', *The Diplomat*.
- Reuters, 2021, 22 April, 'China willing to help India in COVID-19 fight'.
- Reuters, 2022, 15 February, 'India adds 54 more Chinese apps to ban list; Sea says it complies with laws'.
- Reuters, 2022, 31 March, 'Britain respects India's decision to buy discounted oil from Russia'.
- Reuters, 2023, January 28, 'India expects more clashes with Chinese troops in Himalayas', by Krishn Kaushik.
- Roche, Elizabeth, 2021, 'China one of the first nations to offer help to India during 2nd covid wave: Sun Weidong', *Livemint*, 9 June.
- Rossi, Emanuele, 2022a, 'Emirati e India stringono un accordo commerciale storico', *Formiche.net*, 31 March.
- Rossi, Emanuele, 2022b, 'I2U2, via alla collaborazione tra India, Israele, Usa e Uae', *Formiche.net*, 16 June.
- Roy, Rajesh, 2021, 'China, India Move Tens of Thousands of Troops to the Border in Largest Buildup in Decades', *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 July.
- Roy-Chaudhury, Rahul, & Kate Sullivan de Estrada, 2018, 'India, the Indo-Pacific and the Quad', *Survival*, 60(3): 181-94.
- Rudd, Kevin, 2019, 'The Convenient Rewriting of the History of the «Quad»', *Nikkei Asia*, 26 March.
- Saballa, Joe, 2022, 'India Establishes Military Facility on Border to Counter Chinese Buildup', *The Defense Post*, 2022, 17 November.
- Sagar, Pradip R., 2023, 'How the Indian Army is responding to the Chinese troop build-up in the eastern sector', *India Today*, 15 January.
- Sanghi, Neeta, 2021, 'How the Modi Government Overestimated India's Capacity to Make COVID Vaccines', *The Wire*, 23 April.
- Sawhney, Pravin, 2021, 'How India Played into China's Hands on the Border Dispute', *The Wire*, 1 March.
- Sengupta, Prantik, 2021, 'The new «Quad» gives significant impetus to India's prominence in West Asia', *The Print*, 3 November.

- Sharma, Ashok, 2017, *Indian Lobbying and Its Influence in US Decision Making: Post-Cold War*, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Shisheng, Hu, and Wang Jue, 2020, 'The Behavioral Logic behind India's Tough Foreign Policy toward China', *CIR*, September-October.
- Shukla, Ajai, 2021, 'Indian, Chinese troops start disengaging in Ladakh's Pangong sector', *Broadsword*, 12 February.
- [Singh, Bawa, *et al.* 2022] Bawa Singh, Sandeep Singh, Balinder Singh & Vijay Kumar Chhattu, 'India's Neighbourhood Vaccine Diplomacy During COVID-19 Pandemic: Humanitarian and Geopolitical Perspectives', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 2022 (DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096221079310>).
- Singh, Sushant, 2020b, 'China Has India Trapped on Their Disputed Border', *Foreign Policy*, 1 December.
- Singh, Swaran, 2021, 'COVID-19 and India-China Equations: Examining their Interface in the Indian Ocean Region', *Chinese Studies Journal*, 15: 111-132.
- Singh, Sushant, 2020a, 'Line of Actual Control (LAC): Where it is located, and where India and China differ', *The Indian Express*, 1 June.
- Srivastava, Meghna, and Yves Tiberghien, 2022, 'The Paradox of China-India relations', *East Asia Forum*, 26 March.
- Suri, Navdeep, & Hargun Sethi, 2023, 'The I2U2: Where Geography and Economics Meet', *ORF Issue Brief*, No. 618, 27 February.
- Tellis, Ashley J., 2022, '«What Is in Our Interest»: India and the Ukraine War', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April.
- Thakur, Dinesh, 2021, 'India is suffering immensely under the weight of Covid. Now its failures are threatening much of the world', *STAT News*, 5 May.
- The Economic Times, 2023, 17 March, 'Centre excludes questions on Ladakh patrol points from Lock Sabha final list'.
- The Economist, 2022, 14 April, 'India is cutting back its reliance on Russian arms'.
- The Economist, 2022, 24 November, 'On foreign policy, India is reliably unreliable'.
- The EurAsian Times, 2021, 11 May, 'How China Is Helping «Arch-Rival» India & «Iron Brother» Pakistan to Fight Covid-19 Pandemic'.
- The Eurasian, 2022, 15 July, 'No CAATSA Sanctions On India – After Historic Nuclear Deal, US «Approves» CAATSA Waiver For India'.
- The Hindu, 2021, 7 February, 'India has transgressed LAC more often than China: V.K. Singh'.
- The Indian Express, 2022, 15 July, 'US House votes for CAATSA sanctions waiver to India over S-400 missile deal with Russia'.
- The Print, 2022, 'India sends 7,725 kilograms of humanitarian aid to Ukraine', 12 September.
- The Times of India, 2020, 30 June, 'Corps Commander-level meeting between India, China begins in Ladakh's Chusul'.
- The White House, 2021, 'Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: «The Spirit of the Quad», 12 March.
- The White House, 2022a, *Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Modi of India Before Bilateral Meeting*, 11 April.
- The White House, 2022b, 'Quad Joint Leaders' Statement', , 24 May.
- The White House, 2022c, *Joint Statement of the Leaders of India, Israel, United Arab Emirates, and the United States (I2U2)*, 14 July.
- The Wire, 2022, 22 December, 'India, China Held Constructive Dialogue: Joint Statement on Fresh Talks on Eastern Ladakh Row'.

- The Wire, 2022, 6 November, 'Russia Becomes India's Top Oil Supplier in October'.
- The Wire, 2023, 13 January, 'Despite Frosty Relations, India's Trade With China Reaches Record Levels'.
- The Wire, 2023, 25 January, '«India Lost 26 of 65 Patrolling Points in Eastern Ladakh; China Installed Pickets»: Paper'.
- Torri, Michelguglielmo, 2018, 'Asia Maior in 2017: The unravelling of the US foreign policy', *Asia Maior*, XXVIII/2017.
- Torri, Michelguglielmo, 2020, 'The Road to Galwan Valley: An alternative view of India's relations with China and the US since 2005', *Asia Maior*, Special Issue 2: 117-157.
- Torri, Michelguglielmo, 2021, India 2020: Confronting China, aligning with the US, *Asia Maior* XXXI/2020: 385.
- [UAE n.d.] United Arab Emirates, Ministry of Economy, UAE-India Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, no date ([https://www.moec.gov.ae/en/cepa\\_india](https://www.moec.gov.ae/en/cepa_india)).
- Ukrinform.net, 2022, 'India donates total of 187 tonnes of humanitarian aid to Ukrainian hospitals', 7 May.
- United Nations, 2021, *Adopting Resolution 2593 (2021), Security Council Condemns Deadly Attacks in Afghanistan, Calls for Combating Terrorism, Upholding Human Rights*, 30 August.
- Venkataramakrishnan, Rohan, 2022, 'How the long-term China challenge has put India in a diplomatic sweet spot amid the Ukraine crisis', *Scroll.in*, 19 May.
- Xinhua, 2021, 1 May, 'China ready to offer support, assistance to help India fight COVID-19: FM'.
- Yan Xuetong, 2014, 'From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 7 (2): 153-184.

SRI LANKA 2022: THE ARAGALAYA PROTEST MOVEMENT  
AND THE RAJAPAKSAS' FALL FROM POWER

Diego Abenante

University of Trieste  
diego.abenante@dispes.units.it

*The year in Sri Lanka was dominated by a severe economic crisis which led the central bank to declare financial default for the first time in the country's history. The crisis has generated a large popular movement against President Rajapaksa and the Prime Minister which, after months of massive street protests, led to the resignations of both. After much hesitation, the new government negotiated a program of financial aid with the International Monetary Fund. However, many unknowns remained about the new President's ability to introduce the reforms imposed by the international partners, and about the sacrifices that will be required of an already exhausted population. Although the military has avoided openly entering politics, the use of violence by the security forces and the new government's hard line towards the protesters placed great uncertainty over the future of Sri Lankan democracy. Colombo's need for urgent economic support has also led to a rapprochement with India, which has been the regional partner most willing to approve aid packages for the island-nation.*

KEYWORDS – Sri Lanka; debt crisis; popular protest; Rajapaksa; civil-military relations; democracy in South Asia.

### 1. Introduction

Despite the signs of economic crisis that emerged in Sri Lanka during 2021, few observers would have foreseen the upheaval that hit the country the following year. Since the beginning of 2022, the Sri Lankan economy was characterized by a deep crisis which manifested itself in the shortage of basic consumer goods, such as food, fuel and medicines. The struggling of a vast part of the population, with the exception of the wealthiest, in meeting their most basic needs led to a spontaneous wave of dissent. This quickly turned from an economic protest to a general uprising against the government and President Rajapaksa in particular, accused of inefficiency and corruption. Despite an attempt by the President and his circle to respond with emergency measures, the movement – dubbed *Janatha Aragalaya*, or «people's struggle» in Sinhalese – did not subside. The protests culminated in July, with the crowd storming major government buildings in Colombo. This unprecedented manifestation of popular protest led to the resignation of the President. To the surprise of most observers, therefore, within months the crisis brought down the seemingly immobile power system of

the Rajapaksa family and its allies. Despite the excessive use of violence by the security forces against the demonstrators, and despite the ties between the Rajapaksa family and the military, the army showed general restraint, declaring that it had no intention of assuming power. The following sections will analyse the evolution of the *Aragalaya* movement and its ability to force a change of government. At the same time, the essay will highlight the limits of institutional politics, including the opposition, in meeting the demands of the movement. Furthermore, the essay discusses the wider repercussions of the events in Sri Lanka. The crisis has prompted a redefinition of cooperation programs between Colombo and its two main Asian partners, Delhi and Beijing. This fact has inevitably had an impact on India-China economic competition in South Asia. The last part of the essay examines the indicators of the Sri Lankan economy at the end of 2022, and evaluates its prospects for exiting the crisis.

## 2. *The beginning of the protest*

Sri Lanka's precarious economic situation was already evident at the end of 2021, due to long-lasting imbalances, which had been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, declining incomes from tourism and remittances from migrants had led to a shortage of foreign currency. This in turn forced the authorities to proclaim a ban on the import of non-essential goods. In the summer, the authorities had gone so far as to declare a food emergency, and to ration all basic goods and impose fixed prices [Abenante 2021, p. 342]. This policy created the context for the protests that developed in the first months of 2022.

Although the wave of protests that shook Sri Lanka concentrated in the capital Colombo, the first roots of the discontent lay in the agricultural sector. This is hardly surprising given the importance of the sector in the national economy. In 2022 agriculture represented about 7% of the national GDP and employed more than 30% of Sri Lankan workers, especially in the production of rice and tea [US-ITO 2022]. Moreover, those two sectors had been particularly favoured by state subsidies. The early signs of unrest began in March 2021, when the government had decided initially to limit, and then on 26 April to ban altogether the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in agriculture. The decision was justified by President Rajapaksa with the widespread concern about the link between chemicals and the increase of non-communicable diseases, and as part of an ambitious plan to make Sri Lanka an oasis of organic farming [Presidential Secretariat 2021, April 22; Jayasinghe and Ghosal 2022, March 3; Ellis-Petersen 2022, April 20]. However, according to various independent observers, the government's plan was driven by two more practical reasons: first, to reduce the budget deficit, since a system of public subsidies for the purchase of chemical fertilizers

was in force; second, to save precious foreign currency, since fertilizers were almost totally imported and costed about 400 million US\$ a year [*Economy Next* 2020, February 23; *Nikkei Asia* 2022, October 24].

The government's decision forced the farmers to switch to exclusively organic cultivation at a very short notice. This proved to be the beginning of the economic disaster. International agencies had advised Colombo that a sudden ban on chemical fertilizers in the absence of a scheme for the local production of organic fertilizers, or to purchase such products in the international market, would result in a sharp reduction in the crop [US\$A 2021]. Despite the President's promise that the state would distribute organic fertilizers, the impact on the country's agriculture was acutely felt: rice production fell by 20% in just six months of the ban; similarly, tea production and exports decreased by 18% between November 2021 and February 2022. While before the ban Sri Lanka was self-sufficient in rice production, when the crisis began it was forced to spend 450 million US\$ on rice imports [Talukdar 2022, July 22].

According to various technical experts, the government's decision to ban all chemicals was hasty and superficial, as the transition to organic cultivation takes time and cannot be imposed overnight [Ellis-Petersen 2022, April 20; US\$A 2021]. Although the government reversed its decision and lifted the ban in November, the effects had already hit the national economy hard. They produced a sharp increase in food prices on the domestic market, and also damaged the trade balance, since rice and tea were among the main sources of foreign currency. Despite an attempt by the Agriculture Minister Mahindananda Aluthgamage to defend the strategy of making Sri Lanka free from chemical fertilizers, President Rajapaksa about a year later admitted that the ban had been a major mistake [*The Hindu* 2021, November 24; *Outlook* 2022, April 19].

### 3. *The expansion of the protest and the financial default*

The resulting shortage of food and other basic goods was at the roots of the unrest. In March the protest extended from the peasant community to other social groups, above all to the younger generation. At the same time, it shifted its focus from agriculture to government policy in general, accusing the authorities, and the Rajapaksa family in particular, of mismanagement and corruption. The protest initially took the form of local street demonstrations, and night vigils in middle-class residential neighbourhoods [Keenan 2022, April 18]. However, it escalated into a nationwide agitation as a reaction to President Rajapaksa's special address to the nation on 16 March. In the speech, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, consistent with his uncompromising style, refused to assume responsibility, instead placing the blame for the crisis on the COVID-19 pandemic and on financial imbalances created by his prede-



cessors and opponents: «I am not responsible for this crisis...those who contributed to the creation of this crisis are criticizing the government in front of the people today» [Ministry of Mass Media 2022, 16 March]. As usual, the President's speech made extensive reference to military rhetoric and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, which were the two cornerstones of his public image. However, it seemed that this ideological approach did not appeal to the population. The apparent disorientation of the authorities in the face of the crisis was confirmed a week later. On March 23, an All-Party Conference was organized by the President. The initiative was boycotted by the opposition and did not produce concrete results, apart from the confirmation of ongoing contacts with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for financial assistance. The fact that Rajapaksa had decided not to bring the discussion before the Parliament, choosing instead an informal inter-party meeting at his residence was emphasised by part of the media, and appeared as a further demonstration of the President's mistrust of democratic processes [*The Sunday Times* 2022, March 27].

Popular protest grew in intensity as a reaction to the apparent lack of action by the authorities. A week after the All-Party Conference, the agitation was organized through social media and concentrated in the capital Colombo, in the area of the government buildings. The demonstrators began to openly demand the resignation of the President – behind the slogan «GoGotaGo» – and the exit from national politics of the entire Rajapaksa family [Keenan 2022, April 18]. The first serious incidents occurred on the evening of 31 March when the crowd headed for the private residence of the President and clashed with the security forces. This resulted in physical confrontations and the arrest of fifty people. In the following days, several media and social activists denounced an excessive use of force by the police and military forces. The Sri Lanka Collective Against Torture reported several cases of beatings, and the unjustified use of rubber bullets and tear gas against a mostly peaceful demonstration [*The Island Online* 2022, April 4]. On 1 April, faced with the gravity of the situation and fearing a popular uprising, President Rajapaksa proclaimed a state of emergency. A curfew was imposed across the country, along with the shutdown of social media. According to media sources, between 31 March and 4 April, more than 600 protesters were arrested [*Asia News* 2022, April 4].

This, however, did not stop the protests, and crowds took to the streets of the capital again on 4 April, calling for the resignation of the Rajapaksa family from official functions. Five days later, with the slogan «Occupy Galle Face», the demonstrators took possession of the Face Galle Green area in Colombo, near the Presidential Secretariat, making it their base [*The Hindu* 2022, April 12]. In the following weeks this base turned into a tent city with free food, medicines, portable toilets, psychological support, and even a book exchange service. The area was mainly frequented by young men and women from different social classes: students and social activists, teachers,

lawyers and farmers. This sort of ideal community, with its joyful and peaceful atmosphere, was pitted by protesters against the corruption and violence of the state agencies.

The resilience of popular protests, and the apparent lack of credible responses on the part of the executive, led to a worsening political crisis. On 3 April, the entire 26 members of the government resigned, with the notable exception of the Prime Minister, Mahinda Rajapaksa – brother of the President – who remained in his post. The ministers who resigned included three members of the Rajapaksa family: Basil, Minister of Finance, Chamal, Minister of Agriculture, and Namal, Minister of Sports [*Asia News* 2022, April 4]. Although this seemed to be a first sign of change, it soon became clear that the move, rather than being the result of an internal outcry, had been agreed with the President and the Prime Minister, so as to allow the former to appoint a new cabinet [*Al Jazeera* 2022, April 3]. Unsurprisingly, the protesters reacted with a great deal of scepticism. The protest not only did not stop but even intensified its tone and slogans. The fundamental request now became the exit from the political scene of all members of the Rajapaksa family.

In response, Gotabaya Rajapaksa made a last-ditch effort to break the impasse by involving opposition parties in the government. On 4 April, the President launched an appeal to all political forces, including the opposition, to form a government of national unity. In the statement, the President invited «all the political parties represented in the parliament to meet to accept the ministerial portfolios in order to find solutions to this national crisis» [*Al Jazeera* 2022, April 4]. However, all the main opposition groups rejected Rajapaksa's appeal. The secretary of the main opposition party, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB-United People's Power), Ranjit Madduma Bandara, declared that «the people of this country want Gotabaya and the entire Rajapaksa family to leave and we cannot go against the will of the people and we cannot work alongside the corrupt» [*Ibidem*]. In fact, the opposition gave the impression of fear of being involved in the responsibility of governing such a difficult situation. Apparently, their strategy was to let the Rajapaksa family and its allies remain the sole target of popular discontent [Keenan 2022, April 18].

The plan seemed to work, as growing popular pressure caused the first fractures in the government. On 5 April, 43 members of Parliament, including 11 members of Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP-Sri Lanka's People's Front), the party to which the Rajapaksas belong, announced their intention to set up an autonomous parliamentary group. They were soon joined by 14 MPs from another party allied with the government, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which at the same time withdrew from the ruling coalition; they were also followed by 16 MPs from other SLPP allied parties and two from the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), an organization representing the Tamil workers' community. Moreover, the Minister for

Property, Housing and Community Infrastructure, and the Deputy Speaker of Parliament also announced the resignations from their posts. Central bank governor Ajith Nivard Cabraal had also resigned the day before [*Colombo Page* 2022, April 5; *Asia News* 2022, April 4].

#### 4. *The resignation of the Rajapaksas*

The tug of war between protesters, the opposition and the government, was accompanied by a complex debate on international economic assistance. Despite Colombo's evident need for urgent aid in order to save the economy from collapse, the possibility of an intervention by the IMF, or other supranational bodies, was seen by many politicians with mistrust. At the All-Party Conference on 23 March, this feeling found clear expression in the view that international assistance would turn into yet another debt trap for the island-nation. Furthermore, there was widespread fear that loans would be accompanied by demands for unpopular austerity programmes [*The Sunday Times* 2022, March 27]. This sentiment was at the root of the Colombo government's propensity for bilateral negotiations with India and China to obtain short-term loans, rather than for a comprehensive aid package with an international organization. This is an explanation for the delay with which Colombo started negotiations with the IMF, but also for the considerable duration of the discussion. In fact, despite suggestions from experts, President Rajapaksa and the Central Bank governor repeatedly refused to enter into negotiations with the IMF and the World Bank (WB) for the restructuring of the state's international debt [Keenan 2022, April 18, p. 4]. Based on official statements, it was only in mid-March that the President began negotiating with the IMF. The reason for this reluctance was not difficult to see: since early March, the IMF outlined the reforms it believed were essential for Sri Lanka. These included heavy austerity measures such as cuts in public spending, direct and indirect tax increases, an end to the Central Bank's inflationary policy, and the placing on the private market of state-owned enterprises [*Ibidem*]. A similar position was expressed by the WB Country Director for Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, who affirmed the need for Sri Lanka to address the structural roots of the crisis with a profound program of reforms [*Daily FT* 2022, April 18].

On 6 April, Gotabaya Rajapaksa formed a committee of three prominent economists – two of whom had previously held positions in the IMF and the WB – to negotiate with the international partners [*Times of India* 2022, April 7]. Colombo announced the start of negotiations with the IMF for 18 April, also stating that it urgently needed to receive at least 3-4 billion US\$ as immediate aid for 2022 [Keenan 2022, April 18, p. 4]. On 12 April, the Central Bank of Sri Lanka communicated the suspension of payments on its external debt, pending the conclusion of negotiations with the lend-

ers and foreign creditors. Sri Lanka thus became the first Indo-Pacific state to declare financial default since the 1997 Asian economic crisis. It was also the first financial default in the history of the island-nation [Jayasinghe and Do Rosario 2022, April 12; Parkin and Cornish 2022, May 19].

Despite these partial signs of progress on the economic level, between April and May the political situation was at a standstill. On the one hand, President Rajapaksa and the Prime Minister seemed determined to stay in power despite the mounting economic crisis. On the other hand, the protest movement did not retreat a step, undeterred by the pressure of the security forces. Moreover, in early May the public order situation seemed dangerously out of hand when groups of Rajapaksa supporters began to attack the demonstrators. In between, the opposition seemed uncertain what to do. While they were determined not to enter a government led by any member of the Rajapaksa family, they lacked an alternative plan. There were two reasons for the hesitation of the opposition. First, they were highly divided internally, being composed mainly of the SJB, some former supporters of Rajapaksa, the leftist organization Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP-People's Liberation Front), and smaller Tamil and Muslim parties. Second, they lacked the parliamentary numbers either to get a no-confidence vote, or to start an unlikely impeachment proceeding against the President. The scarce representation in parliament made it equally difficult to go down the road of amending the Constitution to deprive the President of his executive powers. This procedure required a 2/3 majority in parliament, which seemed clearly out of reach. However, the opposition's refusal to share the management of the crisis, in order to leave its burden on Rajapaksa's shoulders, could have been interpreted by sectors of the society as hindering the negotiations with international donors, and therefore as an antipatriotic attitude [Keenan 2022, April 18, pp. 5-7].

However ambiguous from the outset, the strategy of the opposition to reject a government of national unity was the key to the first turning point of the crisis, namely the resignation of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa. In his place, the President appointed the veteran politician – and six times Prime Minister – Ramil Wickremesinghe. This gesture came after the failure of all attempts to placate the protests with public appeals. For weeks, the Prime Minister appealed to the demonstrators' responsibility: «every second you protest in the streets» he declared in mid-April, «our country is losing opportunities to receive potential dollars» [News Wire 2022, April 11; *Colombo Page* 2002, April 13]. Finally, on 5 May, he announced his resignation, justifying it as a step to allow for the formation of a government of national unity [Gunasekara and Mashal 2022, May 9]. The move by the Prime Minister had obviously been thought of by the Rajapaksa circle as an inevitable sacrifice in order to avoid the downfall of the President. However, this prediction turned out to be wrong. The spokesmen of the *Aragalaya* movement refused to dissolve, demanding that Gotabaya Rajapaksa also

take a step back. A similar attitude was followed by the opposition parties, which maintained their refusal to join an emergency government.

The strategy of the opposition left much room for debate. According to some observers, its hesitation gave the President and his supporters a chance to strengthen themselves, making the possibility of regime change more difficult. On the other hand, many analysts admitted that it was very difficult to oust Rajapaksa, given the extensive powers that the President attributed to himself with the 20<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Constitution approved in October 2020 [ICJ 2020, October 27; Abenante 2021, pp. 335-336]. Furthermore, given the close ties between the President's family and the military, and the threatening tone of some government statements, there was widespread fear that the army could make a show of force against the protest movement, and even that it might decide to take power into its hands [Keenan 2022, April 18, p. 6].

### *5. The July uprising and the escape of the President*

After two more months of economic crisis, faced with the President's refusal to resign, on 9 July a crowd of around 100,000 demonstrators stormed the Presidential and the Prime Minister's buildings, even heading towards their private residences. The world media released images of cheering protesters inside government offices, inevitably bringing to mind the 6 January assault on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. However, unlike the latter case, in Colombo the demonstrators showed overall respect towards public properties, and the atmosphere was more one of celebration and joy than of anger. Despite this, on the evening of 9 July a fire was reported in the private residence of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe. Independent sources have raised doubts about the demonstrators' responsibility for the fire, both for the peaceful behaviour maintained by the movement, and because the episode followed documented acts of violence by the police [Keenan 2022, July 18]. Faced with the dramatic situation, the same evening the speaker of Parliament announced the resignation of the President. Evidently fearing for his safety, Gotabaya Rajapaksa left the country for the Maldives on 13 July, after appointing former Prime Minister Wickremesinghe as Acting President. From the Maldives, Rajapaksa finally headed to Singapore, from where he sent the resignation letter [NBC 2022, July 13; Keenan 2022, July 18].

Although these events apparently marked the victory of the *Aragalaya* movement, and seemed to pave the way for peace, this was not the case. On 19 July Wickremesinghe delivered a scathing speech aimed at the protesters, in which he called them «fascists» and accused them of aiming for power. The Acting President's speech heralded a show of force that took place three days later. In the early hours of 22 July the army, along with the police, intervened at Face Galle Green. During the action, which saw

the destruction of the camp and the arrest of many leaders and members of the movement, eyewitnesses and journalists reported the excessive use of violence by the soldiers, especially around the Presidential Secretariat. The credibility of the reports seemed to be confirmed by the official protest of the US, UK, Germany and other countries' diplomatic authorities in Colombo for the brutality of the military. A United Nations Human Rights Office's statement said that it was «alarmed by the unnecessary use of force» [Srinivasan 2022, July 22]. According to the security forces' statement, the action was allegedly caused by the protesters' refusal to leave the area. However, the *Aragalaya*'s leaders denied the fact, stating that the demonstrators had announced their withdrawal from the area for the afternoon of the same day. Independent observers suggested that the action was primarily motivated by the authorities' desire to punish protesters for the 9 July storming of government buildings and residences [Keenan 2022, July 18; Srinivasan 2022, July 22].

## 6. *A transition to where?*

Gotabaya Rajapaksa's escape from Sri Lanka on a military plane, accompanied by his wife and two bodyguards, and Wickremasinghe's appointment marked the beginning of a delicate political transition that appeared very uncertain from the outset. Wickremasinghe was then formally elected President by the Parliament on 20 July. Two days later, he appointed Dinesh Gunawardena as the new Prime Minister. However, the political change had no appeal to those social groups that created the protest movement. The new President was labelled by the *Aragalaya* as not credible to lead a real change in Sri Lankan politics. Second, he already ran – and was defeated – twice in the presidential race in 1999 and 2005; this prompted many observers to consider him desperate for office. Third, Wickremasinghe relied on Rajapaksa's SLPP parliamentary support to get elected and to govern. Finally, the leaders of the protest movement blamed him for his confrontational attitude and for the violence of 9 July [Keenan 2022, July 25]. For all these reasons, the new President was considered by most observers as a politician who was ill suited to introduce real change. The strategy of the opposition also remained hesitant throughout the crisis. This was confirmed during the election of the new President. The recognized leader of the opposition, Sajith Premadasa, head of the SJB, after having initially run for office, on 19 July announced his withdrawal from the election. Instead, he announced his party's support for Dulas Alahapperuma, former Minister of Information and Mass Media in Rajapaksa's cabinet [France24 2022, July 19; Reuters 2022, July 19]. This may explain why the *Aragalaya* remained broadly equidistant from all political fronts, and generally maintained an attitude of suspicion, even distrust, towards institutional politics.

Like many other similar movements, the *Aragalaya* was born spontaneously out of institutional politics mainly thanks to social media. This was in part a strength of the movement. However, in the long run, it turned into an element of weakness, due to its disorganization and lack of recognized leaders [Keenan 2022, July 25].

### 7. *A Chinese debt-trap?*

The uncertainty of the prospects of the government born from the protest movement was also linked to its ability to understand and deal with the structural causes of the economic crisis. From this point of view, a crucial aspect was given by the nature of the state debt. Most of the observers of Sri Lankan economy emphasised the long-term nature of its financial imbalances. In particular, it has been emphasized that the Sri Lankan economy has been a «highly export dependent economy» basically since 1948 [Chandrasekhar and Gosh 2022, May 2022]. This has resulted in a tendency to build up a chronic trade and current account deficit, which has been financed for decades mainly by foreign borrowing. This imbalance was particularly acute after the country's economic opening in 1977. Its external debt increased greatly in the 2000s, especially after the 2008 financial crisis. If in 1977 it amounted to 1 billion US\$, in 2008 it had increased to 16 billion, and in 2020 it had reached 56 billion [*Ibidem*]. Based on long-term poor economic choices, Colombo's economy has also suffered from widespread corruption. The effects of COVID-19, and the Russo-Ukrainian war had the effect of exploding these contradictions. Beyond a general consensus on the structural nature of the crisis, opinions differed on its responsibilities. Two currents of analysis can be distinguished: one believes that, despite the chronic long-term weakness of the Sri Lankan economy, the proximate cause of the crisis would be the debt contracted with China for investment in large infrastructures. A second line of thought instead believes that the debt with China is not the cause of the crisis, but that it was caused by the economic strategies dictated by Western international bodies, in particular the IMF.

Analysts who believed China was primarily responsible for the collapse of the Sri Lankan economy pointed out that Beijing encouraged Colombo to invest in large projects, financed with high-interest loans. These would have created the debt trap over the years. The same authors emphasised the close connection between Beijing and the Rajapaksa family's power system during the 2000s. It was during the period 2005-2015 – under President Mahinda Rajapaksa – that Colombo started such large and expensive projects such as the Hambantota port (2007), the Mattala International Airport (2010), the Colombo International Container Terminal (2011), and the Lotus Tower (2012) [Wignaraja, Panditaratne, Kannangara and Hundlani 2022, p. 4; Rowand 2022, July 13].

The alternative interpretation is offered by those analysts who argue that the debt contracted by Colombo with Beijing is much lower than it is often assumed in the West. In fact, it is not easy to quantify Sri Lanka's Chinese debt, and estimates may vary depending on the sources. Yet, current analyses place it between 10% and 20% of Colombo's overall external debt. According to a Chatham House study, the total value of Chinese infrastructure investments in Sri Lanka between 2006 and 2019 amounted to 12.1 billion US\$, or 14 per cent of Sri Lanka's 2018 GDP. This figure was considerably lower than those of other regional economies, as the Maldives, Pakistan, Cambodia and Laos [Wignaraja, Panditaratne, Kannangara and Hundlani 2022, p. 5]. The amount of Chinese loans to Sri Lanka by 2016 was about 9% of the total government debt [Jones and Hameiri 2022, pp. 13-19]. According to this line of analysis, therefore, the fundamental cause for the collapse of the Sri Lankan economy would not be Chinese investments, but rather the poor economic policy decisions by Colombo and the neo-liberal economic recipes promoted by Western governments and international financial institutions. These would have pushed Colombo towards an ever-greater openness to external investments, and therefore to excessive dependence on foreign debt [Talukdar 2022, July 22; Scott Tyson 2022, August 19].

#### *8. Economic assistance and foreign relations*

The country's economic crisis led to an interesting reversal of relations between Colombo, Delhi and Beijing. In 2021 Colombo relied mainly on China for economic support, as it was the only partner willing to grant financial assistance without setting conditions, at least formally. On the contrary Delhi, while pushing towards close relations with Sri Lanka, on the basis of Prime Minister Modi's «neighbourhood first» policy, set the condition that Colombo first enter into an agreement with the IMF in order to obtain economic aid. The latter condition, of course, was unwelcome to the Sri Lankan government as it would have inevitably required profound reforms. According to most observers, Delhi had lost ground to Beijing in terms of influence in Sri Lanka. In 2022, however, the scenario reversed: since the beginning of the crisis, Colombo found more open interlocutors in India than in China. On 17 March, Delhi guaranteed an emergency credit line of 1 billion US\$ to Colombo. These were followed by a variety of other aids from India throughout the year. According to India's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, Delhi provided around 4 billion US\$ in support to Colombo from January to August [Balachandran 2022, June 25; HCI 2022, May 7; *Economy Next* 2022, August 23].

Compared to Indian activism, Beijing's responses to Colombo's contacts were much more cautious. The Chinese government has certainly



promised to support the Sri Lankan economy; however, it has set a series of stringent conditions: first of all, Colombo had to obtain a debt restructuring from its lenders; secondly, Beijing called for the conclusion of the China-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement; finally, the Chinese government insisted that Colombo become more «independent» with respect to Western partners and the IMF. It is true that Beijing also offered immediate economic assistance packages; in May the Chinese government approved a loan of 76 million US\$ to Sri Lanka. However, these were too small compared to the size of the crisis and, in any case, they were much smaller than the Indian offer [Balachandran 2022, June 25; *Al Jazeera* 2022, April 12].

Despite Colombo's doubts about the conditions linked to international financing, the Sri Lankan government has decided to go down that road. After starting negotiations with the IMF in March, Colombo finalized an agreement on an approximately 2.9 billion US\$ Extended Fund Facility on 1 September [IMF 2022, September 1; Keenan 2022, October 10]. Of course, the program was not without costs and included a series of fundamental but heavy reforms for an already impoverished population; these included tax increases, energy and fuel price changes and the fight against corruption [IMF 2022, September 1]. This opened up important uncertainties for the future political stability of the island-nation.

### 9. *The economic indicators at the end of the year*

The severity of the crisis that hit Sri Lanka in 2022 took many economic observers by surprise, given the moderate growth expected the previous year. The forecast for 2021 and April 2022 by the Asian Development Bank were for GDP growth rates of 3.3 and 2.4% respectively. Yet, the updates in September 2022 provided a negative figure of -8.8 per cent [ADB September 2022, p. 17]. For 2023, the projection was slightly improving, due to the measures implemented by the government and by foreign assistance programs, although still with a figure of -3.3 per cent [*Ibidem*]. Interestingly, Sri Lanka's performance stood out as the only negative data in a picture for South Asia's GDP that was marked by overall growth. Equally negative was the evolution of the inflation rate, which rose from 6 per cent in the last 2021 figure to 14.2 in January 2022, reaching 64.3 per cent in August. The inflation forecast for 2023 was moderately lower, albeit still very high, at 18.6 per cent. Foreign exchange reserves, which totalled about US\$ 3.10 billion at the end of 2021, had essentially halved to 1.72 billion in August 2022 [*Ibidem*, pp. 165-166].

The emergence of the crisis also prevented Sri Lanka from benefiting from a general recovery in international tourism in many, though not all, countries in the region. In Sri Lanka, the growth of tourism that had manifested itself in September 2021 was blocked by the economic crisis in

April 2022. Similarly, remittances from migrants had risen in other Asian countries even above pre-pandemic levels, while they reached just 43 per cent of previous levels in Sri Lanka. This was caused by unfavourable exchange rates which discouraged migrants from sending money through formal channels [*Ibidem*, p. 37]. The trade deficit decreased by 18.6 percent in the first half of 2022 as exports, especially in the textile sector, grew faster than imports, which were financed by economic support from India [WB 2022].

As widely reported, poverty in the country increased dramatically during the year. The poorest sections of the population have been hit the hardest due to inflation, food and medicine shortages, limited supply of fertilizers, and declining remittances. This has particularly affected women, who already suffered from unequal conditions before the crisis. Sri Lankan and international NGOs have launched appeals underlining that the crisis has affected men and women differently, and encouraging the adoption of specific measures to alleviate the gender gap [*Ibidem*; GHA August 2022].

## 10. Conclusion

Sri Lanka faced one of the most serious crises in its history during the year. The new president Wickremesinghe and the government dealt with an enormous challenge; namely not only to restore the country's economy, but above all to introduce profound reforms in the political and economic structure. The President was expected to dismantle the system created by the Rajapaksas, based on centralization of power in the hands of the Presidency. Moreover, the inevitable austerity measures demanded by the IMF and international partners will likely generate discontent among the population. There was widespread scepticism about Wickremesinghe's ability to handle such a critical stage, if only because he did not appear to have the necessary consensus. The *Aragalaya* movement criticized Wickremesinghe's nomination from the outset, also citing the fact that in the 2020 election he was not even elected to his parliamentary seat. The President's hostile attitude towards the protests helped complete the picture. These doubts seemed to be erased when Wickremesinghe put forward in August a plan to limit the powers of the President and strengthen those of Parliament, as he had promised during the protests. Indeed, with the approval by Parliament of the 22<sup>nd</sup> amendment to the Constitution on 21 October, the new executive seemed to be heading in the right direction. However, the Amendment was criticized by the opposition for being too limited. According to this view, the Constitution did not introduce accountability and transparency, and still left excessive powers to the President [ICJ 2022, August 9; Kuruwita 2022, October 26]. Beyond these uncertainties, on the positive side, the *Aragalaya* movement has been a very important novelty in Sri Lankan politics. For the

first time, a transversal political movement has arisen in a country historically crossed by divisions along religious and ethnic lines. The success of a largely young, inclusive and peaceful movement certainly opened hopes for the stabilization of the country.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abenante, Diego, 2021, 'Sri Lanka 2021: From pandemic emergency to political and economic crisis', *Asia Maior*, XXXII: 342
- Al Jazeera* 2022, April 3, 'Sri Lankan cabinet resigns en masse as crisis deepens'
- Al Jazeera* 2022, April 4, 'Sri Lanka opposition rejects president's unity government offer'
- Al Jazeera* 2022, April 12, 'Sri Lanka hopeful for \$2.5bn rescue loan from China'
- Asian Development Bank* 2022, September, 'Asian Development Outlook 2022 Update'
- Balachandran, P. K., 2022, 'India strengthens its position in Sri Lanka vis-à-vis rival China', *The Diplomat*, 25 June
- Chandrasekhar, C. P. and Ghosh, Jayati, 2022, 'Roots of the Sri Lankan debt trap', *International Developments Economics Associates*, 3 May 2022
- Colombo Page* 2022, April 5, 'Over 40 government MPs become independent, Deputy Speaker resigns'
- Daily FT* 2022, April 18, 'World Bank says SL needs urgent policy measures to tackle unsustainable debt, Balance of Payment challenges'
- Economy Next* 2022, February 23, 'Sri Lanka state firms to import 79,900 MT of chemical fertilizer'
- Economy Next* 2022, August 23, 'Sri Lanka given US\$4.0bn dollars of support from India: envoy'
- France24* 2022, July 19, 'Sri Lankan opposition leader drops candidacy, backs rival in presidential race'
- Gender in Humanitarian Action* 2022, August, 'Gender Alert: Sri Lanka Crisis'
- Gunasekara, Skandha and Mashal, Mujib, 2022, 'In Blow to Ruling Family, Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Quits in Face of Unrest', *The New York Times*, 9 May
- Gupta, Kanika, 2022, 'Sri Lanka aims for food security after ill-fated fertilizer ban', *Nikkei Asia*, 24 October
- Hellis-Petersen, Hanna, 2022, '«It will be hard to find a farmer left»: Sri Lanka reels from rash fertiliser ban', *The Guardian*, 20 April
- High Commission of India* 2022, Colombo, May 7, 'Operational details of US\$ 1 billion credit line'
- International Commission of Jurists* 2022, August 9, 'Sri Lanka: 22nd Amendment Bill does not guarantee sufficient checks and balances'
- International Commission of Jurists* 2022, October 27, 'Sri Lanka: newly adopted 20th Amendment to the Constitution is blow to the rule of law'
- International Monetary Fund* 2022, September 1, 'IMF staff reaches staff-level agreement on an extended fund facility arrangement with Sri Lanka', Press Release N. 22/295
- Jayasinghe, Uditha and Do Rosario, Jorgelina, 2022, 'Sri Lanka unilaterally suspends external debt payments, says it needs money for essentials', *Reuters*, 12 April

- Jayasinghe, Uditha and Ghoshal, Devjyot, 2022, 'Fertiliser ban decimates Sri Lankan crops as government popularity ebbs', *Reuters*, 3 March
- Jayawardana, Sandun, 2022, 'Away from Parliament, president holds his first APC to «solve crisis»', 27 March
- Jones, Lee and Hameiri, Shahar, 2020, 'Debunking the Myth of «Debt-trap Diplomacy». How Recipient Countries Shape China's Belt and Road Initiative', *Chatham House*, Asia-Pacific Programme, August
- Kennan, Alan, 2022, 'Sri Lanka's Uprising Forces Out a President but Leaves System in Crisis', *International Crisis Group*, 19 April
- Kuruwita, Rathindra, 2022, 'Sri Lankan president's grip over power turns more tenuous', *The Diplomat*, 26 October
- Ministry of Mass Media 2022, March 16, 'President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's special address to the nation'
- NBC News 2022, July 13, 'Sri Lankan president flees to the Maldives amid protests over economic crisis'
- News Wire 2022, April 11, '«Every second you protest on the streets, we are losing dollars» Prime Minister'
- Outlook 2022, April 19, 'Sri Lanka Crisis: President Rajapaksa admits mistakes, says fertiliser ban was wrong'
- Parkin, Benjamin and Cornish, Chloe, 2022, 'Sri Lanka becomes first Asia-Pacific country in decades to default on foreign debt', *Financial Times*, 19 May
- Perera, Melani Manel, 2022, 'Rajapaksa calls for national unity government, but crowds demand his resignation', *Asia News*, 4 April
- Reuters 2022, July 19, 'Sri Lanka opposition leader Premadasa withdraws from race for president'
- Rowand, Michael, 2022, 'China made a failed bet on Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa family', *Foreign Policy*, 13 July
- Scott Tyson, Ann, 2022, 'Port politics: How China fits into Sri Lanka's economic crisis', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 19 August
- Srinivasan, Meera, 2002, 'Occupy Galle Face': A tent city of resistance beside Colombo's seat of power, *The Hindu*, 12 April
- Srinivasan, Meera, 2022, 'Sri Lanka military assaults protesters, journalists in raid', *The Hindu*, 22 July
- Talukdar, Sreemoy, 2022, 'Sri Lanka has a new president after driving out the 'evil' Gota, but its rot goes deeper and further than any leader or clan', *FirstPost*, 22 July
- The Hindu* 2022, November 24, 'Sri Lanka partially lifts ban on chemical fertilizers; allows private sector to import it'
- The Island Online* 2022, April 4, 'Mirihana mayhem: NGO wants torture allegations probed'
- The World Bank* 2022, October 6, 'The World Bank in Sri Lanka, Outlook 2022'
- Times of India* 2022, April 7, 'Sri Lanka appoints advisory panel to help resolve growing debt crisis, engage with IMF'
- United States Department of Agriculture 2022, May 28, 'Sri Lanka Restricts and Bans the Import of Fertilizers and Agrochemicals', Voluntary Report
- United States-International Trade Administration 2022, December 13, 'Sri Lanka-Agricultural Sector'
- Wignaraja, Ganeshan, Panditaratne, Dinusha, Kannangara, Pabasara and Hundlani, Divya, 'Chinese Investment and the BRI in Sri Lanka', *Chatham House*, Asia-Pacific Programme, March 2020



PAKISTAN 2022: THE GEOPOLITICS OF IMRAN KHAN'S FALL  
AND THE FLEDGLING GOVERNMENT OF SHEHBAZ SHARIF

Marco Corsi

Asia Maior – An Italian think tank on Asia  
macorsi@gmail.com

*In early 2022, opposition parties, led by the Pakistani People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistani Muslim League – Nawaz (PML-N), stepped up their attacks on Prime Minister Imran Khan to oust him. Allies of the Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) governmental coalition also expressed dissatisfaction with Khan due to dire financial straits from worsening national economic distress. The government of the former cricket player lost its parliamentary majority and faced a no-confidence vote from the opposition. Although the ousting of the Khan government was officially motivated by economic misrule, it was ultimately driven by friction over foreign and domestic policy decisions resulting in Khan losing the support of the Army. In a swift turn of events, the National Assembly accepted Khan's allegations of a plot between the United States and the opposition to oust him and rejected the no-trust motion. However, an intervention of the Supreme Court of Pakistan overturned these decisions. Taking advantage of his vulnerability, the political opposition dismissed Khan with a parliamentary vote. Imran Khan was succeeded by Shehbaz Sharif, the younger brother of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and leader of an alliance of united opposition parties having the common aim to ouster the PTI government. The fledgling government had to address a dire economic crisis amidst significant pressures from Khan's PTI opposition party and an unprecedented natural disaster crisis. In parallel, the new administration had to mend relations with Washington cooled by Imran Khan's foreign policy, taking care not to compromise crucial ties with Beijing.*

KEYWORDS – China; crisis; economy; floods; opposition; Russia; USA

## 1. Introduction

Pakistan's aspirations to play a leading international role are expressed in the provisions of the Economic Outreach Initiative launched in 2020 [Government of Pakistan 2020, December 16]. The vision of the national foreign policy is centred on the domestic economy and supported by a geo-economic narrative aimed at promoting a positive image of Pakistan to the world and helping develop the country's economic potential [*Ibid.*]. In January 2022, Pakistan unveiled part of its national security policy confirming a focus on economic growth and key partnerships, particularly with China as well as hoped-for ties with the United States [Government of Pakistan 2022; Yousaf 2022, January 11; Akhtar 2022, January 21].

In the period under analysis, Pakistan faced a severe economic crisis, which was the culmination of long-dated structural economic features.<sup>1</sup> The financial distress was also attributable to the global Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 («SARS-CoV-2», henceforth «COVID-19» or «Coronavirus») health emergency. Pandemic-induced supply chain shortages have contributed to rising prices and a growing vulnerability to global shocks. In addition, inflation triggered by the surge in world oil prices linked to the Russian invasion of Ukraine aggravated the situation in Pakistan's domestic economy.

In 2019, Pakistan borrowed US\$ 6 billion from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Initially, Khan's government agreed with the IMF's conditionalities but eventually failed to meet all of them and faced the suspension of the loan. Additionally, Khan's administration borrowed US\$ 10 billion altogether from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and China. During Khan's tenure, Pakistan's relations with a key traditional ally of Pakistan – Saudi Arabia – deteriorated over the neutral position kept by Riyadh on the Kashmiri issue and Islamabad's attitude towards exploring new strategic partnerships [Corsi 2020, pp. 462-463]. At the same time, China remained dissatisfied with the slowed-down progress of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC, refer to section 4) and did not appreciate relations with the PTI government.

Pakistan's ties with the United States plunged over Pakistan's foreign choices [Notezai 2022, July 23]. Islamabad's partnership with Beijing amid the US-China confrontation challenged Pakistan-US bilateralism and relations with the Western powers [Boni 2022, pp. 159-170].<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Washington's disinterest in forging a new partnership with Pakistan after its disengagement from Afghanistan further strengthened the PTI government's strategic ties with China and Russia. In February 2022, Imran Khan visited Moscow to secure Russian energy support. Khan's state visit occurred the same day Russia began military operations in Ukraine. The timing seemed set to represent the PTI leader's acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the armed aggression and a choice of a side.

1. These economic features include a high import rate and dependency on the undiversified export of cotton textiles; high unemployment and low literacy rates; a flawed revenue system with a low taxes-to-GDP ratio; significant fiscal exemptions and a highly subsidised economy; dwindling foreign exchange reserves triggering high inflation rates; and an unsustainable military expenditure [Corsi 2016, *passim*; Jafri 2022, July 4].

2. For example, in 2019 Khan reached an agreement with China to import exclusively Chinese semiconductors, transformers, and other electronics, to the detriment of US exports. Similarly, in 2022, Khan was close to signing an agreement with Russia to purchase oil and wheat with payments in rubles at a discounted rate. If signed and implemented, that agreement would have reduced the demand for US currency and exports [Naseer 2022, March 18; Jabbar 2022, May 10].

These substantial deviations from the provisions of the Economic Outreach Initiative and the foreign policy vision of the military establishment, combined with other internal frictions, fostered a lack of trust in the generals toward Khan, who lost the support of the Army [Jamal 2022, February].

Amid growing public discontent over rising inflation and economic hardship in the country, the Pakistani opposition filed a no-confidence motion in the National Assembly against Khan with the requisite number of votes needed to pass. The political opposition had fought Khan in the past, but this time he was made vulnerable by the lack of support from the military establishment [Nawaz 2022, April 14]. The votes of dissident PTI lawmakers and coalition partners left no chances for the government and its leader, who accused Washington and the opposition of a conspiracy to influence Pakistan's domestic and foreign policy.

The Pakistani parliament chose Shehbaz Sharif to guide the nation. Sharif, the leader of the PML-N, inherited the leadership of a country facing critical economic challenges and high instability due to Khan's attacks on the military establishment and the new government's legitimacy. Furthermore, shortly after the election, the new government faced a national emergency due to torrential monsoon rains that caused severe flooding.

The new government's top priority was to address the growing balance of payments crisis. Austerity, inflation, unemployment and a shortage of foreign exchange reserves limiting Pakistan's import capacities stimulated the rise of political contestation and popular discontent. The new coalition government faced constant pressure from Imran Khan, who called for early general elections and did not interrupt his political attacks even during the national crisis triggered by the natural disaster. The victory of the PTI party in by-elections in several constituencies, including the Punjab province, raised further questions about the legitimacy and longevity of Sharif's government.

Domestic priorities drove the new government's foreign policy, which focused on diplomacy seeking to guarantee further financial assistance from the IMF and allies and reopen a dialogue with the United States. In his inaugural address, Sharif aligned his government's approach with the provisions of the national security policy and called for improving relations with key partners.

## *2. The economic backdrop of the political crisis*

A US\$ 6 billion IMF Extended Fund Facility (EFF) rescue program was launched in July 2019 to address domestic and external imbalances [IMF 2019, July 3]. The IMF disbursed an immediate outlay of US\$ 1 billion while the remaining amount was agreed to be phased in, subject to quar-



terly and half-yearly reviews [Corsi 2019, pp. 461-464]. Funding for the program was subsequently suspended amid the country's growing economic challenges when Khan refused to embrace some of the policies and reforms necessary to complete the sixth revision, such as, for example, an increase in tariffs (electricity, energy, oil, etc.) and a lifting of tax exemptions and subsidies [*The Business Standard* 2022, January 31]. In 2022, the IMF relaxed these conditions to relaunch the stalled program and disburse the next US\$ 1 billion loan tranche. IMF requested the Pakistani government to make the list of sovereign guarantees public, that is, the financial obligations and risks to which public finances are subject [Rana 2022, January 5; Sinha 2022, January 30]. Other IMF conditions involved ensuring the autonomy of the central bank, the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP), from the federal government's control.

On 13 January 2022, the National Assembly approved the Financial Supplement Bill, also known as the «mini-budget», which was a financial plan to meet the conditions set by the IMF [*PakTribune* 2022, January 4; Fab-bri 2022, February 8]. The mini-budget increased taxes in multiple sectors and targeted the withdrawal of approximately US\$ 2 billion in tax exemptions.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, a new bill was approved, in line with the IMF conditions, the SBP Amendment 2021. The salient features of this bill mainly entailed changes to the legal framework of the central bank to increase its autonomy, strengthen its accountability for controlling inflation and achieve financial stability [Government of Pakistan Finance Division 2022; Hameed 2022, January 6].

Following Senate approval of the SBP Amendment bill 2021 into law by a one-vote majority, the IMF board approved the release of the US\$ 1 billion sixth tranche under the EFF [*The News* 2022, February 2].<sup>4</sup> By then, Islamabad had received almost US\$ 3 billion from the IMF – roughly half the program's value. Nevertheless, despite the disbursement of the sixth instalment, the EFF remained suspended due to the government's failure to comply with the implementation of other agreed conditions.

The measures introduced with the mini-budget impacted the vast majority of the citizens of Pakistan and caused internal institutional and political friction. In February 2022, Khan decided to freeze gas and electricity prices and announced government subsidization until the next fiscal year budget, despite cost increases in the global market. He also confirmed a tax amnesty regime for the industrial sector. The opposition protested the bill as a risk to national security given that further indirect taxes would generate more inflation and increase poverty [*South Asia Journal* 2022, January 17; *Ani*

3. A 17% increase in general sales tax (GST) involved various types of raw food and pharmaceutical materials. In addition, taxes on the automotive sector, food-related machinery, electronic devices, and newspapers were raised [Rana 2022, January 14].

4. Established in 1974, the EFF is a vehicle for longer-term lending to countries in need of structural economic reforms.

*News* 2022, February 10]. While not opposed to SBP's autonomy, the opposition expressed concern for the lack of control over fiscal and monetary policy, which could make the SBP vulnerable to external influences from other countries and international financial institutions [Noshab 2022, January 5].

According to the SBP, under PTI's mandate, Pakistan's total debt and liabilities had increased by about 80% over pre-PTI government figures to approximately US\$ 100 billion, exceeding liabilities accumulated by any previous government. Low tax collection, currency devaluation and high spending were among the main reasons for the rise in public debt [Siddiqui 2022, May 17; Gul 2022, May 17]. Pakistan's forex reserves reduced from around US\$ 17 billion to US\$ 10 billion in two months. The country's trade deficit was US\$ 35.4 billion during the three quarters of the fiscal year 2021-22, 70% higher than the same period in the previous year. At the same time, inflation rose from less than 9% to 12.7% [State Bank of Pakistan 2022; Aamir 2022, April 13].

### *3. The external dimension of the crisis: Pakistan's relationship with Russia under the Khan administration*

Pakistan's economic distress can also be attributed to vulnerability to energy supply shocks as well as the global supply chain crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. An over-reliance on imported natural gas made the domestic economy prone to inflationary shocks triggered by the surge in world oil prices. As European countries faced gas shortages following the Ukrainian crisis, Pakistan's gas imports were reduced and shipping costs increased, resulting in energy scarcity and soaring prices [*The Express Tribune* 2022, June 15; Sabir 2022, June 19].

Pakistan's relations with Russia have grown significantly since the economic cooperation of the 1970s and have developed in the context of strong and long-standing Indo-Russian ties. After the end of the war in Afghanistan and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow established new relations with Islamabad. In 2011, when the United States and Pakistan reached their lowest level of confidence following the killing of Osama bin Laden in Pakistani territory by US military forces [Corsi 2011, pp. 101-108], Russia lifted the arms embargo on Pakistan and, in 2014, entered into a defence cooperation agreement with it. In parallel, Islamabad and Moscow enjoy a mutual collaboration with Beijing that has grown in recent years. Interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have seen these three countries support the Taliban government in Kabul. Subsequently, Pakistan, Russia and China recognized each other's positions and interests in Afghanistan [Subramanian 2022, February 24]. At the same time, the relations of each of these countries with the United States have deteriorated in recent years.

The widened gap between Pakistan and the United States strengthened the strategic partnership between Islamabad and Moscow [Roy 2021, June 29; Yousafzai 2022, January 20]. Growing economic, energy and defence cooperation bind the two governments. Pakistan is interested in Russian military equipment and commissioned Russian Gazprom to build the Pakistan Stream pipeline carrying liquefied natural gas from Karachi to the city of Kasur in Punjab [The News 2022, September 15]. Russia has expressed interest in investing in the US\$ 1.2 billion Central Asian and South Asian Power Plant (CASA-1000)<sup>5</sup> project to create sustainable electricity trade between Tajikistan, the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, which is expected to have a commercial start date in 2024.

In February 2022, at the invitation of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Imran Khan visited Moscow, which was the first state visit of a Pakistani leader to Russia in 23 years. The visit had geopolitical significance given the contextual absence of a dialogue between the White House and Khan [Mallik 2022, February 6].

Khan went to Russia to seek greater bilateral economic engagement and support for energy projects [The Express Tribune 2022, February 24; Yousaf 2022, February 25]. Regarding defence and security, Pakistan's concerns were triggered by Russia's supply of a new modern S400 air defence missile system, obviously targeted against India. Talks centred on a mechanism for intelligence-sharing and enhanced cooperation. In regional and Afghan contexts, Pakistan and Russia cooperate and coordinate at various international multilateral and regional levels, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the United Nations.

Although Khan did not make any statements from Moscow on the crisis in Ukraine, the timing of his trip to Russia – the same day as the Russian military invasion of Ukraine – proved to be a foreign policy blunder and created tensions with the military establishment, as explained in the following pages [Siddique 2022, February 25]. Pakistan expressed support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, calling for easing tensions and establishing a dialogue. However, Pakistan refused to vote on a United Nations Security Council resolution that deplored the Russian military aggression [Yousuf 2022, March 1; *Ibid.* 2022, March 2; Sinha 2022, March 6].

#### *4. The external dimension of the crisis: Pakistan's relationship with China under the Khan administration*

The CPEC is a segment of China's BRI launched in 2015. CPEC is an economic corridor connecting Kashgar in the Xinjiang autonomous region in north-western China to the Pakistani port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea

5. <https://www.casa-1000.org>.

near the border with Iran. The initiative establishes connections via land routes, special economic zones and oil pipelines, including energy and infrastructure projects currently under construction throughout Pakistan. CPEC attracts 25 billion worth of Chinese investments and supposedly favours China's trade with the countries of the Middle East, Africa and Europe [Zaidi 2022, January 17]. Moreover, CPEC offers Pakistan the opportunity for economic development while having strategic political importance due to strengthening bilateral relations between Islamabad and Beijing. Since the launch of CPEC, Pakistan's economy has grown significantly, with China as the main creditor. Notably, the percentage of public and publicly guaranteed external debt to China increased from 9.3% in 2013 to 27.4% in 2021 [Younus 2021, May 26; Afzal 2021, December 25; Naseer 2022, January 28;].

In early February 2022, Imran Khan visited Beijing to attend the Winter Olympics opening ceremony and meet the country's leadership. The visit marked the culmination of celebrations to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. Khan met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang to discuss wide-ranging issues. Several agreements were concluded during the visit, including industrial cooperation under the CPEC between the Pakistani Board of Investment and the Chinese National Development and Reform Commission [Dawn 2022, February 4; Wani 2022, February 8]. However, Khan left Beijing without significant achievements. Despite the agreements, the CPEC's progress in recent years has been slow due to the pandemic. Moreover, China's concerns have grown regarding its investments in Pakistan due to the lack of security and stability in the volatile northwest areas and Baluchistan [Siddique 2022, February 9; Baloch 2022, October 1]. Beijing showed reluctance to approve further loans for projects to be implemented under CPEC over concerns about the growing national debt and Pakistan's ability to service the loans [South Asia Monitor 2022, May 8; Chaudhury 2022, May 10].

Chinese leaders were reportedly uncomfortable with Imran Khan's premiership [Worldakkam 2022, July 31]. Beijing did not appreciate the Khan administration's interference and controls over Chinese investment to ward off the damaging effects on the country due to a lack of transparency, tax incentives, unfair advantages and the possible advance of corruption.

##### *5. The internal dimension of the crisis: Khan and the military establishment*

Mr. Khan's electoral success in 2018 was primarily traced to the support he received from the country's military establishment [Corsi 2018, pp. 362-365; *Ibid.* 2019, pp. 456-457]. During its tenure, the PTI accepted frequent military interventions in domestic and foreign politics [*Ibid.* 2020, pp. 452-

454]. However, towards the end of 2021, the Pakistani military began reducing its support for Khan. The ex-cricket champion faced friction with the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), General Qamar Javed Bajwa, over issues related to a critical appointment and foreign policy. In October 2021, the two clashed over replacing the director-general of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). While Khan wanted General Faiz Hameed to continue his post, he was eventually replaced by General Nadeem Anjum.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, Khan supported Hameed's candidacy as Army Chief to replace General Bajwa upon the expiration of his term in November 2022.<sup>7</sup> The political repercussions of these frictions were intense [Mishra 2022, May 7].

Khan's foreign policy deviated significantly from the military establishment's vision of building, strengthening and expanding strategically important international partnerships while nurturing the ongoing ties with China [Corsi 2021, pp. 347-349]. Imran Khan adopted an uncompromising foreign policy stance by communicating to the world, in no uncertain terms, Pakistan's readiness to forge alternative alliances without hesitation if the Western powers did not show interest in establishing bilateral relations with Islamabad beyond those focused on security. Indeed, the Biden administration showed little interest in strengthening economic ties with Pakistan. This was made evident by the absence of direct communication between the two leaders. During and after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Washington expressed a continued interest in relations with Islamabad only concerning a strategic security partnership [Corsi 2021, pp. 352-356.]. The Biden administration perceived Khan's refusal to cultivate such ties with the White House as a sign of the PTI government's reluctance to prioritize US interests in South Asia, which increased Islamabad's isolation from Washington.<sup>8</sup> Along with the absence of a high-level dialogue, Khan publicly expressed his unease about bilateral relations with the United States and stressed his resistance to Washington's foreign policy using anti-American rhetoric [Rana 2022, March 9; Masood 2022, March 22].

Khan's visit to the Kremlin, which occurred when Russia invaded Ukraine, further alienated Islamabad from Western partners at the risk of hampering the military's efforts to promote a more meaningful role for Pa-

6. The appointment process of the director-general follows consultations and consensus between the prime minister and the head of the army. The ISI director-general reports directly to the prime minister and the COAS [Urooj and Chaudhry 2021, October 26].

7. The COAS is appointed by the president of Pakistan in consultation with the prime minister as governed by article 243 of the constitution. On 24 November 2022, President Arif Alvi approved the appointment of Lieutenant General Asim Munir as the next COAS of Pakistan and of Lieutenant General Sahir Shamshad Mirza as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee [Yousafzai, Syed, Yusuf 2022, November 24; Siddiqui 2022, November 24].

8. In particular, Imran Khan refused to allow the presence of US military bases in Pakistan [*Ibid.*].

kistan globally [Mohan 2022, February 23]. Also, Khan created tensions with the European Union when he took a provocative approach against Brussels after being urged by the European Commission to condemn Russia's attack on Ukraine during the March 2022 United Nations General Assembly session [Yousuf 2022, March 9].

The tensions with the military materialized in the position of political neutrality assumed by the Army, which did not intervene to protect Khan from the attacks of the opposition, allowing the development of the political crisis [Subramanian 2022, March 31].

### *6. Opposition reinvigorated, and the ousting of the Khan government*

2022 began with opposition parties blaming Imran Khan when the Monitoring Committee of the Pakistan Election Commission made it public that the ruling PTI had not disclosed it was the holder of bank accounts on which it had received millions of dollars between 2008 and 2013 from donors [Virk 2022, January 5]. PML-N Vice President Maryam Nawaz Sharif called for Imran Khan's resignation [Hassan, 2022, January 7]. In January 2022, the PPP announced a rally against rising prices and gas shortages, calling on the Electoral Commission of Pakistan to act against the PTI [*The Express Tribune* 2022, January 7]. Despite the political friction between the PPP and the PML-N, Bilawal Bhutto agreed to rejoin the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM).<sup>9</sup>

Riding the wave of public discontent due to the country's economic difficulties, on 8 March 2022, opposition parties filed a motion of no confidence against the premier in parliament, which was then submitted to the National Assembly on 28 March 2022 [Khan 2022, March 20; Singh and Ravishankar 2022, March 31].

According to the provisions of the Constitution, a prime minister is elected by a majority of the 342-member National Assembly (172 votes). The same votes are needed to oust a prime minister and dissolve a cabinet with a vote of no confidence [Shehzad 2022, March 18]. The PTI government had 179 seats in parliament, including 17 lawmakers belonging to coalition parties [Corsi 2018, pp. 366-370]. Dissident lawmakers from the ruling PTI party and coalition partners announced they would not vote against the motion [*Pakistan Standard* 2022, March 16; *Dawn* 2022, March 17]. On 30 March 2022, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P) – Khan's ally with seven members in the National Assembly –

9. The PDM is an alliance of four big opposition parties, the PML-N, the PPP, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl, and the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party, and smaller ones formed in 2020 to oust Imran Khan and form a new government [Shehzad 2022, January 19; *The News* 2022, February 5; Corsi 2020, pp.454-457; *Ibid.* 2021, pp. 371-372].

struck a pact with the opposition and left Khan's ruling coalition [*The Indian Express* 2022, March 31; Subramanian 2022, March 31]. When a group of ruling coalition lawmakers announced they were considering voting against Khan, it was clear that the opposition had the numbers to oust the Prime Minister [*OpIndia* 2022, March 8; Shah 2022, March 18; Almeida 2022, March 25].

### 7. *The alleged international conspiracy behind the fall of the PTI government*

Khan and the PTI accused the opposition of disloyalty to the state, alleging that it was part of an international conspiracy against the democratically elected government in Pakistan. According to Khan, the PDM coalition and the Biden administration had plotted a coup to oust him from politics and form a government with the tacit consent of the military establishment. Khan referred to meetings held between US consular staff members and Pakistani opposition leaders and a communication from the Pakistani Ambassador to the United States, Asad Majeed, according to which Washington had expressed regret over Khan's independent foreign policy [Oborne 2022, April 7].

On 7 March 2022 – the day before the motion was submitted to the National Assembly Secretariat – Donald Lu, the assistant secretary of State for South and Central Asia in the United States Department of State, had allegedly told Ambassador Majeed that if the no-trust vote against Khan was successful, Washington would normalize bilateral relations with Pakistan. According to Khan, his meeting with Putin was an irritant and one of the reasons the US government wanted him removed from power. Upon Khan's ouster, the Kremlin released a formal statement accusing Washington of «another attempt of shameless interference in the internal affairs of Pakistan for its own selfish purposes» [*The News* 2022, April 5]. The statement added that the political situation in Pakistan «leaves no doubt that the US intended to punish disobedient Prime Minister Imran Khan» [*Ibid.*]. Khan's allegations led to a denial by the US State Department spokesperson [*The Hindustan Times* 2022, April 30].

While a motion of no confidence is regulated under Article 95 of the Constitution, the PTI invoked Article 5, paragraph 1, of the Charter which states that «loyalty to the State is a fundamental duty of every citizen». On 3 April 2022, the Vice President of the National Assembly, Qasim Suri – a member of the PTI – called the motion of no-confidence against Imran Khan unconstitutional and «supported by foreign powers» and did not allow it to be voted [*The News* 2022, April 3]. Soon after, Imran Khan advised the President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Arif Alvi, to dissolve the assemblies and prepare for elections within 90 days in line with the provisions

of the Constitution of Pakistan. Subsequently, the Cabinet Division<sup>10</sup> de-notified Imran Khan as prime minister while confirming his position until a provisional government was appointed [Mohan 2022, April 3]. On 7 April 2022, the Supreme Court of Pakistan overturned President Alvi's decision and ruled that the dissolution of the lower house was unconstitutional [*The Express Tribune* 2022, April 7]. On this basis, the Supreme Court ordered the restoration of the National Assembly and called for it to vote on the non-trust action against Imran Khan on 9 April 2022. That day, after a long session of the National Assembly, the motion was passed with 174 votes. In the early hours of 10 April 2022, Imran Khan's term as prime minister of Pakistan was over [Almeida 2022, April 9; *OpIndia* 2022, April 10].

The opposition nominated PML-N President Shehbaz Sharif as an interim premiership candidate. Minutes before the vote, the PTI National Assembly members resigned *en masse* in protest, forcing new by-elections to undermine the new government's legitimacy.

#### 8. Domestic challenges of the new coalition government: the economy, Khan's opposition, and the floods

With 174 votes – two more than the required simple majority – the Pakistani parliament chose opposition leader Shahbaz Sharif as prime minister to guide the country at least until general elections, which are due no later than October 2023 [Masood and Goldbaum 2022, April 11]. Shehbaz Sharif is the younger brother of former Pakistani premier Nawaz Sharif. He was elected to the National Assembly in 1990 and became chief minister of Punjab in 1997. Together with Nawaz, Shehbaz Sharif spent several years in exile in Saudi Arabia following General Pervez Musharraf's military coup in 1999 [Purkayastha 2022, 10 April; Hassan and Peshimam 2022, April 9; *First Post* 2022, April 10; *The Express Tribune* 2022, April 12]. After returning to Pakistan in 2007, Shehbaz Sharif was re-elected chief minister of Punjab in 2008 and 2013, governing the province until the PTT's electoral success in 2018. In 2018, he was appointed president of the PML-N after Nawaz Sharif was disqualified from office as opposition leader in connection with the Panama Papers scandal [Corsi 2018, pp. 359-362].

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif inherited a country in a challenging economic predicament. A complex external conjuncture combined with procyclical domestic policies had increased domestic demand to unsustainable levels and led to significant fiscal and external deficits, rising inflation and eroding reserve buffers. In April 2022, the IMF set five main condi-

10. The Cabinet Division is a part of the Cabinet of Pakistan, led by the prime minister. It has secretarial responsibilities for the Cabinet, including appointments, reporting, budgeting, and custody of official documents.



tions for relaunching the EFF bailout package. These measures included the cancellation of fuel subsidies, lifting the tax amnesty regime, increasing electricity tariffs, imposing new taxes and guaranteeing savings to reduce the budget deficit [Rana 2022, April 21].

In May 2022, in Doha, Qatar, a delegation from the new government led by Finance Minister Miftah Ismail and the IMF initiated the seventh economic review interview to relaunch the stalled EFF bailout package [*The Express Tribune* 2022, May 18]. Pakistani authorities agreed in principle with the IMF's requests. Yet, a consensus was not reached on several issues, such as the budget deficit, the revenue target, the plan to withdraw energy subsidies, inflation, and the rationalization of expenses [*The Express Tribune* 2022, May 20; *Ibid.* 2022 (a), May 22; *Ibid.* 2022, May 25; *Ibid.* 2022, May 26].

On 10 June 2022, amid intense pressure to stabilize the economy and reach an agreement with the IMF, the new government unveiled its budget for the fiscal year 2022-23. Finance Minister Ismail presented the spending plan to the National Assembly with an outlay of about US\$ 50 billion. The austerity measures proposed included both stabilization efforts and additional taxes. The plan showed that Pakistan had agreed to meet IMF conditions such as the reversal of subsidies, withdrawal of the tax amnesty scheme, increased tariffs, and the imposition of new taxes to revive the aid package. The budget set development spending at US\$ 4 billion, out of which about US\$ 1.7 billion (a 2.7% increase over the previous fiscal year), initially earmarked for defence, was then reduced to US\$ 1.4 billion to comply with the limitations imposed by the IMF.

Proposed critical interventions included raising taxes on the wealthiest segments of society, privatizing government assets to increase revenue and reducing national expenditures [Syed 2022, June 12; Masood 2022, June 29; Rana 2022, July 6]. The budget law introduced a reduction of subsidies to the electricity sector, and provided for an increase in tariffs of around 20%. In addition, a 455% increase in the targeted revenues from the oil development tax to US\$ 3.7 billion heralded the end of subsidies on petroleum products.

The budget set the target at US\$ 43 billion, including an additional 2% tax on individual taxpayers, 39% on banking companies and an increase in the tax burden on non-resident Pakistanis [Government of Pakistan Finance Division 2022; Aamir 2022, June 9; *The Express Tribune* 2022 June 9; *The News* 2022, June 10]. Conversely, a tax reversal and subsidiary incentives were offered to the construction and real estate sectors [Kiani 2002, June 11; Sajjad 2022, June 11; *Business Recorder* 2022, June 11].

After completing the combined seventh and eighth reviews under the EFF for Pakistan in July 2022, the IMF Executive Board approved Pakistani authorities' request for waivers of nonobservance of the performance criteria. IMF acknowledged measures taken by Pakistan to address the country's worsened fiscal and external positions and allowed for the

immediate disbursement of the US\$ 1.17 million tranche [Rana 2022, July 14; IMF 2022].

The dire economic situation did not improve under the new government, whereas Khan's popularity grew [Tarar 2022, May 15]. Khan's post-ouster political reaction and call for a genuine democratic system and parliamentary government in Pakistan mobilised the masses and increased his grip on the people. Khan announced street demonstrations and protests criticizing the armed forces, threatening to overthrow the new government and demanding that early elections be held before the expiry of the government's term at the end of 2023. Police arrested several PTI opposition leaders, and protests turned into skirmishes between police and Khan's supporters [Mahmood 2022, May 23].

The resignations *en masse* of all the PTI lawmakers in parliament's lower house in April 2022 following the change in government imposed new by-elections. Three months after Khan's ouster, the PTI party won 15 Punjab provincial assembly seats out of the 20 available in the July 2022 by-elections [Adnan 2022, July 17; *The Express Tribune* 2022, July 18]. The electoral success was astounding, weakening the credibility and legitimacy of the coalition government because Punjab is traditionally the electoral stronghold of the PML-N – the leading political force. Thanks to the landslide victory, the PTI controlled Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan. Similarly, Khan won an important constituency in Karachi, which is a stronghold of the MQM-P [*The Express Tribune* 2022, August 21; Ibrahim 2022, August 24]. Moreover, in October 2022, the PTI won seats in Peshawar, Mardan, Charsadda, Faisalabad, Nankana Sahib and two of three Punjab Assembly seats [GeoTv 2022, October 17].

Khan's political attacks were not interrupted by the natural disaster that hit Pakistan at the end of August 2022 [Jamal 2022, September 8; *The Express Tribune* 2022, August 5]. Pakistan faced unprecedented rainfall and catastrophic monsoon floods, which in August alone tripled the average annual rainfall [Mallick 2022, September 6; Atlantic Council 2022, September 9]. According to the media, Sindh and Baluchistan, the worst-affected provinces, experienced 784% and 496% increases in monsoon floods, respectively [Abbas 2022, August 26]. One-third of the country was flooded, over 1500 people died, and about 33 million were affected by the disaster [Patel 2022, August 31]. Pakistan appealed for assistance from the international community, receiving donations and aid from many nations to address the «climate» catastrophe, as the United Nations described it [UNOCHA 2022 (a); *Times of India* 2022, September 10; Adil 2022, September 8; Wadhwa 2022, September 10; UNOCHA 2022, November 14].

With damages estimated to be more than US\$ 40 billion, a projected 2.2% decline in GDP, displaced people and increased food insecurity across the country, the floods severely impacted the already suffering national economy [UNOCHA 2022 (b); *The International Rescue Committee* 2022, Au-

gust 30; Mangi 2022, October 19; The World Bank 2022, October 28]. The response of the government proved to be inadequate in providing rescue and timely assistance to the population [Khan 2022, August 29]. Imran Khan accused the past Sindh PPP governments of years of corruption and mismanagement in governing the province.

The by-election results showed that Khan could survive as a prominent politician without the support of the Army and that, had the election been conducted in 2022, Khan would have had a chance to return to power. Strengthened by the electoral results, Khan intensified his attacks against political opponents and the military establishment. During an Islamabad speech in August 2022, Khan attacked and threatened police officers and a judge over the arrest and alleged torture of Shahbaz Gill. A special assistant to Khan, Gill was charged with sedition, arrested and allegedly tortured under interrogation after inciting soldiers to disobey orders from their military leaders. Over his speech, Khan was charged under anti-terror legislation by the police. The Islamabad High Court granted Khan a protective bail blocking his potential arrest; however, his addresses were banned from broadcast television and his access to some social media was reportedly also disrupted. According to Mr. Khan and his allies, his opponents and the military had initiated a crackdown on him and his party to prevent him from returning to power [Shankar 2022, August 22; Campbell 2022, August 22].

In October 2022, Pakistan's Election Commission disqualified Khan from holding public office after finding him guilty of illegally selling gifts from foreign dignitaries when he was prime minister. While the consequences of the ruling were not known in the period analysed by this text, Khan's popularity increased further [Rafiq 2022, September 2; Naseer 2022, September 8; Khatlani 2022, October 23]. At the end of October 2022, Khan launched a week-long march from Punjab heading to Islamabad followed by thousands of PTI supporters to force the government of Shehbaz Sharif to early elections [Raja 2022, October 31]. During the march, Imran Khan was injured and wounded in the leg in an assassination attempt in Wazirabad by a gunman who was captured afterwards. Addressing the nation from the hospital, Khan accused the government and the military of being behind the attack. Members of the PTI party revealed that they had been informed of possible assassination attempts and challenged the involvement of one gunman only reporting about hearing automatic gunfire. The captured shooter claimed that he acted alone for no political reasons. While the event strengthened the opposition, it indicated the need for a de-escalation of the tension reached by Pakistani politics, where Sharif's government was supported by the military establishment but appeared not to have that of the people. The government refused to hold an early election but maintained an open communication channel with Khan [*Dawn* 2022, November 3; *The Express Tribune* 2022, November 4].

9. *Foreign policy priorities of the new government: reconciliation with the United States, confirmation of strategic ties with China and a stable relationship with Afghanistan*

Addressing foreign policy issues in his inaugural speech to parliament after the elections, Shehbaz aligned with the Economic Outreach Initiative's provisions and reiterated the partnership's centrality with China while wishing the country to forge equally good bilateral relations with the United States [*The News* 2022, April 11; Yousaf 2022, April 19; Riedel and Afzal 2022, April 22]. PPP President Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs of the coalition government, made a debut visit to Washington in May 2022 [*The Express Tribune* 2022 (b), May 22; *Ibid.* 2022, May 27]. In June-July 2022, an official visit of the US Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs to Islamabad focused on the US-Pakistani partnership, highlighting the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of bilateral relations [*Daily Times* 2022, July 2; *South Asia Journal* 2022, July 2; *The Express Tribune* 2022, July 30]. A series of communications and meetings between the two governments reiterated the mutual commitment to deepen Pakistan-US ties, particularly after the humanitarian crisis [Yousaf 2022, July 7; Hussain 2022, July 8; US Department of State 2022, September 26; *The News* 2022, September 27]. In addition, the US State Department approved a US\$ 450 million sale of F-16 aircraft and related equipment to Pakistan [*Reuters* 2022, September 8; Jamal 2022, October].

In August 2022, several US drone strikes occurred in Afghanistan, including one that killed al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul. It is unclear where the drones took off and their route to the Afghan air space. However, the increase in the strikes in Afghanistan strengthened the belief that the Pakistani military allowed Washington to use Pakistani territory or airspace after Khan's sacking as part of the alleged plot that ousted the former premier [Rafiq 2022, September 4].

In May 2022, Foreign Minister Bhutto Zardari embarked on a trip to Guangzhou, China, at the special invitation of his Chinese counterpart, Foreign Minister Wang Yi. The visit, which coincided with the 71<sup>st</sup> anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between Pakistan and China, focused on discussing the accelerating progress of the CPEC as well as regional and international issues. In June 2022, General Bajwa also visited China to attend the Pak-China Joint Military Cooperation Committee meeting, which is a bilateral military cooperation platform. In addition, an agreement was reached with Beijing for a US\$ 2.3 billion commercial loan with an interest rate reduced by 1% to 3.8% [Yousaf 2022, May 21; Kartha 2022, June 15; Rana 2022, June 2]. According to unconfirmed sources, this was another by-product of the ouster of Imran Khan [*Worldakkam* 2022, July 31].

The new government confirmed its predecessor's approach to Afghanistan by pleading for the Afghan cause and urging the international community to aid the neighbouring country.<sup>11</sup> Tensions with the Taliban affect internal security, and Islamabad strives to resolve irritants and establish stable and sustainable bilateral ties with Afghanistan [*Dawn* 2022, January 5; Kugelman 2022, January 6; Rana 2022, January 9]. Pakistan has engaged in dialogue with Kabul to contain cross-border terrorism.<sup>12</sup> Following the takeover of Kabul in August 2021, Islamabad requested the new rulers to address its main internal security problem, namely the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The TTP is a Pashtun-centric organization that comprises several Pakistani militant groups and has targeted the Pakistani government and its security forces. After the defeat suffered in 2014 by the intervention of the Pakistani security forces, it has reorganized and expanded its operations beyond the northern frontier areas. It is now mainly based in eastern Afghanistan, in Gilgit Baltistan and Baluchistan and has escalated attacks in Pakistan after the Taliban gained control of the country [Corsi 2021, pp. 360-361; Schroden 2022, October; Khattak 2022, January 24; *The Express Tribune* 2022, April 19].

Instead of providing a list of the most wanted TTP terrorists, the Taliban government offered to broker a peace deal with the banned organisation. The agreement led to a ceasefire in November 2021, which lasted only one month [Khan 2022, December 10]. The killing of the TTP's most wanted commander, Muhammad Khurassani, in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province in January 2022 seemed to end the peace prospects [*The Express Tribune* 2022, December 11; Kamran 2022, January 9; *Ibid.* 2022, January 11]. Casualties among Pakistani soldiers in clashes with militants led Pakistan to launch air strikes against TTP fighters in the Afghan provinces of Khost and Kunar in April 2022 [Siddique 2022, April 21; *South Asia Journal* 2022, April 22]. In June 2022, the TTP announced an indefinite ceasefire. Pakistani authorities confirmed the resumption of negotiations, which resulted in a deadlock shortly thereafter [Naseem 2022, March 30; Jadoon 2022, June 24; Yousuf 2022, August 1].

11. Although Pakistan has not formally recognised the Taliban government, since October 2021, Taliban diplomats have been authorised to take positions at the Afghan embassy in Islamabad and consulates throughout Pakistan [Khan 2021, October 28; *Dawn* 2021, December 22].

12. Pakistan began fencing the border with Afghanistan in 2014 to prevent cross-border militancy, smuggling and the influx of refugees. The Taliban authorities have not recognised Islamabad's right to fencing the Durand Line, have intimidated Pakistani troops to stop and, in some cases, Taliban militants have clashed with Pakistani soldiers [Yousaf 2022, January 10; Shekhawat 2022, January 31; Rasul 2022, February 10].

## 10. Conclusions

Tensions with the Army over foreign policy and internal affairs led Imran Khan to lose the military establishment's support. The political opposition exploited the vulnerability of Prime Minister Khan, gaining support for a motion of no confidence in parliament against him. Having lost the trust of the National Assembly, Khan had to resign as prime minister. He publicly accused the political opposition of having woven a plot with the United States, which was implemented with the tacit consent of the military. According to the former premier, the plan aimed to remove him from the political scene as he was unbalancing Pakistani foreign policy towards the Eastern bloc of China and Russia to the detriment of relations with the US and Western allies, which were desired per the Army's geopolitical plans.

The parliament entrusted Shehbaz Sharif, president of the PML-N and leader of the opposition, with the post of prime minister. Once in power, the new prime minister had to focus on external relations to rebuild ties with strategic international partners. The severe economic crisis that gripped Pakistan at the time of Imran Khan's fall did not find relief with the new government, which was forced to take unpopular measures to guarantee international loans while coping with a national emergency triggered by monsoon floods. Despite his fall from power, Khan's popular following did not diminish. On the contrary, his party, the PTI, obtained significant results in by-elections in traditional strongholds of other political forces. Khan stirred crowds of followers, putting pressure on the fledgling government with constant demands for early elections. At the same time, he decried the alleged attempts by the military and opposition to crack down on the political opposition which he led, to avoid the possibility of his return to power.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aamir, Adnan, 2022, 'Pakistan to unveil budget in political tinderbox: 5 things to know', *Nikkei Asia*, 9 June.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Pakistan's new Sharif government tiptoes into economic minefield', *Nikkei Asia*, 13 April.
- Abbas, Zaki, 2022, 'Pakistan declares emergency in the face of calamitous floods', *Dawn*, 26 August.
- Adil, Aamera, and Faraz Haider, 2022, 'Pakistan Floods & Climate Security: Rethinking Comprehensive National Security', *South Asian Voices*, 8 September.
- Adnan, Imran, 2022, 'Kaptaan's stunning inswinger', *The Express Tribune*, 17 July.
- Afzal, Madiha, 2021, 'The U.S. Needs a Reset with Pakistan', *The New York Times*, 25 December.
- Akhhtar, Rabia, 2022, 'Pakistan's new National Security Policy: A step in the right direction', *Atlantic Council*, 20 January.

- Almeida, Cyril, 2022, 'What led to leader Imran Khan's downfall in Pakistan?', *Al Jazeera*, 9 April.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Why is Pakistan's opposition seeking PM Imran Khan's removal?' *Al Jazeera*, 25 March.
- Ani News, 2022, February 10, 'IMF loans can compromise Pakistan's economic sovereignty, says expert'.
- Atlantic Council, 2022, September 9, 'Experts react: Catastrophic flooding in Pakistan'.
- Baloch, Kiyya, 2022, 'China Is Unnerved by Increasing Attacks on Chinese in Pakistan', *The Diplomat*, 1 October.
- Boni, Filippo, 2022, 'The US-China Rivalry in South Asia and Pakistan's hedging dilemma', *Asia Maior*, Special Issue 2.
- Business Recorder, 2022, June 11, 'Key highlights of budget 2022-23'.
- Campbell, Charlie, 2022, 'Pakistan's Generals Want To Muzzle Imran Khan. It May Backfire', *Time*, 22 August.
- Chaudhury, Dipanjan Roy, 2022, 'China reluctant to lend \$6 bn for Pakistan infra project', *The Economic Times*, 10 May.
- Corsi, Marco, 2011 'Pakistan: tensioni con gli USA e instabilità politica a dieci anni dall'11 settembre', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXII.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2016, 'Pakistan 2016: Economic Features', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXVII.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2018, 'Pakistan 2018: General elections and the government of Imran Khan', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXIX.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2019, 'Pakistan 2019: The Challenges of the First PTI Government', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXX.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2020, 'Pakistan 2020: The PTI Government Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2021, 'Pakistan 2021: In pursuit of a pivotal role in post-pandemic South Asia', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXII.
- Daily Times, 2022, July 2, 'US Assistant Secretary's visit highlights 75th anniversary of bilateral ties'.
- Dawn, 2021, December 22, 'US thanks Pakistan for hosting «vital» OIC summit on Afghanistan'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, February 4, 'Pakistan, China ink Framework Agreement on Industrial Cooperation under CPEC'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, January 5, 'Martyrs' blood went into Pak-Afghan border fencing, will continue as planned: DG ISPR'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, March 17, 'In open show of dissent, several PTI MNAs found staying in Sindh House'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, November 3, 'One killed, 7 injured in attack on PTI's convoy in Wazirabad'.
- Fabbri, Valerio, 2022, 'Seeking IMF loans affect common livelihoods and economy of Pakistan', *Geopolitica.info*, 8 February.
- First Post, 2022, April 10, 'Shehbaz Sharif: 10 things to know about «hands on» PM frontrunner of Pakistan'.
- GeoTv, 2022, October 17, 'By-elections: In major upset to ruling coalition, Imran Khan's PTI bags 6 NA, 2 Punjab Assembly seats'.
- Government of Pakistan, 2020, Press and Information Department, *PR No. 106 Economic Security defines the core of Pakistan's future trajectory*, 16 December.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'National Security Policy of Pakistan 2022-2026'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, Finance Division.

- Gul, Hintiaz, 2022, 'Pakistan under shadows of hybrid warfare', *The Express Tribune*, 18 May.
- Hameed, Mian F., 2022, 'Another Folly: The State Bank of Pakistan Amendment Act 2021', *South Asia Journal*, 6 January.
- Hassan, Mubashir, 2022, 'Maryam demands PM's resignation for 'concealing' sources of PTI funding', *The Nation*, 7 January.
- Hassan, Syed Raza, and Gibran Naiyyar Peshimam, 2022, 'Frontrunner for next Pakistani PM seen as «can-do» administrator', *Reuter*, 9 April.
- Hussain, Naveed, 2022, 'Situationer: Are we back in US-led Western bloc post Imran Khan?', 8 July.
- Ibrahim, Azeem, 2022, 'Imran Khan's Revolution', *Foreign Policy*, 24 August.
- International Monetary Fund, Press Release No. 19/264, 2019, *Executive Board Approves US\$6 billion 39-Month Extended Fund Facility Arrangement for Pakistan*, 3 July.
- , Press Release No. 22/293, 2022, *IMF Executive Board Completes the Combined Seventh, and Eighth Reviews of the Extended Fund Facility for Pakistan*, 29 August.
- Jabbar, Abdul, 2022, 'American-Style Colonialism and Imperialism, with Pakistan the Latest Victim', *South Asia Journal*, 10 May.
- Jadoon, Amira, 2022, 'The Untenable TTP-Pakistan Negotiations', *The Stimson Center*, 24 June.
- Jafri, Juvaria, 2022, 'Pakistan: how an economic crisis has sent prices rocketing', *The Conversation*, 4 July.
- Jamal, Umair, 2022, 'Pakistan's Ambitious National Security Policy', *The Diplomat*, February.
- , 2022, 'US Agrees to Supply Pakistan's F-16s with Maintenance Equipment', *The Diplomat*, October.
- , 2022, 'Why Is Imran Khan Politicking While Floods Devastate Pakistan?', *The Diplomat*, 8 September.
- Kartha, Tara, 2022, 'Pak Army Chief in China: Between US-India Ties & Beijing, Bajwa Is on Thin Ice', *South Asia Journal*, 15 June.
- Khan, Ismail, 2022, 'TTP declares end to ceasefire', *Dawn*, 10 December.
- Khan, S., 2022, 'Why did the government fail?' *DW.com*, 29 August 2022.
- Khan, Tahir, 2021, 'Taliban Install Diplomats in Pakistan Embassy, Missions', *Voice of America*, 28 October.
- Khan, Wajahat S., 2022 'Palace intrigue plagues Pakistan', *South Asia Journal*, 20 March.
- Khatlani, Sameer Arshad, 2022, 'Pakistan-Imran Khan: Down But Not Out', *South Asia Journal*, 23 October.
- Khattak, Daud, 2022, 'Pakistan Sends Secret Delegation To Afghanistan In Bid To Revive Peace Talks With TTP', *Gandhara*, 24 January.
- Kiani, Khaleeq, 2002, 'Budget 2022-23: Budgeting for «hard times» ahead', *Dawn*, 11 June.
- Kugelmann, Michael, 2022, 'The Taliban Pick Fight Over Border With Pakistan', *Foreign Policy*, 6 January.
- Mahmood, Sohail, 2022, 'Pakistan: The PMLN-led Coalition Government Complex Local Challenges and the Way Forward', *South Asia Journal*, 23 May.
- Mallick, Priyanka, 2022, 'Flood Disaster in Pakistan', *South Asia Journal*, 6 September.
- Mallik, Anas, 2022, 'In first bilateral visit by a Pak PM, Imran Khan to go to Russia this month', *Wion*, 6 February.



- Mangi, Faseeh, 2022, 'Flood Losses Now Estimated at \$40 Billion: Pakistan Officials', *Bloomberg*, 19 October.
- Masood, Salman, and Christina Goldbaum, 2022, 'Shehbaz Sharif Becomes Pakistan's New Prime Minister Amid Turmoil', *The New York Times*, 11 April.
- Masood, Salman, 2022, 'Pakistan's Cricket-Star-Turned-Prime Minister Fights for Survival', *The New York Times*, 22 March.
- Masood, Talat, 2022, 'Defence budget in a tough economic scenario', *The Express Tribune*, 29 June.
- Mishra, Abhinandan, 2022, 'Will the Pakistan army witness an internal coup?', *The Sunday Guardian*, 7 May.
- Mohan, C. Raja, 2022, 'Imran Khan Goes to Moscow as Pakistan Romances Russia', *Foreign Policy*, 23 February.
- Mohan, Geeta, 2022, 'Khan «ceases» to be Pakistan PM, president issues notification after dissolving National Assembly', *India Today*, 3 April.
- Naseem, Noorulain, 2022, 'FATA, the TTP, and the Pitfalls of Pakistan's Counterterrorism Strategy', *South Asian Voices*, 30 March.
- Naseer, Namra, 2022, 'Pakistan's Drift towards China and the Difficulty of Maintaining Neutrality Amid Great Power Competition', *South Asia Journal*, 28 January.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Survival Politics: Assessing Pakistan's Neutrality in the Ukraine Crisis', *South Asian Voices*, 18 March.
- Naseer, Tahir, 2022, 'IHC to indict Imran Khan in contempt case on Sept 22', *South Asian Voices*, 8 September.
- Nawaz, Shuja, 2022, 'Back to the future in Pakistan?', *Atlantic Council*, 14 April.
- Noshab, Ramsha, 2022, 'Should the State Bank be autonomous?', *GeoTv*, 5 January.
- Notezai, Muhammad Akbar, 2022, 'Is Pakistan the Next Sri Lanka?', *The Diplomat*, 23 July.
- Oborne, Peter, 2022, 'Pakistan political crisis: Why Imran Khan's enemies want him out', *Middle East Eye*, 6 April.
- OpIndia*, 2022, April 10, 'Pakistan: Imran Khan govt falls after losing dramatic midnight trust vote, speaker had resigned after refusing to conduct the voting'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, March 8, 'Opposition parties in Pakistan move a no-confidence motion against PM Imran Khan'.
- Pakistan Standard*, 2022, March 16, 'Ruling Coalition Partners Tilted Toward Opposition: Pervaiz Elahi'.
- PakTribune*, 2022, January 4, 'Mini-budget to put in Senate'.
- Patel, Kasha, 2022, 'Why Pakistan's record-breaking monsoon season is so devastating', *Washington Post*, 31 August.
- Purkayastha, Shorbori, 2022, 'Who is Shehbaz Sharif – The Man Who is Likely To Pick Up The Reins in Pakistan', *The Quint*, 10 April.
- Rafiq, Arif 2022, 'Pakistan's Ghosts Loom Over Imran Khan', *The Business Standard*, 4 September.
- Rafiq, Arif, 2022, 'Pakistan's Ghosts Loom Over Imran Khan', *South Asia Journal*, 2 September.
- Raja, Asif Haroon, 2022, 'Pakistan: Imran Khan's (IK's) Failures', *South Asia Journal* 31 October.
- Rana, Muhammad Amir, 2022, 'Policy & practice disconnect', *Dawn*, 9 January.
- Rana, Shahbaz, 2022, '«US evaluating» Pakistan's Ukraine response', *The Express Tribune*, 9 March.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Army budget trimmed to pave way for IMF deal', *The Express Tribune*, 6 July.

- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Cabinet meets another IMF condition for \$1b', *The Express Tribune*, 5 January.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'China agrees to refinance over \$2b debt', *The Express Tribune*, 2 June.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Govt takes giant step for IMF condition', *The Express Tribune*, 14 January.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'IMF sets tough terms for bailout revival', *The Express Tribune*, 21 April.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Pakistan reaches staff-level agreement with IMF for \$1.17bn loan tranche', 14 July.
- Rasul, Xenia, 2022, 'How Afghanistan's Political Turmoil Affects the Border Fence Question', *South Asian Voices*, 10 February.
- Reuters 2022, 8 September, 'U.S. State Dept OKs possible sale of F-16 equipment to Pakistan -Pentagon'.
- Riedel, Bruce, and Madiha Afzal, 2022, 'President Biden, don't pass up the opportunity for a reset with Shahbaz Sharif's Pakistan', *Brookings*, 22 April.
- Roy, Rajorshi, 2021, 'Russia's Growing Outreach to Pakistan: Should India be Concerned?', *South Asian Voices*, 29 June.
- Sabir, Ali Asad, 2022, 'Pakistan pays a Russian price', *T Magazine*, 19 June.
- Sajjad, Syed, 2022, 'Rs1.52tr allocated for defence spending', *Dawn*, 11 June.
- Schroden, Jonathan, 2022, 'Terrorists in Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan', *The Diplomat*, October.
- Shah, Saeed, 2022, 'Pakistan's Imran Khan Fights to Stay in Power as Lawmakers Rebel', *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 March.
- Shankar, Vivek, 2022, 'What We Know About Imran Khan, Pakistan's Former Prime Minister', *New York Times*, 22 August.
- Shehzad, Rizwan, 2022, 'Bilawal offers conditional reconciliation with PDM', *The Express Tribune*, 19 January.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'No-trust notice sent to all MNAs', *The Express Tribune*, 18 March.
- Shekhawat, Shivam, 2022, 'Afghanistan-Pakistan relations and the Durand line: Why is it important?', *Observer Research Foundation*, 31 January.
- Siddique, Abubakar, 2022, 'Decapitating The Pakistani Taliban, Afghan Brain Drain, Private Schools Close In Kabul', *Gandhara*, 12 August.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Escalating Violence In A Restive Pakistani Province Resurrects A Forgotten Conflict', *Gandhara*, 9 February.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Pakistan's Deadly Air Strikes Inside Afghanistan Increase Tensions With Taliban', *Gandhara*, 21 April.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Pakistani Prime Minister's «Ill-Timed» Moscow Visit Overshadowed by Ukraine Invasion', *Gandhara*, 25 February.
- Siddiqui, Abdul Qayyum, 2022, 'COAS pick: Lt Gen Asim Munir — a brief profile', *The News*, 24 November.
- Siddiqui, Hassaan, 2022, 'Pakistan faces national emergency to resolve economic crisis', *The Express Tribune*, 17 May.
- Singh, Ameiya Pratap, and Supriya Ravishankar, 2022, 'What Imran Khan's Struggle for Power Tells Us About Pakistan's Politics', *The Diplomat*, 31 March.
- Sinha, Rajesh Kumar, 2022, 'Pakistan: The Uncertain Journey of a Tumultuous Nation', *South Asia Journal*, 30 January.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Russia-Ukraine Conflict and Implications for South Asia', *South Asia Journal*, 6 March.
- South Asia Journal, 2022, April 22, 'Pakistan's Deadly Air Strikes Inside Afghanistan Increase Tensions With Taliban'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, January 17, 'Pakistan: Remittances remain resilient'.

- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, July 2, '4-day visit ends: US assistant secretary discusses Pak-US partnership'.
- South Asia Monitor*, 2022, May 8, 'China reluctant to approve loan to Pakistan citing mounting debt'.
- State Bank of Pakistan, 2022, *Foreign Reserves*.
- Subramanian, Nirupama 2022, 'Army got Imran Khan PM's job, why it's now tugging at the rug under his feet', *The Indian Express*, 31 March.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Emerging axes, new equations: Pak-Russia dynamics in a changing world', *The Indian Express*, 24 February.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'What is the MQM, the party that has turned away from Imran Khan, sealing his fate?', *The Indian Express*, 31 March.
- Syed, Baqir Sajjad, 2022, 'Budget 2021-22: Defence allocation goes up by 6.2pc', *Dawn*, 12 June.
- Tarar, Mehr, 2022, 'Pakistan: 30 days after Imran Khan's Ouster', *The Herald Tribune*, 15 May.
- The Business Standard*, 2022, January 31, 'Imran Khan passes mini budget to appease IMF but angers citizens'.
- The Express Tribune*, 2022 (a), May 22, 'Fate of IMF talks hinges on PM's «big nod»'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022 (b), May 22, 'Resetting ties with US'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, April 12, 'Profile: Shehbaz Sharif – 23rd prime minister of Pakistan'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, April 19, 'Pakistani Taliban: A continuing hurdle to improve Islamabad-Kabul ties'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, April 7, 'Full text of Supreme Court verdict on NA deputy speaker's ruling'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, August 21, 'PTI wins NA-245 seat by huge margin'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, August 5, 'By-elections on nine NA seats on September 29'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, December 11, 'Afghan Taliban, TTP are not one entity: IEA spokesperson'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, February 24, 'Military conflict not in anyone's interest, Imran tells Putin'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, January 15, 'Opposition blasts IMF-backed bills, power tariff hike'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, January 7, 'PPP sets date for anti-govt march on Islamabad'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, July 18, 'Imran renews call for fair polls after PTI's landslide victory over PML-N in Punjab'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, July 30, 'Pakistan seeks US investment'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, June 15, 'EU plan to quit Russian fuel plunges Pakistan into darkness'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, June 9, 'Finance Minister Miftah Ismail unveils Pakistan Economic Survey'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, May 18, 'Talks with IMF begin in Doha'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, May 20, 'Govt agrees to implement IMF demands'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, May 25, 'Pakistan, IMF again fail to reach staff level agreement'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, May 26, 'Bilawal says \$6 billion IMF deal is «outdated»'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, May 27, 'Bilawal stresses engagement with US for ties reset'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, November 4, 'Imran breaks silence of botched assassination attempt'.
- The Hindustan Times*, 2022, April 30, '2+2 will show India-US ties healthy, moving forward: Top US official'.
- The Indian Express*, 2022, March 31, 'As Pakistan PM Imran Khan faces no confidence vote, all you need to know'.
- The International Rescue Committee*, 2022, August 30, 'Pakistan floods: What's happened and how to help'.

- The News*, 2022, 27 September, 'US to give \$10m to Pakistan for food security programme'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, April 11, 'Shahbaz Sharif elected 23rd prime minister of Pakistan'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, April 3, 'PM Imran Khan advises president to dissolve assemblies'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, April 5, 'Russia slams US for «shameless interference» in Pakistan's internal affairs'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, February 2, 'IMF approves \$1 billion loan tranche for Pakistan'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, February 5, 'PPP, PML-N reach consensus on using 'all options' to oust PTI govt'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, June 10, 'Coalition govt unveils maiden budget with Rs9.5tr outlay'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, September 15, 'Russia-Pakistan gas pipeline feasible, Putin tells Shahbaz Sharif'.
- The World Bank, 2022, 'Pakistan: Flood Damages and Economic Losses Over USD 30 billion and Reconstruction Needs Over USD 16 billion – New Assessment', 28 October.
- Times of India*, 2022, September 10, 'UN chief «never seen climate carnage» like Pakistan floods'.
- UNOCHA, 2022 (a), 'Humanitarian response plan: funding update'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022 (b), 'Pakistan: 2022 Monsoon Floods Humanitarian Response Snapshot'.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Pakistan: Monsoon Floods 2022 – 100 days after humanitarian impact & response achievements', 14 November.
- Urooj, Imran and Chaudhry, Sana, 2021, 'What is the process of appointing Pakistan's spymaster?', *Dawn*, 26 October.
- US Department of State, 2022, 'Secretary Blinken's Meeting with Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari', 26 September.
- Virk, Saqib, 2022, 'PTI «hid» Rs310m from ECP', *The Express Tribune*, 5 January.
- Wadhwa, Radhey, 2022, 'Floods in Pakistan: A wake-up call for South Asia', *South Asia Journal*, 10 September.
- Wani, Farooq, 2022, 'China-Pakistan relation: Strain in ties between all-weather friends?', *Financial Express*, 8 February.
- Worldakkam*, 2022, July 31, 'China was nasty to Pakistan under Imran Khan: report'.
- Younus, Uzair, 2021, 'Pakistan's Growing Problem with its China Economic Corridor', *United States Institute of Peace*, 26 May.
- Yousaf, Kamran, 2022 'Most wanted TTP commander killed in Afghanistan', *The Express Tribune*, 11 January.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Bilawal's visit to China will 'boost ties'', *The Express Tribune*, 21 May.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Imran-Putin rendezvous: key takeaways', *The Express Tribune*, 25 February.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'New security policy seeks «peace» with India', *The Express Tribune*, 11 January.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Pakistan asks Afghan Taliban to take TTP «as test case»', *The Express Tribune*, 9 January.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Pakistan downplaying fencing issue?', *Dawn*, 10 January.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Pakistan, US discuss food security', *The Express Tribune*, 7 July.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2022, 'Shehbaz's govt eyes reset in West ties', *The Express Tribune*, 19 April.
- Yousafzai, Ayaz Akbar, Azaz Syed and Nausheen Yusuf, 'President Alvi appoints Lt Gen Asim Munir as COAS, Lt Gen Sahir Shamshad as CJCSC', *The News*, 24 November.
- Yousafzai, Zafar Iqbal, 2022, 'Russia-Pakistan Growing Strategic Partnership', *South Asia Journal*, 20 January.

- Yousuf, Kamran, 2022, 'At UN, Pakistan refuses to condemn Russia', *The Express Tribune*, 2 March.
- , 2022, 'EU Council president speaks with PM amid hiccup in ties', *The Express Tribune*, 9 March.
- , 2022, 'Pakistan urged to vote against Russia's blitzkrieg at UNGA', *The Express Tribune*, 1 March.
- Zaidi, Hussain H, 2022, 'The shift to geo-economics', *The Express Tribune*, 17 January.

## AFGHANISTAN 2022: LIFE UNDER THE TALIBAN

*Filippo Boni*

The Open University  
filippo.boni@open.ac.uk

*2022 was the first full year under Taliban rule. Partly overshadowed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, political and economic developments in Afghanistan received comparatively much less attention than those occurring in the former Soviet space. Nevertheless, Afghanistan witnessed a tumultuous year, amid domestic political adjustments, ethnic power struggles and a dramatic economic and humanitarian situation. Socio-economic conditions have overall worsened under the Taliban with rising levels of food insecurity and refugees both within Afghanistan and in neighbouring states. Internationally, regional countries, including Central Asian Republics, Russia, Pakistan, India and China have maintained their political and economic engagement with the new rulers in Kabul, while refraining from providing official legitimacy to the regime.*

KEYWORDS – Taliban government; China-Afghanistan relations; Pakistan-Afghanistan relations; humanitarian crisis.

### *1. Introduction*

In his 2008 co-authored book *Fixing failed states. A framework for rebuilding a fractured world*, former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani noted how the «failed state problem» was «at the heart of a worldwide systemic crisis that constitutes the most serious challenge to global stability in the new millennium» [Ghani 2008: 4]. 13 years onwards, as the Taliban advance was overwhelming Afghan forces amid the US' announced retreat, Ghani left the country in disarray. His fleeing was highly symbolic of the wider dismemberment of Afghanistan's democratic setup, including long fought-for human rights. Inevitably, debates on whether Afghanistan was a failed state started to re-emerge in media [Economist 2021; Young and Faulconbridge 2021], policy [Raine 2022; Crisis Group 2022] and academic [Brick Murtazashvili 2022] circles. Discussions around the idea of «state failure» in the academic and development practitioners literature generally point towards the ability of a government to perform a number of key tasks, including: protect its citizens from different types of violence; have international and domestic legitimacy; look after its citizens' basic needs and therefore possess the capacity to deliver services [e.g. health, education] to the population [Stewart and Brown, 2009]. Against such a backdrop, and given the interest that this

question has generated in discussions around Afghanistan, this article proceeds by first assessing governance under the Taliban in 2022 on the three areas – authority, legitimacy and service delivery – just outlined. Drawing on news reports and official documents from the international and local organisations still operating within the country, the empirical survey provided below reveals that the Taliban authority has been challenged on multiple fronts domestically and not yet legitimised internationally; in addition, despite some mildly positive trends in terms of exports and revenue collection, the socio-economic situation within Afghanistan remains critical in terms of human rights (and in particular women's rights) and living conditions of the wider population. Overall, the analysis details a critical picture suggesting Afghanistan's drift towards a failed state. The final section of this article dissects the country's international relations under Taliban rule, with a focus on the key regional players including Central Asian Republics, Russia, India, Pakistan and China.

## *2. Taliban authority over Afghanistan*

Since returning to power in the second half of 2021, the Taliban have strived to establish full control over the Afghan territory. While their ability to conquer the 34 Afghan provinces in their advance towards Kabul in 2021 was impressive, in 2022 a number of domestic challenges to their authority emerged, primarily from militant groups opposed to their rule. The Taliban have responded to these challenges by strengthening ties with Al-Qaeda, similarly to what had happened in 1996 when the group first took over. The killing of Al-Qaeda's leader Al-Zawahiri on 31 July 2022 by a US drone strike, exemplifies these dynamics.

At the time of his killing, Al-Zawahiri resided in the heart of Kabul's diplomatic area, in a house that was reportedly owned by a top aide of Sirajuddin Haqqani, one of the key Taliban figures and de facto interior minister. Al-Zawahiri's presence in Kabul attracted international attention to the Taliban's inability or lack of willingness (perhaps both) to break with Al-Qaeda [Hakimi and Price 2022]. It is unclear how many, among Taliban leaders, were aware of Zawahiri's presence in Kabul. However, his residence in an Haqqani-linked shelter has been interpreted as a sign of the close ties between the Haqqani network and Al-Qaeda, dating back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s [Drevon, 2022]. This was confirmed by a report from the UN Monitoring Team, which noted that the relationship between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda «remains close» [UN Security Council, 2022a: 3].

Such close ties between the two groups have helped the Taliban strengthen their grip over Afghanistan, despite the regime facing a number of challenges stemming from a myriad militant groups operating within the

country. The most visible one has been the Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP), the local branch of the Islamic State. The latter has deployed the same insurgent tactics that the Taliban themselves had adopted with the former elected government, in an attempt to challenge the Taliban's ability to maintain security and govern. In order to gather support and build its profile as a challenger to Taliban rule, IS-KP carried out a series of attacks in the northern parts of Afghanistan, that are home to those constituencies that were less favourable to a Taliban takeover [Watkins 2022]. In addition, the IS-KP went for high-profile targets for their attacks, including the Russian Embassy in Kabul (more on this below) and a hotel hosting Chinese nationals, in order to maximise the visibility of their actions and to undermine the Taliban regime in the eyes of important regional players. According to a report by the UN Monitoring Team, the strength of the IS-KP in Afghanistan ranges between 1,500 and 4,000 members, although ethnic differences and geographical distance within the group make effective coordination difficult [UN Security Council, 2022a: 18].

In addition to IS-KP, other opposition groups have emerged, including: the National Resistance Front (NRF), formed by political and military leaders, including former Vice President Amrullah Saleh and coalesced around Ahmad Massoud, son of Ahmad Shāh Massoūd, former leader of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance [Foschini, 2022]; groups supported by former warlords as well as ones established by remnants of the Islamic Republic's armed forces [Giustozzi, 2022]. While these groups do not necessarily pose a significant threat to the Taliban regime, they force the government to committing large security forces in parts of the north, where these groups are primarily based [Giustozzi, 2022].

### 3. *Domestic legitimacy*

While internationally the regime has not yet been recognised by any country (more on this in section 5), from a domestic standpoint the question of legitimacy is important as it interlinks with key developments in the year under examination, including the composition of the Taliban government and wider dynamics of representation (or rather lack thereof) in the new political setting.

The Taliban were successful as an insurgent force because of the decentralised structure that allowed Taliban commanders enough independence and autonomy in pursuing the wider common objective of toppling the Afghan government [Motwani 2022]. But in the transition from an insurgent movement to a political organisation tasked with ruling the country, the Taliban are building a centralised, largely Pashtun-dominated structure, which is causing frictions within their ranks, and partly undermining their domestic legitimacy [Motwani 2022]. Some of the internal frictions emerged



over the draconian measures curbing women's right to education (discussed in section 4 below), with interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani unusually airing his discontent towards the group's supreme leader for the policies he has decided to impose in the country.

In addition to internal frictions, the Taliban government is composed of all men and 43 out of 53 members (80%) are ethnic Pashtuns (the non-Pashtuns include two Uzbeks, four Tajiks, one Turkmen, one Hazara, one Nuristani, and one Khwaja) [Bahiss 2022]. Such a Pashtun-dominated government reflects the exclusionary nature of the movement and it has led to the persecution of ethnic and religious minorities in the name of quelling the military resistance in the north justified by ethno-sectarian divisions [Madadi, 2022]. The arrest of popular Uzbek Taliban commander, Makhidoom Alam, in January 2022, is a case in point. Alam, who fought the US and the Afghan government for nearly two decades and who was responsible for the fall of six northern provinces to the Taliban in 2021, was arrested on precise orders from Taliban's former deputy defence minister Mullah Mohammad Fazl, as a way to sideline the commander, whose influence had been growing as a result of his battlefield successes [Pannier 2022]. Following the arrest, hundreds of Uzbek protesters surrounded the Taliban's security headquarters in Maymana to demand his release. Violence erupted and four people were killed. To quell the protest, the Taliban sent reinforcements, including a unit of suicide bombers and the confrontation ended after four days of negotiations [Pannier 2022]. Although the Taliban governor of the province denied any discrimination on part of the movement, one of the protesters in Maymana, interviewed by the Washington Post, noted that local populations «have been victims of discrimination for a long time» and that «the Taliban say they are an Islamic government and in Islam there is no discrimination. So why do they want to arrest our leaders and those who represent us?» [Raghavan 2022]. Overall, this episode epitomises the exclusionary nature of the Taliban regime to any non-Pashtun elements of the Afghan society, thereby undermining their domestic political legitimacy, especially in the northern parts of the country.

#### *4. Service delivery and socio-economic conditions under Taliban rule*

Since the Taliban's takeover, the Afghan economy is projected to contract cumulatively between the second half of 2021 and the whole of 2022 close to 30-35% [World Bank 2022]. Low growth rates (between 2.0 to 2.4%), and no signs of improvement in per capita incomes owing to high population growth and no significant improvement in poverty or food insecurity, suggest a critical general picture regarding the Afghan economy. A UNDP report [2022] noted that the freeze on \$9 billion in foreign assets belong-

ing to Afghanistan's central bank, coupled with international sanctions, have caused a severe liquidity crisis in the country, also contributing to a rise in the food basket's price by almost 35 percent. According to the report, nearly 20 million Afghans are classified as experiencing high or critical levels of food insecurity, almost twice the average in the preceding three years.

Despite an overall gloomy outlook, two areas stand out with a slightly more positive performance: domestic revenue collection and exports. As for the former, according to the World Bank, total revenue reached US\$ 1.1 billion between 22 December 2021 and the end of August 2022 (exceeding last year's collections during the same period). This was the result of increased revenues collected at borders (including import duties and the Business Receipt Tax), following a decline in corruption in customs and at road checkpoints [Byrd 2022; Watkins 2022; World Bank 2022]. With regards to the increase in exports, Afghanistan's coal exports to Pakistan went up significantly as a result of the price difference between Afghanistan's coal price and that of other coal exporters. Coal exports amounted to US\$ 63.6 million in 2021 but have jumped to US\$ 81.8 million in just Q1-2022 [World Bank 2022].

Besides the economic situation, social and humanitarian conditions within the country remained extremely difficult. From the first report to the UN's Human Rights Council by the UN's Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan, a dramatic picture emerges regarding the condition of women under Taliban rule. The report notes «the staggering regression in women and girls' enjoyment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights» and that women and girls have «rapidly disappeared from all spheres of public life» [UN Human Rights Council 2022: 3]. Measures to that effect include sacking civil servants and female judges as well as suspending secondary education for girls; the stipulation that women should stay at home; the ban on certain travel without a mahram (a close male relative) and mandatory dress codes. In addition, the Taliban issued an order by which «male family members are punishable for women's conduct» and, as the UN Special Rapporteur noted, this is «effectively erasing women's agency and prompting increased domestic abuse». [UN Human Rights Council, 2022: 4].

The situation of refugees in the country remains likewise critical. According to the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), almost 32,400 people have left their homes this year due to fighting. In addition, close to 727,900 people have returned from neighbouring countries to Afghanistan (including 661,600 from Iran and 66,300 from Pakistan) [UNOCHA 2022]. Overall, according to the United Nations Human Rights Commissioner (UNHCR) there are nearly 3.4 million Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in Afghanistan, in addition to refugees and asylum seekers abroad as detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1 – Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in 2022, by top 5 host countries.		
Host Country	Refugees	Asylum Seekers
Pakistan	1.539.046	24.559
Iran	820.714	0
Germany	183.631	41.300
France	55.681	9.066
Austria	43.725	0
<i>Source: Data compiled by the author from UNHCR, Refugee Data Finder</i>		

What is interesting to note from the data on the top 5 host countries, is that there are only two (i.e. Pakistan and Iran) of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries who have taken refugees. On the contrary, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, all Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours, have decided not to take refugees within their own borders. The motivations behind this choice are discussed in the next section.

## 5. *The international relations of Afghanistan under the Taliban*

By the end of 2022, the Taliban regime was not yet recognised internationally. However, such a formal lack of recognition did not necessarily translate into a lack of engagement, especially as far as regional countries were concerned. Central Asian Republics (CARs) acted as key diplomatic hubs, hosting regional meetings with stakeholders to engage the Taliban leadership. China, on its part, has announced its readiness to align the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the development strategies of Afghanistan and to include the latter in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). India too, a country that had consistently and unflinchingly backed anti-Taliban forces, from the Northern Alliance in the late 90s all the way through to the Ghani-Abdullah government in more recent years, has adjusted to the new reality and started engaging the Taliban leadership.

### 5.1 *The Central Asian Republics' regional diplomacy*

CARs have played an important role as hosts to a number of meetings that brought together Taliban representatives and regional countries. Such a diplomatic activism was prompted by the fact that threats to regime stability and national security represent the main lens through which CARs interpret the Afghan scenario. The concerns around the risk of a domestic spillover for CARs from an unstable Afghanistan are therefore best epitomised by the refusal by Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to allow refugees in perma-

nently out of a fear they might be accompanied by militant extremists. To allay some of these concerns, on 26-27 May, Tajikistan hosted a meeting of national security advisers from China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Uzbekistan. Participants encouraged the de facto authorities to create inclusive political structures, pursue a sustainable domestic and foreign policy, ensure compliance with the norms of international law and take steps to eradicate terrorist elements [UN Security Council 2022]. On 26 July, Uzbekistan hosted a conference on Afghanistan which saw the participation of a Taliban delegation led by the de facto Minister for Foreign Affairs, Amir Khan Motaqi. Like in the Tajikistan meeting, participants emphasized the importance of counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics efforts as well as inclusive governance and respect for human rights [UN Security Council 2022]. Beyond security considerations, economic and infrastructure talks were part of CARs relations with Afghanistan in 2022. For instance, in early June a Turkmen delegation visited Kabul to discuss the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project. Similarly, in early August, the Government of Uzbekistan and the Afghan authorities announced that the survey and mapping for the proposed Termiz-Mazar-Kabul-Peshawar railway project had started [UN Security Council 2022]. While looking promising in principle, these infrastructural projects have been regular staples in discussions between Afghan governments and regional partners well before the Taliban took over. Little progress was made over the past 20 years, and it is difficult to see how any genuine infrastructural endeavour could materialise with the precarious security situation in the country.

### *5.2 The Kremlin and Kabul: Developing trade ties amid political caution*

Russia's approach to Afghanistan was two-pronged: politically, Moscow has not officially recognized the new regime in Kabul, and it has hosted in November 2022 the Moscow consultation process without inviting the Taliban leadership. Economically, the Kremlin has instead engaged with the Taliban regime by signing a preliminary deal for the sale of Russian oil to Afghanistan.

As just noted, one of the most visible manifestations of Russia's role in the Afghan scenario was the 4<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Moscow format of consultations on Afghanistan, held in the Russian capital on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November 2022, and including India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Established in 2017 as a regional forum involving special envoys of 11 countries, the forum's main aim was to ensure regional security. Moscow took the leadership role in this process, so that it could pursue two of its core national security interests: 1) preventing the potential threats deriving from instability, violence, and extremism in Afghanistan and the rest of Central Asia; and 2) Moscow's long standing opposition to any US or Western security presence in Central Asia. Although dynamics on the ground have changed in 2022, with the Taliban regime

now in power, security and geopolitical concerns are still paramount for Russian policymakers. Evidence of this can be found from the official statement issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry after the meeting. While calling on the US and NATO to «compensate for the damage inflicted on the Afghans over the years», it also called the Taliban leadership to form a «truly inclusive government in Afghanistan, reflecting the interests of key ethno-political groups, as well as the need to eradicate terrorist, drug and other threats emanating from this country» [Tolo News, 17 November 2022]. The most visible manifestation of this threat came on 5 September 2022, when the suicide bombing of the Russian embassy in Kabul exemplified Russian concerns about the IS-KP's expanding presence in Afghanistan. That was the first attack on a foreign embassy since the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021.

On the economic front, Moscow and Kabul agreed on a preliminary deal that would involve Russia supplying around one million tonnes of gasoline, one million tonnes of diesel, 500,000 tonnes of liquefied petroleum gas [LPG] and two million tonnes of wheat annually [Yawar and Greenfield 2022]. Importantly, both Russia and Afghanistan (alongside Iran) are countries that are de facto isolated and cut out of the international banking system. If finalised, the deal would represent the first major trade deal that the Taliban have agreed since taking power in 2021. While the benefits to the isolated landlocked country are clear, less so are Russia's motivations behind the deal. Some observers noted that agricultural goods and the prospect of future access to Afghanistan's natural-resource wealth could be on the table [Scollon 2022]. Overall, Russia's approach to Afghanistan has remained largely in line with that of previous years, with the only important difference of a renewed willingness of stepping up economic engagement.

### 5.3 *India and the Taliban: Recovering the lost ground*

New Delhi's position vis-à-vis the Taliban regime at the outset of the new Taliban era in 2021 was the weakest among regional countries. Years of unflinching support to anti-Taliban forces prevented policymakers in New Delhi to establish meaningful relations with the Taliban. 2022 was the year in which India was forced to take a U-turn and engage with the Taliban leadership. On 2 June, a delegation of senior Indian officials travelled to Kabul to meet with Taliban leaders. During the meeting, the two sides reportedly discussed «India-Afghan diplomatic relations, bilateral trade and humanitarian aid» (Reuters, 2022). Shortly after, on 23 June, India reopened its diplomatic mission in Afghanistan. These symbolic moves, while aimed at showing some overtures to the Taliban regime, also carried important implications for Delhi's own national security concerns. Reports suggest that in return for India's moves towards the Taliban, the latter has pledged to take action against some of the jihadi groups (e.g. Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed) that have safe havens in Afghanistan [Bacon and Mir, 2022].

India's attempt to engage the Taliban also aims at driving a wedge between the Taliban and Pakistan, at a time in which the latter is concerned about the Taliban's relations with the Pakistani focused Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). But India's engagement with the Taliban rests on the latter's capacity to control militant groups operating from Afghanistan, which has come under question. The Taliban's crackdown against IS-KP, which has fallen short of providing some clear successes, suggests that they may still struggle to conduct targeted operations. Similarly, it is unclear whether they will be able to keep the promise of reining in LeT and JeM, and how that might affect ties with Pakistan.

#### *5.4. Pakistan and the Taliban rule: Emerging strains in bilateral ties*

As opposed to India, in 2021 Pakistan emerged as the country which seemed in an ideal position vis-à-vis the Taliban takeover, given the long-cultivated ties between the Taliban and authorities in Islamabad [Boni 2022]. However, since the initial euphoria which accompanied the return of the insurgent group in Kabul, a number of challenges emerged for Pakistan.

First, the Pakistan-focused faction of the Taliban, the TTP, has gained new strength and has repeatedly carried out attacks on Pakistani soil. In 2022, the number of terrorist incidents in Pakistan was at its highest level (630) since 2016 (1032). Moreover, in 2021 Pakistan only recorded four suicide attacks, while in 2022 there were thrice as many (13), most of which claimed by the TTP [South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2023]. Such a worrying trend has raised concerns in Islamabad about the Afghan Taliban's willingness to rein in this faction. After all, TTP chief Noor Wali Mehsud's pledge of allegiance to Maulvi Hibatullah Akhundzada, the Afghan Taliban leader, is a potent reminder that ties between the two are strong, and that it might be difficult for Pakistan to navigate its relations with the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban to its advantage. While the Afghan Taliban have indeed facilitated the agreement of a five month truce between Pakistan and the TTP (which came to an end in November 2022) Pakistan has so far failed to rein in the terrorist group, whose main operational area remains in Northwestern Pakistan and in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) [Zafar 2022]. The TTP is composed of mostly ethnic Pashtuns, which partly explains the strong bond with the Afghan Taliban, whose lands encompass the areas across the Pakistan-Afghan border (known as the Durand Line).

The latter represents another contentious point in bilateral ties between Islamabad and Kabul. In line with previous Afghan governments who considered the Durand Line an artificial border, the Taliban have refused to accept it as the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. In September 2022, the spokesman of Afghanistan's Ministry of Defense, Enayatullah Khwarazmi, claimed that Pakistan has «no right» to separate Pashtuns living on either side of the Durand Line. Pakistan, on its part, has been building since 2016 a 2,600 km long border fence, to prevent infiltration of militants on its soil.

As evidence of Pakistan's preoccupation with the volatile security situation across the porous border, in August 2022 the Pakistani Defence Minister Khawaja Asif warned the National Assembly of a growing TTP threat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and anti-TTP protests were held across KP [The Express Tribune 2022; The Friday Times 2022].

The third contentious point in bilateral ties is related to Pakistan's geopolitical ambitions to bridge its economy to those of CARs, especially at a time in which its foreign policy has significantly tilted towards China (and Asia more broadly) and away from the US [Corsi 2021; Boni 2021a]. Between 2020 and 2021, Pakistan's business council has published for the first time three country profiles of Central Asian states (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan), as a sign of Pakistan's desire to boost trade with the region [Abbas 2022]. Similarly, works are underway for the construction of the Central Asia-South Asia Regional Trade and Transmission Project (CASA-1000) a 1,270km power transmission line that is expected to export excess hydropower generated in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to energy-hungry Pakistan through Afghanistan.

In order to meet Pakistan's trade and energy needs, as well as its wider geopolitical ambition of reorienting its foreign policy towards the surrounding region, a stable Afghanistan and a good working relationship with the leadership in Kabul are pre-requisites. Both were lacking in 2022.

### *5.5 China in Afghanistan: Pursuing security*

China's approach to Afghanistan in 2022 has largely followed Beijing's engagement of the previous years [Boni, 2021b]. Those who were expecting China to fill in the void left by the US' withdrawal were up for disappointment. The economic slowdown following the zero Covid policy, coupled with unprecedented country-wide public protests, meant that China's main focus was to preserve domestic stability. In many ways, this also helps explain China's key security concern vis-à-vis Afghanistan. To policymakers in Beijing, as with many of their counterparts in the region, the first and foremost preoccupation is that the Afghan territory becomes a fertile ground for groups whose main target is China, and in particular its Westernmost region, Xinjiang. While the Taliban have reassured China that they will not allow their territory to become a base for militants to organise and launch operations against other countries, there are signs that Uyghur militants maintain a presence in Afghanistan. Notably, Abdul Haq, the leader of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), was seen celebrating Eid in the country alongside family members [Pantucci 2022]. A report from the UN Monitoring Group in February highlighted that there were some 200-700 fighters associated with TIP in Afghanistan [UN Monitoring Group 2022].

As we have seen before with the Moscow format of consultations on Afghanistan, China too has developed its own multilateral setting to coordinate regional countries' efforts at stabilising Afghanistan and addressing

the potential security challenges stemming from it. Known as the «Tunxi Initiative of the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan on Supporting Economic Reconstruction in and Practical Cooperation with Afghanistan», it held its third meeting in China at the end of March 2022. Interestingly, in the statement issued at the end by China's Foreign Ministry, it was mentioned that «China supports the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor [...] and is ready to promote synergy between the Belt and Road Initiative and the development strategies of Afghanistan, and support the smooth operation of the China-Afghanistan freight train services, to help Afghanistan better integrate into the regional economic integration process» [MFA-China 2022a]. Similar remarks were made a few days before by then Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who made a surprise visit to Kabul and met Amir Khan Muttaqi, Acting Foreign Minister of the Taliban government [MFA-China 2022b]. Talks about extending the BRI to Afghanistan are not new [Boni, 2022]. Yet, very little has materialised in the past few years in terms of actual infrastructure investments, whether within or outside the aegis of the BRI. While in 2022 Beijing has removed tariffs on 98% of imported Afghan goods and it has re-established an air transport corridor for Afghan pine nuts (worth around \$800 million annually), these are fairly low-level engagements that signal caution more than anything else (Fiala 2022). The attack on a hotel in Kabul in December 2022, claimed by the IS-KP and reportedly targeting Chinese citizens, is an important reminder that before any meaningful economic engagement can take place, and before the Taliban regime is recognised, Beijing, like the other regional players, would be looking for security reassurances.

## 6. Conclusion

The first year of Taliban rule was characterised by struggles for domestic legitimacy between the Taliban and other militant groups seeking to challenge their authority. In addition, the group's Pashtun-dominated, exclusionary structure has further alienated ethnic minorities, especially in the northern provinces and have led to popular demonstrations against the Taliban regime. While in 2021 many observers questioned whether this time the Taliban would be a more moderate force which would adopt policies preserving some of the basic human rights, the first year of Taliban rule revealed the true face of the movement. Curbing women's rights and their participation to public life; excluding ethnic minorities from key posts in the new administration; the banning of music in the country, all these Taliban actions cast a very murky shadow over the country's present and future. The evidence presented in the article also displays some signs of Afghanistan drifting towards being a failed state, especially regarding questions of legitimacy, both domestic and international. Regional countries have been



mainly preoccupied that Afghanistan does not become a fertile ground for militant groups targeting their own soil. But the killing of Al-Qaeda's leader from a safe house linked to a Taliban leader, alongside the presence of TTP and TIP leaders in the country, are potent reminders that stability in Afghanistan is far from achieved, and that security considerations are likely to continue dominating the agenda for the foreseeable future, as they did in 2022.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abbas, Hasan 2022, 'Exploring non-traditional export markets: Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics', *Atlantic Council*, 16 March.
- Bacon, Tricia & Asfandiyar Mir 2022, 'India's Gamble in Afghanistan. The Promise and Peril of Rapprochement With the Taliban', *Foreign Affairs*, 11 July.
- Bahiss, Ibraheem 2021, 'Afghanistan's Taliban Expand Their Interim Government', *International Crisis Group*, 28 September.
- Boni, Filippo 2022, 'Afghanistan 2021: US withdrawal, the Taliban return and regional geopolitics', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXII/2021: 75-391.
- Boni, Filippo 2021a, 'Caught between the U.S. and China: Critical Junctures in Pakistan's Foreign Policy' in Parne, Apanda (ed.) (2021) *Routledge Handbook on South Asian Foreign Policy*, New York: Routledge, pp. 311-323.
- Boni, Filippo 2021b, 'Afghanistan 2020: the US-Taliban peace deal, intra-Afghan talks and regional implications', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 465-478.
- Byrd, William 2022, 'One Year Later, Taliban Unable to Reverse Afghanistan's Economic Decline', *United States Institute of Peace*, 8 August.
- Corsi, Marco, 'Pakistan 2021: In pursuit of a pivotal role in post-pandemic South Asia', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXII/2021: 347-373.
- Drevon, Jerome 2022, 'The Al-Qaeda Chief's Death and Its Implications', *International Crisis Group*, 9 August.
- Fiala, Lukas 2022, 'The Limits of China's Engagement in Afghanistan', China Global South Project, 16 December.
- Foschini, Fabrizio 2022, 'Who Opposes the Taliban? Old Politics, Resistance and the Looming Risk of Civil War', *ISPI*, 11 August.
- Giustozzi, Antonio 2022, 'From Insurgency to Ministries: Assessing the Taliban's Year in Power', *ISPI*, 11 August.
- Hakimi, Hameed & Gareth Price (2022) 'Afghanistan: One year of Taliban rule', *Chatham House*, 15 August.
- International Crisis Group 2022, 'Stopping State Failure in Afghanistan', 27 January.
- The Express Tribune 2022, 'Khawaja Asif warns of increasing TTP threat', 11 August.
- Madadi, Sayed 2022, 'Dysfunctional centralization and growing fragility under Taliban rule', *Middle East Institute*, 6 September.
- [MFA-China 2022a], 'The Tunxi Initiative of the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan Supporting Economic Reconstruction in and Practical Cooperation with Afghanistan', 1 April 2022.
- [MFA- China 2022b], 'Wang Yi Holds Talks with Acting Foreign Minister of the Afghan Interim Government Amir Khan Muttaqi', 25 March 2022.

- Motwani, Nishank 'Taliban leaders still lack legitimacy', *East Asia Forum*, 20 October 2022.
- Murtazashvili, J. 2022 'The Collapse of Afghanistan', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 33, no. 1: 40–54.
- Pantucci, Raffaello 2022 'China in Afghanistan: the Year of Moving Gradually', *ISPI*, 11 August.
- Raghavan, Sudarsan 2022 'A popular Uzbek commander fought for the Taliban for more than two decades. He was arrested anyway.', *The Washington Post*, 1 February.
- Raine, John 2022 'Afghanistan's state failure and the problem of humanitarian containment', *IJSS Analysis*, 28 January.
- Reuters, 2022 'Indian officials meet Taliban in Kabul in first visit since U.S. exit', 2 June.
- Scollon, Michael (2022) 'Taliban-Russia Deal A Drop In The Bucket That Could Fuel Future Trade', *Rferl.org*, 5 October.
- [South Asia Terrorism Portal 2023], 'Data sheets. Number of Terrorism Related Incidents Year Wise', last accessed: 3 February 2023.
- Stewart, Frances & Graham Brown (2009) 'Fragile States', *Crise Working Paper No. 51*, January 2009.
- Tolo News, 2022 'Participants at Moscow Format Release Joint Statement', 17 November.
- The Friday Times 2022 'TTP's Resettlement In KP Is Dangerous: Manzoor Pashteen', 23 September.
- UN Human Rights Council, 'Situation of human rights in Afghanistan. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan', 9 September 2022.
- UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'Afghanistan: Snapshot of Population Movements, January to October 2022 [As of 24 October 2022]', 24 October 2022.
- UN Security Council 2022 'The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security', A/77/340-S/2022/692, 14 September 2022.
- UN Security Council 2022 'Thirteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2611 [2021] concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan', S/2022/419, 26 May 2022.
- UNDP 2022 'One Year in Review-Afghanistan since August 2021', 5 October 2022.
- Watkins, Andrew 2022 'One Year Later: Taliban Reprise Repressive Rule, but Struggle to Build a State', *United States Institute of Peace*, 17 August.
- The Economist, 2022, 'What makes a failed state', 2 September.
- World Bank 2022, 'Afghanistan Development Update. Adjusting to new realities', October.
- Yawar, Moahmmad Yunus & Charlotte Greenfield 2022, 'EXCLUSIVE Afghan Taliban sign deal for Russian oil products, gas and wheat', *Reuters*, 28 September.
- Young, Sarah, & Guy Faulconbridge 2021, 'Afghanistan spiralling into failed state where al Qaeda will thrive, UK says', *Reuters*, 13 August.
- Zafar, Mohammed Ali 2022, 'Pakistan's Scramble for a Peaceful and Stable Afghanistan', *The Diplomat*, 22 September.



# IRAN 2022: DOMESTIC CHALLENGES TO STATE LEGITIMACY AND ISOLATION IN THE GLOBAL ARENA

Giorgia Perletta

University of Bologna  
giorgia.perletta@unibo.it

*The Islamic Republic of Iran has faced severe domestic and international challenges that have progressively brought the country to the brink of global isolation. The ongoing impasse over nuclear negotiations, due largely to contentious demands from the Iranian side, has only served to exacerbate the negative effects of international sanctions on ordinary Iranian citizens. Likewise, Iran's controversial position in regard to the Russian war in Ukraine has increased its isolation on the international stage and resulted in greater domestic economic hardship. Against this background, significant popular protests, led predominantly by Iranian youths, erupted in the autumn of 2022 and continued for over three months. The nature of these protests offers valuable insights into the weakening legitimacy of the country's establishment, in which prominent political slogans and new forms of societal mobilization have revealed the profound gap that exists between the state's historic institutions and the younger segments of Iran's population.*

KEYWORDS – Popular protests; women's rights; nuclear impasse; international isolation; Iran-Russia alignment

## 1. Introduction

August 2022 marked a full calendar year since President Ebrahim Raisi assumed executive power in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In this time, Raisi has failed to fulfil the promises of economic relief and to win the fight against poverty, which were cornerstones of his electoral campaign. Prolonged economic difficulties and intersectional social grievances are symptoms of the progressively worsening crisis of state legitimacy in Iran, which can be traced back to as early as 2009. The Iranian population has faced severe financial difficulties, such as rising prices on basic goods, economic stagnation, and high levels of inflation. The poverty rate has also risen significantly across different sections of society, impoverishing both the middle classes and low-income households. As a consequence, waves of popular protests led by workers from various sectors erupted in many parts of the country throughout the year, in response to economic mismanagement and low or delayed salaries.

However, following the suspicious death of a twenty-two-year-old Kurdish woman, Masha Jina Amini, widespread political demonstrations soon re-

placed these economically driven rallies. Young girls, high-school pupils, and university students vocally criticized the Islamic Republic (and the very foundations upon which it stands), and physically attacked and vandalized its symbols and political icons. The resulting violence and heavy-handed response by Iranian police forces, which resulted in a massive number of arrests, did not manage to weaken the momentum behind these protests, but did underline the state's uncompromising attitude toward this popular outcry.

Meanwhile, the outbreak of the Russian war in Ukraine imposed further hardship on Iran's already suffering economy while simultaneously altering Iran's relationship with both Moscow and the West. Though declaring itself to be a neutral spectator to the conflict, Iran has controversially supported the Russian military effort by manufacturing and supplying drones to Moscow. These actions have only contributed to the country's increasing isolation on the global stage, and further protracted the enduring standoff over nuclear negotiations. In both March and August, all parties appeared close to reaching a new deal; but this prospect has diminished due to internal tensions in Iran, the worsening human rights situation involving the protestors within the country, and the support given by the Iranian military to Russia in the on-going conflict with Ukraine.

Of the above, this article focuses predominantly on the popular protests that broke out in the autumn of 2022, examining their roots and developments, as well as their significance in terms of socio-political stability. It also investigates the enduring effects of international sanctions together with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine on the Iranian economy. Finally, it looks at the long-standing impasse over the nuclear agreement through an exploration of its different phases and general development, while also highlighting the «look to the East» policy that has led to a realignment of Iran-Russia relations in order to offset Western sanctions and international isolation.

## 2. *Domestic policy*

The most important socio-political development of this year has undoubtedly been the spread of a new wave of popular protests that have served to highlight wider societal disenchantment with the Iranian system. In contrast to the last three years, during which financial difficulties and criticism over economic mismanagement were the predominant drivers of public dissatisfaction and worker-led demonstrations, older, long-standing complaints have been given fresh voice in new forms of activism, which emerged with the 2022 streets protests. Anti-government rallies spread all throughout the country, in both urban centres and peripheral provinces, while the political elite's block response was to put down the protests by use of extreme force. Though there have been a few dissenting voices from the reformist movement criticizing the brutal crackdown on protestors, this does not yet

appear to have triggered a substantial rethink on how best to deal with these demonstrations. The *eslahtalaban* (reformists) represent a political movement that since its foundation in the mid-Nineties has been inclined to liberalize social spaces, foster a gradual democratization of the political system, and reduce autocratic deviancies of political power. Leading and prominent figures are the former President of the republic Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), ousted from political debate but still influent behind the scene, Mostafa Tajzadeh, Abdollah Ramezanzadeh, Hassan Khomeini, Abolfazl Shakouri-Rad, and Azar Mansouri. Firstly, what is clearly evident from these protests is the growing gap between established state institutions and wider Iranian society, especially in regard to the younger segments of its population, who are no longer willing to tolerate restrictions on individual liberties. Secondly, as of end of December, there does not appear to be any political group capable of engaging with or delivering upon the demands of the general population. In particular, reformists are no longer perceived as agents of gradual change within the country, nor as representatives of different segments of Iranian society, particularly when it comes to the youth, women, and ethnic minorities. The reformist front – or what remains of it after decades of marginalization by the judiciary and other nonelective bodies – sits outside of any decisive political institutions capable of enacting change. Only 20 out of 270 seats in the parliament were allocated to reformists in the 2020 elections. As the reformist front currently appears vulnerable, unstructured, and incapable of offering any real opposition within the system or stimulating political debate, the Islamic Republic has effectively lost its only main interlocutor with the country's bright and educated youth.

### 2.1. *Waves of popular protests: roots and significance*

During his eighteen months in office, President Ebrahim Raisi has not been able to quiet societal discontent, and over the course of the last year Iran has witnessed several waves of major popular protests. Although public spaces for peaceful dissent have been consistently reduced over the past three years ['Iran events of 2021' 2022], several groups within Iranian society have continued to express their dissatisfaction: on the one hand, due to economic mismanagement, the high cost of living, low and/or delayed salaries; and, on the other, because of the constant restrictions on social and individual liberties. From January to May, economic problems were the major trigger for sporadic and uncoordinated demonstrations, which resulted not only in workers, teachers, industry labourers, and health personal taking to the street, but also pensioners, members of low-income households, unemployed youths, and ethically marginalised groups. Major demonstrations broke out in the urban centres of Ahwaz, Arak, Kermanshah, Hamedan, and Sanandaj. The main slogans typically on display criticized the high cost of living and job insecurity, but also water scarcity and government failure to adjust wages and pensions to offset the higher costs of basic goods ['Teacher demonstrations' 2022]. As well

as demanding better working conditions and higher pensions, the protests were also a way to criticize the government's record on various other issues, such as reducing poverty and the failure to deliver on promises made during the electoral campaign ['Pensioners rally in Iran' 2022].

In May, following the government's decision to revoke subsidies on imported goods, like wheat, basic foods, and medicine, protests erupted in several cities in the provinces of Khuzestan and Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari ['One killed as price' 2022]. After a few days, other provinces also witnessed demonstrations, included Ardabil, Esfahan, Gilan, Khorasan-e Razavi, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, Lorestan, Tehran, and Yazd. According to a report published by Amnesty International, Iranian security forces cracked down on the protestors ['Iran: they are shooting' 2022]. Demands for better economic conditions, higher salaries, and increased pensions in face of rising prices and the cost of living crisis, were also combined with slogans confronting the political elite, including some targeting the Supreme Leader himself behind the chorus *margh bar dictatoh* («death to the dictator») ['Fazeli' 2022]. This chant was not a new one in the context of popular uprisings in Iran. It was also a recurring refrain in the 1978-79 revolutionary movement – at that time being used to target the Shah. The resurfacing of this slogan in May 2022 spoke to a broader sense of social frustration that was no longer confined solely to economic hardship but also to political disillusionment. At the end of the month, other protests erupted in the city of Abadan due to the deadly collapse of the Metropolis building. This disaster was responsible for 34 deaths and triggered angry demonstrations throughout the province. The protestors' complaints centred on corruption and professional negligence, as the building's construction did not meet compliance standards and ultimately resulted in a structural failure [Berg 2022]. Anti-government sentiment and slogans characterized these marches, which were violently put down by the police ['Iranian police fire shots' 2022]. As a consequence, the country's labour minister, Hojatollah Abdolmaleki, resigned ['Iranian labour minister resigns' 2022].

All these public gatherings were usually spontaneous and leaderless, mainly localized in controversial provinces, such as Iranian Kurdistan and the oil-rich Khuzestan, and lacking any real political support. Despite the heavy state repression, they were never completely subdued and always ready to break out once more. Indeed, social discontent erupted again in mid-September after a twenty-two-year-old Kurdish woman, Mahsa Jina Amini,<sup>1</sup> died in suspicious circumstances while under the custody of the

1. Jina indicates the Kurdish nature of the girl's name. However, in the Islamic Republic, ethnic minorities are obliged to choose a Persian name to register their children. It is important to underline the Kurdish connotations of the name, as protests also erupted in Iranian Kurdistan and demonstrators have been frequently using a slogan of the Kurdish resistance at their rallies. Behind the protests for women's rights, a significant component of this movement is the additional struggle of Kurdish minorities.

Iranian morality police (*Gasht-e ershad*).<sup>2</sup> This young woman was visiting the capital with her family when she was arrested on September 13 for wearing what was perceived to be an «improper headscarf», which was allegedly not compliant with the latest government regulations.

At the beginning of 2022, Iran's Headquarters for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice sent a 119-page document to government offices and agencies outlining new regulations concerning the dress code for women. The *Hijab and Chastity Project*, as this directive has been named, was intended to tighten control on women's clothing by imposing further restrictions on their individual choices ostensibly with the aim of «cleansing society of the pollution caused by nonconformance with Islamic dress codes» ['Chastity and hijab project' 2022]. After this document had been made public, some women walked the streets without any headscarf as an act of individual resistance to protest against the new regulation. Behind the symbolic issue of the *hijab*, also known as the Islamic veil, Iranian women have long opposed discriminatory laws, gender segregation, partial exclusion from the job market ['Unemployment with basic education', 2022; 'Unemployment rate for male' 2021], and the reduction of their individual liberties since the very foundation of the Islamic Republic and its juridical system.<sup>3</sup> Those deemed as *bad-hijabi* (a women wearing an improper veil) were frequently assaulted by the morality police, and in some cases even arrested. For example, the young writer Sepideh Rashnoo was arrested on July 16 for protesting about the mandatory veil on public transport in Tehran. Two weeks later, she appeared on national television and read out an allegedly forced confession ['TV «confession» of Iranian anti-hijab' 2022]. During the summer, owing to the release of these new regulations, further acts of individual resistance, such as women walking in streets without the *hijab*, were widespread. It is important to acknowledge, however, that such public acts of resistance against state control over women's bodies and their choices have deep and profound roots. They are in fact the continuum of decades' worth of struggles and campaigns headed up by Iranian feminists and social activists [Mohammadi 2007]. What has occurred in the autumn of 2022 can be seen as a new form of mobilization based upon old, unresolved grievances.

2. The *Gasht-e Ershad* is a section of the Law Enforcement Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran (i.e., the police force). It was founded in 2005 with the aim of patrolling the streets to ensure adherence to Islamic codes. The main targets were women, particularly in relation to their use of the veil. The morality police has an infamous reputation for arbitrary arrests, intimidation, and physical assaults on women.

3. The female unemployment rate in 2021 reached 19%, but it should be noted that according to a report published in 2020 by the Statistical Center of Iran, female participation in labour force is around 15%. Women (also the educated ones) are excluded from the job market due to social and political barriers and their rate of unemployment is higher when compared with men. The male unemployment rate in 2021 was estimated at 9%.



## 2.2. *Women led demonstrations*

Mahsa Jina Amini died in a coma three days after her arrest while in police custody. The authorities claimed that she suffered from poor health conditions and had suddenly passed away due to an unexpected heart attack. To corroborate this version of events and to deny responsibilities, incomplete and fragmented video footage of her detention was circulated, while the Amini family themselves rejected these official claims and denied that she had any previous health issues. According to her parents, Mahsa Jina was brutally assaulted by police officers, as images of her last moments in hospital show signs of injuries and abuse on her body. President Raisi called the family to express his condolences, but no further measures were taken to investigate what happened in police headquarters. On September 17, demonstrations expressing solidarity with Mahsa Jina Amini spread throughout the country, beginning in Saqqez, her Kurdish city of origin. More than 150 cities and small towns witnessed public gatherings, and there were scenes of young women cutting their hair and burning their headscarves [Gritten 2022]. While street demonstrations are by no means a new method of expressing dissent, these protests immediately stood out in terms of the varied level of social participation, the style of mobilization on display, and their clear resonance both domestically and amongst the international community.

Firstly, these protests attracted and brought together a rather heterogeneous social group, predominantly led by young women between the ages of 15 and 25. Young girls were at the forefront of these street demonstrations, but they were also joined and supported by men and women of different generations, across various social groups, and from distinct ethnic backgrounds. As such, one of the real novelties of this wave of protests has been its intersectionality. Protestors gathered behind the powerful slogan *zan, zendeghi, azadi* («women, life, freedom»), which has fast become the rallying call characterizing this period of unrest [Bajalan 2022]. This motto has its origins in the Kurdish resistance movement (*jin, jîyan, azadi*) and was first used by Kurdish women in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). It is important to underline this specifically Kurdish angle, as the 2022 women-led protests in Iran also gave voice to the struggle of ethnic minorities within the country. Therefore, while the solidarity expressed to Mahsa Jina Amini provided a platform to reflect upon the state's continuing violation of women's rights, these protests also broadened to include wider ethnic unrest against state discrimination. Ethnic minorities, especially Kurds and Baluchi, took to the streets to express their wider frustration at decades of political and social inequity. In the case of the Kurds, in particular, their struggle against the central power in Iran is deep-rooted, as evidenced by the fact that half of the prisoners held in Iranian jails are Kurds [Ghaderi & Goner 2022].

Back on the streets, young girls demanded their rights to self-determination and bodily autonomy. They challenged the role imposed upon

woman by the state, criticizing the patriarchal hierarchy within Iranian politics, state-violence, decades of socio-political discrimination, and the humiliating treatment carried out at the hands of the morality police. These demands were also immediately supported by young men, who took part in this wider mobilization because state recognition of women's rights was considered an indispensable and fundamental step towards the recognition of broader individual rights and freedoms. Therefore, women's demands, which in Iran have their origins in decades' worth of women's activism, have now assumed a more universal character. However, these protestors were not asking for minor reforms or gradual changes, but rather for a comprehensive political transformation. Anti-government slogans such as «down with the Islamic Republic» or «down with dictatorship» would resonate for weeks. Thousands of videos circulated on social media and were reported on international broadcasts [‘The rallying cries’ 2022].

Secondly, with regard to the style and characteristics of these widespread mobilizations, streets, schools, and universities have been the key spaces of dissent. Young women occupied secondary schools, refused to attend lectures, took off their veils in class while standing in front of pictures of ayatollah Khomeini. University students organised sit-ins across several campuses [‘Iranian Students Launch Sit-in’ 2022]. Meanwhile, symbolic places and notable icons of the revolution were attacked or vandalized. Khomeini's own house was set on fire nine weeks after the eruption of the protests [Plummer 2022]; and public posters of the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, were also set on fire. Like previous demonstrations, these protests were spontaneous, not organised and lacked any obvious leadership; however, they ultimately facilitated collective acts of civil disobedience. If the absence of real leadership has limited the ability of the protest movement to transform itself into a transversal and structurally inclusive political movement, it has also enabled it to remain strongly resilient in the face of state intimidation, as the authorities have struggled to identify or make an example of any visible political figureheads.

Thirdly, both the domestic and international response to the Iranian protests has underlined the universality of women's rights issues, whose recognition is of interest not only to (Iranian) women but to all human beings. Peaceful parades were organised in European and North American capitals and cities; and the various campaigns that circulated on social media were also aimed to show solidarity and understanding with the Iranian youth. Prominent public figures within Iranian society – famous movie directors and actors, such as Ashgar Farhadi, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, and Tanareh Alidoosti – spoke out loudly through their social media channels against state repression. Iranian athletes participating in international competitions made symbolic gestures in support of the protestors. In October, the rock climber Elnaz Rekabi removed her headscarf while competing in a contest in Seoul – though once back in Iran she was forced to make a tel-

evized apology [Gritten 2022]. The Iranian football team refused to sing the national anthem before their first match at the FIFA World Cup in Doha [Arun 2022]. Yet despite all these expressions of solidarity, the aggressive response to the protests by the police and military forces did not abate, nor was the Iranian *nezam* persuaded to introduce any sorts of reform.

Despite widespread participation in these protests, the majority of the Iranian population did not take part. In some places, merchants were forced to close their shops, mainly to avoid further damages to their properties; workers, especially those in the vital petrochemical sector, though somewhat timidly declaring their support of the protests, have not followed up with any significant mobilization of their own [Batmanghelidj & Kalp 2022]. The majority of people still appear very cautious, perhaps frightened by the possibility of a resulting power vacuum, or because they do not consider the youth movement to be strong enough to genuinely force a change in the system.

When the protests erupted in Iran, President Raisi was speaking at the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York, delivering a speech on Iran's mission to fight injustice [United Nations 2022]. A few days later, he warned the protestors, stating that «chaos will not be accepted» [Gritten 2022]. In early October, Ali Khamenei made his first statement on the protests during a graduation ceremony for police officers. The Supreme Leader accused the United States (US) and Israel of plotting against the Iranian republic by spreading sedition and by infiltrating the protest movement with their own spies [‘Imam Khamenei’ 2022]. This familiar narrative of accusing external forces and enemies of spreading chaos within the country was used to both direct and justify the state's response to events. First, the authorities refused any compromise with the people on the streets, who were condemned as agents of the *doshman* (enemies) [‘The enemy's plan failed’ 2022]. Second, all demonstrations would continue to be purged by extreme force. National television focused upon the damages caused during the unrest, such as burned mosques, attacks on ambulances, and the disruption of public transport. On this basis, the *nezam* authorized the police and security forces to take all necessary measures to suppress the protests, from the use of pellet guns and tear gas to public executions [Shams 2022].<sup>4</sup>

On November 24, the United Nations Human Rights Council approved the formation of an independent international fact-finding mission to investigate the alleged human rights violations in the Islamic Republic of Iran [United Nations Human Rights 2022]. At the end of November, the Iran Human Rights association claimed that there had been at least 488 deaths, including 40 children and 29 women. Most of the victims were

4. On December 12, two twenty-three-year-old men, Mohsen Shekari and Majidreza Rahnavard, who were participating in the demonstrations in Iran, were reportedly executed by public hanging. At the beginning of the new year, two other men, Mohammad Mehdi Karami and Seyed Mohammad Hosseini, were also hanged. These executions occurred after unfair trials based upon forced confessions.

recorded in the provinces of Sistan Baluchistan and Kurdistan ['Iran Protests' 2022]. This data clearly demonstrates the harsh nature of the repression, particularly within ethnic minority provinces. The Oslo-based Human Rights Watch reported that an estimate of more than 18,000 people had been arrested ['Iran: Death Sentences' 2022]. This number could feasibly be higher and is difficult to verify.

Despite several prominent internal voices speaking out against the crackdown on protesters, such as former President Mohammad Khatami, former Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri ['People's voice' 2022], or the Supreme Leader's own niece, Farideh Moradkhani, who was later sentenced to three years in prison for her comments, the Iranian state has not shown any signs of reconsidering its approach. The violent repression has continued for a period of over three months and, to date, it is difficult to foresee any possible change or developments.

### *3. Economy and the financial situation*

By 2022, the Iranian economy had not shown any significant signs of improvement; and, in fact, several domestic and external factors threatened to contribute to its worsening. While nuclear negotiations had long remained at a standstill, the Iranian economy continued to suffer profoundly from the secondary sanctions that had been reimposed by the Trump administration in 2018. President Ebrahim Raisi made little improvements and implemented some highly contested reforms in order to mediate the rising costs of imported commodities. Raisi's attempts to revive the economy, by reversing inflation and fighting corruption and tax evasion, did not achieve any effective results.

#### *3.1 Economic challenges and fragile reforms*

Looking at macroeconomic trends, there were some improvements in the first quarter of the year, such as the reduction of the unemployment rate, which has been estimated at 8.9% – a positive figure compared to December 2021, when it was around 9.6%. However, this rate has continued to fluctuate and, in July, increased to 9.2% ['Iran Unemployment Rate' 2022 (a)]. The unemployment rate for women is consistently higher than that of men. According to the Statistical Centre of Iran, in June 2022, the rate of women who were unemployed at the age of 15 or over was reportedly 16% ['Iran Unemployment Rate (b)']. A serious concern also arises from the youth unemployment rate, which rose to 23.6%, in February 2022, from 22.1% in the final quarter of 2021.

In March, the government announced an increase of around 57% in the monthly minimum wage for workers, in response to several public pro-

tests [‘Iran: Labor Protests’ 2022]. The minimum wage per month was set at 5.679 million toman (about 203 US dollars). This manoeuvre, however, would cause a significant increase in operating costs and consequently led to many companies reducing their overall number of contractors, or opting for more informal employment relationships with their workers (i.e., hiring on a non-contractual basis), as a means to offset the additional costs. This is against the backdrop of an already precarious workforce situation. It is estimated that more than 90% of Iran’s workforce is on short-term contracts, with no guarantees over contract renewal, no protections or access to benefits, and under the risk of being fired for no reason at any time [‘The Beating Heart’ 2022].

Poverty has remained widespread across various social groups; it is estimated that around 60% of the country’s population lives either at or below the poverty line [Kozhanov 2022]. Absolute poverty stands at 18.4%, which equates to one in five Iranians living in absolute poverty [‘Autopsy of unrest’ 2022]. These figures reveal the failure of the incumbent government to win the war against poverty, which was one of the main promises and slogans of Raisi’s electoral campaign.

Another significant economic issue relates to the rate of inflation, which has more than doubled since Raisi took office. Inflation grew considerably from January 2022, when it was estimated at 35.9%, reaching 54% by July [‘Inflation Rate’ 2022]. This negative trend would mainly impact the lower strata of Iranian society, while also reducing the purchasing power of the impoverished middle classes. The effects of inflation increased the prices of basic goods, food, and housing. In April, food prices were 40% higher than in the same period in 2021 [‘Explainer: Raisi’s First Year’ 2022]. The following month, the government lifted import subsidies for essential goods, provoking an increase in food prices by 82% compared to the previous year [Soghom 2022]. The price of rice, milk, meat, and cooking oil more than doubled, while foreign goods were more and more difficult to find. The cost of eggs and red meat increased by 53% in just one year [‘How Much Did The Price’ 2022]. A further contributing factor was the significant drop of the Rial, the Iranian currency, that has fallen more than 40% against the dollar since August 2021 [Shahla 2022]. Due to the rampant inflation, domestic mismanagement, and the ongoing effects of international sanctions, the pharmaceutical sector also increased the cost of its wares. Drugs were difficult to acquire, especially those for rare diseases or special treatments that were usually imported [‘Iran: How Corruption’ 2022].

In May, President Raisi announced that electronic coupons would be issued to help stabilize prices and enable people to buy limited amounts of bread at a subsidized cost [‘Iran’s Raisi’ 2022]. The «economic surgery», which was the name given to the plan for economic reform, included a review of subsidies and the discontinuation of the lower exchange rate

used for the import of essential goods, such as food [Khajehpour 2022]. As mentioned above, public criticism soon emerged over these manoeuvres, which had resulted in a price increase for imported goods and had accelerated inflation [Kozhanov 2022]. This latter also had a deleterious effect on the cooperation between the industrial and banking sectors. Due to rising inflation and rising production costs, small and medium industries needed more capital and, as such, were looking to secure loans, whereas the banks were unable to provide sufficient financing to these industries as a result of inflation. The banks' limited balance sheet led to a general reduction of resources across the banking network, as well as the imposition of an interest rate cap. It is estimated that 92% of the requests for loans from small and medium-sized enterprises have gone unanswered ['The Great Thirst' 2022].

President Ebrahim Raisi based his electoral campaign and domestic discourses on economic recovery, but during his eighteen months in office the economic and financial situation did not present any signs of improvement. Moreover, the "resistance economy", which has been the typical response by the conservative camp to circumvent international sanctions, has shown its limitations. For instance, achieving self-sufficiency in staple foods – a desired held by the Supreme Leader and specifically referenced in his inaugural New Year's address in March ['Nowruz speech' 2022] – presented several difficulties. Iran relies on food imports and there are still several major barriers to achieving full self-sufficiency in food production. The issue of water shortages in several provinces is becoming a fundamental threat, not just in terms of changes to various ecosystems, but for all human-related activities. Agriculture provides for 90% of domestic food demand, but it also consumes 92% of available fresh water resources ['Analysis: Warnings' 2022]. Diminishing rainfall, due to rising temperatures, desertification, and old-fashioned and unsustainable irrigation systems, has adversely impacted on the availability of water and hence on domestic production [Mesgaran *et al.* 2017]. Boosting national cultivation runs the risk of further endangering water supplies in vulnerable provinces.

Trade relations with China, Iran's biggest commercial partner, were still ongoing in 2022, but the second part of the year witnessed a major contraction. According to Bourse and Bazaar foundation, Beijing continued to purchase Iranian oil despite sanctions; however, the overall trade between Iran and China witnessed a contraction, which fell to a monthly total of \$1.04 billion, the lowest level since February 2022. The Chinese import from the middle eastern country trended downward in the autumn, dropping to a 24-month-low of \$365 million ['China-Iran Trade Report' 2022]. Other Chinese imports from Iran also declined, with a fall of 30% from July to September, settling at \$673 million ['China-Iran Trade Report' 2022]. These data are not confirmed by official sources as they need time to get processed and will be release during 2023.

#### 4. *Foreign policy*

Iranian foreign policy in 2022 has been affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing war. This event has not only forced a change in Iran's positioning within the global arena, but also added further uncertainty over the long-standing nuclear negotiations. In this regard, despite several meetings and an intention to keep these talks alive, mutual disagreements between Iran and the US have effectively led to a standstill. While some conditions from the Iranian side have been considered «unacceptable» by the US, Tehran has also continued to develop its enrichment program, provoking severe criticism from the IAEA.

##### 4.1 *The nuclear negotiation*

Since April 2021, Vienna has hosted the negotiations between the P4+1 (UK, France, Russia, China, and Germany) and Iran, who have collectively sought to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Iran has refused to engage in direct talks with the US, despite the latter's crucial role in directing the outcome of any such negotiations. In March, the parties appeared very close to reaching an agreement, as confirmed by Joseph Borrell, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who stated on his Twitter account: «A pause in [the] Vienna Talks is needed, due to external factors. A final text is essentially ready and on the table. As coordinator, I will, with my team, continue to be in touch with all JCPOA participants and the U.S. to overcome the current situation and to close the agreement» [Josep Borrell Frontelles' 2022]. However, some remaining disagreements and the eruption of the war in Ukraine have affected any positive outcomes from these talks.

There are a number of reasons why the possibility of reaching an agreement in March never materialized. Firstly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine shifted international attention and concerns back to the European continent, creating new strategic priorities for all parties involved in the negotiations. In mid-March, the Iranian minister of foreign affairs, Hossein Amirabdollahian, met with his counterpart in Moscow. In light of the pause in talks, Sergei Lavrov vowed to promptly resume negotiations, and insisted that Russian military operations in Ukraine would not have hampered any potential nuclear deal [Hafezi *et al.* 2022]. Regardless, due to the war in Ukraine, new priorities for the European countries involved with the negotiations took precedence over securing a new agreement with Iran.

Secondly, disagreements between the US and Iran still remained over a variety of issues, and these were unable to be resolved. The Islamic Republic has always sought guarantees that a future US administration would not suddenly reverse any previously agreed deal (as the Trump administration had done in May 2018 by unilaterally withdrawing from the JCPOA). However, this request has been rejected by current US President

Joe Biden, who cannot legally bind his potential successors to any treaties signed by their predecessors in office. This remained a major stumbling block in all phases of the negotiations. Another unsolved issue was Tehran's demand that the US remove the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp from their list of foreign terrorist organizations [US Department of State 2022 (a)]. These disagreements led to a two-month breakdown in negotiations until Enrique Mora, the European Union envoy coordinating talks with Iran, visited Tehran in early May to launch fresh discussions. Borrell, commenting on Mora's trip to Tehran, said that they hoped to «relaunch the work between the parties» [European Union External Action 2022] and reopen the door for negotiations.

Another key problem and concern for the P4+1 was related to the problematic investigations of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) into traces of uranium discovered at various undeclared sites in Iran. The IAEA has estimated that Iran's stockpiles of enriched uranium have grown to more than eighteen times the limit originally set by the JCPOA. Iran has continued to enrich uranium beyond the 3.67% threshold set out in the 2015 deal, increasing their stocks of highly enriched uranium (HEU) at both the 20% and 60% level ['Iran's enriched uranium' 2022]. As Tehran displayed no willingness to engage in a cooperative approach nor to provide convincing and technically sustainable proof of its peaceful nuclear activities, on June 8, the IAEA adopted a resolution urging Iran to cooperate with the Agency [IAEA 2022(a)], in order to «fulfil its legal obligations and, without delay, take up the Director General's offer of further engagement to clarify and resolve all outstanding safeguards issues» [IAEA 2022(b)]. Shortly afterward, Iran informed the Agency that it would remove the 27 surveillance cameras which, under the terms of the JCPOA, had been installed across Iranian nuclear facilities to monitor all nuclear-related activities [IAEA 2022c].

In the summer, the «final text» drafted by the EU brought some cause for optimism, and the relevant parties were once again sounding positive that a new agreement was close [Motamedi 2022]. The Iranian negotiation team also expressed confidence that the deal was finally near to being revived, but some of its demands were still being rejected [Hashem & Hagedorn 2022]. In late August, President Raisi stated that he stood ready to restore the nuclear deal but only if the IAEA would close their investigation into the alleged traces of uranium discovered at those undeclared sites in Iran [Motamedi 2022]. More specifically, however, Iran continued to call for the removal of international sanctions and sought other guarantees from the US, conditions that the Biden administration was not willing to satisfy ['MP: Iran has other options' 2022].

With the eruption of popular protests in Iran in mid-September, the nuclear talks remained in deadlock. The US State Department spokesman, Ned Price, declared that the revival of the deal was «*not our focus right now*»



[US Department of State 2022b]. While pressures on the US continued to come from Israel, a long-standing opponent of the revival of any agreement with Iran [Stein 2022], the Islamic Republic has found itself engaged on several fronts: responding to the domestic protests, continuing the tug-of-war with the IAEA over the acquisition of advanced centrifuges [Murphy 2022], and realigning its relationship with Russia in the shadow of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

In November, while the Iranian Foreign Minister Amirabdollahian was declaring his intention to send a delegation to Vienna to «resolve remaining issues» [‘Iran to send team’ 2022], Tehran announced that it had begun enriching uranium to 60% at its Fordow facility – in a defiant response to an IAEA resolution that advocated more transparency and for further investigation into Iran’s activities by the Agency. At this point, any possibility of reviving the nuclear deal appeared remote, and by no means a priority for the relevant parties. Both the Biden administration and the other European countries were far more concerned about the conflict in Ukraine and with the worsening human rights violations in Iran. On December 14, Iran was ousted from the United Nations women’s group. Despite several rounds of negotiations during the year and a handful of near-breakthroughs, the nuclear talks have not shown any signs of progress or improvement; and though the door for further discussion remains open, as it currently stands, any hopes of reviving the JCPOA appear slim.

#### *4.2 The «Look to the East» policy and Iran-Russia relations in light of the Ukraine war*

One of the core pillars of Ebrahim Raisi’s foreign policy is his «Look to the East» strategy, which aims to strengthen commercial, military, and security ties with countries like Russia and China. This policy is not necessarily new, but its pursual has often been alternated with attempts at rapprochement with the West – the latter typically having been urged by pragmatic/reformist governments. Since 1991, Iran and Russia strengthened their strategic partnership and found ground for common cooperation in several fields. After President Donald Trump introduced his «maximum pressure» campaign against Iran, the Islamic Republic turned again its attention to the East in order to consolidate its commercial and security partnerships and to circumvent or nullify the effects of international sanctions. Raisi reiterated the strategic importance of «looking East» throughout his first presidential term, during which the continuing impasse over nuclear negotiations remained a critical factor. In January, the president declared himself ready to finalize a 20-year partnership with Russia [‘President in a group of economic’ 2022]. This long-term cooperation agreement would look to benefit Iran by expanding its ties with neighbouring and regional countries, with the aim of neutralizing the impact of sanctions, but also to help consolidate regional relations via agreements with Eurasian forums and organizations

boasting Russian membership [Noori 2022]. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine profoundly altered these mutual relations and, as a result, Iran's position on the global stage.

In March, the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei blamed the West and particularly the US for the crisis, implying that the Russian military campaign was an understandable response to NATO's threatening activities along the Ukrainian border with Russia ['Iran supports ending the war' 2022]. But to avoid further escalation (and also not to entirely alienate the West during the ongoing nuclear talks), the Iranian government declared their support for «the preservation of the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of all countries» [Government of the Islamic Republic 2022]. Despite the rhetoric, however, the Islamic Republic soon took a clear side in the war; and while this may have consolidated Iran's relationship with Moscow, it has also accelerated its own international isolation.

The Ukraine crisis not only deeply affected the Iranian economy but also the country's positioning in the global arena. Tehran aimed to consolidate its commercial and financial ties with Russia, while the latter sought to learn from and capitalize upon Iran's long experience in resisting international sanctions. The closer relationship between Iran and Russia can be considered a clear strategic necessity, rather than an alliance of friendship; this holds true despite the fact that, at the outset of the conflict, Iran found itself directly competing with Russia on oil prices. In response to Western sanctions and reduced demand from Europe, Moscow redirected the bulk of its oil exports to Asia (and at a discount price). In the summer, Iran tried to remain competitive by raising their own exports to China and by offering Beijing a further discount on the oil price.

In July, Ali Saleh-Abadi, the governor of the Central Bank of Iran, visited Moscow and met with Alexander Novak, the deputy prime minister, and Maxim Reshetnikov, the minister of economic development. During this visit, they discussed the expansion of investments and further monetary and banking cooperation, in order to develop an exchange system as an alternative to the use of the dollar ['Tehran, Moscow agree' 2022]. Economic ties were also discussed by President Vladimir Putin, during his official visit to Tehran in July, when he met with Ebrahim Raisi and Ali Khamenei. This visit was meant to strengthen bilateral relations and to consider ways to eliminate the use of the dollar in trade between the two countries. Among the other issues that were discussed was the operationalization of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a multimodal transportation route connecting India, the Persian Gulf, and the Caspian Sea via Iran, from where it then connects to Saint Petersburg and Northern Europe via Russia. The INSTC was not only meant to increase commercial volume between Iran and Russia, but also to offer an alternative route to the road and rail corridor which facilitates Turkey's connection to Azerbaijan and Central Asia [Tavsan 2021]. In addition, Tehran and Moscow also finalized

their cooperation over both rail and maritime routes concerning the Caspian Sea ['Russia's 1st rail transit' 2022].

The most controversial aspect of the Iran-Russia alliance has been the support given by the Iranian military to Moscow in the Ukraine war. According to American sources, by as early as the summer a Russian delegation had conducted several visits to an airfield in central Iran to evaluate and explore the possibility of acquiring Iranian drones [Madhani & Gambrell 2022]. Since then, Moscow is alleged to have purchased a large number of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs, or drones) that were manufactured in Iran. This could be part of a deeper military partnership between Moscow and Tehran, which prospects are difficult to estimate at date. Sources close to Al Jazeera revealed that the Islamic Republic delivered around 2,400 drones (Mohajer-6s and Shahid 131s/136s) to Russia, which have subsequently been deployed in Ukraine [Varghese 2022]. These drones are typically cheaply produced and mainly used for long-distance attacks, enabling Russia to hit far-ranged targets in central Ukraine from their bases in Crimea [Knights & Almeida 2022]. There, Iran sent specialist trainers to teach the Russian military how to use the drones. Tehran has been severely criticized by the international community for providing this military support to Russia. Despite initial denials, the Iranian Foreign Minister Amirabdollahian finally confirmed that drones were sold to Russia, but claimed this had happened in the months prior to the invasion ['Iran confirms drones' 2022]. In December, the US imposed sanctions on three Russian entities connected to «Moscow's growing military relationship with Tehran» [US Department of State 2022c].

In building up this perceived «anti-Western axis», Moscow and Tehran further bolstered their economic and military alignment at the expense of international isolation. Due to the war, Russia was obliged to consolidate its relations with countries that remained outside of the Western sphere, such as Iran [Divsallar 2022]. Likewise, the Islamic Republic hastened to sign beneficial commercial agreements in order to revive its faltering economy. Above all, however, military and security cooperation was at the core of Moscow and Tehran's closer relationship.

Another aspect that highlighted Raisi's «looking East» policy was the signing of the Memorandum of Obligations, which saw Iran become a permanent member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) on September 15 at the end of the SCO summit held in Samarkand ['Iran signs memorandum' 2022]. Russia played an important role in sponsoring the Iranian membership, especially after the Ukraine war. The Iranian full membership of the SCO would further strengthen Iran-Russia relations, in time when Moscow is keen to keep closer its best allies for its regional and international goals. Established in 2001, the SCO is a Central Asian intergovernmental organization focused on regional security, cooperation, and development. By 2021, the eight permanent members (China, Russia,

Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, India, and Pakistan) had accepted Iran's application for full membership. The Islamic Republic had previously held observer status for thirteen years. Joining the SCO was considered by the Iranian elite as an important step toward strengthening multilateral relations with neighbouring states and making the country a pivotal player as both an energy supplier and as a major transit hub for commercial trade between Central Asia and Europe. This latter ambition is perhaps more of a long-term strategy due to the current lack of modern railways or road networks, as well as any significant maritime access to Iranian ports. Moreover, Central Asian relations are not necessarily as smooth as they may seem. Many SCO members compete with one another across several sectors [Hunter 2021]. For instance, China and India are both competing over investment in the Iranian port of Chabahar, which is located in a valuable geostrategic area and could serve as a prominent commercial hub for the wider region.

With the aim of expanding trade, attracting foreign investment and contributing to the regional security and stability Iran has sought to bolster its relationship with Central Asian countries, as well as with Russia and China, the leading members of the SCO, since the early 2000s. This need appears even more urgent in light of the more recent international sanctions against Tehran, even though it may take years before Iran could start benefitting from this formal membership. For now, any immediate benefits are somewhat limited and further obstacles, such as the persistence of international sanctions that might limit SOC members to trade with Iran to avoid US financial repercussions, will inevitably need to be negotiated. But also, Iran's failure to join the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is a serious obstacle for monetary and banking trade. However, full Iranian membership of the SCO has certainly served a symbolic purpose, being portrayed as a significant diplomatic victory for Raisi during his presidency.

In January, the 25-year comprehensive cooperation agreement between Iran and China entered its implementation phase. This long-term deal was signed in March 2021 with the aim of establishing mutual cooperation across all commercial, security, and military sectors. As another component of the «look to the East» policy, this agreement was intended to consolidate both economic and security ties with China, Iran's major trading partner. However, as alluded to previously, results in trade have proven to be quite modest. One aspect that might explain this trend is China's interest in ameliorating relations with countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). President Xi Jinping visited Riyadh on December 9 and met with GCC leaders. During the summit, the parties released a joint statement vowing to continue their strategic dialogue, to build cooperation and mutual support; but they also underlined the need to resolve issues over Iran's nuclear programme [Saudi Press Agency 2022]. China's strategy in the Middle East appears to have shifted. On one hand, China has exposed

its ambition to consolidate its relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates; yet, on the other, China has also revealed its intention not to rely solely upon Iran. Due to the impasse over the nuclear talks, Beijing has been experiencing difficulties in preserving strong commercial relations with Iran or launching any significant investments in the country.

## 5. Conclusion

The year under review in this essay – 2022 – has not necessarily been an exceptional year, but it has seen certain trends that were already well underway in Iran be amplified, both in terms of domestic and foreign policy. This paper has sought to present and trace some new trajectories, particularly in terms of how the Iranian elite are attempting to preserve their power, and the costs Iran seems willing to incur in order to fortify both its regional and international position.

The eruption of popular protests, primarily led by young women, was a clear demonstration of festering popular dissent – and not only within female circles. The protests that followed the death of Mahsa Jina Amini clearly spoke to a weakening of the so-called «social contract» and highlighted the deep ruptures that have come to exist between the state establishment and Iran's general population, as the former struggles to reform itself, and the latter appears increasingly detached from the country's historic institutions and societal models. The protests – by no means a new phenomenon in the history of the Islamic Republic – have involved different segments of Iranian society, continuing in the same vein as other previous apolitical and uncoordinated grassroot movements. The novelty here was the visibility of a new form of radicalism, both from the protesters and in the response of the authorities. Whereas young women challenged and contested laws and customs through individual and collective forms of rebellion and civil disobedience, the authorities responded with brute force, attempting to suppress the demonstrations by means of extreme violence.

Iranian foreign policy has been greatly influenced by Iran's decision to support the Russian military effort in Ukraine. Iran-Russia rapprochement has come at the cost of additional international sanctions for the Islamic Republic, adding yet further stress to the country's economy. Many voices within the *nezam* have objected to the idea of tying themselves too closely to Russia or China, two powers that have a track record of pursuing their own regional and international agendas, which are not always in line with those of the Iranians. Iran also sought to forge relationships with powers sitting outside the Western sphere, as can be seen by their request to join the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), in a bid to explore alternative markets to Western ones.

In light of these domestic and international challenges, the nuclear talks have remained at a standstill. At the end of 2022, President Biden effectively suggested that any prospective deal over the JCPOA was 'dead' ['Video shows Biden' 2022]. Though this remark was given in an unofficial capacity - an offhand comment made while meeting with his supporters - it did imply that no major progress had been achieved. Officially, the Iranian negotiation team has frequently declared its readiness to strike a new deal; however, the lack of transparency over the alleged uranium discovered at undeclared sites in Iran, coupled with the ongoing crisis in Ukraine (with Iran having abandoned its neutrality by supplying drones to Moscow), has inevitably led to any revival of the JCPOA dropping down the priority list.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Al Jazeera, 2022, 'Iran signs memorandum to join Shanghai Cooperation Organisation', 15 September.
- Amnesty International, 2022, 'Iran: They are shooting brazenly: Iran's militarized response to May 2022 protests', August.
- Arum, Shubi, 2022, 'Iran refuse to sing national anthem in World Cup opener', *Al Jazeera*, 21 November.
- Bajalan, Djene R., 2022, 'The Kurdish Struggle Is at the Heart of the Protests in Iran', 2022, *Jacobin*, 5 October.
- Batmanghelidj, Esfandiyar & Zep Kalb, 2022, 'Why Won't the Workers of Iran Unite?', *Foreign Policy*, 3 November.
- BBC News, 2022, ['Pensioners rally in Iran' 2022] 'تجمع بازنشستگان در ایران؛ معترضان علیه' 'ظلم و ستم' شعار دادند (Pensioners rally in Iran: protesters chanted slogans against oppression), 27 February 2022, (<https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-60545643>).
- BBC News, 2022, 'TV «confession» of Iranian anti-hijab activist is «false»', 24 August.
- Berg, Raffi, 2022, 'Iran building collapse: Protesters turn on government over disaster', *BBC News*, 31 May.
- Bourse and Bazar, 2022, 'China-Iran Trade Report', 12 December.
- ['Chastity and hijab project' 2022] 'طرح عفاف و حجاب' (Chastity and Hijab Project), 2022, Maroof (cfaf-hejab-tafsili-1401-04.pdf (it-marooof.ir)).
- Divsallar, Abdolrasool, 2022, 'Rising interdependency: How Russo-Iranian relations have evolved with the war in Ukraine', *Trends Research*, 12 December.
- Donya-e Eqtesad, 2022, ['Autopsy of unrest 2022'] 'کالبدشکافی ناآرامی‌ها' (Autopsy of unrest), 7 June (<https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/-کالبدشکافی-3723093/46-بخش-خبر-ناآرامی-ها>).
- Donya-e Eqtesad, 2022, ['The Great Thirst' 2022] 'عطش بزرگ صنایع کوچک' (The Great Thirst of Small Industries), 29 September (<https://www.donya-e-eqtesad.com/بخش-صنعت-معدن-5253093/3-عطش-بزرگ-صنایع-کوچک>).
- Etemad Online, 2022, ['How Much Did The Price' 2022] 'قیمت کالاهای اساسی در یک سال' 'گذشته چقدر تغییر کرد؟' (How much did the price of basic goods change in the last year?), 12 May (<https://www.etemadonline.com/بخش-اقتصادی-618945/22-قیمت-کالاهای-اساسی-در-یک-سال-گذشته-چقدر-تغییر-کرد>).

- Etemad, 2022, ['People's voice' 2022] 'صدای مردم را باید شنید' (People's voice must be heard), 10 November (<https://www.etemadnewspaper.ir/fa/main/detail/192679/صدای-مردم-را-باید-شنید>).
- [European Union External Action 2022] European Union External Action, 2022, G7: Press remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell ahead of the Ministerial Meeting in Germany, European Union External Action, 13 May.
- Fars News, 2022, ['Teacher demonstrations' 2022] 'تجمع اعتراضی معلمان در برخی استان‌ها + فیلم' (Teacher demonstrations in some provinces), 12 March, (<https://www.farsnews.ir/tehran/news/14001203000456/-برخی-در-معلمان-تجمع-اعتراضی-معلمان-در-برخی-ها-فیلم-و-عکس-80%E2%80%8C>).
- Fazeli, Yaghoub, 2022, 'Iran protests spread to major central province; unofficial death toll rises to six', *Al Arabiya News*, 18 May.
- Financial Times, 2022, 'Iran's Raisi cuts back on bread subsidies', 10 May.
- France24, 2022, 'Iran's enriched uranium stockpile 18 times over 2015 deal limit: IAEA', 30 May.
- Frances24, 2022, 'Video shows Biden saying Iran nuclear deal is 'dead'', 20 December.
- Ghaderi, Farangis & Ozlem Goner, 2022, '«Why «Jīna»: Erasure of Kurdish Women and Their Politics from the Uprisings in Iran', *Jadaliyya*, 1 November.
- Government of the Islamic Republic, 2022, 'Iran ready to play diplomatic role to help bring peace back to Ukraine', 27 February.
- Gritten, David, 2022, 'Elnaz Rekabi: Crowd greet Iranian climber who broke hijab rule on return', *BBC News*, 19 October.
- Gritten, David, 2022, 'Iran president says «chaos» will not be accepted as protests continue', *BBC News*, 29 September.
- Gritten, David, 2022, 'Iran protests: Death toll rises to 76 as crackdown intensifies – rights group', 2022, *BBC News*, 28 September.
- Hashem Ali & Elizabeth Hagedorn, 2022, 'Iran sends EU response on text to revive nuclear deal', *Al Monitor*, 15 August.
- Human Rights Watch, 2022, 'Iran: Death Sentences Against Protesters', 13 December.
- Human Rights Watch, 2022, 'Iran: Labor Protests Surge', 29 April.
- Human Rights Watch, 2022, 'Iran events of 2021'.
- [IAEA 2022 (a)] IAEA, 2022, NPT safeguards agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran, GOV/2022/34, 8 June.
- [IAEA 2022 (b)] IAEA, 2022 NPT Safeguards Agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran, GOV/2022/63, 10 November.
- [IAEA 2022 (c)] IAEA, 2022, Verification and monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of United Nations Security Council resolution 2231 (2015), GOV/INF/2022/14, 9 June.
- 'Inflation Rate', 2022, *Trading Economy*.
- Iran Human Rights, 2022, 'Iran protests: at least 488 people killed', 29 November.
- Iran Primer, 2022, 'Explainer: Raisi's First Year in Power', 2 August.
- Iran Primer, 2022, 'The Rallying Cries of Iran's Protests', 11 October.
- [Iran Unemployment Rate' (a)], 2022, Iran Unemployment Rate, *Trading Economics*.
- [Iran Unemployment Rate' (b)], 2022, Iran Unemployment Rate: Age 15 or Over: Female, *Ceic Data*.
- Hunter, Shireen, 2021, 'Iran: Shanghai Cooperation Organisation membership will not solve its problems', *Middle East Eye*, 30 September.
- Kayhan, 2022, ['The enemy's plan failed', 2022] 'نقشه دشمن شکست خورد مطالبه مردم؛ مجازات' (The enemy's plan failed, the people's demand; Severe punishment), 2022, 'سخت اشرار جنایتکار'.

- ishment for criminals), 9 October (<https://kayhan.ir/fa/news/250952/-نقشه‌دشمن> (شکست-خورد-مطالبه‌مر-دم-مجازات-سخت-اشرار-جنایتکار)).
- Khajehpour, Bijan, 2022, 'Deep Data: What Raisi's «economic surgery» means for Iran', *AMWAJ*, 1 June.
- Khamenei.ir, 2022, 'Iran supports ending the war in Ukraine; US root of Ukraine crisis', 1 March.
- Khamenei.ir, 2022, '[Nowruz speech' 2022] 'سخنرانی نوروزی خطاب به ملت ایران' (Nowruz speech addressed to the people of Iran), 21 March (<https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=49886>).
- Knights, Micheal & Alex Almeida, 2022, 'Russia's effective use of inexpensive Iranian aircraft points to challenges that other states may soon face elsewhere', *Washington Institute*, 10 November.
- Kozhanov, Nikolay, 2022, 'The economic backdrop of Iran's protests', *The Middle East Institute*, 17 October.
- Madhani, Aamer & Jon Gambrell, 2022, 'White House: Russian officials visited Iran to see drones', *Associated Press*, 16 July.
- Middle East Eye, 2022, 'Iran: How corruption has created a severe medicine shortage', 16 April.
- Mohammadi, M., 2007, 'Iranian women and the civil rights movement in Iran: Feminism interacted', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9(1): 1-21.
- Mohsen B. Mesgaran, Kaveh Madani, Hossein Hashemi, and Pooya Azadi, 'Iran's Land Suitability for Agriculture', *Scientific Report*, 7, N. 7670 2017.
- Motamedi, Maziar, 2022, 'Iran confirms drones to Russia but "months" before Ukraine war', *Al Jazeera*, 5 November.
- Motamedi, Maziar, 2022, 'Iran nuclear deal could be near as EU circulates "final text"', *Al Jazeera*, 8 August.
- Motamedi, Maziar, 2022, 'Iran's Raisi: IAEA inquiry must close for nuclear deal to happen', *Al Jazeera*, 29 August.
- Murphy, Francois, 2022, 'Exclusive: Iran racing to expand enrichment at underground plant, IAEA report shows', *Reuters*, 11 October.
- Noori, Alireza, 2022, 'Iran, Russia get closer as 20-year agreement within reach', *AMWAJ*, 14 January.
- Parisa Hafezi, Humeyra Pamuk and Simon Lewis, 'Russia says it has written guarantees on Iran nuclear deal', 2022, *Reuters*, 15 March.
- Plummer, Robert, 2022, 'Iranian protesters set fire to Ayatollah Khomeini's house', *BBC News*, 18 November.
- [ 'President in a group of economic' 2022] رئیس‌جمهور در جمع فعالان اقتصادی روسیه: مقدمات' (President in the group of economic activists of Russia: The preparations for the finalization of the comprehensive document on cooperation between Iran and Russia have been prepared / Russian economic activists shared their views with Dr. Raisi), 2022, *President.ir*, 20 January (<https://president.ir/fa/134041>).
- Radio Farda, 2022, 'Iranian Students Launch Sit-In After Violent Clashes With Security Forces Over Weekend', 31 October.
- Reuters, 2022, 'Iran to send team to Vienna to discuss nuclear work with IAEA', 2 November.
- Reuters, 2022, 'Iranian labour minister resigns amid protests against soaring living costs', 14 June.



- Reuters, 2022, 'Iranian police fire shots, teargas to disperse protests over building collapse', 28 May.
- Reuters, 2022, 'One killed as price protests continue in Iran', 14 May.
- Saudi Press Agency, 2022, Statement of the Riyadh Summit for Cooperation and Development between the GCC and the People's Republic of China, 9 December.
- Shahla, Arsalan, 2022, 'Iran's Rial Slumps to Record Low Amid Protests, Nuclear Talks', *Bloomberg*, 5 November.
- Shams, Omid, 2022, 'Special Report: What Equipment Is Used To Suppress Iran Protests, Which companies Provides Them?', *Iran Wire*, 7 November.
- Slinger Collection, 2022, 'The Beating Heart of the Labor Movement in Iran', 3 May.
- Soghom, Mardo, 2022, 'Food Price Inflation In Iran Reaches 80 Percent', *Iran International*, 22 June.
- Stein, Amichai, 2022, 'Iran's new demands to revive the nuclear deal are a sigh of relief for Israel. Here's why', *Atlantic Council*, 4 October.
- Tasnim News, 2022, ['Imam Khamenei' 2022] 'امام خامنه‌ای: به‌صراحت می‌گویم اغتشاش طراحی' آمریکا و حقوق‌بگیرانش است/ جامعه هنری و ورزشی ما سالم است/ برای دختر جوان دل ما سوخت (Imam Khamenei: I say clearly that the disturbance is the design of America and its tax payers/ Our artistic and sports community is healthy/ Our hearts are broken for the young girl), 3 October (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/07/11/2782997/-حقوق-امریکا-و-حقوق-بگیرانش-است-جامعه-هنری-و-ورزشی-ما-سالم-است-برای-دختر-جوان-دل-ما-سوخت>).
- Tavsan, Sinav, 2021, 'All-Turkic corridor heralds rise of new Eurasian political bloc', *NIKKEI Asia*, 17 November.
- Tehran Times, 2022, 'Tehran, Moscow agree on expansion of monetary, banking cooperation', 8 July.
- Tehran Times, 2022, 'Russia's 1st rail transit cargo to India arrives in Iran', 12 July.
- Tehran Times, 2022, 'MP: Iran has other options if JCPOA is not revived', 4 September.
- 'Unemployment rate for male', 2021, *The Global Economy*.
- Twitter, 2022, 'Josep Borrell Fontelles on Twitter', 11 March.
- 'Unemployment with basic education, female (% of female labour force with basic education) – Iran, Islamic Rep.', 2022, *World bank*, December.
- United Nations Human Rights. The deteriorating human rights situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2022, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 24 November.
- United Nations, Iran – President Addresses General Debate, 77th Session, 2022, General Assembly of the United Nations, 21 September.
- [US Department of State 2022(a)] US Department of State, 2022, Foreign Terrorist Organizations.
- [US Department of State 2022(b)] US Department of State, 2022, Department Press Briefing – October 12 2022, Ned Price, Department Spokesperson, 12 October.
- 'Analysis: Warnings as Iran pursues self-sufficiency to tackle food insecurity', 2022, BBC Monitoring, 16 June.
- [US Department of State 2022 (c)] US Department of State, 2022, The United States Imposes Sanctions on Russian Entities Involved in UAV Deal With Iran, Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State, 9 December.
- Varghese, Sarjana, 2022, 'Mass drone attacks in Ukraine foreshadow the «future of warfare»', *Al Jazeera*, 20 October.

# ARMENIA 2022: LOOKING FOR A WAY OUT OF THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH IMPASSE

Carlo Frappi

Ca' Foscari University, Venice  
carlo.frappi@unive.it

*In 2022, the Republic of Armenia struggled with a complex set of challenges and opportunities; a by-product of the precarious path towards a peace agreement with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, following the 2020 escalation, and from the reverberations of the war in Ukraine. Yerevan faced Baku's coercive bargaining strategies coupled with Russia's partial yet significant misalignment from a bilateral alliance that dictates Armenia's national security. As a result, security considerations were front and centre of Armenia's strategic thinking. However, the rapidly changing parameters of regional politics and the re-engagement of Euro-Atlantic actors in the Southern Caucasus have also widened Yerevan's diplomatic leeway and led the way to a new understanding of security policy. Hence Yerevan's more pragmatic approach to conflict resolution and its more realistic assessment of the limitations of the Armenian-Russian alliance. Accordingly, Armenia pursued its own security interests through diplomatic engagement with multiple partners. It was consistent with the country's Armenia-centred foreign policy vision, which focuses on its developmental prospects rather than existential threats coming from irreconcilable enemies. Looking for a way out of the Nagorno-Karabakh impasse seems to have led Yerevan to a foreign policy paradigm shift based upon a new conception of national interest.*

**KEYWORDS** – Armenian Foreign Policy; Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; Southern Caucasus; Russia; European Union.

## 1. Introduction

Over the last two years, the pillars of Armenia's post-Soviet foreign policy were shaken to their core. This was primarily as a result of the country's defeat at the hands of Azerbaijan following the September-November 2020 war over Nagorno-Karabakh. In a matter of 44 days, Yerevan lost a great part of the territory conquered in the 1992-94 conflict, when the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh had been established. That same conflict had resulted in Yerevan's sense of strategic advantage over Baku and in unquestioned trust in its main ally and security provider, Russia.

It is hard to overstate the magnitude of change that the 2020 defeat brought to Armenia's post-independence strategy. The conflict with Azerbaijan over the Armenian-populated enclave in Azerbaijani territory may well be seen as the single factor which exerted the highest impact on the evolution of the country's foreign and domestic policy. The conflict over

Nagorno-Karabakh started in 1988 when the Soviet Union still existed, thereby turning into an inter-state war following the latter's collapse. The conflict impinged not only upon Yerevan's threats-opportunities assessment and foreign policy choices, but also on complex and interconnected nation- and state-building processes. Moreover, the decades-long conflict – at an impasse before an inconclusive OSCE-led mediation effort – has sustained the relevance of the Nagorno-Karabakh question over time. The latter has become the main intervening variable between the external environment and Armenia's foreign policy making. Consequently, in the last two years Yerevan has been struggling to re-adapt its new posture against the backdrop of a regional context made all the more volatile by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The conflict has indeed emboldened Azerbaijan's attempt to impose by force the terms of peace and further eroded Moscow's security guarantees. At the same time, however, it provided Armenia with new diplomatic leeway as Euro-Atlantic stakeholders have re-engaged, attempting to promote a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh question.

The aim of this article is to analyze Armenian policies in and around Nagorno-Karabakh in order to assess the magnitude of the foreign policy paradigm shift that occurred in 2022 and the current drive toward and Armenia-centered foreign policy.

The article proceeds as follows. The first part frames the post-Soviet evolution of Armenian politics, with its challenges and opportunities. As such, the article enquires into the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict's impact on Armenia's state- and nation-building processes, along with an analysis of the repercussions of the decades-long «no peace, no war» condition on Yerevan's policy-making. The second part of the article is dedicated to the main trends of Armenia's foreign policy in 2022. By looking at the repercussions of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the Janus-faced regional context is analysed to find the main drivers of Yerevan's foreign policy change.

## *2. Armenian state- and nation-building processes through the lenses of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute*

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has contributed uniquely to the creation of Armenia's modern notions of statehood and national identity. In fact, the struggle for the region's self-determination not only overlapped timewise with the country's state- and nation-building process, but it also intertwined to a great extent with both, making the Armenian case unique in the post-Soviet space. Said uniqueness is largely due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict role on the country's path to independence as well as on the formation and legitimization of its elite. Ignited as *internal* self-determination issue within the federal Soviet structure, the Nagorno-Karabakh issue turned into an independentist struggle vis-à-vis Baku's unwillingness to question

its sovereignty over the *oblast*. This happened against a backdrop shaped by Moscow's inability to manage the emergence of «mirroring nationalisms» [Cornell 2001: 32-39] out of the Soviet Union's multi-ethnic matrix. Thus, contrary to what has happened in similar instances of ethno-territorial conflicts in the former Soviet Union, Armenia's irredentist cause preceded – rather than followed – the «Parade of Sovereignties» [Kahn 2000] that shook the foundations of the federal Soviet structure between 1989 and 1990, ultimately causing its collapse.<sup>1</sup> The uniqueness of the Armenian case also results from the role the struggle for Nagorno-Karabakh played in re-uniting the geographically dispersed Armenian communities, providing a unity of purpose to a quintessentially diaspora nation.

Never dormant under decades-long Soviet rule [Papazian 2001], irredentism over Nagorno-Karabakh rapidly attracted wide popular support and triggered mass mobilization in Armenia proper. This, in turn, helps to understand the impact exerted by the conflict on the country's institution-building and elite-formation processes. As the USSR's administrative crisis laid the groundwork for the affirmation of power centres alternative to the Communist Party, the emergence of mass nationalist movements «burst the very bounds of the old politics [...] and rapidly undermined the power of local communist parties» [Suny 1993: 128]. As such, the Karabakh cause rapidly became the main catalyst for discontent and dissent. The «Karabakh Committee», established in 1988 in support of the annexationist cause, ended up championing all the socio-political grievances and instances advanced by the oppositions. It almost naturally evolved into the Pan-Armenian National Movement (ANM), which won the mid-1990 elections to the Supreme Soviet and saw its leader, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, elected as Chairman of the Supreme Council of Armenia. The transition from the leadership of the SSR to that of independent Armenia was a swift one. In October 1991, a month after the declaration of independence, Ter-Petrosyan was elected as the first President of the newly independent Republic. Moreover, the Nagorno-Karabakh's legitimizing role continued over time and was further strengthened by the lack of a peace agreement between the warring factions. Ter-Petrosyan was replaced by Robert Kocharyan (1998-2008), who – like his successor, Serzh Sargsyan (2008-2018) – was a native of Nagorno-Karabakh and a war veteran. The so-called «Karabakh Party» would eventually hold the reins of government until the 2018 «Velvet Revolution». Hence, Armenia became the only nation in the post-Soviet Caucasus and Central Asia area where the nationalist opposition grown at the dawn of independence held onto power for the ensuing twenty-five years.

1. As Hughes and Sasse [2002: 29] put it, in the Nagorno-Karabakh case the de-institutionalization of the Soviet administrative structures came from *below* and not from *above*, as the demand for secession was the result of internal nationalist irredentism rather than a reaction to nationalizing policies of the Azerbaijan SSR's titular nationality.

The extraordinary potential for aggregation of the Karabakh cause was due to the central role it had already played in the development of Armenian nationalism during Soviet era. It was also the result of its close association with some of the most important elements of Armenian identity. According to Razmik Panossian [2002], Armenia's modern national identity is built around three different – yet not mutually exclusive – narratives, based upon as many national discourses and eposes. The first narrative, building upon the conversion to Christianity in 301, conceives «Armenian-ness» as rooted in the notion that Armenia was the world's first Christian nation, highlighting religion's role in perpetuating distinctive national features against successive assimilation attempts. The second narrative, building upon the myth of the genesis of the Armenians in 2492 BC, argues that the Armenian nation is rooted in its race and language, representing a continuum since pre-Christian times. The third narrative, particularly preeminent in the Diaspora, argues that being an Armenian means being a survivor – or a descendent of survivors – of the 1915 Genocide at the hands of the Ottoman Empire's Young Turk regime. This narrative of survival represents a founding element of Armenia's contemporary national identity, deeply ingrained in the previous two narratives, too.

As in mid-1998 inter-communal violence followed what had started as a merely administrative fight, animosity vis-à-vis the Azerbaijani-Turks<sup>2</sup> over the Armenian-populated enclave resonated with the diverse national narratives. It set off each narrative's «exposed nerves» – as a conflict between Christianity and Islam, as a primordial struggle for sovereignty over the homeland, or as yet another episode in a decades-long struggle against extermination attempts perpetrated by the Turks [Panossian 2002: 139]. Looking at the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict through the 1915 Genocide lenses<sup>3</sup> became common practice across all components of the nation, whether they were Armenian citizens, Karabakh Armenians, or Armenians from the Diaspora. This happened not only because the underlaying *epos* of «survival» and «victimhood» is deeply ingrained in the notion of Armenian-ness,<sup>4</sup> but also because, since the mid-1960s, the memory and commemoration of the *Metz Yerghen* (the «Great Evil») has emerged as the cornerstone of national cohesiveness

2. According to Armenians, the difference between Azerbaijanis and Turks, belonging to the same ethno-linguistic lineage, is at least blurred. In Suny's words [200: 57], «local [Karabakh] Armenians referred to Azerbaijanis exclusively as 'the Turks'. Azeri is, of course, a Turkic language, but the appellation 'Turk' in this context was a transference of the qualities of Ottoman Turks to present-day Azerbaijanis, rather than a reference to linguistic affiliations».

3. On the Genocide's role in shaping events and national narratives in Armenia and Azerbaijan, see Cheterian 2018.

4. First and foremost, the *epos*' strength results from the centuries-long dispersion of Armenians worldwide, who became a stateless nation, subject to physical and cultural annihilation, after the 1375 fall of the Cilicia Kingdom and until 1991 (except for the independent years between 1918 and 1920).

both in the USSR and among diasporic communities. Moreover, since the 1970s, the Genocide also became a vector for the Diaspora's political mobilization in the struggle for recognition by hosts countries.

Reignited by the self-determination cause, survival and victimhood eposes grew preeminent in the nation-building process as a result of the first violent clashes and, particularly, of the pogroms and ethnic cleansing against Armenians between 1988 and 1990 in Sumgait, Kirovabad, and Baku. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh became only the last episode of an historical struggle for survival against the risk of annihilation at Turkish hands, starting from the mid-1890s Hamidian massacres in Anatolia, transiting through the 1905-07 Armenian-Tatar war in the Southern Caucasus, and culminating in the Genocide. As Marina Kurkchian [2005: 154] put it, «in the Armenian perception, the identification of Soviet Azerbaijan with Ottoman Turkey was quickly made».<sup>5</sup> This, in turn, had a direct effect on the creation of the national identity paradigm. Indeed, the reactivation of the collective memory around the Genocide paved the way for the creation of the notion of Armenian-ness built essentially on the «othering» of the Turks. This resulted in an ethnic and holistic understanding of the nation that would include all its components, both within and outside of its newly-conquered statehood.

This understanding of nationhood had a number of significant consequences when applied to the promotion of national interests and the protection of national security.<sup>6</sup> Othering the Turks entailed an ethno-nationalistic understanding of nationhood which empowered the radical fringes of the Armenian political spectrum, both at home and in the Diaspora. This happened at the expense of the more pragmatic segments of the ANM leadership, guided by Ter-Petrosyan. During the Republic's formative years, the national(ist) narrative built around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was a decisive factor in empowering the promoters of Armenian «exceptionalism» in their confrontation with the advocates of a «normal state». The former group, building upon the *uniqueness* of a universal nation, entrusted Armenia with a «special mission», including «the rectification of all historical injustices [and] the reward for all martyrdoms» [Libaridian 1999: 81]. The advocates of a «normal state», instead, promoted the view of a state «subscribing to a civic definition of nationhood and rejecting the notion that

5. Highlighting the nexus between the «survival»-«victimhood» national eposes and the cycle of violence around Nagorno-Karabakh, Kurkchian [2005: 154] also recalls how «The Sumgait attacks were presented in Armenia as a 'Pan-Turkish threat to the whole nation' or as 'the Turkish model of behaviour when dealing with Christian Armenians'».

6. We start here from the assumption that the meaning and scope of national interest – and the resulting national security paradigm – are mutable and shall be evaluated in contingent and historically connoted terms. Moreover, both national interest and the national security paradigm relate, in turn, to the protection of values considered of vital importance for the survival of the State. See Wolfers 1952.

Armenians living all over the world should somehow be integrated into a single polity» [Grigoryan 2018: 848]. They also pursued an «‘Armenia first’ strategy» [Broers 2019: 96], striving to build normal relations with neighbours, including Turkey.<sup>7</sup>

While the war over Nagorno-Karabakh had a decisive influence in the formative years of the post-Soviet Armenian state and nation, its *sine-die* protraction after the 1994 ceasefire agreement had pertinacious effects on the independent path walked thenceforth. On the one hand, the «no-war, no-peace» condition crystallized both the power structure defined at the dawn of independence and the national paradigm built around the conflict with the Azerbaijani Turks. On the other, as the military victory and *de facto* secession of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan was not sanctioned *de jure* either by a peace treaty or an international recognition of the self-proclaimed Republic,<sup>8</sup> the protraction of the conflict left both state- and nation-building essentially incomplete, feeding into what Steele [2008] calls «ontological insecurity». As a result, a «mutilated sovereignty syndrome» took roots in Armenia, reinvigorating the traditional «survival» narrative and fostering a security-based understanding of national interests. This, in turn, had pernicious repercussions on the country’s foreign and domestic policies.

### 2.1. *Nagorno-Karabakh and the security-first approach to foreign and security policy*

Fostered by the perception of an existential threat coming from the «Turks», «ontological insecurity» generated a security-first approach to foreign policy, easily identifiable in the successive National Security Doctrines [Ceccorulli

7. The narrow room for manoeuvre available to the pragmatists in their attempt to move beyond what Suny [2000: 156] called a «powerful and binding national discourse» had already emerged on the eve of independence, around the debate on the provisions of the August 1990 Declaration of Independence. Here, the opportunity not to introduce references to the international campaign for the recognition of the Genocide – seen by Ter-Petrosyan as inappropriate from a diplomatic point of view [Astourian 2005: 84] – fell victim to an overwhelming vote of the Supreme Soviet, which included the provision in the document, along with a reference to Turkish Eastern Anatolia as «Western Armenia» [GRA 1990, art. 11]. Therefore, the «Armenian Cause» or «Hay Tad» – i.e., an ideology encompassing the acknowledgement of the Genocide, the fight against Turkish negationism, seen as the «final stage of Genocide» [Kasbarian 2018: 123], and a revanchist attitude over the lost Armenian homeland – found its way into the Republic’s founding documents.

8. It is worth mentioning that the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh is not recognised by Yerevan. This resulted from former President Ter-Petrosyan’s resolve not to give the conflict an inter-state nature. Such position, confirmed by his successors, responded also to the logic of granting Yerevan the full negotiating representation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, with the endorsement of Minsk Group mediators.

*et al.*, 2017]. In other words, the protracted conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh became the main perceptual filter through which national elites came to interpret regional politics. Moreover, «ontological insecurity», built upon a powerful and binding national narrative, strengthened a deterministic view of the human and physical factors of Armenian geopolitics. Accordingly, the national threat assessment was shaped first and foremost by the perception of an immanent menace resulting from both history and geography, whereby Armenia is squeezed in-between irreconcilable enemies who pose an existential threat to both nation and state.

Going beyond such a perception proved impossible and politically counterproductive, as demonstrated by the 1998 ousting of Ter-Petrosyan. He had strived to find a compromise solution on Nagorno-Karabakh for the sake of normalizing relations with both Azerbaijan and Turkey, consistently with the peace plan proposed by the OSCE. His policy, nonetheless, had been met with fierce resistance – and betrayal accusations – on the home front, in the Diaspora, and in Karabakh itself, triggering an alignment among nationalist oppositions which ultimately led to Ter-Petrosyan's resignation. His replacement with a representative of the so-called Karabakh Party, Robert Kocharyan, drew clear red lines for the future of Armenian foreign policy and negotiating positions on Nagorno-Karabakh. A new maximalist position was thereby introduced, marking the transition from a «compliant» to an «augmented» Armenia [Broers 2019]; in other words, from a flexible attitude open to the restitution of the occupied territories around the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave to an uncompromising way of thinking which envisioned these territories as an integral and inalienable part of the self-proclaimed Republic.

As a consequence, Yerevan's foreign and security policies were shaped according to a «balance of threat» logic – whereby states enter alliances primarily to balance against threats [Walt 1990]. In the perpetual struggle for *survival*, Russia resumed the traditional role of *saviour*, not only for the «hidden hand» [Goltz 1993] extended to Armenians during the 1988-1994 war, but also for the subsequent role played by the Russian-Armenian alliance<sup>9</sup> in deterring the perceived joint Turkish-Azerbaijani threat. Deterrence potential, in turn, became the rationale for Yerevan's approach to the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, built primarily upon the pursuit of military

9. The Armenian-Russian military alliance is based on the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance signed in 1997. However, Russian troops never left Armenian soil after 1991. Their deployment in the country was sanctioned by a series of agreements signed between 1992 and 1995 for the establishment of a military base in Gyumri, which was renewed again in 2010 for another 49 years, and for the patrolling of the border with Turkey and Iran [Nazaretyan 2021]. Moreover, the alliance with Russia – which is by far the first among the country's arms supplier – also has a multilateral dimension, as Armenia has joined the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty (CST) since its inception in 1992, becoming one of the founding members of the resulting Organization (CSTO) a decade later.



and technical parity against the enemy.<sup>10</sup> It was a strategy aimed at the preservation of the *status quo*, and the «conversion of the time factor into a power resource in the political struggle» [Minasyan 2008: 71].

According to the balance of threat theory, the scope of alliances depends upon the scale of threat perception – and particularly upon the enemies' offensive capabilities and aggressive intentions [Walt 1990: 24-6]. This theory helps explain not only Armenian-Russia alliance formation, but also its progressive widening as a result of the strengthening of the Turkish-Azerbaijani axis. The latter, sealed during the 1992-94 Nagorno-Karabakh war, when Ankara closed the border and froze diplomatic relations with Armenia, has steadily widened and deepened ever since. Moreover, since the mid-2000s, energy rents allowed Baku to significantly increase investments in defence procurement,<sup>11</sup> which grew alongside a revanchist rhetoric – as Baku never hid its resolve to revert to military means to restore sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh, should the negotiation prove useless. Finally, in the second decade of this century, Armenia's threat perception increased due to the «abandonment risk» implicit in the Russian-Azerbaijani rapprochement which, in turn, emboldened Baku's coercive approach to the issue.<sup>12</sup>

The progressive deepening of the Armenian-Russian military alliance resulted into two contradictory trends in Yerevan's foreign and security policies. On the one hand, paradoxically, the alliance with Moscow has engendered a vicious circle, whereby the «abandonment risk» made Russia both the main guarantor of and the highest threat to Armenian national security [Shirinyan 2019]. On the other hand, the primacy of security in Yerevan's strategic thinking and the resulting tendency to *bandwagon* with Moscow were the main obstacles to the effective pursuit of a multi-vectorial diplomatic course, consistent with the doctrine of «complementarity». In fact, the principle of «complementarity» has been effectively replaced in foreign policy by an opposite practice of «supplementarity», whereby «Armenia's

10. According to the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, between 1993 and 2021 Russia's share of total Armenian arms imports was 87.8%, amounting to US\$ 832 million. However, the figure doesn't fully reflect the total amount of arms transfer, since Russian supplies to Armenia often came at reduced prices or in the form of military aid.

11. According to SIPRI, in the decade following the inauguration of the Main Export Oil Pipeline to Western markets, Azerbaijan's military spending grew tenfold. By 2013, Baku's military expenditure was higher than the Armenian Government's overall spending.

12. The «abandonment risk» was particularly visible in Moscow's neutrality after the flare-up of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in April 2016, when an Azerbaijani attack resulted in geographically limited yet politically significant territorial gains for the first time. Dealing a blow to Armenia's invincibility myth and feeding into a renewed sense of vulnerability, the «abandonment risk» resulted in a progressive deepening of military cooperation with Russia.

foreign policy commitments need to be synchronized with Russian preferences» [Vasilyan 2016: 41].<sup>13</sup>

The assumption whereby the primacy of security leads Yerevan to draw «a red line that no leader can cross, regardless of pro-Western orientation» [Iskandaryan 2019: 3] in its relations with the Kremlin was confirmed by Nikol Pashinyan, current Prime Minister and the leader of the 2018 «Velvet Revolution», which opened a new chapter in the country's post-Soviet history and transition towards democracy. Pashinyan, despite its previous anti-Russian rhetoric, once in power was rather quick in reassuring Moscow of his administration's loyalty to the alliance. He emphasized the eminently internal nature and origin of the Armenian Revolution, thereby distancing his government from the previous «Colour revolutions» in the post-Soviet area [Terzyan 2020: 7-10]. Arguably, reassuring Moscow of Armenian loyalty<sup>14</sup> was instrumental in pushing domestic reforms, which represented the main reason behind the Revolution.

## *2.2. Nagorno-Karabakh as an obstacle on Armenia's post-Soviet transition and economic development*

Notwithstanding international stakeholders' high expectations around transition toward democracy and the free market in the aftermath of independence, especially under Kocharyan and Sargsyan, Armenia grew into a «competitive authoritarian» system combining a democratic guise with authoritarian practices and informal rules [Levitsky & Way 2010: 207-13] plagued by deep socio-economic problems. The direct and indirect influence of Nagorno-Karabakh and of the resulting primacy of security over these trends may be assessed from four different although connected perspectives.

First and foremost, the struggle for self-determination and the following need to protect the military victory were critical in determining not only the leaderships' legitimation but also the results of the intra-elite power struggle – as demonstrated by the complete economic and political takeover of the country by the 'Karabakh Party' after 1998. The war resulted in the

13. This trend became manifest in 2013 with Yerevan's «U-turn» on the path leading to the signing of an Association Agreement with the EU. After a meeting between Sargsyan and Putin, Armenia interrupted the Agreement negotiations, opting instead to join the Russian-led Customs Union and, in 2015, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Significantly, the Armenian President justified the decision on the grounds that separating economic and security cooperation was unfeasible [POR 2013].

14. It is worth mentioning that the reassurance of Armenia's loyalty led to Pashinyan's decisions, which ran counter to his democratic credentials. This was the case, for example, with the deployment of an Armenian contingent in the CSTO peace-keeping operation launched in January 2022 to quell the riots threatening the Kazakhstani regime.

emergence of commodity-based cartels closely associated with the military, which benefitted from a favourable tax system. These cartels eventually became the pillar of resilient clientelist networks in a kleptocratic economy shaped by the primacies of oligarchies [Broers 2021a; Grigoryan 2018]. Moreover, even at a time when the Nagorno-Karabakh issue lost its mass mobilization potential, it nonetheless helped the regime's consolidation and durability. Elites in power, especially in the face of a declining electoral legitimacy, used the conflict as a political resource to reinforce their position against competitors [Cheterian 2012] and as a «go-to» reason for justifying the continued and mounting socioeconomic problems and political problems» [Ghaplanyan 2017: 122].

All in all, during Kocharyan and Sargsyan's tenures, the Nagorno-Karabakh's legitimization role receded – along with the regime's overall legitimacy – and authoritarian stability came to rest primarily over co-optation and repression strategies [Broers 2019; Shubladze & Khundadze 2017]. Nonetheless, it retained its potential and came back to the centre of national discourse after the Velvet Revolution. As a matter of fact, until the 2020 war Pashinyan reverted to a strong Karabakh-based nationalist rhetoric, consistent with his populist profile and aimed at strengthening his government's legitimization [Sahakyan 2022].

Second, the primacy bestowed upon security triggered a convergence of interests between the elites in power and the Diaspora in the West, which may also explain the regime's longevity. Chiefly concerned with foreign and security policy, the Diaspora took a favorable position vis-à-vis the regime, ultimately gave it both legitimacy and financial support [Cavoukian 2019].

Third, in a vicious circle between the external and internal domain of Armenian politics, Russia's security guarantor role also took on a domestic dimension, as Moscow came to play the role of democracy's «black knight» [Natalizia 2019] and promoter of «authoritarian stability» [Cameron & Orenstein 2012]. This trend was particularly visible during the Kocharyan administration, when the alliance helped shield the country from the risk of contagion coming from the Colour Revolutions occurring in the post-Soviet space.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, besides providing the regime with a source of external legitimacy, Russia was also called to contribute to domestic stability and security through economic means [Ghaplanyan 2017: 52].

This consideration helps introduce the fourth and last way whereby the Nagorno-Karabakh issue has influenced Armenia's post-Soviet transition. Ever since the ousting of Ter-Petrosyan and the failure to elevate economic opportunities over security needs, security took precedence over economic development in the pursuit of national interest. As a result, since the debt-for-equity agreement of 2002, Russian public and private com-

15. For an in-depth discussion on the lack of revolutionary contagion, see Zol-  
yan 2010.

panies have assumed substantial control of the Armenian economy's main strategic sectors – from energy to transport, from telecommunications to mining, finance, and insurance. Combined with Russia's lion share in Armenian foreign trade, investments, and remittance inflows, this further widened the power asymmetry between Russia and Armenia, with their relations coming to resemble a patron-client dynamic. Kocharyan's recipe for economic development ended up decidedly pushing «Armenia into Russia's embrace» [Iskryan 2004, 24 March], thereby compromising the sustainability of the nation's growth model. As a matter of fact, not only did the Armenian economy become closely linked to – and dependent upon – Russia's, but also economic growth in Armenia did not alleviate, but rather increased, the population's economic hardship and the disparities in income and regional development [Ghaplanyan 2017: 52-3]. Moreover, Yerevan's growth strategy favoured the strategic polarization unfolding in the Southern Caucasus, characterized by the Azerbaijani energy rents reinvestment strategy, aimed at chocking Armenia, isolating it from regional infrastructure development [PRA 2019] and worsening Yerevan's structural vulnerability resulting from Armenia's land-locked condition.

### *3. The Russian-Ukrainian War: Setting the stage for current social, political and economic challenges*

Due to the relevance that Nagorno-Karabakh has had over Armenian politics since independence, the 2020 military debacle came as a national trauma and exposed the contradiction of the security-first approach in the country's policy-making. However, the stage for current socio-political, economic, and diplomatic challenge was set by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, started on 24 February 2022. The war came with muted repercussions on Armenia: on the one hand, it exacerbated challenges and risks resulting from the 44 Days War while, on the other, it also opened an unexpected window of diplomatic opportunities to solve the contradictions in Yerevan's traditional approach to the solution of the conflict.

The war between Russia and Ukraine erupted in a domestic and regional context shaped by three main trends unfolding since the 2020 war. Domestically, the 44 Days War exacerbated political and institutional polarization resulting from the 2018 Revolution. Pashinyan, accused of having lost Karabakh and betrayed the national cause, came under fierce criticism by the nationalist opposition and segments of national institutions close to the former regime. Yet, despite the military debacle, the Prime Minister was able to retain a significant consensus and, somehow unexpectedly [Poghosyan 2021], the ruling Civil Contract party won the majority of votes in a June 2021 snap parliamentary election, called under the opposition's pressure. The elections not only renovated the mandate for change behind

the Velvet Revolution, but also confirmed the overall improvement of the electoral process unfolding since 2018.<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, the 44 Days War tipped the balance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan to the benefit of the latter, reversing their bargaining leverage and approach to the negotiations. The war exposed the fallacy in Armenia's main assumptions about the conflict resolution, including the idea that the conservation of the *status quo* would ensure a strategic advantage as well as the trust in the deterrence potential of the alliance with Russia. Moreover, along with the districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, after the war Yerevan lost its main bargaining chip to further the region's self-determination principle. As a result, the previous grounds for conflict resolution put forward by the OSCE Minsk Group and Russia lost their *raison d'être*. Furthermore, Azerbaijan took on a maximalist approach, withdrawing from any compromise solutions regarding the enclave's final status.

Finally, at a regional level, the war confirmed Moscow's regional primacy, reinforced by the deployment of a peace-keeping unit to Nagorno-Karabakh, which represents the last security guarantee for Karabakh Armenians and a significant leverage in relations with Baku. Russia's primacy was also emboldened by the paralysis of the Minsk Group and by the relative disengagement of the Euro-Atlantic powers, which kept the conflict at arm's length. Moreover, Russian's leverage was not eroded, but rather fostered, by the largely symbolic deployment of a Turkish contingent in a joint monitoring mission. Indeed, the Turkish-Russian initiative brought to the Southern Caucasus a common understanding and practice of conflict management that had already been tested in other battlefields. While bearing different strategic goals, Moscow and Ankara came together in a tactical assertion of a «regional ownership principle» [Frappi 2018], which entails the marginalization of extra-regional powers and international mediation mechanisms from conflict management.

While the first two above-mentioned trends were either confirmed or fostered by the war in Ukraine, Russian regional primacy was instead manifestly eroded by the invasion, with significant repercussions on Armenia's foreign and domestic policies.

### 3.1 *The Janus-faced post-conflict landscape*

Ever since the signing of the cease-fire declaration in November 2020, the post-conflict landscape is manifestly Janus-faced. It is both shaped by encouraging trends towards the resolution of the conflict and by concrete risks of renewed escalation that could drag Armenia and Azerbaijan in open

16. The OSCE's Observation Mission certified that the elections «were competitive and generally well-managed» and that «fundamental rights and freedoms were generally respected» [OSCE - Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights 2021: 1].

inter-state confrontation. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its diminished leverage have made the landscape all the more volatile. This, in turn, has emboldened the search for dialogue but also aggravated bilateral tensions. This trend was detectable, in 2022, in the constant swinging between negotiation rounds and military clashes. During the year, five meetings were held between Pashinyan and Azerbaijan's President, Ilham Aliyev: three in Brussels, hosted by the European Council's President, Charles Michel, on April 6, May 22, and August 31. Another one took place in Prague on October 6 on the sidelines of the European Political Community Summit and at a joint EU-French initiative. Finally, the last one occurred in Sochi, under Russian mediation, on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, however, violent clashes occurred on three different occasions. The first two, in March and at the beginning of August, came as a result of Azerbaijani military operations against strategic locations in the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave. The third, the deadliest confrontation since the 2020 war, took place from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> of September along the border between the two countries. It was a clear escalation of the conflict, with Azerbaijani military operations conducted along a 200km front that led to the occupation of strategic positions inside Armenian territory.<sup>18</sup>

The Janus-faced post-conflict landscape is primarily the result of Azerbaijan's «coercive bargaining strategy» [Broers 2021b]. Accordingly, coercive pressures are applied on Armenia, along with a revanchist narrative, to advance Baku's maximalist view to the conflict resolution agenda and outcome. Thus, taking control of strategically advantageous positions through «surgical» military actions in Nagorno-Karabakh or Armenia proper ensures Baku's upper-hand at the negotiating table as well as military advantages in a war scenario. Moreover, Azerbaijan's coercive tactics also took on a hybrid nature, as Baku began targeting lifeline communication lines between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. On top of interrupting gas transits along a pipeline that crosses Azerbaijani-controlled territory in March and December 2022, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December the sole road connecting the two territories along the so-called Lachin Corridor was blocked (and remained such at the time of writing) by Azerbaijani environmental activists with national authorities' blessing.

Baku's coercive bargaining strategy grew stronger throughout 2022 due to the erosion of Moscow's leverage over the parties – as evidenced by

17. In 2022, Armenia and Azerbaijan also pursued direct and at times unmediated negotiations involving not only their respective foreign ministers – who held their first meeting in Tbilisi in July – but also Armen Grigoryan, the secretary of the Security Council of Armenia, and Hikmet Hajiyev, the head of Foreign Policy Affairs Department of the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan.

18. As a result of the military operations conducted since mid-2021, it is estimated that the Armenian territory currently under Azerbaijani control ranges between 127 and 145 square kilometres [Toal & Seferian 2022, 25 November].

the collapse of a Russian-mediated cease-fire during the September clashes – as well as to the overall weakening of its deterrence potential. First, the Nagorno-Karabakh-based Russian peacekeepers failed to deter Baku from applying military and hybrid pressures over the enclave. Second, Russia has refrained to act, both directly and through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), following Azerbaijan's offensive into Armenian territory despite Yerevan's requests for help [RFE 2022b]. This, in turn, led to a crisis of confidence between Moscow and Yerevan. Armenia grew increasingly critical of both Russia and CSTO in 2022, as exemplified by its refusal to sign the final declaration of the CSTO's November Summit [Mejlumyan 2022] and to host the Organization's annual flagship exercises [Kucera 2023].

Faced with Baku's coercive bargaining strategy, reduced bargaining power, and weakened Russian deterrence potential, the Armenian government took a seemingly constructive approach to the negotiations. Coupled with the abandonment of a nationalistic rhetoric, this marked the return to a «compliant Armenia», keen to reach a compromise solution at the detriment of previously drawn red lines. This refers, in particular, to the attempt to simultaneously safeguard the Karabakh Armenians' right to self-determination and Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, through an *internal* understanding of the right to self-determination rather than an *external* one. Indeed, the government's basic understanding of the negotiation process, clarified by Pashinyan in an April speech to the Parliament, revolves around the *de-territorialization* of the issue as the Karabakh dispute is «not a matter of territory but of rights» [PMRA 2022]. This naturally entails the need to «lower the benchmark» on the status of the region, consistently with the international community's expectations and requests. Interestingly, the resolution of the conflict was framed within the Government wider resolve to pursue good relations with all neighboring countries – including Turkey – through a «maximally balanced foreign policy [...] in the state interests of the Republic of Armenia». The reference – added to a January 2022 interview where Pashinyan refused the pursue of the «Armenian Cause» [‘Armenia has never pursued’ 2022] – seemingly linked the Prime Minister's understanding of national interest to the post-independence dichotomy and debate between the ‘normal state’ vision versus exceptionalism, embracing the former at the expense of the latter.

Pashinyan's speech – praised by EU representatives as «important and far-sighted» [JAMnews 2022a] yet strongly criticized by the nationalist opposition at home, by the diaspora, and by Stepanakert *de facto* authorities – confirmed Yerevan's relinquishment of maximalist positions as well as its abandonment of a nationalist rhetoric. This marked a significant realignment between rhetoric and diplomatic initiatives, as the Prime Minister broke with his predecessors' habit to capitalise on a stubborn and uncompromising nationalist rhetoric for domestic consumption while pursuing a more compromising stance at the negotiating table. This, in turn, has often

led to the government becoming hostage «to the nationalist slogan and sentiments» [Abasov & Khachatrian 2005: 17].

The issue of the enclave's future status was officially put on the negotiation table in a six-point peace proposal addressed in May 2022 to Azerbaijan, in response to Baku's five-point proposal received two months prior. Yerevan accepted it in principle as for the recognition of respective sovereignty and territorial integrity, the demarcation of the border, and the unblocking of transport links [TRT Azərbaycan 2022]. However, Armenia also added that «guaranteeing the security of Karabakh Armenians, respecting their rights and freedoms, and determining the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh are fundamental for the Armenian side» [Dovich 2022]. The future status of the enclave remains the main contention point between Yerevan and Baku, as the latter firmly opposes *any* self-determination right – not only *external*, but also *internal*.<sup>19</sup>

The second bone of contention regards the delimitation and demarcation of the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, contributing to extreme volatility on the ground.<sup>20</sup> In 2022, the EU effectively took the lead of that process, which had started in the aftermath of the war under Russian auspices [Arka 2021]. After facilitating the long-awaited launch of a joint Armenian-Azerbaijani commission for this purpose last May,<sup>21</sup> the EU achieved in Prague what could be considered the most important agreement of the year. Breaking the stalemate over reference maps, under the joint EU-French mediation, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed upon border delimitation based on documents of the Commonwealth of Independent States [European Council 2022b] and, therefore, to the Soviet administrative divisions. For the first time, during the Prague negotiations both Azerbaijan and Armenia explicitly recognised their respective borders, marking a breakthrough in the negotiation process and overhauling Yerevan's previous ambiguities on the issue.<sup>22</sup> However, the process of demarcation still

19. Portraying «Karabakh» (the toponym «Nagorno-Karabakh» has been banned from official discourse) as one of the constituent parts of the Republic, Baku denies the need to grant it any special administrative prerogative. Baku also rejects any international involvement in the issue, which it regards as a purely internal affair [PRA 2022a; Valiyev 2022].

20. Consistently with its coercive bargaining strategy, Azerbaijan used the lack of a demarcated border as a justification for the encroachment into Armenian territory. See Hajiyeva 2022.

21. In 2022, the Delimitation and Border Security Commissions met three times: the first, shortly after the Brussels meeting, on the border between Armenia and the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan; the second and the third in Moscow and Brussels respectively, on 30 August and 3 November.

22. Until the Prague meeting, Yerevan did never explicitly commit to the recognition of the border, maintaining that the latter resulted indirectly from the 1992 Armenian ratification of the treaty establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States. This argumentation was also maintained in the six-point plan presented to Azerbaijan in May 2022 [Dovich 2022].



presents significant sources of friction. Since the beginning of the negotiations, Armenia insisted that preliminary security measures across the border were a precondition to start the delimitation and demarcation process. In Sochi, at the end of October, Pashinyan put forward this principle again, proposing the establishment of a demilitarized zone under international guarantees around Nagorno-Karabakh and along the border between the two countries as well as the withdrawal of Azerbaijani units from the Armenian territories that fell under Baku's control after the 2020 ceasefire [RFE 2022c]. The proposal is hardly acceptable to Baku, which insists that no precondition shall be put before the process.

The border issue, in turn, is strictly connected to the third main bone of contention, resulting from the 2020 cease-fire provision whereby all transport links in the region shall be unblocked, including between Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan exclave through Armenian territory [PMRA 2020]. As a confirmation of the Janus-faced post-conflict landscape, the provision simultaneously stands as the main incentive for the belligerents to solve the dispute and as the most concrete threat to the peace process itself. Indeed, the opening of communications may reverse the polarization trend in regional infrastructure politics to the benefit of all the stakeholders. However, at the same time, the lack of agreement on their status prompted Azerbaijan to repeatedly threaten to occupy the southern strip of the country, where infrastructure is supposed to go through to reach Nakhichevan and further to Turkey.<sup>23</sup> The contention point results from the status that is to be granted to the communication line. Yerevan maintains that the latter shall be «under its full control and operated in accordance with the legislation of Armenia» [JAMnews 2022b]. Azerbaijan, in turn, proposed an extraterritorial status for the communication line – with the use of the term ‘corridor’, strongly rebuked by Yerevan – which would be under Russian control and would have the same status as the Lachin Corridor, linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations are taking place in a mediation framework that grew increasingly fragmented and competitive in 2022. The presumption of compatibility of the European and Russian mediation activities built in 2021 before European Council's President Michel's first initiatives fell victim of growing strategic polarization. As a result, Moscow came to understand Brussels' mediation as a «geopolitical game» at the Kremlin's

23. It is worth mentioning that the occupation threat coincided with Baku's outspoken irredentist position over Southern Armenia (as well as Yerevan). Mirroring Armenia's historical complaints over Nagorno-Karabakh, Baku blames Soviet authorities for the 1920 decision to sever Zangezur from Azerbaijan, annexing an «historical [Azerbaijani] land» to Armenia «without any grounds whatsoever» and thereby committing an «act of enmity and injustice» [PRA 2022b]. Arguably, the September encroachment into Armenian territory may be seen as strictly connected to the aforementioned threat. See Broers 2021b and Mgdesyan 2022.

expense [News.am 2022a]. The fault line in Moscow-West relations marked a definitive crisis of the Russia-US-France jointly co-chaired OSCE Minsk Group, which for all intents and purposes is still the only multilateral mechanism *de jure* in charge of mediation between the parties. While not unwelcomed by Baku – maintaining that the mechanism is no longer requested as Nagorno-Karabakh has already been reincorporated into Azerbaijani territory [PRA 2022a] – the Group's crisis delivered a blow to Armenia, which explicitly referred to the desire to negotiate under its mediation in its six-point peace plan [Dovich 2022].

Without a multilateral mechanism entrusted to mediate between the parties and defuse tensions on the ground, the EU progressively raised the profile of its contribution to conflict management. Having broken Russia's *de facto* monopoly over peace negotiations,<sup>24</sup> after the September clashes Brussels also took on the burden of de-escalation. In Prague, an agreement was reached for the deployment of a temporary civilian EU mission on the Armenian side of the border, tasked with analyzing and reporting « the situation in the region around the international border [...], with a view to contributing to the restoration of peace and security in the area, to the building of confidence and to the delimitation of the international border between the two States» [OJEU 2022]. Moreover, following the 'European Monitoring Capacity in Armenia' two-months mission, in mid-December the European Council decided, at Armenia's request, to deploy a transitional planning assistance team with a view to plan and prepare a possible long-term civilian mission. The latter was eventually established, by decision of the EU Foreign Affairs Council, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 2023.

### 3.3 Pursuing an «Armenia-centered» foreign policy

While security considerations remained paramount for Armenia in 2022, the year marked a significant departure from the responses previously given to the national security dilemma. The weakening of Russia's security guarantee forced Armenia to protect itself though diplomacy rather than by military means, making deterrence dependent upon third parties' diplomatic pressures over Azerbaijan and thereby pursuing what Nerses Kopyan [2022] called the «diplomatization of security».

Armenia's drive towards diplomatic coalition-building was, in turn, favored by the trends unfolding at system-level as a result of the war in Ukraine. Despite fears running high in the country [ICG 2022: 3], the main

24. EU's newly gained leading role in negotiations doesn't result merely from the EU Council Presidency's initiative. The latter has been compounded by regular contacts between the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, and the foreign ministers of both sides as well as by the engagement of Toivo Klaar, EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, who hosted meetings between Grigoryan and Hajiyev.

Western stakeholders proved to be not as distracted by the war as to turn a blind eye to the Southern Caucasus. On the contrary, both France and the US came to view the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict through the lenses of the ongoing struggle against Russia's destabilization in Europe scenario, stepping up their diplomatic efforts toward conflict resolution and de-escalation. Both countries openly support the EU's mediation initiative and have been acting as facilitators. Moreover, both countries reacted promptly and resolutely after Azerbaijan's escalation in September, validating the Armenian deterrence-through-diplomacy logic. Washington played a decisive role in brokering the ceasefire and, although it didn't go as far as to condemn the Azerbaijani aggression – as Paris did [France24 2022] – nonetheless it resolutely asked Baku to move its troops to previously-held positions and reaffirmed the inadmissibility of the use of force to solve the issue [U.S. Department of State 2022a]. Amid repeated gestures of solidarity to Armenia, France's main contribution to Yerevan's diplomatization of security came from Paris' attempt to bring the Nagorno-Karabakh issue at the UN Security Council, with a view to re-engage the latter in the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute [AFA 2022]. France activated the Council twice, in September and December, after hostilities were ignited again on the border and before the blockade of the Lachin Corridor. The Lachin crisis, in turn, resulted in a new wave of outspoken denunciations of Azerbaijani coercive tactics from the US, the EU, and France, reinforcing Armenia's perception that the main international players have abandoned the traditional 'both-sidism', leaning towards Yerevan.<sup>25</sup>

Armenia's 'soft' approach towards deterrence also presided over the strengthening of its partnership with Iran, a traditional key asset for Yerevan to escape its geographical and infrastructural isolation. As Teheran grew increasingly uneasy about the Azerbaijani-Turkish upper-hand in regional politics and about the resurgence of Azerbaijani irredentism over the Azeri-populated northern part of the country, it came to share Armenian anxieties about Baku's coercive initiatives. In particular, as regards the risk of a military occupation of the corridor linking Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan

25. This was particularly the case before the resolutions adopted by EU and French legislative bodies. The European Parliament approved two significant resolutions: the 10 March 2022 resolution, connected to the sensitive issue of Karabakh's cultural heritage, «strongly condemns Azerbaijan's continued policy of erasing and denying the Armenian cultural heritage in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, in violation of international law» [European Parliament 2022]. The second one, adopted on 19 January 2023 and aimed at addressing the «Humanitarian consequences of the blockade in Nagorno-Karabakh», denounced «the tragic humanitarian consequences of the blockade of the Lachin corridor» and condemned Russian peacekeepers' inaction, urging Baku to «immediately reopen» the corridor [European Parliament 2023]. For their part, the French Senate and National Assembly approved two analogous resolutions during the fall of 2022 which, condemning Azerbaijan for the aggression against Armenia, called on the government to adopt sanctions against it.

through Southern Armenia, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan that Iran would oppose any attempt to block the Iranian-Armenian border [RFE 2022a] while President Ebrahim Raisi told Aliyev that any change in either borders or south-north transit routes would be intolerable for Teheran [Al Mayadeen 2022]. Furthermore, in a concrete demonstration of support, after the September clashes, Armenia and Iran agreed upon the opening of a Consulate general in the town of Kapan, on the border with Azerbaijan in the southern region of Syunik, where the lines of communication foreseen by the 2020 ceasefire should transit.

Besides responding to the *deterrence-through-diplomacy* logic, diplomatic coalition-building and maximally balanced foreign policy also serve arms procurement and diversification in foreign trade. Both have grown urgent due to systemic shifts and the need to reduce Yerevan's dependency on Russia. The latter proved to be particularly counterproductive in terms of arms procurement, as Moscow not only didn't refurnish an Armenian weapons stockpile severely depleted by the 2020 war, but also froze arm supplies to its ally [Kopalyan 2022]. Furthermore, arms procurement has been made all the more complicated by Yerevan's Western partners' constraints. Inhibited by a 1992 OSCE request for a voluntary embargo «on arms deliveries to forces engaged in combat in the Nagorno-Karabakh area» [SIPRI 2018], they also indirectly hinder security cooperation with Iran, which was recently labelled by the White House as a «threat to the [Southern Caucasus] region», where it exerts a «destabilizing influence» [U.S. Department of State 2022b]. This, in turn, pushes Yerevan into Asian powers' embrace – namely China and India – to refill and modernize its weapons stockpile. Discussions with Beijing around deepened cooperation in the defense sector indeed started in November [Armenpress 2022], while the partnership with New Delhi significantly improved throughout the year. Following visits to India in June and October by representatives of the Ministry of Defense, Armenia signed two arms and ammunition purchase deals worth \$400 million [Wion 2022; Bhan 2022]. Remarkably, under *deterrence-through-diplomacy* logic, India was the only country along with Armenia to explicitly refer to Azerbaijan as the «aggressor side» [United Nations 2022] in the UNSC meeting that occurred after the September escalation.

Diversification of foreign trade partners is a pressing matter both for Armenia and the government consensus, which – still strong in fall 2022<sup>26</sup> – mainly rests on domestic performances. Though Armenia may have ben-

26. According to a nationwide poll conducted by CRRG-Armenia on behalf of the International Republican Institute's Center for Insights in Survey Research and published in October 2022, the percentage of Armenians holding a highly or somewhat favourable opinion of Pashinyan was 53%, with an 8% increase compared to the 2021 poll. See CISR 2022: 13.

efited from the turmoil in Russia in the short-term,<sup>27</sup> the mid- and long-term risks associated with it are not insignificant. This is because Yerevan's high exposure to trade and investments with Moscow makes the country particularly vulnerable, especially since the unexpected resilience shown by the Russian economy in 2022 is not estimated to last long. Moreover, a diversified export strategy is, along with the widening of the export base, the pillar of the government's economic development strategy, which envisions exports as a key driver for economic growth and sustainability [Akepanidta-worn *et al.* 2022]. This has led to a push towards sustained economic diplomacy, which has also been suggested by the International Monetary Fund as a tool to tackle the risks Armenia faces at the external, domestic, and structural levels [International Monetary Fund 2022: 36,38].

Building upon the Armenia-EU Comprehensive Extended Partnership Agreement (CEPA) entered into force in March 2021, the EU emerged as Yerevan's key partner as regards economic diplomacy. Albeit not a free-trade agreement – as a consequence of Armenia's EEU membership – the CEPA nonetheless facilitates trade. Moreover, it bears the potential to increase bilateral economic exchanges with relevant margins for growth and to foster Yerevan's diversification prospects.<sup>28</sup> Besides trade, the connectivity and energy cooperation tracks established under the CEPA are particularly relevant to Armenia,<sup>29</sup> especially around sustainable growth and efforts to

27. After rebounding in 2021, following the 2020 recession, Armenia's 2022 GDP marked a 14% year-on-year growth. All the main economic indicators pointed to the fact that turmoil coming out of Russia in 2022 benefitted Armenia. Between January and October, bilateral trade grew by 86.4%, mainly due to a 2.5-fold increase in exports [Hovhannisyan 2022b]. From January to November, remittances from Russia – whose influx is traditionally high due to the widespread presence of Armenian workers in the country – quadrupled to almost US\$ 3.2 billion, accounting for over two-thirds of the year's total [RFE 2023]. Moreover, the national economy benefited from the influx of Russian migrants, which increased consumption levels, albeit also pushing up inflation. The influx of skilled workers was particularly beneficial to the IT sector, as 50,000 individuals moved to the country and 850 companies with Russian capital and 350 individual entrepreneurs registered in Armenia [Hovhannisyan 2022a].

28. The positive trends in bilateral economic exchanges recorded in 2021 were confirmed in 2022. Between January and October, EU-Armenian economic exchange experienced a 39.2% growth. In the same period, however, the value of EU-Armenian economic exchange (US\$ 1.8 billion) was significantly lower than the one with Russia (US\$ 3.8 billion) [Arka 2022].

29. In the energy sector, the EU promotes strengthened governance and liberalization, the adoption of energy efficiency measures aimed at reducing consumption, and the development of renewables – which is also useful to decommission the obsolete Metsamor nuclear power plant and replace it with alternative and sustainable resources [European Commission 2022: 13]. In the transportation sector, cooperation within the EU Trans-European Transport Network is particularly significant as it can put an end to Armenia's infrastructure isolation by involving the country in the developing Europe-Asia connectivity schemes, which see the Southern Caucasus as a crucial region [Jansen & Ahamad Madatali 2022: 19]. Cooperation in the transport sector has

limit Armenia's vulnerability vis-à-vis over-dependence on Russia. All in all, the economic dimension of the EU's regional projection adds up to its enhanced role as mediator and still-in-the-making security provider, confirming Brussels' resolve and capability to pursue a comprehensive approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh.

The most significant step taken by the government in the direction of an Armenia-centred foreign policy is arguably the renewed normalization attempt with Turkey. As a matter of fact, the process' significance results not only from the material benefits it may ensure to Armenia, but also from its symbolic scope, as it affects the main pillars of the Republic's state- and nation-building. Following up from the 2021 bilateral contacts, the normalization process was officially launched in Moscow in January 2022 and followed by three other meetings that occurred throughout the year by special national envoys. Pashinyan's pragmatic approach to normalization resembles the logic followed – and the means put forward – almost twenty years ago by Ter-Petrosyan. Similarly, it starts from Armenia's developmental needs, which require a reopening of borders and trade with neighbouring Turkey [Business media 2022]. Furthermore, the resolve to pursue the normalization process «without preconditions» [ROTMFA 2022] recalls Ter-Petrosyan's attempt to side-line the divisive Genocide issue, over which – in his own words [2018: 74] – «the only possible approach is to agree to disagree». At the same time, building upon previous failures – and, particularly, the derailment of the process initiated in 2008 with the Zurich Protocols – it follows a 'small steps' approach to normalization, which avoids complex package solutions requiring slippery parliamentary pronouncements. Therefore, though the process has slowly proceeded and led to limited results thus far,<sup>30</sup> the latter are nonetheless significant in bringing about a breakthrough in the bilateral relations. This is epitomized by the Armenian minister of foreign affairs' first visit in over a decade to Turkey and by the bilateral

particular significance also in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, as the EU has both the economic potential and the political credibility to foster a win-win solution to the trans-Caucasian connectivity issue. The inclusion of this matter in the EU-mediated Armenian-Azerbaijani colloquia is strictly connected to the commitment to work together within an «Economic Advisory Group» aimed to «advance economic development for the benefit of both countries» [European Council 2022a].

30. In early 2022, Armenia unilaterally removed the year-long ban on the import of Turkish goods, adopted in October 2020 as a retaliation for Ankara's support to Azerbaijan during the 44 Days War. While direct flight resumed between the two countries at the beginning of the year, the major results of the normalization process were achieved at the fourth special envoys' meeting, held in Vienna in July. Here an agreement was reached on the resumption of cargo flights, which eventually started at the beginning of January 2023. Significantly, it was also agreed to open the border to third-countries citizens for touristic purposes as early as possible. While the latter undertake has yet to materialize, nonetheless Armenia already started to improve the road and bridges leading to the border with Turkey.

meeting between Pashinyan and Erdoğan that took place last October on the sideline of the Prague Summit.

Removing the formal motivation behind the closure of the border and the lack of bilateral relations – i.e., Armenia's occupation of the Azerbaijani districts around the Karabakh enclave – the 44 Days War (27 September – 10 November 2020) set the context for the rapprochement between Yerevan and Ankara. However, Nagorno-Karabakh was also the main deterrent for the normalization of relations, as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan maintained that the solution to the dispute represents a precondition for full rapprochement [TRT Haber 2022], while Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan, in turn, complained that Ankara was «synchronizing» the normalization process with Armenian-Azerbaijani peace talks [News.am 2022b].

#### 4. *Conclusions*

Under different perspectives, Armenian politics has long been held captive of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, as the need to protect the 1992-94 military victory shaped the threats-opportunity perceptions and the resulting decision-making in both the domestic and foreign policy arenas. In particular, the country's ontological sense of insecurity triggered by a mutilated victory reignited Armenian geopolitical determinism along with a «besieged fortress syndrome» that progressively pushed the country into Russia's choking embrace. As a matter of fact, a complex strategic trilemma has emerged along Armenian foreign policy's three pillars: the need to support Karabakh independence, the need to ensure security to the Republic, and the attempt to pursue a multi-vectorial foreign policy. It was a trilemma which was eventually solved by pursuing the first two aims to the detriment of the latter. Moreover, an interpretation of national interests that privileged security over development undermined the transition and favoured the development of a competitive authoritarian system.

The 2020 war and the repercussions of the Russo-Ukrainian war have profoundly changed the regional context and the parameters for Armenian foreign and security policies. The Western powers' re-engagement in the region and, particularly, the EU's breaking of the *de facto* monopoly hitherto exercised over the conflict-resolution process by Moscow together with Brussels' comprehensive approach to the dispute have led the way to new and somehow unexpected opportunities for foreign policy change. Opportunities that the government seems determined to seize, pursuing an Armenia-first agenda to the detriment of previously drawn red lines.

Forced by the weakened credibility of the Armenian-Russian alliance, a new understanding of security and deterrence has unfolded. It is an understanding built upon international engagement and coalition-building

rather than on military means. Conjunctural security strategies do not appear to have been abandoned; nonetheless they are seemingly pursued along with a more pragmatic long-term vision and approach to foreign policy. This is grounded on an Armenian-centred course which entails the return to a multi-vectorial and inclusive practice of foreign relations, which may lead Yerevan out of its «besieged fortress» mentality. Moreover, foreign policy change, albeit strictly subject to the pursuit of the national interest, seems to also be driven by the resolve to strike a balance between security and development that favours the latter.

Taking a wider look, Pashinyan's drive for a foreign policy change seems to resurrect the dated yet relevant *exceptionalism* versus *normalism* dispute. Overcoming long-standing inertia, the vision of Armenia as a «normal state» seems to grow commonplace, fostered and legitimized by the majority of Armenian citizens, who have entrusted the government with a clear and exceptionally resilient mandate for change.

#### CHRONOLOGY

- 1988, February. The Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) authorities appeals to the USSR Supreme Soviet to transfer the Oblast to Armenia SSR. In Yerevan, hundred thousand take to the streets in support of the request, while the Karabakh Committee is formed.
- 1988, February-March. A cycle of intercommunal violence starts in the Nagorno-Karabakh area (Askeran) with the killing of two Azerbaijani. It soon expands to Azerbaijan proper, where the first anti-Armenian pogrom is held in Sumgait. Intercommunal violence results in the flow of refugees from Azerbaijan to Armenia and vice versa (including from NKAO proper).
- 1988, July. USSR Supreme Soviet Presidium rejects NKAO's request of transfer to Armenia SSR, after its Soviet had voted for secession. Yerevan's Supreme Soviet had endorsed Stepanakert's request in June, voting in favor of the annexation; a resolution of Azerbaijan's Supreme Soviet, in turn, rejected the request as unacceptable and condemned Armenian interference in the SSR's domestic affairs.
- 1989, November. The first congress of the Pan-Armenian National Movement (ANM) is held in Yerevan. Levon Ter-Petrosyan is elected as chairman.
- 1990, May. The ANM secures about 35% of the seats in the first multiparty election for the Supreme Soviet. ANM leads the majority of the Assembly while in August Ter-Petrosyan is elected as its president, and hence as head of State, ending Communist rule.
- 1990, August. Armenian parliament issues a declaration of sovereignty. Nagorno-Karabakh is hereby considered as an integral part of the Republic.
- 1991, March. Having boycotted Gorbachev's referendum on a new Union Treaty, Armenian Supreme Soviet announces its own referendum on independence, to be held in September. 94.4% would vote in favour of independence.



- 1991, October. Ter-Petrosyan wins 83% of the votes in the presidential elections and becomes the first President of independent Armenia.
- 1991, December. As the USSR brakes up, Armenia joins the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). On December 10th Nagorno-Karabakh holds a referendum on independence, with 99,9% of the voters supporting the secession from Azerbaijan. In November, Azerbaijan had revoked the autonomous status of the region.
- 1992, May. In Tashkent, Armenia signs the CIS Treaty on Collective Security along with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.
- 1992, August-September. Yerevan and Moscow sign two treaties providing the legal basis for the Russian military presence in Armenia and for the deployment of Russian border guards along the borders with Turkey and Iran.
- 1992, February-May. Armenians gain the upper hand in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, now turned into an open inter-state war. Most of the enclave is conquered, while the control of the Lachin corridor is secured.
- 1992, June. Consistently with a mandate approved in March by the Council of Ministers of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), formal negotiations open in Rome under the auspices of the CSCE Minsk Group.
- 1993, March. Armenian forces launch an offensive resulting, by the end of the Summer, in the capture of large portions of Azerbaijani territory around Nagorno-Karabakh. As a retaliation, in April Turkey closes the border with Armenia. Between April and November, the UN Security Council adopts four resolutions condemning the «invasion» and asking the unilateral withdrawal from «recently occupied» territories, reaffirming the respect for the principles of territorial integrity, inviolability of international borders, and inadmissibility of the use of force for the acquisition of territory.
- 1994, May. Following Minsk Group's fruitless efforts to maintain cease-fires and to bring the parties together for peace talks, a cease-fire agreement is signed by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh representatives, under Russian auspices. At that time, Armenian forces controlled around 15% of Azerbaijan's territory. The conflict had claimed more than 20,000 lives and resulted in the internal displacement of around 600,000 Azerbaijanis.
- 1994, August. In a trip to the US, Ter-Petrosyan outlines his understanding of the peace process. Building upon the need to pursue a realist and prudent foreign policy course, he maintains that a comprehensive peace plan would require compromises, including Armenian withdrawal from the territories captured outside Nagorno-Karabakh proper.
- 1994, December. Robert Kocharyan is elected President of Nagorno-Karabakh *de facto* Republic. He will be re-elected by popular vote in November 1996 and will hold the position until his appointment as Armenian Prime Minister, in March 1997.
- 1995, July. A national referendum adopts a new constitution establishing a semi-presidential system.
- 1996, September. In a disputed presidential election, Ter-Petrosyan secures 51% of the votes and is elected for a second term.
- 1996, December. At the OSCE Lisbon Summit, the chairman-in-office issues a statement on the principles for conflict resolution, entrusting Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and the «highest degree of self-rule within Azerbaijan» for Nagorno-Karabakh.

- 1997, February. A tripartite Co-chairmanship of the Minsk Group is established including Russia, France, and United States.
- 1998, February. Ter-Petrosyan resigns, after endorsing a Minsk Group «step-by-step» peace proposal opposed by Nagorno-Karabakh authorities and rejected by Armenia's National Security Council. In March, Kocharyan is elected President.
- 1999, April. Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents meet for the first time since 1993 in Washington. The meeting marks the beginning of negotiations culminating in the inconclusive 2001 peace talks hosted by the US President in Key West, Florida.
- 2002, October. Armenia joins Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan in signing the CSTO Charter, transforming the military alliance established under the Collective Security Treaty into an international organization.
- 2003, March. Kocharyan wins contested presidential elections, while a pro-presidential coalition including nationalist parties secures the majority of the seats in the May parliamentary elections.
- 2004, July. The Minsk Group announces it will not put forward any new peace proposals to Armenia and Azerbaijan, which bear the primary responsibility for the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. A series of high-level meetings between the parties will follow in the coming years.
- 2007, November. On the sideline of the Madrid OSCE Ministerial Council, the Minsk Group Co-chairs present a preliminary version of the Basic Principles for a settlement of the conflict. The so-called «Madrid Principles» call for inter alia: (a) the return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan; (b) an interim status for the enclave pending a future determination of its final status through a referendum; (c) a corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh; (d) the right of IDPs and refugees to return to their former places of residence; (e) international security guarantees, including a peacekeeping operation.
- 2008, February. In a disputed election resulting in widespread anti-government riots, the Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan – born in Nagorno-Karabakh and former head of the *de facto* Republic's Defence Army – is elected President of Armenia.
- 2009, July. At the LAquila Summit of the Eight, US, French and Russian presidents endorse an updated version of the «Madrid Principles». Despite lack of progresses on implementation, the Principles would thereby remain the most advanced proposal put forward by the Minsk Group.
- 2009, October. Armenian and Turkish foreign ministers sign the Zurich Protocols aimed at normalizing relations between the countries. The Protocols will face staunch opposition in both countries as well as in Azerbaijan – for side-lining the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. They will never reach respective parliaments for ratification.
- 2010, August. Yerevan and Moscow reach an agreement over the extension to 2044 of the 1994 treaty providing the legal base for the use of the Russian Gyumri military base in Armenia.
- 2013, February. Sargsyan is elected for his second and by law last term as President of the Republic.
- 2013, September. After a meeting in Moscow with Vladimir Putin, President Sargsyan announces the decision to join the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, and to be part of the nascent Eurasian Economic Union. The

- decision interrupts the process of signing a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area agreement with the EU, whose negotiations had been concluded in July.
- 2015, December. A new Constitution establishing a parliamentary system is approved by referendum.
- 2016, April. The largest flare-up of the conflict since 1994 occurs along the southern part of the line of contact. After four days of military confrontation, a ceasefire is reached on the 5th of in Moscow. For the first time, Azerbaijan gains control over strategic hilltops in the enclave.
- 2018, April-May. A series of anti-government protests start in Armenia in response to the possibility of Sargsyan running for the prime minister' post, notwithstanding a previous commitment on the contrary. The so-called Velvet Revolution leads to the parliamentary election of Nikol Pashinyan as Prime Minister on May the 8th. In snap parliamentary elections held in December, Pashinyan's My Step Alliance will secure 70% of the vote.
- 2019, August. Notwithstanding the expectations raised by the reopening of Yerevan-Baku dialogue in the aftermath of the Velvet revolution, Pashinyan pays a visit to Stepanakert and calls for unification between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.
- 2020, September. As a reaction to an alleged Armenian offensive, on the 27<sup>th</sup> Azerbaijan initiates a full-scale offensive along the entire line of contact. The war will last 44 days and will end on November 9<sup>th</sup> with a cease-fire declaration mediated by Moscow. Baku gains control of the districts around Nagorno-Karabakh while making significant inroads in the enclave itself. A Russian peacekeeping force is deployed for a (renewable) five years term along the line of contact and the Lachin corridor.
- 2021, January. The first post-war meeting between Pashinyan and Aliyev is hosted by Putin in Moscow, with Russia taking the lead of the mediation process.
- 2021, June. Snap parliamentary elections are held after Pashinyan's resignation amid widespread critics over the conduct of the 44 Days war. Pashinyan's Civil Contract party secures 54% of the vote and 71 out of 107 seats in the National Assembly.
- 2021, September. Armenian-Turkish dialogue over normalization process resumes. In mid-December Ankara and Yerevan announce the appointment of special envoys to negotiate the normalization, who will meet four times in 2022.
- 2021, December. The trilateral meeting of the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev and Pashinyan marks the beginning of EU involvement in mediation over Nagorno-Karabakh.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abasov, Ali, & Haroutiun Khachatryan, 2005, *Karabakh Conflict: Variants of Settlement: Concepts and Reality*, 3rd edition, Baku and Yerevan: Areat, Noyan Tapan.
- [AFA 2022] Ambassade de France en Arménie, 2022, 30 December. 'Vœux de l'Ambassadrice de France en Arménie à l'occasion du Nouvel An', 2022, *Ambassade de France en Arménie*, 30 December.

- Akepanidhtaworn, Klakow, Lili Karapetyan, Nathalie Reyes & Yulia Ustyugova, 2022, 'Raising Armenia's Export Potential', IMF Working Papers WP/22/214.
- Al Mayadeen, 2022, 13 October, 'Raisi: Changes in transit routes with Armenia not tolerable', 2022, *Al Mayadeen*, 13 October.
- Arka, 2021, 29 December, 'Armenia and Azerbaijan to set up commission to engage in delimitation and demarcation of their border – Russian deputy minister', 2021, *Arka*, 29 December.
- Arka, 2022, 5 December, 'Armenia's foreign trade grows by 66.4% in 10 months to \$10.9 bln', *Arka*, 5 December 2022.
- Armenpress, 2022, 11 November, 'Armenia, China discuss perspectives of expanding defense cooperation', *Armenpress*, 11 November 2022.
- Astourian, Stephan, 2005, 'State, homeland, and diaspora: The Armenian and Azerbaijani cases', in Touraj Atabaki & Sanjyot Mehendale (eds.), *Central Asia and the Caucasus Transnationalism and diaspora*, New York: Routledge, 80-112.
- Bhan, Aditya, 2022, 'Armenia-India relations: Budding partnership benefits New Delhi', *Observer Research Foundation*, 16 December.
- Broers, Laurence, 2019, *Armenia and Azerbaijan. Anatomy of a Rivalry*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Broers, Laurence, 2021a, 'How Serzh Sargsyan and the Republican Party of Armenia lost control of a competitive authoritarian system', in Laurence Broers, & Anna Ohanyan (eds.), *Armenia's Velvet Revolution. Authoritarian Decline and Civil Resistance in a Multipolar World*, London and New York: Tauris, 73-99.
- Broers, Laurence, 2021b, 'Augmented Azerbaijan? The return of Azerbaijani irredentism', *Eurasianet*, 5 August.
- Business Media, 2022, 25 January, 'Pashinyan: Growth in Armenian-Turkish trade will have a positive impact on Armenia's economy', 2022, *Business Media*, 25 January.
- Cameron, David R. & Mitchell A. Orenstein, 2012, 'Post-Soviet Authoritarianism: The Influence of Russia in Its «Near Abroad»', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 28(1): 1-44.
- Cavoukian, Kristin, 2021, 'Democratization and diaspora. The Velvet Revolution and the Armenian nation abroad', in Laurence Broers, & Anna Ohanyan (eds.), *Armenia's Velvet Revolution. Authoritarian Decline and Civil Resistance in a Multipolar World*, London and New York: Tauris, 201-230.
- Ceccorulli, Michela, Carlo Frappi & Sonia Lucarelli, 2017, 'On regional security governance once again: how analysis of the Southern Caucasus can advance the concept', *European Security*, 26(1): 59-78.
- Cheterian, Vicken, 2012, 'The Origins and Trajectory of the Caucasian Conflicts', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64(9): 1625-1649.
- Cheterian, Vicken, 2018, 'The Uses and Abuses of History: Genocide and the Making of the Karabakh Conflict', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70(6): 884-903.
- [CISR 2022] Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2022, 19 October 'Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia, June 2022', 2022, CISR – Center for Insights in Survey Research, 19 October.
- Cornell, Svante, 2001, *Small Nations and Great Powers. A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Richmond: Curzon Press.
- Dovich, Mark, 2022, 'Armenia makes public its six-point peace proposal to Azerbaijan', *Civilnet*, 14 May.
- European Commission, 2022, 'Partnership Implementation Report on Armenia', SWD(2022) 154 final, 17 May.

- European Council, 2022(a), 'Press statement by President Michel of the European Council following a trilateral meeting with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia', 23 May.
- European Council, 2022(b), 'Statement following quadrilateral meeting between President Aliyev, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President Macron and President Michel', 6 October.
- European Parliament, 2022, 'Destruction of cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh', P9\_TA(2022)0080, 10 March.
- European Parliament, 2023, 'Humanitarian consequences of the blockade in Nagorno-Karabakh', P9\_TA(2023)0012, 19 January.
- [FCN 2022] *First Channel News*, 2022, 24 January, 'Armenia has never pursued a policy of Armenian Cause: Nikol Pashinyan', *First Channel News*, 24 January 2022.
- France24, 2022, 14 October, 'Putin, Baku criticise Macron for 'unacceptable' Karabakh remarks', 2022, *France24*, 14 October.
- Frappi, Carlo, 2018, 'The Russo-Turkish Entente: A Tactical Embrace Along Strategic and Geopolitical Convergences', in Talbot, Valeria (ed.), *Turkey: Towards a Eurasian Shift?*, Milan: ISPI, 2018, 45-69.
- Ghaplanyan, Irina, 2017, *Post-Soviet Armenia: the New National Elite and the New National Narrative*, London: Taylor and Francis.
- Goltz, Thomas, 2003, 'Letter from Eurasia: Russia's Hidden Hand', *Foreign Policy*, 92: 98-104.
- [GRA 1990] Government of the Republic of Armenia, *Armenian Declaration of Independence*, 23 August 1990.
- Grigoryan, Arman, 2018, 'The Karabakh conflict and Armenia's failed transition', *Nationalities Papers*, 46(5): 844-860.
- Hajiyeva, Gunay, 2022, 'President Aliyev Calls for Delimitation of Azerbaijan-Armenia Border to Prevent Further Escalations', *Caspian News*, 25 September.
- Hovhannisyan, Alina, 2022a, 'Kerobyan: More than 50,000 Russian IT specialists arrived in Armenia', *ArmInfo*, 7 September.
- Hovhannisyan, Alina, 2022b, 'EDB analysts expect 12% growth in mutual trade in EAEU by end of 2022', *ArmInfo*, 26 December.
- Hughes, James & Gwendolyn Sasse, 2022, 'Comparing Regional and Ethnic Conflicts in Post-Soviet Transition States', in James Hughes & Gwendolyn Sasse (eds.), *Ethnicity and Territory in the Former Soviet Union. Regions in Conflict*, London: Frank Cass, 1-35.
- [ICG 2022] *International Crisis Group*, 2022, 28 September, 'Upholding the ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan', 2022, *International Crisis Group*, 28 September.
- International Monetary Fund, 2022, 'Republic of Armenia. Sixth Review Under the Stand-By Arrangement', IMF Country Report No.22/130, Washington DC: IMF.
- Iskandaryan, Alexander, 2019, 'Armenia-Russia Relations: The Revolution on the Map', *Russian Analytical Digest*, 232: 2-4.
- Iskyan, Kim, 2004, 'Armenia into Russia's embrace', *The Moscow Times*, 24 March.
- JAMnews, 2022a, 14 April 'Opinions from Armenia: Can we consider PM Pashinyan's statements as «far-sighted» or «contradictory»?', 2022, *JAMnews*, 14 April.
- JAMnews, 2022b, 1 November, 'Fourth meeting with Putin: did Aliyev and Pashinyan hold their ground?'.
- Jansen, Talander Hugo, & Hannah Nafize Ahamad Madatali, 2022, 'EU relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan', European Parliamentary Research Service, European Implementation Assessment.

- Kahn, Jeff, 2000, 'The Parade of Sovereignities: Establishing the Vocabulary of the New Russian Federalism', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 16(1): 58-8.
- Kasbarian, Sossie, 2018, 'The Politics of Memory and Commemoration: Armenian Diasporic Reflections on 2015', *Nationalities Papers* 46(1): 123-143.
- Kopalyan, Nerses, 2002, 'Diplomatization of Security', *EVN Security Report*, September.
- Kucera, Joshua, 2023, 'Armenia refuses to host CSTO exercises', *Eurasianet*, 10 January.
- Kurkchiyan, Marina, 2005, 'The Karabagh conflict From Soviet past to post-Soviet uncertainty', in Edmund Herzig & Marina Kurkchiyan (eds.), *The Armenians: Past and Present in the Making of National Identity*, Richmond: Taylor & Francis, 147-165.
- Levitsky, Steven & Lucan A. Way, 2010, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Libaridian, Gerard J., 1999, *The challenge of statehood: Armenian political thinking since independence*, Watertown: Blue Crane Books.
- Mejlumyan, Ani, 2022, 'Pashinyan refuses to sign CSTO declaration after bloc's failure to help Armenia', *Intellinews*, 25 November.
- Mgdesyan, Arshaluis, 2022, 'Attacks on Armenia highlight ongoing disputes over «corridor» for Azerbaijan', *Eurasianet*, 14 September.
- Minasyan, Sergey, 2008, 'Armenia in Karabakh, Karabakh in Armenia: the Karabakh factor in Armenia's Foreign and Domestic Policy', in Alexander Iskandaryan (ed.), *The Caucasus Neighborhood: Turkey and the South Caucasus*, Yerevan: Caucasus Institute, 63-72.
- Natalizia, Gabriele, 2019, 'Black knight as a strategic choice? Causes and modes of Russia's support to the authoritarianism in Southern Caucasus', *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 49: 175-191.
- Nazaretyan, Hovhannes, 2021, 'Russia's Increasing Military Presence in Armenia', *EVN Report*, 4 March.
- News.am, 2022a, 25 May. 'Moscow sees persistent attempts by EU to intervene in agreements between Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia', 2022, *News.am*, 25 May.
- News.am, 2022b, 25 May, 'Armenian MFA: Ankara synchronizes the Armenian-Turkish process with the Armenian-Azerbaijani relations', *News.am*, 25 May 2022.
- OJEU - Official Journal of the European Union, 2022, 'Council Decision (CFSP) 2022/1970', L270/93, 18 October.
- OSCE - Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2021, 'Republic of Armenia early parliamentary elections 20 June 2021', ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, Warsaw, 27 October.
- Panossian, Razmik, 2002, 'The Past as Nation: Three Dimensions of Armenian Identity', *Geopolitics*, 7(2): 121-146.
- Papazian, Lalig, 2002, 'A People's Will: Armenian Irredentism over Nagorno-Karabagh', in Levon Chorbajian (ed.), *The Making of Nagorno-Karabagh. From Secession to Republic*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, 54-94.
- [PMRA 2020] Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2020, 'Statement by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the President of the Russian Federation', 2020, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, Press release, 10 November.
- [PMRA 2022] The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2022, 13 April 'Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's speech at the National Assembly during the discussion of the performance report of the Government Action Plan for 2021', 2022, The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 13 April.

- Poghosyan, Benyamin, 2021, 'An election with many surprises', *Commonspace.eu*, 21 June.
- [POR 2013] President of Russia, 2013, 3 September, 'Press statements following Russian-Armenian talks', 2013, President of Russia, 3 September.
- [PRA 2019] President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2019, 11 January, 'Nəzirlər Kabinetinin 2018-ci ilin sosial-iqtisadi inkişafının yekunlarına və qarşıda duran vəzifələrə həsr olunan iclasında İlham Əliyevin giriş nitqi' (Opening speech by İlham Aliyev at the meeting of Cabinet of Ministers dedicated to results of socioeconomic development of 2018 and objectives for future), (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 11 January 2019, <https://president.az/az/articles/view/31514>).
- [PRA 2022a] President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022, 12 January, 'İlham Əliyev yerli televiziya kanallarına müsahibə verib' (İlham Aliyev has been interviewed by local TV channels), President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 12 January 2022, (<https://president.az/az/articles/view/55243>).
- [PRA 2022b] President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022, 27 May, 'Zəngilan rayonunda «Ağıllı kənd» layihəsinin birinci mərhələsi üzrə açılış mərasimində İlham Əliyevin nitqi' (Speech by İlham Aliyev at the opening ceremony of first stage of «Smart Village» project in Zangilan district), President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 27 May 2022, (<https://president.az/az/articles/view/56524>).
- [RFE 2022a] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2022, 19 July 'Khamenei Warns Against Attempts To 'Block' Armenian-Iranian Border'.
- [RFE 2022b] *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 2022, 13 September, 'Armenia Appeals To Russia For Military Aid'.
- [RFE 2022c] *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 2022, 10 November, 'Armenia Proposes Demilitarized Zone Around Karabakh, Along Border With Azerbaijan', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 10 November 2022.
- [RFE 2023] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2023, 27 January 'Russia's Cash Outflow Sends Armenian Bank Profits Skyrocketing', 2023, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 27 January.
- [ROTMFA 2022] Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022, 12 March, 'Press Release Regarding the Bilateral Meeting of H.E. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Türkiye, and H.E. Ararat Mirzoyan, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Armenia on 12 March 2022 at the Margin of Antalya Diplomacy Forum', 2022, Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 12 March.
- Sahakyan, Narek, 2022, 'Searching for Democracy, Finding Nationalism: The First Republic of Armenia in the Post-Revolutionary Discourse of 2018', *Caucasus Survey* 10(1): 76–99.
- Shirinyan, Anahit, 2019, 'Armenia's Foreign Policy Balancing in an Age of Uncertainty', Royal Institute of International Affairs, London.
- Shubladze, Rati, & Tsisana Khundadze, 2017, 'Balancing the three pillars of stability in Armenia and Georgia', *Caucasus Survey*, 5(3): 301–322.
- [SIPRI 2018] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2018, 2 September, 'OSCE arms embargo on Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan)', 2018, *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 2 September.
- Steele, Brent J., 2008, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self Identity and the IR State*, New York: Routledge.

- Suny, Ronald Grigor, 1993, *The Revenge of the Past. Nationalism Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Suny, Ronald Grigor, 2000, 'Provisional Stabilities: The Politics of Identities in Post-Soviet Eurasia', *International Security*, 24(3): 139-178
- Ter-Petrossian, Levon, 2018, *Armenia's Future, Relations with Turkey, and the Karabagh Conflict*, Cham: Springer.
- Terzyan, Aram, 2020, 'New Government, New Discourse and Old Constraints: Armenia After the «Velvet Revolution»', Center for East European and Russian Studies, Post-Soviet Politics Research Papers 3/2020.
- Toal, Gerard & Nareg Seferian, 2022, 'Suddenly a borderland: The new borderization between Armenia and Azerbaijan', *Eurasianet*, 25 November.
- TRT Azərbaycan, 14 March 2022, 'Azərbaycan XİN Ermənistanı təqdim olunan təklifləri açıqlayıb' (The MFA of Azerbaijan revealed the proposals presented to Armenia), *TRT Azərbaycan*, 14 March 2022, ([www.trt.net.tr/azerbaycan/turk-dunyasi](http://www.trt.net.tr/azerbaycan/turk-dunyasi)).
- TRT Haber, 2022, 25 July, 'Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Herkesten attıkları imzalara sahip çıkmalarını bekliyoruz', 2022 (President Erdoğan: We expect everyone to respect their signatures), (*TRT Haber*, 25 July, [www.trthaber.com/haber](http://www.trthaber.com/haber)).
- U.S. Department of State, 2022a, 'Department Press Briefing', 26 September.
- U.S. Department of State, 2022b, 'Department Press Briefing', 10 November.
- United Nations, 2022, 'Amid Fighting between Armenia, Azerbaijan, Assistant Secretary-General Urges Both Parties Commit to Lasting Peace Treaty, in Security Council Briefing', SC/15031, 15 September.
- Valiyev, Cavid, 2022, 'The Karabakh issue: An internal matter for Azerbaijan', 23 October.
- Vasilyan, Syuzanna, 2016, '«Swinging on a Pendulum»: Armenia in the Eurasian Economic Union and with the European Union', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 61(4): 32–46.
- Walt, Stephen M., 1990, *The Origins of Alliances*, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Wion, 2022, 29 September 'India to export Pinaka rocket launchers, ammunition to Armenia in \$250m deal', 2022, *Wion*, 29 September.
- Wolfers, Arnold, 1952, 'National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol', *Political Science Quarterly*, 67(4): 481-502.
- Zolyan, Mikayel, 2010, 'Armenia', in Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Abel Polese (eds.), *The colour revolutions in the former Soviet republics: successes and failures*, New York: Routledge, 83–100.





## REVIEW ARTICLE

### NARRATIVES OF THE ORIGINS OF THE KOREAN WAR: A REVIEW OF SEVEN DECADES

*Mark E. Caprio*

Rikkyo University  
caprio@rikkyo.ac.jp

*The Armistice that the belligerent forces negotiated to end the Korean War was finalized on 27 July 1953, over seven decades ago. However, there has been no serious discussion since then among the signees – the United States (which signed on behalf of the UN Command), the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and China (The Republic of Korea refused to sign the cease-fire agreement) – to formally conclude this war with a peace treaty. Over this time, however, researchers of this war have engaged in debates over its origins that far surpassed those related to other wars both in time spent and pages published. These debates have centred on issues such as the nature of this war (whether it was civil or international, or a combination of both) and the instigator of the belligerence (the Korea that first crossed the thirty-eighth parallel to start the war). The discussions have been driven by early Cold War interpretations of the Soviet Union and United States interests in the Northeast Asian region, interpretations that others later challenged as limited. The immediate post-Cold War period momentarily opened previously closed archives in China and the Soviet Union making available a large cache of documents that further clarified these issues. These documents included important correspondence exchanged between the three communist capitals – Moscow, Beijing, and P'yŏngyang – in the months prior to and after the fighting began. This initiated yet another round of discussions on the war's origins. This review aims to critically evaluate the historiography focussed on the attempt to uncover the true origins of the Korean War. By focusing on the strengths and limitations of the historiographical contributions dealing with the origins of the war, this review article hopes to add to our general knowledge of the war, and, in doing so, to that of the Cold War period, as the Korean war was the first major military confrontation of that period.*

KEYWORDS – Korean War; Soviet Union; United States; ROK; DPRK; Japan; textbooks; telegrams; origins; 25 June 1950; post-war; Ongjin Peninsula

## 1. *Introduction*

Visitors to the Korean War Memorial in Seoul, Republic of Korea (ROK), are greeted at the entrance by the Clock Tower, a statue designed to hold three clocks: one clock with the present time, a second one reserved for the time when the two Koreas reunite, and a third clock frozen at 4 A.M. on the morning of 25 June 1950, the exact moment when according to the ROK historiography the Korean War, or the «625 War» (*Yugio tongnam*), began with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) forces suddenly streaming across the thirty-eighth parallel to initiate the war. The DPRK has long accepted the late June 1950 starting date of the war but insists that its belligerent action was a «counterattack» as it was the ROK who initiated the fighting by first crossing to the north. These historical narratives have endured a number of challenges to their validity over the seven decades since the start of the war. Indeed, the roots of this «forgotten war», as it has come to be known, are arguably debated to a far greater extent than other wars of the recent past<sup>1</sup>. This review aims to trace the major contributions of this debate over the Korean War's origins<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. «Textbook» arguments

The narrative that has stood the test of time in the official history of the ROK, primarily in school textbooks, monuments, and museum displays, centres on three components: The Soviet Union planned and directed the attack; the DPRK carried it out; and they did so suddenly without warning. In the United States and elsewhere this narrative understands the Soviet's ambition as using the DPRK attack as a first step toward a larger plan to spread communism throughout the region. This justified U.S. participation in a war that others argue to have been a civil conflict. In other words, the U.S. participation was equated with its military intervention in the Second World War, its purpose being to save the «free democratic» world from evil ideology – fascism then, and communism now. U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson emphasized the probable Soviet role in his memoirs on the war:

It seemed close to certain that the attack had been mounted, supplied, and instigated by the Soviet Union and that it would not be stopped

1. Ironically, the first usage of «forgotten war» as a moniker for the war apparently appeared in 1951, while the war was still very much in progress, in an article that appeared in the U.S. weekly news magazine *U.S. News and World Report*. This article questioned why, despite the high number of American casualties in Korea, the war had been replaced in the news by stories on beef shortages, government graft, and labour strikes. [*U.S. News and World Report* 1951, October 5, p. 21].

2. Wada Haruki offers a comprehensive introduction to Korean War historiography [Wada 2014, pp. xviii-xxvii].

by anything short of force. If Korean force proved unequal to the job, as seemed probable, only American military intervention could do it. [...] Plainly, this attack did not amount to a *casus belli* against the Soviet Union. Equally plainly it was an open, undisguised challenge to our internationally accepted position as the protector of South Korea, an area of great importance to the security of American-occupied Japan. To back away from this challenge, in view of our capacity for meeting it, would be highly destructive of the power and prestige of the United States [Acheson 1969, p. 20].

Soon after receiving the news of the attack, Acheson contacted President Harry S. Truman before arranging an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council. This met the next day to demand that the DPRK «cease hostilities and ...withdraw their armed forces to the thirty-eighth parallel» [Ibid., pp. 18-19]. A UN command was formed one week later on 7 July to assist the ROK<sup>3</sup>.

Japan, still under occupation control by the United States and prohibited by its Pacific War surrender terms, and limited by its 1947 constitution from engaging in military aggression, could not officially join the UN Command. Its participation in the war, however, was immeasurable; in his memoirs, the then U.S. Ambassador to Japan, Robert D. Murphy, described Japan's role as having been «indispensable» to the forces who confronted the communist challenge [Nishimura 2004, p. 151]. Japanese Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, who also interpreted the DPRK attack in international terms, took measures in the days following the attack to ensure that the UN Command would receive Japan's full cooperation. This, in Yoshida's view, was necessary to protect Japan's self-defence: The attack was, he argued, more than simply a Soviet effort to liberate the ROK and would threaten Japan next should it succeed in Korea<sup>4</sup>. Japan's recently promulgated post-war constitution, drafted primarily by the United States, prohibited in Article 9 the country from «maintaining [any kind of] land, sea, and air forces, as well

3. In addition to the United States and ROK forces, the UN Command included military personnel from Canada, Australia, United Kingdom, Thailand, Ethiopia, Turkey, the Philippines, New Zealand, Greece, France, Columbia, Belgium, South Africa, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. Additionally, Denmark, India, Italy, Norway, and Sweden contributed with humanitarian assistance. The Security Council was able to organize this command as the Soviet Union was at the time boycotting the sessions over the Council's refusal to replace the Nationalist China representative with one from Communist China after the latter's victory in China's civil war had driven the Nationalists to Taiwan, and thus could not exercise its veto privilege. During the Korean War and its aftermath, the Commander of the UN Command, and until recently the Deputy Commander, had always been a U.S. military official.

4. Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru announced that Japan, while remaining neutral, would lend any cooperation necessary to the United Nations forces, which he expected would come to Japan's assistance should the communist invasion spill over to Japan [AS 1950a] and vowed on 14 July 1950 in a speech before the Japanese National Assembly to assist in the fight against the invading communists [AS 1950b].

as other war potential». The Japanese, however, interpreted this Article as not inhibiting its ability to act in its self-defence<sup>5</sup>.

The ROK government described the attack orchestrated by the DPRK military as sudden and unexpected, one that also caught the U.S. by complete surprise. The DPRK armies enjoyed early success. Within a matter of days, they had occupied the ROK capital, Seoul, and driven the ROK military and government back to the Pusan perimeter in the southern-most region of the country, where the ROK relocated its capital and where a large number of its citizens took refuge. It took a daring September landing by U.S. General Douglas MacArthur at In'chŏn to drive out the DPRK forces. Within two months, the UN Command forces had retaken Seoul, crossed the thirty-eighth parallel into the DPRK, and advanced to the Yalu River, the enemy's northernmost border with China and the Soviet Union. One photograph shows U.S. forces enjoying Thanksgiving dinner in late November on the river banks<sup>6</sup>. Chinese armies, who in October 1950 had stealthily crossed into northern Korea, eventually drove the UN Command out of the DPRK territory and back to below the thirty-eighth parallel.

The DPRK, which refers to the war as the «Fatherland Liberation War» (*Choguk haebang chŏnjaeng*), scripted a version of the war's origin that mirrors that of the ROK in one respect, but revises it in another. Fighting did break out between the two Koreas from 25 June, but it was the ROK, rather than the DPRK, that attacked first. Korean War historian Bruce Cumings notes that the DPRK had long insisted that its 25 June attack was an effort to repel an ROK invasion that had taken place two days earlier [Cumings 1990, p. 569]. A 1996 Japanese translation of the DPRK history of Korea maintains that it acted in self-defence. The war began, it argues, after ROK President Syngman Rhee rejected overtures by the DPRK to peacefully unify the peninsula. Rhee then teamed with the imperialist U.S. to send hundreds of thousand soldiers north at different points along the thirty-eighth parallel on 25 June. The ROK then widened the battles while ignoring DPRK warnings to halt the fighting. In an emergency cabinet meeting that Kim Il Sung convened on the day of the attack, the DPRK leader announced that «American imperialists have abandoned the Korean people. The wolf has to answer with a club (*ōkami ha konbō ashiraubekida*). We have to show those who belittle and challenge the Korean people their grit». Kim continued by demanding that his armies launch a counterattack to «sweep [the invaders] away» (*sōtō*)<sup>7</sup> [CSTS 3 1996, p. 80].

The Soviet Union/Russian version of the war has varied in accordance with the revolutionary and diplomatic changes that the country has experi-

5. See Samuels [2997, pp. 30-32] for an early history of Japanese interpretations of Article 9 of its post-war constitution.

6. See photograph in Bruce Cumings [2010, p. 28].

7. Kwang-Soo Kim argues that the DPRK inserted the word «counterattack» into its initial plan of attack to hide its role in starting the war [Kim 2001, p. 19].

enced over the decades since the war. It has, however, remained committed to the idea that the war's beginning was «sudden». While during the Cold War the Soviet Union supported the DPRK version of the war's origins, it shifted its views from the 1990s, when it opened its archives on the war. An article on the Korean War published by the Ministry of Defence in «*Voennoe obozrenie*» (Military Review) addresses the war's origins in passive form: «the war broke out», without blaming either side for the initial attack [Samsonov 2012, online]. Soviet noncommittal on this issue reflects its stance that both sides wanted to unify the peninsula on their own terms.<sup>8</sup>

Chinese history textbooks offer a slightly different angle to the war. Like some Russian accounts, the narrative it tells avoids the question of initial attack – the Korean civil war broke out (*Chōsen no naisen ga bohatsu* – and continued with the UN Command, led by the U.S., entering the conflict. These enemy forces threatened China, it contends, by intervening in its politics, and by crossing the thirty-eighth parallel to advance across the Chinese border. The textbook provided evidence of this intrusion by including a picture of a Chinese village that had sustained damage by U.S. aerial bombing. It further explained that the «oppressive imperialist Americans» did not even imagine that the Chinese would enter the war. MacArthur's predictions that the war would end soon, before Christmas, were frustrated by the Chinese Volunteer Army crossing the Yalu River to fight in Korea, thus prolonging the battles. It was a foreign enemy threat to its national sovereignty that drew China into the war<sup>9</sup>.

There were no third-party forces at the thirty-eighth parallel at the time the two Korea's engaged in the battles that would ignite the Korean War. Thus, the only first-hand accounts available are those left by the ROK and the DPRK. Among the immediate reactions by the relatively small number of U.S. military advisors who remained on the peninsula after the majority of forces had retreated from Korea, after the ROK state had been formed, were those that initially assumed that it had been the ROK who had initiated the war. Previous to its outbreak, President Rhee had threatened to attack north on numerous occasions; the ROK had been responsible for initiating many of the battles that broke out along the thirty-eighth parallel in the summer of 1949. Yet, accounts written soon after the 25 June 1950 attack attribute responsibility to one Korea or the other, depending on the

8. Professor Sergei Kurbanov, one of the more respected Korean scholars in Russia, accents this view by using in his monograph on Korean history the rather neutral term, Korean War, rather than the DPRK's use of the «War of Liberation», or the ROK's «25 June War» [Kurbanov 2009, p. 422] regarding the war. I am grateful to Nagoya University Professor Igor Saveliev for making me aware of and translating the information on the Russian narratives of the Korean War origins.

9. The Chinese history textbooks were translated into Japanese as part of a «*Seikai no kyōkasho shiri-zu*» (Global Textbook Series) of junior and high school textbooks from various countries published by Akaiishi Shoten.

side of the parallel the narrative belongs to as well as on which international partner assisted in their war efforts. Soon, alternative views would question these «textbook» narratives of the war's origins.

### 3. *Challenges to the «textbook» narrative*

That war might erupt across the peninsula had been anticipated almost as soon as the guns of the Pacific War fell silent. At around this time rumours circulated in the area that World War III was imminent, this time with the Japanese fighting alongside the U.S. against the Soviet Union<sup>10</sup>. Concerns that the Soviets were preparing a Korean military unit that would enter Korea as soon as Japan surrendered had surfaced in U.S. official circles even before the Pacific War had ended. Such fears intensified soon after the two occupations had commenced their operations in Korea to predict that the Soviets, attracted by their historic desire for an ice-free port in East Asia, coveted control over the entire peninsula. The first «Conditions of Korea» report that the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) issued after its arrival on 8 September 1945 warned that the peninsula was a «powder keg ready to explode upon application of a spark» [United States Department of State 1969, p. 1049]. Similar statements frequently appeared throughout the five years that preceded the Korean War.

The first formal challenge to «textbook» narratives on the Korean War's origins appeared while the war was in progress, in 1952. At this time the journalist, I. F. Stone, published his *The Hidden History of the Korean War* [Stone 1952]. This, challenging the claim that the invasion had been a surprise, argued that there was sufficient evidence to conclude that the U.S. could not have been caught off guard. For example, he informed that the U.S. Admiral Roscoe H. Hillenkoetter had admitted as much at a press conference held soon after the fighting had begun. On this occasion he said that U.S. intelligence had felt that «conditions existed in Korea that could have meant an invasion this week or next» [Ibid., p. 2]. Stone then traced how both sides had been preparing for military confrontation months prior to June 1950. Indeed, it would have taken the DPRK months to assemble a force large enough to launch the invasion that the ROK and the U.S. accused them of making. How could the ROK and the U.S. have not noticed this? Reports drafted over this period, Stone argues, suggested that they had.

Stone also cited a number of occasions when the ROK government, as well, demonstrated knowledge of the DPRK's impending attack [Ibid., p. 13]. Over the months prior to June 1950, ROK officials had been beg-

10. A number of these rumours spread through letters passed between Koreans and Japanese to acquaintances in Korea and Japan. Excerpts of these letters, intercepted and read by U.S. occupation officials, can be found in the seven-volume set of G-2 Periodic Report [Asia Munhwa Yon'guso 1988].

ging the U.S. for weapons to counter a possible invasion. Fears that Rhee would use the weapons to launch an attack north prevented the U.S. from obliging him. The U.S. had, however, provided the ROK with assurances of assistance, should it become necessary. This assurance was something that President Rhee had long sought and received from MacArthur during the Korean president's visits to Tokyo in early October 1948, and most probably in February 1950, as well as on other occasions. The following March, Rhee vowed at a March First Movement commemorative rally that he would «recover North Korea» [Chungan ilbo 1950, March 1, p. 238]. Just days before the start of the war, on 19 June, John Foster Dulles, then advisor to the U.S. Secretary of State, had declared before the Korean National Assembly that Korea «was not alone» in its struggles against communism [Ibid., p. 17]<sup>11</sup>.

Stone notes that from Seoul Dulles flew to Tokyo where, upon landing, he told reporters that he expected something «positive» from his scheduled talks with MacArthur. He predicted that «positive action» would be taken to preserve the peace of the Far East. Stone suggests that the «positive action» to which Dulles referred could have meant the U.S. sending warning to the communist bloc against committing any belligerent acts. However, given that the war broke out soon after Dulles' statement, according to Stone the «action» that Dulles had in mind was something more concrete, such as a large-scale U.S. intervention against communism in the region [Ibid., p. 27]. Stone concludes that, like the Spanish-American War of 1898, mysteries remain as to who started the belligerence, as well as whether the United States had been drawn into it [Ibid., p. 345]<sup>12</sup>.

Two decades later, Jon Halliday, writing in the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, drew attention to Stone's work. While acknowledging the importance of his efforts, Halliday considered Stone to have been «rather apolitical», and, thus, his work required a «rigorous reexamination». In particular Halliday objected to Stone's use of the word «satellite» to describe the DPRK relationship with the Soviet Union, as well as the rather favourable treatment that he had given President Truman at the time, a man the journalist had described as one who would not do deliberate harm, a man who was a «victim of both the circumstances and forces stronger than himself». Halliday argued the need for a «Marxist history of the Korean War», one that would tell the story more from the Korean people's perspective, one that would see the war's beginning with the arrival of the American military in 1945 as well as the DPRK's attempt to liberate the people of the south [Halliday 1973, p. 36]. Halliday does point out a contradiction in the DPRK's claim that it had responded to an initial ROK attack but then em-

11. During his visit to the ROK, Dulles visited the thirty-eighth parallel just days before the three-year war erupted. For a picture of Dulles peering into the DPRK see Cumings [2010, p. 7].

12. Stone quoted newly appointed Ambassador to Moscow, George F. Kennan, as making this analogy at the University of Chicago in 1951.



phasizes that it fought to liberate the south. He then also details the support that southern communists had given once the peninsula became engulfed in war, as former southern communist leader, Pak Hon-yong, gave to Kim Il Sung prior to the war [Ibid., p. 39]. Halliday in 1988 then teamed with Bruce Cumings, who at the time was completing his own history on the war, to produce a six-part documentary on the war titled *Korea: The Unknown War* [Halliday and Cumings 1988]. The content was then published in a book [Halliday and Cumings 1990].

Soon after, Bruce Cumings published the second of his two-volume history titled the *Origins of the Korean War* that further challenged the text-book origins of the war. The depth and breathe of his study continue to influence scholars of this war, even to those who disagree with his arguments<sup>13</sup>. To properly understand the war, Cumings argued, scholars had to understand the indigenous origins of the war rather than seeing it as a part of a more global cause. He did so by tracing indigenous activities in Korea over the five years leading up to all-out war in 1950, that is, from at least the point of Korea's liberation, if not earlier [Cumings 1981, p. xx]. He explains:

The basic issues over which the war in 1950 was fought were apparent immediately after liberation, within a three-month period, and led to open fighting that eventually claimed more than one hundred thousand lives in peasant rebellion, labor strife, guerrilla warfare, and open fighting along the thirty-eighth parallel—all this before the ostensible Korean War began. In other words, the conflict was civil and revolutionary in character, beginning just after 1945 and proceeding through a dialectic of revolution and reaction. The opening of conventional battles in June 1950 only continued this war by other means [Ibid., p. xxi].

Cumings devotes a full chapter in his second volume to Dean Acheson's January 1950 Press Club speech. Here, Cumings suggests, the Secretary of State purposely excluded the U.S. responsibility to defend Korea in an effort to lure the DPRK into attacking south. The speech outlined the area to which the U.S. was committed to defending in East Asia by drawing a defence perimeter that extended from the Aleutian Islands off of Alaska to the Philippine Islands and passing through Japan. His leaving out the Korean Peninsula, Cumings argues, gave the DPRK a «green light» to advance south of the thirty-eighth parallel. Acheson did not entirely erase Korea from U.S. interests but stated that, should the ROK be attacked, «the initial reliance must be on the people attacked to resist it» [Cumings 1990, p. 421-22]<sup>14</sup>. Cumings reconstructs peasant rebellions that broke out in southern

13. Cumings published his two volumes in 1981 and 1990.

14. Acheson does not mention this speech in his account of the war cited above, the narrative for which he starts from the weekend of 24-25 June.

Korea from 1945, which were followed by guerrilla warfare<sup>15</sup>, and many of which drew on labour issues between peasants and the landed classes, as well as between those who espoused extreme leftist versus extreme rightist thinking. These battles then expanded into border insurrections between the ROK and the DPRK that began soon after the two Koreas formed sovereign states in August (ROK) and in September (DPRK) 1948. Many of these advances, which Cumings argues provided the «setting for June 1950», resulted from ROK's initiatives. One particular attack in mid-July worried U.S. authorities that it might trigger an all-out war. Cumings concluded that this July attack and other such incidents did not result in war because the DPRK was not yet ready to engage the ROK in such an extended confrontation at the time; by June 1950, however, it was [Ibid., p. 388-98].

The Japanese have been relatively quiet in researching such questions; their histories generally reflect the idea that the attack came suddenly from the north. With an interest in separating the war from their colonial history of Korea and having more immediate concerns following their devastating defeat in the Pacific War, perhaps this is not entirely surprising. One important exception, however is research conducted by University of Tokyo professor Wada Haruki whose efforts took him to examine the Soviet connections to the war. Originally trained in Russian studies, his interests gravitated toward post-war Soviet-DPRK relations. Some of Wada's conclusions regarding the Korean War concur with those of Cumings; others do not. Where Cumings emphasizes the indigenous elements in the war's origins, Wada focuses on the regional elements in terming the conflict the «Northeast Asian War». Like Cumings, his research briefly touches on the pre-June 1950 fighting in which the two Koreas engaged, such as the 1949 border insurrections [Wada 2014, pp. 21-25], and traces DPRK initiatives for war, rather than citing the war as a Soviet Union initiative. Using DPRK documents captured by the United States during the war he traces the northern plan to attack ROK forces along the thirty-eighth parallel from 4:40 A.M. on 25 June. He carries the translation of a lengthy telegram sent on 26 June by the Soviet Ambassador to the DPRK, Terentii Shtykov, to the First Deputy Chief of the Soviet General Staff Matvei Vasil'evich Zakharov in Moscow. The telegram outlined the DPRK «preparation and progress» over the days leading up to the attack [Ibid., pp. 76-77].

Wada sees this telegram as the «smoking gun» that demonstrates the DPRK culpability for the fighting that broke out on 25 June, even though he cites Kim Il Sung as describing the attack the following day as a «counterattack» against the «puppet forces of the traitor Syngman Rhee» [Ibid., p. 78]. While Wada's study expands the war's narrative to a wider degree than the limited discussion of the «textbook» narratives, his focus is mostly directed

15. John Merrill's research examines one of the larger battles that took place on Cheju Island from early 1948 to trace its connections with the June 1950 war [Merrill 1989].

toward the war itself, rather than to discussions on the events that led to the 25 June start of conventional war.

Another challenge to Cumings work is that by William Stueck who focuses on the international side of the war. Like Cumings and Wada, he briefly traces the war from Korea's post-liberation history, but cites the DPRK as the force that triggered the war. The attack, he argues should not have come as a surprise to the ROK or United States forces; there had been plenty of warnings of this possibility beforehand [Stueck 1995, p. 10]. Stueck acknowledges that the war may have started out as a civil conflict, but within a week it turned international. Thus, it is this aspect of the war that requires our attention. He explains:

What had begun as a conflict between Koreans aimed at eradicating the division of their country soon became a struggle of broad international proportions, one that threatened to escalate into a direct confrontation between the West and the Soviet bloc [Ibid., p. 13].

Stueck questions whether the war could have been fought without international participation. In this sense the difference between Cumings and Stueck is the former placing more emphasis on the indigenous elements of the war, and the latter on the international elements. It is not that Cumings ignores the role of the two Koreas' international partners, but he claims that without the local Korean elements the possibilities of a Korean War outbreak were nil – basically the opposite of what Stueck argues.

Most recently, British author A. B. Abrams has advanced the idea that the U.S. had more to gain than either the Soviet Union and China in war erupting on the Korean Peninsula and thus the possibility of a war being initiated by the ROK was greater than that by the DPRK. He argues as follows:

While the outbreak of war in Korea was key to ensuring the survival of the Rhee government in the south, and had considerable strategic and economic benefits for the United States, the conflict created immense difficulties for both Moscow and Beijing [Abrams 2020, p. 53].

Abrams' study, which offers a unique perspective on the war, fails to consider evidence made available with the brief opening of Russian and Chinese archives from the 1990s, as well as the secondary research that has emerged since.

#### *4. Documents from the Soviet and Chinese archives*

A third major wave of rethinking the Korean War was initiated by the release of telegraphs and other documents from the Soviet and Chinese archives from the early 1990s, just around the time the Cold War drew to a close. Prior to this time, memoirs left by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrush-

chev published in 1970 as *Khrushchev Remembers* served as the most important source for understanding Soviet, Chinese, and DPRK connections prior to the war. Russian President Boris Yeltsin initiated these efforts to unseal relevant documents when he brought to Seoul while on a state visit in 1994 a box of telegrams that had been exchanged between Moscow, Beijing, and P'yŏngyang in the days before and after 25 June<sup>16</sup>. Since this time a large number of telegrams and official documents have also been released. Kathryn Weathersby, who assumed a lion's share of the Russian to English translations of the telegram collection, explains that since that time «documentary evidence on the Korean War has been enriched even more by the release of virtually the entire collection of high-level documents on the war declassified by the Presidential Archive in Moscow, which numbers approximately 1,200 pages» [Weathersby 1995/1996, p. 30]. This new evidence has been exploited by scholars who have written on Korean and Chinese issues, as well as on Eastern European countries, and whose research has been collected into a series of «working papers» published by the Cold War International History Project, organized by the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C.

Professor Chen Jian, from Cornell University, is one of these scholars. His research completely revised our knowledge of China's decision to enter the Korean War. Prior to this time, Allen S. Whiting's 1960 study titled *China Crosses the Yalu* had been the most authoritative work on this critical angle of the war. Whiting noted that certain factors, such as China's more important interest in absorbing Taiwan and a shortage of resources due to its having had to fight two wars, first against the Japanese and then against the Nationalist Chinese, made fighting another war difficult. Whiting lamented that the absence of documentation needed to determine why the Chinese communists had crossed the Yalu River to fight in Korea limited him to raising hypotheses rather than arriving at conclusive answers to this question. He posed that a strong possible reason for the Chinese decision to intervene was perhaps linked to their dependence on the Soviet Union's assistance should the U.S. continue its ambitions to rollback communism from the Chinese mainland. In this case, their participation in the war was secondary to their relations with their Korean communist ally [Whiting 1960, pp. 152-53]. Another possible concern was that if anti-DPRK forces succeeded in unifying the Korean Peninsula it would have placed U.S. and ROK forces at the Chinese border, something unacceptable to Beijing. According to Whiting, though, Mao's government did not participate in the war's planning and may not have known of the DPRK's plans beforehand. China's concerns at the time were more directed toward Taiwan and Tibet, rather than the Korean Peninsula [Ibid., p. 45].

16. In the early 1990s the Soviet Union and China both established relations with the ROK, to the dismay of the DPRK who felt betrayed by its long-time communist allies.

In 1994, Chen collected his findings into a monograph titled *China's Road to the Korean War*, where he concluded that China was more involved in the war's planning than previously imagined. Chen contends that not only did China know of the DPRK's plans, but also that Mao had approved of them, perhaps reluctantly, in advance. Stalin had directed Kim to seek Mao's approval for the attack and his willingness to come to its assistance if necessary as a prerequisite of the DPRK leader gaining Soviet assistance. Kim visited Mao in Beijing in May 1950 when the Chinese leader promised Kim the support he needed to get Stalin's approval and assistance. Unbeknown to Kim at this time, Stalin had most likely been holding discussions with Mao on the Korean issue and on the concrete possibility of war. One question of controversy appears to have been the two leaders' thoughts on whether the U.S. would intervene. Reports on whether Mao feared this or not are mixed, but by January 1950, and particularly after the aforementioned Acheson Press Club speech, he had become convinced that the U.S. would not interfere should the two Koreas go to war against each other. Chen suggests that, at the time, the Soviets and the Chinese had been developing close relations and thus had become dependent on each other in their struggles with the U.S. [Chen 1994, pp. 85-91]. The two leaders continued to communicate up through, and after, the start of the war.

Another angle to understand the Chinese participation in the war is its connection to the Stalin-Mao relationship. The Chinese Communist victory in October 1949 suddenly challenged Stalin's monopoly on control over the Asian communist movement. Kim Il Sung suggested as much in December 1949 when he threatened to turn to the Chinese for help if the Soviets refused to assist him [Torcov 2001, p. 89]. Could this have influenced Stalin's positive response to Kim at this time? According to Chen Jian, it was only after Mao's visit to Moscow in December 1949<sup>17</sup>, and only after the two communist giants signed a treaty of alliance and friendship, that Stalin agreed to talk with Kim regarding a possible invasion of the ROK. Their new partnership, the Chinese leader felt, could serve as a deterrent to a possible U.S. aggression [Chen 1994, p. 90-91]. Chen further claims that the exchanges between Beijing and Moscow occurred at a time when the roots of their divergences perhaps began to sprout. He writes:

In addition to the usual troubles between any partners (such as the differences in each other's strategic emphasis, and the gap between one's

17. This was Mao's first overseas trip since the Chinese communist victory in October of that year. He stayed in Moscow until February 1950. Just prior to his visit Mao announced his lean-to-one-side policy where he pledged that China would side with Soviet foreign policy, rather than seek alliance with the United States [Shen and Xia 2015, pp. 33-35]. Although the two communist leaders signed a Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, the Soviet leader's reception of his Chinese counterpart was less than cordial. The Western press even speculated that Mao was being kept under «house arrest» in Moscow. Shen and Xia offer a detailed survey of Mao's visit [Ibid., pp. 48-56].

need for support and the other's ability to offer aid), an important source of differences between Beijing and Moscow lay in the conflicting personalities of Mao and Stalin. The reality created by the [Chinese] lean-to-one-side policy became particularly uneasy for Mao when he had to play the role as Stalin's junior in direct exchanges with the Soviets, especially in face-to-face discussions with Stalin himself. One finds here the early clues of the divergence between Beijing and Moscow during the Korean crisis and, in the long-run, of the process leading to a Sino-Soviet split [Ibid., p. 91].

In addition to new revelations on China's participation in the war, these documents have also afforded a clearer picture of Soviet concerns as well. Kathryn Weathersby has written a number of papers that draw on the telegrams as well as on the documents that she found in the Russian archives and that together have enriched our understanding of the Soviet position regarding the war at this time. At the same time, they expose holes in the «textbook» narratives of the war that the U.S. advanced, and Japan adopted.

While the documents strengthen arguments that the DPRK attacked first, they also show quite persuasively that it was Kim Il Sung who made initial attempts to convince a reluctant Stalin to support his ambitions to attack the ROK. Kim first attempted this in March 1949, just around the time when the U.S. and the Soviet militaries were scheduled to retreat from the Korean Peninsula. At that time Stalin, through his ambassador to the DPRK, Terentii Shtykov, responded by saying that the timing was not yet right: the ROK military remained superior; Kim should wait for the ROK to make the first move [Weathersby 1995, pp. 1, 2-9].

As mentioned above, Kim tried a second time in December 1949. By this time the situation had changed dramatically. The Soviet Union had joined the U.S. as a nuclear power in September, and the Chinese civil war had ended with the communist victory in October. The three leaders felt that these developments would lessen the chances of the U.S. entering a war in the region. Stalin gave Kim a positive response to his request in January 1950 and in late February he dispatched Lieutenant-General Vasiliev to take over the responsibility of main advisor of the DPRK army [Ibid., p. 17]. Kim travelled to Moscow to meet Stalin in late March of that year. However, only summaries, rather than a complete transcript, of the meeting have survived. Stalin confirmed to Kim that changes in the international environment had worked in their favour, specifically the Chinese Communist victory and the recently forged Sino-Soviet Treaty. Still, he raised two problematic issues: The possibility of the U.S. joining the war and the Chinese supporting the DPRK's efforts. Kim responded first in the negative – the U.S. would not join if it knew that the DPRK had Soviet and Chinese support, and then in the positive – Comrade Mao had long supported the DPRK's desire to unify the peninsula.

Stalin then turned to two prerequisites for DPRK's success: sufficient preparation and planning. Kim could count on Soviet support in these two areas but Moscow would not directly dispatch its armies to the battlefield. Stalin further cautioned Kim that Soviet support would be curtailed if the United States came to the ROK's rescue. Kim, however, assured the Soviet leader that this would not be possible as the war would not last long. Long-time southern communist leader, Pak Hon-yong, who had fled to north after being harassed by USAMGIK, accompanied Kim to Moscow, and later to Beijing. He had assured Kim that 200,000 southern guerrilla forces were ready to join the northern communists once the war started. Kim passed this information on to Stalin. Stalin urged Kim to discuss this operation with Mao to obtain his support. The report of this meeting ended with the two sides agreeing that concrete plans for the invasion would be finalized by the following summer [Weathersby 2002, pp. 9-11].

Stalin's thinking was that the operation would be an Asian affair, with the Chinese assisting the DPRK and the Japanese possibly assisting the ROK. The Soviets and the U.S. would assist the two Koreas from behind by providing them with military hardware and advice, but they would remain in the background rather than directly joining in the battles and risking provoking a larger world war. Even though the Soviet Union in 1949 had succeeded in becoming the second nuclear power it still remained an inferior one in terms of device numbers<sup>18</sup>.

In May 1950, Kim and Pak travelled to Beijing to meet with Mao Zedong as Stalin had directed. The Chinese leader raised the possibility that the Japanese would join the war: Would such a development affect the DPRK's plans in any way? Kim responded that it would: The Japanese coming to the ROK's assistance would motivate his armies to fight harder. Mao also voiced concern over the possibility of the U.S. entering the war, to which Kim responded that «the Americans do not show any inclination to engage themselves militarily in the Far East», as seen in their reluctance to enter the China civil war [Ibid., p. 12]. Mao emphasized to the DPRK leaders that the Chinese would come to their assistance only if necessary, that is, if the U.S. joined the battles. Later, after the U.S. had entered the war, Kim initially declined Mao's offer to send Chinese troops [Wada 2014, p. 61], at least until the U.S. advanced into DPRK territory in late September 1950. Mao's commitment was perhaps driven by the debt that he felt toward the DPRK who had sent forces to fight for China in its recent battles against Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces [Ibid.]. Overall, from these discussions between Kim, Stalin, and Mao emerges the three communist leaders' serious misreading of the United States' intentions regarding war breaking out in Korea.

18. A report penned by Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen has the U.S. in 1950 having as many as 299 nuclear weapons to the Soviet Union's 5 [Norris and Kristensen 2010, p. 81].

The original plan that Kim presented to Stalin did not necessarily involve the DPRK seeking to control the entire Korean Peninsula, but simply fighting to secure a modest adjustment in the ROK-DPRK line of division. This was important because the initial territory that the DPRK hoped to acquire, the Ongjin Peninsula, was the scene of much of the border disputes that the country fought with the ROK. Capturing this territory would also drastically reduce the DPRK'S border that it shared with the ROK and thus cut the area that it needed to protect.

Kim Kwang-soo of the Korean Military Academy argues against Cumings' claim that the gunfire exchanged by the two Koreas prior to 25 June constituted a part of the Korean War. He does, however, quote Stalin commenting that initiating battles at Ongjin would be useful as it would «help to disguise who initiated the combat activities» [Kim 2001, p. 14]. The scholar lays out the DPRK's four-stage plan that had its armies attacking and then swiftly moving to occupy the capital, Seoul, before advancing south toward Pusan [Ibid., p. 18].

Kim draws from two documents that at the time had not been considered as they had just recently been made public from the Soviet archives. The information they carried convinced him beyond doubt that the initial attack on 25 June came from the north, and Kim Il Sung's «counterattack» was in fact the aggressive action by the DPRK military that started the war. One document was authored by a Lieutenant-General Vladimir Razuvaev, Chief of the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces in P'yongyang. The general's report outlined attack plans drawn primarily by the Soviet Union. The second document was a war narrative from the day of attack through May 1951 compiled by the Soviet General Staff [Kim 2001, p. 13]. Here Kim found that the initial war plan had the DPRK military attacking south, representing the attack as a response to a ROK attack, and halting operations after occupying Seoul to leave the task of completing the invasion to the southern communists [Ibid., pp. 16-17]. The Razuvaev report in particular, if accurate, presents valuable evidence detailing the initial origins of the June 1950 fighting.

On June 25, units of the 3rd Border Security Brigade in the Ongjin peninsula stopped enemy attacks on the north of the 38th parallel by previously organized fires and, after executing preparatory artillery fires for 30 minutes, began to attack the enemy which had switched to defense. The Brigade advanced 2-2.5 km on the axis of the main attack around 6 o'clock [Ibid., p. 20].

Kim strengthens his arguments by comparing information contained in these newly-obtained documents against that of other documents previously made available, including DPRK documents that the U.S. captured during the war. His research demonstrates that the war was initiated for the sole purpose of peninsular unification; although the Soviets played a



major role in helping the Koreans develop the war plans, Stalin appears to have had no further ambitions to extending the war beyond the Korean Peninsula. He is also critical of those such as Cumings who have argued that the war's roots had been sowed years earlier, from the time of Korea's liberation. He admits that definitive knowledge of the actual events can only be based on indirect reports rather than those from direct witnesses. Like others looking at Soviet and Chinese documents, Kim fails to consider an equally important side of the Korean War narrative: the ambitions and actions of the ROK over this time.

There is also hard evidence showing that Kim Il Sung had learned that the ROK knew of his plans to attack and thus he had to quickly revise this initial plan. This adds question to the ROK claim that the DPRK attack was sudden, a surprise. As John Foster Dulles peered across the thirty-eighth into the DPRK, Shtykov cabled Moscow to report to Stalin that a frantic Kim Il Sung was ranting that the ROK had uncovered his plans of attack. He had, therefore, to change the plan to extend the attack across the entire width of the Peninsula. The Soviet Ambassador explained:

The Southerners have learned the details of the forthcoming advance of the [Korean People's Army]. As a result, they are taking measures to strengthen the combat of their troops. Defence lines are reinforced and additional units are concentrated in the Ongjin direction... Instead of a local operation at Ongjin peninsula as a prelude to a general offensive, Kim Il Sung suggests an overall attack on 25 June along the whole front line [Torcov 2001, p. 119; Weathersby 2002, p. 15].

That the ROK was on to the DPRK's plans and believed by the north to be preparing an attack is verified in a lengthy two-volume history of the war by ROK scholar Pak Myŏng-rim [Pak 2003, p. 388-89]. This piece of information obscures our understanding on who fired the initial shot. Both sides had their guns readied to fire across the parallel on the morning of 25 June.

Pak's massive study is perhaps the most complete account of the war in Korean historiography. As with other scholars whose research has benefited from the new findings from newly released documents, Pak clearly states at the onset of his study that there can no longer be any doubt that it was the DPRK that first launched the attack on June 1950 [Ibid., p. 34]. Yet, the origins of the war, he argues, run deeper. His study also argues that the social ideological changes occurring on either side during the years prior to the war to be relevant to the war's origins, primarily from the time of the 1948 order (48 *nyŏn chilsŏ*) over which time the DPRK and the ROK developed into separate states. Pak claims that this point differs from those who approach the war from a foreign diplomatic perspective [Ibid., p. 42].

### 5. *The ROK ambitions up through June 1950*

Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis, after sifting through research produced from the new information that briefly poured out of the Chinese and Russian archives, titled his revised history of this period *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*. Concerning the Korean War origins, he writes that «after repeated attempts, Kim got the green light from Stalin early in 1950, while all Rhee received from Washington were yellow lights shading over into red» [Gaddis 1998, p. 71]. True, this is the general narrative of the war's origins, and it does correctly reveal that Rhee (unsuccessfully) tried to engage the United States in a war previous to June 1950. However, from this new evidence we have learned far more on the DPRK ambitions than those of the ROK. With the important exception of few, such as Bruce Cumings and A. B. Abrams, the actions of Syngman Rhee and other ROK officials leading up to the Korean War have been neglected. As there are many unanswered (perhaps unanswerable) holes regarding this side of the story, we are limited to address them as questions, rather than facts [Caprio 2011].

What is known is that Korean President Syngman Rhee was just as eager, if not more so, to initiate battles to unite the two halves of the Korean Peninsula; he also refused to join the DPRK, China, and the UN Command in signing the July 1953 Armistice, a cease fire that ended the fighting but not the war. Rather, Rhee tried to prolong the war. By the time the Korean War erupted Rhee had caused a number of disturbances that contributed to the peninsula's division. Indeed, it seemed that division followed the time he left Korea to live what would amount to close to four decades overseas from the 1910s. The divisions that he caused as the first president of the Korean Provisional Government (KPG), formed by overseas Koreans in Shanghai, China in 1919, forced a number of important cabinet members to leave the political body in the early 1920s Rhee was eventually driven from office but would serve as the KPG's representative in Washington, D.C. during the Pacific War. With General MacArthur's assistance, he returned to southern Korea in October 1945, earlier than other overseas Korean leaders. Perhaps calculating that he could not win an election with the entire peninsula voting, he became one of the first, if not the first, to advance the idea of a separate southern Korean state. His role in the anti-trusteeship movement from early 1946 was a prime factor for the breakup of the United States-Soviet Union Joint Commission that was to consult with peninsular democratic groups to form a united Korean government<sup>19</sup>. Rhee and other Korean politicians objected to the idea that a weak Korean state would be

19. The U.S.-Soviet Joint Commission, which met over 60 times and dragged on into October 1947, broke down in a disagreement over which Korean groups the Commission should consult to form a unified provisional government: with the Soviet Delegation insisting that any group that expressed disagreement with the process not be eligible for consultation, and the U.S. countering that the democratic right to free

subjected to up to five years of trusteeship tutelage in responsible political governance and economic policy to ensure that it would not become the centre of regional power efforts to control the peninsula as had been the case in the decades leading up to its annexation by Japan in 1910. A plan to place the peninsula under trusteeship that would last up to five years prior to Korea gaining its sovereignty was drawn up in December 1945 by the foreign ministers of the U.S., the Soviet Union, and Great Britain who met in Moscow to resolve lingering World War II issues. The U.S.-Soviet Commission that was formed soon after met for two years to enact this plan, but even before the Commission disbanded in October 1947, the U.S. petitioned the United Nation's Security Council to address the Korean issue. The Soviet Union refusal to cooperate with the Council's efforts led to both states holding separate elections, which led to the formation of the ROK (August) and the DPRK (September). Rhee refused to recognize eleventh-hour efforts by his two major rivals, Kim Ku and Kim Kyu-sic, to negotiate with the northern Koreans a plan to unify the Korean state. This occurred just before the May 1948 elections, which caused the two Kims to boycott the elections and thus handing Rhee the presidency virtually unopposed.

Over the two years between the formation of the ROK and the beginning of the Korean War, Rhee initiated numerous discussions with U.S. officials, and planned and carried out numerous attempts to invade the north. One such discussion that the president held with U.S. Ambassador John Muccio took place in February 1949, just before the U.S. withdrew most of its military personnel from the ROK. At this time Rhee put forth his arguments as to why the ROK forces were ready for battle: The ROK could increase its armed forces by 100,000 if they enlisted Korean soldiers who had fought against the Japanese in the Pacific War and against the Chinese Communists in China's yet unfinished civil war. The ROK army's morale, he estimated, was stronger than that of DPRK soldiers; should the ROK attack first it could expect to benefit from mass enemy defections. Muccio's response left open the possibility of an ROK attack, but only after the U.S. forces had withdrawn. He warned Rhee against initiating such an operation while U.S. troops remained on Korean soil [United States Department of State 1976, 956-958]. The ROK president, honoured this warning only partially. The ROK's attempts to engage the DPRK in battle by initiating border insurrections began from May 1949, a month before the U.S. withdrew the majority of its troops from southern Korea in June. Cumings writes that these battles took «hundreds of lives and embroil[ed] thousands of troops». He argues that the ROK engaged in these battles to prolong the presence of U.S. troops, on which, according to an Army G-2 study, «their own positions, fortunes, and perhaps even their lives depended» [Cumings 1990, p. 388].

speech should allow as many groups as possible to participate, even if they voiced objections to the system.

A second question revolves around Rhee's February 1950 visit to Tokyo to meet with General Douglas MacArthur. MacArthur served as commander of the U.S. forces in the Northeast Asian region and oversaw the U.S. occupation administrations in Japan directly, and in southern Korea indirectly. Upon arrival, Rhee indicated at a press conference that his intention for visiting Tokyo at this time was to improve relations with the Japanese in an effort to strengthen the frontline against the communist threat. The ROK president, who enjoyed close relations with MacArthur – he was given use of the general's private plane, the *Bataan*, on multiple occasions – met often with the general during his visit. Transcripts of their discussions, however, do not exist. Wada Haruki cites MacArthur as mentioning the possibility of the U.S. using nuclear weapons should China or Russia enter the war [Wada 2002, p. 127]. Rhee did include hints of these discussions in a letter to Robert Oliver, a long-time close friend and confidant who would author a number of biographies on Rhee. In a letter that Rhee titled «military problems», he included the following paragraph that summarized in part his discussions with MacArthur.

When I was in Tokyo I made the statement [to MacArthur] that Russia is supplying the Northern forces and that Russia is pressing them to invade the South as soon as “the dust settles in China”. You know that there was nothing new in that statement because the Soviets have continually supplied the North. However, at the present moment the Soviets do not wish to be accused of this complicity, and that is exactly why I made the statement. As a result, the order has been given from Moscow to withdraw all forces from the North during the next two months [Rhee to Oliver, March 1950].

Unfortunately, Rhee does not offer any hints as to MacArthur's reaction. But this short excerpt of a rather lengthy letter clearly demonstrates that the two discussed the possibility of the United States assisting the ROK in the case of war. It also suggests, with less clarity, that Rhee and MacArthur had direct information on Soviet-DPRK discussions<sup>20</sup>. It is important to note that Rhee visited Tokyo after Stalin had agreed to support Kim in January 1950, but before the two communist leaders actually got together in Moscow later that year. Unfortunately, the little information available on the Kim-Stalin meeting is still more than that available on the Rhee-MacArthur

20. Rhee's remarks must be read with a degree of caution. Even during the war, as well as after Japan's surrender, he was known for making exaggerated statements to U.S. officials in order to obtain his goals, most often confirmation of U.S. support for Korean governments. However, as demonstrated in the *HQ, USAFIK Intelligence Summary, Northern Korea*, a three-volume collection of intelligence reports on northern Korea, mostly drafted by spies in the north and gathered before the Korean War, the U.S. had access to sensitive information regarding military matters in northern Korea.

discussions. Soon after returning to the ROK, on 1 March and on other occasions, Rhee again urged his country to attack the north [Cumings 1990, p. 481; Abrams 2020, pp. 43–47]. The various hints of Rhee's intentions in the years prior to June 1950 strongly suggest the need for a more complete account of the war from ROK sources. A number of the telegrams, for example, describe Kim Il Sung as acting hysterical while he requested Stalin's assistance. Whether these outbursts by Kim can be linked to DPRK military encounters with the ROK military requires consideration.

## 6. *Japan's role in the Korean war*

Another angle of the Korean War's origins that has received more attention as of recent is the role played by Japan. The pacifist terms of Japan's surrender in 1945, as well as its 1947 post-war «peace» constitution that forbade the Japanese from forming a military, on paper prohibited Japan from participating in this war. Yet, as we have seen, both the Soviets and the Chinese not only anticipated the possibility of Japan's intervention, but during the war Moscow even brought before the United Nations the accusation that Japan was participating in the war<sup>21</sup>. It is fair to question the degree to which the United States would have engaged its militaries in the war had it not been able to enlist Japanese assistance as, to use a Korean scholar's words, a «base-state» [*kichi kukka*] [Nam 2018]. Yet, Japan's proximity to the Korean Peninsula, as well as the dismal condition of its economy, presented the islands as an ideal case for what University of Chicago professor Paul Poast termed the «Iron Law of War» – «the idea that war produces economic booms» [Poast 2005]. Japan's underuse of resources, both human and material, were problems that the Korean War helped resolve. Indeed, the one point emphasized in Japanese and Korean textbooks regarding Japan's participation in the war was the war's role in driving the initial stage of Japan's post-war economic recovery [ARKS 2000, p. 298; Kim et al 2014, p. 381].

The explanation of Japan's participation in the Korean War goes beyond the economic gains that the war brought to the archipelago. It also can be seen as the beginning of the rejuvenation of the Japanese military. With the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, Japan created a 75,000-man National Police Reserve and dramatically increased the size of its coast

21. The Soviet Union had solid evidence from Japanese captured and killed in the early years of the war that the Japanese were engaged in the fighting [Ōnuma 2006; Nishimura 2004; Fujiwara 2020]. It must be noted that a larger number of Japan-based Koreans, many of whom spoke Japanese but not Korean [Kim 2007] and could have been mistaken for Japanese, also fought, and died, on the peninsula. A small number of Japanese found themselves briefly fighting with the Chinese, as well, on the Korean Peninsula [Yamaguchi 2006].

guard, both at the United States insistence<sup>22</sup>. Japan also contributed to the U.S.'s September landing at In'chŏn and elsewhere by sending minesweepers to the harbours to clear the mines to allow for the landings. This caused a number of Japanese deaths as a Landing Ship Tank [LST] exploded after it contacted mines during these operations. Japanese who had been employed at Japan-based U.S. military bases followed U.S. units to the peninsula and were even given weapons to use during DPRK attacks. Funerals for the deceased Japanese were held often in secret; families were also kept in the dark over the circumstances that the deceased had experienced in Korea.

The U.S. bases in Japan increased both in size and number during the war, thus offering unemployed Japanese work at higher-than-average wages. U.S. aircraft left from Japanese bases to fly aerial bombing raids on Korean cities, mostly in the DPRK but also in the ROK. Finally, Japan created or expanded facilities to entertain soldiers granted Rest and Recuperation (R & R) leave from the war. This alone added hundreds of millions of dollars every year of the war to a Japanese economy that graciously welcomed the hard currency that the soldiers paid for the services provided by Japan's «water industry» (bars, hotels, and brothels and the like) [Norma 2020, p. 370]. On the one hand, Japan, still under U.S. occupation for most of the war, had no choice but to submit to U.S. demands at this time. On the other hand, as indicated by Yoshida's call for Japan's full cooperation noted above, it also did so most willingly, and benefitted quite handsomely in the process<sup>23</sup>.

### 7. Conclusion: Unanswered questions to the Korean war's origins

Barbara F. Walter [2022], in her study on civil wars, argues that they tend to break out when a society finds itself in-between autocracy and democracy, when a people have gained a sense of the benefits of a democratic society but are blocked from attaining this society by rival forces. She argues that such conflicts, which gradually evolve rather than suddenly break out, result from the conflicting sides hardening their views, instead of compromising. Walter's arguments can be useful to explain the situation that the Korean people faced just after their liberation from colonial rule. Over the years that followed Japan's defeat and Korea's liberation and occupation, the Soviet Union and the U.S. quickly threw their support behind extremist politics that displayed no interest in negotiating, much less compromising, to reunite the peninsula. Not only did the two occupiers fail to deliver in their promise to guide Koreans in the mechanics of responsible politics and eco-

22. This National Police force expanded in 1954 to form Japan's Self-Defence Forces (*jieitai*), which now has over 250,000 active members.

23. Yoshida, and others, famously saw the war as a «gift» in its timing.

nomics. Their administrations soon supported leaders who mirrored their respective interests, too: the U.S. to contain the spread of communism and the Soviet Union to form a buffer zone against possible attacks in Asia. Both superpowers appear to have been satisfied with the status quo; it was the Koreans who aimed to reunify the peninsula through war after peaceful means had failed.

The two Koreas could not have contemplated initiating belligerence against their rival without the help of their patron superpower. Documentary evidence shows that in the end a reluctant Stalin agreed to work with Kim Il Sung to launch such an attack. Yet, Stalin also insisted that the Soviet Army would not enter the fighting, and he predicted that the U.S. would not, as well. The Soviet leader did not want to go down in history as the instigator of World War III. Thus, both the U.S. and the Soviets erred in their assumptions about each other: the U.S. in placing the total blame on the Soviets' shoulders for using the attack as an initial step in a wider effort, and the Soviets in assuming that the U.S. would stay out of this Asian war as it had the civil war in China. Documents released in the 1990s have increased our knowledge of the Soviet-DPRK-China triangle, none more importantly perhaps than the content of the meetings that Kim held with Stalin and then with Mao in early 1950. This increases the importance that the February 1950 MacArthur-Rhee talks, as well as those that may have included Japanese Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, may bring to our understanding of the war's origins.

This review suggests that discussions on the origins of the war, for the most part, remain fixated on the events of the last weekend of June 1950<sup>24</sup>. Thus, the emphasis remains on the surrounding international community rather than on the two Korean states, which had been engaged in battles along the thirty-eighth parallel for at least one year in advance. Both sides had had to deal with «domestic» insurrections from the time of the U.S. and Soviet arrivals in 1945. Both halves entertained suspicions that the other had plans to attack in the near future. The leaders of both Koreas had voiced on numerous occasions their willingness to attack the other ever since the states had been created in mid-1948. And both leaders sought the support of their former occupier to carry out an attack. Perhaps, the best conclusions to draw is that first, we will never know who initiated the fighting on 25 June 1950, and second, determining this may be of secondary importance to our understanding of this rivalry in a broader perspective,

24. More recently discussion regarding the Korean War have moved to different topics. One special issue of the *Journal of Korean Studies* edited by Charles Armstrong [2013] includes articles on the Armistice agreement. A book edited by Tessa Morris-Suzuki [2018] contains chapters on how the war affected neighbouring countries including Japan. Japanese and Korean scholars have also been active in researching Japan's role in the war [In Korean Yi 2003, Nam 2016; in Japanese Ishimaru 2008, Fujiwara 2020].

from Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule onwards. The legacy of the Korean War lives through the division of the peninsula and the present DPRK nuclear potential, the former initiated by the U.S. in the closing days of the Pacific War and the latter the communist state's answer to U.S. threats to use nuclear weapons both during the war and its aftermath.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abrams, A. B. 2020, *Immovable Object: North Korea's 70 Years at War with American Power*. Athens: Clarity Press.
- Acheson, D. 1969 *The Korean War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company).
- [ARKS 2000] (A New History Textbook). Tokyo: Shibanhon.
- [AS 1950a] '吉田 芦田会談—首相、協調外交を要望' (Yoshida-Ashida Talks: The Prime Minister Requests Supporting Diplomacy) June 27, 1950.
- [AS 1950b] '吉田首相、施政方針録説 国内体制を講和へ平和貢献国連に協力' (Prime Minister Yoshida, Speech on Administrative Policy, Toward a Peace Treaty in Domestic System through Cooperation with the United Nations Contribution toward Peace) 15 July 1950.
- Armstrong, C. ed. 2013. 'Thematic issue: The End of the War? The Korean Armistice after Sixty Years', *The Journal of Korean Studies* 18(2).
- Caprio, M. E., 2011, 'Neglected Questions on the 'Forgotten War': South Korea and the United States on the Eve of the Korean War', *Asia Pacific Journal/Japan Focus* (e-journal).
- Chen J., 1994, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-Soviet Confrontation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Chungan ilbo, comp., 1996, 米軍CIC 情報報告書1 (United States CIC Information Reports), Seoul: Chonggu ilbo Hyōngdae Sayōnguso.
- CSTS 3 1996] (Korean History vol. 3) 1996 P'yōngyang: Weigukmun Ch'ulpansa.
- Cumings, B., 1981, *The Origins of the Korean War, Volume 1: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945—1947*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cumings, B., 1990. *The Origins of the Korean War, Volume 2: The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947—1950*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dingman, R., 1993, 'The Dagger and the Gift: The Impact of the Korean War on Japan', *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*. Spring(1), pp. 29-55.
- Fujiwara, K., 2020, 朝鮮戦争を戦った日本人 (Japanese Who Fought in the Korean War), Tokyo: NHK shuppan.
- Gaddis, J. L., 1998, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goncharow S. N., John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, 1993, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Halliday, J., 1973, 'What Happened in Korea? Rethinking Korean History 1945-1953', *Bulletin of Concerned Korean Scholars*, 5(3): 36-44.
- Halliday, J. and Bruce Cumings, 1988, *Korea: The Unknown War*, London: Thames Television, (Documentary film).
- Halliday J., and Bruce Cumings, 1990, *Korea: The Unknown War*, New York: Penguin Books.



- Hallim Tachakkyō, Asia Munhwa Yōn'guso, 1988, HQ, USAFIK G-2 Periodic Report 在韓米軍情報日誌, Ch'unch'ōn: Hallim Tachakkyo, Ch'unch'ōn: Asia Munhwa Yōn'guso.
- Hallim Tachakkyo, Asia Munhwa Yōn'guso, HQ, USAFIK G-2 comp., 1988, *Periodic Report* / 韓美軍 情報日誌 Ch'unch'ōn: Hallim Tachakkyo, Asia Munhwa Yōn'guso.
- Ishimaru Y. 2008 朝鮮戦争と日本の関わり一忘れさられた海上輸送 (Japanese Involvement in the Korean War: The Forgotten Marine Transportation). *Bōeisho rekishi kenkyū nenpō* 11 (2008), 21-40.
- Kim K.-S., 2001, 'The North Korean War Plan and the Opening Phase of the Korean War: A Documentary Study', *International Journal of Korean Studies* V(1), pp. 11-33.
- Kim, S., 2007, 在日義湯兵帰還せず (Japan-based Korean Members of the Righteous Army Didn't Return), Tokyo: Iwanami shoten.
- Kurbanov, S. 2009. Istoriia Korei: s drevnosti do nachala XXI v. [History of Korea: from the ancient times to the beginning of the twentieth-first century], St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg University Press, 2009.
- Merrill, J. 1989 *Korea: Peninsular Origins of the War*, Newark: University of Delaware Press.
- Morris-Suzuki, T. 'Fire on the Other Shore?: Japan and the Korean War', in *The Korean War in Asia: A Hidden History*, Tessa Morris-Suzuki, ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.s
- Nam, K. 2016. 기지국가의 탄생-일본이 치른 한국전쟁 (The Birth of a Base-State: Japan's Korean War), Seoul, Sōul tachakkyo chulpa'n munhwawon.
- Nishimura, H., 2004, 朝鮮「に」に「に」した日本 (Japan's «War Participation» in the Korean War), Tokyo: Sanichi shobo.
- Norma, C. 'The Operation and Impact of the American Military's «R & R» Programme in Japan during the Korean War', *Asian Studies Review* 44(3), pp. 365-81.
- Norris, R. S. and Hans M. Kristensen, 2010, 'Global Nuclear Weapons Inventories, 1945—2010', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 66(4), pp. 77-83.
- Ōnuma H., (ed.), 朝鮮戦争と日本 (The Korean War and Japan), Tokyo: Shinkansha.
- Pak M., 2003, 한국전쟁의 발발과기원 (The Outbreak and Origins of the Korean War), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Seoul: Nanam.
- Poast P., 2005, *The Economics of War*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Renmin Jiaoyu Chubanshe Lishi shi, 2001, 入門 中国の歴史—中国中等学校歴史教科書 (Introduction to Chinese history: Chinese high school history textbook), transl. Kojima Shinji et al, Tokyo: Akaishi shoten.
- Renmin Jiaoyu Chubanshe Lishi shi, 2004. 中国の歴史—中国高等学校歴史教科書 (Chinese history: Chinese high school history textbook), transl. Kojima Shinji et al, Tokyo: Akaishi shoten.
- 'Rhee to Oliver' (8 March 1950). The Syngman Rhee Presidential Papers, Seoul: Yonsei University, File 83, #01260015.
- Robinson, R. D., 2023, 'Betrayal of a Nation.' in Frank Hoffmann and Mark E. Caprio, *Witness to Korea 1946-47: The Unfolding of an Authoritarian Regime*. Berkeley, CA: Academia Publishers.
- Samsonov A., June 2012, 'The Forgotten War of 1950-1953'. *Voennoe obozrenie*, online journal.
- Samuels, R. J., 2007, *Securing Japan: Tokyo's Grand Strategy and the future of East Asia*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

- Stone, I. F. (1952). *The Secret History of the Korean War*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Stueck, W. 2002. *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Stueck, W. 1995 *The Korean War: An International History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Torcov, A. V. 2001, 朝鮮戦争の謎と真実—金日成・スターリン・毛沢東の秘密電報による (Truth and Riddles Regarding the Korean War: Based on Kim Il Sung, Stalin, and Mao Zedong's Secret Telegrams, trans. Shimatamai Nobuo and Kim Sŏngho), Tokyo: Soshinsha.
- United States Army Forces in Korea, 1989, *HQ, USAFIK Intelligence Summary Northern Korea*, Ch'unch'ŏn: Hallim T'achakkyo, Asia Munhwa Yŏn'guso.
- United States Department of State, 1967, 'The Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Hariman) to the Acting Secretary of State', (27 December 1945), *Foreign Relations of the United States 1945*, General Political and Economic Matters, vol. II, Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office.
- United States Department of State, 1969, 'The Political Adviser in Korea (Benninghoff) to the Secretary of State', (15 September 1945), *Foreign Relations of the United States 1945*, The British Commonwealth, The Far East, Vol. VI, Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office.
- U.S. News and World Report* 1950. 'Korea: The «Forgotten War»', 1951, 5 October.
- Wada H., 2002, 朝鮮戦争全集 (The Complete Korean War), Tokyo: Iwanami shoten.
- Wada H. 2014 *The Korean War: An International History*. Trans. by Frank Baldwin. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Walter, B. F., 2022, *How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them*, New York: Crown.
- Weathersby, K., 1995/1996, 'New Russian Documents on the Korean War' *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 6/7, pp. 30-84.
- Weathersby, K., Spring 1995 'Korea, 1949-50: To Attack, or Not to Attack? Stalin, Kim Il Sung, and the Prelude to War', *CWIHP Bulletin #5, Cold War International History Project*, Washington, D.C. The Woodrow Wilson Center, pp. 1-9.
- Weathersby, K., July 2002, "Should We Fear This?" Stalin and the Danger of War with America" Working Paper No. 39, *Cold War International History Project*, Washington, D.C. The Woodrow Wilson Center, pp. 1-26.
- Whiting, A. S. 1960, *China Crosses the Yalu: The Decision to Enter the Korean War*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Yamaguchi, M., 2006, 僕は八路軍の少年兵だった (I was a youth member of the Eighth Route Army), Tokyo: Kojinsha.



## REVIEWS

### SIGNALS OF DIALOGUE: EXPLORING SINO-VATICAN RELATIONS

Federica C Ricci  
Ca' Foscari University of Venice  
federica.cicci@unive.it

Chu, Cindy Yik-yi, and Paul Philip Mariani, eds. *People, Communities, and the Catholic Church in China*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. xix+157 pp. ISBN: 978-981-15-1679-5.

On 22 October 2022, the Holy See announced a second two-year extension of the controversial Provisional Agreement with People's Republic of China (PRC) regarding the appointment of Bishops. The volume *People, Communities, and the Catholic Church in China* provides a comprehensive view of the complex relations between the Vatican and Beijing, especially in light of the absence of any official diplomatic relations between the two sides (the Holy See is one of the 13 states currently recognising the Republic of China in Taiwan instead of the PRC). The volume brings together nine scholars to provide an insightful examination of the Catholic Church in China after 1949 and its relations with the Vatican. One of the strengths of the book is its interdisciplinary approach, with contributors coming from a range of fields, including history, sociology, and theology. This approach allows for a rich and nuanced understanding of the Catholic Church in China and highlights the many ways in which it has interacted with Chinese societies in the post-Maoist era. This multifaceted approach is reflected in the opening chapter, 'The Chinese Catholic Church in Changing Times', written by the editor Cindy Yik-yi Chu, which provides an overview of the entire volume.

In detail, the volume consists of four sections. The first section is titled Policies. The chapter 'An Overview of the Catholic Church in Post-Mao China', written by Gianni Criveller, offers a detailed description of the Chinese Catholic Church since 1978, a year that saw both the launching of the 'Reforms and Opening-Up Period' in China, and the election of Karol Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II. Criveller first focuses on John Paul II's very critical attitude toward the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and its repression and control of religious organisations. Successively, Criveller notes how

under Pope Francis Sino-Vatican relations experienced a noticeable thawing, marked by the signature of the Provisional Agreement between the two sides in September 2018. The agreement, however, has not resulted in an actual improvement for Chinese Catholics, who have continued to experience «limitations on the practice of religion» (24). Criveller concludes the chapter with an examination of the challenges currently facing the Catholic Church in China, an institution besieged on one side by modernization and secularisation, and on the other side by the increasing control over Chinese society exercised by the CCP under the leadership of Xi Jinping. The third chapter, authored by Sergio Ticozzi, covers the history of the «underground» Church in China – a clandestine organisation separated from state-controlled Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association – since Deng Xiaoping's liberalisation of religious policy in 1978. Tracing back to the 1950s, the underground Church was ignored in the early years of the Denghist era, its existence was eventually acknowledged by Chinese authorities in the late 1980s. According to Ticozzi, due to Beijing's intensification of Party-State's control over Chinese civil society, as well as the thawing between the Vatican and Beijing under Francis' papacy, the future of the underground Church is increasingly isolated and precarious.

In the second section, *People*, the authors examine two significant figures of contemporary Chinese Christianity, Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian and Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kun. In the fourth chapter, Rachel Xiaohong Zhu discusses Bishop Jin's role in the relations between the Church and the Chinese state within the diocese of Shanghai. Bishop Jin defined Shanghai as a «four-horse carriage» (p.48), since the four organisations, the Shanghai diocese, the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, the Chinese Catholic Church Administrative Committee and the Shanghai Catholic Intellectual's Association cooperated efficiently and highlighted the importance of «Church's unity in diversity» and that «local Churches should fit into the national context under the guidance of the Holy Spirit» (54). In the fifth chapter, Beatrice K.F. Leung discusses the social and political activism of Cardinal Zen, the Bishop Emeritus of Hong Kong, recently arrested for «collusion with foreign forces» in the aftermath of Beijing's repression of the 2019 protests in the former British colony. Zen is described as a «prophetic figure» (62), and as the «new conscience of Hong Kong» (66) because of his campaigning for democracy and human rights, including religious freedom. Leung's chapter also covers Zen's antagonistic relationships with the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region's government, and his opposition to the Sino-Vatican Provisional Agreement, in light of the repression of underground Catholics in China (72).

The third section of the volume is titled *Organizations*. The sixth chapter, authored by Raissa De Gruttola, concerns the activities of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum (Sigao Shengjing Xuehui) since 1976. The Studium is a biblical institute of the Franciscan Order. Established in Bei-

jing in 1945, it coordinated the first translation of the Bible in Mandarin Chinese in 1968 in Hong Kong. De Gruttola's chapter examines how the Studium has provided translation and publishing of critical texts of Catholicism in Mandarin Chinese since the late 20th century. The seventh chapter, 'The Jinde Charities Foundation of Hebei Province and Catholic Charities in China', by Zhipeng Zhang, examines the eponymous Catholic non-profit charity organisation founded in Shijiazhuang, Hebei province – one of the first non-profit organisations of Chinese Catholicism. Through an overview of the Catholic charities in China since 1979, Zhang shows how, over time, Jinde Charities has expanded its work into eight main services: «emergency humanitarian assistance, social development, education training, grants, AIDS prevention, anti-human trafficking programs, and elderly services» (105). Zhang argues that the provision of social services by organisations such as Jinde Charities have played a significant role in raising the status of the Church in China in recent decades.

The final section is titled Communities. In the eighth chapter, Bruno Lepeu examines the Catholic youth ministry in contemporary China, an institution which he argues is critical to understand the evolution of the Catholic Church in an increasingly urbanised China. The editor Paul P. Mariani concludes the volume with the ninth chapter, «The Sheshan 'Miracle' and Its Interpretations». The chapter investigates an episode of religious fervour that occurred in Shanghai in 1980, when thousands of people visited the Sheshan Basilica in the western district of the city hoping to witness a miracle. Mariani notes how years of Party-State propaganda and top-down communication have failed to «stop the youth from going to holy sites or attending church» (140).

The authors of this volume cover a gap in research over religions in China, as both the Catholic Church and Chinese Catholics have been under-researched when compared to the other religions officially recognised by Beijing (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism). The volume is well organised, with a coherent thematic division. One of the key themes that emerge from the book is the complex and often fraught relationship between the Catholic Church and the Chinese state. The authors provide a detailed account of the various ways in which the Church has sought to navigate the often-difficult political landscape in China and its current efforts to engage with the CCP. Overall, *People, Communities, and the Catholic Church in China* is a valuable and important addition to the literature on the Catholic Church in China. It provides a rich and nuanced account of the Church's history and current state, and it offers important insights into its future prospects in a rapidly changing China. This book is essential reading for anyone interested in the history and current state of the Catholic Church in China.

THE END OF THE GREAT GAME IN MONGOLIA

*Antonio Graceffo*

LETU Mongolia American University

antonio@chinaecongroup.com

Matteo Miele, *Mongolian Independence and the British: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in High Asia, 1911-1916*, Bristol: E-International Relations, 2022, xv+222 pp. (ISBN: 978-1-910814-64-2).

Looking at Mongolia today, we see a country squeezed between two giant neighbors. A fledgling democracy, Mongolia is dependent economically on both Russia and China, and must often tailor its foreign and trade policies to appease one or the other, for fear of being punished with a border closure. Somehow, in spite of having been a Soviet satellite and being surrounded by the world's largest autocracies, Mongolia has managed to survive as a sovereign nation, albeit with some compromises. Tibet, East Turkestan, Tuva, Buryatia, and Kalmykia were not so lucky, having been absorbed into either China or Russia. Matteo Miele's book, *Mongolian Independence and the British: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in High Asia, 1911-1916*, sheds some light on the question of how Mongolia managed to remain unincorporated, and how it wound up in its current economic and political situation.

Miele focuses on five of the most crucial, yet least studied, years in Mongolia's modern history, the period beginning with the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, followed by the founding of the Republic of China, declarations of independence by both Tibet and Mongolia, and ending just before the Bolshevik Revolution (which is a part of Mongolian history more people are familiar with). Articles and books about Mongolia, including this one, often begin with some description of the roles played by Russia and China in the country's geopolitical landscape. This book, however, is written from a British perspective, and presents a very unique but informed point of view.

It would be easy to overlook the role the British played in the formation of the republic of Mongolia, because they never had a major interest or colony in the country. However, Miele describes how Mongolia unwittingly became the chessboard where the final rounds of the Great Game between Russia and Great Britain were played out.

The author writes in a very engaging style, presenting complex concepts and an information-dense history in an easy-to-read manner, accessible to all readers. The narrative contains a distinct note of helplessness as the fate of Mongolia was repeatedly renegotiated by Britain, Russia, and China, generally without the participation of Mongolian leaders. At least negotiations with China mentioned Mongolia directly. But in much of the debate between Britain and Russia, pieces of Mongolian autonomy were traded in exchange for concessions in Tibet and to a lesser extent Persia.

Although Miele tells the reader that his narrative begins at the end of The Great Game, he shifts back and forth in time, explaining the historical foundation then returning to the time period in question. He writes that after the fall of the Qing Dynasty, Tibet and Mongolia both declared themselves sovereign states, and then mutually recognized each other's independence. He details the changes this brought to the balance that had been established through the 1907 Anglo-Russian agreement.

In order to contextualize the connection between Mongolia and Tibet, the author takes the reader back to Kublai Khan, who absorbed Tibet into the territorial domains of the Yuan Dynasty during the 13th century. The spread of Tibetan Buddhism throughout the Mongol Empire left the fate of Mongolia inextricably linked with the fate of Tibet.

Britain wanted to create a buffer between the Russian Empire and the British Raj. For this reason, the Crown wanted an independent Tibet. Russia, for its part, saw Mongolia as a window through which to gain access to Tibet, and then on to India. Consequently, Russian weapons flowed into Mongolia and Tibet, while Tibetan monks flowed into Mongolia. Miele does an excellent job of providing dates, so that the reader will not get lost in the time shifts.

The British had hoped to use China as a means of keeping the Russians out of Tibet. When it became apparent that this plan would not succeed, the British determined that they would have to entreat Tibet directly. For this reason, in 1904, the Crown dispatched Francis Younghusband to Lhasa, where he signed an agreement. As the Dalai Lama had fled to Mongolia, and would not return until 1906, the seal of His Holiness was affixed by the Regent along with the seals of the council of ministers of the largest monasteries, as well as those of the National Assembly. Under the agreement, Tibet officially recognized the 1890 border with China, as well as the border with the Kingdom of Sikkim. The latter subsequently became the site of military clashes between the kingdom's subjects and the Chinese.

The 1904 agreement between Tibet and Britain stated that Tibet would not cede any of its territory, no foreign power would intervene in the internal affairs of Tibet, and that no representatives of a foreign government would be admitted into Tibet. Additionally, Tibet would not pay taxes to a foreign government. Britain, in turn, would be paid an indemnity of 500,000 to 750,000 rupees, and would be permitted to continue to occupy, temporarily, the area between Bhutan and Sikkim.

The absence of the Dalai Lama from Tibet presented a threat to British interests, in that, the Mongolian capital of Urga was much closer to Moscow than to British India. The British feared that the Russians might try to reach and influence the Dalai Lama, in Mongolia, to get him to sign agreements favoring Russian interests. In 1906, the British signed an accord with China, agreeing not to annex Tibet. The agreement also said that neither Britain nor China would allow a third party to interfere in Tibet.



Spanning hundreds of years of background, this treatise explores the complex web of political events which determined Mongolia's fate. While the major players are China, Russia, and Britain, the book also recounts how the larger story was influenced by Japan, Persia, Tibet, Afghanistan, Sikkim, the Anglo-Bhutanese War, and the Taiping Rebellion. Even the Russo-Japanese War had implications for the rivalry between Britain and Russia with the renewal of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1905.

At the signing of the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907, the British and Russians met in St. Petersburg, in order to define the geopolitical role of Persia, Afghanistan, and Tibet, the three main areas where the interests of the two empires challenged one another. Consequently, Persia was divided into three regions. The northern region was designated as the Russian sphere. The southern part would remain under British influence, while the rest of the country was left open.

According to the agreement, the British would retain Afghanistan as a protectorate. The right of the Qing Dynasty to rule over Tibet was recognized by both Russia and China, who agreed to not interfere in the internal administration, nor to post representatives to Lhasa. Although Tibet was considered the third geographical bastion of the Raj, it would remain under Manchu rule. This agreement would resolve nearly 100 years of competition and military campaigns fought out between the interests of London and Moscow. It removed Russia and Russian influence from India's political discourse, until the Bolshevik Revolution, ten years later.

When the Qing Dynasty collapsed, in 1911, the conflict between the interests of Russia and Britain was rekindled, because it moved Mongolia and Tibet out of the scope of the original agreement. Chinese soldiers in Mongolia were no longer receiving their pay and thus revolted, a sign the Mongolians took to mean that the shackles connecting them to Chinese rule had been severed. Consequently, Mongolia declared independence. The new Republic of China (ROC), founded in 1912, was not, in Mongol reckoning, a continuation of the old Qing Dynasty, and thus had no authority over Mongolia, which began petitioning Western countries for recognition.

Russia recognized the autonomy of Mongolia, which the Mongols interpreted as independence. The Russians, however regarded the situation more ambiguously. The agreement between the two was written and signed in more than one language, with slightly differing terms. The German language version committed the Russians to protecting Mongolian autonomy. The British similarly recognized Mongolian autonomy, but under Chinese suzerainty.

With the Qing Dynasty gone, Britain and Russia entered discussions again, regarding Mongolia, as well as the partitioning of Persia and the creation of Azerbaijan, which Russia wanted as a buffer. Another wrinkle in the narrative was that the Bogd Khan, the theocratic ruler who sat on the throne of Urga (the Mongolian capital), was a Tibetan monk. While Mon-

golia was economically linked to Russia, religious affinity tied the country to Tibet. Mongolia and Russia signed a friendship and trade treaty in December 1912, with Moscow hoping to use its relationship with Mongolia as a gateway into Lhasa. A few weeks later, Tibet and Mongolia signed a treaty, mutually recognizing each other's independence from China.

Britain sought to exploit the relationship between Mongolia and Russia in order to get Russia to accept the Simla Convention, which was negotiated between Republic of China, Tibet and Great Britain in 1913, but, because of disputes over the agreement's terms, China pulled out. The agreement was finally signed in 1914 by Britain and Tibet, without the Republic of China. This agreement was in conflict with the agreement previously signed between Russia and Britain in 1907.

Mongolia had hoped to regain Southern Mongolia (now the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China). However, the Republic of China opposed Southern Mongolia from joining Outer Mongolia. The Mongolians hoped that Russia would help, but under Russia's recognition of Mongolian autonomy, the Russians reserved the right to determine where the border of Mongolia lay. Russia had made a secret agreement with Japan, stipulating that Russia would limit its influence to Outer Mongolia. Consequently, they could not allow Inner Mongolia to become part of Outer Mongolia.

In 1913, the Republic of China agreed to grant Mongolia autonomy. But shortly after signing the agreement the ROC tried to reassert itself in Mongolia. At the same time, Mongolia sent letters, requesting recognition from Germany, France, and other Western powers, all of which refused. And Russia, Mongolia's closest ally apart from Tibet, refused to extend a loan to the fledgling state. It seemed that Mongolia's autonomy was barely recognized outside of Mongolia and Tibet.

When it suited Russia, however, they could be very helpful. Russians trained Mongolian soldiers in 1912 and Russian weapons were given to Tibet, to oppose Chinese invaders. The Russians armed Mongolian soldiers and supported a Mongolian invasion of Manchuria, allowing them to operate out of Russian barracks.

Miele gives a brief overview of the outcome of the events covered in this book. In 1917, the Bolshevik revolution led to the formation of the USSR. The Soviets would then help the Mongols drive China out of Mongolia forever. The ROC would lose its war with the People's Republic of China, and Chiang Kai-shek and his supporters would flee to Taiwan. Sikkim was absorbed into India in 1975 but has been a point of dispute between China and India ever since. Tibet lost its autonomy and has been ruled by the People's Republic of China since 1951.

Mongolia was a Soviet satellite until 1990. Southern Mongolia was lost to China. Buryatia and Kalmykia were taken by Russia. But Mongolia has survived and remains independent today. Unfortunately, the problems

outlined in this book still exist today. In addition to being too small to compete with its giant neighbors, Mongolia remains landlocked and dependent on Russia and China for imports and exports. Although Mongolia is theoretically free to sign international agreements and to establish an independent trade regimen, in the final analysis Russia or China can assert an effective veto by threatening to close the border and shut off the flow of products or energy.

In conclusion, *Mongolian Independence and the British: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in High Asia, 1911-1916* presents an informed insight into the power competition between great empires in the wake of the collapse of the Qing Dynasty. The book details the rise of an independent, theocratic Mongolia which served as a hapless catalyst, threatening a fragile peace between Russia and Britain. The Miele's narration grabs the reader's attention and can be read for enjoyment or for academic study. The research and detail that have been put into this book are remarkable and depict a fresh take on a nearly forgotten yet significant era. For Mongolia-enthusiasts, it fills in many gaps, thus ultimately helping to establish a basis of understanding for the current geopolitical landscape, across China, Mongolia, and Russia.

Scientifically laid out, the book contains explanations on how the translations, place names, and transliterations were handled, and which standard forms were used. For the more serious scholar, it also contains dates, archival documents, bibliographic references, a table of acronyms, annexes, references, and indexing. Additionally, comprehensive end notes follow each chapter, for confirmation of specific facts and for further reading.

## KOREA'S COLONIAL HISTORY AS SEEN FROM ABROAD

Mark E. Caprio  
 Rikkyo University  
 caprio@rikkyo.ac.jp

Ku Daeyeol, *Korea 1905-1945: From Japanese Colonialism to Liberation and Independence*, Kent, CT: Renaissance Books, 2021, 468 pp. (ISBN: 978-1-912961-21-4).

The period of Japanese colonial rule over the Korean Peninsula has been covered widely. Ku Daeyeol's treatment is unique, however, in that he examines the vicissitudes of Korean history between 1905 and 1945 from the outside, focussing his analysis particularly on how Great Britain and the United States, but also the Soviet Union and China, reacted to the Japanese invasion.

Professor Ku's background is important here. He did his post-graduate studies in the United Kingdom, at SOAS University of London. He, then, returned home to join the Korean Foreign Affairs and National Security before transferring to Ewha Women's University in Seoul, South Korea, until his retirement in 2011. In the work under review, Ku, in his quest to determine «how we can define the Korean question in the wider context of international relations» (xix), finds extraordinary the extent that the «outside powers shaped Korea's domestic landscape» (xviii). Ku relies heavily on primary materials from the British and United States national archives, as well as on secondary sources from Russian and Chinese literature. He concludes from this broad survey that the major powers that shaped Korea's destiny shifted between realist-directed balance-of-politics policies and the more idealistic trusteeship approach to determining the place of the Korean Peninsula in regional, as well as global, politics. The decisions made by these states regarding Korea's post-liberation future, following Japan's defeat in the Pacific War, were contingent on their confidence, or lack thereof, in an independent Korean state being able to sustain viable political and economic institutions amidst shifting dynamics in the post-war global community. The situation that the two Koreas confront at present is a legacy of the negative aspects of these two factors, as well as the historic policies of neighbouring states, which placed greater attention on their own national interests rather than over those of the Korean people.

Ku divides *Korea 1905-1945* into two sections: the first considering the years leading up to the 1910 annexation of the Korean Peninsula and up to the early 1930s; the second focusing on the wartime years, from the late 1930s until Korea's liberation from Japanese rule. In the latter section, Ku attaches primary focus on how the wartime years and their aftermath saw primarily the United States, China, Great Britain, and, to a lesser extent,

the Soviet Union, debating Korea's post-war future. Ku uses Chapter 1 to set the framework of his study:

Politically, the Korean peninsula was important for some Western powers, i.e., Britain and the United States, mainly for the protection of their interests in China. However, this value was not «vital» but negotiable, since their interests in China were safeguarded by other means.... Nevertheless, the Korean peninsula retained its significance in East Asia regional politics. For China, the peninsula bordered the Gulf of Bohai, which extended to its political center, the Beijing-Tianjin area, and also «Manchuria»; for Japan it was a «dagger» pointing at its heart; for Russia, it offered an ice-free port, as well as a potential rear base that could support resources, both human and material, for its Siberian and Far Eastern development. In this sense, the three [Asian] nations' interests in Korea were vital, immediate, and direct (16).

Japan, which had been strengthening its position on the Korean Peninsula from the late 1860s, was able to gain the upper hand over its competitors through military successes over China (1895) and then Russia (1905). It was able to appease the Anglo-American powers with guarantees to respect their economic interests on the Korean Peninsula for a period of time after annexation. Thus, the powers reasoned, Japan's influence on this territory would not disrupt the balance of power that had existed through this time. Following its defeat of Russia, Japan established Korea as its protectorate in 1905, before finally annexing it in August 1910. The delay in the latter advancement had been due to Russian objections and the Japanese anticipation of a second Russo-Japanese War on the horizon. Japan, however, was able to negotiate away this danger in 1907 and 1910, and thus cleared the way for incorporating the Peninsula into its empire (58-60).

Attitudes toward Japan's handling of its Korean colony changed over the initial decade of its rule due to foreign powers judging Japanese rule over Korea to be overly harsh. Japan also retracted on its promises to honour British and American economic interests in Korea (94, 101). Ku describes in Chapter 4 the decisive turn of the attitudes of the global community toward Japan's rule in Korea caused by Japan's violent reaction to Korea's largest display of anti-Japanese sentiment, the 1919 March First Movement. The Movement was encouraged by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's self-determination declaration contained in his «Fourteen Points» speech of January 1918, and planned around the anticipation of large crowds assembling to attend the upcoming state funeral for King/Emperor Kojong – his death rumoured to have been through poisoning, perhaps by the Japanese, who had forced him to step down from his throne in 1907.<sup>1</sup> The Korean lead-

1. Kojong, king until 1897 when he declared himself emperor, was forced out of his position by the Japanese after they learned that he had sent a delegation to The

ers of the movement drafted a Declaration of Independence and turned themselves in to the Japanese police. The Korean people, on their part, proceeded to peacefully march through the streets of Seoul. These demonstrations spread quickly throughout the country over the following months. The Japanese crackdown resulted in as many as 7,000 Korean deaths, and tens of thousands more arrested, many of whom were tortured.

Ku's summaries of the British and United States' reactions are informative. He contends that the British, guilty of similar violence in the Amritsar massacre of the same year, had an «anti-Japanese bias, though no one advocated the independence of Korea» (114). The United States' reaction, however, was more open. It appeared in government circles, as well as the press, and through missionary channels (122). Foreign pressure on Japan was instrumental in the colonizers making major changes in their colonial rule that included freedoms of press and assembly. They also initiated discussions on allowing the Korean people higher administrative positions and possibly self-rule. The Korean people standing up to the Japanese caused these outside powers to momentarily see the Koreans in a more positive light (136).

In this first section, Ku also traces the Japanese development of the Manchurian region across the Korean border as the «bridge» that Japan required to expand further into the Asian mainland. This was a primary factor that led to Japan engaging China, and then the United States, in wars from the 1930s (Chapter 6). Here Ku traces the rather long history that Koreans had in the region, and the crossfire they encountered when their interests conflicted with those of both the Japanese and the Chinese.

Koreans saw Manchuria as both a refuge from oppression and an economic opportunity. From the mid-1930s Korean migration to Manchuria steadily continued to increase, yet not nearly at a pace that would reach the five million people goal planned by Japanese Governor General of Korea Minami Jirō and aimed at opening up space to allow for Japanese migration to Korea (181). The Chinese reaction, fuelled by nationalist sentiment, was to oppress the Korean migrants. This gave the expansion-minded Japanese reason to intervene on behalf of its «subjects», leading to incidents that increased Japanese strength in the region.

Ku contests a «conspiracy theory» that claims that Japan plotted incidents, such as the 1931 Wanbaoshan Incident,<sup>2</sup> to increase its presence in the area. Instead, he argues that its cause is related to the Chinese harbouring the idea of «expelling the Koreans from the area» (174-75).

Hague in an attempt to gain a seat at the conference table at the 1907 The Hague Peace Convention. The Japanese considered this to be in violation of the protectorate treaty that had placed Japan in charge of Korea's diplomatic affairs.

2. The Wanbaoshan Incident of 1931 involved a dispute between Chinese and Korean farmers over the latter's irrigation practices that threatened to flood Chinese fields. News of Chinese ill-treatment of Koreans farming in this area reached Koreans on the Peninsula and resulted in the outbreak of anti-Chinese movements (p. 174, 175).

Part 2 of Ku's monograph deals with wartime Korean relations with these same powers, of critical importance as they basically determined the country's fate following Japan's defeat in August 1945. Independence was promised, but «in due course», in a communiqué forged by the United States (President Franklin Roosevelt), Great Britain (Prime Minister Winston Churchill), and China (Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek) in Cairo, and then approved by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in Teheran, one week later. The communiqué's words badly hid the idea that the Korean people would be granted their sovereignty but only after an undetermined period of trusteeship managed by a collection of states that would guide the Korean people toward responsible government. Ku borrows Martin Wight's definition of «trusteeship»: a «combination of the Machiavellian tradition of realism, the Kantian tradition of revolutionism, and the Grotian tradition of rationalism» (Wight 1992, 385). In addition, British officials saw liberating colonies through trusteeship as also opening the door for the U.S. to gain «sound advantages» in these territories. The Chinese reaction was mixed but among the more powerful voices were those who argued for Korea's immediate independence upon liberation. The Soviet Union, most of this period unengaged in the Asian wars, argued that the period of trusteeship should not involve the deployment of non-Korean militaries on the Peninsula, and be limited to as short a time span as necessary.

Behind the positions of the individual powers involved in determining Korea's political future there was, of course, the desire of each of them to advance their own individual interests on the Peninsula. However, the original thinking behind trusteeship, at least as expressed by Roosevelt, was more benevolent: to simply fulfil the Korean wish of immediate sovereignty would be to cast that nation into the same situation that the Japanese had used to justify its conquest in the first place. An «independent but weak Korea would become subject to international pressure and intrigue and would threaten political stability and peace in the Pacific» (405).

The author's discussion on trusteeship (Chapter 12) presents an in-depth analysis on how the different allied powers viewed this proposed policy and how the Koreans reacted to it. Ku's claim, however, that all Korean people were against any policy that would prolong foreign occupation beyond that which was necessary (404) requires clarification, as Korean attitudes toward this policy changed over time. While at first it is true that people of all ideological suasions, from the extreme right to the extreme left, objected to foreign occupation, in the end the more moderate elements came to see the trusteeship policy as the best route to their country eventually emerging united and sovereign. Their voices, nonetheless, were silenced by Syngman Rhee and the extreme right-wing campaign against trusteeship that he led.

The emerging Cold War rendered fruitful discussions between the Soviets and the Americans next to impossible as the two ideological camps

took to moulding the actions of their Korean clients in their own interests. Britain, shedding the little attention it had for the Korean problem, and the Nationalist Chinese, engaged in a civil war with the Chinese Communists, transformed the issue by default into a Soviet versus the United States confrontation. Ku reflects as follows:

[W]hen the Cold War began, the confrontation with the Soviet Union became the most important agenda of U.S. foreign policy. As a result, policy objectives in the peninsula had to take on different priorities. The Soviet Union was pushing for the «Sovietization» of the north, and the Joint Commission was failing to create a blueprint for a unified government in the peninsula. To most of the Americans, compromise with the Russians was now impossible (421).

The United States, unwillingly Ku suggests, coming to support extreme, anti-communist politics, further complicated any idea of discussion across the thirty-eighth parallel that divided Soviet and U.S. occupations. The Soviet side supported a North Korean government at its border that it deemed «friendly»; on its part, the United States buttressed a South Korean government to combat the North and to buffer its interests in Japan and the Northeast Asian region (421). Soviet and U.S. national interests on the Korean Peninsula trumped cooperation with Koreans, aimed to determine their country's future.

Through *Korea 1905-1945*, Korea's mid-twentieth century history can be seen as a microcosm of the Cold War that engulfed the world in the decades following the Second World War. Ku's story sets the stage for three years of civil war between the two halves of their Peninsula, decades of totalitarian rule, and a division that continues to separate the two Korean states up to the present. Although important new angles of this history have emerged in recent decades, as Ku laments, the critical documents that tell the Soviet side of it remain insufficient, and thus leave us (as in 1945) guessing at Moscow's true intentions.

Ku is to be complimented for retaining an objectivity in telling this story that has not been seen in other surveys on these issues. From the start he questions whether the «Koreans themselves are free from all responsibility» for their unfortunate fate (xxiv). His research undertakes a deep survey into the interests and thinking of the global powers, thus making it unique among studies of this period. It deserves attention by students on twentieth century Korean history as well as those undertaking the study of the Cold War.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Wight, Martin, 1992, *International Theory – The Three Traditions* (eds. Gabriele Wight and Brian Porter), New York: Holmes & Meier.



RECOVERING THE ASIAN ROOTS OF THE PHILIPPINE REVOLUTION

*Laura Diaz-Esteve*

Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC)

[laura.diaz.esteve@gmail.com](mailto:laura.diaz.esteve@gmail.com)

Nicole CuUnjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation. A Global Intellectual History of the Philippine Revolution, 1887-1912*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2020, 272 pp. (ISBN: 9780231192156).

For long, Filipino, Spanish, and US historiographies that dealt with the long Philippine Revolution (1896-1906) did so following national boundaries.<sup>1</sup>

They generally placed their respective institutions and agents at the center of their narratives and, in the cases of Spain and the US, often ignored, respectively, the successor or predecessor colonial rules. As postcolonial, imperial, and global history flourished, researchers have turned to studying the role of all the actors involved in this key event and have begun to shed light on the complex inter- and trans-imperial dynamics that marked its development. Among others, academics have tracked the western influences on Filipino nationalism, the disruptions and continuities the transition from Spanish to US imperialism caused in the archipelago, and the impact of these events in the metropolises.

As these examples reflect, however, the globalization of the history of the Philippine Revolution has majorly put this in dialogue with the evolution of the Spanish and American empires and their possessions. This tendency is both a consequence and one of the causes of the consolidated perception that the Philippines' historical experience is more similar to that of other territories Spain and the US colonized than of Asia. As a result, besides a few exceptions, most literature on the revolution does not examine the influences of its Asian context. Such alienation is especially striking given that, as Nicole CuUnjieng Aboitiz points out, the Philippine Revolution took place «against a backdrop of imperial consolidation and local resistance that was truly region-wide» (2). It is this gap that this historian fruitfully addresses in the book under review.

*Asian Place, Filipino Nation. A Global Intellectual History of the Philippine Revolution, 1887-1912* analyzes the role Asian geographies played in Filipino nationalist political thinking and the transnational networks that influenced this ideology and contributed to its translation into political action. In doing so, however, its author not only adds a critical omission in the history of the Philippines. Rethinking the revolution by examining its

1. Although the convention is to mark 1902 as the end of the Philippine Revolution, I use here the chronology that the author herself uses. See footnote 7, p. 184.

Asian connections leads CuUnjieng Aboitiz to nuance our understanding of the broader phenomenon of Pan-Asianism, as she identifies the one that emerged from the «peripheries», with its particularities. Therefore, Asian Place, Filipino Nation also builds upon the growing literature on «the global connections and transmission of ideas» involved in the evolution of anticolonial nationalism (3). In particular, with this novel approach to the Philippine Revolution and, through it, Pan-Asianism, this work enriches those bodies of historiography by developing two interrelated ideas.

First, the book demonstrates that guiding intellectuals and political leaders of the Filipino nationalist movement that culminated in the revolution embedded the Filipino identity within Asia and, specifically, linked it with «the Malay race and its historical environment» (36). Given the ethnolinguistic diversity of the islands, they «carved out a national space not through shared cultural practice or ideology, but through a grounding in place» (35, *italics added*). Understood as «both territorial (the significance of a particular physical space, with its history, land, rivers, and monuments) and social (involving origins, distinctions, social position)», place provides «the basis of political society [...] upon which other political notions, such as duty, freedom, and order, gained meaning» (35). Departing from this definition that Edmund Burke formulated, CuUnjieng Aboitiz takes this concept further by sustaining that Filipino *ilustrados* used this notion of place to forge a distinct nationalism, which was «constructed in universalist Western grammar» and inspired by Enlightenment ideals but specified and particularized by its Asian roots (36).

Along this line of defining the Filipino identity, intellectuals and revolutionaries also «reclaimed Filipino Malayness» (40). Using western scholarship's theories and methods, they argued that Filipinos «were of 'Malay civilization' in their languages, customs, religious beliefs, social institutions, psychology, and cultural practices» (40). As a consequence, they countered «the argument of Europeans who described the archipelago as overrun by an anarchy of tribes and races» (41). Opposite to that idea, they based the Filipino nation upon «an older, richer, documented civilizational realm» (41). Also, they recognized the intra-Asian connections and affinities that preceded the arrival of Spain in the archipelago and lived on under its rule to connect the Filipino nation, among others, to a Chinese ancient and glorious past and with Japan's contemporary rise as a global power. By doing so, they tried to place themselves in the racial hierarchies that Social Darwinism of the era sustained, with well-known political implications.

These «legitimate, affective ties of place and group» (6) served *ilustrados* and revolutionaries, on the one hand, «to speak to one another as two Filipinos» and «carry the local toward the national» (7); that is, to forge a distinct and coherent national identity. On the other hand, it helped them battle western imperial rationalizations of their domination of foreign lands and sustain the Filipino claims to self-government before the international

community. Finally, and more importantly for the book, it linked Filipino nationalism with the destiny of fellow Asian and Malay societies. How this sense of belonging translated into transnational networks is the second idea CuUnjieng Aboitiz develops throughout her book.

The author convincingly argues that Filipino nationalists envisaged and harnessed a web of Pan-Asian intellectual and material connections. Enlarging the East Asian solidarities that «central» Pan-Asianism originating in Japan and China had conceived, this Filipino «peripheral» Pan-Asianism considered that a wider array of Asian and Malay societies, including those from Southeast Asia, were «bound together through parallel historical experience and current geopolitical realities» and recognized «one another through appreciation of their common cultures, norms, and symbols» (135). As CuUnjieng Aboitiz demonstrates through the Filipino case and their relations with, mostly, Japanese and Vietnamese activists, anti-colonialists and nationalists across these territories supported each other's struggles through discourse and material aid in order to face Western Imperialism and build an Asian «federation of equals» (24).

The book explains how these Pan-Asian ideas and networks that nourished Filipino nationalism evolved throughout different phases of the revolution, from its direct precedents until its aftermath, studying the Asian dimensions of the political thought and relationships of a selection of Filipino intellectuals and political elites. After an introductory chapter that localizes this research in the historiography, Chapter 2 situates the origins of these Asian identitarian roots and solidarities at the emergence of the Filipino national consciousness itself, developed by ilustrados like José Rizal and Isabelo de los Reyes while unsuccessfully campaigning to improve the Philippines' situation within the Spanish Empire. Chapter 3 shows how, once the Filipino nationalist movement's disillusionment with «Mother Spain» reached its highest point and changed reformism for revolution, its leaders also looked to the Philippines' future by recuperating its precolonial past. While doing so, they displayed, with nuances in the different contexts of the conflict, the consciousness of fighting a struggle with global significance. Chapter 4 focuses on Mariano Ponce, one of the most outstanding foreign emissaries of the Philippine Republic. Here is where, through his writings, travels, and relationships, CuUnjieng Aboitiz better illuminates the nature of peripheral Pan-Asianism. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the book by examining the far-reaching legacy of the Philippine Revolution and the peripheral Pan-Asian solidarities it propelled, both inside and outside the Philippine Islands. It argues that this impact lasted much beyond the turn of the century, revealing itself even in the context of global decolonization and national revolutions that followed the Second World War, as the Maphilindo experiment and Third Worldist solidarity prove.

In order to trace those Asian dimensions of the Philippine Revolution, CuUnjieng Aboitiz has realized a commendable study of the rich

Filipino national historiography and vast primary sources: mainly private archives, speeches, and publications—such as *La Solidaridad*—from notable Filipino ilustrados and revolutionaries, including archives from Spanish and US authorities that had also identified these Asian transnational subversive networks and tried to monitor them. No matter how well-known those sources were, CuUnjieng Aboitiz managed to read into them an original and convincing interpretation by framing them against the backdrop of growing transnational and global histories and in relation to the literature on other Asian anticolonial movements.

From this exhaustive investigation, future lines of research emerge. As CuUnjieng Aboitiz explains, this analysis focuses on «elite anti-colonial, proto-national, and national discourse» (154). The results of this already complex task make us wonder, however, whether and how other sectors of the archipelago's society shared this sense of belonging to Asia and the Malay race. For example, members of this same Filipino elite under study, over the revolution, moved from defending the Philippines' independence to advocating many different political arrangements after 1898, such as Filipino autonomy under American protection. It could be interesting to see their relation to this Asian dimension of the revolution and how they later abandoned it or reconciled it (if they did so) with their new positions.

To summarize, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation* is a thought-provoking book that contributes to a more sophisticated understanding of the Philippine Revolution by highlighting its Asian roots. In doing so, CuUnjieng Aboitiz shows how this key event constituted a «laboratory of ideas» that coined far-reaching «visions of world order alternative to those offered by the West» (6), shedding light on the broader phenomena of Asian anti-colonialism and nationalism. Hers is, therefore, a much-welcome addition to Philippine, Imperial, and Global Histories.

LAOS AND THE GLOBAL LAND RUSH: PRECARIOUS GAINS AND THE ONGOING  
STRIVE FOR STATE-BUILDING

Marco Zappa  
Ca' Foscari University of Venice  
marco.zappa@unive.it

Michael B. Dwyer, *Upland geopolitics: Postwar Laos and the Global Land Rush*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2022, xvii+232 pp. (ISBN: 9780295750491).

In James Scott's enlightening perspective, the uplands of Southeast Asia have long been *loci* of desertion and opposition to the state. In these natural theaters, characterized by mountainous and forest environments, people have wandered and grown crops, hunted and extracted natural resources such as wood for their own survival, escaping the often tyrannical and homogenizing eye of the state. However influential, Scott's view was molded by his study of premodern interactions between states and non-state peoples in the highland of «Zomia» precluding to the rise of the modern state in the early 20th century [Scott 2009].

By contrast, *Upland Geopolitics* by Michael B. Dwyer aims at updating this debate focusing on north-western Laos against the backdrop of a «global land rush» (2), i.e., the proliferation of transnational land deals across the global South and the rise of China in the political and economic order of the Asia-Pacific region. Dwyer does so by adopting a political ecology perspective apt to show the interrelatedness of nature and politics. Based on decade-long research, the book is articulated in five main chapters each of which focuses on a specific phase in the history of spatial politics in Laos.

As Dwyer points out in the introduction of the volume, «the uplands are a biophysical and socio-ecological landscape» that are «at once spaces themselves and a way of looking at space» (9-10). Particularly, from the state's «lowland» perspective, uplands are remote forested and mountainous areas, home to ethnic minority groups who practice shifting cultivation. In this context, central and local governments, private companies, local power brokers and local dwellers establish «complex relations» as both actors and objects of development initiatives, wealth extraction, political control, and so forth. Contra the so-called «authority gap» explanation, according to which transnational deals leading to land grabs are caused by the lack of good governance in the host nation, Dwyer adopts the concept of micro-geopolitics which effectively subsumes both the global and «enclosed» dimensions of the land grab phenomenon in the context of continental Southeast Asia. This multi-level and multi-dimensional competition for enclosures where to monetize local resources, including workforce, has been undoubt-

edly facilitated by modern technologies (infrastructures and motor vehicles) and the social marginality of upland inhabitants.

Chapter 1 carefully depicts the current state of Lao-Chinese rubber development cooperation against the backdrop of the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In the light of the relative novelty of the infrastructural development process of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), in the following chapter, Dwyer traces the origin of the enclosure movement in Laos up to the Cold War years. Specifically, the author singles out the role played by US intelligence officials and aid programs in the context of the so-called «Secret War» and confrontation between the loyalist forces and Pathet Lao between the mid-1950s and mid-1970s, in shaping Laos path of territorial dis-integration and dis-connectedness. As a result of these events, a sense of «national unreality» still looms in the country's north-western regions (51-53). Particularly, following the French example, US strategists empowered local ethnic leaders to nurture administrative autonomy and recruit anti-Communist fighters in the highlands in what could be termed a «late-colonial military strategy» (61). Running counter to such a plan, in the 1960s and 1970s, the government of the PRC started providing aid to Vientiane to break its isolation and help its government to counterbalance the US and USSR's influences.

Apart from its «border shifting» effects that were reported in US Congressional reports in the early 1970s (69), it was on these routes that dozens of Lao refugees crossed to Yunnan and learnt about rubber tapping, eventually bringing key know-how back to their country in the late 1980s and 1990s (24-25). Ultimately, this knowledge provided the grounds upon which the Lao national and provincial governments moved to eliciting rubber farming as a key to establishing permanent livelihoods in north-western border regions. In this regard, chapter 3, dedicated to the issue of population management and relocations, is particularly worth discussing as the consequences of the Pathet Lao regime's technocratic schemes vis-a-vis political capital-poor ethnic populations emerge. Borrowing from colonial and US techniques, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Lao authorities implemented enclosure and people resettlement policies aimed at creating «focal development» sites that besides developmental considerations, Dwyer argues, had a specific security rationale. The diffusion of state-managed agroforestry systems, whereby local dwellers were granted the temporary use of plots of land under the supervision of state-owned forestry companies, infrastructure development, and resettlement programs targeting Hmong communities in particular, served, on the one hand, to promote local development and, on the other, to reduce the economic base of target communities, hence curbing possible sources of «security problems» and pushing fractions of these to relocate in lowland areas. As demonstrated by the Muang Huong focal site and elsewhere, this strategy was instrumental in the state's advance into the inner upland.

Particularly interesting in this discussion is the role of European advisors (particularly Swedish) working with the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) government officials to develop the country's forestry. In a report widely cited in the chapter, at one point, it is suggested that «to speed up out-migration of the high mountains [...] even stronger efforts than hitherto are made to favour education of the children among the hill tribes», as to alleviate the demographic pressure on the state's forestry operations (93).

On top of these facts, the decision by the Lao PDR to embrace market-oriented reforms in the late 1980s under the motto «turning battlefields into marketplaces» played a crucial role in further supporting uneven zoning initiatives in the northern regions. As the author points out, «For Lao leaders rubber exemplified both a vision for the desired upland agrarian transition to “permanent livelihoods” and, via the investment and state subsidies offered by China's “Going Out” policy, a means to finance it» (102). Nevertheless, Chinese investments in the region only added up to historically consolidated layers of complexity and unevenness. The cases presented in chapter 4 poignantly demonstrate this point. Despite promises of stability and prosperity for resettled and displaced communities in focal sites through land concessions to foreign investors, state's programs for land management and control failed, causing fractions of the target sub-populations to go back to slash and burn agriculture on a reduced land area. Dwyer details forms of deception and evasion from state's directives (such as altering maps) and workings of contemporary capitalism and aid regimes (such as smallholder rubber production) that are reminiscent of the «hidden transcripts» so cogently described again by Scott [1990].

Instead of illustrating a win-win strategy, the book digs deeper into a fluid and dynamic situation where only partial and precarious gains are possible. On the one hand, transnational land deals have helped Chinese authorities to achieve several targets such as (a) partially tackling domestic problems such as heroin consumption by way of opium-replacement subsidies to Golden triangle nations (including Laos); (b) supporting Chinese companies' business expansion abroad; and (c) establishing new political and economic asymmetries with neighbours for diplomatic leverage [see on this Han 2019]. On the other, however, they urged Chinese companies to manage the «social» aspects of land availability, i.e., its exposure to particular interests on the ground, long standing patron-client networks relying on the agency of provincial, district and village-level administrators, which require additional investments in capital and workforce. As detailed in chapter 5 of the book, foreign businesses' as well as the central government's aspirations and policies to enhance one locale's legibility often clash with historically determined fractures exposing an ongoing process of state formation.

Considering the above, the book sheds light on the outstanding complexity of transnational land deals focusing on an often-neglected case such

as that of Laos. Dense and rich in details, the result of the extensive ethnographic work conducted by the author, the book may result in an arduous reading for non-specialists. However, the use of maps, photos, and narrative sketches at the opening of each chapter, and summaries at their ends, help the reader to navigate the text more easily. At any rate, the book offers a timely analysis of several issues of global significance as it clearly stresses the importance of zoning strategies for Laos and other governments in the so-called «global South», but, most importantly, in continental Southeast Asia. With an innovative methodology which accepts complexity rather than obliterating it, *Upland Geopolitics* epitomizes the difficulties and the struggles that state administrators face in their strive to project state power on a territory over which they proclaim sovereignty. Despite the increased availability of modern technology and, thus, state capacities, diversity of economic models and lifestyles can still survive through engagement and negotiation though in an increasingly compressed space.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Scott, James C., *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, Ann Harbor, MI: Yale University Press, 1990.
- Scott, James C., *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009.
- Han, Enze, *Asymmetrical Neighbors: Borderland State Building Between China and Southeast Asia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.



HOW THE BJP WINS: IT DID NOT WIN AND THEN IT DID

*RFI Smith*

Formerly RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia  
rfismith@ozemail.com.au

Vinay Sitapati, *India Before Modi: How the BJP Came to Power*, London: Hurst and Company, 2021, xiv+409 pages (ISBN: 9781787385375).

Nalin Mehta, *The New BJP: Modi and the Making of the World's Largest Political Party*, Chennai: Westland Non-Fiction, 2022, xxxvi+809 pages (ISBN: 9789391234003).

### 1. Introduction

These books offer timely and complementary insights into the rise and rise of the electoral phenomenon that is the contemporary BJP. Vinay Sitapati uses existing literature complemented by interviews, archives, and memoirs to explore how Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Lal K. Advani and many others, built from the disparate components of post-independence Hindu nationalism, a competitive political party. He foreshadows the evolution of Narendra Modi from organiser and caste analyst to preeminent leader of a very different BJP. Nalin Mehta combines digital analysis of who is in the party, and what its publicly accessible communications say, with case studies of how in government at the centre the party extends its electoral appeal. His accounts of the links between beneficiaries of welfare schemes and the party and government are revealing. They help show how, under Prime Minister Modi, the party extends its reach and the Prime Minister himself engenders a sense of personal connection.

Both authors, whether synthesising existing knowledge or breaking new ground, emphasise the importance to the party of organisation and unity. In politics and in government its approach can be summarised as: «organisation, organisation, organisation». However, its strategies have not stood still. In the books, four transitions in the party's organisation and development stand out:

- From early years of diluting ideology to win elections to explicit appeals to ideology and to win elections handsomely
- From competing within a post-independence consensus led by Congress to replacing it with assertive Hindu nationalism
- From high caste, top-down leadership, caught out by bottom up demands, to top down leadership embracing claims and support from below to extend its constituency; and
- From a compelling ethos of organisational collegiality in a disciplined,

cadre-based party to a dominant leader with a large, still disciplined organisation, a powerful personal appeal to voters and a compelling voice in decisions.

- Two continuing questions about key ideas and the party's organisation also stand out:
- How does the Hindutva promoted by the party relate to Hinduism?
- How does the party, whether in opposition or in government, relate to party institutions and related organisations, especially the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS).

The books suggest, through several examples, that on the continuing questions ambiguity coexists uneasily with firmness. Sitapati notes that Dr SP Mookerjee, founder of the precursor to the BJP, the Jana Sangh, resigned from the Hindu Mahasabha because it would not admit non-Hindus. Also, Atal Bihari Vajpayee appeared more liberal than he may have been and Lal Krishna Advani acted more bigoted than he was. In religion, neither was particularly observant. Mehta's examples, perhaps significantly related at the front of the book, come from family experience. When his grandfather placed a Ram sticker on a motor scooter in the family home his military father promptly took it off. Mehta's father-in-law, descendant of a land-owning Hindu family, with a history of supporting mosques, retired after puja to a closed room to read the Quran. Neither author uses these stories to editorialise. But they do prompt readers to do some thinking.

## 2. *India Before Modi: How the BJP Came to Power*

Sitapati begins by setting out the drivers that led to the foundation of the Jana Sangh. Discussion of the process of party building follows, including brief assessments of the style of the main leaders at each stage, electoral successes and failures, brief experience in government as part of the Janata Party and later for a full term as the BJP. This includes a running account of the relationship between Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani around which the book is organised. The book then discusses the conflicts, stand offs and switchbacks that resulted in the Janata Party's foundation and collapse, the formation of the BJP in 1980 and the alternation in leadership between Vajpayee and Advani.

The book notes the influence of growing radicalism among Hindus, which it says Vajpayee missed. It then examines the BJP's record in government in 1998-2004, including the tensions between Vajpayee and Advani. As Prime Minister, Vajpayee ignored his long-standing partner who he only belatedly made Deputy Prime Minister. It concludes with the rise of Modi, reflections on the nature and significance of the partnership between Vajpayee and Advani, and comparisons with the relationship between Modi and Amit Shah.

Sitapati argues that the main driver for political action was elections. Electoral democracy crystallised divisions between Hindus and Muslims. Turning a Hindu majority population into a Hindu led government through elections was a compelling idea. However, electoral democracy also crystallised divisions between Hindus themselves. The process of party building was not quick. Differing approaches to Hindu nationalism had to be accommodated. A pre-existing Hindu nationalist organisation, the Hindu Mahasabha had had limited electoral appeal. The RSS did not contest elections and initially resisted the formation of the Jana Sangh. Further, the Congress Party contained many Hindu nationalists and intermittently appealed specifically to Hindu nationalist voters.

In the turbulence of partition and independence Congress swept post-independence elections. In the lead up to the elections, Dr SP Mookerjee, who had resigned from the Nehru government on the issue of protecting Hindus in Pakistan, proposed a new party. The Jana Sangh was founded in 1951 after the RSS eventually agreed to cooperate (it provided people but remained organisationally distinct). However, the post-partition context, including assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a Hindu nationalist, imposed constraints. These had a long run influence on how the party pitched its appeal and fared in elections.

The transition away from diluting ideology towards a more assertive stance was also not quick. In retrospect, a set of facilitating factors had to come together. Sitapati argues that while the ground began to shift under the Jana Sangh as the «Congress System» unwound, the emergence of Narendra Modi and proclamation of a New India had to wait another forty years. Initially the party had to establish itself on the ground and in parliament. With skilled organisers, including Advani, it did so in the community. Industrialists opposed to Indira Gandhi's nationalisations (including Jinnah's grandson, Nusli Wadia) helped with funding. But in parliament it was in a minority.

Vajpayee, on the death of SP Mookerjee, became the party's leader in parliament. Having originally come to notice as Mookerjee's eloquent Hindi speaking interpreter he was already a noted parliamentary orator. Yet to have influence the party, with limited numbers, needed to cooperate with other parties, inside parliament and out.

As Sitapati points out, in this process the RSS was both a help and a hindrance. Able and disciplined leaders, deputed from the RSS, helped build the party organisation. But vocal Hindu nationalist claims from the RSS and the party organisation hindered cooperation with other parties. The Janata Party, into which the Jana Sangh merged to fight the 1977 election, collapsed after a conflict-ridden period in government. One among many points of conflict was the role of the RSS.

Other points of tension included how an upper caste leadership could win lower caste support, what to do about the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, how

to respond to the liberalisation of some restrictions on economic activity by the Congress government of Narasimha Rao and how to relate to the party and the RSS when in government.

A turning point on extending voter support was Advani's ability to keep the peace within the party when the government increased civil service reservations for Other Backward Castes (OBCs). As one of the party's principal organisers, Advani had learnt from contact with the socialist leader, Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, the demographic power of OBCs was worth fighting for. However, the party's handling of demands for replacement of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya with a Ram temple exposed the party's internal differences. Advani's *yaltra* in support of a new temple, with Narendra Modi a key organiser, gathered support which led ultimately to the mosque's destruction. But it led also to political disruption. P.V. Narasimha Rao as Prime Minister thought Advani, as party leader at the time, had misled him. Vajpayee, who Rao would have preferred to deal with, remained silent. Among the most vocal supporters of destruction were Hindu *Sadhus* who had acted independently of any organisation. Sitapati notes that the RSS was glad the mosque was down but cross about the loss of control.

Like the Jana Sangh, the BJP did not object to much of Congress's post-independence economic policies. Indeed, Sitapati notes that Vajpayee reportedly said that voters liked socialism. When the Rao government, changed directions the BJP sat on the fence. However, in government Vajpayee found that Rao had changed the economy. Here, without consulting Advani, he continued in Rao's direction. This included several steps towards privatisation of government businesses.

In government with no single coalition partner able to threaten his majority, Vajpayee nevertheless faced continuing discontent within the *Sangh Parivar*. He was happy to use the resources of government, including his personally selected head of the Prime Minister's Office, a former foreign services officer. He did not pay particular attention to views in the party or the RSS. Sitapati argues that he found out the hard way that he could not side-line both Advani, his long-standing link to the party, and the RSS. He found out too, even with Advani's help, that because of intractable conflicts over Kashmir, attempts to conciliate with Pakistan were bound to fail. Grand gestures got nowhere. In the end, Sitapati argues that, on economic and foreign policy, Vajpayee led the government to «swim in the mainstream». In response people in the RSS and the *Sangh Parivar* asked: «What's the point?»

Following the defeat of the Vajpayee government in 2004, a Congress led coalition held office for two terms. In the BJP, opposition to the Vajpayee/Advani partnership by the partnership of Modi/Shah, evident since the 1980s, grew. After riots and killings of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, following murders of Hindus returning from Ayodhya, Vajpayee had wished to sack Modi as Chief Minister. But Modi survived and won a subsequent election handsomely. Support from backward castes and in the areas of most

violence were notable. When he sought to contest the 2014 national election as the party's candidate for Prime Minister it was said he would be stopped. But his controversial record proved to matter little. He bypassed with ease his former patron, Advani. With a program of pan Hindu solidarity, downplaying of caste, undiluted ideology, promises of good governance, prospects of development, and eloquent personal leadership he took the BJP in a new direction.

Sitapati concludes first with reflections on the partnership between Vajpayee and Advani. On the partnership he is blunt: in the family like culture of the RSS Vajpayee and Advani learnt the value of unity; their achievements came when they worked as one, matched oratory with organisation. This is followed by reflections on how his account relates to other analyses of Hindu nationalism. On this he is blunt on one thing: he asserts that because of the electoral promise of a Hindu majority the roots of the BJP are not anti-democratic; like the Jana Sangh the party under Vajpayee/Advani worked with electoral democracy. He is more tentative on the nature of Hindu nationalism. In his view it is based less on religion than on ethnic identity. Hindutva is adaptive to local culture. He notes further that the view of Hindus as victims is associated with «defensive violence»: the need to stand up for Hindus in every battle». He suggests, however, that such association is less clear in the institutions of Hindu nationalism than in ideology. The substance of the book follows his first reflections.

However, his reflections on Hindu nationalism and the significance of BJP participation in electoral democracy, are less well supported. The ambiguities he notes in relations between Hinduism and Hindutva invite much further consideration. So do assumptions that electoral democracy alone is an effective mark of democracy. Along with participation in elections other critical factors would demand consideration, including the nature of the electoral system, processes of participation and political debate, and the effectiveness of how citizens can interact with governments between elections.

### *3. The New BJP: Modi and the making of the world's largest political party*

Mehta sets out how the BJP under Modi transformed itself. It made a deep change in drive, organisation, and electoral results. As he puts it, it did not win. And then it did. In a significant contribution, he sets out how he thinks it did it.

He argues that its tools of growth included differentiated material and ideological incentives combined with sophisticated digital applications and communication strategies. Like Sitapati's account, the book outlines the party's ideology, approaches to governance, economic thinking, and relationship with the RSS. In these, the party continues a thread from SP Mookerjee and the Jana Sangh to the present. He too notes that ambiguities as well as continuities remain. In an important section the book explores

the party's expansion beyond its original base. The effectiveness of its appeals to women is especially remarked. In conclusion the book examines the party's aspirations as the 'Party of Ram'. This is counterpointed with a brief discussion of difficult issues yet to be effectively addressed. It is a light reminder of tough matters of public policy and management of up to now little public political resonance. While the contributions of party and *Sangh Parivar* organisational capabilities are notable throughout, the leading role is seen to stay with Narendra Modi.

Mehta's account of transformation begins with the party in Uttar Pradesh. There, leading up to the 2014 national elections, it made three big changes. It became the most socially representative party; built up local level organisational efforts around voting booths; and refocused on unapologetic Hindutva. Following election at the centre, it added the politics of welfare and caste representation. In Modi's BJP, as reflected in the administration of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Hindutva, hard nationalism, development, efficient welfare, and outreach to lower castes combined in targeted mixes. Organisation geared to promoting these themes, brought members and voters into the party. It also sought to keep them in.

Mehta provides extensive examples of how in the north the party extended its social reach. Examples are backed by a Social Index Project from the results of which Mehta argues that 'the idea of BJP being an upper-caste dominated party can no longer be supported'. While there has been argument about his numbers, his account of how the party approached election preparation and campaigning supports his contention.

Under Modi it promoted an inclusive Hindutva welcoming to those at the lowest levels in and beyond the caste pyramid. In doing so it leached into the support bases of parties which had risen on the mobilisation of lower castes. Further, the party made membership and prospects of appointment to a position in the party structure easy. It was enough to make a 'missed call' to a dedicated number to be enrolled as a member through an automated process.<sup>1</sup> Members, from any background, who were demonstrably active could vote in intraparty elections and hold office.

Members of formerly excluded castes could chair booth committees and be recognised by a place on the platform at higher level meetings. Higher officials checked to make sure that local operations were effective. They demanded follow up of voters by local officials. Elected members who lacked impact in their electorates lost their tickets. Personal tactical touches were encouraged. Leaders should include overnight stays in areas of focus. Higher caste office holders were enjoined to take tea with Dalits.

But in a conspicuous exception, the party did not seek Muslims. In areas with strong Muslim populations, it did not endorse Muslim candi-

1. The dedicated number disconnected automatically; a membership form was sent to the author of the phone call by SMS; following return of a completed form a membership number was issued.

dates. On the contrary, it mobilised Hindu votes by first promoting Hindu candidates and then mounting campaigns against Muslims.

Nevertheless, in government the party did not rely exclusively on Hindutva. It mixed it differentially with other strategies. In a phrase Mehta heard from party workers, welfare benefits were the 'wheel' and Hindutva the 'speed'. Benefits provided by government included access to facilities to make life more bearable for lower castes and other low income groups. They notably included benefits directed to women. These included Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT) adapted and extended from the previous government. They included also signature schemes, including building of household toilets and provision of water supply. In this way the party recognised the special significance of toilets and water for women.

Establishing eligibility with officialdom could still be difficult. But once application was made and eligibility determined, benefits were said to flow. Digital delivery, where applicable, cut leaching by intermediaries. Here Muslims too could apply for and receive benefits. Eligibility was said not to depend on religion. Mehta reported that, in a phrase that demands further exploration, while Muslim support was not thought necessary for elections, it was needed for «governance».

However, electoral considerations were far from absent. Beneficiaries became a new political category – in Hindi, *labarthees* (लाभार्थी – whose votes were actively sought. One means was through beneficiary get togethers – in Hindi, *sammelans* (सम्मेलन). Such get togethers, arranged with access to lists of beneficiaries, aimed to get the «quiet people» to «stand up». Different get togethers were organised for different benefits, for example one for gas bottles and a separate one for toilets. The party and government departments worked together. Lists of beneficiaries were exchanged. Further, the Prime Minister held focused meetings with selected groups. These included women, forest dwellers, Adivasi groups and seafarers. Those who did not immediately receive benefits received encouragement to nourish hope. Delivery and follow up emphasised throughout a direct link between benefits and the Prime Minister.

Mehta's account of transformation continues with the party's drive to extend beyond its northern and western geographical and linguistic base. Wins under Modi have come mainly from twelve states (ten Hindi speaking). Field experience and interviews give life to Mehta's account. It is a story of resourcefulness and targeting. It is also one of frustration. Where its strategies have worked (Karnataka and the Northeast) it has gained entry through selected sensitive issues. It has then found local leaders, provided online resources, and grown from there. Aspiring leaders who could not find berths in existing parties could get a crack at influence in the BJP. As Mehta puts it «mergers and acquisitions» provided a means of growing quickly. Such growth is reinforced for BJP governments, formed in this way, by the prospect of support for local projects from the national government.

However, barriers of regional culture and language are strong. As Mehta says, even experienced organisers from the party and the RSS found them difficult. In parts of the Northeast, he notes the effectiveness of appeals to long running ties with Hindu culture and organisers who have learned local languages. But as he notes also, people who come in for power can forge their own agendas. In the Northeast Mehta reports churning and the possibility of rapid shifts. A recurrent theme is that extending support beyond the north and west demands experienced organisers who speak local languages and have grown up in local cultures. Mehta reports that BJP supporters in Tamil Nadu lament the lack of an «Amit Shah who speaks Tamil».

Where transformation is very clear too is in organisational infrastructure. The party has restructured internal organisation; built modern offices; set up training centres; organised voluminous archives; and developed multi-layered digital communications strategies. Mehta's argument is that in this transformation digital capability is intrinsic. By 2019, with half of voters on social media and two thirds on digital payment systems, digital outreach could be combined with a personal touch. Digital training of cadres spread capability. Speed of digital reacting kept messaging current. It used different messages for the public and the party. It spoke in multiple voices, including through the RSS. Further, it was fluent in social media. Its troll armies and WhatsApp infiltration became notorious. From a digitised index of communications Mehta tracked trends in messaging. He notices an important shift. By 2017 the BJP was talking more about Modi than about itself. It was also talking more about development than about temples.

However, in policy directions claims of transformation tended to take form in adaptations and increments. In ideology, approaches to governance, economic thinking, and relationship with the RSS the party continued trends outlined by Sitapati. Culture and nationalism remain pervasive. For the RSS, culture, now as then, leads. In a phrase that highlights a continuing ambiguity Mehta describes its relationship with the BJP as independent but «integrated». In education, its influence and that of the *Sangh Pariwar* are strong. In other fields, the most prominent new directions took place in a widening range of digital applications. As Mehta recognised both started under the previous government. But as he shows repackaging and expansion have been dramatic.

In economic thinking, Modi has, if anything, backtracked from Vajpayee. Vajpayee liked to stay in the centre. But he also talked about disinvestment. More so than Modi, Mehta suggests. Indeed, he cheekily begins a chapter on the BJP's economics with the heading «When Right is Left». Like Shekhar Gupta [2021], Mehta argues that under Modi the BJP is not, on economics, a right-wing party. It has focused on keeping inflation down and on social welfare, social projects, and infrastructure. On disinvestment, expected to take place more than it has, Modi's approach has been incremental. In economic management, growth is encouraged. But



bold options have not been accepted. Economic directions have seen few big policy shifts.

Mehta's combination of a journalist's eye and a researcher's industry provides detailed insights into how the party operates. In his account the party has, in conjunction with the RSS and the *Sangh Parivar*, combined, in an adaptive way, themes from Hindu nationalism and sophisticated organisational methods and digital technology to extend the party's electoral reach. His data sets provide much material for others to explore. Similarly, his case studies, although illustrative rather than comprehensive, provide rich leads for others to follow. Throughout his stance is that of an empathetic observer and narrator. Endorsement or critique is not his business.

However, in conclusion Mehta canvasses not only the party's wider ambitions but also a selection of significant challenges. It has global ambitions. It wishes to extend Hindu cultural power beyond India. It wishes to build on and extend ancient traditions. The Ram temple at Ayodhya is envisaged as a vehicle for taking new messages to the world. In Prime Minister Modi's terms this includes a reframing in which «Ram Rajya» is focused on the marginal and the poor.

However, Modi and the party have also to deal with problems at home and abroad, including fall-out from the Coronavirus pandemic, an economy that fluctuates and does not provide steady growth in employment, and the stand-off on the China border. Internally, the party must handle new coalitions in its support base, tensions of expansion, and succession planning. It needs also to manage the fault line between Hindus and Muslims. Campaigning against Muslims has helped it aggregate Hindu votes. But in government it has recognised that it cannot ignore Muslim communities. Mehta's discussion here is brief. But it may prompt readers to ponder the significant implications.

#### 4. Conclusion

Both books focus on political mobilisation. However, in examining the political strategies of the BJP they make also a substantial contribution to understanding the context in which governing takes place. They have the merit of suggesting more questions than they set out to answer.

In the BJP's unitary and election focused model, issues of public policy and management have less priority than themes of politics and cultural ascendancy. Questions arise about the Modi government's centralised and personal model and how far its capabilities extend. Hindutva, welfare benefits, and digital applications have helped mobilise voters. The RSS and the *Sangh Parivar* have been force-multipliers. But both books end with cautions about future ambitions: Mehta with questions about how the BJP will meet selected challenges and Sitapati with an observation: «all flowers will wither

someday, must wither someday». These prompt two thoughts: what will the new communities mobilised by Modi's BJP want to do within the party and with their lives; and what will the government be able to do to provide an enabling environment?

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gupta, Shekhar, 2021, «What is Modi-Shah BJP's ideology? You're wrong if you say Right wing, because it's Hindu Left», *The Print*, 25 December.

THE HISTORIAN, THE COLONIAL PAST OF INDIA, ITS PERSISTENCE,  
AND THE DUTY OF ENQUIRY

Tommaso Bobbio  
tommaso.bobbio@unito.it

Aditya Mukherjee, *Political Economy of Colonial and Post-Colonial India*, New Delhi: Primus Books, 2022, pp. 592 (ISBN: 978-93-5572-180-8), Hard-cover price ₹1950; \$84.95; £74.95.

From many points of view, India's relationship with colonialism is not a closed chapter in the country's history. Although British rule over the sub-continent ended 77 years ago, its legacies are still alive today, partly open and visible, partly veiled in a kind of colonial mentality that still permeates layers of Indian society. Since independence, the country's relationship with the former colonisers, as well as with Europe and the "West" in general, has been marked by several contradictory phases. From Jawaharlal Nehru's efforts to give India a leading role among the non-aligned countries in the 1950s to the slow but inexorable failure of socialist-inspired state economic planning in the 1980s, successive governments have grappled, and continue to grapple, with the long shadow of almost two centuries of colonisation, seeking, of course, to build and consolidate an economic system that would allow the country to grow and the population to improve in terms of wealth, education and quality of life. At a deeper level, however, India, like many other former colonial countries, has to contend with the persistence of a particular mindset that implicitly ascribes to the colonial experience the merit of having brought "residual or partial" benefits. The old self-representation that the colonisers' efforts were not only an exercise in domination but also a mission to bring civilisation and progress to the backward areas of the world is still very strong.

It may not be too surprising that this kind of prejudice still permeates the mentality of very large strata of the former colonisers' societies, although it should raise many questions that debates about the effects of colonialism in terms of economic exploitation and the diffusion of a hegemonic culture of superiority hardly go beyond academic circles. In recent years, popular movements in North America and Europe have directly or indirectly addressed the evils of the colonial experiences and attempted to reorient collective memory towards a more conscious understanding of the ongoing imbalances that are direct effects of colonial exploitation. Movements such as Black Lives Matter, which started in the United States and touched most of Europe, have highlighted the need to openly reflect on issues such as slavery and colonialism, to engage mainstream media and a wider public. In parallel, many museums and curators have begun to re-

think the ways in which institutions can raise awareness of such issues, redesign their spaces and collections in such a way that the display of heritage and art becomes a tool to stimulate critical thinking and promote historical awareness. Although these examples show that coming to terms with colonial experiences – and their legacies – can reach an increasingly wide audience, such discussion is still almost completely absent from school curricula.

Primary and secondary school textbooks hardly propose analyses of how colonial rule was structured to transfer resources from the colonies to the metropolises, or how cultural hegemony sustained economic exploitation and produced equal evils in the form of racism, communitarianism and collective violence. Instead, the sections devoted to European ‘expansion’ over the rest of the world are usually imbued with an aura of benevolence based on the assumption that domination was the almost natural outcome of Europeans’ greater progress (technological, cultural and economic) and that such progress somehow passed on to the colonised societies. This understanding is so widespread that until recently one could read in a very popular history textbook for Italian middle school (8th year) published by the leading educational publisher (Mondadori scuola) that:

Britain [...] was indeed also a bearer of civilisation, especially in India [...] where the British built power lines and railways, banned the suicide of widows who were burned alive at their husbands’ funeral pyres, and fought the caste system.

Having organised public administration down to the smallest detail, they entrusted it to Indian officials and clerks, coordinated by freely elected local councils with legislative and executive powers.

Indian elites have learnt a lot from these experiences of self-government and democracy, and it is perhaps no coincidence that India today not only occupies one of the first places among industrialised nations, but is also the largest and most stable democracy in Asia.

Even if an Italian textbook cannot just be considered the sole representative of a cultural orientation, a thorough analysis of history textbooks in general shows that the bias of reading European colonialism and imperialism through the lens of the civilising mission is still pervasive. Even more, it shapes the way history is still taught and passed on to new generations of middle and high school students.<sup>1</sup> This situation has produced a dichotomy between public debates that are increasingly and sometimes violently – as in the case of the ‘attacks’ on statues following the Black Lives Matter movement – critical of the legacies of colonialism, and a tendency to downplay the negative effects of European colonialism in the long run. And even though

1. These statements are based on the analysis of four sets of history textbooks for Italian middle and high schools, published by mainstream publishing houses Mondadori Scuola, Pearson-Paravia and Zanichelli.

there is general agreement in public opinion to condemn colonialism, there seems to be a great lack of knowledge about how exactly colonialism harmed colonised countries, what the instruments of exploitation were and how they functioned [e.g., Sierp 2020].

While these examples give an insight into the ubiquity of a colonial mindset in European societies, contradictions and ambiguities about colonial legacies are also commonplace in India. When confronted with his country's position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine in June 2022, Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar, speaking at the Globsec Forum (2 June 2022), stated: «Somewhere Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems. That if it is you, it's yours, if it is me it is ours» [Outlook 2023]. Apart from this explicitly and openly polemical statement, Jaishankar's position reflects an underlying impatience with Western hegemony and geopolitical constructs that has been recurrent - albeit with differences and particularities - among Indian political elites since independence. Besides, in recent years debates about caste discrimination, the increasing marginalisation of religious minorities or the consolidation of *Hindutva* as a shared cultural framework, mostly bring into question the legacy of British colonial rule. In the last three decades, historians and to some extent anthropologists have made great efforts to investigate and assess the multiple and sometimes unpredictable effects of colonial domination, the organisation of power and administration affected patterns of mutual recognition, modified group solidarities and produced new tensions and forms of identification. Since the 1990s, the rise of Hindu fundamentalism at the centre of Indian political life has certainly been the most visible example of such a dynamic, as its origins question the ways in which the British dealt with religious communities as political entities and allow us to examine the persistence of episodes of collective violence in the post-independence period.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in recent years, the persistence and increasing media exposure of caste discrimination have fuelled debates within and outside academia, in which, in turn, the role of British colonialism is often questioned.<sup>3</sup>

Among all these debates, one of the aspects that has been more thoroughly studied and at the same time neglected in public debates is the long-lasting impact of colonialism on the economy of both the metropolis and the periphery. Again, it is only in recent years that parts of these debates have begun to reach the mainstream media and break through the surface of silence in political and collective culture, largely thanks to increasing at-

2. For a classical study into British legacies in exacerbating communal issues see Pandey 2006; for an introductory overview of the debate, see Bayly 1985.

3. A reference point on the issue has become Dirks 2001. For more recent works, which have both discussed and reframed Dirks theses, see in particular Sarkar 2014. Also, for an example of how the debate reached mainstream media see Chakravarti.

tention to the massive impact of slavery on the global economy and Western hegemony, which mass movements such as Black Lives Matter have helped to expose. As a result of increasing media attention to slavery and racism, for example, the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University established a Legacies of Enslavement Advisory Group in 2019. The report the group published three years later, in September 2022, acknowledged that the university derived «significant benefits» from slavery, both through donations and direct investment in the South Sea Company, a firm involved in the slave trade.<sup>4</sup> This and other examples have certainly helped to draw attention to Europe's colonial past in a way that challenges the still widespread prejudice of the civilising mission.

In this perspective, Aditya Mukherjee's work certainly represents one of the clearest and most grounded analyses of the various features of the colonial economy, the ways in which its organisation slowed the rise of a capitalist class in the subcontinent, affected labour relations, and fed back into the postcolonial project of development and economic reform. *Political Economy of Colonial and Postcolonial India*, a collection of essays written between the 1970s and the present, situates the understanding of the subcontinent's economic history in the broader framework of the history of global integration of markets and mobilities in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the rebalancing in the decolonisation decades of the 20th century. In the context of debates on colonial legacy that are slowly reaching a wider audience, Mukherjee responds ideally by grounding the analysis on the mechanisms of exploitation that explain one of the fundamental truths about British colonialism in India: that during nearly two centuries of rule, Britain rose from an almost insignificant economy to the leading power in the global political and economic scenario at the end of the 19th century, while India went from being the second richest economy (after China) to a backward one [ch. 1-2, in particular pp. 62-70.].

The numerous explanations for this trend form the main body of the book and propose a reading of the various aspects of the colonial experience that focuses on showing how maximum economic exploitation was the main objective of colonialism until India's independence in 1947. Even though the theory of Drain was formulated as early as the 1880s, Mukherjee deepens its scope in at least three directions: first, in line with the work of other Indian economic historians of his generation, such as Utsa Patnaik, the author not only explains the broader political framework that underlay the outflow, but also analyses the ground-level mechanisms and financial implications that enabled the British government to transfer huge capital to the metropole until the end of its rule [pp. 78-90; but also ch. 3 for an

4. The news appeared in all major media around the world. See, e.g., *BBC News*, 2022.

interesting comparison with Indonesia].<sup>5</sup> Secondly, the book is very attentive to make connections and understand how economic exploitation was based on the construction of a cultural hegemony based on the assumption of superiority, efficiency and rationality. In this sense, the stereotype of the civilising mission appears as just another tool in the service of economic exploitation [pp. 150-155]. Third, the study is extended beyond the formal end of the colonial era to follow the struggles to define the character of the postcolonial state in terms of political projects, mobilisation, but also national and cultural belonging.

The trajectory that is taken into account is not just that of a country under colonial domination: the history of India is here inserted in both a broader time frame and a wider geo-political perspective. In line with recent historiography that inscribes colonial histories in long-term and global perspectives, this collection of essays is a useful reading for those who wish to better understand the economic history of modern India, as well as for readers who might be interested in redressing the impact of colonialism as a phenomenon that is inextricably intertwined with global dynamics of economic integration, mobility and dependency [e.g., Pomeranz 2000; Cooper 2005]. There is no possible understanding of contemporary India without a deep knowledge of the socio-economic and political premises set up by colonialism, and a conscious acknowledgment of the continuities and legacies that from colonial experience extend up until today. At the same time, with striking clarity Mukherjee reminds us that the wealth and the prominent position that former colonial countries still enjoy in global geopolitical balances of power is pinned on the history of economic exploitation and extraction of wealth brought about by European countries over about two centuries.

And if a reassessment of the extent of European colonialism on economic, as well as cultural, balances has eventually, although with great difficulties, broken the boundaries of academic debates, Mukherjee warns us of the intellectual ambiguity still embedded in large portion of the social sciences, where Eurocentric positions are assumed as methodological presumptions without being discussed enough [pp.457 ff]. Too often within and outside academia, colonial past is dealt with as a concluded experience, an era – in terms of historical periodisation – that ended with the decolonisation process in the decades following World War II and that can now be viewed with detached, if not even benevolent, eyes [p. 459-462]. While debates assessing the effects of colonial experiences and their legacies are rightly increasing, bringing these issues to a more public level, the author reminds us that the «colonial paradigm» is still dominating the mindset of

5. With regard to evaluating the actual amount of capital transferred from India to Britain, a 2018 article on *Al Jazeera* [2018], based on Utsa Patnaik's analysis, rose great debates, claiming that the *drain* could be set at 45 trillion dollar from 1765 to 1738.

large strata of society, not only in global north but also in former colonised countries of the global south. Much is still to be done to challenge the widely accepted idea that colonialism, after all, was a driver of civilisation or at least economic progress.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Al Jazeera*, 2018, 19 December, 'How Britain stole \$45 trillion from India. And lied about it'.
- Bayly, Chris, 1985, 'The Pre-History of Communalism? Religious Conflict in India, 1700-1860', *Modern Asian Studies*, 19 (2): 177-203.
- BBC news*, 2022, 23 September, 'Study finds Cambridge University 'benefited from slavery'',
- Chakravarti, Ananya, 2019, 'Caste Wasn't a British Construct', *The Wire*, 19 June.
- Cooper, Frederick, 2005, *Colonialism in Question, Theory, Knowledge, History*, Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Dirks, Nicholas, 2001, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Pandey, Gyanendra, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, Oxford: OUP, 2006.
- Pomeranz, Kenneth, 2000, *The Great Divergence, China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sarkar, Sumit and Tanika (eds.), 2014, *Caste in Modern India, a Reader*, Raniket: Permanent Black.
- Sierp, Aline, 2020, 'EU Memory Politics and Europe's Forgotten Colonial Past', *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 22(6): 686-702.



THE ROLE OF CITIZENSHIP IN THE COMING OF HINDU RASHTRA

*Clemens Six*  
University of Groningen, the Netherlands  
c.six@rug.nl

Anupama Roy, *Citizenship Regimes, Law, and Belonging: the CAA and NRC*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, 270 pp. (ISBN: 978-0-19-285908-2)

Since the Indian People's Party (Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP) gained national power in New Delhi for the first time in 1998, Hindu nationalist organisations have started to transform the Indian republic in mainly two ways: alter the way Indians imagine their society, its historical origins, and its collective identity away from a secular, multi-religious entity towards Hindu hegemony; and change the character of the state and its relationship with society by relying on state-like institutional and organisational networks largely beyond the effective control of the state. Both of these processes have severe consequences for India's democracy, which in the long run they in fact undermine. As such, they are best understood as a systematic, coherent, and gradual effort designed along a masterplan to turn India into a Hindu Rashtra, a reign of the Hindus, in which a Hindu mainstream in culture, politics, and society forces everybody and all communities not part of this mainstream into a subordinate or even illegitimate position. The premiership of Narendra Modi, which began in 2014, has accelerated and deepened these changes and brought the vision of Hindu Rashtra as close to a reality as never before. Anupama Roy's book is an important contribution to understand how this vision became manifest in alterations of the Indian republic's citizenship regime and how these changes are vital to alter the political-legal character of the Indian state as a whole.

The book focuses primarily on the regulations and impact of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), two recent (2019) pieces of legislation that simplified the access to Indian citizenship for Hindu, Sikh, Christian, Buddhist, Jain and Parsi migrants who fled from India's neighbouring societies while at the same time discriminating against Muslims in Assam and elsewhere in their efforts to acquire such citizenship. In the BJP's official rhetoric around these regulations, there is an explicit link to Partition, i.e., the separation of British-India into India and Pakistan in the summer of 1947. The Sangh Parivar, i.e., the family of Hindu nationalist organisations, has always perceived Partition as a historical wrong to be corrected as quickly and comprehensively as possible. By extension, Pakistan and Pakistani citizenship are essentially illegitimate. The NRC and CAA should be seen within this historical pre-supposition.

The main chapters of the book provide detailed studies of how these two legal instruments unfold their repressive character at the local level. The rich methodology through which Roy approaches his subject is a combination of government reports, case law, constituent assembly debates, archival material, and personal interviews the author conducted over the previous years in Assam and other parts of India. Particularly the interviews make the legalistic and at times quite abstract subject matter much more accessible for the generally interested reader while at the same time providing some concrete illustrations of how legal discrimination and exclusion from citizenship work out in real life for communities, families, and individuals.

Roy characterises this mosaic of different research methods as a «legal-anthropological account of citizenship in contemporary India» (32) that envisions the changes in law and judicial interventions as manifestations of much larger alterations of how the state relates to its people. In that light, the book provides the reader not only with a detailed study of these two particular pieces of legislation but also with an analysis of the most recent and most far-reaching transformation of India's citizenship «regime» (4). By that, Roy means the whole apparatus of legal-administrative operations that constitute citizenship including their ideological and political embeddedness. The question of citizenship thus turns into a symptom of both dimensions of India's reconstruction towards a Hindu *Rashtra*, the re-imagination of India and the transformation of statehood. It is a concrete manifestation of who belongs to Indian society, under what conditions, and equipped with what kind of legal-political status. Because of its inbuilt patterns of discrimination between Muslims and the rest, Roy understandably interprets this contemporary citizenship regime as a violation of the Indian constitution.

Throughout the chapters Roy deploys a number of different notions of citizenship. For the reader less familiar with citizenship as a research subject it is not always easy to maintain a clear overview on how many notions there are and how they are distinct from each other. But these notions do illustrate the historical evolution of citizenship primarily since the Constituent Assembly debates around Independence in 1947 and the different layers that constitute today's citizenship regime in the Indian republic. Let me highlight three of them. «Hyphenated» citizenship describes the competence and even obligation the Indian state has given itself to establish and regularly update a national register of citizens and issue identity cards to document their rightful belonging to Indian society. This citizenship dynamic became particularly relevant in Assam in India's Northeast, a region with a long history of migration and contested notions of belonging and religious-national identity. The case of Assam is not only relevant to understand how notions of citizenship have been established and challenged in post-Partition India. Assam was also a central political battleground when the NRC was fleshed out after the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2013 had entered into force. The hyphenated character of this notion of citizenship

refers to the intermingling of formal citizenship as a legal status with questions of collective identity, religion, and descent. In contrast to the earlier days of the republic, this new notion of citizenship attaches the legal status to cultural and thus strongly contested criteria of belonging and in this way opens up various opportunities for outright legal discrimination and political marginalisation.

A second notion is «bounded» citizenship, which refers to the legal regime of the CAA. This layer of the Indian citizenship regime introduced strict and unnegotiable distinctions between citizens and non-citizens and associates the former with national territory and the imagination of a religious-majoritarian national community. Together, hyphenated and bounded citizenship constitute the essence of a legal-political apparatus that the state created to cartograph what it considers its legitimate population while in return marginalising or even cutting out what it labels illegitimate.

While these two manifestations of citizenship became induced by the state, a third one evolves in opposition to the state. What Roy calls «dissident» citizenship is an umbrella term for efforts initiated by societal actors, local communities, and political-institutional opponents of the government to undermine Hindu nationalism's discriminatory citizenship regime and fight its internal logics on the ground. In what I consider the best part in the book, chapter 4 reconstructs numerous efforts launched from within India's society and institutional landscape to challenge the first two notions of citizenship and push the political-legal practice again back towards more respect for the Indian constitution and equality as the indispensable foundation of a democratic order. Local parliaments, the judiciary, civil society initiatives, artists, civil servants, and national opposition critical of the BJP's citizenship regime made various attempts, partly successful, to challenge this regime and weaken its implementation among communities at least gradually removed from New Delhi's executive powers. The chapter also contains some otherwise rare references beyond India.

As the author emphasises in various parts of the book, the embeddedness of the CAA and NRC in the broader ideological-political context is key to understand their evolution and function within India's contemporary political course. In light of the BJP's regular publications and election manifestos of the 1980s and early 1990s, both the CAA and NRC appear as the consistent implementation of Hindutva's core ideas formulated and made visible already at that time to everyone paying attention.<sup>1</sup> The general conjuncture Roy observes in the development of the citizenship regime towards the core criteria of blood and descent is a reflection of the Sangh Parivar's belief in what defines India as a nation of Hindus. These principles

1. An illuminating rereading in this context is the BJP election manifestos from 1984 and 1989 as well as the BJP White Paper on Ayodhya from April 1993 (all accessible at [bjp.org](http://bjp.org)). These three documents sketch out what India's future meant for this party in terms of concrete political change.

of belonging go back to the 1920s when V.D. Savarkar formulated the key ideological features of Hindutva, namely the common descent of all Hindus and their devotion to India as their holy land.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, Roy's approach indicates another historical pattern frequently overlooked in today's discussions on the rise of the BJP and its affiliated Hindu nationalist organisations: the ways in which the Congress party facilitated this rise. While there is no doubt that the rule of the BJP in New Delhi under Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998-2004) and especially Narendra Modi (since 2014) constitute a qualitative change towards an actual Hindu Rashtra in India, the continuities particularly since the Emergency regime (1975-1977) and Indira Gandhi's fourth term in the first half of the 1980s are underacknowledged in the discussion.<sup>3</sup> The transformations of national and local Indian politics that occurred since the second half of the 1970s are essential to understand how the BJP managed since the second half of the 1980s to re-position itself from the margins of Indian politics into its centre stage. Roy's thoughtful and detailed analysis of how the Congress pushed India's citizenship regime gradually but steadily towards a more exclusive and thus discriminatory regime ultimately becoming based on blood and descent is a vital contribution to such a historically more adequate understanding of India's contemporary transformation. Rather than focusing exclusively on the (no doubt disastrous) policies of the Modi administration leading to national disintegration and inter-communal hostility, a historically more extended interpretation of the harbingers of Hindu Rashtra under the leadership of the Congress party is a much-needed complementary element in this analysis.

Finally, Roy's book illustrates another element discussions on citizenship share in many contemporary societies far beyond India. The revision of citizenship regulations is frequently grounded in and legitimised by a comprehensive notion of crisis.<sup>4</sup> As the argument goes, because society and state are in a crisis, existing citizenship regimes need to be revised and tightened towards (a particular kind of) outsiders in order to combat this crisis. In the Indian case, this logic contains mainly two notions of crisis. One is

2. V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* 6<sup>th</sup> ed, New Delhi, Bharti Sahitya Sadan, 1989.

3. This essential aspect of the Congress party's history is missing in large parts of the historiography. See, for example, the otherwise illuminating books by Zoya Hasan, *Congress After Indira: Policy, Power, Political Change (1984-2009)*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2015; and Zoya Hasan (ed.), *Ideology and Organization in Indian Politics: Polarization and the Growing Crisis of the Congress Party (2009-19)*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2022.

4. The term populism, coming from the debates on crisis and politics in contemporary United States and Europe, is also increasingly used for the Indian context. See, for example, Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021; and Mihir Bose, *Narendra Modi: The Yogi of Populism*, Goring, Bite-Sized Books, 2021.

a long-term state of emergency. A religious-ethnic «majority», since centuries besieged by hostile «minorities», needs to break out of its passivity and flawed notion of tolerance to emancipate itself and re-establish true historical order. The other notion of crisis is more short-term and refers to imminent forms of conflict the crisis-beaters usually produce themselves. The saffronisation of India's citizenship regime illustrates both notions of crisis that function as a vital context to both de-legitimise the established citizenship regime as historically inadequate and advance open discrimination as the order of the day.

In conclusion, then, Roy's book deserves a broad readership for the creative ways through which it combines a rich methodology with the analysis of a timely subject that illuminates many relevant facets of the ongoing endeavour to turn the secular Republic of India into a Hindu Rashtra.

## INDIA'S FIRST DICTATORSHIP: THE EMERGENCY, 1975-77

Sujeet George  
 Max Weber Stiftung, New Delhi  
 george@mwsindia.org

Christophe Jaffrelot & Pratinav Anil, *India's First Dictatorship: The Emergency, 1975-77*, London: C. Hurst & Co., 2020, 508 pp. (ISBN: 9781787384026).

Historians working on South Asia have long regarded the end of British rule in the Indian subcontinent as a veritable boundary for their research. This caesura has been rapidly dismantled in the last decade as newer archives have opened up and researchers have incorporated multiple source accounts to piece together the experiences of postcoloniality in the second half of the twentieth century in South Asia. Situated within this emerging scholarship, Christophe Jaffrelot and Pratinav Anil's *India's First Dictatorship: The Emergency, 1975-77* persuasively imagines the afterlives of colonialism and India's myriad experiments with democratic ideas.

The book is divided into 3 thematic sections which together contain 10 chapters along with an introduction and conclusion. Part 1, comprising five chapters, lays out the theoretical framework under which the authors categorize the period of Emergency and details the specific characteristics of the Emergency regime. Drawing on Juan Linz's typology of the various forms of authoritarianism, Jaffrelot and Anil characterize the Emergency as «organic statist». Such a variant of political governance involves a delicate interplay between political authoritarianism and existing social hierarchies, and the two work in tandem to reinforce each other. Typically, organic statist regimes lack a distinct ideology of rule, and they foster an ethic of depoliticization among the population. A unique feature of Indira Gandhi's Emergency regime was that Gandhi was averse to exercising outright absolutism and hence at least in appearance she operated within the restraints put forth by Indian parliamentary and juridical structures. In this sense, the authors term the 21 months of Emergency rule as a *constitutional democracy* since it functioned within the framework of the Indian constitution (17).

The Emergency was imposed in June 1975 in the aftermath of a series of economic crises in the preceding years which had resulted in rising inflation and a crisis in agriculture across the country. The first three chapters of Part 1 detail the ways in which Indira Gandhi responded to accusations of malfeasance and administrative incompetence by systematically curbing a range of individual rights, clamping down on political dissidents through mass incarceration, and bending the judiciary and the media through means fair and foul. The complicity of the Indian bureaucracy, the police, and of the state radio and television was crucial in this process as socialist

propaganda and the centrality of Indira Gandhi to the national consciousness were systematically established. The last two chapters of Part 1 examine the spatial and temporal dimensions of the period of Emergency. In chapter 4 Jaffrelot and Anil argue that there was a distinct temporal dimension to the Emergency, wherein they draw a distinction between the initial months of Indira Gandhi's rule and the takeover of the regime by her son Sanjay Gandhi in the latter part. The transition of informal power from Indira to Sanjay marked the move towards a full-fledged state-sponsored targeting of specific sections of the society. Sanjay notoriously focussed on two specific domains, namely, family planning and urban gentrification. Mandatory sterilisation programmes run by Sanjay's cronies and massive evictions of the urban poor, especially in and around Delhi, became the worst instances of state violence in postcolonial India. Indira being cast aside from policy-making signalled the transformation of an ostensible socialist authoritarian state into a full-fledged *sultanist* regime run by the son. Sanjay's rise to power also offered opportunities for a number of younger Congress politicians to find a role on the national stage. The likes of Pranab Mukherjee, Kamal Nath, Ambika Soni and Ghulam Nabi Azad among others cut their teeth during the Emergency and went on to have prominent roles within the Congress party and national politics. The impact of Emergency was also not uniform across the breadth of the country. The force of the repressive regime was felt more severely in those states where the Congress was also in rule. Further, there was a clear divide between north and south India in the extent to which government-sponsored programmes could be implemented. Chapter 5 lays out the differing degrees of impact across the country, with northern India bearing the brunt of state violence.

The middle section of the book examines the immediate causes leading up to the proclamation of Emergency. Chapter 6 in this section critically engages with both the JP movement and the Allahabad judgement—two factors that have conventionally been understood as the catalyst to Indira Gandhi's political posturing and her grab of absolute power. One of the central arguments of the book—which is persuasively presented in this chapter—is that the functioning of Emergency rule, while drawing on Indira Gandhi's force of personality, was a consequence of longer-term socio-economic factors and continued friction between the executive and the judiciary. The severe economic crisis in the early 1970s as well as allegations of widespread corruption in government administration had provided the push for the opposition parties to rally around veteran leader (and self-proclaimed Gandhian) Jayaprakash Narayan's call for a «total revolution». Narayan's charisma and oratory galvanised the opposition against Indira Gandhi's regime and helped him attain a pan-India following. But his fight turned out to be «more about power and morality» and thus lacked any distinct ideology (232). Perhaps the lasting legacy of the JP movement was the legitimacy it accorded to the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and

the Jan Sangh. Alongside the political unrest brought about by the JP movement, the other immediate cause was a judgment passed by a high court in Allahabad in 1975. The case involved the election of Indira Gandhi in the general elections of 1971 that was challenged by Raj Narain, Gandhi's political opponent at the election. The Allahabad high court found Indira Gandhi guilty of electoral malpractices and barred her from contesting elections for the next six years. Rendered ineffectual by the judgement, and with the opposition seeking her resignation, Indira Gandhi chose to declare a state of emergency and assume absolute power. Jaffrelot and Anil demonstrate that the standoff between Indira Gandhi and the judiciary was part of a longstanding tussle that had been brewing since the late 1960s. These juridical battles were primarily over the role of the judiciary as a watchdog over the executive and as the custodian of the fundamental rights of the Indian people.

Chapter 7 examines two key factors that enabled the fostering of authoritarianism in the long run. The authors highlight the increased centralisation of power within the Congress party, with a gradual strengthening of Indira Gandhi's hold on the functioning of the party. This centralisation of power in the hands of a single individual was part of a corresponding gradual deinstitutionalisation of the Indian National Congress, a process that had begun with the split within the party in the late 1960s. Chapter 8, the final chapter of Part 2, elaborates on the diverse groups who supported the Emergency. From the Communist Party of India to the Marathi-nationalist Shiv Sena, from most of the large corporate houses to multiple trade unions, the Emergency received endorsement from diverse fronts. The Indian middle class as well as the bureaucracy gave its silent approval and remained willing spectators to the unfolding drama. The coming together of such a heterogeneous spectrum of actors was in part due to the lack of any ideology espoused by the Emergency regime. Further, as the authors demonstrate, Indira Gandhi astutely echoed the concerns of whichever group she interacted with, at once standing for everything and nothing.

The last section, titled «Resistance and Endgame», comprises two chapters which detail the accounts of those who opposed the Emergency and the reasons for the eventual calling off of the 21-month experiment by Indira Gandhi. In many popular accounts, the resistance to the Emergency regime has taken on a near-hagiographic status. Such a characterization fits in with the current ascendancy of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), as it was the RSS and the Jan Sangh (the previous avatar of the BJP) which are imagined as the heroes of the counter Emergency struggle. Jaffrelot and Anil, instead, sketch the chaos and confusion that riddled the meagre efforts to oppose Indira Gandhi's diktats in this period. By neutering the media, putting many of the opposition party members in jails, and by laying down cudgels against the judiciary, Indira Gandhi had effectively stymied most efforts to challenge the state. The final chapter of the book addresses the



dilemma raised by the preceding chapter: if the powers of the state were unchallenged, and dissent effectively trampled, why then was the state of Emergency called off? As with the reasons for the imposition of Emergency, the circumstances leading to the scrapping of the Emergency regulations were a combination of individual caprice and external variables. The curbs put on the media and on journalists was applied to both Indian and foreign broadsheets, which meant that the flow of information could not be regulated as desired by Gandhi. Arguably the pressing motivations came from within: Sanjay's band of henchmen and their brazen violation of individual rights sought to shift the power base from Indira Gandhi to her son, something the matriarch was loath to allow. More significantly, calling off the Emergency and announcing general elections reflected more on Indira Gandhi's deluded belief in her own invincibility on the election battlefield. As the resounding defeat of the Congress party in the 1977 elections showed, she had misread the mood of the public. The victory of the Janata Party under Morarji Desai meant a return to normalcy, but the impact of the Emergency period lingered. The Justice Shah Commission instituted by the Desai government to deliberate on the Emergency found that Indira Gandhi had violated multiple constitutional norms while infringing on the rights of individuals across a broad socio-political spectrum. That the findings of the Shah Commission were considered inadmissible and were pushed under the carpet after Indira Gandhi's return to power in 1980 is perhaps the most apposite reflection on the dysfunctional state of democratic practice in India.

The legacy of the Emergency period has been analysed variedly by political commentators both in the immediate aftermath and in the years since. Most such accounts either see the period as a state of exception before the country returned to the norm, or as a turning point after which the practice of democracy in India irrevocably changed. In the conclusion, the authors argue that the logics of governance put forth during the Emergency, the broad indifference and/or support that it drew from the various sections, as well as the manner in which independent regulatory bodies and the media proved ineffective are all part of the very story of the functioning of democracy in postcolonial India. The story of the Emergency period as sketched by Jaffrelot and Anil is thus about the travails of institutionalizing norms of liberal democracy in a society structured by social hierarchies of caste, region and religious differences.

Conventional accounts of the Emergency have characterized it as stemming from Indira Gandhi's authoritarian impulses and her urge to centralize governance. In addition to Gandhi's personality traits which ostensibly favoured the hijacking of power, the immediate causes which triggered Gandhi's move was the rising tide of the JP Movement and the judgement of the Allahabad High Court which rendered Gandhi's 1971 election invalid. *India's First Dictatorship* does an admirable job of widening the socio-po-

litical lens within which these two immediate triggers can be better contextualized. At a political level, the Emergency further legitimised the RSS and laid the foundations for the BJP and its brand of Hindutva politics to gain a broad appeal and acceptance. At the level of the working of the economy, the enticements of socialism were cast away both by the governments that followed as well as by the general population. Indira Gandhi's return to power in 1980 was accompanied by a gradual relaxation of the hold of the state on businesses. The economic reforms of 1991 which opened up the Indian markets to foreign investment can thus be viewed as emerging from the morass of the Emergency period.

One of the more provocative stances put forth by the book lies in its very title. Jaffrelot and Anil characterize the Emergency period as being independent India's *first* brush with dictatorship. The authors leave it to the reader to gauge whether this is meant as a provocation or as a prognostication. Contemporary India hurtles towards instituting a Hindu majoritarian state with the tacit or explicit support of the electorate, the institutional watchdogs, and the media. Viewed in this light, the continued functioning of democratic norms—including state-centre relationship, the independence of regulatory bodies such as the Election Commission, and the safeguarding of individual and minority rights—have been under incessant threat. It is difficult to engage with the Emergency period without inadvertently considering the parallels with politics in contemporary India (the writers allude to this as well). The open-ended nature of the book's title thus offers the reader many an opportunity to draw parallels as well as engage in hypothesizing democracy's future in the country. *India's First Dictatorship* is as much about the practice and workings of democracy in postcolonial India as it is a detailed exegesis of a specific (exceptional) moment in the country's history. By contextualizing this period within a wider socio-economic canvas and in seeing the roots of the political crisis as part of a longer tussle between the state and judiciary, the authors nudge the story of Emergency away from the solitary, shadowy figure of Indira Gandhi. What emerges in its stead is a nuanced portrayal of the early decades of independent India, the material realities of the Indian population in which an authoritarian regime found broad acceptance, and the possibilities and limits of instituting democratic norms as part of the everyday ethos of a postcolonial society. Written in an engaging style and buttressed by extensive archival sources and oral interviews, the book offers a definitive account of the Emergency period and offers insights that will be of interest to a wide range of historians and social scientists working on South Asia.

DALITS AND «HINDU» NATIONALISM: AN EX-INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE

Mukesh Kumar

ETH, Zürich

Mukesh.krishna@hotmail.com

Meghwanshi, Bhanvar, *I Could not be Hindu: The Story of a Dalit in the RSS*, New Delhi: Narayana Private Publishing, 2020, 236 pp. (ISBN 9788189059934). Translated from Hindi by Nivedita Menon.

This lucidly written riveting autobiography narrates the political journey and activism of an estranged RSS (Rashtriya Swayam-sevak Sangh/National Self-help Organisation) worker from a «low-caste» background, who was initially deeply enchanted by the RSS's call for the selfless service of the nation. Founded in 1925 to establish India as a «Hindu» nation, the RSS since then has supposedly worked towards promoting «the unity» of Hindu society by equating religious identity with national identity, while overshadowing ethnic and caste identities and issues. Despite lofty ideals and nationalistic idioms, the RSS's vision has been founded on the strong hatred against Muslims and Christians, considered to be previous «Hindus» who allegedly pledge their loyalties to alien religions. The two religions are considered by the RSS to be imported from outside to lure naïve Indians, therefore, Muslims and Christians cannot be truly Indian. Bhanwar Meghwanshi (hereafter BM), trained in such an ideological environment by a village level RSS *shakha* (branch) in Rajasthan, quickly rose from being a *gananayak* (a ground level leader of the people) to the post of the district office chief of the RSS (28), a position in the RSS hierarchy rarely given to people from his background. He grew up hating Muslims even though there was not a single Muslim in his village (56).



Intoxicated with religious nationalism, BM was ready to give his life by participating in the journey of Hindu activists to Ayodhya in the early 1990s –the birthplace of the celebrated Hindu god, Ram–to demolish the Babri mosque and liberate the god's birthplace from the clutches of Muslims. But rather sooner than later two successive events broke BM's enchantment with the RSS: (a) the absence of the so-called «upper caste» leaders from the arduous journey (at least one thousand kilometres away from home), which eventually met police brutality (23-25), and (b) refusing to accept food cooked at his place meant to be consumed by «upper caste» leaders of the RSS after the completion of an event held in his village (82-85). The «upper caste» leaders got the food packed up promising to eat it

later but threw the food away after crossing the village boundary, so that they did not get polluted by eating food cooked in a «low-caste» household. Upon knowing this incident from a friend who was travelling with the contingent of the RSS, BM could not believe that it could happen to him and set out to find the bitter truth, only to be disheartened by it upon seeing the food lying on the side of the road (82-85). The incident left a deep scar on the mind of BM and ignited the question of the place of Dalits or formerly «untouchables» in the RSS envisioned Hindu nation. BM further writes, «I experienced fully what it meant to be of lower caste. Again and again the thought troubled me: How can this happen? How can the Sangh do this to me? They don't believe in untouchability, in caste discrimination, they believe all Hindus to be one, they talk of a united Hindu society, and then this kind of hypocrisy?» (83).



The RSS has always been uncomfortable with the question of caste due to the Brahminical control of the organisation. Although it indulges in the politics of religion by terming itself a cultural organisation, the RSS is primarily a caste association of «upper castes», controlled and led by Brahmins, the priestly class of India. Since its foundation, all the heads of the RSS have been Brahmins except one, Rajju Bhaiya, of the Rajput caste. Disgruntled with the RSS approach of neglecting the caste question that he would raise from time to time (86-88), BM eventually began to expose the hypocrisy of its leaders. He opines that Dalits' dignity and self-pride are denied by the RSS by subtly undermining Dalit political consciousness through false narratives of equality and manipulative slogans of nationalism. He astutely observes that «systematically using religion, culture, and nationalism as popular slogans to mislead the masses, they [the RSS] put us mentally in thrall to them, and we become blind followers» (118). BM reached the conclusion that Dalits are only foot-soldiers for the RSS, exploited to take part in riots and violence against religious minorities, particularly Muslims. As he claims based on his personal experience, 'the condition of Muslims and Dalits was equally bad, that our enemy («upper castes» *sic*) was the same and we should fight it together' (100).

Caste based discrimination never left BM wherever he went. There are numerous anecdotes in the book that recall unfair treatments meted out to him on account of him being a «low-caste» person. For instance, when he took up the teaching job, parents of many children came to the school and tried to stop him from drinking water from the same pot (132). Similarly, he was also denied entry to temples or was forced to hide his caste identity while visiting somebody else's home (107). Undoubtedly, caste still remains the main source of plight for the majority of Indians, and quite ironically, it is religion which has historically acquired a more prominent place in public

discourse among intellectuals, journalists, and politicians alike, who, often not differently from the RSS, consider the question of caste insignificant. BM was constantly reminded that untouchability is «*just a small matter*» by the «upper caste» RSS members. Their collective silence hurt him the most and he realised that Dalits could never be Hindus. The book here offers a compelling critique of the caste hypocrisy of Indian society in general and of «upper castes» in particular by several astute commentaries towards the end (189-225).



The caste-based discriminatory experiences thus shaped the personal and political outlook of BM about which the rest of the book deftly delves in. The resultant transformation in BM's mind-set was turning towards rational thinkers and caste critics, such as Phule, Periyar, Ambedkar, who strongly condemned caste practices in Indian society. To take revenge on the RSS, BM even thought of religious conversion as a viable option to leave the caste identity behind but was equally repelled by all organised religions (99-111). He eventually stuck to the humanitarian teachings of these rational thinkers as well as of saints such as Kabir, Buddha, and Ravidas. His engagement with them helped him to get rid of hatred against Muslims instilled by the ideology of the Brahmins of the RSS. He not only became a voracious reader but met with like-minded people on the path of becoming a social activist for the cause of promoting religious harmony, fighting against caste discrimination, and working for raising political consciousness among Dalits. A wide corpus of Dalit literature and saints' poetries enabled him to critically engage with the question of human dignity and worth. The missionary-like training given by the RSS proved useful for BM to move through various challenging professions from teaching to journalism, which he later took advantage of to further his activism.

The call for the Dalit-Muslim unity led him to found organisations, connect with left-leaning activists, publish magazines and journals, and actively participate in fights against discrimination towards Dalits. He founded civil society organisations like *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* and *People's Union for Civil Liberties* with the aim of increasing public awareness of socio-political issues. He started a magazine called *Diamond India* to openly fight the unaccounted corruption of the RSS by exposing their casteist, communalist, and corrupt behaviour. Similarly, he promoted many initiatives to show that a lone person can fight important battles if they have self-determination and grit.



The book also sheds a considerable light on the *modus operandi* of the RSS from its village-level organisation to the social background of its sup-

porters and sympathisers in public offices, including Indian bureaucracy and police. It is still an unregistered organisation, all the orders are oral, nothing in writing. No activist of the RSS has identity cards or receive receipts for their work. The main task of the activists is *prachar* (propagating the thought of the Sangh) and not *vichar*, having independent thoughts and opinions. Various surrogate organisations unofficially linked to help the RSS contribute to expanding its network as one of the largest «NGOs» type organisation in the world. The book's major contribution is to present how a battle against an organisation like the RSS, which promotes bigotry, hatred, and enmity in society on the ground of religion, has to be fought at the caste level, not at the level of religion. By using categories like religion and nation, the organisation and its supporters not only manipulate the hope of social equality among «upper castes» and Dalits but also diminish caste discrimination, as BM claims throughout the book. The clarity of his thoughts, his life-struggles, and learning by experiencing mingled with critical moments of India's political history make *I could not be Hindu* a thrilling read. The excellent translation also contributes to the book's readability.

ORATION AND NARRATION: FASHIONING INDIA THROUGH PRIME MINISTERIAL  
SPEECHES

Prateek Pankaj  
Heidelberg University  
prateek.pankaj@stud.uni-heidelberg.de

Anandita Bajpai, *Speaking the Nation: The Oratorical Making of Secular, Neoliberal India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018, 335 pp. (ISBN: 9780199481743).

Oratory occupies a crucial position in electoral and mass politics in many countries around the world, including India. This is so much so that certain speeches become stately rituals themselves; for instance, the Prime Minister's Independence Day speech on 15 August every year in the case of India. Such speeches, especially when made by the heads of government, contribute in no small measure to imbuing the nation's polity with certain ideals and characteristics. In other words, political oratory helps produce the discursive framings of a nation.

This is one of the main ideas at work in Anandita Bajpai's *Speaking the Nation: The Oratorical Making of Secular, Neoliberal India*. As the author puts it, the book «is an attempt to trace how some of the prominent authors of the nation, its elected political heads, who, at the same time, are the protagonists and vanguards of the state, speak India into being» (2). The main subject of the book is the post-1991 developments in India. This was the period when neoliberal economic reforms were institutionalised in India by opening up the economy to international trade and foreign investment. The year 1991 marked the beginning of the premiership of PV Narasimha Rao who became the first Prime Minister of India not belonging to the Nehru-Gandhi family to complete a full term and under whom the economic reforms were put in place. The rise of Hindu nationalism in the mainstream politics of India took its first most explicit form with the Ramjanmabhoomi movement in the early 1990s, which resulted in the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992. This was also the decade which saw the «mass-mediatization of politics» through a proliferation of mass media (4-6). Bajpai argues that all these developments are related to «the story of market liberalization and state secularism» – her two main concerns in this book (6). It is further argued that the onset of economic reforms presented a moment of crisis and anxiety which was sought to be assuaged by the political leadership and converted instead into a narrative of an emerging India – a narrative still active as evident from the numerous books written on India as a rising global power (x-xi). Moreover, the accompanying threats to state secularism in the wake of Hindu nationalism were also addressed by the political lead-

ership in an attempt to argue for the existence of a secular democracy as a precondition for economic growth; in other words, for a successful rising India (36). Lastly, this fashioning of the nation in context of economic reforms and questions around secularism – which I will review in more detail later – demonstrate, according to Bajpai, «the state's attempts to rearm, recalibrate, and reconsolidate its position as the legitimate unifier, overarching problem solver, organizer, and voice of the nation» (15).

How then does political oratory come into this story? Bajpai turns to the speeches of Indian Prime Ministers, the highest functionary of the executive, to study how the state profiles the nation with respect to the challenges of market liberalisation and state secularism from 1991 onwards. She argues, «The prime ministers, through their spoken word, may thus be viewed as the sensemaking and meaning-lending actors who translate the transforming politico-economic scenario to wider audiences» (31). To do this, she primarily analyses the speeches of four Prime Ministers who held office after 1991. In addition to Rao, these were Atal Bihari Vajpayee of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Manmohan Singh of the Indian National Congress – the party to which also Rao belonged – and the incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the BJP. Over a thousand speeches in English and Hindi are studied including Modi's speeches up to 15 August 2016. The book seeks to make a point for the value of using prime ministerial speeches as sources and objects of study «in their own right» (29). Hence, a large chunk of the source material in this book for analysing how Prime Ministers fashion the nation comes from their speeches.

The book is organised into an introductory section, five chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction lays out the basic idea and approach of the book and gives a brief breakdown of the chapters.

The first chapter in many ways contextualises and sets the foundation for the rest of the book. In this chapter, the author deals with traditions of orality and aurality in India not only in the fields of political mobilisation but also ancient modes of teaching, learning and knowledge dissemination. It is argued that this cultural background along with more recent historical experiences in mass politics need to be understood to make sense of political speech-making. The author also spends some time detailing the tenure of the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, under whom the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) was elevated to the highest position in the government and the figure of the Prime Minister emerged as a kind of «teacher» for the nation (68). These Nehruvian traditions and styles of engagement with the national population, Bajpai argues, exercise a persisting influence over prime ministerial oratorical practices in India even today (64).

The second and third chapters focus on what the author calls «temporalizing tactics», that is, methods used by the Prime Ministers to justify and legitimise the economic reforms of 1991 in a temporal sense. In other words, Bajpai shows how the Prime Ministers present the promise of a better



future based on economic growth while the reforms are sold as an inevitable means to reach that future (94-95). At the same time, the reforms are not presented as something radical or exclusively benefitting only certain sections of the population. The reforms are both promoted as humane and inclusive (108) and are couched in the vocabulary of Nehruvian socialism, making use of terms such as «self-reliant» and «self-sufficient» to legitimise them (116).

The fourth chapter then considers «spatializing strategies» of legitimation by making references to the macro processes of globalisation and the subsequent need for India to not be left behind. Bajpai also argues that under the sway of globalisation, a sense of security is sought to be provided by the Prime Ministers by claiming that economic liberalisation would not be detrimental to India's sovereignty and cultural identity (172). Moreover, she draws out a difference in the content of the speeches depending on the target audience. For internal audiences, she argues, the reforms are «underplayed» so as to not make them seem like a strong break from the past, while for external audiences the nature and scope of the reforms are exaggerated to make them more attractive to foreign investors (188).

Finally, the fifth chapter is about secularism. It is argued that the Prime Ministers draw on a diverse range of resources to articulate the tenets of secularism, especially when speaking to audiences at home. These include civilisation imaginaries, myth, and history, especially from the nationalist movement (228) all in an attempt to «discursively concoct syncretism as the foundational principle of India» (233). With regards specifically to the economic reforms of 1991, secularism, according to Bajpai, is branded as a necessary requisite for growth. «India's emergence is presented as taking place within the framework of a liberal 'multireligious' and 'multicultural' secular democracy. India's distinctiveness is embedded not only in that it is an emerging power, but one that is explicitly secular and democratic», she writes (243).

There is much to unpack in the book, and it delivers less on some fronts than others. The main aspect where the book leaves more to be desired is in its argument about secularism, especially when dealing with how Modi speaks about secularism.

Bajpai argues that while Modi's articulations of secularism in front of external audiences is identical to his predecessors in that all of them present secularism as a «non-debatable asset» and a «statist reality» (259), he strikes a different tone when speaking to internal audiences. Here, his speeches are marked by either an absence or ambiguity regarding the term and, when secularism is mentioned, Modi often uses sarcasm to «empty the term of its meaning» – unless the occasion is a more formal state ritual such as Independence Day speeches (258-259). Still more important is how Modi shifts the discussion from secularism to issues of economic development through statements such as «Secularism to me is India First» (259). Even though

Bajpai mentions Modi's tactic of eroding secularism of its meaning, this does not seem to form a main takeaway of her treatment of Modi's speeches vis-à-vis secularism. She writes that by Modi's tenure, «secularism becomes a pre-given truth which need not be defended, but whose coordinates are projected as so natural to Indian society that the debate is then shifted to questions of development» (280). The implication seems to be that under Modi secularism does not remain a contested issue because it becomes «so natural to Indian society» in the first place, which then allows Modi to focus his speeches and shift the discourse to «questions of development». This is similar to the claim that under Modi the economic reforms become so ingrained that they need not be defended or justified (p. 163) and one gets the impression that secularism emerges as an established indisputable fact. This is patently not true and the givenness of neoliberalism and secularism under Modi is not the same. While the former does indeed become indisputable and an accepted fact of the economy, secularism is much undermined in Modi's India. It might be argued that Modi's more direct challenges to secularism start coming up from his second term onwards which began in 2019,<sup>1</sup> or in any case after 2016, a time period which falls out of the purview of the book. That notwithstanding, given Modi's long political career even before 2016 – and the fact that Bajpai does consider some of his speeches from the time he was the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat (253) – a more critical reading of Modi's engagement with secularism seems warranted. Even if we grant that the author is arguing that secularism is only «projected» as being so natural to India that it does not need to be talked about whereas in reality it is actually contested, it still complicates the final conclusions of the book. That is to say, the argument that Prime Ministers paint the picture of an India which *needs* to be a secular democracy in order to attain economic growth does not hold up when one considers Modi's undermining of secularism and upholding of neoliberal market economy at the same time, at least when speaking to internal audiences.

Although, in the beginning parts of the book, one finds a relative lack of attention given to bringing out the differences in the speeches of different Prime Ministers and some blurring of context, this is corrected later where continuities and discontinuities between the four Prime Ministers are drawn out. For instance, it is highlighted that while all Prime Ministers pre-

1. Modi, for instance, did not mention «secularism» in his 2014 speech after becoming the Prime Minister but claimed that no party could “deceive India” under the garb of secularism after his re-election in 2019. See, “Text of Narendra Modi's Speech at Central Hall of Parliament,” *The Hindu*, May 20, 2014, accessed January 14, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/Text-of-Narendra-Modi%E2%80%99s-speech-at-Central-Hall-of-Parliament/article11624655.ece>; and “This Election, No Party Could Deceive India In The Veil of Secularism, Says PM Narendra Modi In Victory Speech,” *Outlook*, May 23, 2019, accessed January 14, 2023, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-this-election-no-party-could-deceive-india-in-the-veil-of-secularism-says-pm-narendra-modi-in-victory-speech/330867>.

sent the reforms as inevitable and indisputable, their individual speeches have different points of emphasis. Rao has to «establish a relation of co-equivalence between a promising future and the reforms», while Vajpayee has to justify supporting the reforms because his party opposed them earlier when they were in opposition; on the other hand, Modi has to do neither of this because by his time the neoliberal model of the economy becomes a fact taken for granted (163).

Apart from this, the book does convincingly demonstrate the multiple techniques used by various Indian Prime Ministers to explain the economic reforms to the public. The position of the PMO in this regard is reiterated in line with the premise set by the first chapter. What also emerges is the lasting hold and relevance of prime ministerial conventions and rituals laid down during the Nehruvian era, including the use of the vocabulary of «self-sufficiency» to legitimise market liberalisation. In terms of the writing, the book is well-organised and written in an accessible manner, although some statements feel repetitive at times. Every chapter gives the reader a clear sense of what it will contain and following the author's train of thought is also easily done.

Perhaps the most important takeaway from the book is its extensive treatment of the Prime Ministers' speeches as a source. This of course does raise questions too. One is the issue of context. Even though the book is attentive to who is being addressed in a given speech, especially when the distinction is between internal and external audiences, it is unclear if there are changes in what a Prime Minister says about the same topic at different points of time in their tenure. Two – and Bajpai herself points this out – is the issue of how far can studying just the Prime Minister's speeches accurately illustrate how the nation is discursively produced given the presence of powerful deputies in the government who also command popular imagination and may strike different tones than the Prime Minister (see note 97, p. 253). Nonetheless, a book-length treatment of the Prime Ministers' speeches as a source is methodologically innovative and should be welcomed as a window for doing more research on its merits and challenges.

The book should be of interest to students and scholars of Indian politics, contemporary history, and media as also to the burgeoning field of sound studies in the humanities and social sciences. It should also be accessible by a general readership by virtue of its lucid writing.

## A BRIEF POLITICAL HISTORY OF IRAN 1979-2022

Wafa Mohiddin  
Independent scholar  
Wafa.sultana.mohiddin@gmail.com

Mehran Kamrava, *Triumph and Despair: In Search of Iran's Islamic Republic*, London: Hurst and Co., 2022, 304 pp. (ISBN 978-1-78-738803-1).

A prolific writer and scholar of the Persian Gulf studies, Mehran Kamrava publishes his latest book *Triumph and Despair: In Search of Iran's Islamic Republic* at an intense time as the Iranian regime faces yet another unprecedented challenge to its legitimacy. Massive protests spearheaded by women sparked by the killing of a young woman, Mahsa Amini, by the state's morality police over immodest clothing on 16 September 2022 has spread across the country and beyond its borders. The author, who is a Professor of Government at Georgetown University Qatar and director of the Iranian Studies Unit at the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies of the same university, explains that the primary purpose of his book was to give a detailed picture of political developments spanning from the return of Ayatollah Khomeini to Iran in 1979 until four decades later, focusing on its key milestones. The book has ten chapters that chronologically explores broad themes including political institutionalization, consolidation, reformation, authoritarianism, political economy, threat perceptions and policymaking, state-society relations and identity. Throughout the book lies the key theme of triumph and despair in the Islamic Republic under various leaderships with an omnipresent *velayat e faqih* (guardian of the jurist) in the regime's political mosaic holding reins of its people's destiny. Largely focussing on its internal dynamics alone, the author's scholarship, expertise and incisiveness provides an exhaustive work on Iran's modern political history.

The author narrates a brief revolutionary story and its aftermath which he argues has parallels with other post-revolutionary states like France, Russia, China or Cuba (2). However, what was unique about Iranian revolution is that it revolved around Islamist politics along with its dire need for democracy and economic justice (4). The author chronicles a number of developments towards political institutionalisation and consolidation in chapters two and three. Here Kamrava contends that it was not mere personification of Ayatollah Khomeini as an embodiment of anti-monarchist authoritarianism that elevated the clergy to leadership. Rather, it was the chain of political events along with the establishment of the new constitution and supporting institutions that synchronously helped consolidate the clerical rule. This book relevantly explains the creation and rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps as an institutionalized and independent

military organization: it leaves no stone unturned as the author recounts its «reign of terror» (73) as it becomes one of the most important pillars of the Islamic Republic. It also provides an in-depth account of internal threats to the clergy power-bloc from groups such as the Mujahedeen, the Fadaian and the communists. The author lays bare accounts of arbitrary imprisonments, wrongful executions and perpetual human rights abuses during and post revolution. He shows that the state has successfully recalibrated the revolution's ideals of the Khomeinists and established a «religious brand of clientelist populism» (85), a process that included the redefinition of the role of clergy in Iranian history as the champions of the poor against foreign powers.

Chapters four and five detail a brief phase of reformist interregnum of the Islamic democracy followed by despotic leadership which was committed to «deny, dismiss, repress and downgrade» any political culture (148). Both chapters convince the reader that, despite a period of reformation and readjustments in the late 1990s and early 2000s during which promises of liberty and democracy saw a glimmer of hope, the regime is here to stay. Not long ago one of the founding fathers of the Iranian revolution and a pragmatic conservative, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, addressed the Assembly of Experts stating that the «prisons and police are not the way to establish Islam in society» (107). Yet, in the constant clash between conservative traditionalism and reformism, the author argues that the latter has unquestionably failed due to lack of unity, internal contradictions and, above all, institutional opposition. The Green Movement of 2009-10, in which the Iranian public challenged the regime and its leadership, is a significant case in point. While the public's «cosmopolitanism struck homo Islamicus that the Republic aimed to create» (137), the apparently vulnerable regime got more repressive. The author encapsulates these cycles of triumph and despair claiming that «born out of and into crises, the Islamic Republic is immeasurably better at crisis management than it is at just management under normal circumstances» (149).

The book does a fine job in exploring the state's political economic history of both pre and post revolution and in analysing policies aimed at uplifting the lower classes but doing far below their potential. The author evaluates prolonged economic crises as a result of the regime's domestic policies and international sanctions while making no projections. To understand what makes Iran an important geopolitical player in the region despite the sanctions and the ongoing isolation, chapter seven provides a thorough analysis of its threat perceptions and policies in the region. These are in turn shaped by revolutionary policymaking as well as by significant events like the Iran-Iraq war, Iran's hostile relations with the United States especially during the hostage crisis, the clash between ideology and pragmatism as the country plays the role of a realist actor in the international arena (200) navigating through internal and external challenges. But in the

era of an emerging post-western world order in which countries like India and China are reclaiming their lost wealth, power and cultural hegemony, the fact that the book completely overlooks Iran's strategic Look East policy, despite its significant implications domestically and globally, appears as a glaring lacuna.

In the final chapters, *Belonging and Exclusion* and *A Question of Identity*, the author addresses the nature of state-society relations, which definitively changed with the Iranian revolution. In doing so, he discusses the question of Iran's diverse and cosmopolitan population, which has consistently faced repercussions with the regime oscillating between democracy impulses and authoritarian imperatives. Kamrava focuses on the regime's oppressive treatment of three particular groups, namely, women, youth and non-Persian communities. These chapters are useful for understanding why the regime's efforts in moulding Iranian culture into Khomeini's vision of Islam and hegemonizing post-revolutionary narratives are challenged by its people even four decades later. The country is home to different ethnic communities like the Azeris, Baluchs, Arabs among others, but the regime believes in the superiority of its Persian ethnicity. The author notes that there has been slow progress in the profile of Iranian women in terms of liberties and basic rights, but a brief review of the country's labour market or political arena confirms that these remain exclusively male domains (245). However, as per the author's admission, «no single volume could do justice» (7) to the complexities and nuances of an incredibly complex country like Iran. In fact, supplementary readings are needed to fully grasp particularly difficult topics like ethnic, religious and Sunni minorities' relations with the regime.

The author is hopeful that political change is bound to happen but is apprehensive about its scope and direction as the reader can infer from the analysis of the Islamic revolution of 1979 as a variation of authoritarianism, transforming the country from monarchy to Islamic republic but failing its initial promises of justice and liberty. Present-day Iranians are no longer the same as the postrevolutionary Iranians who faced the Iran-Iraq war. With its population increasingly becoming «democratically defiant» (301) and fond of the West, the Islamic Republic's survival solely depends on its ability to mutate, evolve, repress and navigate through challenges. Given its hybrid political system with deeply authoritarian features outweighing its accountability and representative nature (299), a meaningful political change in Iran has a long way to go.

The book represents a comprehensive study of the modern political history of Iran spanning four decades since 1979. While providing a detailed analysis based on primary sources as well as on well-known works of Iranian and non-Iranian scholars published both inside and outside Iran, the book has no clear theoretical framework. The author's not so optimistic tone and expository style reflects his concerns and emotions as someone deeply connected to the region. As the Persian Gulf region continues to

become an area of growing interest with its states struggling for power and influence, this book has a timely relevance for students, researchers, academics, policymakers, diplomats and for anyone interested in a rundown on the creation and survival of the Islamic Republic's regime in the past four decades.

## A SUPERB BOOK FOR UNDERSTANDING IRAN

Salem Ghurab  
 Qatar University Gulf Studies Center  
 S.ghurab@qu.edu.qa

Mehran Kamrava, *A Dynastic History of Iran: From the Qajars to the Pahlavis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, 230 pp. (ISBN 978-1-0092-2464-2).

*A dynastic history of Iran* is a superb book for understanding Iran – Persia until the 1930s – since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century until the 1978-1979 revolution. Mehran Kamrava is an authority on Iran who wrote five monographs about Iran prior to the one under purview.<sup>1</sup> This book intends to «present a corrective» (xi) to one of his earlier works, *The political history of Modern Iran: from tribalism to theocracy*, published in 1992.

In his endeavor, Kamrava brilliantly succeeds in presenting a political history of Iran since the Qajar dynasty, through the interregnum and until the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty. The author traces the «rise and fall» of the two dynasties while explaining the dynamics at play prior to their rise to power, the political setting – both domestic and international – and the factors leading to their downfall. In doing so, Kamrava presents sharp analyses and shows a good knowledge of the relevant literature.

The 1905-1911 Constitutional Revolution is a major watershed in Iranian history, changing the balance of power and provided political advantages to the ruled at the expense of the ruler. A sort of triangular coalition comprising merchants, clergy and intellectuals began voicing their opposition to the absolute power of the shah (44). Even though each of the three groups had its own objectives and interests, the effort to attain political rights from the state united them. The author emphasizes the role intellectuals played in their attempt at shaking off the status quo. Yet in reality their role was marginal, if not entirely eclipsed, once compared with the unwavering activities of the clergy. Among the reasons for this were «a weak theoretical grounding, internal contradictions, and infighting among intellectuals» (58). It is noteworthy that intellectuals, even during the reign of Reza Shah, cared less for political changes than for symbols of a sort of «western» modernity such as «Pahlavi caps» and the rejection of women's

1. *Revolution in Iran: Roots of Turmoil*, London, Routledge, 1990; *The Political History of Modern Iran: From Tribalism to Theocracy*, New York, Praeger, 1992; *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008; *A Dynastic History of Iran: From the Qajars to the Pahlavis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022; *Triumph and Despair: In Search of Iran's Islamic Republic*, New York & London, Oxford University Press & Hurst, 2022.



veil, the *chadur*. In short, intellectuals found Reza Shah's policies on social issues worth praising (80). Overall, it is no exaggeration to say that the Iranian westernized intellectuals, despite being in favor of secularism at the discursive level, were not active forces in fostering real checks and balances to hinder the absolute power of the Shah. They were mainly anti-religion but hardly anti-dictatorship per se, finding the salvation of Iran in resorting to its pre-Islamic heritage as the first step to catch up with Western progress.

The clergy, conversely, took a different direction in their interaction with the two dynasties. Although divisions weakened their unity, a trend emerged among them that opposed intrusion from external powers. The 1872 Reuter Concession and veil restrictions are two good examples. The first put a nail in the coffin of national industrialization, granting Baron Julius de Reuter the 75% share of Iran's mines, except those that contained precious stones. The second took place in 1936 when female students at University of Tehran were legally forbidden from wearing the veil. In the two incidents, the clergy took the lead in opposing the ruler. This led to the acceptance of the religion by Iranian socialists, who saw religion represented by the clergy as one crucial element of the solution.

In his analysis of the history of the two Iranian dynasties, Kamrava adopts a top-down approach. While the book promises to render an account of the main forces constituting changes, giving rise, and, later on, bringing about, the fall of the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties, the focus remains mainly on the high echelon of power. As a result, the history of the state turns to be a chronology of the rulers combined in one book. Only when dealing with the events leading to the downfall of the Pahlavis attention is duly to the people. Otherwise, the masses are voiceless, having no real presence and agency in the history of a country shaped by absolute power domestically and geopolitically being at the mercy of Russia and Britain in their Great Game.

The 1978-1979 revolution opened a new era in Iran, transforming a secular state into a religious fundamentalist one. Kamrava rightfully argues that, despite being a rupture that marked an interregnum some characteristics remained intact under the rule of the ayatollahs. As a matter of fact, «neopatrimonialism, nationalism, economic underdevelopment, and political and cultural hybridity» (194) were driving forces prior to the Constitutional Revolution, during the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty, and in the aftermath of the Khomeini's ascendance to power. The result is a constant debate on the struggle between conservatism and modernity. After all, a mullah with a turban is replacing a king with a crown, ensuring the continuity of political hybridity that «simply changed names, from the shah to the *velayat-e faqih*» (194).

The book presents some typos and minor historical mistakes. The famous alchemist Jabir Ibn Hayyan is misspelled as Jaber ibn Hayyam. His death was in 813, according to Kamrava (6), whereas he actually died in 815. In addition, the author mentions the 1967 state visit to Tehran by the American vice-president Richard Nixon as the origin of the «Nixon Doc-

trine» (162). Whereas the chain of events is correct, Nixon was not officially incumbent as a vice-president, who was instead Hubert Humphrey. In fact, Nixon, as a former vice president and as a presidential candidate, made the decision «to make a series of foreign study trips».<sup>2</sup>

Also, despite the fact that Islam has two branches, Shia Islam and Sunni Islam, in the book the author makes this difference incomprehensible. At one point he compares «Sunna Islam» and «Shia faith» (6), rendering the latter a faith distinct from Islam. Later on, the two become identical as branches of Islam when in 1501 the Safavid dynasty replaced Sunnism by Shi'ism as the new Iranian dynasty state religion (38). The switch in terminology may escape the reader's attention in comprehending the adherence Shi'ism held to Islam, since it became a faith on its own.

To conclude, *A dynastic history of Iran* is an excellent book for anyone interested in understanding the recent political history of Iran. With the sharp analysis and deep understanding the author manifests in the book, together with his easy-to-read language, the book is of great significance to the general reader as a start to piece together the different parts of the history of a complicated country.

2. Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1978, p. 279.

SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN: THE STRUGGLE TO SHAPE THE MIDDLE EAST

*Nesibe Hicret Battaloglu*  
Qatar University Gulf Studies Center  
Nsoy@qu.edu.qa

Edward Wastnidge and Simon Mabon (eds.), *Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Struggle to Shape Middle East*, Manchester University Press, 2022, pp. 200 (ISBN 978-1-5261-5083-7).

If one single phenomenon marked the last 40 years of Middle Eastern politics, it would be the long-standing rivalry between the two regional power-houses of Saudi Arabia and Iran. This fact became even more apparent in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings in 2011, as the Saudi-Iranian competition spilled over into a vast geography stretching from Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to Yemen with devastating consequences.

In an academic attempt to capture this multi-casual and multi-faceted rivalry, Edward Wastnidge and Simon Mabon have assembled a body of research in an edited book titled «Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Struggle to Shape Middle East». The editors are prominent scholars working on this topic. Wastnidge is Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Studies at the Open University, and Mabon is Chair of International Politics at Lancaster University.

The book is organized around eight chapters in addition to the introduction and a concluding chapter. The first two chapters are devoted to the analysis of how the two main actors, Saudi Arabia and Iran, view the rivalry between themselves. In the first chapter, May Darwish presents a neo-classical realist (NCR) reading of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards Iran. According to Darwish, it is a combination of structural conditions at the regional level and the rise of confrontational nationalism at the domestic level that shaped Saudi Arabia's framing of Iran as a foe. The second chapter turns to Tehran as the authors, Banafsheh Keynoush and Edward Wastnidge, delve into elite narratives and debates in Iran about Saudi Arabia, Tehran's foreign policy towards Riyadh, and Iran's own regional security notion. The following chapter focuses on the religious aspect, most notably the role of Islam as a source of legitimacy in both Iran and Saudi Arabia. Lucia Ardovini compares how Islam, as a political tool, influences domestic and foreign policies in both states, including the dynamics of rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The remaining chapters are on country-specific case studies where this rivalry has played out. These chapter also give a time-space dimension and a context to better understand nuanced repercussions of this rivalry by nesting a significant deal of agency to local actors in Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. In Chapter 4, Rasheed Al-Rasheed delves into how Saudi-Iranian

rivalry in the region shapes the mutual perception of Sunnis and Shias in Bahrain. Given the difficulty of conducting field research in Bahrain on such a sensitive political topic, Al-Rasheed makes an important contribution to the volume with primary information collected through interviews.

In the chapter on Iraq, Stephen Royle and Simon Mabon trace the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Iraq. Iraq presents an interesting spot to examine this competition, as the country evolved from being a security threat to both Iran and Saudi Arabia, to a theatre for their regional rivalry. By contextualizing the Saudi-Iran rivalry in Iraqi politics, Royle and Mabon also set the parameters of different engagement tactics deployed by Riyadh and Tehran in Iraq.

The sixth chapter focuses on Lebanon and explores the complexity of roles played by Saudi Arabia and Iran there. The author, Hussein Kalout calls Lebanon an «irreplaceable piece» for Saudi-Iranian competition given the sectarian nature of the politics there. The author argues that the tutelary model of involvement of Saudi Arabia and Iran in Lebanon has infused the socio-political fabric and has led to a «pronounced diminution of sovereignty» (136). Chapter 7 focuses on Syria as a country where a brutal civil conflict has been internationalized to an unprecedented degree. As the events have unfolded since 2011, external penetration including the one by Saudi Arabia and Iran became part and parcel of the conflict. Christopher Philips compares Saudi and Iranian achievements in Syria, by showing Tehran's comparative success on the ground. Philips argues that structural factors alone fall short of explaining the conflict's outcome and introduces domestic dynamics as intervening variables in explaining Saudi Arabia's inability to use its sources to its advantage.

The final case study of the volume focuses on Yemen as an arena for Saudi-Iranian rivalry. In this chapter, Maria-Louise Clausen introduces the concept of «sunk cost effect» to explain Saudi Arabia's struggle to exit the conflict in Yemen given the Kingdom's material and ideational investments in the conflict there. Clausen argues that Saudi Arabia's efforts to link the Houthis to Iran enabled Riyadh to frame this war as a part of wider Saudi-Iranian rivalry, which in return «increased Saudi reputational and material cost related to withdrawal» (157). The concluding chapter reflects on the nuanced repercussions of this particular competition across time and space.

While writing this review, the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have entered a phase of reconciliation under Iraqi mediation efforts. Yet, this particular rivalry has undoubtedly left deep marks across the region and remains quite important to understand regional politics. In this book, Wastnigde and Mabon shed light on different, complex and changing aspects of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran and they certainly make an important contribution to the topic. While a detailed review of each and every chapter goes beyond the limits of this review, it is important to highlight few general overarching points in a critical manner.

Although the book does not explicitly intend to analyse them, it reveals significant long-term tendencies in the region on how the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran played out. In the sixth chapter Kalout calls Lebanon an «irreplaceable piece» where regional and international rivalries have taken place, but so do Syria, Iraq, and Yemen as this edited volume successfully shows. A historical review on the evolution of the state system reveals the highly penetrated foreign intervention patterns in the regional politics. In order to understand the *longue durée* tendencies of this particular rivalry, state formation processes, economic vulnerabilities, the multiplicity of identities and the regional roles become important common regional features. This book is certainly not sufficient to explain all these phenomena, but it is a good start for the inquiry in this sense.

Passing through separate chapters, one can easily identify different tools and techniques that both Saudi Arabia and Iran deployed to carve out a sphere of influence for themselves, while simultaneously trying to undermine each other. While Saudi engagement can be characterized as economic statecraft, i.e. economic aid to particular factions, Iran has deployed more ideological weapons, as Christopher Philips notes, «to develop an effective network of fighters – only some of which were mobilised by sect, others by being part of the anti-Western ‘Axis of Resistance’» (153). This opens an agenda for further research on the repertoires of rivalry and their effectiveness on the ground. Further, as the book reveals, Iran has been relatively more effective in gaining from the competition, particularly in Syria but also in Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon. More research on the power of ideational factors in proxy relations can be fruitful to understand the dynamics of rivalry patterns in the region.

On the theoretical front, the book adopts an eclectic framework to show the contingencies in this rivalry. In their concluding chapter the editors note that «Providing space for such theoretical, methodological and analytical eclecticism enables the deeper, more context-specific cases to come to the fore, without conforming to the orthodox approaches of more Euro/Western-centric analysis of the politics and international relations of the Middle East» (173). The eclectic approach is prevalent in the overall outlook of the book. Yet, a significant number of chapters recognizes explicitly the utility of a NCR framework to incorporate domestic variables into the analysis. Darwish and Philips are the overt supporters of this view and follow a more explicit framework borrowed from the NCR approach. Clausen also highlights the importance of domestic factors to analyse the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

May Darwish introduces the notions of «confrontational nationalism» in Saudi Arabia as an intervening variable, namely, an «imperfect transmission belt», to shape threat perception towards Iran. Darwish’s analysis present an important yet neglected attempt to integrate ideational factors in foreign policymaking in the Gulf region. As a natural part of NCR, domestic variables are considered causes of sub-optimal decision-making in foreign

policy, even though structural factors are prioritized in the analysis. Moreover, the chapter does not provide theoretical tools to study «change»; i.e., the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, while domestic factors (Saudi nationalism) are intact. Indeed, a role theory-inspired framework would bridge the gap between structure and agency while incorporating material and ideational elements in explaining the Saudi dimension of this rivalry. In addition, such an approach would provide analytical and methodological tools to examine the change in the competition dynamics.

In the final review, the book provides a contextualized reading of the Saudi- Iranian rivalry since the Arab Uprisings in the region. The chapters are well designed to show the time and space dimension of this competition as well as other case specific contingencies. The editors and authors are also quite competent to show the agency of local actors and groups, which sometimes get uncredited in academic works. As good research is supposed to do, the book asks more questions than those it answers. There is little doubt that the content of this edited volume will provide several insights for further investigation on this topic.



APPENDIX  
LIST OF THE ASIA MAIOR'S ISSUES

*With, in brackets, the recommended citation style*

Vol. I Giorgio Borsa e Paolo Beonio-Brocchieri (a cura di), *Asia Major. Un mondo che cambia*, Ispi/il Mulino, Bologna 1990 (*Asia Major*, Vol. I/1990);

Vol. II Giorgio Borsa e Paolo Beonio-Brocchieri (a cura di), *L'Altra Asia ai margini della bufera. Asia Major 1991*, Ispi/il Mulino, Bologna 1991 (*Asia Major*, Vol. II/1991);

Vol. III Giorgio Borsa (a cura di), *Le ultime trincee del comunismo nel mondo. Asia Major 1992*, Ispi/il Mulino, Bologna 1992 (*Asia Major*, Vol. III/1992);

Vol. IV Giorgio Borsa (a cura di), *La fine dell'era coloniale in Asia Orientale. Asia Major 1993*, Ispi/il Mulino, Bologna 1993 (*Asia Major*, Vol. IV/1993);

Vol. V Giorgio Borsa e Enrica Collotti Pischel (a cura di), *Luci e ombre sullo sviluppo in Asia Orientale. Asia Major 1994*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 1994 (*Asia Major*, Vol. V/1994);

Vol. VI Giorgio Borsa e Giovanna Mastrocchio (a cura di), *Tra Democrazia e neoautoritarismo. Asia Major 1995*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 1995 (*Asia Major*, Vol. VI/1995);

Vol. VII Giorgio Borsa e Giovanna Mastrocchio (a cura di), *Integrazione regionale e ascesa internazionale. Asia Major 1996*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 1996 (*Asia Major*, Vol. VII/1996);

Vol. VIII Giorgio Borsa (a cura di), *Continua il miracolo asiatico? Asia Major 1997*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 1997 (*Asia Major*, Vol. VIII/1997);

Vol. IX Giorgio Borsa (a cura di), *L'Asia tra recessione economica e minaccia nucleare. Asia Major 1998*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 1998 (*Asia Major*, Vol. IX/1998);

Vol. X Giorgio Borsa e Michelguglielmo Torri (a cura di), *L'incerta vigilia del nuovo secolo in Asia. Asia Major 1999*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 1999 (*Asia Major*, Vol. X/1999);



Vol. XI Giorgio Borsa, Corrado Molteni e Francesco Montessoro (a cura di), *Crescita economica e tensioni politiche in Asia all'alba del nuovo millennio. Asia Major 2000*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 2000 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XI/2000);

Vol. XII Giorgio Borsa, Corrado Molteni e Francesco Montessoro (a cura di), *Trasformazioni politico-istituzionali nell'Asia nell'era di Bush. Asia Major 2001*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 2001 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XII/2001);

Vol. XIII Elisa Giunchi, Corrado Molteni e Michelguglielmo Torri (a cura di), *L'Asia prima e dopo l'11 settembre. Asia Major 2002*, CSPEE/il Mulino, Bologna 2003 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XIII/2002);

Vol. XIV Corrado Molteni, Francesco Montessoro e Michelguglielmo Torri (a cura di), *Le risposte dell'Asia alla sfida americana. Asia Major 2003*, CSPEE/Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2004 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XIV/2003);

Vol. XV Corrado Molteni, Francesco Montessoro e Michelguglielmo Torri (a cura di), *Multilateralismo e democrazia in Asia. Asia Major 2004*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2005 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XV/2004);

Vols. XVI & XVII Michelguglielmo Torri (a cura di), *L'Asia negli anni del drago e dell'elefante 2005-2006. L'ascesa di Cina e India, le tensioni nel continente e il mutamento degli equilibri globali*, Guerini e Associati, Milano 2007 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XVI & XVII/2005-2006);

Vol. XVIII Michelguglielmo Torri (a cura di), *L'Asia nel «grande gioco». Il consolidamento dei protagonisti asiatici nello scacchiere globale*, Guerini e Associati, Milano 2008 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XVIII/2007);

Vol. XIX Michelguglielmo Torri e Nicola Mocci (a cura di), *Crisi locali, crisi globali e nuovi equilibri in Asia*, Guerini e Associati, Milano 2009 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XIX/2008);

Vol. XX Michelguglielmo Torri e Nicola Mocci (a cura di), *L'Asia di Obama e della crisi economica globale*, Guerini e Associati, Milano 2010 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XX/2009);

Vol. XXI Michelguglielmo Torri e Nicola Mocci (a cura di), *Ripresa economica, conflitti sociali e tensioni geopolitiche in Asia*, Emil di Odoya, Bologna 2011 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XXI/2010);

Vol. XXII Michelguglielmo Torri e Nicola Mocci (a cura di), *L'Asia nel triangolo delle crisi giapponese, araba ed europea*, Emil di Odoya, Bologna 2012 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XXII/2011);

Vol. XXIII Michelguglielmo Torri e Nicola Mocci (a cura di), *Rallentamento economico e debolezza della politica in Asia*, Emil di Odoya, Bologna 2013 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XXIII/2012);

Vol. XXIV Michelguglielmo Torri e Nicola Mocci (a cura di), *Il dragocinese e l'aquila americana sullo scacchiere asiatico*, Emil di Odoya, Bologna 2014 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XXIV/2013);

Vol. XXV Michelguglielmo Torri and Nicola Mocci (eds.), *Engaging China, Containing China*, Emil di Odoya, Bologna 2015 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XXV/2014);

Vol. XXVI Michelguglielmo Torri and Nicola Mocci (eds.), *The Chinese-American Race for Hegemony in Asia*, Viella, Roma 2016 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XXVI/2015);

Vol. XXVII Michelguglielmo Torri and Nicola Mocci (eds.), *The End of The Obama Era in Asia*, Viella, Roma 2017 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XXVII/2016);

Vol. XXVIII Michelguglielmo Torri, Elisabetta Basile and Nicola Mocci (eds.), *Asia in the Waning Shadow of American Hegemony*, Viella, Roma 2018 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XXVIII/2017);

Vol. XXIX Michelguglielmo Torri and Nicola Mocci (eds.), *Reacting to Donald Trump's Challenge*, Viella, Roma 2019 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XXIX/2018);

Vol. XXX Michelguglielmo Torri, Nicola Mocci and Filippo Boni (eds.), *Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution*, Viella, Roma 2020 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XXX/2019).

Vol. XXXI Michelguglielmo Torri, Nicola Mocci and Filippo Boni (eds.), *Asia in 2020: Coping with COVID-19 and other crises*, Viella, Roma 2021 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XXXI/2020).

Vol. XXXII Michelguglielmo Torri, Filippo Boni and Diego Maiorano (eds.), *Asia in 2021: In the grip of global and local crises*, Viella, Roma 2022 (*Asia Major*, Vol. XXXII/2021).



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Asia Maior think tank owes a debt of gratitude both to the Centro Studi Vietnamiti of Turin, which hosts the think tank official seat, and, in particular, to its Director, Ms. Sandra Scagliotti, for her continuous and generous support. This debt is here gratefully acknowledged.





Finito di stampare.  
nel mese di giugno 2023  
da The Factory s.r.l.  
Roma