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

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

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A large, intricate mandala pattern in the bottom right corner of the page. It is a light beige color and features complex, symmetrical geometric and floral designs, including concentric circles, triangles, and scalloped edges. It partially overlaps the orange background and the text area.

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

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989
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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.¹ 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».²

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»³ 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.⁴ 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».⁵



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.⁶ Besides, Russia was a main energy exporter, being the third largest petroleum producer in the world.⁷

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.⁸



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».⁹ 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,¹⁰ South Korea,¹¹ Taiwan¹² and Singapore,¹³ 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,¹⁴ Iran,¹⁵ Myanmar¹⁶ – 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.¹⁷ If China's foreign policy, in the period under review, was «primarily preoccupied with domestic audiences rather than international ones»,¹⁸ 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 Ukraine¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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»,²¹ 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.²²

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.²³ 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.²⁴

In the case of India, it was clear since the beginning that her «neutrality» was nothing different from ill-disguised support for Russia.²⁵ 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.²⁶

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.²⁷



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,²⁸ 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,²⁹ 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».³⁰

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.³¹

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.³² A few days later, an additional member joined the entente, being welcomed as the 14th founder state: Fiji.³³

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».³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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.³⁶

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.³⁷ Beijing was also active in Central Asia – where, nonetheless, its influence was exerted at the expense of Russia's³⁸ – and in the South Pacific – where, however, Beijing's gains were limited.³⁹

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.⁴⁰

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).⁴¹

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.⁴²

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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵



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).⁴⁶ 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 House⁴⁷ – took place both in openly authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states and in self-styled democracies.

The political set up in China became increasingly authoritarian.⁴⁸ This had negative cascading effects on the situation in Hong Kong.⁴⁹ 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».⁵⁰

In Malaysia, the 15th 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.⁵¹

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

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.⁵³ 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 20th 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: 15th 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.⁵⁴

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.⁵⁵

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».⁵⁶ 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».⁵⁷

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».⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹ 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,⁶² 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.⁶³

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.⁶⁴



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.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶

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 20th 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,⁶⁷ and, more broadly, for the stepdown of the Premier, the dissolution of Parliament and the rewriting of a new, «truly democratic» constitution.⁶⁸

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.⁶⁹

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.⁷⁰

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.⁷¹ 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

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