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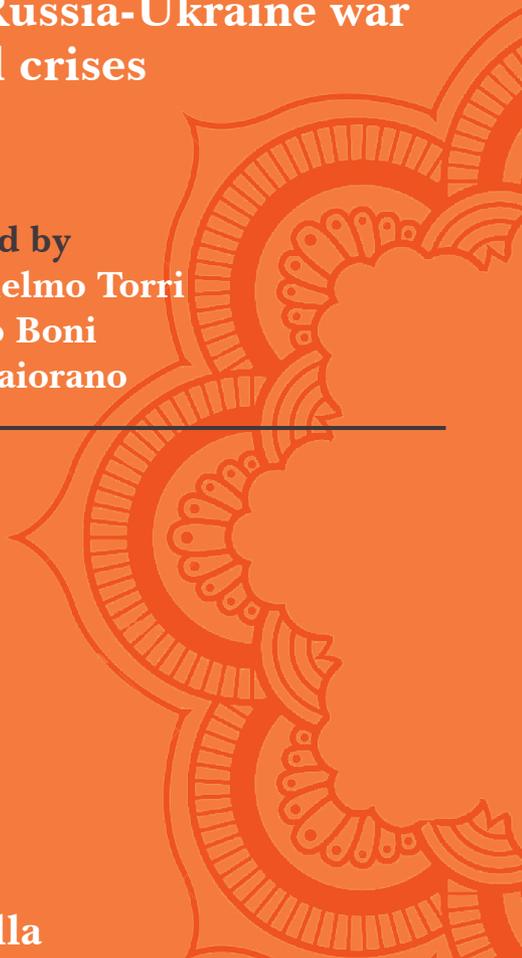
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## **Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises**

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

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**viella**



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

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*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» (*dianfan* 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 slowdowns. 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» (*jitian duihang* 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 liquified 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 re-group 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.

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23. In Chinese, 但«台独»同台海和平稳定水火不容.

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