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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 a light orange color, located in the bottom right corner of the page. It features complex, symmetrical geometric and organic shapes, resembling a stylized flower or a traditional Indian mandala. The pattern is partially cut off by the right edge of the page.

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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INDIA 2021-2022: PLAYING AGAINST CHINA ON DIFFERENT CHESSBOARDS

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This article focusses on the five major developments which characterized Indian international relations in 2021 and 2022. The first of them was the gradual disengagement between Indian and Chinese military forces along the Himalayan undefined border. The second was the launching of an ambitious «vaccine diplomacy» aimed mainly to strengthen India's influence world-wide, but more specifically in Asia. The third was India's role in the Quad. The fourth was joining Israel, the UAE and the US in a new quadrilateral entente. The fifth was India's reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Concerning the first development, this article analyses the peculiar and undefined nature of the Himalayan border, highlighting the fact that in large areas it exists only on the drawing boards of India's and China's military staffs and leading political circles. This situation – which, by itself, makes incidents bound to happen – is of no easy solution, even if the two parties involved were characterised by a sincere desire to resolve the issue, which does not seem to be the case. In fact, as this article points out, in spite of the process of disengagement along the Himalaya, anti-Chinese feelings remained dominant among Indian politicians and public opinion. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that, as this article shows, India's «vaccine diplomacy» (which, after a promising start, failed spectacularly), her participation in both the Quad proper and the new quadrilateral entente (whose official name became I2U2), and her highly ambiguous policy of neutrality on the Russian invasions of Ukraine (in spite of India's close connection with the US) had all as a main aim confronting and containing China.

KEYWORDS – India-China relations; India-China border; vaccine diplomacy; Quad; I2U2; India's Russian policy.

1. Introduction

The year 2020 had witnessed the worst situation of tension on the India-China border since at least 1987, when the two countries had found themselves on the brink of war. The years under review, however, saw the gradual and concerted – although admittedly halting – disengagement of the two countries' armed forces at the points of greatest tension. This, nonetheless, did not translate into any improvement of the deeply antagonistic view of China entertained in India by the whole political class, most analysts and large sections of the public opinion.

In the final analysis, therefore, tension with China mixed with deeply rooted suspicions on the alleged anti-India goals of Beijing's foreign policy remained the backdrop and ultimate driving force of India's foreign policy during the period under review. Not surprisingly, the other main developments of India's foreign policy in the years here analysed were managed by the Indian government with the need to confront China in mind as well, or perhaps above all.

The first of these developments, which was preeminent in 2021, was the attempt to transform the world-wide COVID-19-induced health crisis into an opportunity for India. The aim was to build up India's influence world-wide, but particularly in Asia, with the view to counterbalance China's own influence. After a promising start, nonetheless, New Delhi's attempt ended in failure, mainly as a consequence of the Indian government's mismanagement of the COVID-19 crisis at home.

New Delhi, however, remained in the international limelight because of her role in two minilateral alliances. The first was the Quad, namely an entente between Australia, India, Japan and the US. Relaunched in 2017, after a period of hiatus, the Quad became particularly active in the two years under review. The second minilateral alliance was another four-country entente, which came into being in the closing months of 2021 and, beside India, included Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the US.

A main, although undeclared, finality of the Quad remained – in this period as in the years before – the containment of Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific. In the other quadrilateral entente, also, which had mainly economic finalities, the anti-China dimension was not absent. Either preventing or slowing down Chinese economic expansion in West Asia was among the finalities pursued by the sponsor of the entente, namely the US. This, no doubt, was a goal unambiguously shared by India.

The final development that India had to cope with in the period under review was the need to manage the international fall-out of Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. During the previous years, the India-US military connection had become so close as to constitute – according to some analysts, including the author of these lines – a *de facto* alliance. Whether or not the India-US military closeness was a *de facto* fully-fledged alliance, Washington and its allies expected India to side with them against Russia. Nonetheless, India took an ambiguous neutral standing, refusing to publicly condemn the Russian invasion and not hesitating to profit from the possibility of buying oil and other Russian goods at discounted prices. Contrary to the expectations of many, however, the US and its closest allies, instead of sanctioning India, fairly quickly accepted its highly ambiguous position. Behind their reaction there was the fact that, while the US was engaged in facing down Russia in Europe, it saw as its main and most dangerous challenge a rising China. Whereas India's support in tackling the Russian aggression in Europe would have been welcome but far from

decisive, its role in the US-sponsored anti-Chinese arc of containment in the Indo-Pacific was crucial. As that was a role which, indeed, New Delhi was happy to play, India could count on the indulgence of the US and its allies as far as her hedging on the Ukraine question was concerned.

In the next sections, India's foreign policy in the years 2021 and 2022 is analysed by focussing on the key points just highlighted.

2. *The border problem with China*

2.1. *The India-China disengagement process along the Himalayan border: A timeline*

As noted above, the year 2020 had seen the most dramatic increase in tension along the Sino-Indian Himalayan border since 1987. As discussed elsewhere [Torri 2021], at the closing of that year, in spite of attempts at negotiation, which had been haltingly going on since summer, no concrete step forward on the path towards de-escalation had been taken [Torri 2021]. As a result, during the winter months, the substantial and enhanced number of troops which had been deployed by both China and India along or in proximity to the disputed parts of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), namely the supposed provisional Sino-Indian border,¹ maintained their forward position, braving «the deadly risk brought about by the extreme weather conditions of the Himalaya in Winter time» [Bedi 2021]. Eventually, possibly also as a consequence of «the attrition both armies had suffered during their LAC deployments in intense cold, October onwards» [ibid.], a first disengagement agreement was reached and announced on 10 February 2021 by China and a day later by India [ibid.].

The agreement, which was the result of the 9th round of talks at the level of the commanders of the two opposing armies,² saw the complete withdrawal of troops from the contested Pangong Tso area by 19 February

1. Why, according to this author, the LAC is a «supposed» provisional border is explained below, in section 2.3.

2. Corps Commander-level talks as a way to solve the tensions along the Sino-Indian border, which became first apparent following the clashes on 5-6 May 2020 on the northern bank of Pangong Lake (or Pangong Tso), started on 6 June 2020. The situation on the ground, however, far from improving worsened, reaching its nadir with the clash in Galwan Valley (15-16 June), which caused losses of human lives for the first time since 1975. A second round of talks was held on 22 June 2020, which led to Indian and Chinese military commanders reaching a «mutual consensus to disengage» from all «friction areas» along the contested Line of Actual Control (LAC)» [Hindustan Times 2020, 24 June]. However, this decision was not followed by any concrete step. The first was taken on 10 February 2021 (see below). Between 30 June 2020 and the end of the year 2022, a further 14 rounds of talk were held, the latest one (the 17th) on 20 December 2020.

and its transformation in a buffer zone. This was followed by the setting up on 25 February 2021 of a hotline connecting the Indian and Chinese foreign ministers.

In the following months of 2021, the rounds of talks at corps commanders level went on and resulted, on 31 July 2021, in the agreement for a further disengagement at Patrolling Post 17A, near Gogra Post in Eastern Ladakh [Kaushik 2021]. However, in the following months, the further corps commanders' meetings did not result in any additional disengagement. Some eight months later, namely by March 2022, it had become clear that disengagement in Hot Springs, Depsang and Demchok – namely contested areas considered of high strategic relevance – was too important a question to be reached at the level of corps commanders and had to be made at the highest political level [Ramachandran 2022, 15 March].

In this situation, on 25 March 2022, there was a surprise passage to Delhi on the part of Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who met both his Indian counterpart, Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, and India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval. Wang appeared less interested in breaking the border stalemate than in de-emphasizing the importance of the border problems. Following what had become the traditional Chinese approach to the relation with India, Wang stressed the interests shared by both China and India at world level, in the attempt to relaunch some kind of bilateral cooperation [MFA-PRC 2022a].

Indian reaction to Wang's approach was negative. As cogently summed up by India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar: «The frictions and tensions that arise from China's deployment since April 2020 cannot be reconciled with a normal relationship between the two neighbours» [Al Jazeera 2022, 26 March].

Wang and Jaishankar met again on 7 July 2022, on the side-lines of the Group of Twenty (G20) Foreign Ministers meeting in Bali. In the interval between the two meetings, Beijing strived to mollify New Delhi's hostility by supporting India's role as the rotating chair of the SCO, which India would assume in September of that same year, and of the G20, due in September 2023 in New Delhi.

Beijing's strategy was not totally devoid of results, as made clear by the Indian Foreign Minister's thanks to China for its support, given by Jaishankar on the side-lines of the Bali meeting [MFA-PRC 2022b].

This more relaxed situation possibly explains why, on 17 July 2022, the 16th India-China Corp Commanders level talks resulted in the agreement to disengage from Gogra Hot Spring Area, which was carried out by 13 September 2022 [News On Air 2022, 16 September; Jash 2022].

The concluding months of the year 2022 did not see any further disengagement. Between 15 November and 2 December, *Yudh Abhyas*, a joint military exercise involving India's 9th Assam Regiment and the US 11th Airborne Division was carried out in Auli, just 100 kilometres from the LAC's

central sector in Uttarakhand. Not surprisingly, the joint exercise provoked China's protest that the exercise violated the India-China agreements of 1993 and 1996. [Ramachandran 2022, 13 December].

The situation seemed to further worsen when, on 9 December 2022, Indian and Chinese troops clashed at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Arunachal Pradesh. Nevertheless, the clash was a minor one, causing «minor injuries to a few personnel from both sides». Besides, after the clash, the two sides «immediately disengaged from the area» [The Wire 2022, 22 December].

On 20 December 2022, a fresh round of high-level military talks was held, «with a focus on resolving the remaining issues in Eastern Ladakh». Although the «frank³ and in-depth discussion» between the two parties did not lead to any further disengagement, at least the two parties «agreed to maintain the security and stability on the ground in the Western sector». They also agreed «to stay in close contact and maintain dialogue through military and diplomatic channels and work out a mutually acceptable resolution of the remaining issues at the earliest» [The Wire 2022, 22 December].

2.2. The lack of positive repercussions of the disengagement process on Indian public opinion

Summing up, the years 2021 and 2022 saw a slow, even haltingly, but nevertheless substantial process of disengagement along the LAC. This, however, did not improve the deeply negative view of China entertained by India's political class, most Indian analysts and the quasi-totality of Indian public opinion. As noted by former ambassador M. K. Bhadrakumar, the «break-through» at Pangong Tso of February 2021 «was a good thing to happen», and was to be «savoured as a net gain on the road to peace». «Curiously», however, noted the former ambassador,

... the opposite seems to be happening. The reduction of military tensions in Pangong Tso has become a matter of heartburn for sections of the media and the fraternity of India's 'China hands' – and possibly, hawkish elements within the establishment – who scoff at the very notion of peaceful resolution of territorial differences with China now or ever [Bhadrakumar 2021].

The same attitude continued to be preminent for the whole period under examination. Accordingly, for example, as noted by a well-known Indian senior journalist, Prem Shankar Jha, in March 2021 «Beijing emphatic assertion that India should host the BRICS summit in the latter part of the year despite the confrontation in Ladakh has been greeted with suspicion by the media» [Jha 2021b].

3. In diplomatic jargon a «frank» discussion is a discussion characterized by open disagreement.

In fact, most Indian analysts dismissed the positive political value of any disengagement as either the consequence of the caving in by Indian negotiators under Chinese pressure or due to the fact that China had adapted to accept Indian requests because forced by its own internal problems. So, for example, according to Colonel Ajai Shukla, the Pangong Tso disengagement had resulted in the Indian army giving up the possibility to enter an area which India had patrolled since the 1962 Sino-Indian war [Shukla 2021, 12 Febbraio; Singh, Sushant, 2020b]. On her part, Professor Amrita Jash, in an otherwise appreciable analysis of the India-China boundary dispute, while commenting the completion of the September 2022 disengagement in the Gogra-Hot Spring area, reached the conclusion that it did not signal any real progress on the path to effective de-escalation. In her opinion, China – as well as India herself – had been forced to disengage by the necessity to improve the diplomatic atmosphere prior to the SCO summit due on 15-16 September 2022. Also, the need for Chinese President Xi Jinping to maintain internal and external stability in view of the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, due in October 2022, had played a role. Her conclusion was that:

If one appreciates these two factors, the recent disengagement process in eastern Ladakh tends to appear more as a temporary adjustment, or tactical manoeuvring, rather than a genuine push to resolve the dispute. Lasting de-escalation therefore remains elusive [Jash 2022].

Even more pessimistic was the conclusion reached by noted analyst Harsh V. Pant. Pant observed that «India tried to forge a partnership with China based on shared global outlooks», in the belief that «this global convergence would eventually lead to a bilateral convergence», namely to a solution of the border problems. However, in Pant's evaluation, such a belief was nothing different from a «mythology». Indian foreign policy decision-makers had continued to perpetuate it «till it was once and, hopefully, forever shattered by the bloody clashes of June 2020 in the Galwan Valley, leading to the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers» [Pant 2022].

2.3. *Where on earth is located the LAC?*

Summing up, most Indian analysts shared a deeply pessimistic outlook concerning India's relation with China. This pessimistic outlook descended from the view, entertained not only by most of them, but also by the bulk of Indian politicians and public opinion, that China, through the use of a complex and varied set of political, economic and military strategies, was bent on surrounding, choking and subordinating India, while nibbling away at her northernmost national territory.

Discussing the features of India's negative outlook of China and the reasons which explain them is a quite complex subject, which cannot be satisfactorily discussed here and, anyway, exceeds the thematic limits of

this article. In order to remain inside them, it suffices to focus on the fact that, in the period under review, the pre-existing negative outlook related to China was reposed and strengthened chiefly on the basis of analyses which focussed mainly on the border situation, whose unsettled state was explained as a result of China's allegedly unrelenting pressure. This pressure was read as aimed at expanding China's control over Indian territory by making use of what – with a successful metaphor – has been described as «salami slicing» strategy. According to well-known Indian analyst Brahma Chellaney, this strategy «centers on a steady progression of small actions, none of which serves as a *casus belli* by itself, yet which over time lead cumulatively to a strategic transformation in China's favor» [Chellaney 2013].

This kind of analysis, although superficially convincing and in line with the evaluations by most Western analysts, has, nonetheless, a crucial drawback. This is the unstated assumption that the LAC – exactly as the Line Of Control (LOC) dividing India from Pakistan in Kashmir – although not an official border, is, at the very least, a well-defined provisional border, whose layoff is clear to both parties and acknowledged by both of them. Or, to put it in the words of a well-known Indian weekly [India Today, 2015, 11 June] «a demarcation reflecting territories that are at present under both side's control, pending a resolution of the boundary». Reality, however, was strikingly different.

As already explained elsewhere [Torri 2021], a well-defined and mutually acknowledged, although unofficial, dividing line separating China-controlled from India-controlled territories *does not exist* along most of the Himalayan border. What does exist is a series of permanently or semi-permanently occupied posts, controlled by either India or China, sprinkled along the Himalaya. These bases are in the middle of territories which are de facto «no man lands» and have never or only fitfully been patrolled by either military (or, in some cases, by both, although at different times of the year). The posts effectively held by either China or India are *notionally* connected by lines which have never been mutually demarcated on the ground. In some cases, these lines are *notionally* drawn along areas where the military of the nation claiming them as part of its own territory has never set foot, or, at the most, has done so only temporarily, or only recently.

The bases permanently or semi-permanently manned by either militaries and the lines notionally connecting them make up the LAC. Here a first main problem is that the LAC according to India and the LAC according to China are massively divergent, as shown by the fact that the Indian LAC is 3,488 kilometres long, whereas the Chinese LAC is only around 2,000 kilometres long [e.g., Singh, Sushant, 2020a].

This state of affairs, although crucially important, is usually overlooked by politicians and analysts, *both Indian and Chinese*. Nonetheless, the peculiar nature of the Indian and Chinese systems of control in the Himala-

yas and the fact that the two states have such wildly different ideas about the length of the provisional border entail at least three notable consequences.

The first is that, in practice, there is not one LAC, but, rather, two; and, as already noted, widely divergent at that.

The second consequence is that these two widely divergent LACs, along much of their respective courses, have a kind of phantasmatic existence: they concretely exist only on the drawing boards and in the operational plans of the militaries of either India or China. Quite simply, they do not exist on the ground along large tracts of their respective courses.

The third consequence is that, particularly where the LACs only exist on the official or semi-official maps of one of the two states, they sometimes coincide, but, more often, they do not. While sometimes they are divided by a «no man» land, sometimes they overlap.⁴ And, very often, they overlap in areas which are usually seen as strategically important. This is the necessary consequence of the fact that both India and China, in unilaterally drawing (on their maps) their respective LACs, have arbitrarily inserted as part of the territories that each nation claims as its own as many areas as possible that are considered strategically important. It goes without saying that, in most cases, these are areas which have never been permanently occupied and only in some cases have been or are fitfully patrolled – and sometimes, as already noted, by the militaries of both nations, although during different periods of the year.

In the final analysis, no internationally valid border divides India from China, as an internationally valid border must first be jointly agreed by the two nations involved and then jointly demarcated on the ground. This problem, however, is compounded by the peculiarity that along much of the territory where an Indian-China official border should lie, *not even a provisional border exists*, but only a series of permanently or semi-permanently manned bases, separated by wide stretches of what it is, to all effects, no man land.

This is a kind of situation that, in spite of its many ambiguities, would not be dangerous per se. The problem is that both China and India have been moving forward, advancing deeper and deeper into unoccupied territories and sometimes even into territories that have been briefly or fitfully occupied by the other side.

When these forward moves occur, two outcomes are possible. If side A realizes that side B is entering a no-man area, trying to assume its de facto control, side A counter-moves, entering the same area and confronting the other side, in the attempt to put an end to the actual occupation of what

4. Overlapping «is much less frequent in the eastern sector of the de facto border, which spans the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, and the middle sector, on the northern border of the Indian states of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh». Conversely, «the divergence between the two LACs is at its maximum in the western sector, where India-held Ladakh abuts against China-held (although India-claimed) Aksai Chin» [Torri 2021].

is invariably claimed as territory belonging to side A. This countermove is usually carried out through a mixture of psychological pressures – for example showing boards with writings asking the opposite party to retire – and manoeuvring aimed at assuring a tactically dominant position. Most times the ongoing incident is resolved in just one day, with both sides retreating to their starting points. Historically, only in few cases these confrontations have continued for longer periods, and in even fewer have resulted in violent confrontations [Bhonsale 2018, particularly Table 4]. Unfortunately, as already remembered, in 2020 these confrontations escalated from non-violent to violent and, although without the use of firearms, caused human losses and triggered such a rise in tension to apparently push the two countries on the verge of war.

The second possible outcome occurs when one of the two sides establishes a permanent or semi-permanent basis in the formerly no-man land, without the opposite side realizing it, if not at a later date. When the realization that the opposite party has silently extended its *de facto* control on previously unoccupied land occurs, the aggrieved party reacts in different ways, depending on its nationality. If it is Indian, a massive number of indignant analyses appear on the traditional and new media, decrying the fact that more or less large tracts of the sacred and inviolable soil of the motherland have treacherously been annexed by China. These analyses usually end up with stern criticism of the incumbent government, which is accused of ineptitude, weakness, guilty complacency and many other rather despicable shortcomings. Often, these accusations are taken up by the opposition in parliament. Conversely, if the aggrieved party is China, the reaction is not so immediate and vocal. When, however, the same process occurs in reverse, the Chinese media does not fail to justify the action of its armed forces by presenting it as a reaction to previous Indian encroachments.

While the Indian press highlights and emphasizes China's transgressions on alleged Indian soil, it is usually silent when the opposite happens. As a result, if one uncritically relies on Indian press reports, the impression is inescapable that transgressing the phantasmatic provisional Himalayan border is a one-way Chinese affair; Indians are never guilty of it. This powerfully contributes to strengthen the prevailing impression, entertained by Indian public opinion, that China is steadily implementing an aggressive and treacherous «salami slicing» strategy, aimed at nibbling away Indian territory. Only rarely what has become India's «common wisdom» on China is challenged by statements from representatives of the dominant political and military circles. One of these rare statements was authored by the Indian Minister of State for Road Transport and Highways and former army chief, General V. K. Singh, on 7 February 2021. Singh, a well-known hawk on China, while speaking to the Indian media, flatly stated:

...none of you come to know how many times we have transgressed as per our perception. We don't announce it. Chinese media does not

cover it... Let me assure you, if China has transgressed 10 times, we must have done it at least 50 times, as per our perception [The Hindu 2021, 7 February].

2.4. *Viewing the LAC from the other side of the border*

In China, although analyses and debates on the situation of the Himalaya have much less prominence than in India, they are not totally absent. It is therefore of interest to see how Chinese analysts view the problem.

What immediately stands out is that, apparently, the Chinese approach to the problem is a mirror image of the Indian one. Like their Indian counterparts, most Chinese analysts, when discussing the situation along the Himalaya, appear convinced of the existence of a well-defined LAC. Of course, the difference is that the LAC they refer to is the one conceived by China.

This perception explains how the criticism made by Chinese analysts is mirror-like to that made by Indian analysts. This mirror-like symmetry goes to the point that two influential Chinese analysts, Hu Shisheng and Wang Jue [2020], while discussing «India's tough foreign policy towards China», make use of the term «sausage slicing» to describe what they see as «a never-ending assertion of territorial rights via aggressive patrolling» on the part of India along the undefined Himalayan border [see also, Jha 2021].

2.5. *What implies the existence of an undefined and non-demarcated border*

At this point, before moving forward, it is imperative to assess the meaning of what has been argued so far. An internationally acknowledged Sino-Indian border does not exist and a continuous provisional border does not exist either, while extensive tracts of the territory between China and India are simply no-man land. Also, in most cases incidents along the phantasmatic Sino-Indian border have historically occurred in what is, to all effects, no-man land. In the final analysis the only fact which is clear and indisputable is that both China and India claim certain borders that extend on territory that they do not control and, anyway, whose control is not acknowledged by the counterpart. It is also worth stressing that both sides have been quite outspoken in claiming areas that are under the control of the other side. China, after tacitly accepting for decades the McMahon line, namely the highest crest of the Himalaya, as the de facto Sino-Indian border in the Eastern sector, beginning in 2006⁵ has started to vocally and publicly claim what it calls Southern Tibet – namely the present-day Indian state

5. With the interview granted on 13 November 2006 by China's ambassador in New Delhi, Sun Yuxi, on a private Indian television channel. E.g., *Hindustan Times* 2006.

of Arunachal Pradesh – as historically part of its own national territory [Torri 2022: 126-130]. On its part, India has never given up its claims on Aksai Chin, that is a territory never controlled by Delhi and largely under Chinese sway since the 1950s. India's claims were reiterated and strengthened in 2019 by the number 2 in the Indian government, Home Minister Amit Shah. Shah publicly claimed the entire Aksai Chin as Indian territory in two separate speeches in parliament, declaring that regaining control of it was «worth dying for» [Business Standard 2019, 22 November and 5 December].

Allocating responsibility for «transgressions» taking place beyond a boundary which legally does not exist and whose de facto lay is a matter of dispute is objectively difficult. Nevertheless, undeterred by this difficulty, most Indian and Western analysts seem to have very clear ideas about what is happening in the Himalayas and which party is transgressing on land which is not inside its national borders. So, for example, a learned reader of the first draft of this article has flatly stated that, after the incidents in 2020,

the PLA [the Chinese army] remains in control of a sizable – exactly how large is unclear – area in Ladakh that India considers its own. It has not withdrawn since it took those areas in early 2020 and although New Delhi is reluctant to discuss it, China is effectively occupying significant territory – perhaps 38,000 square kms [...] So, while there has been some tactical disengagement, the strategic gains made by China in 2020 remain, and that needs to be recognized [...].

This claim is grounded by its author on «extensive media reporting», exemplified, in his/her considered opinion, by an article published in the prestigious French daily *Le Monde* [2022, 9 August]. This article, however, is squarely based on two arbitrary and one-sided assumptions. The first is that the international Sino-Indian border is the border claimed by India since the 1950s – namely a territory that India never controlled and which was never assigned to India by an international treaty. The second is that the LAC lies exactly where India claims it lies.

The argument that the PLA has occupied extensive tracts of Indian territory in the Himalaya has been supported by one of the editors of this journal, who has brought to this writer's attention some reports in the Indian press, discussing a paper stating that in 2020 India lost control of 26 of the 65 Patrolling Points in Ladakh, as result of «[r]estrictive or no patrolling by Indian Security Forces (ISFs)» [The Wire 2023, 25 January; *The Economic Times* 2023]. In other words, the argument made by these Indian press reports and the paper they discuss is that China had occupied Himalayan territory which India claimed as its own on the (tenuous) basis that it had previously patrolled it. Nevertheless, even this tenuous basis of legitimacy for India's claims had been nullified by the simple fact that India, for reasons better known to her political and military leaders, had

voluntarily stopped patrolling those particular areas. This, read together with the fact that no legal border exists in the region, is far from proving that China has occupied *Indian* territory.

What it proves – and its relevance should not be underestimated – is that Indian public opinion is convinced that China has illegally occupied Indian territory. This may well be a wrong perception; however, as stated by a well-known sociological law, what is held to be true – never mind that it actually is – becomes true in its consequences. This is exactly what has happened in this case. The fact that Indian public opinion has become convinced that China is illegally occupying Indian territory cannot but have consequences. The most dangerous one is that any solution of the Sino-Indian ongoing tensions has been made both extremely difficult and improbable.

2.6. *Why Western analysts share the Indian view of the India-China border problem*

Western analysts have the tendency to accept the Indian view concerning the Himalayan border problem as the correct one because it nicely dovetails with the currently dominant China-related narrative in the West. This narrative is based on the idea that the world crisis triggered by the Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy of 15 September 2008 was read by China as signalling the visible decline of Western – and, more specifically, US – power. This perception encouraged Beijing to develop an increasingly aggressive foreign policy towards its neighbours, evidently on the basis of the idea that the capability on the part of Washington to protect its allies was diminishing. This new aggressive policy really took off in or around 2012, with Xi Jinping's ascent to power.⁶ Accordingly, as stressed by Indian analysts themselves – e.g., former Indian national security adviser Shivshankar Menon [2022] – China's aggressiveness along the Himalaya is part and parcel of a more general Chinese new approach to foreign policy, fully visible in the East China and South China seas.

This analysis does not take into account two elements. The first is that the problems between China and India did not start either in 2008 or 2012, but in the 1950s. The second element is that, between 1988 and 2005-2006, the India-China relations went through a phase of visible improvement. This positive trend, however, was reversed in 2005-2006, namely *before* the start of the new phase of China's foreign policy. Without dwelling on the causes of this somersault (which this author has discussed elsewhere in some detail [Torri 2020]), what is important to stress here is that the tensions between, on the one hand, China and her Eastern and South-eastern neigh-

6. The bibliography on China's «new aggressiveness» is too wide to be given here with any degree of completeness. In any case, see, e.g., Chen *et al.* 2013/14; Johnston 2013; Friedberg 2014; Jerdén 2014; Mastro 2014; Yan 2014; Hoo 2017; Chang Liao 2018.

bours and, on the other, China and India do not have the same origins and causes. Considering the two sets of tensions as the two faces of the same coin can only cloud our ability to arrive at a full understanding of the problem we want to explain.

A heuristically sounder way to put the causes of the tensions along the Himalaya into perspective is to reflect on the fact that the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) has had problems in settling its land borders with no less than 14 neighbouring countries. In some cases, these problems, particularly those with the URSS and Vietnam, have been so difficult to solve to cause major military clashes. Nonetheless, it is a fact that only the land problems with India and Bhutan – the latter a state which is little different from an Indian protectorate – remain unresolved.⁷

Of course, a comparative study of the reasons why the land border problems between China and its neighbours have been solved in 12 cases but not in the case of India and a state that is India's de facto satellite, although no doubt useful, is beyond the scope of this article. Here the problem has been recalled only as a caveat against the unthinking acceptance of the thesis that the assertive turn taken by Xi Jinping's China in the Indo-Pacific and its launching of projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) do account for the dramatic worsening in India-China relations and India's growing wariness about Beijing's intentions. This, of course, is what has been argued by the bulk of the literature on the topic with such a consistency to transform the «newly aggressive Xi Jinping's China foreign policy» thesis into something akin to the «common wisdom» on this topic.

Without venturing into the ongoing debate on how aggressive and truly new China's «new aggressive foreign policy» really is, this author's contention is that India-China relations were already conspicuously deteriorating before Xi's rise to power and for reasons that had nothing to do with it [Torri 2020]. Which means that China's supposed new aggressiveness against India might have been a contributing factor to the deterioration of India-China relations, but certainly not its causal factor. Not taking into account the past of China-India relations can only distort any analysis aimed at identifying the root causes that continue to make India-China relations difficult.

2.7. Some concluding reflections on the India-China border situation at the end of the period under review

At the end of the period under review, two contradictory elements characterized the situation along the undefined and not-demarcated India-China border. One, scarcely noted by the Indian and Western press, pointed to an improvement of the situation; another, on which Indian and Western me-

7. Problems concerning the sea borders separating China from her neighbours appear to be considerably more difficult to solve and, in fact, in most cases, have not been solved.

dia focussed, pointed to a situation of increasing danger of all-out military confrontation.

2.7.1. *The coming into being of a more tranquil situation*

As discussed above, during the period under review, the danger of war gradually receded and, eventually, on 10/11 February 2020, a first disengagement agreement was reached. Of course, the agreement was important by itself and also as a potential first substantial step forward on the path to peace and tranquillity along the border. What, however, potentially made it a turning point in the long-drawn India-China border dispute was another development, firstly highlighted by senior Indian journalist Prem Shankar Jha. In Jha's words:

To say that this [the agreement leading to the 10/11 February disengagement] has been a crucial breakthrough in the longstanding border dispute would be an understatement. For the agreement is not only an explicit acknowledgement that a 'Grey Area' or 'No Man's Land' has existed between the two countries' conflicting definitions of the LAC, but also marks a formal elevation of this area to the status of a 'buffer zone' [Jha 2021a].

In fact, the creation of buffer zones separating the India-claimed Himalayan areas from those claimed by China continued in occasion of the further disengagements, contributing to highlight the existence of two LACs divided by a «no man» zone.

Admittedly, the meaning of this quite important development, went lost to most Indian analysts, as shown by the fact that whereas some of them claimed that the disengagement had been a victory for India, inasmuch additional territory had been included in the Indian side of the LAC [Pant and Joshi 2021], others claimed the exact opposite, pointing out that India had lost to China areas previously part of the territory on the Indian side of the LAC [Shukla 2021; Sawhney 2021]. Also, when reporting the establishment of a buffer zone as result of the second main disengagement (agreed on 31 July 2022), the Indian defence establishment and the Indian press, rather than admitting that the mutual acknowledgement of the existence of two LACs, separated by a buffer zone, was underway, preferred to claim that «a *temporary* no-patrolling zone on either side of the LAC» was established [Kaushik 2021; emphasis added]. Others, implied that the buffer zone had been created on areas previously controlled by India [Khan 2022]⁸

In sum, most Indian analysts appeared either unable or unwilling to comprehend the potential political meaning of the ongoing disengagement process.

8. Khan, Wajahat S., 2022, 'In the world's highest battlefield, China has the advantage over India', *Gzero*, 18 December.

2.7.2 *The coming into being of a more tense and dangerous situation*

Both China and India had started to expand and improve their military infrastructures along the Himalaya well before the 2020 clash. Beginning in 2020, not only there was an acceleration in the building of military infrastructures on both sides of the uncertain dividing line, but also a re-deployment of both Indian and Chinese troops, with the dual objective of strengthening the respective defensive positions and enhancing their capability to launch offensive strikes. Both armies built or modernized new airports and heliports, completed with hardened shelters, sometimes supposedly nuclear-proof, for aircrafts, unmanned aerial vehicles and long-range surface-to-air missiles. Both armies built new strategic roads, integrated on the Indian side by the building of new bridges, tunnels and heated accommodations for Indian troops. India was also planning the construction of two strategic railway lines in the Northeast and an additional one in Ladakh.

The number of the troops deployed behind the respective sides of the LAC dramatically increased, their striking power enhanced by the induction of vehicle-mounted howitzers, light tanks and main battle tanks; their mobility by the deployment of helicopters capable of ferrying both soldiers and artillery. At the same time, both India and China strengthened the respective air forces deployed at striking distance from the adversarial side.

In building up their military forces and logistic infrastructures, India and China had to cope with different challenges, created by the different configuration of the terrain in the two countries. Behind China's forces deployed on the Himalaya, there is an extensive high plateau, quite distant from the Chinese heartland. This means that the Chinese have to negotiate very long supply lines. The situation on the Indian side is quite different, with shortened supply lines. However, the Chinese supply lines are a comparatively dense network of all-weather roads, which could be disrupted by India only with difficulty. Conversely, at least a part of the most recent road connections on the Indian side are dirt tracks, which not only could easily be disrupted by Chinese attacks, but are already being damaged by the inclemency of the weather.

The different configuration of the terrain plays a role also as far as the offensive capabilities of the two air forces are concerned. As pointed out by Manoj Joshi: «Operating from the high Tibetan plateau, Chinese aircraft pay a weight penalty and cannot carry a full war load. Besides, Indian radar systems located high in the Himalaya pick them up as they take off. Indian fighters [...] can take up full war loads and pop up over the Himalaya to strike» [Joshi 2023].

If it is clear that the armed forces of both countries have been going through a dramatic increase in men and means, it is more difficult to assess the exact consistency and power of the two military apparatuses, and,

more importantly, if one of the two is in a position of superiority vis-à-vis the other.⁹

Judging also from the «cautiously worded statement» by Indian Army chief General Manoj Pande on 15 January 2023 [Sagar 2023], the impression of this writer is that Chinese and Indian forces had reached, at that point in time, a situation of substantial parity along the Himalayan undefined border.

In the absence of either a mutually agreed provisional border or code of conduct, military power parity is a deterrent as good as any against imprudent and risky military adventures. Nonetheless, according to a confidential research paper by the Ladakh Police, made public by Reuters in mid-January 2023 – and already alluded to in section 2.5. – the situation remained dangerous. The paper, based on intelligence gathered in the border areas, interpreted in the light of a study of the pattern of India-China military tensions over the years, came to the conclusion that new clashes between Indian and Chinese troops along their contested frontier could not be ruled out [Reuters 2023].

Summing up, the situation along the contested Himalayan border remained contradictory. Disengagement and the building of buffer zones appeared to point towards an improvement of the situation of tension along the Himalaya. The profoundly antagonistic view of China on the part of Indian public opinion and the confidential report of the Ladakh police pointed in the opposite direction.

3. India's vaccine diplomacy and its failure

In the years under review India's confrontation with China was not limited to the Himalayan heights. Confronting China's influence was indeed also a key objective of the «vaccine diplomacy» launched by Narendra Modi on 19 January 2021, while the COVID-19 pandemic was in full swing. On that day, the Indian Prime Minister announced that the first shipments of India-produced vaccine doses to neighbouring countries would begin the following day [Magee 2021].

There is little doubt that Modi saw the pandemic as a crisis that had to be turned into an opportunity, in order to prop up India's international standing as a major world power and confront and diminish China's in-

9. The rather impressionistic analysis of the situation of increasing militarization ongoing on the Himalaya is based on Indian or international press reports, which, in turn, are based on news from Indian or US official circles, open-source intelligence and studies by independent research groups, which base their assessments also on satellite photographs. See, e.g., De Silva and Jones 2021; Detsch 2021; Dutton 2021; NDTV 2022; Roy 2021; Bagchi 2022; Khan 2022; Saballa 2022. Of particular interest is the analysis carried out by Manoj Joshi [2023], a well-known authority on the Sino-Indian border.

fluence in South Asia and elsewhere. These were objectives that could be reached if India succeeded in playing the role of defender of the health interests of weaker nations and leveraging her strength as the largest world producer of generic medicines.¹⁰

This strategy started to be implemented already in 2020, and became even more incisive once the anti-COVID vaccines became available in December of that year. In January 2021, India launched a veritable international vaccine campaign, making massive doses of anti-COVID vaccines available first to neighbouring countries and then world-wide. By the end of March 2021, however, the brutality and negligence with which the Indian government had managed the pandemic domestically came home to roost [Maiorano 2022]. As soon as the second and devastating COVID wave hit India in mid-March 2021,¹¹ the Indian government was forced to put an end to anti-COVID vaccine exports. Limited exports were restarted several months later, in mid-October 2021, but it was only at the end of November that they resumed at full speed. By that time the good will and influence gained by India up to mid-March 2021 had been largely squandered.

3.1. *From success to disaster*

When, in December 2020, the mass production of SARS-CoV-2 vaccines became possible, India, because of its solid pharmaceutical industry, was in pole position to become a main producer world-wide [Madan 2019]. In particular, already in June 2020, the British drug maker Oxford AstraZeneca and Serum Institute of India (SII), India's No. 1 biotechnology company and a foremost one world-wide, had entered an agreement. Under it, SII would produce one billion doses of AstraZeneca's anti-COVID vaccine, to be distributed to low-income countries, including India [Rajagopal 2020]. At the beginning of January 2021, the AstraZeneca vaccine was granted emergency use authorization both in India and in a series of other countries of the Global South¹² [AstraZeneca.com 2021; Pasricha 2021a]. At the same time, other India-produced COVID vaccines appeared to be on the verge of commercialization, in particular the completely indigenous Covaxin, produced by Bharat Biotech in cooperation with the Indian Council of Medical Research and the Pune National Institute of Virology [Pant & Tirkey 2021; Singh, Bawa, *et al.*; Dhar 2021].

10. On the eve of the COVID pandemic, India's pharmaceutical industry ranked the 3rd largest world-wide in terms of volume of its products, the 13th largest in terms of value. It also occupied the 10th rank as an exporter of generic medical drugs. See Madan 2019.

11. According to the medical journal *Cureus*, the second wave hit India between 13 March 2021 and 19 June of the same year [Agarwala *et al.* 2022].

12. Argentina, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Mexico, Morocco, Brazil, South Africa, Saudi Arabia.

In mid-January 2021, once the COVID-19 vaccines had become fully available, India started to massively export them to neighbouring countries. The first consignments went to Bhutan, Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar and Seychelles. Mauritius came soon after. Then, in February, India's vaccine exports went beyond the South Asian/Indian Ocean area, reaching the Caribbeans, Brazil, Algeria, South Africa and Egypt. India also contributed to the COVAX programme,¹³ which, in turn, supplied vaccine doses to «nearly 100 countries in the global South by the end of 2021» [Ariyawardana 2022: 153].

The number of vaccine doses exported by India was really remarkable. As on 11 May 2021, it amounted to 66,369,800 vaccine doses sent to 95 nations [Tyagi 2021].¹⁴ Only 16% of the doses exported, namely 10.715.000, had been sent as aid. An additional 30%, namely 19.862.800 vaccine doses, had been donated to the WHO as supplies for the COVAX programme (of which, however, India was also a beneficiary [Gettleman *et al.* 2021]). Finally, something more than half of the vaccine doses, namely some 54% of the total exports, equal to 35.792.000 doses, had been sent as commercial supplies by the two main Indian vaccine manufacturers; SII and Bharat Biotech [Kurup 2021].

This massive programme of exports was presented as the prosecution of India's well-honed tradition of international solidarity. Given India's record in this field,¹⁵ there is no doubt that this explanation is not devoid of truth. Nonetheless it does not represent the whole truth; significantly, not a single dose of vaccine was ever sent to Pakistan, regarded by India as an enemy. Also, as noted above, more than 50% of the doses exported were supplied on commercial bases. But, in truth, not even pro-Modi analysts had any doubt that, together with humanitarian considerations, another – and possibly preeminent aim – of the India-promoted world-wide vaccination campaign was enhancing Indian influence, mainly in order to confront China. The pursuit of this objective was favoured by fact that, in the field of medical supplies, India had «actually a comparative edge and advantage over China» [Pasricha 2021a].¹⁶

13. COVAX, namely the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access Facility, was introduced by the WHO, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and the Vaccine Alliance to promote the development of COVID-19 vaccines and their equitable distribution throughout the world. See Ariyawardana 2022.

14. China, on the other hand, had sold 80 million doses to 60 nations.

15. In the past, India took in the refugees fleeing Tibet, those fleeing what was then East Pakistan during the brutal repression of the ruling military junta, and Tamils fleeing the civil war in Sri Lanka. India was also in the forefront in launching a relief programme for the countries hit by the tsunami of Christmas 2004. Finally, during the HIV pandemic, India supplied low-cost antiretroviral drugs to African countries. See Ganguly 2021.

16. As claimed by Dr Sreeram Chaulia, dean of the Jindal School of International Affairs.

India's vaccine diplomacy, at first extremely successful and hailed as such by most analysts, had two fatal flaws. The first was the mistaken conviction, which Modi made public in his special address in Davos of 28 January 2021, that India had already won its domestic battle with the pandemic. In fact, the Indian ruling circles were so sure to have defeated the pandemic thanks to the policy of brutal lockdowns which had been implemented in 2020¹⁷ that no preparatory work had been done in order to prepare the country for a possible second wave. Hence, India's pharmaceutical resources had been deployed to promote the international distribution of India-produced vaccine doses. When the second wave struck, it spread death and destruction all over India, forcing the government to halt the export of vaccines, included those which had already been paid or, anyway, promised. It was a decision which came as a rude shock both to countries, such as Nepal, which depended on Indian supplies, and the COVAX programme.

The second fatal flow of India's vaccine diplomacy was the government's grossly mistaken overevaluation of the capability of Indian pharmaceutical industry to produce COVID vaccines. As shown in a hard-hitting analysis by Indian journalist Neeta Sanghi, in the period under review the generally held belief in India was that her pharmaceutical industry contributed 60% of the world's production of vaccines. Hence the conviction that India was in the position to contribute an equal share of COVID vaccines world-wide.

Unfortunately, these beliefs were mistaken. India did account not for 60% of the total vaccines available world-wide, but, more modestly, «for around 60% of the total vaccines *supplied to UNICEF*» [Sanghi 2021; emphasis in the original]. UNICEF vaccines do not represent the totality of global vaccines and are largely aimed at immunizing children in poor countries. In sum, India-produced vaccines, although being a quite sizeable quota of the world production, were by far less than 60%. More relevant for the present discussion is the fact that the manufacturing strategy behind the production of COVID-related vaccines rested mainly on the transformation of seasonal influenza vaccines. This was a kind of vaccine for which India's pharmaceutical industry had a low production capability, because the market of influenza vaccines is largely restricted to developed countries. In other words, India's pharmaceutical industry had always produced limited quantities of seasonal influenza vaccines and, consequently, had a low capacity for production of anti-COVID vaccines. So, ultimately, the actual COVID-related production capability of vaccines on the part of the Indian pharmaceutical industry, was indeed around 20% (to be exact, according to data of India's Ministry of External Affairs, made public in April 2021, India's contribution to the global volume of doses of COVID-19 vaccines was 21%) [Sanghi 2021].

17. For an in-depth analysis of the Indian Government's anti-pandemic policy and its shortcomings see Maiorano 2021: 309-328, and Maiorano 2022: 298-309.

The government's inability to go beyond its own slogans and acknowledge the limitations of the Indian pharmaceutical industry was then compounded by the short-sighted policy towards both foreign and domestic vaccine manufacturers. Pfizer, which, in the closing months of 2020, had applied for authorization to produce vaccines in India, was openly discouraged by Health Minister Harsh Vardhan and ended up by withdrawing its application in January 2021. But domestic producers fared no better. The government forced the price tag of India produced vaccines below US\$ 3.00, namely below the price considered by COVAX as the minimum viable charge for COVID-19 vaccines. By itself, this move was not necessarily a negative one, had the government intervened to support the domestic producers through financial subsidies and/or advance payments against future supply. But it was only after the second wave struck and vaccine shortages became glaring that the government moved to support domestic producers [Ariyawardana 2022]. In fact, it was only on 19 April 2021, namely more than one month after the stop to vaccine exports, that the government, at long last, agreed to subsidize the enhancing of the vaccine production capacities of the two main Indian vaccine producers – SII and Bharat Biotech – by supplying them with Rs. 30 billion and 15 billion respectively.

By then, government policies had radically shifted from complacency about the existing COVID-19 vaccine production capacity to an activism bordering on recklessness. Already on 12 April 2021, the government had decided to approve foreign vaccines without any further local trials, provided that either they had already been approved for emergency use by the regulatory authorities of some foreign countries (the US, the UK, or Japan), or had been prequalified by World Health Organization (WHO). Also, in the case of the Russia-produced vaccine Sputnik V and the domestically produced Covaxin, the government approved their employment in spite of the fact that both of them had neither received the emergency use authorization by foreign regulators nor concluded the usual clinical trials in India [Thakur 2021].

3.2. *Reaping the consequences of failure*

As already stated, a main goal of India's vaccine diplomacy was confronting China. Particularly important was preventing the expansion of Chinese influence in South Asia. Pakistan, because of its solid connection with China, epitomised by the realization of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) [Boni 2019], was considered a lost cause – and, as noted above, no India-produced vaccine dose ever went to Pakistan. But New Delhi was deeply interested both in repairing relations with Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, which for different reasons had deteriorated, and in offsetting Chinese influence over those countries.

Beijing, as soon as Chinese-produced anti-COVID vaccines had become available, had offered them to Dhaka, Thimphu and Colombo. At

first, Beijing's offer had not been taken up, both because of doubts about the efficacy of the Chinese vaccines and the ready availability of India-produced AstraZeneca inoculations. Of course, things changed when, as seen above, in March 2021 India stopped all vaccine exports, including the doses already paid for.

Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka could not but turn to countries other than India to procure the vaccine doses they needed. Then, just a month after India stopped her vaccine exports, namely in April 2021, the WHO granted its approval to Chinese-produced Sinopharm. In the same period, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi offered to set up an emergency reserve of vaccines for the South Asian region [Pasricha 2021b]. Thus, the geopolitical space left vacant by India was soon filled by other countries, in particular China but also Russia [Bose 2021].

In a way, even more galling for New Delhi was China's public offer to help India in fighting the dramatic surge of COVID cases caused by the second pandemic wave. The offer was first made public by a spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Minister on 22 April 2021 [Reuters 2022, 22 April.], and then reiterated by the Chinese Foreign Minister in a phone conversation with his Indian counterpart on 30 April [Xinhua, 2021, 1 May], and, more important, by China's President Xi Jinping in a letter to Modi that same day [The EurAsian Times, 2021, 11 May].

India had been one of the first nations to send medical supplies to Wuhan, once the COVID pandemic first became manifest there. Consequently, New Delhi could have accepted Beijing's offer as a return for the help provided in 2019. But, evidently, even seasoned that way, that was a morsel too bitter to be swallowed whole by India's ruling class. The face-saving solution was found in not giving any official response to the Chinese government's offer, thus silently letting it fall through, but in accepting the assistance of private, non-governmental Chinese agencies, such as the Red Cross Society of China.

Of course, the distinction between help from the Chinese state and help from private, non-governmental Chinese agencies was a rather insubstantial fig leaf. Certainly, it did not prevent Sun Weidong, the Chinese ambassador in New Delhi, from pouring salt on the wound to Indian pride. In a public speech on 8 June 2021, Sun, basing himself on what he termed «incomplete statistics», claimed that, in the first half of May only, China had sent to India more than 100.000 oxygen concentrators, 8,000 ventilators, 90,000 thermometers and over 100 million masks. He also compared Beijing prompt response to India's plight to Washington's evasive answer to India's request for medical help [Roche 2021].

China's help to India, however, was not an isolate case. Even before Beijing's offer of help to New Delhi, India had been reduced – as noted by Neeta Sanghi [2021] – «from being the “pharmacy of the world” to a desperate seeker of imported vaccines». The hard reality of the unfolding

disaster caused by the second wave of the COVID pandemic forced India to put an end to the policy of refusing foreign aid. This policy had been followed since 2004, when then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had refused foreign assistance in dealing with the consequences of the massive tsunami that devastated the coastal areas of the eastern Indian Ocean that year.¹⁸ Now, in 2021, by making use of the flexibilities allowed in the official policy on receiving foreign aids – which had been set out in a position paper in March 2008 – India accepted medical supplies from no less than 25 countries, other than China. Interestingly, among them there was Pakistan [Quinto 2021; Chakraborty 2021].

3.3. *Attempting to get back into the game*

By mid-November 2021, the COVID situation in India started to improve. This allowed Modi to relaunch India's vaccine diplomacy. In September, the members of Quad, including India, vowed to deliver over a billion of India-manufactured vaccine doses. In doing that, the Quad nations were promising to finally implement a programme that had originally been announced in March but blocked by India's COVID crisis. The following month, at the G20 summit held in Rome on 30-31 October, Modi boldly offered to deliver five billion doses of anti-COVID vaccine by the end of 2022 [Ganguly 2021].

India's late return to the game of «vaccine diplomacy» and Modi's boast that India would supply five billion vaccine doses by the end of 2022 could not return India to the central position in the fight against COVID-19. As noted by Sumit Ganguly: «Prime Minister Modi's tragic handling of COVID-19 and his uneven policy record at home and abroad [did] not inspire much confidence in his return to the global stage or in India's ability to deliver on the commitments it makes». Also, as again pointed out by Professor Ganguly, while at the beginning of the year only India and China were distributing vaccine doses to the Global South and beyond, by the beginning of December G7 countries, including the US, had «pledged to donate billions of doses by the end of 2022». Their entering the game «meant that India's return to vaccine diplomacy would be additive rather than distinctive». This, by itself, would negate Modi's objective to present India as a key world player in the fight against the COVID pandemic [Ganguly 2021].

When Narendra Modi promised that India would supply 5 billion doses, his offer dwarfed that made by higher-income countries, which had committed to donate no more than 2.74 billion doses [Kiernan *et al.* 2021]. However, once again, Modi's promise turned out to be nothing but an empty boast: data collected by the Launch and Scale Speedometer, updated to

18. For synthetic but useful summing up of the evolution of India's policy on foreign aid see Kumar 2021.

mid-February 2023, show that India-donated vaccine doses were no more than 71 million. India, therefore, had given a minuscule proportion of the quantity promised by Modi and was only 8th in the scale of donor countries.¹⁹

4. The revival of India's foreign policy after the failure of «vaccine diplomacy»

The period between the failure of India's vaccine diplomacy, signalled by the freeze of COVID vaccine exports in late March 2021, and the beginning of the Ukraine crisis eleven months later saw India's attempt – on the whole successful – to restore her dented prestige at the international level. This objective was reached through a set of different initiatives, in particular the role that India played as non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), her participation in the activities of the Quad and her joining a new US-sponsored quadrilateral entente, the «Western Quad» or «I2U2». Both her participation in the reenergized Quad and her joining the I2U2 represented less the start of new trends in India's foreign policy than the crowning or completion of long-term trends, in most cases ongoing well before Modi's ascent to India's prime ministership.

4.1. India at the UNSC

On 1 January 2021, India became a non-permanent member of the UNSC, a two-year term office. This was a position which allowed India to promote the pursuit of her long-sought goal of obtaining a permanent UNSC seat. Also, India took over as president of the UNSC in August 2021, namely the same month that saw the Taliban's violent seizure of power in Afghanistan [Boni 2022]. This was a development deeply contrary not only to US and Western interests, but also to those of India, given Indian involvement in supporting the Ghani government. As UNSC president, India chaired the discussions on how to manage the Afghan catastrophe, and played an active role in moulding Resolution 2593. Adopted with 13 votes and two abstentions (China and Russia),²⁰ Resolution 2593 demanded that Afghan territory not be used to threaten or attack any country, and reiterated the

19. India came not only well behind the US (at the first place with a little less of 800 million doses) and China (at the second place with some 350 million doses), but also behind Germany (a little less than 169 million doses), France (a little more than 127 million doses), Spain (some 107 million doses), Italy (a little more than 106 million doses) and Australia (a little more than 77 million doses). However, India was ahead of Canada and the UK, both with a little less than 61 million doses. See Launch and Scale Speedometer 2023.

20. The resolution was voted by Estonia, France, India, Ireland, Kenya, Mexico, Niger, Norway, St. Vincent-Grenadines, Tunisia, United Kingdom, United States, Vietnam.

importance of combating terrorism in Afghanistan. It also called for enhanced efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan and asked the Taliban to honour their statement of 27 August 2021, in which they had promised that Afghans could leave the country at any time and from any border they wished [United Nations 2021]. The resolution soon came to represent the consensus view of the global community on how to deal with the situation in Afghanistan.²¹

4.2. *India and the Quad*

The period under review saw the rapid and conspicuous growth in relevance of the Quad, namely the quadrilateral entente including Australia, India, Japan and the US. This entente had originally taken shape as a result of the joint efforts of these four nations in providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief following the 2004 Tsunami. After a few years of promising growth, the Quad had come to a sudden end, being disbanded in 2008. However, on 11 November 2017, the quadrilateral entente was resuscitated in a meeting of senior officials belonging to the four nations, held on the side-lines of the ASEAN summit in Manila. Both in its first and second phase, the institutional framework of the Quad had been limited to periodical meetings between representatives of the four member nations. Also, its objectives remained indefinite up to the beginning of its second phase. Nevertheless no one doubted that the Quad was an alliance in progress, whose main – although undeclared – objective was the containment of China.²²

Adhering to a well-defined anti-China common strategy and implementing it was however made difficult – and had caused the folding up of the Quad in 2008 – by several factors. One was the different economic and military structures of the member states; another, possibly more important, was their different geographical locations. Significantly, during the Quad's first phase, the member states were constantly unable to conclude their meetings with a joint statement. Rather they issued separate statements that, although with several elements in common, were characterized by important differences. Significantly, as noted by some analysts, anti-China positions in the different final statements were spelled out with a clarity and forcefulness which were directly proportional to the geographical distance of the state authoring the statement from China [e.g., Torri 2018: 19-20].

The relaunching of the Quad in November 2017 was mainly the work of the Trump administration. In sponsoring the rebirth of the four-nation

21. For India's Afghan policy, following the Taliban takeover, see Boni 2023b.

22. On the history of the Quad, see Madan 2017; Roy-Chaudhury & Sullivan de Estrada 2018; Buchan & Rimland 2020. On the reason behind the sudden folding up of the first Quad see Rudd 2019.

entente, Washington not only aimed at strengthening the US sponsored anti-China arc of containment, but at transforming the Quad into the nucleus of a NATO-like military organization.

This was a goal made explicit on 31 August 2020 by US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun. Nonetheless, it was a prospect that left India – namely the only Quad member country to have a land border with China, and, as already noted, an extremely long and unsettled one – decidedly cold.

The Quad had a *de facto* military arm, represented by the periodical Malabar Exercise,²³ which had a powerful reach on the Indian and Pacific Oceans; however, the four countries entente did not have a corresponding land-based military organization. This made India the Quad member country by far more exposed to a possible retaliation by China. Hence, New Delhi's continuing reluctance to the Washington sponsored transformation of the Quad into a full-blown military alliance. It was a reluctance which induced then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to define India as the «wild card» in the four-country entente [NDTV 2023]. Significantly, although the rebirth of the Quad had been hailed by a joint communiqué on the part of the member states, each of them accompanied it with its own communiqué. As in the first phase, although the four different communiqués had much in common, they had significant variations as well.

The situation changed when the Biden administration took over (20 January 2020). It soon became clear that the new administration – as the previous one – considered the Quad as a main instrument to wield US influence over the oceans surrounding the Asian continent, and, therefore, to project such influence inside the continent itself. In this project, India could not but play a key role, as, without her, the control of the Indian Ocean – from the east coast of Africa up to the strategically decisive Malacca Straits – would have been extremely difficult if not totally impossible. No doubt, this was something that had been understood by the Trump administration too. Nonetheless, the most that it had done to ally New Delhi's preoccupations had been tightening the bilateral military connection and continuing with the increasingly massive sales of state-of-the-art weapons to India. This strategy, however, had had limited results in dispelling India's doubts about a militarization of the Quad. Very possibly, the perception of both India's importance as a member state of the Quad and the need of ally her fears was at the origin of a radical change of emphasis in the identification of the Quad objectives on the part of the Biden administration.

Since the Biden administration took over, both the number of the Quad meetings and the level of the representatives taking part in them grew spectacularly [see table 1]. At the same time, the Malabar exercise, which af-

23. Exercise Malabar had been born in 1992, namely well before the birth of Quad, as an annual bilateral naval India-US exercise. However, when the Quad was first created, the exercise was spectacularly expanded to include Australia, Japan and Singapore, taking on the appearance of the Quad's military extension.

ter 2007 had been de-escalated to a bilateral India-US exercise, to become a trilateral one (including Japan) in 2014, further expanded. Beginning with its 23rd edition, held in November 2020, the Australian navy was included. It is worth stressing that, although Australia had been requesting to re-join²⁴ the Malabar exercise since 2017, India had hitherto resisted the request.

Not only the importance of the Quad was growing, but Indian attitude towards it had become more welcoming. The turning point in both developments was the first summit of the Quad leaders, which took place in the virtual format (due to the persistence of the COVID pandemic) on 12 March 2021. The meeting concluded with a joint statement, entitled «The Spirit of the Quad». In it, after the habitual rhetoric about «promoting a free, open, rules-based order, rooted in international law», the objectives of the four countries entente were clearly defined. They were the response to the economic and health crisis caused by COVID-19, the combat against climate change, the control of the cyber space, the control of critical technologies, counterterrorism, quality infrastructure investments, humanitarian-assistance, disaster-relief and maritime domains awareness [The White House 2021].

What characterized this programme – which was reiterated in a more detailed form in the joint statement concluding the Quad leaders' meeting 24 May 2022 [The White House, 2022b] – were two elements. The first was the absence of any explicit reference to any present or future military dimension of the entente. The second was that most objectives outlined, and potentially the most relevant among them, had an unmistakably anti-China subtext. The control of the cyberspace aimed at negating it to China; the control of critical technologies was undisguisedly aimed at competing with Huawei, the Chinese leading global provider of information and communications technology (ICT); quality infrastructure investment aimed to compete with China's BRI; even the response to the COVID-19-induced crisis was in competition with China's attempt to promote its influence through its own «vaccine diplomacy».

Indian analysts and political personalities have sometimes claimed, usually in an implicit way, that the metamorphosis of the Quad project from an Asian NATO in the making to an organization which aimed at containing China by making use of non-military means was the result of India's influence. Basing ourselves on the available documentation, however, it is difficult, if not impossible, to decide if metamorphosis of the Quad objectives was autonomously decided by Washington or brought about or at least facilitated by New Delhi's diplomacy. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that it satisfied India's sensitivities and served its interests. Also, the Biden administration-promoted Quad policy was clearly complementary to autonomously sponsored India-promoted foreign policy strategies. Or, reversing the point of observation, some potentially important India-promoted foreign policy

24. Australia had taken part in the 2007 exercise.

strategies might be viewed as complementary to the prosecution and expansion of Quad-promoted strategies.

Table 1 The Quad 2.0: key events 2017-2022	
11 November 2017 (Manila)	The Quad is re-started during a meeting of senior officials from the US, Japan, India, and Australia.
26 September 2019 (New York)	Meeting of the foreign ministers of the Quad member countries.
4 November 2019 (Bangkok)	Meeting of senior officials of the Quad member countries.
6 October 2020 (Tokyo)	Meeting of the Quad foreign ministers.
3-6 and 17-20 November 2020 (First phase in the Bay of Bengal, second phase in the Arabian Sea)	Quad countries hold combined naval exercises, Malabar 2020 (the 23 rd edition), with participation of the navies of India, the US, Japan, and, for the first time, Australia.
12 March 2021 (virtual)	First Quad leaders' summit. A final joint communiqué is released, entitled 'The Spirit of the Quad'
26-29 August 2021 (Philippines Sea)	The first phase of the 24 th Malabar exercise is conducted by the by the navies of the Quad countries.
24 September 2021 (Washington, DC.)	Second meeting of Quad leaders (the first in-person)
12-15 October 2021 (Bay of Bengal)	Second and concluding phase of the 24 th Malabar exercise, conducted by the navies of the Quad countries.
11 February 2022 (Melbourne, Australia)	Fourth Quad foreign ministers meeting.
3 March 2022 (virtual)	Third Quad leaders' summit (the second virtual one). Quad leaders agree Ukraine experience should not be allowed in the Indo-Pacific.
24 May 2022 (Tokyo)	Quad's leaders fourth meeting.
23 September 2022 (New York)	Meeting of the Quad foreign ministers on the sidelines of UNGA.
9-15 November 2022 (off the coast of Japan)z	Malabar Exercise, conducted by the navies of the Quad countries (25 th edition).
Compiled by the author on the basis of Australian, Indian, English-language Japanese and US press reports, plus official White House press releases.	

In particular, this was the case with the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). Launched by Narendra Modi at the East Asia summit of 2019,

IPOI aspired to «create partnerships between like-minded states», with the objective «to pool their resources in areas like maritime security, trade, sustainable use of maritime resources under a blue economy, capacity building through the sharing of crucial information and resources, and building maritime infrastructure for connectivity and disaster prevention» [Panda 2023]. Differently put, Quad-promoted and IPOI-sought-after objectives were synergetic.

4.3. *India and the «Western Quad»*

The announcement that, beside the original one, a new quadrilateral entente was in the making, including India, Israel, the UAE and the US, was made on 18 October 2021, while India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar was on an official visit to Israel. The announcement was the result of decisions taken during a part-virtual, part-in person summit between the foreign ministers of the four states [Laskar 2021; Malhotra 2021].

The new grouping was provisionally called International Forum for Economic Cooperation. However, UAE Ambassador in India Ahmed Albanna defined it the «West Asian Quad» [Rossi 2022b]. The label stuck and continued to be used by the media also after the change of the official name of the new entente to I2U2 (the two Is being the initials of India and Israel and the two Us those of the US and the UAE).

The goal of the new entente was openly transactional: ideological considerations were pushed aside in favour of integrated economic cooperation. This was favoured by the complementarities of the economies involved and by the fact that the «Western Quad» was the logical culmination of a series of initiatives already under way.

Concerning the economic complementarities, Israel contributed with technical expertise, the UAE with investments, India with low-cost manpower; on its part the US, which could provide both investments and expertise, also acted as the guarantor of the entente. Looking at things from the vantage point of Indian interest, it is clear that her joining the new entente was the end result of the convergence of two different trends: one was the increasingly close connection with Israel; another was the increasingly close relationship with Arab Western Asia. The eventual harmonization of these hitherto somewhat contradictory trends had been offered by the US-sponsored Abraham Accords. Announced on 13 August 2020 and effective since 15 September of the same year, the Abraham Accords had normalized the relations between Israel and the UAE.²⁵

At the time of the signing of the Abrahams Accords, India's connections with both Israel and the UAE were already on a visible upward swing. In 1992, the year when India established diplomatic relations with Israel, bilateral trade between the two countries amounted to a modest US\$ 200 million;

25. Bahrain joined the agreement on 11 September 2020.

from April 2021 to January 2022, however, it had grown to a little less than US\$ 6.3 billion, with the balance of trade in favour of India. This balance left apart the huge arms exports from Israel to India, which, after the normalization of the bilateral relations, had rapidly made of Israel one of the main arm suppliers to India, in direct competition with the US and Russia. Also, numerous strategic partnerships between Israel and India were already on foot in the field of agriculture, climate, water, science and technology, and food [Bhamidipati 2022]. Finally, India and Israel were also united by an intelligence-sharing agreement for counterterrorism purposes [Rossi 2022b].

As far as India's connection with the UAE is concerned, it must be noted that the latter country was host to an Indian expatriate community numbering nearly 9 million people. Their annual economic remittances accounted for some 65% of the total remittances to India, or some 3% of India's GDP. The UAE was also one of India's key suppliers of oil and India's third largest trade partner as well as India's second largest export destination [Suri & Sethi 2023].

The tightening of the relations between India and not only the UAE but Saudi Arabia too had resulted in agreements aimed at countering the economic activities and ensuring the extradition of Indian and Pakistani terrorists based in those Arab countries. Particularly since the visit of Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud to India in 2006, Saudi Arabia and the UAE had been «investing in India's national infrastructure projects, increasing non-oil trade with India and expanding crucial imports from India ranging from vaccines to wheat» [Ganguly and Blarel 2022]. Most specifically, according to Francesco Galietti, CEO of Policy Sonar, a political risk consultancy, the backbone of the economic connection between the UAE and India had become «the manufacturing value chain in food production and processing». In Galietti's evaluation: «The Emiratis use India as an outdoor garden, financing the creation of dedicated infrastructure in the Indian subcontinent and deploying DP World's formidable terminal operators»²⁶ [Rossi 2022b]. This set of connections had underpinned the India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) signed on 27 March 2021, a few months before the announcement of the creation of the Western Quad.

The 2021 India-UAE CEPA had two main aspects: the first was either the elimination or gradual and substantial reduction of all the tariff and non-tariff barriers in the two-way trade; the second was the equal treatment granted to Emirati companies in the case of their participation in tenders for public contracts in India [GOI 2022; UAE n.d.]. Symptomatic of both

26. Dubai Ports World (DP World), headquartered in Dubai, is the world's third-largest port terminal operator and one of the world's largest providers of supply chain and logistics services, operating in 69 countries. Formed in 2005 from the merger of Dubai Ports Authority and Dubai Ports International, DP World handles 70 million containers transported annually by some 70,000 ships, representing around 10% of global container traffic.

the importance of the UAE-India CEPA and the interest of both parties in concluding it was the fact that the agreement was reached in barely 88 days, namely a really unusual and surprisingly rapid timeframe [Rossi 2022a].²⁷

The Western Quad was presented as – and, undoubtedly, at the moment of its launching preeminently was – «an international forum for economic cooperation, with a focus on exploring, emphasizing and ultimately channelizing the unique capabilities of each country into a joint working group» [Sengupta 2021]. Nonetheless, there are few doubts that the initiative had been sponsored by the US as a way to counter and possibly block China's growing economic penetration into Israel and the UAE.

Quite apart from the economic benefits accruing from her participation in the I2U2, this was a political objective that India could not but wholeheartedly share. From this viewpoint, the new quadrilateral entente foreshadowed the coming into being of a sort of eastern wing of an anti-China US-sponsored arc of containment, of which the Quad proper was the eastern wing. In this context, India played the role of connecting link and supporting keystone of the whole system. It is also worth noting that India had another additional political advantage from its participation in I2U2. Being a member of the Western Quad strengthened her attempt to isolate Pakistan from the Gulf countries.²⁸

It is significant that, in spite of the tensions caused in the India-US relation by New Delhi's position on the Ukraine crisis (analyzed below), the tightening of the I2U2 grouping progressed rapidly and smoothly. On 14 July 2022 the first (virtual) prime ministerial/presidential meeting of the leaders of the four countries was held and the launching of two important projects, both located in India, was announced. They were a US\$ 2 billion UAE-financed project, aimed to create a series of integrated food parks across India, and a cooperative hybrid renewable energy project in Gujarat, consisting of 300 megawatts of wind and solar capacity complemented by a battery of energy storage system [The White House, 2022c].

5. *The Ukraine crisis and India's (ambiguous) neutrality*

On 24 February 2022, Russian armed forces, which had been amassing near the border with Ukraine since October 2021, invaded the neighbouring country. The invasion, baptised by Russian President Vladimir Putin with the Orwellian name of «special military operation», had Ukraine's «demilitarization» (namely the dismantling of Ukraine's armed forces) and «dena-

27. As noted by Rossi: «With the EU, the making of such an agreement has been in the works for 15 years». And, of course, it is far from being completed.

28. On India's attempt to isolate Pakistan from the Gulf countries, see Boni 2023a: 240-242.

zification» (namely regime change and the imposition of a vassal regime in Kyiv) as their declared goals.

In starting the invasion, Vladimir Putin most likely acted under the double delusion that Russian military forces would if not fully conquer, at least come to control the vital ganglia of Ukraine, including its capital city, in a matter of days and that the West would meekly accept the *fait accompli* without any reaction more dangerous than some indignant public censures.

The unexpected and highly effective resistance offered by Ukraine and the rallying behind it of the US and the most important European states transformed what had been planned as an unstoppable, victorious blitzkrieg and a painless political operation into a long-drawn war and the most dangerous and prolonged European-centred crisis since the end of World War II. Its cascading political and economic effects soon began to be felt not only in Europe but in much of the rest of the world.

The Western powers, while providing Ukraine with military and non-military supplies, tried to isolate Russia both politically and economically, by imposing increasingly tighter sanctions on it. In this, however, their success was limited; many countries, particularly in the Global South, hedged their bets choosing some form of neutrality. In some cases, it was a neutrality that bordered on tacit or badly concealed support for Russia.

Among the countries which, since the beginning, espoused a position of alleged neutrality, there was India, which justified her position by claiming that, rather than taking sides, she preferred to work for peace. In fact, since the beginning of the «special military operation», Modi had kept his lines of communication open with both the Russian and Ukraine Presidents, in the alleged effort to favour direct negotiation between the two.

While the Ukraine crisis unfolded, India's position became increasingly nuanced and ambiguous. Her refusal to openly condemn Russia was qualified by a series of official positions which sounded as implicitly critical of Russian behaviour.²⁹ Also, India kept sending humanitarian help to Ukraine [e.g., Ukrinform.net, 2022; *The Print*, 2022]. Conversely, nonetheless, in spite of the sanctions imposed by the West on Russia, India accepted Russian offer to buy Russian oil at discounted price.

Not surprisingly, India's stance triggered a series of criticisms on the part of Western politicians and media. Rather counterintuitively, however, these criticisms were not accompanied by any sanction on the part of the US and its closer allies. In fact, India's standing on the Ukraine crisis came to be *de facto* accepted by them after a little more than one month since the start of the Russian invasion. By the end of the year, it had become crystal-

29. For example, India's Ambassador to the UN, after abstaining during the February UNSC vote, noted that the global order was anchored in «respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty of all states» [Kirbyjen 2022]. Also, India outrightly denied Putin's statements that Indian students had been taken hostage by the Ukrainians [Ellis-Petersen 2022].

clear that, in spite of India's ambiguity toward Russia, India-US relations remained particularly close and cordial.³⁰

5.1. *India's policy of ambiguous neutrality: its beginning*

When, on 26 February 2022, only two days after the launching of Russian invasion, the UNSC voted on a resolution demanding the immediate withdrawal of the Russian troops, India was one of the three countries which abstained.³¹ India also abstained on a procedural resolution calling for an emergency session of the UN General Assembly [Lukin and Pareek 2022].

On 3 March 2022, at a special Quad meeting, convened by US President Biden specifically to discuss «the war against Ukraine and its implications for the Indo-Pacific», India was the only one among the four members of the entente not to condemn Russia [Jayasekera 2022]. However, no public denunciation or criticism of India's position followed, but only «gentle efforts», made far from the limelight, aimed at convincing India to change her position [Prakash 2022]. In fact, the months from March to May witnessed a «flurry of diplomatic activities», characterized by exceptionally numerous high-level visits to New Delhi on the part of heads of governments, foreign ministers and senior-level officials, together with virtual meetings between Modi and the leaders of countries such as the US and Australia [Venkataramakrishnan 2022].³²

A fortnight after the Quad special meeting, on 18 March 2022, an Indian government official revealed that India had decided to increase her imports of Russian oil, which was offered with a 20% discount [Al Jazeera 2022, 18 March]. In the following months, India's imports of Russian oil boomed. By September 2022, they had increased 10 times compared to the year before, which had transformed Russia from a marginal player to India's third-biggest oil supplier [Das and Ghosal 2022]. By October, Russia became India's top oil supplier (making up for 22% of India's total crude imports), surpassing her traditional key providers, namely Iraq and Saudi Arabia [The Wire 2022, 6 November]. Also, the value of India's coal imports from Russia significantly increased and, by September 2022, had risen four-fold compared to the previous year [Das and Ghosal 2022].

30. According to Filippo Boni (personal communication, London, 8 January 2023), it is well possible that the influential Indian lobby in the US played a role in facilitating Washington's acceptance of India's «neutrality» on the Ukraine question. On the Indian Lobby and its growing political importance, see, e.g., Sharma 2017; Kumar and Lacy 2020; CEIP.

31. The others were China and the UAE. The latter soon changed its stand and took position against Russia.

32. Among the foreign visitors to New Delhi there were UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Japan Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, European Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen. All of them were trying to convince Modi to abandon his neutrality policy. Their efforts were countered by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, he too on pilgrimage to New Delhi.

5.2. *The US' acceptance of India's policy of neutrality*

On 21 March 2022, US President Joe Biden, discussing the Quad position on the Ukraine crisis at a business round table, while stressing that Japan and Australia had been «extremely strong [...] in terms of dealing with Putin's aggression», admitted that India's standing on the matter was «some-what shaky» [Das 2022a].

Counterintuitively, however, ten days later (31 March) both the US and Great Britain signalled their acceptance of India's decision to buy discounted Russian oil. Daleep Singh, US deputy national security adviser for International Economics, declared that the US, although hoping that there would be no rapid growth of Indian oil imports from Russia, was not going to set any «red line», as «[f]riends do not set red lines» [Das 2022b]. On her part, British Foreign Minister Liz Truss stated that her country respected India's decision to buy discounted oil from Russia [Reuters, 2022, 31 March].

On 11 April there was an unplanned virtual meeting between Biden and Modi, requested by the US [The White House 2022a; Pandey 2022]. This was followed by the already planned 2+2 India-US meeting, bringing together the foreign and defence ministers of the two countries. What had been the most significant political result of the 2+2 meeting, anticipated by the bonhomie visible in the bilateral Biden-Modi meeting, was made clear by US Secretary of State Tony Blinken's declarations on 11 April. At the joint press conference which concluded the 2+2 meeting, Blinken stressed the connections existing between the US and India «across virtually every realm: commerce, education and security». With reference to India's purchases of Russian energy resources, the US Secretary of State noted that there were «carve-outs» for them. Which, in plain language, meant that exceptions, although made with some effort or difficulty, could be made. As already signalled by Daleep Singh, Blinken's only caveat was that the US was «looking to allies and partners not to increase their purchases of Russian energy». A statement that, however, was preceded by the caveat that: «Every country is differently situated, has different needs, requirements...», and followed by the acknowledgement that there was «a long history, a long relationship between India and Russia, which was going back to a time when the US was «not able to be a partner of India». Blinken's conclusion was that: «We [the Americans] are now both able and willing to be such a partner; to be a security partner of choice for India» [Business Standard, 2022, 12 April].³³

Summing up, the bilateral Biden-Modi virtual meeting and the closely following 2+2 ministerial meeting sanctioned the fact that the US and

33. The willingness on the part of Blinken - and thus of the US - to accept that India would continue to purchase ever increasing quantities of Russian oil can also be explained by the fact that – as revealed by *The Wall Street Journal* – India was reselling part of it on the international market [Hirstenstein and Faucon 2022]. In this way, India was helping to maintain oil supplies at levels that did not cause an overall price increase. I am grateful to Diego Maiorano for drawing my attention to this issue.

India had agreed to differ on the Ukraine question, while maintaining and increasing their connections.

5.3. *The reasons behind India's neutrality towards Russia*

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion, the US and its most important allies framed the conflict in Ukraine as an all-out fight counterpoising democratic countries to autocratic regimes. Viewed in this perspective, the ambiguous neutrality of India, the world's largest democracy, could not but appear surprising. Of course, here a main problem was that, as documented by analyses in this journal and elsewhere, since Narendra Modi's ascent to the prime ministership India had gone through a severe democratic involution. Hence, when the Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine the political configuration of the «largest world's democracy» – and according to Modi's bizarre claims, the oldest one, together with the US [The White House 2022a], and the «mother of all democracies» [Outlook, 2023, 15 March] – was in an advanced stage of democratic involution. The process, started in 2014 by Modi's ascent to the prime ministership, was transforming India's democracy into a political system much more similar to that of Russia and other authoritarian democracies (such as Hungary and Poland), than to the democratic systems prevailing in the main Western democracies.

However, it goes without saying that the question of democracy had relevance only at the rhetorical level. The policies followed by all the countries affected by the Ukraine war were firmly grounded on realpolitik.

In the case of India, its stand on the Ukraine crisis was motivated by the pursuit of two objectives, both ultimately related to the containment of China. This applies even if, rather paradoxically, New Delhi and Beijing found themselves on the same side when (abstaining from) voting on the Ukraine question in the UN.

The first reason behind India's Ukraine policy – so obvious to be immediately individuated and widely commented by analysts and media world-wide – was related to India's still heavy dependence on Russia supplied weapons and weapon systems. Although India, the world's main importer of arms, had been differentiating the sources of its acquisitions during the previous two decades, and, consequently, decreasing the share of Russian arms which she bought [The Economist 2022, 14 April], the facts remains that the Indian armed forces were still predominantly equipped with Russian weapons [Jaffrelot and Sud 2022]. Any sudden and drastic reduction in arm supplies from this source could not fail to reflect negatively and conspicuously on the operational capabilities of the Indian armed forces. In turn, any reduction in these operational capabilities could not but reflect negatively on India's ability to militarily counter China.³⁴

34. It is worth stressing that the low level of efficiency shown by the Russian military during the Ukraine invasion had been noted by India's ruling circles. According to some analysts, this was bound to cause an even stronger decline in India's acquisition of Russian arms. See, e.g., Poita 2022.

This kind of constraint was quite evident. But another one was present that, in the evaluation of such a perceptive analyst as Ashley Tellis, was even more important. This was the necessity on the part of India to preserve its friendship with Russia «to prevent deepening Russian ties with China» [Tellis 2022]. A Russia which, put under pressure by the West, could find some sort of support only from China, therefore becoming increasingly closer to it – and, given the hugely different weight of the two countries, increasingly dependent on it – was nothing less than a geopolitical nightmare for India. This explains an Indian «neutral» policy that, in the eyes of Indian strategic elites themselves amounted to «a subtle pro-Moscow position» [Tellis 2022]. The objective of this policy was giving Russia enough political space to prevent or at least slow down too tight an embrace between Moscow and Beijing.

In the final analysis, the reasons behind New Delhi's ambiguous Russian policy, while squarely based on the pursuit of national self-interest, did not clash with the long-term interest of the US itself. Keeping Indian armed forces in good shape, and therefore maintaining India as a credible military counterweight to China, was fully congruent to the US policy in the Indo-Pacific. Likewise, creating a geopolitical space which would allow Russia some freedom to manoeuvre, which, in turn, would prevent its subordination to China from being an inevitable outcome, did not go against Washington's interests. All this goes a long way in explaining Washington's acceptance of New Delhi's stand, particularly if one keeps in mind that the latter's ambiguity on Russia was coupled by the clear-cut alignment with the US position in the Indo-Pacific.

5.4. The US's continuing acceptance of India's neutrality towards Russia

The April turning point – represented by the bilateral Biden-Modi virtual meeting and the 2+2 ministerial meeting – was confirmed by the decision taken by the US House of Representatives on 14 July 2022. It concerned the vexata quaestio of India's acquisition of Russia-produced, state of the art long-range surface-to-air mobile missile defence system S-400 Triumf.

The Triumf system was generally considered as the most sophisticated air defence platform in existence, with the additional advantage to cost around half of its Western equivalents [Pandey 2021]. Not surprisingly, many countries had shown interest in buying it, including India. However, since 2017, countries which bought from Russia could be targeted by US sanctions, imposed on the basis of the US Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) [Public Law 2017]. CAATSA, which had been signed into law on 2 August 2017, aimed «to counter aggression by the Governments of Iran, the Russian Federation, and North Korea». It made possible to sanction any country, company or individual that had «significant transactions» with any of the three countries in the crosshair of CAATSA. Naturally enough, a major Russian defence hardware as the S-400 system soon became a privileged objective of CAATSA sanctions. Not only

China but also a NATO member-state as Turkey was sanctioned because it had bought Triumf anti-missile platforms.

Among the countries which had decided to buy the S-400 system there was India, which signed a US\$ 5 billion deal with Russia to buy five S-400 platforms in October 2018 and started to induct them in December 2021. Since the signing of the deal, the threat of CAATSA sanctions had hanged on India like a sword of Damocles. On 14 July 2022, nonetheless, the House of Representatives passed a legislative amendment, authored and sponsored by Indian-American Congressman Ro Khanna, urging the Biden administration to waive any possible CAATSA sanction on India. As explicitly stated by Khanna, the House's request aimed at helping India to deter aggressors like China [The EurAsian 2022; The Indian Express 2022].

The amendment still needed the approval of the Senate and the signing of the US President before becoming law. However, the fact that it had been passed in the House of Representatives by a bipartisan vote, meant that its final enactment was little more than a formality [Bedi 2022].

These openings on the part of the US were reciprocated by an enhancement on the part of India of her subtle and mainly indirect criticisms to Russia's aggression. On 16 September 2022, on the side-lines of the annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, there was a bilateral Modi-Putin meeting, the first face-to-face one since the launching of the Russian invasion. In that occasion, the Indian Prime Minister stated: «I know today's era is not [an era] of war», and added that he hoped to discuss «how we can move forward on the road of peace in the coming days» [Laskar 2022].

By making this statement, Modi was not finally distancing India from Russia on the Ukraine war. Rather, he was carrying on the political line constantly followed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine; namely keeping a *de facto* pro-Russia position, made more palatable to the US and other Western countries by some anodyne criticism to Moscow. Significantly, India continued to abstain on the UN votes condemning Russia. Also, India took part to the 2022 edition of the quadrennial Russia's Vostok military exercise, held between 1 and 7 September. India's participation – which was blandly criticized by the US – was nonetheless limited and, in deference to Japan's objections, did not include taking part in the drills in the Sea of Okhotsk and the Sea of Japan [Ollapally 2022; Noll 2022; Ferris and Nouwens 2022]. Conversely, India joined the Quad Malabar exercise off Yokosuka between 8 and 18 November and, as already noted, the *Yudh Abhyas* joint India-US military exercise was carried out in Auli (Uttarakhand), close to the China border, between 15 November and 2 December [Business Standard 2022, 27 October].

Against this backdrop, India-US relations continued to be characterized by cordiality, which was visible during the meeting between India's Foreign Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, on the side-lines of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly. As stated

by Jaishankar at the joint press conference which he held with Blinken, the India-US alliance was «a very positive experience [...] with a lot of promise», offering the potentiality to jointly «shape the direction of the world» to India and the US [De Silva and Jones 2022].

6. Conclusion

During the two years analyzed in this article, the polar star of India's foreign policy appears to have been the need to cope with what New Delhi sees as the Chinese threat. The disengagement along the Himalayan border, which, during the period under review, did take place, was far from bringing about any substantial improvement in the relations between the two Asian giants. With very few exceptions, China continued to be viewed as an existential threat by little less than the totality of Indian politicians, analysts and public opinion. Accordingly, any major Indian foreign policy move made in the period under review appears to have had as a main or, at the very least, a relevant objective either confronting China or self-positioning in view of a future confrontation with it. This remains true in spite of the disengagement along the Himalaya and the curious fact that, immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, New Delhi found itself on the same side as Beijing when voting at the UN on Russia. India's moves concerning «vaccine diplomacy», her proactive participation in the Quad, her joining the I2U2, and keeping a neutral stand as far as Russia's Ukraine war was concerned could be explained – and were explained – with different motivations. Nonetheless, behind or together with any other motivation, the need to confront and face down China either presently or in the future loomed large.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's overriding goal in foreign policy is to have India acknowledged as a major world power. It is clear that, in his opinion – and in that of the bulk of Indian politicians and analysts – the litmus test of India's status as a major world power is reaching a position of parity with China. Given the huge differential in economic power between the two countries – a differential that will hardly be overcome in a foreseeable future – the India-China parity, so eagerly sought after by Modi, can only be reached by firmly positioning India inside the networks of alliances and ententes that nations such as the US and Japan have been building to counter China's rise.

In the final analysis, notwithstanding its many ambiguities and turn-arounds, the basic course of India's foreign policy, far from being erratic, or «reliably unreliable» [The Economist 2022, 24 November], is unmistakably and reliably consistent. Any apparently erratic move is motivated by the urge to confront China.

Only a major rethinking of the relation with China – which at the moment looks highly unlikely – could change it.

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