

FOREWORD

ASIA IN 2025: THE UNRAVELLING OF THE ASIAN ORDER IN THE PINCER OF GREAT POWER PRESSURE AND DOMESTIC STRAIN

For more than a decade, *Asia Maior* (the journal), through its analyses, has identified and described the intensifying rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC)¹ as the primary force shaping the political and economic destiny of the Asian continent. By 2025, this confrontation has escalated a notch on the scale of intensity; in fact, it has ceased to be a mere matter of trade disputes or diplomatic friction. It has hardened into a rigid, conflictual duopoly—a systemic overarching reality that constrains the choices and dictates the political boundaries of every nation in the region.

To understand the history of *Asia Maior* (the geopolitical area)² in 2025, one must look at the continent through the metaphor of a tightening pincer. Most Asian states today find themselves trapped within this grip. One arm of the pincer is forged by the relentless geopolitical confrontation between Washington and Beijing, an antagonism radically transformed and exacerbated by the return of Donald J. Trump to the White House. The other arm is formed by the acute, often violent domestic crises unfolding within the borders of most Asia countries.

Crucially, these two forces do not operate in isolation. The defining historical argument of the *Asia Maior* issue which we are presenting in this foreword is that the domestic turmoil plaguing so many Asian nations is not merely the product of local grievances. Rather, a substantial portion of these internal crises is the direct consequence of the profound uncertainty and economic dislocation caused by the Sino-American confrontation. The erratic transactionalism of US foreign policy under the second Trump administration, combined with Beijing's defensive consolidation, has fractured the global trading architecture and dismantled long-standing security guarantees. Exposed to sudden tariff wars, supply chain disruptions, and market instabilities, the fragile domestic frameworks of many Asian

¹ For the sake of brevity, in the remainder of this essay we generally use the term 'China' as a synonym for «People's Republic of China».

² The *Asia Maior* think tank defines «Asia Maior», the geopolitical expression, as that part of Asia bounded to the west by Turkey and the Arab countries, to the north by the Caucasus Mountain range, the Caspian Sea and the border with Siberia, and to the east and south by the Pacific and Indian Oceans respectively.

states have simply reached a breaking point, rendering them increasingly unable to endure the pressure.

This analytical framework provides the essential key to interpreting the diverse events of 2025 across Asia Maior. In the remainder of this foreword, we shall examine – primarily on the basis of the essays included in this volume – how this dual pressure has played out on the ground, tracing the specific ways in which exogenous shockwaves have shattered domestic social contracts. At the same time, this *Asia Maior* issue also explores some notable exceptions where local dynamics or peculiar geostrategic advantages have allowed certain states to partially evade the pincer, examining the specific reasons behind their atypical trajectories.

Before dissecting these individual national histories, however, it is necessary to examine the first arm of the pincer: the conflictual US-China duopoly. Let us start from the US pole, which in 2025 was characterized by a profound shift in foreign policy, driven by the «Trump factor».



The «Trump Factor» in 2025 cannot be understood merely as a change in the occupancy of the White House; it represents a profound historical rupture. For decades, American foreign policy in Asia, though often flawed, operated within a predictable framework of long-term alliances, multilateral agreements, and explicit security guarantees. The second Trump administration has decisively dismantled this architecture, replacing it with an uncompromising approach that treats international diplomacy not as a structure for regional stability, but as a bazaar of short-term mercantile deals.

Under this ascendancy of raw transactionalism, historic geopolitical partnerships are stripped of any shared normative purpose. Instead, Washington assesses its relationships with Asian nations exclusively through the narrow lens of immediate economic or strategic reciprocity, where commitments are treated as conditional, contingent, and highly unpredictable.

This retreat from international responsibility has created a political vacuum and has fundamentally eroded the collective security guarantees upon which middle and small Asian powers had long depended for their survival. Yet, the historical novelty of 2025 lies in the fact that this erratic American posture has not spared even those major regional powers that had previously considered themselves indispensable partners to Washington – and had been considered as such by Washington.

The most striking and unexpected demonstration of this shift is found in the international trajectory of India. As Ian Hall convincingly argues in this volume, New Delhi entered 2025 with the firm expectation that the return of Donald J. Trump would automatically fortify the US–India strategic partnership, given the perceived personal rapport between the US President

and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.³ This proved to be a severe historical miscalculation. Rather than bolstering a precious strategic ally, Washington aggressively applied its transactional doctrine to New Delhi.

The consequences for New Delhi were immediate and damaging. Caught off guard by Washington's transactional approach, the government of Narendra Modi found itself strategically exposed in the spring of 2025. This vulnerability emerged during a sudden military crisis with Pakistan in Kashmir, triggered that April by a devastating terrorist attack against Indian security forces in Pahalgam. Instead of offering steadfast strategic backing to its most important partner in the Indian Ocean area, the second Trump administration acted with characteristic unilateralism, prioritizing the search for a swift diplomatic success - which, by the way, was achieved in name only - over India's vital regional security interests. As we shall examine in detail later in this foreword, this episode exposed the severe limits of New Delhi's coercive diplomacy. Also, it forced a sobering realization upon the Indian leadership: Washington's support could no longer be taken for granted, leaving India precariously isolated in the face of its two main adversaries, Pakistan and China



While the erratic transactionalism of Washington has disrupted traditional alignments, the second element making up the conflictual duopoly which forms the first jaw of the global pincer is the China pole, characterized by the purposeful long-term strategic vision that Beijing has mapped out for both its domestic and foreign policies. China's international posture in 2025 is not a mere defensive reaction to American pressure, but the evolution of a long-standing and highly efficient strategy of comprehensive power expansion. As documented extensively in past volumes of *Asia Maior*, Beijing has, for over a decade, systematically eschewed reckless military adventurism, preferring instead to project its influence through massive geo-economic instruments. The primary vehicle for this continental and maritime power projection remains the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), which has allowed China to anchor a vast network of developing and middle-income states to its economic orbit, establishing Beijing as an indispensable infrastructure provider and financial anchor across Asia.

By 2025, this pre-existing strategy has been forced to undergo a significant readjustment in response to the aggressive shift in US foreign policy. The Chinese leadership has interpreted the return of Donald J. Trump to the White House not as a passing political anomaly, but as the permanent institutionalisation of an unpredictable and hostile US policy of containment. As the long-standing integration between the two economies

³ Ian Hall, 'India 2025: Turbulence and turmoil in foreign policy', in this volume.

is increasingly viewed as a liability rather than a deterrent, a full economic decoupling has become increasingly likely. As explored in the essays on China by Flora Sapio and Veronica Strina, Beijing has met this challenge by accelerating its strategy of «doing our own things well» (*gonggu zizhi*).⁴

This shift represents a deliberate, state-directed retreat into domestic technological and economic resilience. Rather than abandoning its global ambitions, Beijing has recognised that its external strength depends on fortifying its internal foundations against sudden foreign shocks. Consequently, the Chinese government has focused its energies on achieving absolute self-reliance in core areas, most notably through the expansion of advanced high-tech manufacturing, the domestic development of semiconductors, and the thorough restructuring of internal supply chains to insulate the country from Western sanctions and tariff barriers.

This drive for self-reliance is mirrored and structurally backed by a parallel acceleration in naval power projection. As David Scott documents in this volume, 2025 has witnessed a sharp escalation in carrier-led power projection across maritime Asia, as aircraft carriers have definitively emerged as the apex symbols of national prestige and military deterrence.⁵ Beijing's deployment of the electromagnetic-catapult-equipped *Fujian* – complemented by the simultaneous blue-water operations of the *Liaoning* and *Shandong* past the island chains – has radically called into question the pre-existing regional balance. This Chinese naval surge has triggered immediate, competitive counter-balancing responses from powers like Japan, which rapidly advanced its F-35B carrier-conversion programmes, and India, which forward-deployed its indigenously built *INS Vikrant*⁶ in defensive and deterrent postures. Furthermore, the US, the UK, and France have deployed their own Carrier Strike Groups, engaging in coordinated allied operations and joint naval manoeuvres aimed at challenging China's growing naval assertiveness.

China's focus on internal consolidation does not signal a retreat from the world stage; rather, it provides the secure domestic pad from which Beijing continues to deploy its sophisticated international role as a pragmatic alternative to Western hegemony. In an era where Washington's security guarantees have grown volatile and Western financial assistance remains tied to political conditionality, Beijing has increasingly positioned itself as a reliable, non-interfering guarantor of stability for regimes across the Asian

⁴ Flora Sapio, 'China in 2025: «Focus our Energies on Doing our Own Things Well»'; and Veronica Strina, 'China's 2025: Forging a new global role', both in this volume.

⁵ David Scott, 'Naval Hegemony and Deterrence: Aircraft Carrier Strategies and Power Projection in Asian Waters', in this volume.

⁶ The aircraft carrier *INS Vikrant*, the first to be completely built in India, entered service in 2022 and was hailed by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a symbol of India's technological self-reliance (*Aatmanirbhar Bharat*).

continent and beyond. This vision of a revised international order has been systematically articulated by China through a set of key global programmatic platforms: the Global Development (GDI), Security (GSI), Governance (GGI), and Civilization (GCI) Initiatives.⁷ By continuing to offer trade, infrastructure, and security partnerships without normative preconditions, China has successfully adapted its pre-existing regional strategy to exploit the vacuum left by the contraction of US global influence



This conflictual duopoly, however, is far from being a stable equilibrium; rather, it is defined by a deep and pervasive instability that carries a constant risk of catastrophic miscalculation. The perilous nature of this friction is most acutely visible in the case of Taiwan, which remains the most volatile flashpoint on the Asian arena. As Stefano Pelaggi demonstrates in this volume, the island during 2024–2025 became the theatre of a deeply precarious standoff.⁸ On one side is a US administration whose approach is so explicitly and shamelessly transactional that it treats even its most sensitive strategic commitments as negotiable assets in a broader mercantile game. On the other side is a Chinese leadership that regards the reintegration of Taiwan into the national framework as a non-negotiable historical goal.

This volatile combination of American unpredictability and Chinese determination has created an environment where traditional deterrence has eroded. In the absence of structured multilateral diplomatic channels – which have been systematically weakened by Washington’s disregard for global governance – there are fewer mechanisms to absorb a sudden shock. Consequently, the tension between the two superpowers is not a distant geopolitical backdrop; it is an active fault line whose tremors shake the entire continent. It is precisely because the global architecture offers no safety valves that the shockwaves generated by this superpower rivalry travel so rapidly and destructively downwards, penetrating the domestic fabric of individual Asian states and exacerbating their internal vulnerabilities.

⁷ Introduced sequentially by the PRC leadership, these four initiatives collectively define Beijing’s framework for global governance. While structured around an appealing, win-win rhetoric of mutual benefit, they function primarily to realign the international architecture with Beijing’s own strategic priorities and national interests. For a comprehensive analysis of the deployment and systemic impact of these initiatives, see Matteo Dian and Silvia Menegazzi, *China’s Global Initiatives: GDI, GSI, GGI, GCI and the Future of International Order*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025.

⁸ Stefano Pelaggi, ‘Taiwan 2024–2025: Constraint, adaptation, and the cross-strait equilibrium’, in this volume.

Having delineated the volatile international architecture driven by the US-China duopoly, we must now examine the second arm of the pincer: the profound domestic instability unfolding within the borders of individual Asian states. At first glance, the internal landscape of the continent in 2025 presents a bewildering array of crises, ranging from violent civil unrest and institutional paralysis to severe macroeconomic distress. However, to view these internal turmoil stories as isolated, purely domestic, phenomena would be erroneous. Conversely, it would be equally misleading to treat them as mere passive reflections of superpower rivalry.

The historical reality of 2025 lies in the complex, shifting relationship between endogenous vulnerabilities and exogenous shocks. While the domestic arm of the pincer is forged by long-standing internal fractures – such as ethnic tensions, fragile democratic institutions, or lopsided economic development – the external arm operates through the far-reaching shocks caused by the Sino-US confrontation. Although each of these two forces is already a factor of crisis, their convergence cannot but systematically push the affected regional states toward a breaking point

The extent to which these domestic tensions are determined by local factors or by the hardening of the conflictual US-China duopoly varies significantly across the continent, revealing a spectrum of different national trajectories. In many cases, local grievances and long-standing structural weaknesses constitute the primary factor of crisis; in others, the international environment acts as either the primary force which creates entirely new sources of internal instability or, at the very least, as a driving factor transforming domestic tension into open political crisis. In fact, the erosion of global trading rules under the weight of Washington's tariff policies and Beijing's strategy of assertive economic self-reliance has severely restricted the room for manoeuvre available to national governments. Fragile regimes – suddenly exposed to supply chain disruptions, rising energy costs, and currency instabilities – have found themselves increasingly unable to deliver on their domestic social contracts. In a desperate bid for geopolitical survival, many of these governments have responded by aggressively centralising authority, shutting down feedback loops⁹, and alienating their own populations, thereby transforming an international economic pressure into an acute internal political crisis.

⁹ Social feedback loops – namely grassroots protests, independent investigative journalism, labour union grievances, and unmanipulated market signals – however unwelcome they may be to governments and difficult for them to manage, fulfil the crucial socio-political function of signalling the public's genuine expectations and grievances to those very executives.

Understanding this second arm of the pincer therefore requires a careful, case-by-case analysis that weighs the specific balance between local dynamics and global pressures.



To map this complex landscape, the national trajectories analyzed in this volume can be classified into three distinct categories, depending on how they experience the pressure of the pincer. The first category consists of states where international tensions act as the main cause of distress, overriding local political frameworks. A second category illustrates the opposite dynamic, where endogenous factors – long-standing structural decay and internal political friction – constitute the principal cause of crisis. In addition to these two, there is a third, more intricate category of mixed or hybrid cases, where global strategic rivalries and pre-existing institutional convulsions completely fuse together. This threefold taxonomy is further enriched by a set of exceptions: those landlocked Eurasian states that, blessed with unique geographic and material advantages, have managed to insulate themselves from the surrounding storm, at least for the time being.

Among the states, analyzed in this volume, where endogenous factors are the principal cause of crisis there are Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

In his analysis of the Pakistan's trajectory throughout 2025, Marco Corsi demonstrates how Islamabad's persistent turmoil remains fundamentally driven by unresolved crises of institutional legitimacy and structural economic decay.¹⁰ The fragile coalition government led by Shehbaz Sharif was brought to power through highly contested elections. Marked by the forced exclusion of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the ongoing imprisonment of Imran Khan, this political exclusion has fuelled a deep socio-political polarization. The ensuing internal fracture culminated in 2025, when the opposition alliance Tehreek-e-Tahaffuz-e-Ayeen Pakistan (TTAP) spearheaded a fierce battle against the 26th Constitutional Amendment. This reform was condemned as an overt attempt by the civilian–military establishment to subordinate the judiciary and insulate the ruling coalition from legal challenges.

The resulting domestic paralysis directly interacts with a dysfunctional economic model. As Corsi shows, while short-term macroeconomic stabilization was artificially sustained in 2025 via emergency lending packages from the IMF and the World Bank, the national budget for the fiscal year 2025/2026 laid bare the state's structural impasse. Trapped under the weight of astronomical debt repayments and sluggish exports, Islamabad was forced to systematically reduce development spending while

¹⁰ Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2025: Internal governance challenges, security perils and foreign policy crosswinds', in this volume.

significantly expanding its defence outlays. This fiscal distortion was further exacerbated by a domestic security crisis, marked by an escalation of militancy from the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and the *Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP). External factors undoubtedly intervened in 2025, most notably through the fallout from the April Pahalgam terrorist attack and the ensuing Indian military retaliation. According to Corsi's analysis, however, Pakistan leveraged these international crises merely to reinforce its transactional alignments with Washington, Beijing, and Riyadh, while completely neglecting the structural rot within its own borders.

Another case of endogenous crisis is Sri Lanka. To fully comprehend the island's predicament in 2025, its contemporary situation must be contextualized within a broader chronological and political perspective, rooted in the legacy of the *Aragalaya* – the massive popular movement that erupted in 2022. The *Aragalaya* represented a historic, unexpected triumph for grassroots democracy in South Asia; it was a powerful, entirely domestic attempt to resolve a crushing economic and institutional crisis through endogenous forces. This wave of popular mobilization effectively shattered the entrenched political status quo, ultimately paving the way for the historic ascent to power of the *National People's Power* (NPP) alliance under Anura Kumara Dissanayake.¹¹

Nonetheless, as the detailed evaluation of 2025 authored by Gulbin Sultana demonstrates,¹² this extraordinary democratic opening has – at least for the time being – faltered when confronted with the pragmatic demands of state management. The first year of the NPP administration exposed a stark and sobering gap between the *Aragalaya*'s aspirations for systemic change and the ruling elite's actual governance capabilities. Despite securing an absolute parliamentary majority against a highly fractured opposition, the new government's executive inexperience rapidly emerged as a primary source of weakness.

The structural limits of Sri Lanka's recovery remained tightly bounded by inherited debt frameworks and were further compounded by domestic environmental shocks, such as the severe fiscal strain caused by Cyclone Ditwah. While Colombo attempted to maintain a balanced, transactional foreign policy to mitigate regional geostrategic pressures, the fundamental crisis in 2025 remained internal. It was defined by a growing public impatience for tangible economic relief, illustrating how a triumphant domestic push for democratic renewal can become ensnared in the administrative and structural quagmires of the very state it sought to transform.

¹¹ Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Asia Maior in 2024: Under the sign of a declining democracy', «Asia Maior», Vol. XXXV/2024 (2025), pp. XXXIV-XXXVII.

¹² Gulbin Sultana, 'Sri Lanka 2025: Maiden year of the NPP administration', in this volume.

A separate, yet historically contiguous pattern of a devastating endogenous crisis – born from the ashes of a sudden political rupture – is provided by Bangladesh. As Amit Ranjan illustrates, in 2025 the country remained profoundly consumed by the complex and turbulent aftermath of the August 2024 «Monsoon Revolution», which had ended the authoritarian rule of Sheikh Hasina.¹³ Ranjan demonstrates that Bangladesh's instability in 2025 was organically generated by a dual internal vacuum: a chronic difficulty in restoring domestic law and order, and a deep structural disagreement among political actors regarding the state's future.

The interim government led by Chief Advisor Muhammad Yunus found itself trapped inside a net of in-depth and powerful domestic tensions. In this situation, the Yunus government attempted to pursue sweeping constitutional and institutional reforms with little success. Relentless pressure from traditional political parties, most notably the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), demanding immediate parliamentary elections, turned the government's efforts into a Sisyphean task doomed to failure.

Ranjan's analysis also uncovers a dangerous domestic mutation within the Bangladeshi political landscape: the rapid ideological and physical expansion of Islamist groups, such as *Jamaat-e-Islami* and *Hefazat-e-Islam*. Capitalising on the collapse and subsequent ban of Hasina's *Awami League*, these factions dramatically enhanced their societal activism, complicating the consolidation of a secular democratic framework, in particular by advocating public discrimination and unleashing violence against religious minorities. Furthermore, Ranjan shows that even the interim administration's significant foreign policy shifts were entirely subordinate to this domestic logic. Dhaka's strategic decisions to reset diplomatic ties with Pakistan and draw closer to Beijing were not rational responses to the deterioration of the international order, but rather internal manoeuvres designed to build a definitive counter-narrative to that propagated by the ousted regime. Of course, this was a domestic choice that inevitably widened the strategic rift with India. Bangladesh thus represents the ultimate paradigm of a country whose external alignments and pervasive vulnerability in 2025 were the direct, unmediated expression of an ongoing internal systemic convulsion.



Another group of polities – including, among those analyzed in this volume, Hong Kong (or, rather, China's policy in this city), Vietnam and Nepal – illustrates the absolute primacy of exogenous forces, where domestic trajectories are directly dominated, distorted, or subordinated by the

¹³ Amit Ranjan, 'Bangladesh in 2025: Under the shadow of «Monsoon Revolution»', in this volume.

structural pressures of the Sino–American antagonistic duopoly. Within these polities, domestic politics and internal crises are not generated from within; instead, they are entirely dominated and moulded by overwhelming exogenous pressures. In these cases, the systemic competition between Washington and Beijing reshapes civic spaces, dictates macroeconomic parameters, and severely restricts the margin of manoeuvre for local actors.

Whether through direct administrative absorption, intense trade and tariff coercion, or structural developmental dependence, these political entities find their stability entirely hostage to external systemic shocks. Consequently, their internal political developments and foreign policy adjustments cannot be understood as organic products of domestic dynamics, but must be interpreted as immediate, unmediated reflections of the overarching global confrontation which keeps in its grip most of Asia Maior.

The most absolute and dramatic example of a polity systematically reconfigured by exogenous forces is provided by the territory (or «Special Administrative Region») of Hong Kong. In her analysis, Than Kiū highlights the emergence of a highly specific political–economic equilibrium which she terms «conditioned continuity».¹⁴ Under this framework, Beijing has fully operationalized its comprehensive national security architecture, utilizing high-profile judicial prosecutions, administrative reshuffling, and calibrated appointments to definitively silence domestic dissent and narrow the boundaries of civic space and media independence. As Than Kiū demonstrates, this internal political asphyxiation does not stem from a domestic crisis of governance, but is the end result of policy decisions taken in Beijing, with the sole aim of promoting the strategic interests of the People’s Republic of China.

Significantly, Than Kiū also demonstrates that Hong Kong’s core wholesale financial functions – such as Renminbi clearing, international bond markets, and high-end professional services – have been intentionally insulated and maintained to secure China’s economic gateway to the world. To mitigate the rising investor caution and the selective flight of private mobile wealth triggered by Western sanctions, Beijing has accelerated the territory’s deep economic integration into the Greater Bay Area (GBA) and prioritized RMB internationalization, namely the increase of the global use of Chinese currency (the renminbi or yuan) for trade, investment, and central bank reserves. In this situation, external actors like the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union have attempted to balance normative condemnation with continued commercial engagement.

An analogous case of pure exogenous conditioning – which, moreover, is exerted over a well-consolidated state apparatus – is that of Vietnam. In his

¹⁴ Than Kiū, ‘Hong Kong 2025: Conditioned continuity under national security’, in this volume.

analysis, Fabio Figiaconi illustrates a profound paradox that, in 2025, characterized the country's political evolution.¹⁵ Domestic politics were entirely dominated by the unchallenged ascendancy of Communist Party's General Secretary Tô Lâm, who successfully launched radical administrative mergers to streamline the state machinery ahead of the 14th National Congress. Despite this formidable centralization of executive authority, nonetheless, the country's macroeconomic and strategic pathways remained completely hostage to external forces. As shown by Figiaconi, Vietnam's stability in 2025 was systematically tested not by internal governance failures, but by the intensifying trade and tariff turbulences generated by the Sino-American antagonistic duopoly. Hanoi's traditional «bamboo diplomacy» – the historical foreign policy doctrine aimed at maintaining parallel, balanced relations with all major global players¹⁶ – revealed its severe structural limits in a global landscape upended by Trump's radically transactionalist policy.

As Trump-imposed aggressive tariff policies disrupted global value chains, Vietnam found itself in an increasingly precarious position. To preserve its robust economic growth, Hanoi was forced to abandon its traditional policy of mistrust towards China, deepening its commercial links and maritime confidence-building measures with Beijing. This pushed China-Vietnam bilateral trade toward new records. Simultaneously, Hanoi engaged in intense diplomatic manoeuvring – mobilizing high-profile strategic dialogues and bilateral meetings – to insulate Vietnam from punitive American trade measures driven by its ballooning bilateral surplus. Ultimately, Figiaconi's analysis highlights a striking paradox: despite its formidable internal cohesion and centralized bureaucratic grip, Vietnam in 2025 operated within an exceptionally narrow margin of manoeuvre. The country's predicament demonstrates how the systemic pressures of the superpowers' confrontation can decisively dictate the international posture of even the most stable regional actors.

The final example of a domestic crisis determined by exogenous pressure is provided by Nepal. In his comprehensive analysis of the political evolution of this country in the years 2024 and 2025, Puspa Sharma highlights a dramatic domestic flashpoint: the outbreak of violent youth protests led by «Generation-Z» in September 2025.¹⁷ These street confrontations – immediately triggered by a government ban on several unregistered social media platforms – reflected a deep-seated domestic frustration with the self-centric and inefficient governance of traditional

¹⁵ Fabio Figiaconi, 'Vietnam 2025: Tô Lâm's powerplay and the limits of bamboo diplomacy', in this volume.

¹⁶ Richard Quang-Anh Tran, 'Vietnam 2024: Continued economic growth, change in leadership, and «Bamboo Diplomacy»', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXV/2024 (2025), pp. 223-233.

¹⁷ Puspa Sharma, 'Nepal in 2024-2025: Politics, economics and international relations', in this volume.

political elites. Yet, as Sharma's analysis demonstrates, Nepal's overarching vulnerability and its long-term stability were predominantly dictated by external structural frameworks rather than domestic political tensions. In fact, as shown by Sharma, Nepal is facing immense macroeconomic pressure due to its scheduled graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) status to developing country status in November 2026. This is an institutional transition that automatically entails the loss of vital international trade preferences. This delicate internal economic adjustment is further complicated by an asphyxiating external environment, where Kathmandu's margin of manoeuvre is severely restricted. In fact, every major infrastructural choice, developmental loan, and foreign policy decision on the part of Nepal has become entirely hostage to geopolitical competition. In the final analysis, Sharma's assessment underscores that Nepal is trapped not only within the contracting space generated by the Sino-American antagonism, but also within the overlapping sub-regional rivalry between Beijing and New Delhi.



A third and more complex category is defined by an intricate hybridity. In these cases, the structural pressures of the Sino-American antagonistic duopoly do not simply overpower local dynamics; instead, they intersect and fuse with pre-existing, deep-seated internal institutional crises. Within this group of states – which include India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Iran, Thailand and the Philippines – domestic political convulsions and external geopolitical pressures act as mutually reinforcing factors of crisis. Geopolitical pressure, rather than operating as an external shock, becomes internalized, providing local elites with the rationales, pretexts, or economic imperatives to accelerate domestic systemic transitions, such as executive centralisation or the militarisation of governance. Consequently, any attempt to surgically separate the domestic factors from the international ones when analyzing the plight of these states is bound to fail; local and global causes of crisis have merged.

The most significant of these hybrid cases is India. Here, the profound vulnerabilities of the subcontinental giant cannot be neatly categorized as the end result of purely internal or external causes; rather, they represent the necessary outcome of the sum of a decade-long domestic restructuring under the Narendra Modi regime (2014–2025) and severe international shocks. This is a thesis grounded on the comprehensive body of research carried out by *Asia Maior* since Volume XXV/2014. The essential features of this thesis are, in a way, forcefully synthesised in the Special Issue No. 3/2025, to which, for the sake of simplicity, we may refer. In it, James Manor's analysis highlights a severe political crisis driven by the systematic de-institutionalisation of the state, the hollowing out of regulatory bodies, and

an unprecedented concentration of power within the Prime Minister's Office.¹⁸ This political centralisation directly reinforces the exclusionary crony capitalism identified by Elisabetta Basile and Claudio Cecchi as a defining feature of the Indian economy under the Modi dispensation.¹⁹ Consequently, while a veneer of high GDP growth is maintained, domestic inequality has expanded and the vast informal sector remains trapped in permanent precarity. Within this fragile socio-economic landscape, the regime systematically utilizes majoritarian identity politics – Hindutva – to fracture societal resistance along religious lines and maintain social control. This political ideology is directly reflected in contemporary Indian architecture and urban planning, where, as Pilar M. Guerrieri convincingly argues, grand architectural spectacles are deployed to showcase and reinforce a belligerent Hindutva iconography, while systematically enforcing a *damnatio memoriae* of the Nehruvian secular legacy.²⁰

Yet, the true hybridity of the Indian case is brought into sharp relief by the two India-related essays published in this volume, one – focussed on the domestic situation – authored by Diego Maiorano and Raghav Khattri²¹; the other – focussed on India's foreign policy – authored by Ian Hall.²² As anticipated in the opening section of this foreword, New Delhi's strategic overconfidence regarding Donald Trump's return proved to be a profound miscalculation, the geopolitical and diplomatic consequences of which are meticulously laid bare by Ian Hall and the economic ones thoroughly analyzed by Diego Maiorano and Raghav Khattri. Far from being a mere diplomatic friction, the ensuing bilateral tension culminated in a punitive trade war unleashed by the Trump administration. This aggressive stance manifested in severe economic measures, including US tariffs reaching up to 50% on the bulk of Indian goods and the imposition of a steep US\$ 100,000 fee on H-1B visas.

The resulting distress, caused by this unexpected and brutal economic pressure, worsened dramatically in the wake of the April military crisis in Kashmir. As already hinted, India's subsequent retaliation against Pakistan exposed severe structural limits in New Delhi's decade-long coercive strategy, ultimately leading to a deeply damaging diplomatic setback. While

¹⁸ James Manor, 'Narendra Modi's India ten years on: A second Indian Republic or a second Emergency?', *Asia Maior - Special Issue No.3/2025* (2026), pp. 15-38.

¹⁹ Elisabetta Basile and Claudio Cecchi, 'Modi's India as a Variety of Authoritarian-Hegemonic Capitalism' *Asia Maior - Special Issue No.3/2025* (2026), pp. 39-88.

²⁰ Pilar M. Guerrieri, 'Architecture and Urban Planning as Pivotal Tools in Narendra Modi's Political Agenda', pp. 89-105.

²¹ Diego Maiorano and Raghav Khattri, 'India 2025: Economic paradoxes, political recovery, and the battle for electoral integrity', in this volume.

²² Ian Hall, 'India 2025: Turbulence and turmoil in foreign policy', in this volume (already cited).

Donald Trump loudly boasted of having brokered an unrequested ceasefire - a narrative promptly endorsed by Islamabad as a tactical opportunity to drag the United States into the Kashmir dispute - New Delhi's firm denial of any external mediation triggered a visible and severe deterioration in Indo-US relations. Indeed, by rejecting Washington's involvement, India forcefully reaffirmed its historical refusal to tolerate third-party intervention in its bilateral conflict with Pakistan. The Trump administration subsequently increased tariffs from an unprecedented and extremely high 25% on most Indian goods to a prohibitive 50%. Here, the suspicion - voiced, among others, by a figure of the calibre of Raghuram Rajan, a former governor of the Reserve Bank of India - is that this punitive escalation was likely motivated by Trump's desire for political retaliation after New Delhi refused to validate his self-proclaimed role in resolving the Indo-Pakistani crisis.²³ Ultimately, this entire episode powerfully demonstrates the negative, cascading impact of external shocks upon India's domestic landscape, revealing how deeply international pressures could penetrate and destabilise the subcontinental giant's internal economic security.

This external pressure was compounded by Beijing continued and relentless geoeconomic and infrastructural penetration across the subcontinental periphery, effectively bringing India's immediate neighbours under its growing influence and leaving New Delhi increasingly isolated.

Once all the above is taken into consideration, the argument so relentlessly and consistently put forward by the Modi government's apologists - that Modi's foreign policy is a resounding success and a proof of strategic autonomy - seems hollow. A more realistic analysis reveals a different truth: India remains unable to exert effective influence even over its far less powerful neighbours on the subcontinent.²⁴ When mirrored against these structural setbacks, the widening gap between New Delhi's foreign policy grand rhetoric and its actual strategic substance becomes starkly evident.

What has been said so far, however, should not lead us to underestimate the current Indian government's remarkable ability to adapt and respond under pressure, particularly on the domestic front. As Maiorano and Khattri underscore in this volume, the ongoing democratic involution has legally and institutionally reinforced the ruling party. Yet, the BJP-led government still had to deploy significant tactical skill to counter deep structural vulnerabilities. Indeed, during 2025, the Modi administration successfully managed a volatile economic scenario - marked by uneven

²³ Sanstuti Nath, "Russian Oil Wasn't An Issue": Raghuram Rajan's Take On US Tariffs On India, «NDTV», 10 December 2025. Rajan also noted that Pakistan, having endorsed Trump's claim, secured a tariff rate of just 19%.

²⁴ As demonstrated by Michelguglielmo Torri and Filippo Boni in the Special Issue No. 3.

growth and a severe job-creation deficit – while securing decisive victories in the Delhi and Bihar state elections.

This resilience was especially evident in New Delhi's response to external economic shocks. When the International Monetary Fund (IMF) downgraded India's national accounts statistics to a «C» grade due to the use of artificial deflators, the government reacted with sweeping internal counter-measures. These included a major structural overhaul of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and the long-delayed enforcement of the four landmark Labour Codes in late 2025. Furthermore, this sophisticated capacity for crisis management extended to security. By deploying military force after Pahalgam but choosing strict police restraint following the subsequent November Red Fort blast in Delhi, the government demonstrated its ability to dictate the domestic media cycle and maintain full political command—a task facilitated by the widespread self-censorship practiced by most Indian media to avoid government reprisals.

Ultimately, the analyses of India provided in this volume lay bare a profound paradox. They depict a country whose increasingly authoritarian involution has endowed the ruling party and its leader with almost complete control of the internal political situation, strengthened by narrative control. Nonetheless, it is also a country trapped in a situation of long-term socio-economic predicament, caused by the intermingling of exogenous and endogenous causes.

This intricate intermingling of internal instability and structural external coercion is equally visible in the case of Japan. As Raymond Yamamoto and Marco Zappa demonstrate, Tokyo's contemporary trajectory throughout 2025 shatters any illusion of Japanese exceptionalism regarding political continuity or strategic immunity from global pressures.²⁵

On the endogenous front, Japan experienced an unprecedented domestic political earthquake, as the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lost its parliamentary majority in both houses of the National Diet for the first time since 1955. This legislative paralysis was compounded by mounting public discontent over a soaring domestic inflation driven by rising staple commodity prices. The end result was the erosion of the governance capacity of the state, a situation that ultimately led to the political unseating of Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru. The subsequent rise of Takaichi Sanae as Japan's first female prime minister represented a significant ideological lurch to the right.

As an assertive heir to Abe Shinzō's nationalist legacy, Takaichi's platform of expansionary fiscal policy was driven by a radicalised adaptation of Abeist doctrine. This approach amplified massive state spending to fund

²⁵ Raymond Yamamoto and Marco Zappa, 'Japan 2025: the Liberal Democratic Party's crisis and the rise of Takaichi Sanae', in *questo volume*.

military strengthening and strategic resilience. However, such radicalism immediately generated profound domestic resistances, most notably clashing with the orthodox monetary stance of the Bank of Japan.

As Yamamoto and Zappa's analysis highlights, this severe domestic turbulence cannot be viewed as detached from the destabilising exogenous forces exerted by the international system. Under the pervasive shadow of the conflictual US–China duopoly, Tokyo has been forced to accelerate the «normalisation» of its security and military posture to deal with intensifying regional tensions. In fact, much like the Indian case, Japan's strategic landscape was profoundly disrupted by the return of Donald Trump to the White House. The ensuing geopolitical shock forced the newly established Takaichi cabinet into an anxious, asymmetrical effort to woo the US administration. Tokyo was compelled to urgently reaffirm the US–Japan security alliance and its nuclear deterrence guarantees, whilst continuing to try to balance Beijing's expanding regional influence. Ultimately, the Japanese case perfectly encapsulates the hybrid paradigm: a historical pillar of regional stability finds its domestic democratic consensus fracturing at home, precisely as it is caught in the crushing strategic and economic cross-currents of a zero-sum superpower rivalry.

A no less dramatic – and highly volatile – manifestation of this hybrid crisis is found in the Republic of Korea. As Marco Milani and Antonio Fiori's essay powerfully illustrates, Seoul's trajectory throughout 2025 shatters the conventional narrative of South Korea as an unshakeable, consolidated liberal democracy smoothly navigating external storms.

On the endogenous front, the country was rocked by deep political turbulence. The extreme domestic polarization under conservative President Yoon Suk-yeol – which had culminated in his attempt to impose martial law – led to his formal impeachment in April 2025. The subsequent snap presidential election in June 2025 brought Lee Jae-myung to power, inaugurating a volatile new political cycle aimed at restoring institutional stability amidst severe ideological fractures. This transition severely strained the state's political cohesion, exposing the fragility of South Korea's democratic apparatus.

Far from being isolated, this domestic turbulence directly intersected with, and was aggravated by, acute exogenous pressures emanating from the US–China conflictual duopoly. Seoul found itself trapped in an increasingly dangerous security environment, exacerbated by the deepening strategic and military alliance between North Korea and Russia. Much like the Japanese and Indian experiences, South Korea's strategic landscape was profoundly disrupted by Donald Trump's return to the White House and the launching of his myopic transactionalist policies. The ensuing geopolitical shock cast serious doubt among South Korea's political leadership and public opinion regarding Washington's traditional regional security guarantees, as the new

US administration revived aggressive demands for increased defence burden-sharing.

Another striking, mirror-like example of this hybrid category – where domestic crises are fundamentally determined by the symbiotic convergence of endogenous and exogenous factors – is offered by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). Throughout 2025, Pyongyang’s strategic trajectory was heavily driven by the shifting fault lines of the US–China duopoly, compounded by Russia’s aggressive Eurasian diplomacy. Rather than a purely passive reflection of exogenous shocks, however, North Korea’s international posture was a calculated domestic response to long-standing, suffocating endogenous vulnerabilities – most notably chronic economic stagnation, food distribution crises,²⁶ and the ideological strain of formally abandoning the constitutional goal of pan-Korean reunification.²⁷ To secure regime survival despite the state’s chronic structural weakness – rooted in a severely stagnant economy unable to provide basic welfare – Kim Jong-un leveraged external alignments. He locked Pyongyang into deep military and logistical integration with Moscow through the operationalization of the 2024 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty.²⁸ While this alignment provided the regime with vital Russian energy and technology, it also exposed the country to Trump’s volatile transactionalism. Furthermore, it significantly heightened Beijing’s growing unease; China increasingly feared that such an unchecked axis could provoke a major nuclear-armed escalation, potentially breaking the fragile status quo and triggering a massive Western military deployment along its immediate frontier.²⁹

An equally dramatic and systemically acute manifestation of this hybrid dynamic is exemplified by the Islamic Republic of Iran throughout 2024–2025. As demonstrated by the complementary analyses of Anahita Motazed Rad and Hamideh Saberi in this volume, Tehran’s current trajectory represents a perilous convergence where a collapsing regional posture fuses

²⁶ E.g.: Research Institute for North Korean Society, ‘Dying of Starvation: Hunger in North Korea’, *The Asia-Pacific Journal/Japan Focus*, Vol. 6, Issue 5 (3 May 2008); Human Rights Watch World Report 2026: *North Korea. Events of 2025*; Sophia Brachtendorf, ‘Despite Offers of International Aid Food Security in North Korea Remains Critical’, *Welthungerhilfe*, April 2025; Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, ‘A wealthier North Korea widens Kim Jong-un’s options’, «East Asia Forum», 5 February 2026.

²⁷ E.g.: Christopher Green, ‘Korean unification dream forsaken, new goal is managing division’, *Asia Times*, 12 September 2025; Richard Connor with AFP, dpa, Reuters, ‘North Korea drops reunification goal from constitution’, *Deutsche Welle*, 6 May 2026.

²⁸ ‘Full Text of Russia-North Korea Strategic Agreement’, *Transcend Media Service*, 24 June 2024 (the agreement was signed on 20 June 2024).

²⁹ Jiyong Zheng, ‘China is confronting new realities on the Korean Peninsula’, *Brookings*, 30 April 2026.

with deep-seated, historically rooted domestic fragility.³⁰ On the endogenous front, the political establishment faced a severe crisis of institutional legitimacy, compounded by the sudden death of President Ebrahim Raisi in May 2024 and historic low voter turnouts. This situation was further exacerbated by entrenched economic decay and a pervasive state–society rupture. Crucially, Saberi’s analysis reveals that the widespread social unrest and the contemporary demand for regime change – exemplified by the «Woman, Life, Freedom (Zhina)» movement – are not spontaneous or isolated anomalies. Rather, they constitute the maturation of an unfinished historical struggle for bodily autonomy and political agency that began with the spontaneous women’s uprising of March 1979 against compulsory hijab. For over four decades, in defiant response to this «dual patriarchy» – which combines private male dominance with state-codified public coercion – this resistance has evolved, transforming from a defensive reaction into a proactive, autonomous political force that challenges the very foundations of the theocratic order.

Yet, this internal state–society alienation and systemic crisis were constantly amplified and moulded by crushing external shocks. The erosion of Iran’s forward defence doctrine – culminating in the collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024 and the degradation of the Axis of Resistance – stripped Tehran of its regional strategic depth. The situation reached a volatile climax in June 2025 with a direct military confrontation against Israel and the United States. This was followed in September by the reactivation of the UN «snapback» sanctions mechanism, spearheaded by the E3 European diplomatic trio (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom). The move triggered the automatic reimposition of previous international penalties linked to Iran’s nuclear program, locking the country into severe international isolation.

In a desperate bid to prop up its crumbling international position, Tehran leveraged its «Look East» doctrine. It formalized long-term arrangements with Moscow through the January 2025 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement. Simultaneously, it deepened its asymmetric energy dependence on China. However, as the June war and the reimposition of sanctions revealed, the strategic reciprocity of both Russia and China remained strictly bounded by their own geopolitical risk calculations. Instead of breaking its isolation, Iran simply became more vulnerable, trapped in an unequal relationship where Russia and China held all the leverage. Thus, the Iranian case is a perfect example of the hybrid category, proving how international containment, regional military

³⁰ Anahita Motazed Rad, ‘Iran 2024–2025: Strategic retrenchment amid regional setbacks and systemic pressures’ and Hamideh Saberi, ‘«We did not make a revolution to go backwards»: the Iranian women’s uprising of march 1979 and its systematic erasure from historical memory’, both in this volume.

degradation, and a historical, forty-year internal struggle against a dual patriarchy have completely merged, trapping the securitized regime between global pressures and an unyielding domestic resistance.

Another manifestation of the hybrid dynamic discussed here is provided by Indonesia. Our analytical framework reads the country's contemporary trajectory as an intricate symbiosis where a policy of state restructuring, centralization and militarization is driven not only by President Prabowo Subianto's unambiguous authoritarian leaning, but ultimately also by the necessity to cope with the external challenges arising from the working of the conflictual US–China duopoly.

No doubt, on the endogenous front, 2025 marks a watershed moment for the consolidation of executive power under President Prabowo Subianto, driven by his sweeping governance initiative known as the «Red-and-White» (*Merah-Putih*) project. As Teuku Reza Fadeli convincingly demonstrates,³¹ Prabowo's pronounced domestic centralization and the integration of the military into civilian governance do not stem from exogenous economic crises. Rather, they take place within a context of relative macroeconomic stability and elite consensus, which the new presidency has skilfully exploited to restructure institutions and discipline civil society. Yet, if the genesis of this authoritarian turn is domestic, we argue that its long-term sustainability cannot be decoupled from the structural pressures of the international system.

Indeed, it is under the shadow of the Sino–American rivalry – which, as already pointed out, increasingly treats any exclusive alignment as an act of hostility – that Jakarta's traditional posture of non-alignment is pushed to its absolute limits. In order to finance its immense domestic undertakings and sustain the very economic stability that legitimizes the regime, the Prabowo administration is forced into a precarious balancing act. On the one hand, it attempts to secure vital flows of Chinese capital by deepening its economic integration with Beijing; on the other, it simultaneously tries to placate Washington by reinforcing its long-standing security cooperation. This means that, although the restructuring of the Indonesian state is generated by internal political calculations rather than external shocks, the country cannot escape global systemic pressures. Consequently, Indonesia qualifies as a hybrid case because its domestic political survival and its economic security have become hostage to the sharp, conflicting forces emanating from the US-China duopoly.

Another prominent example of a hybrid case, where the structural pressure of the Sino–American antagonistic duopoly adds itself to a domestic-generated crisis is that of Thailand. In his assessment of the evolution of the Land of the White Elephant in 2025, Paul Chambers

³¹ Teuku Reza Fadeli, 'Indonesia 2025: The «Red-and-White» project and the consolidation of executive dominance', in this volume.

analyzes a year of profound institutional insecurity and political transition.³² The year began with the Thaksin Shinawatra-influenced Pheu Thai party leading a fragile coalition government under Thaksin's daughter, Paetongtarn. In this situation, pre-existing domestic institutional vulnerabilities were rapidly weaponized by conservative forces. Following controversies over a leaked private phone call with Cambodia's former Premier Hun Sen – in which Thaksin's daughter criticized the Thai military's handling of the bilateral border conflict – the conservative-leaning judiciary temporarily suspended Paetongtarn in June, ultimately ousting her and her government in August for alleged ethical violations. This judicial intervention paved the way for a new coalition led by Anutin Charnvirakul, the leader of the Bhumjai Thai party, who, despite his alignment with the royalist-military establishment, also secured short-term progressive backing by promising imminent constitutional reform and the dissolution of the Lower House.

As pointed out by Chambers, these domestic political developments were linked to an engineered external crisis. Throughout July and the latter half of the year, the Thai military engaged in violent border clashes with Cambodia. In turn, these frontier skirmishes were systematically used by the military as a convenient pretext to escape civilian control and reassert their autonomous political power within the state. This internal militarization and institutional decay unfolded against a backdrop of economic stagnation and a deep dependence on Chinese support.

In the final analysis, Anutin's fragile tenure was beset by a multi-layered crisis. On the international stage, his government had to manoeuvre through the turbulent geopolitical wake of the Sino-American rivalry. Domestically, external pressure was exacerbated by immediate, compounding challenges, ranging from the proliferation of regional crime syndicates to severe environmental disasters. By the time the Lower House was dissolved at the end of the year, Thailand's situation provided a flawless example of a mixed case: an arena where domestic executive instability, judicial activism, and military autonomy did not occur in a vacuum, but were constantly fuelled by, and adapted to, the overarching geostrategic pressures of the antagonistic US-China duopoly.

A final, compelling case of complex convergence of internal instability and structural external pressure – although a case endowed with highly specific and distinctive national characteristics – is exemplified by the Philippines. As Enrico Gloria's essay demonstrates, Manila's trajectory over the 2024–2025 period exposes the profound institutional fragility of a

³² Paul Chambers, 'Thailand 2025: Year of insecurity and transition', in this volume.

democracy in the grip of elite family rivalries and constrained by superpower competition.³³

On the endogenous front, the country witnessed the dramatic and venomous unravelling of the UniTeam alliance, the electorally dominant coalition that had brought President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Vice President Sara Duterte to power in 2022. Far from a mere episodic political spat, this rupture degenerated into an all-out factional war, which paralyzed state institutions, fought through impeachment threats, corruption exposés, and highly public scathing attacks between the two entrenched political dynasties. This bitter domestic feuding severely compromised the state's governance capacity and diverted vital developmental spending, underscoring how deeply embedded personalization and weak bureaucratic structures remain within the Philippine polity.

This severe domestic instability directly intersected with, and heavily conditioned, the archipelago's alignment within the conflictual US–China duopoly. Political rivalries at home intensified extreme and contrasting foreign policy positions, as the Marcos administration continued its resolute shift away from the pro-Chinese stance of the previous Duterte administration, aggressively pivoting back to Washington. The Marcos administration's objective was both to fortify the Philippine external defence posture and secure crucial Western economic partnerships, while simultaneously consolidating its domestic political dominance. This strategic shift thrust Manila at the centre of the tensions arising from the antagonistic US–China duopoly, resulting in the Philippines being caught in recurring, highly dangerous maritime confrontations with an increasingly assertive China over disputed landforms in the South China Sea, such as the Scarborough Shoal.

Ultimately, the analysis of the Philippines in this volume depicts a nation where the breakdown of the domestic elite consensus directly exacerbates, and is simultaneously intensified, by the country's exposure to the perilous, zero-sum geopolitical rivalry between Washington and Beijing.



The analytical framework applied so far – which classifies contemporary Asian regimes on the basis of their varying degrees of vulnerability to the US–China conflictual duopoly – is not without its significant exceptions. Indeed, a comprehensive mapping of the continent reveals the existence of specific sub-regions, where the impact of the US–China conflictual duopoly is largely attenuated or superseded. In these areas, domestic political survival and external alignment are dictated not by the currents of maritime

³³ Enrico Gloria, 'The Philippines 2024–2025: Feuding families, weak institutions, and the limits of Philippine democracy', in this volume.

superpower competition, but by alternative, continental matrices of power and regional patronage that occur according to a distinct explanatory logic.

The first notable exception to the tripartite taxonomy hitherto followed, is that of Azerbaijan, analyzed in this volume by Carlo Frappi.³⁴ Throughout 2025, Baku's authoritarian regime leveraged the accelerating fragmentation of the Eurasian order to aggressively expand its strategic autonomy and external influence. As Frappi demonstrates, Azerbaijan transcended the structural constraints typical of small states, adopting a highly transactional and revisionist role, usually associated with assertive middle powers. Acting in interconnected regional theatres – spanning Central Asia, the Black Sea, and the Middle East – the Aliyev leadership deployed a calculating, opportunistic diplomacy, even acting as a silent transactional mediator between Turkey and Israel during regional crises. The Azerbaijani case demonstrates how centralized autocracies can exploit the decay of multilateral architectures and the ensuing geopolitical vacuum. Rather than a threat, this vacuum becomes a chessboard where otherwise secondary actors can project power externally and consolidate their regime's survival at home. But, of course – as we shall explain below – this is possible less because of the political ability of the Azerbaijani leadership than because of the particular and privileged geopolitical position of the country.

A further exception to the analytical classification adopted in this foreword is represented by the Central Asian countries, examined in this volume by Nicolò Fasola and Sara Berloto.³⁵ In Central Asia, the traditional regional order has transitioned from a historical Russian monopoly to a complex system of «dual patronage», jointly exercised by Moscow and Beijing. Throughout 2025, as documented by Fasola and Berloto, the region, rather than witnessing a geopolitical clash, reflected a broader strategic alignment: both China and Russia prefer to cooperate to keep the West out of the region, rather than compete destructively over control of individual client states.

This high-level coordination between Moscow and Beijing creates a situation of stability within which local governments can operate, playing on the economic resources of China and the security guarantees of Russia. Favoured by this geopolitical situation, the five Central Asian republics have smartly deployed sophisticated multi-vector foreign policies and hedging strategies to further their own national interests.

Naturally, at this point, a question arises: why are Azerbaijan and the Central Asian republics able to preserve, or even expand, genuine freedom of

³⁴ Carlo Frappi, 'Azerbaijan 2025: Foreign policy behaviour in a fragmenting Eurasian order', in this volume.

³⁵ Nicolò Fasola & Sara Berloto, 'From Monopoly to Dual Patronage: The evolution of Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia (1991-2025)', in this volume.

choice, whilst giants such as India and Japan or historically astute states in South-East Asia find themselves caught in the Sino–American stranglehold?

The answer lies in the convergence of three structural factors that radically distinguish the South Caucasus and Central Asia from the rest of the Asian continent.

The first is the absence of a «maritime front» and the continental nature of these states. The Sino-American conflictual systemic duopoly is, in its geopolitical essence, a clash played out along the maritime and insular fault lines of the Indo-Pacific. Washington exerts its maximum military and customs pressure either where it can deploy its fleet – specifically against Indo-Pacific island and coastal states – or where it commands historical containment alliances such as Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Additionally, it targets areas where it can easily block strategic maritime checkpoints, most notably the Strait of Malacca. But, of course, it has no way to exert its military power on Central Asia, namely an entirely landlocked area, or Azerbaijan, which abuts on a closed sea – the Caspian Sea – where the US Navy is not present. In the absence of Washington’s immediate physical pressure, the binary nature («either with us or against us») of the Sino-US systemic duopoly is relaxed. This grants these countries a degree of strategic leeway denied to their neighbours situated along, or in close proximity to, the littorals of the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

The second factor explaining the difference we are discussing is the geopolitical configuration of the landlocked parts of Asia. Here the US is de facto absent, and the two main powers, competing for hegemony are Russia, the former hegemon, now on a declining trend, and China, the emerging power. So, here the question is: why in Central Asia and the Caucasus the competition between the two dominant powers does not deploy along the same lines of the China-US competition, causing the same results on the other, minor powers? This happens because China and Russia prefer to cooperate to keep the West out of the region, rather than go to war over control of individual client states. This high-level coordination between Moscow and Beijing paradoxically creates a buffer of institutional stability within which local governments can operate, playing on the nuances and economic needs of one (China) and the security needs of the other (Russia).

Finally, there is a third factor, namely the availability of key energy resources in the Caucasian and the Central Asian countries. Both Azerbaijan (oil and gas) and Central Asian republics such as Kazakhstan (uranium, hydrocarbons, rare earths) and Turkmenistan (natural gas) hold raw materials that the whole world – including the European Union – desperately needs for energy transition and to break free from Russian dependence. This gives these states a clout difficult to underestimate: those who possess such strategic resources are not subject to the rules of the global market; to a large extent, they dictate them. Baku, for example, has immense bargaining power

with Europe precisely because it supplies gas as an alternative to Russian gas. On the top of the availability of key energy resources, Central Asian states have an additional instrument of power: they control the overland routes linking China to Europe. Which means that they play a key role in making possible the strategic and economic expansion pursued by Beijing through the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative.



Moving beyond these continental exceptions, a rigorous mapping of the contemporary Asian crisis cannot turn a blind eye to those areas of crisis that, while stretching beyond the traditional geographic boundaries of *Asia Maior*, profoundly reverberate across the entire continent and beyond, challenging our very understanding of international justice. It is precisely because of this and because the ethical imperative that must animate any concerned intellectual enquiry in times of systemic brutality, that this volume includes Enrico Bartolomei's essay on the Palestinian question.³⁶ Far from being a detached Middle Eastern anomaly, the ongoing tragedy in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea constitutes an in-depth and dangerous geopolitical fault line, whose destabilizing waves heavily affect the rest of the world and, hence, *Asia Maior*.

As Bartolomei demonstrates, the conceptualization of Zionism as a specific form of «settler colonialism» and a «colonialism of a dual nature» was not an afterthought of Western academia. This radical perspective was systematically pioneered in the mid-1960s and early 1970s within Palestinian anti-colonial thought, particularly through the works of Fayez Sayegh and the PLO Research Centre. By individuating and analyzing this foundational intellectual heritage, the essay illustrates how the Palestinian liberation movement had already clearly identified the «logic of elimination» and the systematic racialization of sovereignty as the core components of Zionist policy.

In the economy of this volume, introducing this radical perspective serves a dual purpose: geopolitically, it reminds us that the erosion of the rules-based international order is accelerated by the double standards applied to the Palestinian tragedy; ethically, it reaffirms the duty of a scientific journal not to shield itself behind rigid regional taxonomies when the human and political costs of conflict demand absolute analytical clarity and intellectual solidarity.



³⁶ Enrico Bartolomei, «Colonialism of a Dual Nature»: Fayez A. Sayegh, the PLO Research Centre and a Palestinian genealogy of the settler colonial paradigm', in this volume.

In conclusion, the essays collected in this volume lead to a clear and unsettling awareness: Asia Maior (the region) is caught within a tightening pincer. Its two jaws – the external pressure of the Sino-US confrontation and internal political and social crises – are relentlessly closing in upon individual states, proving that these two dynamics are now inseparable. Although exceptions to this rule do exist – and have been discussed in this volume – the bleak reality of contemporary Asia is one moulded by both great power rivalry which feeds on local vulnerabilities, and by domestic crises, systematically amplified by exogenous factors. Ultimately, therefore, the analyses presented in this volume and synthesized in this foreword shatter any residual illusion of a rules-based international order, exposing a landscape where international law is replaced by double standards, and where external coercion and domestic polarization consolidate illiberal governance, insulate ruling elites, and foster increasingly unjust societies.

Against this disheartening backdrop of systemic decay, the role of the intellectual becomes critical. As Edward Said reminded us, an intellectual's primary task is to speak truth to power – a mandate that requires total impartiality and objectivity in the selection and analysis of the relevant data. It also requires singling out, on the one hand, the falsehoods and abuses of those in power, and, on the other, the inadequacies and ambiguities of opposing forces. It is through this ceaseless effort to offer some analytical clarity that we can hope to help understand and resist the looming dangers of our times.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Filippo Boni for reading and commenting on the draft of this Foreword. His suggestions were instrumental in significantly enhancing the text. It goes without saying, of course, that any remaining shortcomings are entirely my own responsibility.

Michelguglielmo Torri