



# ASIA MAIOR

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## Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

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

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A large, intricate, light-colored floral or mandala-like pattern is positioned in the bottom right corner of the cover, partially overlapping the dark green background.

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

# ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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## FOREWORD

### ASIA IN 2023 - UNDER THE BANNER OF CONTINUITY: THE US-CHINA CONFRONTATION, THE CONTRACTION OF FREEDOM, AND THE FALLOUT FROM WARS IN WESTERN EURASIA

As during the previous year, in 2023 the situation in Asia was characterized by three major developments: the US-China confrontation; the authoritarian involution ongoing in most Asian countries; the cascading effects of Russia's war on Ukraine, to which, in the closing three months of the year, were added those of the Gaza war. The war in Europe had a relatively recent origin – at least apparently – on 24 February 2022. On the contrary, the origins of the other two major developments went back in time; at least to 2008 in the case of the China-US confrontation and at least to 2014 in the case of the authoritarian involution of most Asia countries. Among these three developments, possibly the most important one was the contraposition between China and the US. From it, we start our overview of the situation in Asia in 2023.

- I -

In recent years, the US-China confrontation has become the overriding and overarching factor in international relations world-wide but, most specifically, in Asia. In 2023, the beginning of the year was characterized by the «Chinese balloon incident», which saw a Chinese high-altitude balloon, possibly deployed for intelligence gathering, crossing the North American airspace to be finally shot down by a US missile on 4 February. This caused the suspension of the planned visit to China of US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken. Nonetheless, in spite of this inauspicious beginning, the remainder of the year saw a gradual improvement of the situation, epitomised, in Giulia Sciorati's words, by the «transition from the “balloon crisis mode” to high level meetings».<sup>1</sup> In fact both Washington and Beijing appeared engaged in managing their bilateral relationship, keeping their communications open and a dialogue ongoing in areas such as economic cooperation and climate issues. However, the more relaxed scenario which took shape after the negative setbacks of the balloon incident were overcome should not mislead on the true state of the (conflictual) US-China relations.

While consciously avoiding direct confrontation, both Washington and Beijing proactively carried on their mutual challenge by the construc-

1. Giulia Sciorati, 'China in 2023: A «Global-Security-Attentive» Foreign Policy', in this same volume, p. 27.

tion or strengthening of a complex set of allegiances and ententes and/or the launching of new initiatives, all aimed to fortify their own position and diminish that of the competing power. Even in this case, both Washington and Beijing continued along a path already travelled in previous years.

As noted in the preceding *Asia Maior* issue, in confronting China, the Biden administration did not discard several of the policies implemented by the Trump administration, both flexing the US military muscles and carrying on with the attempt to increasingly decouple the economies of the two countries. At the same time, Washington conceived and launched some new strategies.

In line with Trump's anti-Chinese strategy was the decision in October 2023 to impose an embargo on the sale to China of advanced semiconductors and the technology required to produce them.<sup>2</sup> Also, the US Navy, challenging China's territorial claims on the Taiwan Strait, continued to sail warships through it on a near-monthly basis, to prove the Strait's international status.<sup>3</sup>

The most important example of the Biden administration's continuation of an anti-China policy, was, however, a new military pact, which, because including Australia, the UK and the US, was expression of a strategic methodology foreign to the Trumpian view of international relations as pre-eminently bilateral transactions. AUKUS, as the pact was called by making reference to the initials of the parties involved, was signed on 15 September 2021, and, while allegedly aimed to support security and stability «in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond», was unambiguously intended to counter the expansion of China's influence in the Indo-Pacific. The first major initiative of the pact was the supply to Australia of conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines, capable to carry out long-range attack missions.<sup>4</sup>

As it was made clear already at the announcement of the pact, the details of the arrangement were to be negotiated over the next 18 months. In fact, these negotiations resulted in the announcement in March 2023 of «The AUKUS Nuclear-Powered Pathway: A Partnership for the Future», or «Optimal Pathway» for short, which outlined the methods and phases through which Australia would acquire both nuclear submarines and the know-how which would ensure her capability to operate and maintain them. Also, it was decided the increase of port visits to Australia on the part of British and American nuclear submarines, beginning in 2023 and 2026 respectively, officially to increase Australian familiarity in hosting and maintaining this type of vessels.

2. Alexander Alper, Karen Freifeld and Stephen Nellis, 'Biden cuts China off from more Nvidia chips, expands curb to other countries', *Reuters*, 17 October 2023.

3. Derek Grossman, 'America's Indo-Pacific Alliances Are Astonishingly Strong', *Foreign Policy*, 5 December 2023.

4. Cana Kim, David Lee, Nicole Magney, Noelle Troutman, Sarah Tzinieris, Thorin Wright, *AUKUS Briefing Book*. Security and Defence PLuS, PLuS Alliance, 2023.



The first nuclear submarines specifically built for Australia would be delivered by the early 2024. Meanwhile, the US engaged to sell three of her own nuclear submarines (Virginia Class SNNs) «with the potential to sell an additional of two if needed, beginning the early 2023s».<sup>5</sup> Finally, the legal obstacles in US laws against the sale of nuclear weapons abroad were removed by the US Congress, when passing the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) in December 2023.<sup>6</sup>



The measures listed so far were accompanied by the strengthening on the part of Washington of diplomatic ties, again in an anti-Chinese function, with a number of Asian states. Particularly important was the role played by Biden in bringing together a triangular US-Japan-South Korea entente. Both Japan and South Korea were autonomously carrying out an anti-China policy.<sup>7</sup> However, the relationship between the two East Asian countries remained difficult, in spite of the promise of South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol to enhance relations with Japan, followed by a surge in diplomatic engagements between the two countries. In fact, the perduring anti-Japanese sentiments widespread in Korean society, arising from the memory of the harsh colonial domination imposed by Japan on Korea and the war crimes that Japan perpetrated there, remained strong. In this situation, Biden was nonetheless able «to launch a “new era” of trilateral collaboration».<sup>8</sup> Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol were hosted at Camp David by the US President. In Biden’s words, the meeting started «a new era in partnership between Japan and the Republic of Korea and the United States».<sup>9</sup> It was a partnership whose objectives were formulated in the usual coded anti-China vocabulary; realizing «a free and open Indo-Pacific», coordinating «capacity building support in the domain of maritime security», bolstering «the rules-based international order», enhancing «regional security and prosperity». A pursuit which, of course, was based on the three partners’ «shared values of freedom, human rights and rule of law».<sup>10</sup>

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

6. Australian Government, *Defence Ministers, Passage of priority AUKUS submarine and export control exemption legislation by the United States Congress*, 15 December 2023.

7. Marco Milani and Antonio Fiori, ‘Korean peninsula 2023: A year of rising tensions and political polarization’, and Giulio Pugliese and Marco Zappa, ‘Japan 2023: Still walking in Abe Shinzō’s footsteps’, both in this same volume, pp. 39-64 and 65-124 respectively.

8. Marco Milani and Antonio Fiori, ‘Korean peninsula 2023: A year of rising tensions and political polarization’, p. 58.

9. ‘Remarks by President Biden, President Yoon Suk Yeol of the Republic of Korea, and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan in Joint Press Conference | Camp David, MD’, *The White House*, 18 August 2023.

10. *Ibid.* See also Trevor Hunnicutt, Hyonhee Shin and Eric Beech, ‘Biden, Kishida, Yoon at historic Camp David summit’, *Reuters*, 19 August 2023.

The strengthening of diplomatic ties between the US and Asian countries was also visible as far as the US-Taiwan connection was concerned. Not only it remained robust, but reached «an unprecedented level of commitment» on the part of Washington.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Biden distanced himself from a fundamental aspect of U.S. policy toward Taiwan, namely Washington's deliberate strategic ambiguity about America's willingness to militarily defend the island-state from an annexationist attempt by Beijing. Rather, the US President publicly specified in two different occasions (22 October 2021 and 19 September 2022) that, in case of an attack on the part of China on Taiwan, the US would military intervene, even if Washington did not have any kind of formal security alliance with Taipei.<sup>12</sup> Also, if no formal security alliance existed between Washington and Taipei, a formal economic association, The US-Taiwan Initiative on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Trade, was in the making. First unveiled in June 2022, the initiative – which aimed to strengthen economic ties between Washington and Taipei, and open Taiwan to more US exports - reached its first concrete result on 1 June 2023, when a bilateral agreement aimed to streamline border procedures was signed.<sup>13</sup>

The years 2022 and 2023 also saw a spectacular overturn of the pro-China foreign policy which had been followed by Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte during his term in office (2016-2022).<sup>14</sup> His successor, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., started a new phase of closeness with the US, meeting Biden twice. In April 2023, a bilateral agreement was announced, expanding the number of US military bases in the Philippines from five to nine. As stated in the agreement, its aim was «to strengthen the interoperability of the U.S. and Philippine Armed Forces and allow us to respond more seamlessly together to address a range of shared challenges in the Indo-Pacific region».<sup>15</sup> The announcement stated that these challenges included «natural and humanitarian disasters», but nobody could fail to see that its main

11. Derek Grossman, 'America's Indo-Pacific Alliances Are Astonishingly Strong'.

12. *Ibid.* Stephen McDonel, 'Biden says US will defend Taiwan if China attacks', *BBC*, 22 October 2021; Frances Mao, 'Biden again says US would defend Taiwan if China attacks', *BBC*, 19 September 2022.

13. Monica Miller, 'US and Taiwan announce formal bilateral trade talks', *BBC*, 18 August 2022; Annabelle Liang, 'US-Taiwan relations: New trade deal signed as China tensions rise', *BBC*, 1 June 2023. For a more detailed analysis of the evolution of the diplomatic ties connecting the US to Japan and Taiwan as well as those connecting Japan and Taiwan, besides the already quoted Giulio Pugliese and Marco Zappa, 'Japan 2023: Still walking in Abe Shinzō's footsteps', see Aurelio Insisa, 'Taiwan 2023 and the 2024 Elections: A DPP partial victory after a contested electoral campaign', in this same volume, pp. 144-164.

14. Miguel Enrico G. Ayson and Lara Gianina S. Reyes, 'The Philippines 2022-2023: A turbulent start for the New Era of Marcos leadership', in this same issue, pp. 167-185.

15. U.S. Department of Defense, *Philippines, U.S. Announce Locations of Four New EDCA Sites*, 3 April 2023.

objective was China's containment. Not surprisingly, after the particularly serious incident of 22 October 2023, involving Chinese and Philippine coast guard vessels and military run boats in the Second Thomas Shoal<sup>16</sup> – namely a disputed area in the South China Sea or (according to the Philippines) West Philippine Sea – US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and the US President himself repeatedly warned China that the US would defend the Philippines in case of any attack in the disputed South China Sea.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, US-Indonesia relations were strengthened when, in November 2023, Indonesian President Joko Widodo visited the White House, where he and Biden signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement, allegedly marking «a historic new phase» in the two countries bilateral relations.<sup>18</sup> This was followed a few days later by the signing in Jakarta of «a historic Defense Cooperation Arrangement (DCA) between the two countries» by US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin and Indonesian Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto.<sup>19</sup>



At least some of the agreements listed in the previous section were also related to potentially the most important initiative by the Biden administration in Asia, namely the attempt to resuscitate the economic side of Obama's «Pivot to Asia».<sup>20</sup> Announced by Biden on 23 May 2022, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) included, besides the US, other 13 founding member states. Ten of them were Asian states; China, of course, was not among them.<sup>21</sup>

Like Obama's Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), ditched by Trump in his first day in office,<sup>22</sup> IPEF aimed to make the US the decisive «rule-setter» in the Asian economic space. And, quite unambiguously, the rules set by the US would be aimed to favour the decoupling of the economies of

16. 'Philippines says Chinese vessels hit two of its boats near disputed shoal', *NPR*, 22 October 2023.

17. Derek Grossman, 'America's Indo-Pacific Alliances Are Astonishingly Strong'.

18. The White House, *FACT SHEET: President Joseph R. Biden and President Joko Widodo Announce the U.S.-Indonesia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*, 13 November 2023.

19. Wahyu Dwi Anggoro, 'Indonesia and US Sign Historic Defense Cooperation Arrangement', *IDX Channel News*, 17 November 2023.

20. On the «Pivot to Asia» see, e.g., Chi Wang, *Obama's Challenge to China: The Pivot to Asia*, London: Routledge, 2015.

21. The IPEF founding members were Australia, Brunei, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, The Philippines, United States, Vietnam.

22. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Asia Maior in 2017: The unravelling of the US foreign policy in Asia and its consequences', *Asia Maior* Vol. XXVIII/2017 (2018), p. 9.

the member-states from China and to favour the penetration of US enterprises. IPEF, however, while pursuing the same political objectives of TPP, adopted a radically different strategy. Negotiations of rules concerning custom tariffs were discarded in favour of other themes. These themes, later defined the «four pillars» of the IPEF, were: fair trade; supply chain resilience; infrastructures and decarbonization (under the label of «clean economy»); tax and anti-corruption measures (under the label of «fair economy»). Each of the participating countries was at liberty to choose in how many «pillars» to join the negotiations and whether or not to adhere to their results.

As noted in the previous issue of this journal, the IPEF had the potentiality to be a game-changer in the economic – and, therefore, political – international relations in Asia. However, it was a potential that could only be realized through a long and difficult negotiation. In fact, soon after Biden's announcement, the necessary negotiation was proactively carried out by the member states, under the guidance of the US.<sup>23</sup>

Although inferior to the most optimistic hopes, the results obtained were far from being irrelevant.<sup>24</sup> Particularly important was the agreement concerning the supply chain, which reflected «lessons learned from the

23. In the period up to the end of 2023, the negotiation was articulated in a series of nine in-person meetings held in Brisbane (10-15 December 2022), New Delhi (8-11 February 2023), Bali (13-19 March 2023), Singapore (8-15 May 2023), Detroit (27 May 2023), Busan (9-15 July 2023), Bangkok (10-16 September 2023), Kuala Lumpur (15-24 October 2023), San Francisco (13-14 November 2023). These meetings were accompanied by «a significant number of virtual inter-sessional meetings, numerous bilateral meetings at all levels» involving not only the representatives of the member states but also those of labour, NGOs and industry. Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore, *Press Statement on Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity Meetings in San Francisco*, without date but possibly issued on 14 November 2023.

24. The negotiation for the IPEF Supply Chain Agreement was substantially conclude in the Singapore meeting of May 2023, and the formal Supply Chain Agreement was signed during the San Francisco meeting of November 2023. Again, during the San Francisco meeting the substantial conclusion of the negotiations concerning the «Clean Economy» and the «Fair Economy» was announced. In the same occasion it was also made public the establishment of «a ministerial-level council and commission to formalize and ensure ongoing cooperation». Finally, there was the declaration of the creation of an IPEF Catalytic Capital Fund, «to pool resources and expand the pipeline of bankable climate infrastructure projects in IPEF emerging and upper-middle income economies» and of an IPEF Clean Economy Investor Forum «to catalyze investment for sustainable infrastructure and climate technology across IPEF economies». U.S. Department of Commerce, *Fact Sheet: Substantial Conclusion of Negotiations on Groundbreaking IPEF Clean Economy Agreement*, without date (<https://www.commerce.gov/files/fact-sheet-substantial-conclusion-negotiations-groundbreaking-ipef-clean-economy-agreement>).

COVID-19 pandemic and supply chain shortages».<sup>25</sup> According to the pact, each partner state was to monitor supply chain vulnerabilities and import dependencies and to share information with other partners. This would remedy a basic problem revealed by the supply chain crises occurred during COVID-19 and as result of the Ukraine-Russia war. In the words of Ryan Mulholland of the Center for American Progress, it was a problem depending upon the fact that, although most countries had a good sense of what products were coming into their market and what was being exported abroad, they had far less intelligence regarding the component parts and materials that a trading partner imported in order to support its production of a product destined for the market of another country.<sup>26</sup>

Apart from the IPEF-related results which the Biden administration effectively reached by the end of 2023, the IPEF-related negotiations aimed to attain a further goal, namely an agreement concerning the «clean trade» pillar. It was hoped that the clean trade negotiation would be concluded – at least de facto – before the November 2023 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit, in spite of the coldness on the part of India.<sup>27</sup> However, in the end, it was not India's opposition that blocked the deal (as noted above, agreements concerning any of the IPEF pillars did not require unanimity on the part of the member states), but problems on the part of the US, which was unclear about what to actually request regarding some key aspects of digital trade.<sup>28</sup>

The IPEF project was often disparaged by Western analysts, because unable to reach all its goals and anyway of allegedly little significance as it did not cope with the problem of tariffs. However, it is a fact that the IPEF was judged a credible enough political strategy, and therefore a threatening one, by Beijing, which repeatedly and variously criticized it. According to Beijing, the IPEF was an attempt of forcing countries in the region to take sides by disrupting supply chains; it was an «economic NATO» squarely aimed at China; it was an attempt, on the part of the US, to co-

25. Ryan Mulholland, 'The IPEF Supply Chain Agreement Is a Win for U.S. Industrial Policy', *Center for American Progress*, 20 November 2023.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Erin Murphy, 'The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework's uncertain future', *East Asia Forum*, 24 March 2024. On India's coldness see 'India accepts three out of four pillars of US-led IPEF, so why has it stopped short of a total agreement?', *The Indian Express*, 10 September 2022.

28. David Lawder, 'U.S. suspends Indo-Pacific talks on key aspects of digital trade – lawmakers', *Reuters*, 8 November 2023. See also, the letter to Joe Biden by five US senators and seven US members of Congress (the first signatories being Elizabeth Warren and Jan Schakowsky respectively), dated 6 November 2023 (<https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FINAL%20Letter%20to%20Biden%20in%20Support%20of%20USTR%20Digital%20Trade%20Work.pdf>).

erce its allies to decoupling their economies from China.<sup>29</sup> All criticisms that, in this author's assessment, were not without foundation.



Beijing too, in proactively carrying on its challenge to Washington while avoiding direct confrontation, continued along a path already travelled in previous years, as shown by the fact that, in the period under review, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)<sup>30</sup> continued to be a main element in China's foreign policy. The BRI, however, became part of a more complex strategy which saw the launching, in the years 2020-2023, of new initiatives aimed to complement it and strengthen China's soft power internationally.

Launched in 2013 by China's President Xi Jinping, the BRI brought together under an apparently common programme<sup>31</sup> – and, perhaps more importantly, under one catchy narrative – Chinese economic and infrastructure projects dating back to the 1990s.<sup>32</sup> When announced by Xi Jinping as his signature project, the BRI appeared as a gigantic infrastructures plan, with economic, strategic and political aims. In economic terms it had two main objectives, one related to China's domestic economic situation and the other to China's foreign policy. As far as the domestic side was concerned, the BRI aimed to externalize a set of economic problems which had beset the Chinese economy since the 2008 global financial crisis, such as over-reliance on the infrastructure sector and potential industrial overproduction problems. As far as the international side was involved, the BRI had as its goal to connect China to the remainder of Old Continent, but also to Latina America and South Pacific. In strategic terms, the BRI aimed to build inland routes particularly to China's sources of raw materials and, more importantly, energy resources, bypassing the easily militarily lockable bottleneck represented by the Strait of Malacca.

29. Teddy Ng, 'China says Washington's 'divisive' Indo-Pacific strategy doomed to fail', *South China Morning Post*, 23 May 2022; 'China goes on offensive against IPEF, projects it as 'economic NATO' to blunt its dominance', *The Week*, 24 May 2022; Qi Xijia, 'US coerces allies into targeting China at IPEF', *Global Times*, 28 May 2023. For a more in-depth analysis of China's reaction to the IPEF, see Mohamad Zreik, 'Navigating new waters: China's strategic responses to the Indo-Pacific economic framework for prosperity', *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 2024 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/2185377.2024.2399064>).

30. The project, announced by Xi Jinping in 2013 as the new Silk Road, was formalized in 2015 with the name of «One Belt, One Road initiative (OBOR)»; later, in 2015, the English name was changed in «Belt and Road Initiative», while the Chinese name did not change.

31. That the BRI is a common programme less in reality than in appearance is explained in the continuation of this essay.

32. Andrea Ghiselli, *Protecting China's Interests Overseas: Securitization and Foreign Policy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Finally, in political terms, the BRI aimed to enhance China's influence in the countries joining the project.

The BRI physical-infrastructure projects peaked in the years 2016 to 2019, to slow down after that date, as a consequence of both COVID-19 and the deceleration of Chinese economic growth. The slowdown in physical infrastructure projects was at least partially compensated by the momentum assumed by the Digital Silk Road Initiative (DSR). Launched in 2015 as a subset of the BRI, the DSR had become increasingly important on its own since 2019. The augmented importance of digital investments, nevertheless, was not the only change in the BRI set up. Initially characterized by the large size of many projects, managed by Chinese state-owned companies (SOEs), the emphasis shifted in November 2021 to «small and beautiful», namely to smaller projects, where the role of private-owned Chinese companies became increasingly important.<sup>33</sup> In the words of Professor Christoph Nedopil Wang, director of the Griffith Asia Institute, while «in 2020 all the top partners for BRI engagement were SOEs, since 2022 private sector companies lead BRI investment».<sup>34</sup> This shift was accompanied by a dramatic contraction of Chinese investments abroad; China overseas development finance «shrank from about USD90 billion in 2016 to about USD5 billion in 2021».<sup>35</sup>

The contraction in investments was not the only problem affecting BRI at the beginning of the year under review. According to Ammar A. Malik, head of AidData's Chinese Development Finance Program, in 2022 35% of the BRI projects were suffering from some sort of «implementation challenge».<sup>36</sup> Also, a growing number of projects had been or risked to be cancelled for reasons including corruption scandals, the violation of labour rights and environmental problems.<sup>37</sup> Another major problem, contributing to turn the public opinions of many states against the BRI was the danger to be pushed into a «debt trap».

This was a fear unsupported by any serious study on the topic. In fact, existing studies showed that China's development financing system was fragmented, without any strong coordination, characterized by the pursuit on the part of each of its constituent elements of their own, mainly econom-

33. While in the first phase of the BRI, the average deal size exceeded US\$ 500 million, by 2022 it had dropped to less than US\$ 400 million. See Christoph Nedopil Wang, 'Ten years of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): Evolution and the road ahead', *Griffith Asia Institute and Green Finance and Development Center, Regional Outlook Paper*, No. 76, 2023, p. 11.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

36. Simone McCarty, 'China's Belt and Road is facing challenges. But can the US counter it?', *CNN*, 22 August 2022.

37. Philip Lott, 'Road to Nowhere? Prospects for the BRI in 2023 and Beyond', *9Dashline*, 24 January 2023.

ic, gains.<sup>38</sup> As showed by one of these studies, in Sri Lanka and Malaysia, «the two most widely cited ‘victims’ of China’s ‘debt-trap diplomacy’», the most controversial BRI projects had been autonomously initiated by the local governments, in pursuit of their own domestic agendas. Accordingly, the debt problems supposed to be the end-result of a Machiavellian policy on the part of China had arisen «mainly from the misconduct of local elites and Western-dominated financial markets».<sup>39</sup>

Also, by 2022, another development had come to the fore, debunking the «debt trap» theory; by that date, nearly 60% of China’s foreign loans were held by countries considered in financial distress, which could repay what they had borrowed only with great difficulty, if at all.<sup>40</sup> This was a situation in which China, far from being in the position to leverage the debt contracted by BRI-engaged countries, appeared in danger of catastrophic financial losses. As noted by Meia Nouwens of IISS, it was a situation in which «it could be asked whether, instead of trapping sovereign countries in Chinese debt for strategic value, Beijing has inadvertently been caught in a debt trap of its own making».<sup>41</sup>

Significantly, while for some two decades Beijing had managed debt restructuring on a bilateral basis and involving only Chinese state-owned banks, «in February 2023 it called the G20 to multilateralise the debt burden that China faces, calling for ‘joint action, fair burden’ in debt settlement».<sup>42</sup>

But, of course, a theory does not need to be based on facts to be believed and, therefore, influential. It suffices if it gives simple, seemingly logical, easily remembered explanations for complex problems; all characteristics eminently possessed by the «debt trap» theory. Which, accordingly, continued to be repeated,<sup>43</sup> moulding large strata of the public opinions of many countries, both inside and outside the BRI.

By the beginning of 2023, all the above factors had convinced most analysts outside China that the BRI was «losing steam», was a «road to no-

38. Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, ‘Debunking the Myth of «Debt-trap Diplomacy»’, *Chatham House*, 14 December 2020; Nadia Clark, ‘The Rise and Fall of BRI’, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 6 April 2023.

39. Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, ‘Debunking the Myth of «Debt-trap Diplomacy»’.

40. In the years 2020-2023, over US\$ 78bn of Chinese loans had to be renegotiated or written off. See Lunting Wu, ‘China’s Transition From the Belt and Road to the Global Development Initiative’, *The Diplomat*, 11 July 2023.

41. Meia Nouwens, ‘China’s Belt and Road Initiative a Decade on’, *The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) (ed.), Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment 2023. Key developments and trends*: London: Routledge, 2023 (<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003454724>), p. 105.

42. *Ibid.*

43. E.g., Bernard Condon, ‘China’s loans pushing world’s poorest countries to brink of collapse’, *AP News*, 18 May 2023



where», and had been de facto ditched by the Chinese leadership.<sup>44</sup> These gloomy forecasts, nonetheless, were disproved during the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, held on 17 and 18 October 2023 in Beijing, which was attended by representatives from 140 countries and 30 international organizations.<sup>45</sup> During the forum, which marked the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the BRI, Xi Jinping committed ¥ 780 bn (US\$ 107 bn) to finance the initiative for the next five years, namely the same amount pledged at the first BRI forum in 2017.<sup>46</sup> In the same occasion, Xi stressed a series of changes in the BRI methodology, which had already become apparent; in particular the shift from big to small projects and the emphasis on green development.<sup>47</sup>

According to the evaluation made at the beginning of 2024 by Professor Christoph Nedopil Wang, in the 10 years after its announcement the cumulative BRI engagement breached the US\$ 1 trillion mark (US\$ 1.053 trillion), of which about US\$ 634 billion in construction contracts, and about US\$ 419 billion in non-financial investments. Investments and finance were on the rise, with about 212 deals worth US\$ 92.4 billion compared to about US\$ 74.5 billion in 2022. Also, investments as a share of BRI engagement reached in 2023 record levels at over 52%, which, as pointed out by Professor Wang, indicated «higher ownership and risk taking of Chinese enterprises».<sup>48</sup>

BRI investments in 2023 were dominated by private sector enterprises, but construction contracts continued to be the preserve of SOEs. On the

44. 'Study shows China's Belt and Road plans losing momentum as opposition, debt mount', *The Straits Times*, 29 September 2021; Christina Lu, 'China's Belt and Road to Nowhere', *Foreign Policy*, 13 February 2023; Sourav Dahal, 'Belt and Road to Nowhere', *The Katmandu Post*, 15 February 2023 (updated on 16 February 2023); 'China's BRI losing Steam as loans turn sour, new investments decline: Report', *The Times of India*, 7 September 2023. Most of these evaluations were based on the (often superficial) reading of an AidData report; see Ammar A. Malik, Bradley Parks, Brooke Russell, Joyce Jiahui Lin, Katherine Walsh, Kyra Solomon, Sheng Zhang, Thai-Binh Elston, and Seth Goodman, *Banking on the Belt and Road: Insights from a new global dataset of 13,427 Chinese development projects*, Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary, September 2021.

45. 'Belt and Road forum: Xi Jinping signals China will stay the course in development pitch to Global South', *South China Morning Post*, 18 October 2023.

46. Of course, even judging from the standpoint of the BRI's past history, the fact that a certain amount of resources has been committed does not necessarily mean that it will actually be spent. No doubt, the ongoing slowdown of the Chinese economy could play a role in preventing the total fulfilment of the engagement taken during the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.

47. 'Belt and Road forum: Xi Jinping signals China will stay the course in development pitch to Global South'; Grace Stanhope, 'Belt and Road 2.0', *The Lowly Institute*, 13 November 2023.

48. Christoph Nedopil, 'China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2023', Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University (Brisbane) and Green Finance & Development Center, FISF Fudan University (Shanghai), February 2024, pp. 6, 7.

whole, Chinese overseas engagement grew, which was a particularly significant development, if one takes into account that foreign direct investments (FDI) into emerging economies in 2023 dropped significantly.<sup>49</sup> In fact, already in 2021, when Beijing's development finance commitments had been declining, China, with an annual output hovering around US\$ 85bn a year, outspt «the U.S. and other major powers on a 2-to-1 basis or more».<sup>50</sup> The growth in investments was accompanied by an increased emphasis on environmental protection, as China's energy-related engagement in 2023 was the greenest in absolute and relative terms in any period since the BRI's inception, reaching US\$ 7.9 bn.<sup>51</sup>

In the final analysis, far from folding up, the BRI continued to be prominent among the set of strategies employed by Beijing to expand its influence world-wide. Admittedly its defining features had gone through a process of change, which had begun during the COVID-19 phase and had been formalized during the 3<sup>rd</sup> BRI Forum of 17-18 October 2023. These changes aimed at avoiding some of the pitfalls which had become visible during the previous years. As already noted, these changes included the shift from SOEs to private enterprises; that from large scale projects to smaller projects; and the greening of BRI-related initiatives. Also, during the 3<sup>rd</sup> BRI Forum, much emphasis was given to the need to prudently and tightly manage the ongoing projects. Finally, a narrowing of the group of participants had become visible, shown by the fact that 19 countries saw a 100% drop in BRI engagement, including Turkey and Kenya, while Russia saw one deal only in 2023, after no engagement at all in 2022. Also, Africa became the largest recipient of Chinese engagement, overtaking Middle Eastern countries.<sup>52</sup>



As noted above, the continuation of the BRI was coupled by the launching in the years 2020-2023 of new initiatives aimed to complement it and

49. The European Union, Japan and the US have made «multiple efforts to provide alternative to Chinese infrastructure projects», but without much success. In the assessment of Meia Nouwens of IISS: «Some of these [EU, Japan and US] initiatives have yet to result in a single successful project, while others have been too slow to get off the ground, or to expand geographically, to offer realistic options to recipient countries seeking infrastructure investments». Meia Nouwens, 'China's Belt and Road Initiative a Decade on', p. 107.

50. Ammar A. Malik *et al.*, *Banking on the Belt and Road: Insights from a new global dataset of 13,427 Chinese development projects*, p. 1; see also pp. 11-12.

51. Christoph Nedopil Wang, 'Ten years of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): Evolution and the road ahead', pp. 9-10; Christoph Nedopil, 'China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2023', p. 7.

52. Christoph Nedopil, 'China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2023', p. 3; Grace Stanhope, 'Belt and Road 2.0'.

strengthen China's soft power internationally. As highlighted in the previous issue of this journal, these initiatives included the Global Development Initiative (GDI), announced by Xi Jinping on 21 September 2021, and the Global Security Initiative, announced by China's President on 21 April 2022. On 15 March 2023, they were followed by the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), announced by Xi Jinping during the Chinese Communist Party and world political parties summit.<sup>53</sup>

The official goal of the GDI was to expedite the implementation of the UN 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development,<sup>54</sup> by fostering balanced, coordinated and inclusive development.<sup>55</sup> To support developing countries pursuing these goals, Xi Jinping pledged US\$ 3bn over the next three years.<sup>56</sup> In the period from its launching to the end of 2023, concrete measures for implementing the GDI included the upgrading the Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund,<sup>57</sup> the increase of its capital to US\$ 4bn, the start of Phase III of the China-FAO South-South Cooperation Trust Fund, and the heightening of support for the China-UN Peace and Development Fund.<sup>58</sup> By November 2023, more than 100 countries and international organizations had voiced support for the GDI, while over 70 countries had joined the Group of Friends of the GDI.<sup>59</sup> Particularly relevant was the presence of all 10 ASEAN members

53. 'Full text of Xi Jinping's keynote address at the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-level Meeting', *China Daily*, 26 March 2023.

54. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (<https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>).

55. More precisely, when unveiling the GDI, Xi Jinping had pointed out that it would focus on cooperation in eight priority areas - poverty alleviation; food security; COVID-19 response and vaccines, development financing, contrasting climate change, promoting green development, industrialization, digital economy and connectivity. See 'Xi Jinping's full speech at the U.N.'s 76th General Assembly', *Nikkei Asia*, 22 September 2021.

56. Isaac Ankrah, 'Understanding China's Global Vision through the Four Global Initiatives (4GI's)', *The Africa-China Centre for Policy and Advisory*, 18 December 2023.

57. 'Global Development Initiative injects strong impetus into global poverty reduction cause: official', *Xinhua*, 26 September 2023. The Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund had been launched by China in September 2015 to support South-South cooperation and assist developing countries in implementing their agendas at the UN Sustainable Development Summit 2015. See <http://en.cidca.gov.cn/southsouthcooperationfund.html>.

58. Isaac Ankrah, 'Understanding China's Global Vision through the Four Global Initiatives (4GI's)'.

59. 'China-proposed Global Development Initiative under spotlight at seminar in Vienna', *Xinhua*, 30 November 2023. The Group of Friends of GDI had been founded at the UN on 20 January 2022. See also Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Asia in 2022: The consequences of the war in Ukraine, US-China rivalry, democratic decline and popular protests', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXIII/2022 (2023), p. XIX.

in the Group of Friends, South-east Asia being the recipient of the largest number of initial GDI projects.<sup>60</sup>

As already noted, the GDI appeared to have been conceived by the Chinese leadership not as a substitute of the BRI, but as its complement. Whereas the main focus of the BRI remained on traditional infrastructures, the GDI privileged measures more tightly related to development cum poverty reduction.<sup>61</sup> Financial sources also differed; the BRI was mainly financed by China's policy banks, commercial banks, multinational development banks, sovereign wealth funds; conversely, the GDI principally depended on the Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme.<sup>62</sup> These differences in financial sources favoured a tighter control on the GDI on the part of the Chinese government,<sup>63</sup> no doubt to prevent the kind of spending policies followed by the BRI up to 2023, which, as already noted, had brought about a proliferation of bad debt on the part of many recipient countries.

The second global initiative launched in the years 2020-2023 was the GSI, which allegedly aimed «to address global security challenges and promote peace and stability by emphasizing international partnership, cooperation and dialogue».<sup>64</sup> The main objectives of the new initiative were indicated by Xi Jinping as the commitment «to taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously, uphold the principle of indivisible security, build a balanced, effective and sustainable security architecture, and oppose the pursuit of one's own security at the cost of others' security».<sup>65</sup> These objectives would be pursued while engaging «to peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and

60. Samuel Garrett, 'Has China's Global Development Initiative replaced its Belt and Road?', *United States Studies Centre*, 7 September 2023.

61. More specifically they were indicated as «poverty reduction, food security, pandemic responses, financing for development, climate change and green development, industrialization, digital economy, and connectivity». Lunting Wu, 'China's Transition From the Belt and Road to the Global Development Initiative'.

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Ibid.*

64. Isaac Ankrah, 'Understanding China's Global Vision through the Four Global Initiatives (4GI's)'.

65. It is worth to bring to the attention of the reader that the concept of «indivisible security» (or the «indivisibility of security») implies that the security of a country is inseparable from the security of the other countries in the region. This concept was first used during the Cold War and was included in the Helsinki Declaration of 1 August 1975. The concept was later used by Russia to justify its military build-up near Ukraine, which eventually resulted in the invasion of 24 February 2022. See Polina Ivanova & John Paul Rathbone, 'What is 'indivisible security'? The principle at the heart of Russia's ire against Nato', *Financial Times*, 7 February 2022; Patrick Wintour, 'Why does Russia focus on «indivisible security» in Ukraine standoff?', *The Guardian*, 3 February 2022

consultation». The GSI objectives were strictly tied, according to Xi Jinping, to those pursued by the GDI, because, as the Chinese President noted in the speech which unveiled the GSI: «Security is the precondition for development».<sup>66</sup>

Following the usual Chinese *modus operandi*, the GSI, when unveiled, was short on details. These details, however, were spelled out in a GSI Concept Paper which was published on 21 February 2023,<sup>67</sup> and fleshed out through the enhanced activism on the part of Chinese diplomacy in several fields of crises, including the Ukraine and Israel-Palestine crises. But its most conspicuous success – one which «stunned the world», because it involved the possibility to «reshape the Middle East, and the role of the United States» in it<sup>68</sup> – was China’s role as facilitator of a deal brokered in March 2023 between long-time rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The third global initiative launched by China in the years 2020-23 was the GCI. Its official aim was the creation of a world network of cooperation between different «civilizations». This network was based on the idea that, as pointed out by Xi Jinping: «All civilizations created by human society are splendid», and that, as a consequence, the relations between them ought to be based on the «principles of equality, mutual learning, dialogue and inclusiveness».<sup>69</sup> Hence, according to Xi, cultural exchanges were to transcend estrangement, mutual learning was to transcend clashes, and co-existence was to transcend feelings of superiority.<sup>70</sup>

The GCI was less a programme than the ideological legitimization of the other global Chinese global initiatives, BRI included. It basically stated that China economic and security support was offered to other «civilizations» without the strings attached represented by the attempt to impose the acceptance of China’s ways. In fact, as noted above, according to the GSI ideology any single civilization had its own ways, determined by its unique historical past. As such, any of them had equal dignity to those of any other civilisation. China’s aid, therefore, did not involve a request to change the

66. ‘Full Text: President Xi Jinping’s keynote speech at the opening ceremony of BFA annual conference 2022’, *China Daily*, 21 April 2022.

67. ‘Full text: The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper’, *Global Times*, 21 February 2023.

68. Michael Schuman, Jonathan Fulton, and Tuvia Gering, ‘How Beijing’s newest global initiative seek to remake the world order’, *Atlantic Council*, 21 June 2013.

69. It is worth drawing the reader’s attention to Xi Jinping’s adoption of the category «civilization» as the central one in China’s view of international relations. As just noted, in this vision, each «civilization» has equal dignity and is autonomous. But the concept of «civilization» allows Beijing to claim hegemony over all the constituent parts of China’s civilization. In other words, it legitimizes Beijing’s hegemonic claims over Hong Kong and Taiwan (and – who knows? – in the more distant future, over Singapore).

70. ‘Full text of Xi Jinping’s keynote address at the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-level Meeting’, *Xinhua*, 16 March 2023.

socio-economic structure of the aided countries according to Beijing's directives. A position, as is easy to see, completely different from that of the West and, in particular, the USA.



As noted in the previous Asia Maior issue: «Both the GDI and GSI were based on principles apparently in line with those of the West, in the first case, or at least not antithetical with them, in the second case».<sup>71</sup> The GSI's basic philosophy, however, was alternative to that followed by the West at least from the beginning of the Cold War. Still, wishing for international relations based on the «principles of equality, mutual learning, dialogue and inclusiveness», which would transcend estrangement, clashes, and feelings of superiority, does not appear, at first sight, so alien to many of the basic principles professed by the West. Nonetheless, analysts and ideologues in the West, but most particularly in the US and UK, after initially dismissing the Global Initiatives as «short on details, albeit not on platitudes»,<sup>72</sup> launched a sustained attack on them. The GIs were assessed as the instruments of a direct assault on the US-centred, «rules-based» world order. As such, they aimed at eliminating «universal values in areas such as human rights and democracy»,<sup>73</sup> and, therefore, at protecting authoritarian states. In fact, their final goal was the de-legitimation of the existing US-promoted liberal order and its substitution with a new multipolar world order, where authoritarian states would be prevalent and China would be on top.<sup>74</sup>

All this criticism was in line with the enhancement of the rhetorical arguments against one another, which – as already noted in the previous issue of this journal<sup>75</sup> – was part of the ongoing US-China confrontation. It however betrayed a deepening anxiety on the part of the West, but most particularly the US, that, in spite of the slowdown of the Chinese economy and the problems caused by Beijing dubious management of the COV-

71. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Foreword. Asia in 2022: The consequences of the war in Ukraine, US-China rivalry, democratic decline and popular protests', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXIII/2022 (2023), p. XX.

72. Michael Schuman *et al.*, 'How Beijing's newest global initiative seek to remake the world order'.

73. *Ibid.*

74. A compilation of excerpts from journalistic articles criticizing the GIs in particular and Chinese foreign policy more generally can be found in 'Something to Think About China's Global Civilization Initiative', *Exploring the Problem Space*, 25 October 2023. See also Jonathan Cheng, 'China Is Starting to Act Like a Global Power', *Wall Street Journal*, 22 March 2023; James Palmer, 'Why Xi Is Rebranding Chinese Cultural History', *Foreign Policy*, 19 April 2023; 'China's Latest Attempt to Rally the World against Western Values', *The Economist*, 27 Aprile 2023.

75. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Foreword. Asia in 2022: The consequences of the war in Ukraine, US-China rivalry, democratic decline and popular protests', p. XXI.

ID-19-induced crisis, China's foreign policy was becoming not only increasingly aggressive, but, more importantly, increasingly successful in giving the lead of the Global South to Beijing.



In fact, the anxiety on the part of the US about the ever more successful attempt on the part of China if not to take the lead, at least to play an progressively more important role at the international level was not without foundation. The BRI and the other three GIs were indeed part of a strategy which aimed to strengthen China's international position, and, for this very reason, to diminish that of the US. It was an aim pursued on the one hand by offering economic support to the Global South and, on the other, by the attempt to make the Chinese way to development-cum-autonomy-and-security hegemonic (in the Gramscian meaning of the term), in particular among «civilizations» different from the Western one.

Now the important question is: to which extent the BRI & GIs had been successful, by the period under review, both in promoting the ascendancy of China as a global player and the weakening of US influence in the Global South? No doubt, the ideological justification proposed by Beijing for its international initiatives was well thought-out and seducing. But, equally unquestionably, it was a seduction which, at least up to the closing of this writing, had had little success with the countries to which it was aimed. As pointed out in an *Issue Brief* of a well-known US think tank: «A survey of nearly 7,000 prominent figures in the emerging world conducted in 2020 by AidData revealed that while China's influence was growing rapidly in global development, that influence was not seen as positively as that of many other major players».<sup>76</sup> This is not particularly surprising because the economic support offered by China to the countries of the Global South, although couched in the rhetorical language presenting it as a disinterested win-win strategy, was a hard-nosed policy, which not only had as its main objective the promotion of Chinese interests, but was offered at a higher cost than that required by the International Monetary Fund. Also, at least up to 2020, China had generally appeared reluctant to restructure debts incurred by nations that had availed themselves of financing obtained through the BRI. On the top of all that, a militarily increasingly powerful China was conducting an all the time more aggressive policy toward its neighbouring states. Not surprisingly, as a rule, Chinese international relations with countries in the Global South were all the better the greater their geographical distance from China.

When all the above has been pointed out, however, the fact remains that China offered a source of financial support, in particular to the coun-

76. Michael Schuman *et al.*, 'How Beijing's newest global initiative seek to remake the world order'.

tries of the Global South, which was alternative to the sources controlled by the West and, in particular, the US. Even more importantly, by 2021, China had emerged as «the lender of last resort» to developing countries, offering rescue lending for a total of US\$ 240bn to more than 20 debtor countries in the years 2020 and 2021 only.<sup>77</sup> Hence the success of China's seduction of the countries of the Global South. As a matter of fact, it was a seduction which, in many cases, trumped the fears triggered by Beijing's military aggressiveness. From this viewpoint, the case of Vietnam is paradigmatic.

In 2023 the US-Vietnam connection apparently become so close that, by reading the assessments of some Western analysts,<sup>78</sup> one could be tempted to hypothesize that Vietnam was near to join the US sphere of influence in Asia. In September, the US President visited Hanoi and, on 10 September, signed a joint agreement with Vietnam leader, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong, elevating US-Vietnam relations from Comprehensive Partnership (established in 2013) to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, placing the US on Vietnam's highest diplomatic status.<sup>79</sup> The agreement pledged greater cooperation in the semiconductors and minerals sector, and aimed to increase market expansion opportunities for US business.<sup>80</sup> Hence, Western commentators saluted the US-Vietnam agreement not only as heralding the «deepening of political and diplomatic relations, as well as economic, trade, and investment cooperation» between the two countries, but as proof of the growing insertion of Vietnam in the network of alliances and ententes woven by Washington to contain China.<sup>81</sup>

This optimistic evaluation, nonetheless, was soon put in doubt by Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Vietnam on 12-13 December 2023. The visit, marked by a great display of mutual cordiality, clearly demonstrated that economic cooperation between the two countries trumped the ongoing dispute over the position of their common boundary in the South China

77. Sebastian Horn, Bradley C. Parks, Carmen M. Reinhart, Christoph Trebesch, 'China as an International Lender of Last Resort', *NBER Working Paper Series* (Paper 31105), April 2023, pp. 4, 12, 13, 22.

78. E.g., Derek Grossman, 'America's Indo-Pacific Alliances Are Astonishingly Strong'; Jonathan D. London, 'A New Era Is Dawning in US-Vietnam Relations', *The Diplomat*, 9 September 2023;

79. The White House, *FACT SHEET: President Joseph R. Biden and General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong Announce the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*, 10 September 2023.

80. Joseph Damond, 'The US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: A Personal and Historical Perspective', *EGA*, 15 September 2023.

81. E.g., Derek Grossman, 'America's Indo-Pacific Alliances Are Astonishingly Strong'.



Sea.<sup>82</sup> Hence, the signing of «dozens of bilateral cooperation documents»<sup>83</sup> related not only to security but also to rail links, telecoms and digital data cooperation.<sup>84</sup> While an agreement on rare earths, clearly desired by Xi Jinping, was not reached, the joint statement which concluded the visit underlined the common desire «to seek ways to co-operate on key minerals».<sup>85</sup>

- II -

In 2023, another continuing trend, characterizing the situation in Asia, was the process of authoritarian involution affecting most countries. As in the preceding years, this phenomenon was not limited to democratic and quasi-democratic polities but also to openly authoritarian ones. After all, even inside authoritarian polities, there are different degrees of liberty-deprivation, and, in 2023 as in the preceding years, liberty-deprivation became more pronounced not only in democracies and quasi-democracies but in authoritarian states too. Indeed, this process was conspicuous both in the most populous authoritarian country in Asia (and on Earth), namely China, and in the most populous (supposed) democracy in Asia (and on Earth), namely India.<sup>86</sup>



As summarized by Freedom House and argued by Silvia Menegazzi in this and previous Asia Maior issues, in recent years the authoritarian involution of China's polity has steadily continued, becoming increasingly pronounced. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the ruling Communist Party of China (CCP) tightened its control over all aspects of life and governance, including state bureaucracy, media, online discourse, religious practice, universities, businesses, and civil society associations. This process was strengthened when, in October 2022, Xi Jinping's took up the office of party leader for the third time, which consolidated his personal power «to a degree not seen in China

82. Vietnam had signed the MoU on BRI cooperation in 2017. China had long been Vietnam's largest trading partner, while Vietnam was China's biggest trading partner among the ASEAN countries and the fourth largest globally. In 2022, China-Vietnam trade stood at US\$ 234.92bn and was on an upward trend in 2023. 'China, Vietnam lift ties to new stage, aiming for shared future', *Xinhua*, 14 December 2023.

83. 'Xi calls state visit to Vietnam successful culmination of China's diplomatic efforts in 2023', *Xinhua*, 14 December 2023.

84. Francesco Guarascio, Khanh Vu and Minh Nguyen, 'China, Vietnam hail upgrade of ties; agree to boost security', *Reuters*, 13 December 2024.

85. *Ibid.*

86. The involution of the Indian political system from a full, although imperfect, democracy to an «electoral autocracy» has been continuously documented by this journal, beginning with its analysis of India's political situation in 2015.

for decades».<sup>87</sup> In turn, Xi Jinping's increasingly tight control over China's state apparatus found expression in the introduction of new laws<sup>88</sup> and an increased attention to cadre training, aimed to reinforce «patriotic education», namely full adhesion to Xi Jinping's ideology.<sup>89</sup>

The ongoing authoritarian process was accompanied by «a multi-year crackdown on political dissent, independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and human rights defenders», which, according to Freedom House, resulted in China's civil society being «largely decimated».<sup>90</sup> Because this process has been documented in Silvia Menegazzi's analyses in this and the previous issues of *Asia Maior* and in other readily available sources, it does not need to detain us here. Some key points, nonetheless, deserve to be briefly underlined.

The first is the situation of freedom of expression and beliefs. According to Freedom House, China has a most sophisticated system of media censorship, particularly online.<sup>91</sup> This system, according to some Western analysts, allows the Chinese state to carry out «what may be the most extensive effort to selectively censor human expression ever implemented».<sup>92</sup> Accordingly, while the state allows open discussion and debate on social media, it strictly controls and manages influential social forces that can challenge the hegemonic position of the party-state. This objective is pursued, in particular, by co-opting, repressing and limiting the reach of influential non-Party «thought leaders».<sup>93</sup> Hence, in 2023, as in previous years, professional journalists, citizen journalists and bloggers were detained, disappeared, or were criminally charged.<sup>94</sup>

Even more depressing was the situation of ethnic minorities, particularly in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia. In Xinjiang – where the policy of repression against minorities appeared to be at its height – more than a million Uyghurs and other members of Turkic ethnic minority groups were detained in prisons and labour camps (sometimes called Vocational Skills Education and Training Centers). Also, in Xinjiang and Tibet a policy of ethnocide was ongoing. It found expression in the increasing numbers of ethnic minority children who «have been separated from their parents and

87. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2024: China* (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/china/freedom-world/2024>).

88. Discussed by Silvia Menegazzi in this and the preceding *Asia Maior* issue.

89. See Silvia Menegazzi's essays in this and the preceding *Asia Maior* issue.

90. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2024: China*.

91. *Ibid.*

92. Gary King, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E. Roberts, 'How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression', *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, No. 2, May 2013, pp. 326.

93. Mary Gallagher and Blake Miller, 'Who Not What: The Logic of China's Information Control Strategy', *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 248, Issue 1, December 2021, p. 1011.

94. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2024: China*.

forced to attend state-run boarding schools, where Mandarin is the sole language of instruction and where students are subject to intense political indoctrination».<sup>95</sup> As part of this ethnocidal policy, ethnic minority writers, scholars, musicians, religious figures, and anybody else criticizing this state of affairs were subject to long prison terms and other forms of punishment.<sup>96</sup>

This authoritarian involution unfolded not only domestically, but in Hong Kong, where any form of autonomy was dismantled. As documented by Than Kiū in this Asia Maior issue, in 2023 the imposition of an integrated set of political and administrative reforms in Hong Kong ended up centralizing all decisions «in the hands of a government which, in turn, [was] increasingly dependent on Beijing».<sup>97</sup> This policy was supervised by a newly-created Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office (HKMAO), directly depending on the CCP and controlled by members of the Chinese intelligence. Hence, as noted by Than Kiū, the political set up in Hong Kong became one in which «security through surveillance» trumped even economic development.<sup>98</sup>



To an Italian, as this author is, who moves from the analysis of the authoritarian involution ongoing in China to that taking place in supposedly democratic India, an Italian proverb comes irresistibly to mind: «If Messene cries, Sparta does not laugh»; differently put, if the situation in China is dismal, in India it is not much better. As documented by Diego Maiorano and Raghav Khattri, in this same Asia Maior issue,<sup>99</sup> in India the year 2023 was characterized by the continuation of that downward trend in democracy which had become apparent with Narendra Modi's ascent to power, following the 2014 general election, and which had accelerated after his second consecutive victory at the 2019 general election.<sup>100</sup> It was an authoritarian involution that, according to Maiorano and Khattri, was particularly evident in two domains: the restriction of civil liberties and

95. *Ibid.*

96. *Ibid.*

97. Than Kiū, 'Hong Kong 2023: The new Chinese province', in this same issue, p. 141.

98. *Ibid.*

99. Diego Maiorano and Raghav Khattri, 'India 2023: Towards the general elections amid rising social tension', in this same issue, pp. 283-284.

100. As pointed out by Maiorano and Khattri, some scholars argue that the democratic crisis ongoing in India has roots which go back well before Modi's rise to power. This may be true, but what is relevant is that the democratic crisis became apparent only when Modi became prime minister, and, no doubt, the proactive and aggressive anti-minorities and anti-opposition activities of organized groups which are part of the hard core of Modi's supporters played a conspicuous role in the worsening of the situation.

the erosion of democratic institutions. An international broadcast corporation as BBC, a local news outlet as Newsclick, an independent think tank as the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) were all at the receiving end of repressive moves on the part of the government, which made use of a set of measures including raids by tax officials, arrests of journalists under the draconian anti-terrorism Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), and, in the case of the CPR, cancellation of the certificate necessary to access foreign funds. Also, Rahul Gandhi – namely the most important politician of the Opposition – was sentenced to two years in prison and disqualified as MP for an allegedly offensive remark against Modi, made during the 2019 electoral campaign. Eventually, the Supreme Court suspended Gandhi's conviction, pending his appeal, which allowed him to be reinstated as MP. But, at the end of the year, more than 100 MPs belonging to the Opposition were suspended for asking a probe in a security breach occurred in the Parliament on 13 December 2023. This suspension and the subsequent boycott by opposition parties of the on-going parliamentary session was ruthlessly utilized by the majority to pass some critical bills without debate or scrutiny.<sup>101</sup>

Possibly more disturbing than the restriction of civil liberties and erosion of democratic institutions discussed by Maiorano and Khattri was the dejected and steadily worsening state of the minorities, in particular those belonging to the non-Hindu religions, namely Muslims and Christians, and those belonging to the most discriminated social strata, namely Dalits and Adivasis.

The steadily worsening state of the religious minorities was the end-product of an ongoing assault, mainly carried out at three levels. The first was the spreading of a toxic mass ideology, which singled out the members of the minorities as not fully Indians, and, as such, disloyal to the Indian nation, bent on damaging the real Indians, namely the Hindus, and prone to violence; the second was the enactment or maintenance of discriminatory laws and regulations, targeting Muslims and Christians; the third was the violent vigilante activity carried out by a galaxy of extra-parliamentary groups, whose actions were rarely if ever sanctioned by law enforcement agencies – which, of course, encouraged these groups to be increasingly aggressive and vicious.

The toxic anti-minority ideology which was becoming hegemonic in India was spread particularly by the ruling party, the BJP, and the Sangh Parivar, namely the extra-parliamentary forces that, under the guidance of the oldest and more organized among them, the RSS, support the BJP. A main component of this toxic ideology is the theory of the five jihads, supposedly carried out by the Indian Muslims with the goal to transform India

101. Diego Maiorano and Raghav Khattri, 'India 2023: Towards the general elections amid rising social tension', pp. 283-284.

into a majority Muslim country by 2025. They are: the love jihad, the land jihad, the UPSC jihad, the Bollywood jihad, and the *thook* (spit) jihad.

Love jihad supposedly consists in the seduction of Hindu girls by Muslim men, in order to convert them to Islam; land jihad is the supposed taking over of land owned by Hindus through violence or other illegal means, to gift it to the Waqf (the inalienable Islamic charitable trust); UPSC jihad concerns the examinations conducted by the Union Public Service Commission for entry into the civil service, which are supposed to favour Muslim candidates; Bollywood jihad consists in the supposed dominance of Muslim superstars in the Indian movie industry, which results in movies which give a mendaciously favourable portrait of Islam; *thook* jihad, finally, supposedly consist in the habit by Muslim cooks to spit into the food they prepare for their Hindu patrons, even if it is not clear – at least to this writer – how this could favour the spread of Islam in India.

It goes without saying that no documentary proof has ever been produced to prove the existence of any of the five jihads. That they exist and are ongoing is something plainly ridiculous and, in certain cases, fly in the face of what even the most clueless person in India can see daily with their own eyes.<sup>102</sup> This, however, does not detract from the fact that the jihad theories have been assiduously disseminated, and continuously reiterated by politicians and activists belonging to the BJP and the Sangh Parivar both through public speeches and the social media. The result has been in accordance with the saying usually misattributed to Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels: «If you repeat a lie often enough, people will believe it, and you will even come to believe it yourself». In fact, by now, the jihad accusations are accepted as true by consistent swathes of the Hindu population. This has translated into the spread of a climate of hate against the Muslim minority, which, in turn, has made easy carrying out the other two attacks on the Indian Muslims. A series of laws or regulations targeting Muslim activities have been or are being introduced, making difficult, among other things, interreligious marriages and social intercourses among persons belonging to different religions. At the same time, the anti-Muslim climate has greenlighted the violence of Hindu vigilante groups against Muslims and mixed-religion friends or couples. Both anti-Muslim laws and vigilante violence are also justified by the accusation that Muslims either eat cow meat or trade it. Most lynchings, which rou-

102. From this point of view, the Bollywood jihad deserves the palm. In a yearly production oscillating between 1500 and 2000 movies per year, those giving a favourable view of anything Muslim can be counted on the fingers of the hands. Conversely, in the past few years many openly Islamophobic movies have appeared, being sometimes commended by the Prime Minister himself. The UPSC jihad deserves second place in the classification of the absurd, as Muslims are almost absent in the Indian bureaucracy, in particular at the executive level. But the other pretended jihads too unambiguously belong to the reign of the absurd.

tinely take place in India and target Muslims, are justified on the basis of this accusation.

Without delving on any in-depth description of the legal and extra-legal persecution against the Indian Muslims in 2023,<sup>103</sup> it is worth stressing that perpetrators of violent actions against them, including riots and lynchings with lethal results, go usually scot-free. Conversely the Muslim victims are often jailed and, taking a leaf from Israeli treatment of Palestinians, their houses demolished.<sup>104</sup>

The situation of the Christian Indian minority is hardly better. Exactly as in the case of the much bigger Muslim minority,<sup>105</sup> the situation of the Christians has never been particularly happy in independent India. But – again as in the case of the Indian Muslims – it has conspicuously worsened since Modi's rise to power. In the case of the Christian minority, the jihad theories and meat-eating-or/and-meat-trading accusations are substituted by the theory that Indian Christians sneakily carry out a campaign of «forced conversion» targeting the Hindu community. It is a campaign allegedly conducted by making use of deception, bribery, and a variety of other unseemly means, including force.

Like in the case of the nefarious jihads led by the Indian Muslims, the hardly less wicked forced conversion campaign led by the Indian Christians has been countered at the legal and extra-legal levels. At the legal level, the main instrument has been the anti-conversion laws. Anti-conversion laws, which are not a new feature in the Indian legal landscape, have never been enacted at the federal level, but are present in many Indian states. The bulk of these laws has been introduced after Modi's rise to the prime ministership and all of them have been applied with growing severity ever since. In certain cases, for example in Maharashtra, Christians have been indicted of forced conversion even if no anti-conversion law is in the books. In most cases, anyway, in Maharashtra as elsewhere, legal actions against Christians accused of forced conversion appear to be a ploy to persecute the Christian minority.

As in the case of the Indian Muslims, Indian Christians have been the target not only of legal persecution but also of unprovoked vigilante violence. Once again, as in the case of Muslims, not only the Christian victims

103. Which are detailed in particular in in Irfan Engineer and Neha Dabhade, 'Deepening of Hatred, Hate Speeches and Impunity in 2023: Communal Violence in India', *Communal Violence in India Report 2023*, and United States Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, *India 2023 International Religious Freedom Report*.

104. See also Meenakshi Ganguly, 'Discriminatory Policies Trigger Religious Violence in India', *Human Rights Watch*, 3 August 2023; and Murali Krishnan, 'India's religious violence: What's behind raging clashes?', *Deutsche Welle*, 8 October 2023.

105. According to the most recent available data, those given in the 2011 national census, Hindus constitute 79.8% of the population; Muslims 14.2%; Christians 2.3%.

are not defended by the police, but if they report the violence they have suffered to the police, they are often indicted and detained. In the case of Christians, the standard accusation is that of actually being responsible for forced conversion. Of course, as in the case of the Muslims, the virtual impunity enjoyed by the Hindu vigilante groups which act against the Christians only spurs these groups to become more aggressive.

Not surprisingly, according to Open Doors, a global network documenting anti-Christian persecutions and advocating the protection of Christians but also generally of religious liberty, in 2013, on the eve of Narendra Modi's rise to the prime ministership, India ranked 31<sup>st</sup> in the list of the 50 countries where Christians faced persecution; in 2023, India had climbed to 11<sup>th</sup> place, making it «one of the most dangerous places for Christians» in the world.<sup>106</sup>



Narendra Modi has not been short of promises towards the Dalits (untouchables), since the time of his victorious electoral campaign leading to the 2014 general election, even if he has been much more restrained as far as the Adivasis (tribal peoples) are concerned. In either case, nonetheless, the condition of the two most discriminated social groups in India has worsened under Modi's dispensation. This has been shown by a report released on 4 December 2023 by the NCBR, the government agency responsible for collecting and analyzing crime data. An examination of the data included in the NCBR report reveals that in the years 2018 to 2022, while crimes against Dalits and Adivasis went up, «the conviction and charge-sheeting rates remained abysmally low».<sup>107</sup> Differently put, as in the case of Muslims and Christians, the rise of crimes against Dalits and Adivasis went largely unpunished. Also, the same data showed that the situation was particularly bad in states controlled by the BJP, in particular Uttar Pradesh.<sup>108</sup>



China and India are by far the most relevant examples of the authoritarian involution affecting Asia, but they are in no way unique. In 2023 Cambodia finally morphed into a dynastic autocracy, while human rights continued

106. '«Two attacks a day»: Why India is one of the most dangerous places for Christians', *EFE*, 14 December 2023; 'Persecution of Christians Escalates in India, EFI Reports', *Morning Star News*, 27 March 2024.

107. Rasik Bin Altaf, 'Free to Hurt: Alarming Spike in Crimes Against Dalit Revealed by NCRB data', *The Dialogue Box*, 11 January 2024.

108. 'BJP-ruled Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh top SC-ST atrocity list, shows NCRB report', *The Telegraph*, 9 December 2023.

to be rolled back.<sup>109</sup> Malaysian democracy, on its part, «witnessed a growing trend in public debates being shaped by racially and religiously framed narratives» and continued to be characterized by a situation in which political power was predicated on Muslim-Malay exclusivism.<sup>110</sup> Myanmar continued to be devastated by the ongoing civil war.<sup>111</sup> Sri Lanka was under the shadow projected by the government's apparent unwillingness to shed light on responsibility for political violence in the country and the lack of certainty that it would respect the electoral agenda which called for presidential and parliamentary elections in 2024.<sup>112</sup> In Pakistan, the judicial persecution of Imran Khan, the former premier and incumbent leader of the opposition, was coupled with the postponement of the provincial and general elections.<sup>113</sup> In Afghanistan, the denial of basic rights to women and ethnic minorities remained a defining feature of the Taliban regime.<sup>114</sup> In Iran the repression against the «woman, life, freedom» movement, sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini (September 2022), went on.<sup>115</sup> Hundreds of protesters were killed and thousands were detained. As pointed out by Human Rights Watch: «Security forces' impunity [was] rampant, with no government investigations into their use of excessive and lethal force, torture, sexual assault, and other serious abuses».<sup>116</sup> Also, still according to Human Rights Watch, Iranian authorities expanded their efforts in enforcing abusive compulsory hijab laws, while security agencies targeted family members of those killed during the protests.<sup>117</sup>



As in 2022, in spite of the widespread contraction of political liberties affecting most Asian states, in 2023 there were exceptions, documented both in the essays published in this volume and in the reports of the main organizations devoted to analysing the state of democracy in the world. Japan, South Korea

109. Caroline Bennett, 'Cambodia 2022-2023: Securing dynastic autocracy', in this same issue, pp. 217-234.

110. Emanuela Mangiarotti, 'Malaysia 2023: A reform agenda overshadowed by identity politics', in this same issue, pp. 187-202 (the quotation is from p. 187)

111. Matteo Fumagalli, 'Myanmar 2023: New conflicts and coalitions reshape war narrative, challenging an embattled junta', in this same issue, pp. 235-257.

112. Diego Abenante, 'Sri Lanka 2023: Wickremesinghe's first six months between economic recovery and political uncertainty' in this same issue, pp. 340-352.

113. Marco Corsi, 'Pakistan 2023: Multiple crises in the lead-up to the general elections', in this same issue, pp. 354-373.

114. Filippo Boni, 'Afghanistan 2023: Taliban governance and international isolation', in this same volume, pp. 375-387.

115. Giorgia Perletta, 'Iran 2023: Intensified Focus on the Eastward Strategy and Ongoing Fractures in State-Society Relations', in this same Asia Maior issue, pp. 389-405.

116. Human Rights Watch, 'Iran. Events of 2023', *World Report 2024*.

117. *Ibid.*



and Taiwan remained full-fledged democracies. In Nepal, after the constitutional crisis in 2021, in spite of «enormous contradictions» still experienced by its political system «almost twenty years after of the Republic»,<sup>118</sup> the situation of democracy improved. In fact, most parties appeared committed to democratic processes and authorities appeared more tolerant of peaceful assemblies.<sup>119</sup> A certain improvement of the democratic situation was also visible in the Philippines, under the dispensation of the new president, Ferdinand «Bongbong» Romualdez Marcos jr., who, unexpectedly, both overturned most policies of his predecessor, the illiberal Rodrigo Duterte, and tacitly distanced himself from the authoritarian legacy of his father, Ferdinand Marcos sr., who had ruled the country as a dictator. As shown by Ayson and Reyes in this same Asia Maior issue, «Marcos Jr.'s sudden reversal of his predecessor's controversial governance agendas became the defining narrative of his administration's initial year».<sup>120</sup> The new President admitted the «abuses» that had occurred during Duterte's war on drugs and, differently from his predecessor, did not show any inclination to subvert judicial independence. Marcos Jr. also reversed his predecessor's hard-line approach to the Philippines' decades-long communist insurgency and revived the Government's peace talks with the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP).<sup>121</sup>

Finally, it is worth pointing out that, in 2022, most of the popular protests which had swept several Asian countries as a reaction to the ongoing tightening of the pre-existing spaces of freedom did not last in 2023. The exception was Iran, where militant non-violent resistance against the repressive policies of the regimes continued, although with a diminished intensity.<sup>122</sup>

- III -

In 2023, the third continuing trend characterizing the situation in Asia was the adverse impact on the region of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which caused a rise in economic uncertainty, geopolitical tension and military spending. In the concluding months of the year, the Israeli war on Gaza became a further source of geopolitical tension.

From an economic viewpoint, the invasion of Ukraine, the unexpected resistance of Ukraine to the invasion, the necessity for both Russia and

118. Matteo Miele, 'Nepal 2020-2023: From the institutional crisis to new political paths', in this same volume, pp. 333-334.

119. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2024: Nepal* (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/nepal/freedom-world/2024>).

120. Miguel Enrico G. Ayson and Lara Gianina S. Reyes, 'The Philippines 2022-2023: A turbulent start for the New Era of Marcos leadership', p. 181.

121. *Ibid.*, pp. 167-185.

122. Giorgia Perletta, 'Iran 2023: Intensified Focus on the Eastward Strategy and Ongoing Fractures in State-Society Relations', pp. 391-393.

Ukraine to adjust their economies to war needs, the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia by most Western and some Asian countries could not but disrupt the economies of both Russia and Ukraine. As noted in the previous *Asia Maior* issue, this was bound to effect Asia, «both because most Asian countries imported Russian oil, and because some of them imported agricultural commodities from either or both Ukraine and Russia».<sup>123</sup> Immediately after the invasion, this resulted in the spike in the prices of oil, gas and food staples. By the first months of 2023, however, the situation improved, as the price of both oil and wheat went back to the pre-war level,<sup>124</sup> while the price of natural gas went down considerably, although remaining well above its historical average.<sup>125</sup> Nonetheless, the continuation of the war and the lack of any clear indication of its ending in a near future kept both energy and food prices fluctuating.<sup>126</sup> This caused considerable economic uncertainty in several Asian countries, in particular Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Philippines.<sup>127</sup>

Economic uncertainty was accompanied by rising geopolitical tension. In fact, the war in Ukraine «raised the level of anxiety about existing tensions in Asia», as it clearly showed that the «unthinkable» possibility of a major war in which at least one of the protagonists was a nuclear power was very real.<sup>128</sup> Differently put, the possibility of China making use of military means to take over Taiwan suddenly appeared a much more real threat than before the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. In some quarters, this potential threat looked even more pronounced because of the lack of any Asian alliance along the lines of NATO.<sup>129</sup> This enhanced perception of danger favoured the acceptance on the part of several Asian countries of the US policy – already discussed in the first part of this essay – aimed at building security networks in order to contain China.

123. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Foreword. Asia in 2022: The consequences of the war in Ukraine, US-China rivalry, democratic decline and popular protests', p. xii.

124. Zohra Cosima Benamar, 'Oil price back to pre-war level', *D+C*, 23 March 2023; Noah Berman and Mariel Ferragamo, 'How Ukraine Overcame Russia's Grain Blockade', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 27 February 2024.

125. International Energy Agency, *Gas Market Report, Q1-2024* (<https://www.iea.org/reports/gas-market-report-q1-2024>).

126. Yunyi Zhou and Kevin Z. Chen, 'Food Price Inflation in East and South-east Asia: Situation, Driving Forces, and the Outlook', *Studies in Agricultural Economics*, Vol. 125, 2023, pp. 77-86.

127. Bjoern Rother, Tokhir Mirzoev, Naoya Kato, Oana Luca, Alexei Miksjuk, Romina Kazandjian, Maxwell Kushnir, and Jijun Wang, 'Fall 2023 Global Food Crisis Update—Recent Developments, Outlook, and IMF Engagement1', *IMF* October 2023. See also Lawrence Agcaoili, 'Philippines most at risk from rising food, power prices', *The Philippine Star*, 29 August 2023

128. Reuben Johnson, 'How the war in Ukraine is impacting security in the Indo-Pacific', *Breaking Defense*, 14 June 2023.

129. *Ibid.*

In the concluding months of the year, an additional element of geopolitical tension in Asia was represented by the Israeli war on Gaza. As a rule, countries with a majority Muslim population took an unambiguous stand against Israel's war of extermination in Gaza, some of them going as far as to justify Hamas's attack of 7 October 2022.<sup>130</sup> But sympathy for the Palestinians' suffering was present in other Asian countries too, particularly on the part of the local public opinions, adversely impressed by the growing death toll in Gaza and videos showing the effect of Israeli bombing, circulating on social media.<sup>131</sup> China was ready to exploit the situation criticizing not only Israel but also the United States, for its support for Israel and the double standards it demonstrated.<sup>132</sup>

The wars in Ukraine and Gaza only added to the already existing geopolitical tensions. In this situation, the rise in military spending on the part of most Asian states, which was another characterizing feature of the state of Asia Maior in 2023, comes as no surprise. While the rise in military spending has been a feature of the world situation in the past years, in 2023 Asia was the area where this rise was more pronounced after Europe; so much so that it outpaced the rate of economic growth.<sup>133</sup>

- IV -

As in 2020 and 2021, the political evolution of Asia in 2023 has been marked by three major trends; two of them – the US-China contraposition and the contraction of liberty – are trends which have been ongoing for several years; the remaining one – the fallout of the wars in the Western side of Eurasia – is something which took shape only after 24 February 2022. All three trends had a deeply negative effect on Asia, which has been detailed in this essay and those collected in this volume. Both this essay and the others collected in this volume have highlighted that these negative consequences do not exhaust the field of possibilities available to Asian countries. The US-China contraposition has opened (previously non-existing) political and economic spaces to several Asian countries. The contraction of political lib-

130. Joseph Rachman, 'Half a world away, Gaza is a burning topic for Southeast Asia's domestic politics', *The Times of Israel*, 4 January 2024.

131. *Ibid.* Colin Rubenstein & Michael Shannon, 'The Gaza War as Seen from Southeast Asia', *The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, January 2024.

132. Ahmed Aboudouh, 'China is fixed on discrediting the US on Gaza War. But this policy lacks credibility and will likely fail', *Atlantic Council*, 14 December 2023; Amar Jallo, 'China Exploits the "War on Gaza" in its Power Struggle with Washington', *Wilson Center*, 31 January 2024.

133. Katharina Buchholz, 'Military Spending Rises Fastest in Asia, Eastern Europe', *Statista*, 22 April 2024; Karl Dewey, 'Asian defence spending ambitions outstrip growth', *IJSS*, 5 February 2024; Nan Tian, Diego Lopes da Silva, Xiao Liang and Lorenzo Scarazzato, 'Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2023', *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, April 2024.

erty in most Asian countries has been accompanied by the maintenance of democracy in a minority of them, and an improvement of the democratic situation in some few cases. The negative fallout of the wars on Western Eurasia is bound to end as soon as these wars end, which, according to some analysts, is something which will happen in a not-too-distant future.

Once all this has been pointed out, the fact remains that the negative elements of the situation appear to decisively outweigh the positive ones. The US-China contraposition could end up in a military confrontation, whose starting point would very possibly be either Taiwan or the Second Thomas Shoal. And any US-China military confrontation could escalate to a nuclear war. No enlargement in democracy in the other Asian countries can really outweigh the steadily contraction of liberty in China and India. There are signs that both Russia on one side and Ukraine and its supporters on the other are nearing a stage of exhaustion, which will force them to some kind of political solution of the war. In the Middle East, however, no solution is in the offing for the Palestinian question, and, without it, it is difficult to think that any long-lasting peace is possible. The fact that Israel appears decided to make use of its massive military superiority vis-à-vis the other states of the region to decisively alter the existing political set-up does not improve the situation. In the long run, Israel's attempt to impose its will on the Middle East by the ruthless employment of its overwhelming military might could reveal itself a fool's errand. Whichever the end result of Israel's ruthless policy, in the medium and long run it will anyway destabilize the Middle East and continue to provoke a negative fallout on many Asian countries.<sup>134</sup> Hence, as a conclusion of this overview of the evolution of Asia in 2023, what has been said in the previous two issues of this journal must be repeated; the situation remains bleak, and much optimism about the future of the region is unwarranted.

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*My thanks to Aurelio Insisa for his criticism and suggestions. Of course, it goes without saying that any responsibility for possible errors and inaccuracies still included in this essay is mine alone.*

134. For example, the war on Gaza has put an end, at least for the time being, to any possible development of the I2U2 or «Western Quad». On the I2U2, see Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Foreword. Asia in 2022: The consequences of the war in Ukraine, US-China rivalry, democratic decline and popular protests', p. XVII.