



ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXIV / 2023

Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

viella



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

Vol. XXXIV / 2023

Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

viella

Asia Maior. The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989.

Copyright © 2023 - Viella s.r.l. & Associazione Asia Maior

ISBN 979-12-5469-681-1 (Paper) ISBN 979-12-5469-682-8 (Online)

ISSN 2385-2526 (Paper) ISSN 2612-6680 (Online)

Annual journal - Vol. XXXIV, 2023

This journal is published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & the CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli Extra-europei «Cesare Bonaccossa», University of Pavia

Asia Maior: The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989 is an open-access journal, whose issues and single articles can be freely downloaded from the think tank webpage: www.asiamaior.org.

The reference year is the one on which the analyses of the volume are focused. Each *Asia Maior* volume is always published in the year following the one indicated on the cover.

Paper version	Italy	€ 50.00	Abroad	€ 65.00
Subscription	abbonamenti@viella.it		www.viella.it	

EDITORIAL BOARD

Editor-in-chief (direttore responsabile):

Michelguglielmo Torri, University of Turin.

Co-editors:

Filippo Boni, The Open University.

Diego Maiorano, The University of Naples «L'Orientale».

Associate editors:

Axel Berkofsky, University of Pavia;

Giulio Pugliese, University of Oxford and European University Institute;

Emanuela Mangiarotti, University of Pavia;

Pierluigi Valsecchi, University of Pavia.

Consulting editors:

Elisabetta Basile, University of Rome «Sapienza»;

Kerry Brown, King's College London;

Peter Brian Ramsay Carey, Oxford University;

Rosa Caroli, University of Venice;

Jaewoo Choo, Kyung Hee University (Seoul, South Korea);

Jamie Seth Davidson, National University of Singapore;

Ritu Dewan, Indian Association for Women Studies;

Laura De Giorgi, University of Venice;

Kevin Hewison, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill;
Lucia Husenicova, University Matej Bel (Banská Bystrica, Slovakia);
David C. Kang, Maria Crutcher Professor of International Relations, University of Southern California;
Rohit Karki, Kathmandu School of Law;
Jeff Kingston, Temple University – Japan Campus;
Mirjam Künkler, Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study – Uppsala;
Noemi Lanna, University of Naples «L'Orientale»;
James Manor, School of Advanced Studies – University of London;
Aditya Mukherjee, Jawaharlal Nehru University;
Mridula Mukherjee, Jawaharlal Nehru University;
Parimala Rao, University of Delhi;
Guido Samarani, University of Venice;
Marisa Siddivò, University of Naples «L'Orientale»;
Eswaran Sridharan, Institute for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania;
Arun Swamy, University of Guam;
Akio Takahara, University of Tokyo;
Edsel Tupaz, Harvard University alumnus, Ateneo de Manila University and Far Eastern University;
Sten Widmalm, Uppsala University;
Ather Zia, University of Northern Colorado;

Book reviews editors:

Elena Valdameri, ETH Zürich;
Aurelio Insisa, University of Hong Kong;
Luciano Zaccara, Qatar University.

Editorial secretary:

Chiara Benini

Graphic project:

Nicola Mocchi.

Before being published in *Asia Maior*, all articles, whether commissioned or unsolicited, after being first evaluated by the Journal's editors, are then submitted to a double-blind peer review involving up to three anonymous referees. Coherently with the spirit of the double-blind peer review process, *Asia Maior* does not make public the name of the reviewers. However, the reviewers' names – and, if need be, the whole correspondence between the journal's editors and the reviewer/s – can be disclosed to interested institutions, upon a formal request made directly to the Editor in Chief of the journal.

Articles meant for publication should be sent to Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com), Filippo Boni (filippo.boni@open.ac.uk), Diego Maiorano (dmaiorano@unior.it); book reviews should be sent to Elena Valdameri (elena.valdameri@gess.ethz.ch).



ASSOCIAZIONE ASIA MAIOR

Steering Committee: Filippo Boni, Marzia Casolari, Matteo Fumagalli, Michelguglielmo Torri (President).

Scientific Board: Guido Abbattista (Università di Trieste), Domenico Amirante (Università «Federico II», Napoli), Elisabetta Basile (Università «La Sapienza», Roma), Luigi Bonanate (Università di Torino), Claudio Cecchi (Università «La Sapienza», Roma), Alessandro Colombo (Università di Milano), Anton Giulio Maria de Robertis (Università di Bari), Thierry Di Costanzo (Université de Strasbourg), Max Guderzo (Università di Siena), Giorgio Milanetti (Università «La Sapienza», Roma), Paolo Puddinu (Università di Sassari), Adriano Rossi (Università «L'Orientale», Napoli), Giuseppe Sacco (Università «Roma Tre», Roma), Guido Samarani (Università «Ca' Foscari», Venezia), Filippo Sabetti (McGill University, Montréal), Gianni Vaggi (Università di Pavia).



CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli extra-europei
"Cesare Bonacossa" - Università di Pavia

Steering Committee: Axel Berkofsky, Arturo Colombo, Antonio Morone, Giulia Rossolillo, Gianni Vaggi, Pierluigi Valsecchi (President), Massimo Zaccaria.



viella

libreria editrice

via delle Alpi, 32

I-00198 ROMA

tel. 06 84 17 758

fax 06 85 35 39 60

www.viella.it

CONTENTS

IX *Foreword*

- 1 SILVIA MENEGAZZI, *China in 2023: Stimulating Economic Recovery along with Patriotic Education*
- 23 GIULIA SCIORATI, *China in 2023: A «Global-Security-Attentive» Foreign Policy*
- 39 MARCO MILANI & ANTONIO FIORI, *Korean peninsula 2023: A year of rising tensions and political polarization*
- 65 GIULIO PUGLIESE & MARCO ZAPPA, *Japan 2023: Still walking in Abe Shinzō's footsteps*
- 125 THIAN KIÜ, *Hong Kong 2023: The new Chinese province*
- 145 AURELIO INSISA, *Taiwan 2023 and the 2024 Elections: A DPP partial victory after a contested electoral campaign*
- 167 MIGUEL ENRICO G. AYSON & LARA GIANINA S. REYES, *The Philippines 2022-2023: A turbulent start for the New Era of Marcos leadership*
- 187 EMANUELA MANGIAROTTI, *Malaysia 2023: A reform agenda overshadowed by identity politics*
- 203 RICHARD QUANG-ANH TRAN, *Vietnam 2020-2023: Covid Pandemic Recovery, Unprecedented Leadership Turnover, and Continued Multilateralism*
- 217 CAROLINE BENNETT, *Cambodia 2022-2023: Securing dynastic autocracy*
- 235 MATTEO FUMAGALLI, *Myanmar 2023: New conflicts and coalitions reshape war narrative, challenging an embattled junta*
- 259 DIEGO MAIORANO & RAGHAW KHATTRI, *India 2023: Towards the general elections amid rising social tension*
- 301 IAN HALL, *India 2023: Tactical wins and strategic setbacks in foreign policy?*
- 323 MATTEO MIELE, *Nepal 2020-2023: From the Institutional Crisis to New Political Paths*
- 339 DIEGO ABENANTE, *Sri Lanka 2023: Wickremesinghe's first six months between economic recovery and political uncertainty*
- 353 MARCO CORSI, *Pakistan 2023: Multiple crises in the lead-up to the general elections*
- 375 FILIPPO BONI, *Afghanistan 2023: Taliban governance and international isolation*
- 389 GIORGIA PERLETTA, *Iran 2023: Intensified Focus on the Eastward Strategy and Ongoing Fractures in State-Society Relations*
- Special articles*
- 407 ENRICO FARDELLA, *When history rhymes: China's relations with Russia and the war in Ukraine*
- 433 DAVID SCOTT, *The return of the 'Indo-Pacific'*
- 451 *Reviews*
- 479 *Appendix*

CHINA IN 2023: A «GLOBAL-SECURITY-ATTENTIVE» FOREIGN POLICY

Giulia Sciorati*

London School of Economics and Political Science
g.sciorati@lse.ac.uk

This article provides an in-depth analysis of China's foreign policy in 2023, exploring four dimensions: global security, China-United States relations, China-Russia ties, and China's «active» approach in the Global South.

2023 witnessed an attempt to depart from China's historical «non-interference principle», marked by the conceptual redefinition of the «Global Security Initiative» and the country's active involvement in dispute and conflict resolutions across the Global South. In the opening empirical section, the article examines China's stance on global security, and its attempts to balance «activism» and non-interference. The following section investigates the complexity of China-United States relations, highlighting attempts at strategic dialogue amid persistent geopolitical struggles. Afterwards, the article argues that a recalibration of China-Russia ties is ongoing, emphasising China's diplomatic discourse on non-allegiance and its less-ambiguous approach toward Ukraine. The last section discusses China's style of activism in disputes and conflict theatres in the Global South, analysing the Russia-Ukraine war, the Iran-Saudi deal, and the Israel-Palestine war. The article concludes by highlighting the tension between China's increasingly more active role in global security and the international system and the country's attempts to preserve its historically crafted image as a «responsible» and «peaceful» great power.

KEYWORDS – Foreign policy; global security; China-US; China-Russia; Global South.

1. Introduction

China's foreign policy in 2023 can be characterised as one of unprecedented activism in global security, where the country took on a more engaged role as a global power and sought to redefine its position in global security governance. This development demonstrates an interest in updating and reformulating China's position as a global security provider, challenging the longstanding dominance of the US as the sole global security actor since the post-World War II international system was established.

The subsequent section explores China's longstanding policy of «non-interference», a principle that has shaped the country's foreign re-

* The author is grateful to the Asia Maior editorial committee and the two anonymous reviewers for their feedback and comments.

lations since the Cold War [Chen 2014; Samarani 2017]. In 2023, China transformed its approach to non-interference, adopting a more proactive role in global security, particularly evidenced by the conceptual redefinition of its «Global Security Initiative» (GSI) [Fu 2022, 6 September]. This transformation was also visible in China's actions in relation to disputes and conflicts around the world. Beijing's efforts to reconcile this more proactive stance with its traditional policy of non-interference reflected longstanding debates among scholars in China, which have recently become more prominent in diplomatic discussions and decisions in foreign policymaking. The article explores this trend by focusing on three recipients of the country's foreign policy – namely the US, Russia and countries in the Global South – that is, the three priorities of Chinese foreign policy.

The following two sections thus focus on China's relations with the US and Russia. Section 3 discusses China-US relations, noting that despite efforts to promote dialogue, tensions persist, particularly concerning Taiwan's sovereignty. Section 4 examines China-Russia ties in 2023, highlighting a recalibration in China's discourse on its relationship with Moscow, particularly regarding the Russia-Ukraine war. While bilateral cooperation continues, mostly focusing on common security concerns and strengthening economic ties, China attempts to show a (discursive) departure from a total alignment with Russia.

The final section discusses China's activism in Global South security. China's involvement in foreign disputes and conflicts in 2023 is here analysed, revealing a strategic stance that emphasises political settlements while attempting to safeguard the country's non-interference principle. This approach eventually aims to reinforce China's image as a responsible power [Foot 2001].

Regarding data sources, this article relies on official documents, media articles, reports, speeches, and statements by political figures in English, Chinese, and Russian, as well as secondary literature. The author acknowledges potential biases in the analysed data, particularly from Chinese and Russian sources, but emphasises the importance of critically examining these sources for a deeper understanding of China's contemporary foreign policy and for efforts to de-Westernise and de-hierarchise the discipline of International Relations.

2. China's Foreign Policy in the Wake of Renegotiated Non-Interference

In 1955, then-Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai first advocated for what later became universally known as China's «non-interference» – a policy suggesting the country's commitment to abstain from meddling in the domestic affairs of other states under the tacit accord of reciprocity [Sørensen 2019]. Over the years, this principle has become a hallmark of China's

foreign relations, akin to its «non-conditionality» rule [Alden and Hughes 2009], which excludes democratisation goals from loans and aid deals. While the practical application of non-interference may appear ambiguous, it remains the ideological cornerstone connecting China with many Global South countries, with the appeal of China's non-interference to its foreign partners, especially to non-democratic regimes, lying in the belief that Beijing would refrain from intervening in, e.g., how states handle domestic protests, phrase their labour laws, or distribute wealth. However, changing China's traditional stance on global security in 2023 – an area where non-interference is particularly challenging to uphold – may have put this «ideological bond» at risk.

Extensive literature has already been published concerning China's previous attempts to renegotiate the country's approach to non-interference [e.g., Chaziza and Goldman 2014; Gonzales-Vicente 2016; Zheng 2016; Hirono *et al.* 2019; Sørensen 2019]. Among these studies, a notable renegotiation occurred with China's participation in peacekeeping operations, where the country managed to preserve a semblance of non-interference by ensuring that legitimate national governments would consent to external intervention and peacekeepers would operate under the United Nations (UN) framework [Pang 2005]. Consent from target countries and UN-led operations (instead of Chinese-led) «protected» the country's claims to operate under non-interference.

On 21 February 2023, however, with China introducing a concept paper outlining the characteristics of its newly established GSI [MFA PRC 2023c], the country showed the willingness to depart from its historical «inaction» in the face of foreign disputes and conflicts and embrace a more proactive role. Indeed, this approach to global security witnessed China abandoning the shield of the UN and presenting itself as a «free agent» in global security. Despite such change, China has strategically sought to maintain at least an appearance of its non-interference principle by framing its role not as that of a traditional mediator but more as a moderator or facilitator of dialogue [Seiwert 2023]. Indeed, official discourse generally depicted China as playing a secondary role in global security, with agency remaining in the hand of conflicting parties. Such a framing is thus set to reassure countries wary of China's active approach to global security and preserve the authenticity of the country's non-interference.

Documentary evidence published throughout the year further reiterates this trend, with particular emphasis on the concept paper on the GSI («The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper», *Quanqiu Anquan Changyi Gainian Wenjian* 全球安全倡议概念文件) [MFA PRC 2023c], the «Law on Foreign Relations of the PRC» (*Zhonghua Renmin Gonghe Guo Dui Wai Guanxi Fa* 中华人民共和国对外关系法) adopted in June [MFA PRC 2023j], and the BRI white paper entitled «The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future» (*Gongjian "Yi dai Yi lu": Goujian Renlei*

Minyun Gongtongti de Zhongda Shixian 共建“一带一路”：构建人类命运共同体的重大实践) released in October [State Council PRC 2023b].

Despite pertaining to different corpora, these documents underline the common principles that inform China's behaviour. Notably, «inclusivity and mutuality» emphasise that China does not see itself as the sole actor in global security but advocates for a multipolar global security governance. For instance, the concept paper on the GSI states that «China stands ready to work with all countries and peoples [...] to address all kinds of traditional and non-traditional security challenges» [MFA PRC 2023c]. In its efforts to moderate/facilitate dialogue, China sets its position on the sidelines and avoids favouring a conflicting party over the other. Moreover, the three documents commit to peacekeeping, reinforcing a change in non-interference that historically ensured China's success. Article 16 of the Law on Foreign Relations, for instance, emphasises that the country «observes the basic principles of peacekeeping operations and maintains a position of fairness» [MFA PRC 2023j]. The other two documents make similar arguments, stressing the crucial role of «joint consultation and contribution» to global security [State Council PRC 2023b] and the aim to «eliminate the root causes of international conflict» [MFA PRC 2023c].

2023 has made apparent China's intention to re-negotiate its non-interference principle more openly, and potentially set the stage for the country's role as a global security provider, thus redefining its position on the global stage.

3. *China-United States in the Wake of Newfound Strategic Dialogue*

Among other historical anniversaries, 2022 marked the fiftieth anniversary of Richard Nixon's 1972 historic visit to Beijing, a pivotal moment that shifted China-US relations during the Cold War era [e.g., Samarani 2017]. However, 2022 did not replicate the iconic rapprochement seen fifty years earlier. Instead, the relationship between the two great powers persisted in competition, emphasising the hegemonic struggle versus a rising power dynamic, with Taiwan's sovereignty as a central point of contention. Nonetheless, a fragment of the 1972 legacy of US-China relations seems to have resurfaced in 2023, particularly from a dialogic perspective. Both sides have attempted to establish a new framework for interaction, aiming to transform open antagonism into dialogue. However, despite 2023 being a phase of renewed communication between the two great powers, this dialogue remains imperfect. It is crucial not to mistake it for lack of competition or «future struggle» (*douzheng* 斗争), a term highlighted in Secretary General Xi Jinping's October 2022 Work Report to the 20th Communist Party Congress [State Council PRC 2022].

Such a process unfolded in early 2023, marked by what is now identified as the notorious «Chinese balloon incident». This incident involved a

high-altitude balloon crossing North American airspace – Alaska, Western Canada, and contiguous US territories – before being shot down by the US Air Force on 4 February near the coast of North Carolina. International observers foresaw strained China-US relations due to this incident [Culver 2023, 22 February; Kennedy 2023]. It amplified significant US concerns over China's technological capabilities, triggering memories akin to 9/11 in the US public, as it was the first time such an incident directly affected US soil. The diplomatic standoff from this incident led to the suspension of preparations for US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's anticipated visit to China in April [Miller *et al.* 2023, 5 February]. Chinese authorities have been hesitant to resume preparations for the visit. Some have attributed this behaviour to concerns about the potential publication of analyses on the balloon's debris [Sevastopulo 2023, 14 April]. Despite this tense start, China-US relations in 2023 concluded on a more positive note for the two countries. While lacking groundbreaking announcements, Xi Jinping's visit to the US and meeting with President Joe Biden in San Francisco signalled a mutual agreement to resume high-level dialogue and communication between the two powers.

The transition from the «balloon crisis mode» to high-level meetings involved a series of lower-level engagements. These meetings relied on established channels of the bilateral relationship, ensuring ongoing communication even during critical moments. Like the China-US rapprochement in the 1970s, where diplomatic talks stemmed from sports and academic cooperation, in 2023 the focus shifted to climate concerns. US Special Climate Envoy John Kerry's three-day visit to China in July marked one of three high-level visits by current US administration officials since the pandemic travel restrictions had been eased [US DoS 2023b]. Preceded by Blinken's June visit and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen's visit ten days earlier, Kerry's discussions centred on economic and climate issues [US DoS 2023a; Capoot 2023, 9 July]. This signalled both nations' willingness to reopen dialogue, particularly in areas crucial for domestic stability and international positioning, such as economic cooperation and shared concerns about climate issues. Following her visit, Yellen stressed the commitment to prevent the US and China from supporting «unintended escalatory actions that could harm our overall economic relationship» [Capoot 2023, 9 July].

Despite both major powers signalling a readiness to redefine their diplomatic relationship, contrasting views on China prevailed in the US political discourse, marking a persistent portrayal of Beijing as an antagonist, if not an outright enemy. Throughout the year, discussions centred on the profound ideological differences between China and the US, dominating top-level political discourse. Notably, Biden's characterisation of Xi as a «dictator» during a presidential campaign fundraiser in June 2023 reflects ongoing ambiguities in portraying China as an adversary – a narrative

seemingly important for the current president's potential in the 2024 elections.¹ Similarly, the unexpected replacement of Chinese Foreign Ministry Qin Gang in July fuelled debates about China's perceived threat [AP News 2023, 25 July].

However, some influential voices in US politics have begun re-evaluating China's threat level. CIA Director William Burns, amidst the balloon crisis, questioned China's potential military invasion of Taiwan, interpreting the alleged 2027 timeframe as more of an indicator than an already-made decision [Volz 2023, 26 February].² Additionally, Yellen's speech at John Hopkins University in April suggested a shift in the US approach, scaling down the intent to economically decouple China [US DoT 2023].³

Maintaining dialogue and open communication has remained pivotal in the China-US relationship throughout the last ten months of 2023. Despite Henry Kissinger's July visit to Beijing not resulting in a new Shanghai Communiqué⁴ [AP News 2023, 20 July], and his passing in December [MFA PRC 2023n], the US and China invested significant political capital in regularly and openly exchanging information. They aimed to prevent a complete interruption of communication akin to a Cold War scenario, once considered unimaginable. Although US political discourse on China still involves conflicting arguments, both nations' diplomatic efforts appear aimed at following a path of potential dialogue. However, the issue of Taiwan's sovereignty remains a highly contentious aspect that may as well hinder this pursuit.

4. *China-Russia in the Wake of «Recalibrated» Relations*

China-Russia relations have often been understood as a deepening convergence, bordering alliance. This trend directly responds to the escalating systemic confrontation between China and the US, prompting Beijing to actively seek «allies» in contesting the liberal international order [e.g., Kaczmarek 2015, Korolev 2019, Bossuyt & Kaczmarek 2021, Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2022, Kirchberger *et al.* 2022]. The initial ambivalence in China's stance toward Russia's aggression of Ukraine further fuelled this perception

1. «That was the great embarrassment for *dictators*, when they did not know what happened» [Tan 2023, 21 June, emphasis added].

2. «Now, that does not mean that [Xi] has decided to conduct an invasion in 2027 or any other year; but it is a reminder of the seriousness of his focus and his ambition» [Volz 2023, 26 February].

3. «We do not seek to “decouple” our economy from China's. A full separation of our economies would be disastrous for both countries. It would be destabilising for the rest of the world. Rather, we know that the health of the Chinese and U.S. economies is closely linked» [US DoT 2023].

4. The diplomatic document issued by the US and the People's Republic of China on 27 February 1972, concluding Richard Nixon's visit to China.

[Huang 2023, 8 July]. Despite the developments in 2023 not completely clarifying China's position toward Moscow, Chinese official discourse depicted a less ambiguous approach, emphasising attempts to offer a more balanced perspective on the Russia-Ukraine war. China showcased a resurgence in diplomatic efforts toward Ukraine, directly – through high-level meetings – and indirectly – via economic and financial support. This shift, coupled with altered rhetoric from China's top diplomats, aimed to reposition China in the eyes of the international community.

It is crucial to note that this repositioning does not signify a distancing from Russia. In fact, the two nations have maintained a tight schedule of diplomatic engagements throughout the year. President Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin engaged in state visits to each other's countries. Xi visited Moscow in March, and Putin attended the third «Belt & Road Forum» in Beijing in October [President of Russia 2023a; President of Russia 2023b]. However, there were subtle changes from previous years, such as Xi's in-person absence from the «Eurasian Economic Forum» in Moscow [Xinhua, 25 May] and the divergence in reciprocal visits between the two countries' heads of government.⁵

Examining China-Russia relations in 2023 through diplomatic discourse reveals three prominent themes. First, there appear to be minor frictions in the bilateral relationship, with China seeking to reposition itself and Moscow emphasising the uniqueness of bilateral ties. This is illustrated, for instance, in statements by China's former Foreign Affairs Minister Qin Gang and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. According to Russian News Agency TASS, Qin, newly appointed, stated during a telephone conversation with Lavrov in late January that «Chinese-Russian relations are based on the principles of non-allegiance [...] and non-confrontation, while not targeting any third party» [TASS 2023, 9 January]. Notably, the TASS transcript specifies that «non-allegiance» should be interpreted in terms of systemic bloc confrontations, and not in terms of changes in the nature of the bilateral relationship between Beijing and Moscow.⁶ Such a specification, however, is absent in the Chinese transcript [MFA PRC 2023a]. A few months later, while meeting Qin in person in Uzbekistan at the outskirts of the «Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation», Lavrov was quoted defining China-Russia ties as characterised by «robust resilience» and the frequency of

5. While Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin visited China twice in 2023, in May and December, Chinese Premier Li Qiang failed to reciprocate [Russian government 2023a; Russian Government 2023b].

6. The Russian transcript reads: «Chinese-Russian relations are based on the principles of non-allegiance [*with any blocs*], and non-confrontation, while not targeting any third party» [TASS 2023, 9 January, emphasis added]. The Chinese document states: «China-Russia relations are based on non-alliance, non-confrontation and non-targeting of any third party» [MFA PRC 2023a].

bilateral meetings by the «need to *synchronize* [...] positions» [TASS 2023, 13 April, emphasis added].

The second theme involves the war in Ukraine and China's resumed diplomatic dialogue with Kyiv. Throughout 2023, China seemingly attempted to construct a more open position toward Ukraine, with, among other things, then-head of the CPC's diplomacy Wang Yi meeting up with Ukraine Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba during the «Munich Security Conference» in February [MFA PRC 2023b]. There was also the appointment of a new Ukrainian ambassador to Beijing in June (a position that had remained vacant since 2021) following a phone conversation between Xi and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in April [MFA PRC 2023g]. Perhaps most importantly, a Ukrainian government member, Ukraine's deputy Economy Minister Taras Kachka, visited China in July for the first high-level visit since the war [Quin Pollard 2023, 20 July]. According to Xinhua, Lavrov «applauded China's position paper for accommodating the security concerns of all parties and being conducive to eliminating the root causes of the conflict» during a conversation with Wang in Moscow [*Xinhua*, 19 September] – a sentiment shared by Putin shortly afterwards [MFA PRC 2023k]. Russia's somewhat formal support of China's position paper on Ukraine had been facilitated by Wang's words a month earlier. By stating that «on any international and multilateral occasion [...] China would uphold an independent and impartial position» [State Council PRC 2023a], the Chinese Foreign Minister signalled the importance for China to show a different facet to the international community even at the expense of upholding a less ambiguous stance over Ukraine.

A corollary to the construction of Ukraine in China's diplomatic discourse is represented by Beijing's stance on nuclear energy and nuclear weapons. China not only offered direct financial support to Ukraine to maintain nuclear energy facilities properly working through a donation to the «International Atomic Energy Agency» [CGTN, 6 March], but, through China's UN Ambassador Geng Shuang, the country also repeatedly invited Russia and Ukraine to «stay away from the nuclear redline» [Guancha 2023, 24 June].

Lastly, a final theme shows China-Russia ties at their most positive in 2023. Emphasis is placed on cooperation and international dialogue toward Afghanistan, a security issue China and Russia share. Indeed, the two countries have made efforts to keep Kabul under observation, especially since the Taliban takeover in 2021, including sponsoring multilateral meetings with countries neighbouring Afghanistan such as Iran and Pakistan [MFA PRC 2023f].

In conclusion, China's diplomatic discourse shows both recalibration in the approach towards its bilateral relationship with Russia and Beijing's efforts to reposition itself in response to the Russia-Ukraine war.

5. *China's Foreign Policy in the Wake of «Activism» in the Global South*

As noted in the previous sections, the most notable change in China's foreign policy during 2023 has been its increasingly active approach to foreign disputes and conflicts. As China was emerging as a significant global power, the boundaries of its once unwavering non-interference stance have been put under more pressing negotiation. The concept had remained under discussion in China's academic circles for years, with some arguing for the need to reassess non-interference considering the changing global context, suggesting the country's greater engagement with international affairs. Others, in contrast, had warned that any renegotiation of non-interference may raise questions about China's sovereignty and invite external interventions in the country's own internal affairs [Zheng 2016]. At the same time, China has strived to reconcile its role as a «responsible great power» with the concept of its «peaceful rise».⁷ This has led to a cautious approach, steering clear of potential foreign disputes and conflicts that could force the country to assume a clear position in favour of or against disputing countries.

This cautious stance was also particularly evident in China's voting behaviour in the UN Security Council, with frequent abstentions in controversial votes involving countries in the Global South [Chan 2013]. However, in what has been perceived as a «novelty», reports of China's diplomatic intervention in conflict theatres – actual or hypothetical – became prominent in international media and a real expectation among analysts and policymakers alike. The perception of a Chinese «shift» was further complemented by the release of several new diplomatic position papers which, detailing China's approach to ongoing crises worldwide, were indicative of a more attentive role on the international stage. Above all, in 2023, three specific cases underscored China's newfound role as a potential agent in mediating foreign conflicts and disputes. These included the publication of «China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis» (*Guanyu Zhengzhi Jiejue Wukelan Weiji de Zhongguo Lichang* 关于政治解决乌克兰危机的中国立场) in February 2023 [MFA PRC 2023d], the «Joint Trilateral Statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran» (*Zhonghua Renmin Gonghe Guo, Shate Alabo Wangguo, Yilang Yisilan Gongheguo San Fang Lianhe Shengming* 中华人民共和国、沙特阿拉伯王国、伊朗伊斯兰共和国三方联合声明) in March 2023 [MFA PRC 2023e], and the «Position Paper of the People's Republic of China on Resolving the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict» (*Zhongguo Guanyu Jiejue BaYi Chongtu de Lichang Wenjian* 中国关于解决巴以冲突的立场文件) in November 2023 [MFA PRC 2023m]. Analysing these documents provides insight into how China envisions its role as a

7. On China as a responsible power, see Foot [2001]. On the country's peaceful rise, see Yue [2008].

«responsible» and «peaceful» great power while operating within a de facto non-interference self-imposed mandate.

A clear distinction emerges regarding the nature of the foreign crises under scrutiny, especially concerning the frames through which China's «solutions» are presented. Notably, the cases of Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine are treated similarly in China's position papers, emphasising the need for a «political settlement» mediated by the UN, with the will of the conflict-afflicted population as the main driver of any solution. This approach allows China to influence conflict resolutions while deflecting responsibility to other supranational actors (i.e., the UN) and giving agency to the conflicting states, thereby safeguarding its non-interference principle.

The proposed solution for the Iran-Saudi case follows a similar pattern, endorsing Saudi Arabia and Iran's negotiation roles while downplaying the roles of mediators such as China, Iraq, and Oman. Indeed, in the Joint Trilateral Statement, active agency remains exclusively ascribed to Tehran and Riyadh. Significantly, in the Trilateral Statement, the Saudi and Iranian sides not only expressed their appreciation and gratitude to the Republic of Iraq and the Sultanate of Oman for hosting rounds of dialogue that took place between both sides during the years 2021-2022. They also made manifest their appreciation and gratitude to the leadership and government of the People's Republic of China for hosting and sponsoring the talks, and the efforts it placed towards its success [MFA PRC 2023e].

In all the above cases, the emphasis is on a «political solution», which places conflicting actors at the forefront, protecting China's hands-off interventionist approach. This consistent stance aligns with Beijing's self-narrative as a rising power, distinct from US norms and practices, particularly appealing in regions like the Middle East with a history of instability linked to US direct military operations.

Another significant aspect emerging from these documents is the emphasis on humanitarian assistance and the protection of afflicted populations, reinforcing China's image as a responsible global power prioritising civil society's well-being over global power struggles. For instance, in the Israel-Palestine document, Beijing invites all parties to «refrain from depriving the civilian population in Gaza of supplies and services indispensable to their survival, set up humanitarian corridors in Gaza to enable rapid, safe, unhindered and sustainable humanitarian access, and avoid a humanitarian disaster of even greater gravity» [MFA PRC 2023m].

In addition to positioning itself against a more hands-on US, this approach ensures that China's «political solutions» remain uncontested, allowing the country to establish itself as a viable «moderator/facilitator of dialogue» across the Global South. The only exception seems to be the Israel-Palestine conflict, where Chinese diplomats' discourse, despite maintaining a similar approach in the Israel-Palestine position paper as with Russia-Ukraine, have assumed more assertive tones, particularly highlighting brutalities against the Palestinian population – a stance that can be partially

explained by the historical ties shared by China and Palestine [e.g. Marzano 2022]. For example, during a telephone conversation with the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, Wang was reported saying that: «Israel's actions have gone beyond the scope of self-defence, and Israel should heed the call of the international community and the Secretary-General of the United Nations and stop its group punishment to the people in Gaza» [MFA PRC 2023].

In 2023, China's foreign policy appeared to have deviated from its traditional non-interference principle, embracing a more interventionist role in foreign disputes and conflicts. Notably consistent across diverse core cases, China's approach reinforced its self-proclaimed image as a responsible global actor by focusing on humanitarian assistance.

6. Conclusions

In his seminal volume *On China*, Henry Kissinger quoted the advice of a famous Qing-era Confucian scholar on engaging with foreigners: «Your manners and deportment should not be too lofty, and you should have a vague, casual appearance. Let their insults, deceitfulness, and contempt for everything appear to be understood by you and yet seem not understood, for you should look somewhat stupid» [2011, digital edition]. Such an anecdote has offered a good analogy for the ambiguity that has characterised China's foreign policy and its practice of never fully showing its hand in the past. However, the evolution of the country's approach to international affairs in 2023 may as well have made this comparison obsolete.

This article has offered some considerations on China's foreign policy in the past year, focusing on the country's activism, especially in the realm of global security. Such considerations are a contribution to studies attempting to understand the extent to which China is nowadays renegotiating its traditional principle of non-interference by being more active in mediating foreign disputes and conflicts. However, the article also takes stock of the country's attempts to maintain a «pretence of non-interference», thus upholding «activism with Chinese characteristics».

When examining China-US ties, both sides' attempts to transform antagonistic competition into dialogue have emerged from the analysis, particularly exemplified by Xi's state visit to the US in November 2023. However, the «Chinese Balloon Incident», first, and the issue of Taiwan's sovereignty, second, have underscored the fragility of a dialogue characterised by geopolitical struggle and conflicting narratives. Moreover, the analysis of China-Russia ties has revealed Beijing's discursive attempts to recalibrate the bilateral relationship with Moscow in response to global security issues, especially Ukraine. While maintaining frequent diplomatic exchanges, China's discourse on Russia departed from a static to a dynamic alignment, showing the extent of Beijing's strategic adaptability. The most

notable change, however, remains linked to China's more interventionist role in the Global South, where the country has assumed a new position as a moderator/facilitator of dialogue with a keen eye on humanitarian assistance. The three specific cases – Russia-Ukraine, Iran-Saudi, and Israel-Palestine – highlighted China's habit of framing solutions within the context of the UN to preserve a semblance of its non-interference rhetoric.

In 2023, China's foreign policy has shown the country's commitment to taking on a more proactive role in global security governance while also attempting to maintain its carefully crafted image of responsible global actor.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alden, Chris, and Christopher R. Hughes, 2009, 'Harmony and Discord in China's Africa Strategy: Some Implications for Foreign Policy', *The China Quarterly* 199: 563-584.
- AP News, 2023, 20 July, 'China's Xi Tells Kissinger That China-US Ties Are at a Crossroads and Stability Is Still Possible'.
- AP News, 2023, 25 July, 'China Removes Its Outspoken Foreign Minister During a Bumpy Time in Relations with the US'.
- Běrziņa-Čerenkova, Una A., 2022, *Perfect Imbalance: China and Russia*, Singapore: World Scientific.
- Blake, Aaron, 2023, 'Chinese Spy Balloon Deflates As A Political Issue', *The Washington Post*, 1 March.
- Bossuyt, Fabienne, & Marcin Kaczmarek, 2021, 'Russia and China between Cooperation and Competition at the Regional and Global Level. Introduction', *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 62(5-6): 539-556.
- Capoot, Ashley, 2023, 'Yellen Had a «Constructive Visit» to China with Opportunities for "More Frequent Contacts" in the Future, She Says', *CNBC*, 9 July.
- CGTN, 2023, 6 March, 'China Supports IAEA's Efforts to Ensure Nuclear Security in Ukraine'.
- Chan, Phil C. W., 2013, 'A Keen Observer of the International Rule of Law? International Law in China's Voting Behaviour and Argumentation in the United Nations Security Council', *Leiden Journal of International Law* 26(4): 875-907.
- Chaziza, Mordechai, and Ogen S. Goldman, 2014, 'Revisiting China's Non-Interference Policy towards Intrastate Wars', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7(1): 89-115.
- Chen, Jian, 2014, 'Zhou Enlai and China's "Prolonged Rise"', in Ramachandra Guha (ed.) *Makers of Modern Asia*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2014, pp. 147-171.
- Culver, John K., 2023, 'The Balloon Drama Was a Drill. Here's How the US and China Can Prepare for a Real Crisis', *The New Atlanticist*, 22 February.
- Foot, R., 2001, 'Chinese Power and the Idea of a Responsible State', *The China Journal* 45: 1-19.

- Fu, Mengzi, 2022, 'Global Security Initiative: China's Answer to Challenges', *Foreign Policy*, 6 September.
- Goh, E., 2005, 'Nixon, Kissinger, and the "Soviet Card" in the U.S. Opening to China, 1971-1974', *Diplomatic History* 29(3): 475-502.
- Gonzalez-Vicente, Ruben, 2016, 'The Limits to China's Non-Interference Foreign Policy: Pro-State Interventionism and the Rescaling of Economic Governance', in Hameiri, Shahar, & Jeffrey Wilson (eds.) *The Contested Rescaling of Economic Governance in East Asia*, Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, digital edition.
- Guancha, 2023, 24 June, '耿爽：希望俄乌冲突双方严守核安全底线，远离核战争红线' (Geng Shuang: We hope that both sides in the Russia-Ukraine war will strictly adhere to the bottom line of nuclear safety and stay away from the red line of nuclear war) (https://www.guancha.cn/international/2023_06_24_697999.shtml?s=zwyxgtjbt).
- Hirono, Miwa, Yang Jiang, and Marc Lanteigne, 2019, 'China's New Roles and Behaviour in Conflict-Affected Regions: Reconsidering Non-Interference and Non-Intervention', *The China Quarterly* 239: 573-593.
- Huang, Zhengze, 2023, 'Will China Change Its Approach to the Ukraine War?', *The Diplomat*, 8 July.
- Jervis, R., 1999, 'Realism, Neorealism, and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate', *International Security*, 24(1): 42-63.
- Kennedy, Scott, 2023, 'Trial Balloon: Balancing Multiple Goals in U.S.-China Relations', *Centre for Strategic and International Studies Web Site*, 2 August.
- Kaczmarek, Marcin, 2015, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order*. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge.
- Kirchberger, Sarah, Svenja Sinjen, & Nils Wörmer (eds), 2022, *Russia-China Relations: Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?* London: Springer Nature.
- Korolev, A., 2019, 'On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation', *Asian Security* 15 (3): 233-252.
- Li, Roland, 2023, 'Xi Jinping: I Hope S.F. and California Continue to Lead the Way in Growing U.S.-China Friendship', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 November.
- Marzano, A., 2022, 'The BRI and the Mashreq: The Case of Israel', *Afriche e Orienti* 1: 60-76.
- Miller, Zeke, Michael Balsamo, Colleen Long, Amer Mahdani, & Lolita C. Baldor, 2023, 'US Downs Chinese Balloon, Drawing a Threat from China', *AP*, 5 February.
- [MFA PRC 2023a] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023, *Qin Gang Has a Phone Call with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov*, 9 January.
- [MFA PRC 2023b] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023, *Wang Yi Meets with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba*, 19 February.
- [MFA PRC 2023c] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023, *The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper*, 21 February.
- [MFA PRC 2023d] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023, *China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis*, 24 February.
- [MFA PRC 2023e] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023, *Joint Trilateral Statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 10 March.
- [MFA PRC 2023f] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023, *Joint Statement of the Second Informal Meeting on Afghanistan Between Foreign Ministers of China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran*, 14 April.

- [MFA PRC 2023g] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023, *Director-General of the Protocol Department of the Foreign Ministry Hong Lei Accepts the Copy of Credentials from Newly-Appointed Ambassador of Ukraine to China Pavlo Riabikin*, 20 June.
- [MFA PRC 2023j] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023, *Law on Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China*, 28 June.
- [MFA PRC 2023k] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023, *President of Russia Vladimir Putin Meets with Wang Yi*, 20 September.
- [MFA PRC 2023l] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023, *Wang Yi Has a Phone Call with Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia Faisal bin Farhan bin Abdullah bin Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud*, 15 October.
- [MFA PRC 2023m] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023, *Position Paper of the People's Republic of China on Resolving the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, 30 November.
- [MFA PRC 2023n] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023, *Wang Yi Mourns the Passing of Henry Kissinger*, 5 December.
- Pang, Z., 2005, 'China's Changing Attitude to UN Peacekeeping', *International Peacekeeping* 12(1): 87–104.
- [President of Russia 2023a] President of Russia, 2023, *Meeting with President of People's Republic of China Xi Jinping*, 20 March.
- [President of Russia 2023b] President of Russia, 2023, *Russian-Chinese Talks*, 18 October.
- Quin Pollard, Martin, 2023, 'Ukraine Official Makes First Senior Visit to China Since Before Russian Invasion', *Reuters*, 20 July.
- [Russian Government 2023a] Russian Government, 2023, *Mikhail Mishustin Held Talks with Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China Li Qiang*, 24 May.
- [Russian Government 2023b] Russian Government, 2023, *28th Regular Meeting of Russian and Chinese Heads of Government*, 19 December.
- Samarani, Guido, 2017, *La Cina contemporanea*, Turin: Einaudi.
- Seiwert, Eva, 2023, 'Why China Is an Unlikely Mediator in the Russia-Ukraine War', *Italian Institute for International Political Studies Web Site*, 22 June.
- Sevastopulo, Demetri, 2023, 'China Stalls Antony Blinken's Beijing Visit over «Spy Balloon» Concerns', *Financial Times*, 14 April.
- Sørensen, C. T. N., 2019, 'That Is Not Intervention; That Is Interference with Chinese Characteristics: New Concepts, Distinctions and Approaches Developing in the Chinese Debate and Foreign and Security Policy Practice', *The China Quarterly*, 239: 594-613.
- [State Council PRC 2022] State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2022, *Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, 16 October.
- [State Council PRC 2023a] State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2023, *China, Russia Maintain Close Strategic Coordination, Jointly Promote Multipolarity: FM*, 8 August.
- [State Council PRC 2023b] State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2023, *The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future*, 10 October.
- Tan, Clement, 2023, 'Biden Labels Chinese President Xi a Dictator', *CNBC*, 21 June.
- TASS, 2023, 9 January, 'China's New Top Diplomat Pledges to Keep Strong Relations with Russia's Lavrov – Ministry'.

- TASS, 2023, 13 April, 'Lavrov Lauds Resilience of Russia-China Relationship'.
- [US DoS 2023a] US Department of State, 2023, *Secretary Blinken's Visit to the People's Republic of China (PRC)*, 19 June.
- [US DoS 2023b] US Department of State, 2023, *Special Presidential Envoy for Climate Kerry Meets with the People's Republic of China (PRC) Vice President Han Zheng*, 19 July.
- [US DoT 2023] US Department of Treasury, 2023, *Remarks by Secretary of the Treasury Janet L. Yellen on the U.S. - China Economic Relationship at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies*, 20 April.
- Volz, Dustin, 2023, 'CIA Chief Says China Has Doubts About Its Ability to Invade Taiwan', *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 February.
- Waltz, Kenneth, 1979, *Theory of International Politics*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Xinhua, 2023, 25 May, 'Xi Addresses Opening Ceremony of Plenary Session of Second Eurasian Economic Forum'.
- Xinhua, 2023, 19 September, 'Chinese FM Calls on China, Russia to Adhere to True Multilateralism'.
- Yue, J., 2008, 'Peaceful Rise of China: Myth or Reality?', *International Politics* 45(4): 439-456.
- Zheng, C., 2016, 'China Debates the Non-Interference Principle', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 9(3): 349-374.

