



ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXIV / 2023

Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

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A large, intricate mandala pattern in a lighter shade of green is positioned in the bottom right corner of the cover, partially overlapping the text area.

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

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

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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 Bonacossa», 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	

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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».¹ 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.² 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.³

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.⁴

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».⁵ 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 2023.⁶



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.⁷ 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».⁸ 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».⁹ 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».¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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.¹² Also, if no formal security alliance existed between Washington and Taipei, a formal economic association, The US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st 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.¹³

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).¹⁴ 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».¹⁵ 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 Shoal¹⁶ – 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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹



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».²⁰ 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.²¹

Like Obama's Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), ditched by Trump in his first day in office,²² 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.²³

Although inferior to the most optimistic hopes, the results obtained were far from being irrelevant.²⁴ 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».²⁵ 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.²⁶

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.²⁷ 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.²⁸

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.²⁹ 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)³⁰ 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 programme³¹ – and, perhaps more importantly, under one catchy narrative – Chinese economic and infrastructure projects dating back to the 1990s.³² 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.³³ 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».³⁴ 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».³⁵

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».³⁶ 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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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».³⁹

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.⁴⁰ 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».⁴¹

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».⁴²

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,⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ These gloomy forecasts, nonetheless, were disproved during the 3rd 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.⁴⁵ During the forum, which marked the 10th 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 2017.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

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».⁴⁸

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 3rd 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.⁴⁹ 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, outsput «the U.S. and other major powers on a 2-to-1 basis or more».⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹

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 3rd 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 3rd 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.⁵²



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.⁵³

The official goal of the GDI was to expedite the implementation of the UN 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development,⁵⁴ by fostering balanced, coordinated and inclusive development.⁵⁵ To support developing countries pursuing these goals, Xi Jinping pledged US\$ 3bn over the next three years.⁵⁶ 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,⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹ 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.⁶² These differences in financial sources favoured a tighter control on the GDI on the part of the Chinese government,⁶³ 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».⁶⁴ 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».⁶⁵ 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». ⁶⁶

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, ⁶⁷ 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 it⁶⁸ – 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». ⁶⁹ 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. ⁷⁰

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».⁷¹ 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»,⁷² 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»,⁷³ 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.⁷⁴

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 journal⁷⁵ – 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».⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ 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,⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹ The agreement pledged greater cooperation in the semiconductors and minerals sector, and aimed to increase market expansion opportunities for US business.⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹

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.⁸² Hence, the signing of «dozens of bilateral cooperation documents»⁸³ related not only to security but also to rail links, telecoms and digital data cooperation.⁸⁴ 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».⁸⁵

- 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.⁸⁶



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».⁸⁷ In turn, Xi Jinping's increasingly tight control over China's state apparatus found expression in the introduction of new laws⁸⁸ and an increased attention to cadre training, aimed to reinforce «patriotic education», namely full adhesion to Xi Jinping's ideology.⁸⁹

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».⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹ 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».⁹² 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».⁹³ Hence, in 2023, as in previous years, professional journalists, citizen journalists and bloggers were detained, disappeared, or were criminally charged.⁹⁴

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».⁹⁵ 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.⁹⁶

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».⁹⁷ 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.⁹⁸



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,⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰ 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.¹⁰¹

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.¹⁰² 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 2023,¹⁰³ 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.¹⁰⁴

The situation of the Christian Indian minority is hardly better. Exactly as in the case of the much bigger Muslim minority,¹⁰⁵ 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 31st in the list of the 50 countries where Christians faced persecution; in 2023, India had climbed to 11th place, making it «one of the most dangerous places for Christians» in the world.¹⁰⁶



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 NCB, the government agency responsible for collecting and analyzing crime data. An examination of the data included in the NCB 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».¹⁰⁷ 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.¹⁰⁸



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.¹⁰⁹ 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.¹¹⁰ Myanmar continued to be devastated by the ongoing civil war.¹¹¹ 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 2024.¹¹² 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.¹¹³ In Afghanistan, the denial of basic rights to women and ethnic minorities remained a defining feature of the Taliban regime.¹¹⁴ In Iran the repression against the «woman, life, freedom» movement, sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini (September 2022), went on.¹¹⁵ 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».¹¹⁶ 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.¹¹⁷



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»,¹¹⁸ the situation of democracy improved. In fact, most parties appeared committed to democratic processes and authorities appeared more tolerant of peaceful assemblies.¹¹⁹ 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».¹²⁰ 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).¹²¹

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.¹²²

- 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».¹²³ 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,¹²⁴ while the price of natural gas went down considerably, although remaining well above its historical average.¹²⁵ 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.¹²⁶ This caused considerable economic uncertainty in several Asian countries, in particular Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Philippines.¹²⁷

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.¹²⁸ 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.¹²⁹ 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 2022.¹³⁰ 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.¹³¹ 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.¹³²

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.¹³³

- 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.¹³⁴ 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.

Michelguglielmo Torri

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.

CHINA IN 2023: STIMULATING ECONOMIC RECOVERY ALONG WITH PATRIOTIC EDUCATION

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In 2023, the People's Republic of China witnessed two major significant developments. Firstly, the Chinese Communist Party demonstrated a clear intention to increase Party ideological rectification through important political gatherings, institutional reforms, and the introduction of new laws. This reflected an effort by the Xi Jinping leadership to fortify the linkage between ideology, politics, and the legal system. Emphasis was also placed on cadre training, indicative of the Party's commitment to reinforce patriotic education, by ensuring the alignment of its members with the Party's objectives. Secondly, in the aftermath of the post-pandemic recovery, the Chinese leadership actively worked to reshape the domestic perception of the Chinese economy by projecting an image of resilience and strength, deflecting attention from potential difficulties. These two significant developments underscored the Party's strategic manoeuvres to consolidate ideological unity and legitimacy, enhance cadre capabilities, and shape a positive narrative surrounding the country's economic trajectory.

KEYWORDS – economic recovery; patriotic education; cadres training; ideological unity.

1. Introduction

One of the most significant issues of 2023 in the People's Republic of China (PRC) was the recovery after almost three years of rigid COVID-19 restrictions. It is estimated that China's abandonment of COVID-19 measures between late 2022 and the beginning of the year 2023 reinvigorated a US\$ 18 trillion economy that had recorded one of its lowest growth rates in nearly half a century [Reuters 2023, 15 March]. According to data released by the Chinese government, China witnessed a consistent economic resurgence with a 5.5% year-over-year GDP growth. The production across various sectors, including agriculture, industry, services, and energy, exhibited rapid expansion [The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2023]. In summary, according to government sources, China's economic performance demonstrated a positive trend during the first half of the year. However, despite initial signs of recovery, the Chinese economy slowed down significantly in the second quarter of 2023. There are several explanations for China's flawed economic recovery. Prime among these, there is the Par-

ty's priority to defend Xi Jinping's authority, prioritize security challenges, and implement a communication campaign aimed at promoting Xi's new ideological formulation of Chinese-style modernization, rather than introducing new measures to stimulate internal demand and confidence among Chinese consumers [Pei 2023]. In 2023, the term «Chinese-style modernization» (*zhongguo shi xiandaihua* – 中国式现代化) evolved into a key concept characterizing the legitimacy of both the Chinese Communist Party and Xi Jinping's development agenda [People's Daily 2023, 20 February]. This catchphrase prominently featured at the commencement of Xi's third term during the opening of the National People's Congress on 4 March 2023 [China Media Project 2023, 12 May]. One month before, on 7 February 2023, during a speech at a study session of the CPC Central Committee, Xi Jinping had remarked that «it is Party leadership that determines the fundamental path of Chinese modernization» [Qiushi 2023, 31 May]. To this extent, the relevance of the catchphrase is key to understanding the way the Chinese leadership reflects and shapes narratives about China's modernization path. More precisely, from a Chinese leadership point of view, China's development follows a unique path towards modernization, characterized by its huge population size and the desire to improve living conditions equally throughout the country. This uniqueness began in the late 1970s, and within a few decades, the PRC was able to achieve an industrialization path that took Western countries centuries to accomplish [Qiushi 2023, 14 November].

Likewise, technological innovation represents a key aspect of China's modernization. Amidst growing challenges related to the abandonment of COVID-19 restrictions and anti-corruption campaigns, another important event for the year under review concerned the 2023 World Internet Conference (WIC) held in Wuzhen from 8 to 10 November. During the Summit, President Xi Jinping delivered an online message emphasizing how China focuses on developing «a Global Strategy on Artificial Intelligence and how Wuzhen has become over the years a platform for global digital exchanges and cooperation through dialogue and sharing of practices and technologies» [Bonaglia and Frisoli 2023]. Despite the limited coverage received by the event in the West, compared to other (political) events occurred in China over the course of the year, the Wuzhen Summit stands as a fundamental example of China's ambitious goal of promoting «indigenous innovation» (*zizhu chuangxin* – 自主创新). The term, which draws on the CCP long history, has become a central strategic concept in Chinese government rhetoric during the Xi Jinping era, building on a long-standing tradition of emphasizing self-reliance in industry and technology [Waldie 2022]. In 2023, China's quest for greater technological self-reliance also sparked a debate about issues related to technological sovereignty in key areas such as microchip production. By fostering a domestic microchip industry, China sought to mitigate vulnerabilities associ-

ated with external dependencies [*Economic Daily* 2023, 6 September]. The importance of self-reliance in industry and technology was also evident in the recruitment strategies of the leadership. Although the Politburo has long been dominated by economic technocrats, the appointment of five prominent scientists to the 24-member Politburo at the 20th National Congress of the CCP in October 2022 reflected President Xi Jinping's willingness to ensure the country's economic, scientific, and technological self-reliance while boosting resilience to external shocks [Jie 2023: 2]. Unsurprisingly, since the mid-2000s, China has graduated more STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) PhDs than the United States, and it is estimated that by 2025 Chinese universities will produce more than 77,000 STEM PhD graduates per year compared to approximately 40,000 in the United States [Zwetsloot *et al.* 2021].

This essay is structured into five different sections each delving into critical aspects that illustrates China's major issues and events characterizing its domestic politics for the year under review. By focusing on Party's ideological rectification, legal reforms and China's economic recovery, this study discusses the CCP's strategic efforts to strengthen ideological cohesion and legitimacy with the intent to construct a favorable narrative about the country's development path. Accordingly, there is a widespread interpretation by scholars of the relevance of the various levels of legitimacy in non-democratic countries, among which the linkage between economic growth and nationalism rests key to understand the main sources of legitimacy in China [Holbig and Gilley 2010]. Likewise, despite it is correct to affirm that each CCP leadership generation relies on different forms of legitimacy, after Mao's death the following leadership generation derived «instrumentally semi-legal-rational legitimacy by good governance, despite their attempts to earn traditional legitimacy through highlighting both leftist communist ideology and rightist Chinese culture» [Huang and Pang 2022: 984]. As a matter of fact, it is precisely within such process that since the 1980s the leadership in power also promoted the idea that greater prosperity has strengthened rather than weakened under the CCP's rule [Doyon and Froissart 2024]. However, as confirmed for the year under review, what has changed with the current administration is that this process has clearly intensified, becoming a priority from the perspective of the CCP and Xi's agenda. In a nutshell, the link between economic growth and Chinese-style modernization remains central to the Xi Jinping administration. More precisely, in the view of party leaders and cadres, legitimacy and ideological unity must be strengthened through patriotic education, economic resurgence, and technological innovation.

Following this introduction, the section titled «Party and Politics» discusses the Chinese Communist Party's influence on major political trends. It offers a concise overview of key events shaping the government's agenda, coupled with an informed analysis of Politburo study sessions. The

section titled «Chinese Economy» analyses crucial economic data from the reviewed year. It discusses disparities between Chinese and non-Chinese sources and highlights the role of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) in China's economic resurgence. The section titled «Key Developments in Law and Regulations» provides a concise overview of major legal framework updates in China. Lastly, the concluding section summarizes insights from each preceding part. It will reflect on the interconnectedness of political, economic, and legal dimensions, emphasizing the fundamental role of the CCP.

2. *Party and Politics*

Remarkably, for the year under review the number of senior-level investigations jumped by 40% compared with 2022, when the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) recorded 32 investigations into high-ranking officials. According to a report released by the South China Morning Post, prior to 2023 the single year characterized by the highest number of senior officials investigated by the CCDI was 2014, with 38 investigations [*South China Morning Post* 2024, 6 January]. Since assuming the presidency in 2013, Xi Jinping has in fact spearheaded an extensive and high-profile anti-corruption campaign within China. This initiative marked a significant departure from the previous leadership style and aimed to tackle corruption at various level of the government, the Party, and State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). While corruption is not a new phenomenon in China, nor are anti-corruption efforts conducted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the latest anti-corruption drive – which occurred in China for the year under review – calls into question that Xi Jinping's power is solid or uncontested as many believe [Young 2023]. With regards to China's firing of top-level officials, two important names stood out in the course of 2023: Qin Gang, China's former foreign minister, and Li Shangfu, China's former defence minister. According to international media outlets, the military and defence apparatus was the most problematic, with nine military officials additionally expelled from the National People's Congress in late December [*Bloomberg* 2023, 29 December]. As a matter of fact, the anti-corruption crusade in the Xi Era is arguably «the largest and most powerful crackdown on corruption in the entire history of the CCP» [Gong and Tu 2022: 7]. The main features that distinguished it from the previous generations are the extensive prosecution and harsh punishment of corrupt officials in parallel with strong institution-building efforts to promulgate a series of party and state regulations, as well as the reorganization of anti-corruption agencies [Gong and Tu 2022: 8]. At the government level, China's preeminent supervisory and anti-corruption authority is the National Supervisory Commission (NSC), established in 2018 through a constitutional amendment, as part

of the CCP's reform efforts initiated in 2016. The NSC operates under the direct oversight of the National People's Congress (NPC) and its Standing Committee. The authority operates also in parallel with the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), the highest supervisory organ of the CCP. More recently, both institutions prioritized Xi's status and security over anti-corruption efforts [*The Diplomat*, 2019, 23 February].

2.1. Significant updates on the government's agenda

China's most relevant political event for the year under review, the Two Sessions (*lianghui* 两会), was held in Beijing from 4 to 13 March 2023. The meeting comprised the 14th National People's Congress (NPC) and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Consultative Conference (CPPCC). During this event, the discussion focused on prioritizing economic stability, the recovery and expansion of consumer spending, and the promotion of high-quality economic development. The key topics covered and discussed at the meeting were the following: 1) stability growth as a top priority; 2) boosting domestic demand as a key driver for economic growth; 3) strengthening the modernization of the industrial system; 4) boosting market confidence and stimulating the vitality of the private sector; 5) pursuing a new round of SOEs reform; 6) facilitating high-level opening up to stabilize foreign trade and investments; 7) enhancing fundamental research to boost self-reliance and strength in science and technology; 8) promoting green development to reach the dual carbon goals; 9) advancing the comprehensive registration-based system to improve the modern capital market with Chinese characteristics; 10) preventing and mitigating major financial risks; 11) facilitating coordinated regional development; 12) improving people's well-being; 13) implementing a new round of institutional reform of the State Council.

Interestingly, although dozens of topics were discussed during China's Two Sessions, on Chinese social media the most commented themes were not fully aligned with the ones discussed by the leadership in power. More precisely, they were: 1) the Taiwan issue; 2) China's military advancement; 3) technological self-reliance; 4) the figure of Xi Jinping as a powerful leader; 5) Chinese media in the new era [Koetse 2023].

The Work Report presented by outgoing Chinese Premier Li Keqiang proposed ten main projected targets for development for the year under review: 1) a GDP growth of around 5%; 2) 12 million new urban jobs; 3) a decrease in urban unemployment rate of around 5.5%; 4) a CPI increase of around 3%; 5) growth in personal income in line with the country's economic growth; 6) a steady increase in both the volume and quality of imports and exports; 7) a basic equilibrium in the balance of payments; 8) grain output of over 650 million metric tons; 9) continued reductions in energy consumption per unit of GDP and in the discharge of major pollutants, with priority on controlling fossil fuel consumption;

and 10) steady improvements in the quality of the eco-environment [State Council Information Office 2023a].¹ Beyond the targets, it is relevant to also analyze the Work Report delivered by Prime Minister Li to assess the emphasis on major relevant topics.

A study conducted by the Bruegel Institute by using Artificial Intelligence (AI) and semantic classification techniques monitored the 2022 and 2023 Work Reports to discover that the five most mentioned topics were GDP growth, the private sector, debt, innovation and ‘other’. With reference to the year 2023, the two most-mentioned topics were GDP growth and innovation [Garcia-Herrero *et al.* 2023]. Additionally, the authors focused on the top five sentiments expressed repeatedly throughout the reports: neutrality, approval, optimism, caring and admiration. For the year under review, neutrality and approval were the top two sentiments [Garcia-Herrero *et al.* 2023]. Although GDP growth and innovation remain at the cornerstone of China’s economic policy, it is worth discussing the political implications of such findings. For instance, the fact that at the opening of the CCP’s National People’s Congress, Li’s speech heavily focused on promoting China’s «full economic recovery» shows that, after being battered for several years by the pandemic, China’s economic policymaking is still guided by a certain level of economic pragmatism, rather than geopolitics or ideology only. Indeed, in the initial months of 2023, Xi Jinping and his administration prioritized China’s economic resurgence. In pursuit of this goal, the government implemented diverse measures aimed at preserving political stability to the greatest extent possible [Piao and Cui 2024]. KPMG, a multinational services company and among the top four accounting organizations worldwide, provided a reality check of the figures and policies presented by the Chinese government through the Work Reports for the last two years. The KPMG report highlights technical innovation and green transformation as the two main channels driving investments in the manufacturing industry. Likewise, the slowdown in the tightening of monetary policies in overseas markets provided more space for China’s monetary policy to reform while stabilizing the RMB exchange rate [KPMG 2023: 4].

The year 2023 also saw the release of a very important document for the Chinese government, which was issued by the Central Committee together with the State Council on 16 March 2023, and titled «Party and State Institutional Reform Plan» (hereafter the Plan). The objective of the Plan was to reinforce Party control, improve resource allocation, and accelerate progress towards self-reliance in science and technology. In this regard, two major decisions appeared of paramount importance: the establishment of the «Central Science and Technological Commission» and the reorganization of the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST). Con-

1. Former Premier Li Keqiang died at the age of 68 in October 2023 of a heart attack.

cerning the former, the Commission was structured as a decision-making body in charge of: (1) strengthening the leadership of the CCP's Central Committee in science and technology; (2) formulating major strategies and policies for science and technology development; (3) coordinating military and civilian science and technology development. With regards to the China's Science and Tech Ministry, the major change was that the Ministry would no longer oversee specific scientific research project evaluations and management; instead, it would guide and supervise the operation and management of professional institutions for scientific research management and exercise a strengthened supervision and evaluation of the implementation of scientific research projects and their results [Zhang 2023]. To this extent, the MOST is expected to function as a sort of administrative body on behalf of the Central Science and Technological Commission. In addition, the Plan deliberated to establish the «National Data Administration», an agency directly under the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC).

From the government's point of view, another important event, occurred in the course of 2023, was the restructuring of the State Council, which takes place every five years after the start of the new NPC. The eight-and-an-half-day-long meeting was of paramount importance for the Chinese government as it concluded with the announcement of the new President and Vice-President of the People's Republic of China. They were, respectively, Xi Jinping, elected for a third term, and Han Zheng, former Vice-Prime Minister from 2018 to 2023. The NPC also nominated the new appointees to the State Council: Li Qiang, Ding Xuexiang, He Lifeng, Zhang Guoqing, Liu Guozhong, Wu Zhenglong, Chen Yiqin, Qin Gang, Li Shangfu, Wang Xiaohong [Li 2023].²

It is worth remembering that China's watchers, in analysing the personnel brought to the fore at the beginning of Xi Jinping's third term, appeared to be concerned by the fact that Xi's inner circle was essentially made by «yes man». In their opinion, this demonstrated that state security and social stability had the precedence over economic issues. Again, on the basis of the analysis of the personnel brought to the fore, Western analysts argued that the policy priorities of the new Xi's administration focussed on the development of state owned enterprises at the expenses of the private sector [Li 2023].

2. It is worth stressing that Qin Gang, China's most prominent American experts and influential policymaker, was removed from his post after just seven months in the job as Minister of MOFA in July 2023. China's Defense Minister General Li Shangfu was removed in October 2023, two months after he disappeared from public view. Their successors are Dong Jun, currently serving as the 13th Minister of National Defense and Wang Yi, former and current Minister of Foreign Affairs.

2.2. Political gatherings and cadre training in 2023

In the People’s Republic of China, the official delineation of the governance structure separates the state, represented by the government, from the ruling party, the CCP. For the year under review, it is crucial to analyze major political occurrences also from the perspective of the party system, identifying for instance, which Party events played a key-role. In particular, the analysis must be focussed on specific organizations deserving to be mentioned given their relevance for cadre training: the Politburo and its Standing Committee, the Central Committee of the CCP, the Politburo Study Sessions, the Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms, the Central Commission for Financial and Economic Affairs, the Central Commission for National Security, the Central Commission for Political and Legal Affairs, the Central Economic and Work Conference, and the Central Party. Among these, the study sessions of the Politburo provide unique insights into the interests and priorities of the CCP’s elites [Hart 2021].

Politburo Study sessions are monthly meetings attended by top party members concerning events of strategic importance in different fields: economics, foreign policy, governance, and military affairs. Although the CCP Politburo has convened group study sessions since the start of the Hu Jintao administration in 2002, as showed in Table 1 in the Xi’s era there was a distinctive change in the topics covered, and the study sessions came to be dominated by a focus on Party affairs, foreign affairs, military, and security affairs [Hart 2021]. Otherwise, as also stated in a policy brief published in 2007, under Hu’s administration for the most part Politburo Study sessions covered topics concerned with the international situation and domestic issues such as agricultural development, employment, education, health care, etc. [Lu 2007].

Table 1: Description of CCP Politburo Group Study Sessions in 2023

Date	Category	Major topics - Description
31 January 2023	Economics and Finance; Development	China’s economic development (dual circulation, economic security and self-reliance, and rural-urban divides; self-reliance and critical technologies).
21 February 2023	Economics & Finance	China’s bid for technological self-reliance; the strengthening of basic scientific research.
31 March 2023	Party Affairs	The study of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era” in all fields of China’s development.

29 May 2023	Party Affairs	The quality and coverage of China's education ecosystem; science and technology; self-sufficiency.
30 June 2023	Party Affairs	Marxist teachings adapted to China's national context.
24 July 2023	Security and Military Affairs	Military governance, military-civilian relations
27 September 2023	Economics & Finance	China and WTO reform; foreign investments and global value chains.
28 October 2023	Party Affairs	Ethnic minorities and party history
28 November 2023	Economics & Finance	Rule of Law; foreign business in China
Source: Compiled by the author based on data from CSIS 2023a; CSIS 2023b.		

Aside from the Politburo, another key institution responsible for Party training in China is the Central Party School (CPS).³ Traditional scholarship has focused mostly on the ideological function served by party schools and there exists less knowledge on the larger system of cadre training institutions anchored by the CPS [Lee 2015].

The Party school system traces its origin to the pre-1949 period when the Chinese communists were fighting against the nationalists to gain power [Shambaugh 2008: 829]. At the national level, the CPS remains the most prestigious institution and, in addition to training and teaching curricula, it also performs the function of a think tank in charge for Party reform policies [Shambaugh 2008: 840]. On 16 October 2023, the CCP Central Committee issued a new document titled «National Cadre Education and Training Plan (2023-2027)» [全国干部教育培训规划 (2023-2027年)], which demonstrates the paramount relevance played by the CPS for ideological study still at present times [People's Government of China 2023]. The document also remarked the leading role of the CPS in the cadre political training process and highlighted its joint work with the CCP Central Organization Depart-

3. «There are about 46 million state and Party cadres in China and they are all now subjected to regularized training in one of four types of training institutions: the three national cadre academies (*ganbu xueyuan* 干部学院) run in Pudong, Jinggan-shan, and Yan'an by the Party's Organization Department; the Central Party School (*zhongyan dangxiao* 中央党校) in Beijing and approximately 2,800 other Party schools across China; 1,500 or so administration academies (*xingzheng xueyuan* 行政学院); and 600 or so academies of socialism (*shehui zhuyi xueyuan* 社会主义学院) run by the Party's United Front Department » [Shambaugh 2017: 166].

ment in putting together the studying material to be utilized for Xi Jinping Thought courses [Dotson 2024].

On 7 February 2023, Xi Jinping delivered an important speech at the opening ceremony of the CPS Study session. The topic of the seminar was «Studying and implementing the spirit of the 20th Party Congress of the CCP and correctly understand and promote Chinese-style modernization». Xi Jinping exemplified the historical significance of realizing the «great rejuvenation» of the Chinese nation, a collective aspiration dating back to modern times, by also acknowledging the CCP's pivotal role in exploring China's modernization path. Xi Jinping also highlighted the need to adhere to the party's leadership for the prosperity of Chinese-style modernization and warned against deviations that may compromise its success [State Council Information Office, 07 February 2023]. Since Xi Jinping has taken office in 2012, Party cadres' training has become an integral and prioritized aspect of the CCP's agenda. Likewise, since the 18th National Congress of the CCP, held in November 2022, the Party school system has been subject to several reforms [Otterwik *et al.* 2023].

3. *The Economy*

Regarding China's overall economic performance in the reviewed year, it is essential to examine two primary interconnected issues: the validity of China's own data about the performances of its economic sector and to what extent economists in the world differ in their estimates of China's economic trends. As a matter of fact, in recent years an increasing number of economists begun to consider Beijing's official data to be only a reference point, as trust in China's economic data deteriorated as a consequence of a growing lack of transparency [*Financial Times* 2024, 17 January]. In fact, the validity of China's national economic data is questioned because national numbers are based on data collected by local governments, which have an incentive to skew local statistics in order to obtain rewards for meeting economic targets. The Chinese government through the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) tries to correct biases through administrative resources, yet the accuracy of the final numbers of aggregate GDP still remains questionable [Chen *et al.* 2019].

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) describes the year 2023 as «a year of change and challenges for China». The report identified three main trends defining the leadership's priorities for the Chinese economy during 2023; 1) the remodelling of the property sector; 2) a careful management of fiscal arrangements and public finances; 3) China's strategy vis-à-vis Europe in green energy equipment and energy-intensive industries [EIU 2023].

The American research institute Rhodium Group has also monitored the ups and downs of the Chinese economy in 2023 with regards to four

different sectors; 1) business investments; 2) government spending; 3) net exports; and 4) housing consumption. To what it concerns business investments, the Rhodium Group assessed them as rather negative: in addition to the contraction of the property sector, disinvestment in foreign direct investment showed a consistent trend of firms moving foreign capital outside China. With reference to government expenditure, the Rhodium Group report denied China's official data – which claimed a 4.3% contribution from combined household and government consumption in 2023 – estimating instead government expenditure to be closer to zero percentage point through Q3 [Rosen *et al.* 2023]. Furthermore, there was a contraction in net exports, and housing consumption trends exhibited a negative trajectory. This was due to Chinese households opting for deleveraging in 2023 instead of increasing consumption [Rosen *et al.* 2023].

The *China Economic Update*, published by the World Bank in 2023, states that «economic activity in China has picked up in 2023, driven by increased demand for services, resilient manufacturing investment, and public infrastructure stimulus» even though «the economic performance has been marked by volatility, ongoing deflationary pressures, and still weak consumer confidence» [World Bank Group 2023a]. In a nutshell, major international institutions depicted an image of the Chinese economy in a state of dynamic evolution, although not without evident difficulties [World Bank Group 2023b]. According to China's own numbers, figures for 2023 were all above 5%. Given China's extraordinary performances in the third quarter of the year, many international institutions upgraded China's economic growth forecasts, even by predicting a higher growth for the 2024 [*Xinhua* 2023, 24 December].

3.1. SASAC and State-Owned Enterprises

In 2023 China's economic recovery was significantly influenced by the pivotal role played by state-owned enterprises (SOEs). As the country grappled with global challenges, including the aftermath of the pandemic and economic uncertainties, SOEs were envisioned by the government as key drivers of resilience and growth. Over the decades, these state-controlled enterprises, spanning various sectors, played a crucial role in stabilizing the economy and fostering recovery. In the year 2023, their role was highlighted through the Government Work Report and the numerous meetings held by the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (SASAC) [*China Daily* 2023, 10 April].

SASAC is China's ad-hoc ministerial level organization subordinated to the State Council, and it is responsible for managing SOEs in China. SOEs have always been key assets in China's critical economic sectors. Currently, there are listed a total of 93 enterprises under the Data Directory of SASAC [State-owned Asset Supervision and Administration Commission, 2023]. Since its establishment in 2003, SASAC has overseen improving the

corporate governance of enterprises in China and restructuring SOEs for key economic sectors. In short, China's SOEs can be divided into three different macro-categories: 1) strategic, capital-intensive comparative-advantage defying (CAD) industries, such as aviation, aerospace, warship, core chip manufacturing, new materials; 2) natural monopoly industries with a major bearing on the national economy, such as telecommunication, highways, railways, and ports; 3) competitive industries that are consistent with China's comparative advantages, such as steel, cement and equipment manufacturing industries [Lin 2021]. To what it concerns firms directly under SASAC, first there are top-level companies, often the successor organizations of a former industrial ministry. These are followed by listed firms, businesses, and subsidiaries enterprises often recalcitrant to abandon bureaucratic edifice of state ownership [Naughton 2015: 53].

Over the years, SASAC encountered various challenges in its endeavours to corporatize and marketize state-owned enterprises, primarily due to the reluctance of these enterprises and increased intervention by the Central Organization Department. The latter, expressing growing apprehension about diminishing Party authority, became therefore more involved in the process. On top of that, the Xi administration's recentralization of authority enhanced four governance mechanisms and techniques to assert control over China's SOEs sector: central leading small groups, the cadre management system, Party committees and campaigns. They're growing influence resulted in the weakening of the authority of other actors engaged with SOEs reform, that is, SASAC and the NDRC [Leutert 2018]. Despite the positive results proclaimed by government-led institutions – with revenues reaching 39.8 trillion yuan (\$5.62 trillion) for the year 2023, according to SASAC – China's SOEs reform stalled out in the course of 2023. Chinese leaders were still more concerned about domestic instability and potential unrest rather than implementing substantial reforms within the state sector. Hence there was no real prospect for the restructuring of a category that clearly struggled with privatization [Goldberg 2023, 18 November].

4. Key developments in the Law and Regulations

Aside from the CCP's involvement in reinforcing patriotic education and shaping the narrative surrounding economic performances, the enactment of new laws and multiple amendments played a crucial role in China in the year under review. Indeed, 2023 was in the People's Republic of China also a year in which numerous new laws were drafted and previous laws were amended. In particular, the introduction of the «Patriotic Education Law» marked a notable emphasis on fostering nationalistic sentiments among the younger generations. This law aimed to strengthen ideological control and promote a sense of loyalty to the Communist party through educational cur-

ricula. However, nationalistic education in China is also putting a squeeze on international schools. As the Party intensified its endeavours to strengthen control over the content taught in the classrooms, more and more international schools decided to close and leave the country, as happened in the case of Elite British schools [*The Guardian* 2023, 31 December].

Secondly, the enactment of the «Foreign State Immunity Law» underscored China's commitment to protecting its sovereignty and legal autonomy both domestically and on the international stage. This legislation clarified the legal framework governing cases involving foreign states, aligning with China's more assertive approach in the global arena. Under the law (article 7), a foreign state «shall not enjoy immunity from the jurisdiction of the courts of the People's Republic of China in any proceedings arising out of a commercial activity between the foreign state and an organization or an individual of another state including the People's Republic of China» [Ministry of Justice of the People's Republic of China 2023, 15 December].

Thirdly, amendments to the «Charity Law» signalled a concerted effort to further regulate charitable and no-profit activities within the country. These amendments aimed to enhance transparency, curb potential misuse of funds, and ensure that charitable organizations align with the government's developmental objectives. Additionally, the revised «Counterespionage Law» demonstrated once again China's priority on national security. The amendments aimed to address emerging threats by broadening the scope of counterespionage definitions while enhancing the government's capacity to safeguard sensitive information. Collectively, these legislative changes illustrated China's commitment to strengthening ideological unity, protecting its legal interests in international relations, ensuring the efficient functioning of charitable organizations, and fortifying national security measures in response to evolving geopolitical challenges, among which the China-United States competition remained the underlying priority. As China continues to navigate its role in the global arena, these laws play a crucial role in shaping the country's domestic landscape and influencing its interactions with the international community.⁴ Against this backdrop, this paragraph analyses into details the new laws drafted and amended for the year under review.

On 24 October 2023, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) promulgated the «Patriotic Education Law» (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu fa* 中华人民共和国爱国主义教育法). The promulgation followed a draft first introduced by the Standing Committee of the NPC in July 2023. The law, which took effect on 1 January 2024, comprises a total of 40 articles and it outlines the responsibilities for central and local government departments as well as in schools and for families

4. While the article doesn't cover all the laws and regulations promulgated and amended in China during the reviewed year, the selected ones are representative of the CCP's most significant interests in law formulation.

to strengthen patriotic education [Reuters 2023, 25 October]. The law not only formalizes current practices about patriotic education but, significantly, broadens its application to encompass Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, overseas Chinese, and the Internet. In essence, it reveals the Chinese Communist Party's perception of its most substantial vulnerabilities in maintaining China's control on the youth, cyberspace, and Chinese communities beyond the mainland [Huang and Zou 2023, 1 August]. As noticed by Suisheng Zhao, since assuming office Xi Jinping has heightened his efforts in the patriotic education campaign, aiming to reinforce the CCP's authoritarian governance. Under his leadership, a new generation of nationalists has been cultivated, displaying a lack of tolerance for any criticism directed at the CCP regime. Additionally, this emerging cohort exhibits a robust hostility towards Western powers and the values they represent. After all, the CCP has maintained its legitimacy primarily based on two pillars since the end of the Cold War: economic performance and nationalism. [Zhao 2023]. Likewise, patriotic education has a long history in China. As a matter of fact, a crucial insight learned by party leaders, whether reformers or conservatives, from the «Tiananmen Incident» was precisely the imperative need for political indoctrination of the younger generation [Zhao 1998]. Consequently, Deng Xiaoping and his successor, Jiang Zemin, strategically embraced nationalism as a unifying force. Recognizing it as the sole bedrock of political belief still shared by most Chinese people, they employed this approach despite the swift erosion of Communist official ideology [Zhao 1998].

A second relevant news with regards to law and regulation implementation for the year under review concerned the amendment to the «Charity Law» (*eishan fa* 慈善法) passed on 29 December 2023, at a session of the National People's Congress Standing Committee. The amendment will take effect on 5 September 2024 [China Daily 2023, 29 December]. In 2016, Chinese legislators had introduced the first statute dedicated to the Chinese non-profit sector—the Charity Law of the People's Republic of China, indeed, the first law to regulate charitable organizations and their activities. The Charity Law was a landmark step toward breaking down the old system for regulating social organizations in China. However, it also made the legal environment far more complex, given that it did not equalize the rules for all Chinese non-profit organizations (NPOs), and crucially, it did not provide a basic social organization law applicable to all types of non-profit entities [Snape and Simon 2017]. This being the situation, the amendment updates of the Charity Law promulgated in 2023 aimed at solving the several identified problems hindering the development and regulation of philanthropy in China. They primarily focussed on; 1) the regulations of charitable organizations; 2) the regulation of charitable trust; 3) the regulation of public fundraising; 4) the emergency public fundraising; and 5) crowdfunding [NPC Observer 2023, 19 January]. However, it is useful to stress that the «Law of the People's Republic of China on Administration of

Activities of Overseas Nongovernmental Organizations in the Mainland of China» was also adopted in 2016 by the National People's Congress Standing Committee, which came into effect January 1, 2017. Additionally, even though in the PRC repression of NGOs intensified since the rule of Hu Jintao, it is believed that under the Xi Jinping's administration the mode of repression intensified precisely through law-based implementation [Zhu and Jun 2021].

On 26 April 2023, the revised «Counterespionage Law of the People's Republic of China» (*zhongguo renmin gongheguo fan jian die fa* 中华人民共和国反间谍法) was passed by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. The newly revised Counter-Espionage law came into force on 1 July 2023, after it was initially proposed in December 2022 and then introduced in April 2023. The Ministry of State Security, as reported in its WeChat account, stated that «the revised Counterespionage Law implements Xi Jinping's thoughts on the rule of law and the overall national security concept, insisting that national security is all for the people and relies on the people, and based on the current complex counterintelligence struggle situation, with a strong sense of national security for the people to build a strong counterintelligence and anti-espionage situation» [Ministry of State Security 2023]. Over the past few years, China has apprehended numerous Chinese and foreign individuals on espionage charges, among them, a businessman from a Japanese pharmaceutical company, Astellas Pharma, arrested in March 2023 and accused of divulging state secrets to another country, in detention since September 2020 [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 20 October]. There were also some details in the amendments that worried the international community, prime among them, the definition of «espionage», envisioned as not only as the theft of state secrets but also any other documents related to «national security». According to some commentators, such amendments are a sword of Damocles on anyone engaging in information exchange with foreign individuals or entities, as they must exercise utmost caution and undertake a challenging preliminary evaluation to firstly determine the potential risk of inadvertently engaging in espionage [Brussee and von Carnap 2023]. On a similar vein, China's revised Counterespionage law creates new risks for a wide category of sectors: foreign companies, business travellers, academics, journalists, and researchers, considering that the updated legislation would grant unparalleled enforcement authority to the Ministry of State Security and its regional counterparts, enabling them to enter, interrogate, and scrutinize the electronic devices and business facilities of individuals [*Forbes* 2023, 3 July].

Finally, among the many legal drafts reviewed and adopted at the sessions of the Standing Committee of the NPC for the year under review it is worth mentioning China's first «Foreign State Immunity Law» (*zhonghua renmin gongheguo waiguo guojia huomian fa* 中华人民共和国外国国家豁免法), which took effect on 1 January 2024. The law has 23 provisions and

stipulates that China will move away from the absolute theory of foreign state immunity, adopting instead the restrictive theory of foreign state immunity [State Council Information Office 2023b]. The consequence is that foreign states will no longer be granted immunity from suit and judicial enforcement in mainland China and Hong Kong in relation to, no-sovereign acts, such as commercial activities. According to some experts, unexpected geopolitical shifts and deteriorating relationships between authoritarian powers and foreign countries can have disastrous consequences for foreign businesses operating in those countries [Qiu and Goodman 2023]. Additionally, the 23-Article law provided a legal basis for Chinese courts to take jurisdiction over civil cases involving foreign states, therefore increasing the channels for Chinese citizens and companies to obtain relief [Caixin Global 2023, 5 September].

Remarkably, the new law has important political implications beyond international law. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the Party Central Committee has prioritized the development of legal frameworks pertaining to foreign affairs. Additionally, it has consistently advocated for the simultaneous advancement of both domestic and foreign-related legal systems, utilizing the rule of law to facilitate external engagement while safeguarding China's national interests. This commitment has led to in the establishment of the Foreign State Immunity Law [Chinareform.org.cn 2023, 4 September]. More generally, international commentators tried to understand why China moved away from absolute to restrictive immunity.⁵ At the same time, it seems relevant to mention the actors affected by the new law. For instance, the law does not grant automatic foreign state immunity to State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and international organizations. Reading the law literally indicates that the immunity status of these entities depends on their authority to wield sovereign powers on behalf of the foreign state. Given this context, in line with the prevailing position in both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Hong Kong law, State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) that do not engage in sovereign functions are not protected from legal actions or enforcement proceedings [‘The implications of the Foreign State’ 2023].

5. It is important to reference here the distinction between the «absolute» and «restrictive» approaches to state immunity. Under a fully «absolute» approach, a foreign state enjoys total immunity from being sued or having its assets seized or enforced against by a foreign court, even in commercial matters. Under the «restrictive» approach, a foreign state is only immune in relation to acts of state involving an exercise of sovereign power. It should be mentioned that most jurisdictions around the world (i.e., the US, the UK, Canada, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, and most member states of the European Union) adopt the restrictive doctrine of state immunity.

5. Conclusion

An examination of China's domestic politics in the year under review reveals the significant role played by the current leadership in strengthening ideological party-building, which is expected to leave an indelible mark on China's political and ideological trajectory. To this extent, this article has analyzed three pivotal dimensions – Party and Politics, Chinese Economy, Law and regulations – each defining the contemporary political landscape of contemporary China.

The section «Party and Politics» stresses the undeniable influence of the Chinese Communist Party in shaping China's patriotic education and political discourse. Understanding the CCP's centrality is crucial for deciphering China's governance structures, as it permeates every aspect of the country's political life. As shown in this article, the Party's commitment on cadre training and patriotic education also highlights its role as the sole architect of China's political trajectory. In addition, the relationship between the CCP and the SOEs is unquestionably intricate, exemplifying the unique blend of party-state governance that characterizes China's political system. The reason, according to Gore, descends from the fact that, in the Xi Jinping's era, the resurrection of ideology has been accompanied by a large-scale institution-building of the Party, through an ideological turn that is re-enacting Leninism for a population of 1.4 billion in the context of a vibrant market economy [Gore 2023]. Likewise, as stated elsewhere, in the Xi Jinping's era, ideological education has been dramatically transformed into a tool in the hands of the leadership to cement support and Party's legitimacy [Menegazzi 2020].

Moving to the economic dimension, the examination of the «Chinese Economy» reveals China's economic resilience amidst growing national challenges. Following a period of robust economic activity in early 2023, China's economy has encountered a notable downturn marked by a decline in exports, reduced consumption, and production. Notwithstanding these challenges, certain sectors, including technology platforms, electric vehicles, green energy, and electronics, remain vibrant sources of innovation and growth. Likewise, there are indications that the economy is gradually recovering, particularly after experiencing significant declines in July and August 2023 [Huang 2023]. At the same time, the intricate interplay between state-owned enterprises and market forces underscores the dynamic nature of China's economic rise. As the country grapples with challenges such as technological competition, the resilience of its economic model based on the idea of a «Chinese-style modernization» becomes a focal point for the narrative used by Chinese decisionmakers.

Lastly, the section titled «Key developments in the Law and regulations» discusses the complex relationship between China's legal framework and politics. Legal reforms and amendments implemented by the Chinese

government in the year under review further shaped the contours of China's legal governance and influence legal norms in China, domestically and internationally. The brief analysis of China's legal landscape in the course of 2023 appears therefore indispensable for comprehending the relevance of the CCP in shaping China's legal system in line with the Party's interests.

In conclusion, the centrality of the Communist Party, its influence on the economy, and the intricate relationship between law and politics shape the Party's narrative over China's political developments. The interplay between these dimensions underscores the synergies and tensions that define China's political realm, the major domestic actors involved and, its future path. Within such context, it becomes evident that the Communist Party's enduring influence, the patriotic education carried on by the different Party's actors, and the evolving dynamics of China's legal context are all dimensions defining China's contemporary political narrative.

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

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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-conditional» 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.

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KOREAN PENINSULA 2023: A YEAR OF RISING TENSIONS AND POLITICAL
POLARIZATION* **

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After the years of the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2023 both Koreas started a process of domestic and external consolidation and restructuring. This process however had the main effect of increasing tensions and political polarization on the peninsula.

After a very close presidential election in South Korea, in 2023 the new president, Yoon Suk-yeol, tried to implement the reforms that had promised during his electoral campaign. However, the domestic political polarization and the control of the National Assembly by the opposition party created obstacles to this process. The result was a strong increase in political polarization between progressives and conservatives and a personalization of the political debate around the two main leaders, Yoon and Lee Jae-myung, within the parties.

North Korea, in the meantime, continued to strengthen its partnership and cooperation with Russia and China, with the goal not only of improving its domestic economic and military situation, but also reinforcing its position at the international level. The simultaneous rapprochement between South Korea and Japan, that took place in the first half of the year, and the consolidation of the trilateral relation with the United States, celebrated with the summit in Camp David, contributed to create two separate fronts on the peninsula and in the region, increasing tension.

In this situation, inter-Korean relations continued to suffer, with both Koreas contributing to this deterioration: North Korea through its continuing missile tests and military provocations, South Korea by responding with harsh rhetoric, hard line positions by the government, and military actions of its own.

KEYWORDS – South Korea; North Korea; Yoon Suk-yeol; Lee Jae-myung; political polarization; Kim Jong Un; Russia-North Korea relations; North Korea missile tests; satellite launch; inter-Korean relations; Japan-South Korea relations; U.S.-Japan-South Korea.

* This article is the outcome of a joint research effort of the two authors. More specifically, however, Marco Milani wrote sections 1; 2.1; 2.2; 2.3; 3.1 and 3.2, Antonio Fiori wrote sections 2.4; 4.1; 4.2 and 5.

** This work was supported by the Seed Program for Korean Studies of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the Korean Studies Promotion Service at the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2021-INC-2230003).

1. *Introduction*

After almost three years with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic influencing almost every political, social and economic aspect on the Korean peninsula, in 2023 both Koreas were able to restart a process of restructuring and consolidation, both at the domestic and at the international level. This processes, however, led to an increase of tension on the peninsula and in the region, with possible dangerous consequences in the future.

In South Korea, the newly elected president, Yoon Suk-yeol, had his first full year in office, with the goal of realizing a series of important reforms that he had promised during the campaign. The situation proved to be more complicated than expected. The split between the government, controlled by the conservative party, and the National Assembly, where the progressive party held majority, led to a political stalemate in several key sectors and also to an increase in the polarization between the two parties. The rhetoric and personal attacks continued to escalate during the year, reaching very high levels of tension. In addition, within the main parties, frictions started to emerge, in particular related to the strong leaderships of Yoon Suk-yeol and Lee Jae-myung, which led to an increase in the personalization of the political debate and the marginalization of dissenting voices in both parties, as demonstrated by several high-profile defections.

North Korea attempted to revive its domestic situation, after being hit hard by the pandemic in 2022, and the main strategy that Kim Jong Un's regime devised was to strengthen its partnership with long-time friends, such as China and even more Russia. The partnership with Russia, in particular, became one of the key goals of the country, with exchanges of high-level visits and, more importantly, Kim's trip to Russia in September, where he met with President Vladimir Putin. The core of the new collaboration was based on military issues: with North Korea helping Russia with ammunitions and projectiles, and Moscow supporting Pyongyang for advanced missile and satellite technology. It was not a coincidence that in November North Korea was finally able to put a working reconnaissance satellite into orbit, after several attempts.

If on the one hand the partnership between North Korea, Russia and China continued to grow, on the other South Korea launched an important rapprochement with Japan, under the benevolent gaze of the United States. Since his first weeks in office, Yoon announced that it was crucial to pursue good and future-oriented relations with Japan, despite the existing historical controversies. The reason was that Seoul and Tokyo had many things in common, including shared values and principles and also security interests in the region. This rapprochement took place in March and April, when the two leaders exchanged visits and promoted a reinforcement of their cooperation in many sectors. In August, with the summit in Camp David, hosted by U.S. President Biden, the new trilateral partnership was formalized. Be-

fore that meeting, Yoon was invited to Washington for an official state visit, in April, and was able to obtain a series of important guarantees for the country's security and for the reinforcement of the U.S. nuclear deterrent in Korea, such as the creation of the Nuclear Consultative Group. This dynamic had the consequence of consolidating two separate blocs in the region, replicating the informal alliances of the Cold War years.

Inevitably, this situation strongly affected inter-Korean relations, which, during 2023, went through one of the worst phases of recent years. The harsh rhetoric and military provocations of North Korea, which had started in the previous years, were met by the hard-line approach promoted by President Yoon and epitomized by the change at the head of the Ministry of Unification and within the ministry itself. The emphasis on the idea of unification based on liberal democratic value represented a serious blow to the rapprochement between the two Koreas. This situation escalated over the course of the year and peaked at the end of December, when Kim Jong Un announced that South Korea was no longer considered as a partner for unification and reconciliation but only as a separate and hostile state, questioning the entire process of inter-Korean relations of the past five decades.

2. *Domestic politics*

2.1. *A complicated first year in office for Yoon Suk-yeol*

The 2022 presidential elections in South Korea portrayed a country that was strongly polarized between the two main political parties, and more in general between the conservative and progressive fronts. Yoon Suk-yeol was elected with the narrowest margin in the democratic history of the country [Milani & Fiori 2023: 49] and this polarization continued to increase during Yoon's first full year in office, despite his promise, on the night of elections, of working to reduce this division and reunify the country [Lee 2022, 10 March]. This development not only negatively influenced relations between the two major parties, but it turned out to be also a major obstacle for the implementation of a series of reforms and policy initiatives that the President had announced during the electoral campaign and in his first weeks in office. The situation was further worsened by the split between a conservative presidency and a progressive majority in the National Assembly, as a result of the 2020 legislative vote, and by the prospect of the crucial elections for the renewal of the Parliament, scheduled for April 2024.

The importance of domestic reforms for relaunching economic growth was made clear by President Yoon in his New Year Address to the Nation, in which he emphasized the challenges from the volatile international situation – that had led to higher prices, high interest rates and supply chain disruptions – and the need to boost the country's exports in order to overcome the situation. In addition, Yoon specifically mentioned

the need to push forward the reforms of three key sectors: labour, education and pension. In particular, related to the first one, Yoon criticized the role of workers' organizations and labour unions, calling for more flexibility, support for the companies that created jobs, and prevention of labour disputes and controversies [Lee 2023, 10 May]. As expected, these statements raised tension within the country, both on the part of the opposition Democratic Party, which had a majority of seats in the National Assembly, and labour organizations.

The split between the legislative and executive powers remained a key feature of the country's domestic politics also in the first months of 2023. In February, the National Assembly passed an impeachment bill against Interior Minister Lee Sang-min, for his possible responsibility in failing to prevent and in managing the tragic events that had happened in the neighbourhood of Itaewon in October 2022 [Lee 2023, 8 February]. The decision was later overturned by the Constitutional Court in July [Park 2023, 25 July]. However, it was a clear sign of the existing difficulties in working together by the two main parties.

Yoon Suk-yeol had also to face challenges within his own party, the People Power Party (PPP), which was deeply divided between supporters and opponents of the President. After the ouster of the controversial leader of the party, Lee Jun-seok, in 2022, in March 2023 the election of a new chairperson by party members was held. The competition turned out to be not only for the leadership of the party but also to determine the President's influence over his own party. The final result gave a significant boost to Yoon's position, with the large victory in the first ballot for Kim Gi-hyeon (53%), the candidate closest to the President [Kim 2023, 9 March].

Despite this temporary success, the position of Yoon Suk-yeol remained difficult, with low approval ratings, between 30 and 40%, and problems in implementing domestic political reforms [Kim 2023, 9 May]. While in international politics, the new administration was able to push forward some important initiatives, at the domestic level economic growth remained slow and tension with the political and social opposition remained very high.

During the summer, the internal situation became even more complicated for the President, with a series of crisis and controversies that partly took the administration off guard. The first of these issues emerged between June and July, when the Japanese government announced its plan to start discharging the water from the Fukushima nuclear plant into the ocean. This decision put the South Korean government in a dilemma: on the one hand, Yoon Suk-yeol did not oppose the decision, mainly in order to maintain a positive momentum for the recently newfound harmony between Seoul and Tokyo [see section 4.2]; on the other hand, a large portion of the South Korean population protested vehemently against the decision, and also against their own government, which was accused of not taking into

proper consideration the health of the population for the sake of maintaining good relations with Japan. The Yoon administration repeatedly tried to reassure the public opinion about the safety of the operation, citing the report of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In early July, IAEA had stated that all the standards were respected and that the environmental impact was negligible. Also, a South Korean scientific team, which had been sent to Fukushima, reiterated that the water release did not pose threats to human health or to the environment [Kim 2023, 8 July]. Nevertheless, a majority of the population remained very hostile to this decision, demonstrating once again how complicated relations between South Korea and Japan were, despite the initiatives of the President.

Soon after the Fukushima waters issue, the South Korean government had to face a further problem in the form of the extreme weather events that hit the country. First, a series of heavy rains in different areas, in mid-July, caused massive damages and the death of 49 persons [Yoon & Young 2023, 17 July]; a few weeks later, in early August, a serious heat wave caused several deaths in the country and severe problems for the World Scout gathering, which was taking place in the Saemangeum area, with tens of thousands of participants from all over the world [Yim & Park 2023, 7 August]. In both cases, the government was accused of poorly managing the situation; in addition, the international dimension of the Scout event represented a further blow in terms of image for South Korea.

A third issue that emerged in the summer contributed to undermining the consensus towards the government in the country. Between July and August, a series of random violent attacks – labelled by the media as «don't-ask-why» crimes, because they were committed without a clear motive or a relation between the attacker and the victims – took place in Seoul and the surrounding area. On 21 July, a man stabbed several people, killing one and wounding three, and on 3 August another man hit pedestrians with his car and then attacked people with a knife, killing two and injuring twelve. These events contributed to the decrease of the sense of safety in the population and required a response by the government [Yoon 2023, 3 September]. These issues, although not all directly attributable to the government action, contributed to the decrease of the President's popularity [Kim 2023, 6 September]. Yoon's response materialized with an increasingly stronger rhetoric against his political adversaries, repeatedly labelled as «communists» and «anti-state forces», contributing to the escalation of the political polarization within the country [Yim 2023, 22 September].

2.2. *A dangerous increase in the country's political polarization*

The extremely tense situation in South Korea between the two main political fronts remained as a constant feature also in 2023. One of the key aspects of this polarization concerned the investigations for corruption into the leader of the Democratic Party and former presidential candidate, Lee

Jae-myung. In January, Lee was interrogated twice by prosecutors for corruption charges related to the period when he was mayor of Seongnam [Alexander 2023, 1 February]. In addition, on 31 January, the former president of the Ssangbangwool industrial group, Kim Song-tae, claimed to have paid US\$ 8 million to North Korea for economic projects and to facilitate a possible travel to the country by Lee Jae-myung [Hwang 2023, 3 February]. These investigations were immediately considered by supporters of Lee and of the Democratic Party as political retribution against the former opponent of Yoon Suk-yeol, brought forward through the prosecution, of which Yoon had been a leading member for many years. On 4 February, the party organized a demonstration in Seoul, to protest against these actions that were seen as politically motivated [Shim 2023, 6 February].

The situation escalated quickly when, in mid-February, Lee was interrogated for the third time and, soon afterwards, an arrest warrant against him was issued. The request was approved by the President and by the Ministry of Justice and submitted to the vote of the National Assembly, in consideration of the fact that Lee was a member of Parliament. On 27 February, the Assembly voted against the arrest of Lee Jae-myung, but only for one vote, despite the fact that the Democratic Party had a large majority in the Parliament (169 seats out of 299) [Shin 2023, 27 February]. This outcome opened a fierce debate in the progressive front, since it made clear that within the party there was a significant opposition against Lee's leadership.

The investigation of the prosecution on Lee Jae-myung and other members of the Democratic Party continued in the following months. There was a new indictment for corruption against Lee in March [Shin 2023, 22 March], a new investigation related to corruption practices within the party for the election of Song Young-gil as leader back in 2021 [Yun & Shin 2023, 25 April], and allegations against another important member of the Party, Kim Nam-kuk, regarding his ownership of and dealings with cryptocurrency [Lee 2023, 14 May]. These new developments further increased the tension between the political parties and between the Democratic Party and the judiciary.

In the meantime, the progressives continued to harshly criticize the government, not only for the alleged politicization of the judiciary power, but also for the poor results in terms of managing the crises that emerged during the summer. The tension continued to escalate, as shown by a new 13-hours interrogation against Lee Jae-myung in mid-August, and reached its highest point of the year, when, on 31 August, Lee announced that he was starting a sit-in and a hunger strike in front of the National Assembly to protest against Yoon Suk-yeol's government [Kim 2023, 31 August]. This initiative by the leader of the opposition, and the deterioration of his health condition as a consequence, did not stop the prosecution from interrogating Lee on different charges again on 9 and 12 September, and from issuing a new arrest warrant on 18 September, the same day in which he was hospi-

talized for his failing health conditions. Unexpectedly, this time the National Assembly voted in favour of the arrest of Lee Jae-myung [Yim 2023, 21 September]. Lee, nonetheless, was not arrested because the court rejected the request of arrest on the basis that there was no significant risk of destruction of evidence by Lee, which made his right to non-detention during the investigation prevalent [Ji 2023, 27 September]. The decision temporarily froze this potentially explosive issue and was obviously welcomed by the progressives, while criticized by the conservatives. Both parties started a process of internal consolidation and restructuring in order to prepare for the campaign for the crucial legislative elections scheduled for 2024.

2.3. Political restructuring toward the elections for the National Assembly

In the last months of the year, the two main political parties started to focus on the preparation for the upcoming electoral campaign for the National Assembly. With the 2020 elections, that were held during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Democratic Party was able to obtain a significant majority in the Parliament [Milani 2021: 79-81]. This meant that, after the election of Yoon Suk-yeol in 2022, the two main political institutions of the country were split between the two main parties. For the progressives, the National Assembly, despite having limited political powers compared to the presidency in the South Korean political system, became the last stronghold against the President and his political agenda; for the conservatives, it was the main obstacle for the implementation of their policies and reforms. In addition, the election was seen also as a sort of referendum on Yoon Suk-yeol's government in the middle of his term. The stakes were thus particularly high.

A first glimpse of the approaching electoral competition took place on 11 October, with the by-elections for the National Assembly in the important district of Gangseo in Seoul. Here, the candidate of the Democratic Party, Jin Kyo-hoon, won the seat with a margin of more than 17 points over the candidate of the People Power Party [Song 2023, 12 October]. This resounding defeat for the conservatives, albeit limited to only one seat, had immediate consequences for the leadership of the party, that decided to establish an innovation committee, led by Ihn Yo-han, a medical school professor of US descent (born John Alderman Linton), and the first non-ethnic Korean citizen to achieve such an important role within a political party [Shin 2023, 24 October]. The decision to create the committee, and to appoint Ihn in the leading role, was a sign of the recognition by the PPP of the need to change and restructure the party in order to improve its consensus within the public opinion. One of the first decisions of the new committee was to revoke the suspension of the former party leader Lee Jun-seok, of the mayor of Daegu Hong Joon-pyo, and other suspended party members, with the aim to consolidate and unify the conservative front before the elections [Kim 2023, 2 November]. Despite the full autonomy that was granted to the

new committee, tension quickly emerged between Ihn Yo-han and the party leader, Kim Gi-hyeon, especially on the rules for nominating the candidates for the National Assembly elections. With the goal of pursuing renovation of the party's politicians, the committee proposed that party leaders and lawmakers with long experience or closely associated with the President would refrain from running for the election. The proposal was not met with enthusiasm by the party leadership [Shin & Seo 2023, 30 November]. The rejection of the main proposals for innovation from the committee led to the decision to end its activities on 7 December, three weeks before what had been scheduled [Lee 2023, 7 December]. The internal split between the committee and the leadership – that reflected a broader division between a faction that called for bold change and renovation and another one that wanted a more gradual process – continued to have consequences, and led to the resignation of the party leader, Kim Gi-hyeon, on 13 December, after only 9 months in office [Jo & Lee 2023, 13 December]. The last weeks of the year were thus characterized by a difficult transition and confusion within the conservative party. President Yoon Suk-yeol promoted a significant government reshuffle that included eight ministers – some of them particularly important such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs – and several Vice-Ministers, with the twofold goal of revamping the action of the government but also of leaving a free hand to high-profile politicians within the party to run for the legislative elections [Nam 2023, 18 December]. On 21 December, the Minister of Justice Han Dong-hoon left his position and was appointed as new leader of the People Power Party, with the mandate of bringing the situation under control and prepare for the election campaign [Kobara 2023, 22 December].

If the situation was particularly chaotic within the conservative camp in the last part of the year, the same was also true for the progressive side. The vote in favour of the arrest of the leader Lee Jae-myung left deep scars within the Democratic Party and was interpreted as a strong signal of dissatisfaction with the leadership in a significant portion of the party. The electoral success of the by-elections only partially healed the situation; however, with an important electoral campaign looming on the horizon, a consolidation was necessary also for the progressives. Immediately after the vote for Lee's arrest, the Democratic Party appointed a new leader in the National Assembly, Hong Ihk-pyo, after the resignation of the previous one Park Kwang-on [Kang 2023, 26 September]. In the following weeks, Lee Jae-myung tried to consolidate his position as party leader, side lining those who had criticized him and vigorously opposing the government initiatives in the Parliament [Lee 2023, 10 October]. The contrast within the Democratic Party between supporters and opponents of Lee's leadership started to have practical results in December, when former Prime Minister and former party leader Lee Nak-yeon announced that he was planning to leave the party and form a new one before the legislative elections, with the goal of at-

tracting politicians and voters not aligned with either of the two major parties [Kang 2023, 13 December]. The announcement represented a serious threat to the unity of the progressive camp, considering that it came from one of its most prominent political figures. Lee Nak-yon's decision elicited criticism among party members, who did not consider positively the idea of splitting the party, and thus strengthened the support for Lee Jae-myung. At the same time, the party leader seemed to be open to the possibility of a meeting with his opponent to try to mend the situation [Kang 2023, 18 December]. The meeting, which took place on 30 December, did not resolve the issue, since the two adversaries were not able to find an agreement. This result was mostly the consequence of Lee Nak-yon's request that Lee Jae-myung step down from the party leadership and agree to establish a joint leadership committee before the election; a request that was rejected by Lee Jae-myung himself [Kim 2023, 31 December].

In the meantime, also a former leader of the conservative party, Lee Jun-seok, announced his plan to form a new party before the April elections [Kim 2023, 27 December]. The similarities in the messy process of consolidation within both main parties highlighted how the polarization between the two sides and the personalization within the two parties around the personalities of Yoon Suk-yeol and Lee Jae-myung were affecting the political debate. The strong emphasis on the role of the two political leaders resulted in the marginalization of dissenting voices within the parties and also in an increase of personal attacks against both Yoon and Lee. This development represented a particularly menacing prospect in view of the elections for the National Assembly.

2.4. Kim Jong Un meets old friends and strengthens the country's defence system

On 1st January, North Korean media published a brief report on the works of the Sixth Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee of the Workers' Party – held at the end of December 2022 – which contained excerpts of Kim Jong Un remarks. The fact that marginal space was reserved in the report to the analysis of economic results suggested that Pyongyang had failed to achieve noteworthy growth over the course of the previous year, also due to the limitations imposed by the pandemic. On the other hand, the report's strong focus on the security situation and defence plans reflected the regime's intention to continue to take a hard line against the «hostile» attitude of the United States and South Korea. In his report to the Plenum, Kim shared his vision regarding the current global order, noting how it had clearly transformed into a «new cold war» and stressing again «multipolarization» as a key development, as he had already done in his report to the Supreme People's Assembly in September 2022 [KINU 2023]. His worldview was encapsulated by what appeared to be a fundamental shift in North Korea's foreign policy, evidenced by a decided tilt towards China and Russia

and probably also by a recalibration of the United States' strategic value for the security of the regime.

This renewed intimacy between North Korea and Beijing and Moscow was clearly demonstrated in spring, when trade exchanges were restored after the restrictions imposed because of the pandemic [Yoon 2023, 17 February]. In addition, the Chinese and Russian delegations participated in the 70th anniversary celebrations of the Korean War armistice, held in North Korea on 27 July. The main representatives of both countries – Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and China's Politburo member Li Hongzhong – had the opportunity to participate in high-profile institutional and celebratory events and engage in discussions with the North Korean leadership. Shoigu promised to «strengthen cooperation» between the countries' armies [KCNA 2023b] and discussed «strategic and tactical collaboration» in a meeting with North Korean Leader Kim, although state media did not provide more details [KCNA 2023c]. Both emissaries delivered a letter sent to the North Korean leader by their respective heads of state, Putin and Xi [KCNA 2023c; KCNA 2023f]. Kim Jong Un personally led Shoigu to visit the Weaponry Exhibition held in Pyongyang, during which the North Korean leader showed his guests a part of the North Korean arsenal, revealing, for the first time, brand-new weapons [KCNA 2023d]. The exhibition aimed to demonstrate how the North Korean weapons industry had overcome material shortages and economic contractions to meet the full militarization of the country, as auspicated by Kim Jong Un. North Korea has managed to test almost all nuclear-capable assets listed by Kim at the Eighth Party Congress and, in all likelihood, will continue to develop these and other weapons devices. Successively, Shoigu and Li joined Kim Jong Un during the military parade [KCNA 2023g], symbolically supporting North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile development, which both Beijing and Moscow had previously consistently condemned, at least formally, at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Only few weeks later, the three allies reconvened again in Pyongyang, to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the country's founding; the Chinese delegation was led by Vice Premier Liu Guozhong, while a military song-and-dance ensemble along with some diplomats arrived from Russia. Both Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin sent congratulatory letters, expressing their willingness to strengthen strategic communication and expanding bilateral ties [KCNA 2023i; KCNA 2023j]. The parade that took place in Kim Il Sung Square featured «paramilitary forces» and did not appear to showcase North Korea's banned weaponry, such as intercontinental ballistic missiles. Nonetheless, just two days before, Pyongyang had unveiled its first «tactical nuclear attack submarine», which was catalogued by Kim Jong Un as part of a «push toward the nuclear weaponization of the Navy» [KCNA 2023h].

The emphasis on promoting the relationship with Russia continued also in the following weeks. Immediately after his visit to Russia, in Septem-

ber, Kim Jong Un briefed the party central committee's Politburo, stressing the need to «strengthen close contacts and cooperation» and placing bilateral ties «on a new strategic level in response to the demand of the new era» [KCNA 2023n]. At the end of September, the Supreme People's Assembly, North Korea's rubber-stamp parliament, had a two-day meeting, at the end of which a constitutional amendment, stating that the country «develops highly nuclear weapons to ensure» its «right to existence» and to «deter war», was unanimously adopted [KCNA 2023o]. Kim Jong Un stressed the need to accelerate production of nuclear weapons to deter what he defined as U.S. provocations, such as military drills and deployment of strategic assets in the region. The amendment came a year after North Korea officially enshrined in law the right to use pre-emptive nuclear strikes to protect itself, making its nuclear status «irreversible». In his speech, however, Kim highlighted that a major revamp of his country's economy was «the most pressing task for the government» and urged the agriculture sector to work harder to promote the people's conditions, implicitly admitting the worsening in living conditions of the population.

At the end of November, North Koreans went to the polls to vote for deputies to local assemblies: unprecedentedly, it was reported that the 0.09% of the votes were against candidates for deputies to provincial people's assemblies and the 0.13% against selected candidates to city and county people's assemblies [KCNA 2023r]. This rare revelation of opposing votes in the local elections may be intended to show that the country held the election following the August revision of the election law, that introduced a seemingly multi-candidate system at the provincial and municipal level [Kim 2023, 9 November].

Before the end of the year, as usual, Kim Jong Un kicked off the plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the Party, setting the stage for unveiling policy decisions for the new year. Apart from listing the «remarkable success made in the overall national economy» and lauding the agricultural, construction, and industrial sectors for their noteworthy achievements, Kim set forth unspecified tasks for the military and the munitions industry to «further accelerate the war preparations» in the face of «(anti-North Korea) confrontation moves by the U.S. and its vassal forces unprecedented in history» [KCNA 2023s]. Kim harshly blamed South Korea and the United States for raising tensions in the region, by referring to their expanded joint military exercises, deployments of U.S. strategic military assets, and trilateral security cooperation with Japan, as turning the Korean peninsula into a dangerous war-risk zone. Against this backdrop, Kim called for rewriting his own country's constitution to eradicate the idea of a peaceful unification between the war-divided countries and to cement the South as an «invariable principal enemy» [KCNA 2023s]. In eliminating the idea of a shared sense of statehood between the Koreas, Kim could be reinforcing North Korea's older approach of ignoring Seoul and attempting direct dealings with Wash-

ington. On the other hand, declaring the South as a permanent adversary, rather than a potential partner for reconciliation, could also be aimed at improving the credibility of Kim's escalatory nuclear doctrine, which authorizes the military to use nuclear weapons pre-emptively against adversaries, if North Korean leadership is considered under threat.

3. *Inter-Korean relations*

3.1. *Increasingly harsh positions and escalation of tension on the peninsula*

Relations between North and South Korea continued to be particularly problematic over the course of 2023, with a significant escalation of tension and rhetoric from both sides. The new year was opened by a series of short-range missile launches by Pyongyang, between 31 December 2022 and 1st January 2023 [Lee 2023, 1 January], which was met by the South Korean president with an increasingly hard-line position. On 11 January, Yoon Suk-yeol declared that, in the event of a further increase of North Korean nuclear threats, South Korea could decide to develop nuclear weapons or to ask the United States to redeploy nuclear weapons on the peninsula [Choe 2023, 12 January]. Along the same line, when U.S. Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, and U.S. Secretary of Defence, Lloyd Austin, visited Seoul between January and February, the two countries reaffirmed the strength of their alliance, the U.S. commitment to defend the peninsula, and agreed to expand their joint military exercises [Choi, Si-young, 2023, 5 February]. This commitment was reinforced by the joint aerial exercises that took place on 2 and 3 February [Choi, David, 2023, 2 February]. North Korea responded condemning the exercises and declaring that the country was ready to take unprecedented countermeasures. A promise that was fleshed out by the launch of an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) in mid-February, the first since November, and also two additional short-range missiles [Shin 2023, 21 February].

This escalation of rhetoric and military tension reached its highest point, as usual, in March, when South Korea and the U.S. held the biggest military exercise of the year, Freedom Shield. The exercise started on 13 March and lasted for 11 days [Song 2023, 13 March]. On its part, North Korea responded, in addition to strong verbal condemnation by Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong, by a massive series of missile launches and tests. They included the launch of 6 short range missiles on 9 March, 2 cruise missiles from a submarine on 12 March, 2 more short range missiles two days later, one more ICBM on 16 March, a short-range missile equipped with a mock nuclear warhead on 19, more cruise and short range missiles on 22 and 27, and a 59-hours test of a submarine drone with nuclear capabilities during the same days [Foster-Carter 2023a]. The number and diversification of these tests demonstrated the advancement of North Korea's

arms technology, and the absence of any major reaction by the international actors to these tests also signalled the fact that they had been accepted as representing a sort of «normal» behaviour on the part of North Korea.

In April, North Korea continued with its tests, especially of submarine technology and of a new ICBM, the Hwasong-18, that, according to the regime, was propelled through solid fuel instead of liquid one, a very important advancement because it allows a faster, easier and safer deployment [Choi & Park 2023, 14 April]. South Korea, on its part, continued to reinforce regional defence, strengthening its military relationship with both Japan and the United States. Not surprisingly, after the release of the Washington Declaration by Yoon and Biden, which included a reinforcement of the American nuclear deterrent on the peninsula, the North Korean regime condemned this new initiative and pledged to strengthen its nuclear armament even more [Shin 2023, 1 May].

The paths of the two Koreas seemed to be increasingly distant; while South Korea was relying more and more on the alliance with the US, and on the possibility to extend the partnership to other regional countries such as Japan, North Korea continued to strengthen its military system, relying also on the support of Russia and China. Inter-Korean relations were, yet again, embedded within broader strategic rivalries and confrontation, with the possibility of very dangerous results for the peninsula.

On 31 May, North Korea attempted to launch a military spy satellite into orbit, the Mallygyong-1, through the rocket Chollima-1. However, the launch was not successful, with the rocket falling into the sea shortly after taking off, due to a malfunction [Kim & Kim 2023, 31 May]. The initiative was in line with the idea expressed by Kim Jong Un of modernizing the military system. The launch was tried again, on 24 August, with another failure, but also with the indication that a third attempt would be tried in October [Kim 2023, 24 August], signalling the importance of this program for the North Korean regime. The debris from the first launch were then recovered by the South Korean military in the waters near the country, and the analysis revealed that the satellite was very rudimentary and practically unusable for military purposes.

What North Korea lacked in terms of knowledge and know-how for satellites and rockets, it certainly had for missiles. On 12 July, Pyongyang tested again the Hwasong-18 ICBM, with a potential range of around 15.000 kilometres [Kosuke 2023, 13 July]. The test, that took place during the NATO Summit in Lithuania, in which also Yoon Suk-yeol and Japan Prime Minister Fumio Kishida participated, was strongly condemned at the international level. A meeting of the UNSC was also convened but without the approval of any new measure, because of the opposition of Russia and China. More short-range missiles were then launched in July and August, in particular after the U.S. and South Korea launched a second very important joint exercise, the Ulchi Freedom Shield in late August, which was met, as

usual, with the launch of missiles and other military operations, this time under the supervision of Kim Jong Un himself [Kim 2023, 3 September].

3.2. *Towards the end of inter-Korean relations?*

The situation between the two Koreas seemed to follow the usual playbook of the previous year and a half, with important increase of tension and military pressure from both sides, which was met with more military pressure from the other. This dynamic was clearly very dangerous and extremely detrimental for inter-Korean relations. In the second half of 2023, the situation continued to worsen, and not only because of military provocations, but also because of practical steps taken by both sides, aimed at relegating inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation to history.

The first step in this direction was taken by the South Korean government, with a general redefinition of the Ministry of Unification. On 28 June, Yoon Suk-yeol replaced Kwon Young-se, officially because the latter wanted to focus on his parliamentary career before the following elections, with Kim Yung-ho, a very hard-line figure with extremely critical positions against North Korea. This decision was paired with a clear indication by President Yoon that the Ministry had to change: from being a «support department for North Korea» to focus on unification «based on liberal democratic order» [Foster-Carter 2023b: 108]. This redefinition of the role of the Ministry and the appointment of such a controversial figure in the leading position caused concerns not only in the opposition, but also in parts of the conservative party. However, this was perfectly in line with what Yoon had promised in the campaign and it was perfectly coherent with Yoon's more general foreign policy, stressing the importance of democracy and democratic values and of creating coalitions with other like-minded countries.

The hard-line position towards North Korea was furthered reiterated by Yoon's speech on Liberation Day, 15 August, in which he stated that peace on the peninsula could be achieved only through strength [Jung 2023, 15 August].

This hardening of positions predictably could only have the result of generating a very similar reaction from North Korea, with multiple signals pointing in the direction of more confrontation. Missiles launches continued in September, while Kim Jong Un was consolidating his country's partnership with Russia, with an eye on military and satellite technology. The real breakthrough came on 21 November, when North Korea was able, with its third attempt, to put its reconnaissance satellite into orbit. Soon after the regime declared that the satellite was working properly [Choe 2023, 21 November]. Few hours after the launch, both South Korea and Japan confirmed that the satellite had really made into orbit, although they stated it was impossible to understand if it was properly working. In any case, South Korea insisted this was a clear violation of UNSC resolutions that prohibit North Korea from using ballistic missile technology; on its part, Pyongyang

maintained it was a «legal right» of the country «to strengthen its right to self-defence» [KCNA 2023q]. In any case, if the spacecraft works, it could significantly improve North Korea's capabilities, including enabling it to more accurately target opponent's forces.

The significance of the event went beyond the fact that North Korea had been able to put a satellite into orbit. The day after, South Korea suspended the no-fly zone on the border, part of the Pyongyang agreement of 2018 reached between Kim Jong Un and the former South Korean President Moon Jae-in in order to reduce tensions and risk of conflict along the border. North Korea responded terminating the entire agreement, restoring guard posts and rearming soldiers on the border [Foster-Carter 2023c: 114-115]. This development was particularly concerning because the agreement was designed to reduce the possibility of a military escalation in the dangerous area of the border. But the climate between the two Koreas was of strong confrontation from both sides, characterized by increasing military pressure and escalating rhetoric. On 18 December, North Korea launched again an ICBM, the fifth of the year, marking the highest number of this kind of tests in a single year [Van Diepen 2023, 21 December].

The final blow to inter-Korean relations came in late December, when Kim Jong Un, in the plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the Party, announced that reunification had become impossible and that South Korea was no longer a partner for reconciliation and reunification, as part of the same nation. Hence, in Kim's analysis, relations between the two Koreas should be treated as relations between two separate, hostile and belligerent states, and North Korea, while not seeking war, had to be ready to respond and to subjugate South Korea in case of an attack [Kim 2024, 1 January].

The practical effects of this new policy will be evaluated in the future, but it certainly represents a departure from a key principle of inter-Korean relations, dating back to the first Joint Declaration of 1972, in which the two Koreas recognized to be part of the same nation and that unification was the main goal to pursue.

4. *International relations*

4.1. *Kim goes to Russia. A new and dangerous partnership with Moscow*

The rumours that had been circulating for a few days, fuelled by unidentified White House officials [Wong and Barnes 2023, 4 September], were finally confirmed when, on 10 September, Kim Jong Un left Pyongyang to visit the Russian Federation [KCNA 2023k]. The visit had been likely planned since late August, when a large delegation of North Korean officials, including those overseeing the leadership protocol, travelled from Pyongyang to Vladivostok and then to Moscow [Wong and Barnes 2023, 4 September]. After crossing the narrow border that divides North Korea

from the Russian Federation and, following a brief stop in Khasan [KCNA 2023l], where the North Korean leader was received with full honours by the military picket and a band, as well as by the governor of the region, Kim, aboard his armoured train equipped with all comforts, reached Vostochny, in Siberia, home to an important spaceport [KCNA 2023m]. There, the North Korean leader was joined by Putin, who led Kim in a careful inspection of the launch facility of the Soyuz-2 space rocket.

The most relevant question, however, is why Kim Jong Un, who, like his father, is somewhat reluctant to travel outside his country, decided to leave Pyongyang for Russia. The answer presumably has to do with the mutual needs of North Korea and Russia. The latter would like to guarantee the influx of ammunition – which North Korea certainly does not lack – which Putin desperately needs to carry out military operations against Ukraine. The North Korean regime, for its part, sees the possibility of replenishing its coffers with foreign currency and obtaining basic supplies absolutely necessary to try to improve the situation of an isolated country prostrated by international sanctions and by the self-imposed isolation during the pandemic. Possibly more important is the possibility of receiving support in the technological sector that would allow Pyongyang to take a significant step forward in the military field. The fact that the meeting between the two leaders was held at the Vostochny spaceport was particularly indicative of the intentions of the North Koreans, who had tried twice – and failed both times – to send a spy satellite into orbit. This was an objective described by Kim himself as indispensable to bolster up defence capabilities against the military threat posed by the U.S. and South Korea and to make possible the deployment of «preemptive military power according to the situation» [KCNA 2023a].

Against this backdrop, just before the talks started, Putin reportedly declared that Moscow would offer assistance to North Korea in building satellites [Sokolin 2023, 13 September]. The fact that military technological development would be one of the main topics of discussion between Kim and Putin was easy to imagine. From inside the luxurious and hyper-armoured train that took Kim to Russia, in fact, some important military officers emerged. They included Ri Pyong Chol, vice chairman of the Workers' Party's powerful Central Military Commission and marshal of the army; Jo Chun Ryong, director of the Munitions Industry Department; and, above all, Pak Thae Song, who presides over the space technology sector [Kim *et al* 2023, 12 September]. North Korea's extreme interest in Russian technology – useful for perfecting spy satellites but also for equipping submarines with nuclear technology – was supposedly confirmed by the presence of these and some other prominent figures from Pyongyang's leadership.

The provision of weapons from North Korea to Russia, which had presumably taken place in September, was confirmed in mid-October by the White House, which revealed that satellite images showed cargos leav-

ing from an ammunition depot in North Korea to reach a depot near Russia's southwestern border [Mason 2023, 13 October]. The same day, pictures showing images of containers in the North Korean port city of Najin, ready to be shipped to Russia, were released by the White House, which also claimed that the containers had reached Russia the day before the meeting between Kim and Putin [DeYoung 2023, 13 October].

In a further demonstration of growing bilateral ties, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Pyongyang, where, on 18 October, during a reception, he expressed «solidarity» with North Korea and thanked the regime for its «principled support» of the «special military operation» in Ukraine [Choi, Soo-hyang, 2023, 19 October]. Another delegation, led by Russia's Natural Resources Minister Alexander Kozlov, arrived in Pyongyang in mid-November, to discuss «cooperation in the fields of trade, economy, science and technology» [KCNA 2023p].

According to South Korea's Defence Minister Shin Won-sik, it was thanks to Russian help that, in November, Pyongyang was able to put its first spy satellite into orbit, resolving North Korea's rocket engine issues that were responsible for the two failed attempts in May and August 2023 [Jo & Park 2023, 23 November]. However, some commentators expressed their scepticism on the possibility that North Korea received Russian assistance for this specific launch shortly before it; the timeline would suggest previous technical assistance [Van Diepen 2023, 28 November].

4.2. *Yoon mends fences with Japan and strengthen his «diplomatic offensive»*

Since taking office, President Yoon Suk-yeol has been pushing to mend the historical grievance with Tokyo and strengthen a security cooperation, which would doubtlessly include Washington, to better cope with the increasing North Korean nuclear threats. This attitude became clear on 1st March, a very important date for Koreans, since it marks the 1919 uprising against the Japanese colonizers. Yoon, in a televised speech, paid homage to the «patriotic martyrs» who sacrificed themselves for their country's freedom and independence but avoided mentioning any specific colonial wrongdoing on the part of the Japanese colonizers. Moreover, he explained why Japan, due to the sharing of universal values and the importance of cooperation in different fields, had to be seen as a partner [Lee 2023, 3 March]. Only few days later, Seoul announced a plan consisting of two aspects. The first was the dropping of the Supreme Court's 2018 order that imposed to Japanese companies to compensate Korean victims of forced labour during the occupation of the peninsula. The second was that an existing South Korean public foundation, funded by private-sector companies, would unilaterally offer reparation to survivors, removing the demand for an apology and payments on the part of Japan [Kwon 2023, 6 March].

Seoul's decision was hailed by the Biden administration as «ground-breaking» [The White House 2023a], given that the American administra-

tion had pressed its two allies to reconcile. The response from South Korean civil society, however, was not equally positive.

Anyway, the rapprochement paved the way to respective visits of Yoon to Tokyo in March 2023 – the first in a dozen years by a South Korean leader to Japan – and Kishida to Seoul two months later. Previously, the two leaders had only briefly met on the side lines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York, in September 2022. The 2023 summits brought about positive outcomes, since the two countries agreed to drop an almost four-year trade dispute on some high-tech materials used for chips and to normalize the intelligence-sharing pact known as GSOMIA (General Security of Military Information Agreement), which had been left in limbo by the previous administration, after Japan imposed export restrictions on Seoul [Kim 2023, 21 March].

These decisions were met with intense criticism from the South Korean opposition and activists, who talked of «humiliating diplomacy» [Shin 2023, 16 March] and chastised Yoon for ending his meeting with Kishida without receiving an apology. Yoon's efforts to mend ties with Japan were undoubtedly aimed at enhancing Biden's appreciation for his administration and to elevate international perceptions of South Korea as a global player.

At the end of April, in order to mark the 70th anniversary of the U.S.-ROK alliance, Yoon held a summit with the U.S. President. The outcome was the Washington Declaration, in which the U.S. vowed to strengthen extended deterrence consultations, while South Korea restated its non-proliferation obligations under the Non-proliferation Treaty framework. Yet, again, many in South Korea felt disappointed; on the one hand because this decisive turn towards the US would contribute to further escalate tensions with China and North Korea, and, on the other, because this was seen as a design aimed to silence calls for South Korea's own nuclear force or the redeployment of American tactical nuclear weapons in the South, a request that had gained momentum in recent months.

Yoon administration's diplomatic efforts were largely rewarded in mid-May, when the South Korean President attended the G7 summit in Hiroshima. He held bilateral meetings with several leaders, highlighting both Seoul's expanding international reach and the growing demand from partners to see South Korea playing a larger role abroad. Also, Yoon reinforced Seoul's efforts to align itself alongside the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and, most importantly, participated in a meeting with Biden and Kishida to enhance trilateral cooperation in addressing North Korea's threats, economic security, and regional strategic coordination [The White House 2023b]. In addition, Yoon met with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, to confirm South Korean provision of non-lethal and humanitarian aid to the attacked country. This unconditional support was reconfirmed when, in mid-July, Yoon made a surprise visit to Kyiv – after his trip to Lithuania, for a NATO summit, and to Poland – and promised an increase in South

Korea's humanitarian aid, but without referring to weapons supplies [Lee 2023, 15 July].

In August, upon Biden's invitation, both Yoon and Kishida participated in a trilateral summit in Camp David, the first of this kind that was not held on the side lines of an international gathering. The meeting represented a very important step in the process of reviving and institutionalizing security cooperation between the three nations. The summit, as stipulated in the final Statement of Principles and Joint Statement, produced a new «commitment to consult», which implied a coordinated response to common security challenges and represented the first time that the leaders of Japan and South Korea acknowledged that their security was intertwined. In line with this new approach, there was the establishment of a three-way hotline, the commitment to conduct annual military exercises and share intelligence, and the decision to hold a new annual trilateral summit [The White House 2023c; The White House 2023d]. In the end, in the face of persistent threats from China and North Korea, Yoon and Kishida buried the hatchet and put aside their differences, cementing an even stronger relationship with Washington to respond in a coordinated way.

In the second part of the year, Yoon continued his diplomatic offensive. In September, after attending summits related to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Jakarta, he flew to India to take part in the G20 summit, where he discussed climate change, the environment and energy transition and stressed South Korea's commitment to contribute to a free, peaceful, and prosperous future, by safeguarding the international order [Office of the President, Republic of Korea 2023]. It goes without saying that even in that occasion Yoon reiterated the key aspects of his country's cooperation with the U.S. and Japan and their respective commitment to regional peace and prosperity. Yoon also held talks with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on bilateral cooperation in areas such as the defence industry and supply chains.

In mid-November, after having participated in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in San Francisco, President Yoon embarked in a trip to Europe, with stops in the United Kingdom and France, as part of a diplomatic push before the 2030 World Expo bid. In London, the South Korean President and the British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, signed the Downing Street Accord, that upgraded their relations to a «global strategic partnership», emphasizing mutual cooperation in different areas, including joint responses to global issues, and revising the South Korea-Britain free trade agreement [Prime Minister's Office UK 2023]. The Accord – which aligned with the Yoon administration's global pivotal strategy – was particularly relevant in relation to technology, defence and security, in line with the agreements that the UK had already signed with Japan and Singapore. After the trip to London, Yoon visited France, where he met with President Emmanuel Macron and agreed to strengthen technology cooper-

ation [Lee 2023, 24 November]. The summit also served as an opportunity to fortify global security cooperation with France, a permanent member of the UNSC, ahead of South Korea's start of its term as a non-permanent member, in January 2024.

Despite the setback of failing to obtain the 2030 World Expo for Busan, the second half of the year served for President Yoon to consolidate his position and that of his country on the global stage, in particular reinforcing relations with Europe and other countries, with which South Korea shared values and practices based on democratic principles, a key goal of Yoon's administration from the beginning.

5. Conclusions

The process of restructuring and consolidation of several aspects of the political and economic situation in Korea, after the COVID-19 pandemic, did not lead to positive results in 2023; on the contrary, it led to a general increase in tension and polarization. In South Korea, the first year in office of Yoon Suk-yeol was characterized by growing difficulties with the opposition and by the impossibility to implement the main reforms that he had planned. Polarization and personalization of the political debate affected the two main parties from within and in their mutual relations. Considering the upcoming elections for the National Assembly in 2024, for which the role of the two main parties will be crucial, this dynamic will surely influence the performances of both.

In foreign policy, President Yoon Suk-yeol had promised to enhance relations with Japan early in his presidency. In fact, in 2023 there was a surge in diplomatic engagement between the two countries, which have also restored themselves as full trading partners, normalized the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), and begun sharing real-time intelligence on North Korean missiles with the United States. Despite the relevance for the two countries in terms of security cooperation, this push for reconciliation by Yoon was not fully welcomed by Korea's civil society, whose resentment against the neighbour, stemming from historical grievances, has never disappeared. Washington, in any case, took note of Seoul and Tokyo's improving relations. U.S. President Joe Biden promptly took advantage of the two allies' detente to launch a «new era» of trilateral collaboration, inviting South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to a meeting at Camp David, which enabled the three countries to form a *de facto* alliance, much to the anger of Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang.

On the other hand, Russia made a comeback to prominence in North Korea in 2023. Sergei Shoigu, the Russian minister of defence, surprised everyone by traveling to North Korea at the end of July. Following this, in Sep-

tember, Kim travelled to the Russian Far East, where he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Additionally, Pyongyang hosted Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in October. Kim's trip to Russia raised the prospect of further North Korea-Russia military cooperation, in an effort also to put pressure on South Korea and the U.S.

North Korea gave up on its brief experimentation with reforming policies and remained self-isolated, although some exchanges were restarted with neighbouring countries. China and, to a lesser extent, Russia were now its allies, and, in times of turmoil, the political power of the Kim family remained remarkably stable, for better or worse.

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JAPAN 2023: STILL WALKING IN ABE SHINZŌ'S FOOTSTEPS*

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On the basis of a wide range of critically assessed and triangulated secondary and primary sources, including elite interviews and official documentation often in the original language, this article suggests that Japan's domestic politics, and also its foreign and security policies, displayed a remarkable degree of continuity with the path set by the late Abe Shinzō, and thus carry his imprint. Notable exceptions are Kishida's initiatives in the energy, economic, and fiscal realms. Amid major scandals and internal readjustments in the majority party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Japan's domestic politics appear to be dominated by a single party maintaining its edge over possible adversaries in a fundamentally non-competitive democratic system. This trend has been further reinforced by growing political disaffection. Public trust in the government in 2023 was at a minimum, while surveys show that more than 40% of the Japanese electorate did not support any specific political party. Against this backdrop, however, the Kishida administration was successful in ending a long-lasting period of deflation in the Japanese economy and coming to terms with the legacy of former PM Abe Shinzō. In fact, the lasting influence of Abe lives on in the LDP's factional balance, influencing Kishida's policy stance.

Especially in the realm of Japan's security policy and international relations, 2023 testified to Abe's legacy. Japan's changes in its military doctrine and its force posture, together with its strategic outreaches to its east Asian neighbours and European and Pacific players, mirror US grand strategy. In fact, Japan also worked in lockstep with US-led multilateral diplomacy aimed at purposeful multi-layered security ententes, often on an ad hoc basis, to balance China militarily, counter the expansion of its regional diplomatic and economic influence and maintain the status quo along the first island chain. The seeds sown by the second Abe administration bore fruit in Japan's security embrace of Taiwan, an embrace which capitalised on Abe's poorly understood 2015 legislative and strategic revolutions.

With a focus on the geopolitics of the first island chain, the article then looks at Ja-

* This article is the end product of a joint research effort, each part of it having been discussed by the two authors before and after being written. The sections on Japanese domestic politics (Sections 2 to 7) were written by Marco Zappa whereas the sections on Japan's foreign and security policy (Sections 8 to 13) were written by Giulio Pugliese. The authors wish to thank two reviewers and John Bradford, Edward Howell, Ian Neary, Hugh Whittaker, Wrenn Yennie Lindgren and Andrea Fischetti for support and helpful comments.

pan's burgeoning security cooperation with South Korea and European states. It does so to argue that while Kishida's Japan is seemingly reactive to US grand strategy, it acts in broad continuity of the course set by the two Abe administrations. After all, under Abe, Japan expanded its strategic partnerships to include European players and NATO. Moreover, while Kishida is not a revisionist nationalist, unlike Abe, Japan's reset of its relations with Seoul is a by-product of the new Yoon administration's ability to compromise rather than a result of the Japanese government's concessions. After analysing the burgeoning Japan-NATO relations, the article concludes with a discussion of Japan's successful G7 presidency, the apex of minilateral diplomacy in 2023.

KEYWORDS Kishida Fumio; new capitalism; first island chain; Japan-Taiwan relations; minilateralism; Japan-South Korea relations; Japan-NATO relations.

1. Introduction

To quote Confucius, «without trust, we cannot stand». Since his rise to power in late 2021, on several occasions Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio has referred to this saying, pledging to rebuild national confidence in politics and his administration. As this article will show, however, in 2023, at least as far as Japan's domestic affairs were concerned, the Japanese public's relation with the government in Tokyo deteriorated due to mismanagement, gaffes and scandals involving government officials and Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leaders. In addition to laying bare the dysfunctional character of contemporary Japanese politics, political contingencies in the year affected the government's attempts at reform (e.g. by promoting a transition to the digitalisation of Japanese society and economy) and management of pressing issues, such as the legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Fukushima No. 1 wastewater issue. In the face of a declining cabinet approval rate, in the 2023 global and domestic economic conjuncture, businesses amassed huge profits and agreed to push up wages, ending a decade of *de facto* economic stagnation. Nevertheless, Kishida's low popularity in most of 2023 empowered intra-LDP powerbrokers who had been instrumental in his rise to power. These dynamics reinforced Kishida's need to act as a consensus-maker, thus catering to Abe's policy legacy.

In the Confucian view, in addition to trust, a government needs weapons to enhance its legitimacy and security. It might not be a coincidence that a major area of government intervention in 2023 was that of defence and national security. The Japanese government was aiming to leverage «comprehensive national power, including diplomatic, defence, economic, technological, and intelligence/information capabilities». This

policy was spelt out in the 2022 National Security Strategy, with an ill-concealed focus on Japan's security embrace of Taiwan and the need to balance China more forcefully, which was yet another hint of Kishida walking in his predecessors' footsteps. The past year moreover featured various strategic engagements, spanning from Japan's neighbouring East Asian countries to its European counterparts, and its multilateral diplomacy focused on creating purposeful and multi-layered security agreements in close alignment and coordination with the regional initiatives of the US government. Rather than hedging, Japan was moving in concert with the US and like-minded powers with the aim of caging both China and a potentially disruptive and transactional new Trump administration. The deepening of Japan-US-Republic of Korea strategic relations, Japan's military coordination with the US to protect the status quo along the first island chain, first and foremost across the Taiwan Strait, and Japan's ability to foster security relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European security actors, on top of important regional players such as Australia, suggested growing alignment among «like-minded partners». This alignment was also partially conducive to more stable relations with China, although the tenability of this *détente* was openly questioned as 2024 dawned.

2. The Kishida administration struggles with declining public confidence and political apathy

Political trust is a major indicator of several factors such as the basic legitimacy of a government, a nation's political participation and its voting behaviour [Krauss *et al.* 2017]. As will be shown, in 2023 public trust in the government of Japan (GoJ, hereafter) fell to a historic low, sensibly affecting the administration's legitimacy. Dissatisfaction and disaffection with the government are nothing new in Japan and they have been on the rise since the burst of the asset price bubble and political scandals in the late 1980s and early 1990s [Krauss *et al.* 2017, 12]. In 2023, however, in addition to such historically determined discontent, overt political apathy seems to have reached new heights, resulting quite paradoxically in further empowerment of the currently dominant political elite [Kasai 2018]. Against the backdrop of a depoliticised and demobilised society, rather than public support as measured by media polls, divisions within the leadership became a decisive factor hampering the government's decision-making and hold on power.

As Wallace and Pugliese [2023] point out, the second half of 2022 was a political disaster for PM Kishida. In the aftermath of Abe Shinzō's assassination in July 2022, growing frustration with alleged ties between dozens of LDP lawmakers and vice-ministers and the Unification Church

brought the public's confidence in the government and its management of public affairs to a low of 36%. The government's decision to hold an 11 million US dollar state funeral with thousands of international invitees in October that year further reduced the cabinet's already precarious approval ratings [McCurry 2022, 27 September; Wallace and Pugliese 2023; Sakurai 2022].

In addition to these political mishaps, the government's support rate was affected by a «turnover contagion» (*jinin domino*) involving, among others, the Minister of Reconstruction, Akiba Ken'ya. The Minister had ties with the Unification Church and allegedly paid compensation to two of his secretaries involved in his election campaign in violation of Japan's Public Offices Election Law. Against this backdrop, Kishida sacked Akiba and the Parliamentary Secretary for Internal Affairs, Sugita Mio, who had caused controversies with repeated sexist and homophobic comments. The Prime Minister (PM)'s prompt reaction was aimed at speeding up the budget approval process but it did not help the government out of the quagmire of declining public confidence [The Yomiuri Shimbun 2022, 23 December; Satō *et al.* 2022, 27 December].

The negative approval trend continued in January 2023. In particular, the PM's lack of clarity regarding an increase in defence spending in the draft state budget presented in late December contributed to his plummeting support. The government announced a ¥ 114 trillion national budget (about € 716 billion) which included an increase in its defence spending to ¥ 10.1 trillion (89.4% more than 2022), nearly ¥ 37 trillion on social security, ¥ 6 trillion on public works and ¥ 5.4 trillion on education and science [GoJ MOF 2022]. The increase in defence spending was instrumental in adjusting Japan's security strategy to a purportedly changed international security environment. The draft budget detailed that the financial resources for Tokyo's Defence Buildup Programme would mainly come from non-tax revenue (e.g. reforms of public spending, carry-overs from other government funds for special purposes, returns of unused deposits and funds and profits from the sale of government-owned properties, etc.). At the same time, however, it indicated that ¥ 1 trillion would be appropriated through tax measures over the 2023-27 period [GoJ MOF 2022, 6]. This inevitably led to speculation about a possible consumption tax hike, winning Kishida the derogatory nickname of «tax-hike four-eyes» (*zōzei megane*) [Yamazaki 2023, 18 October]. Criticism of the PM's intention was voiced by cabinet members Nishimura Yasutoshi and Takaichi Sanae, both of whom were close to late Abe [Asahi Shinbun Seijibu 2023, 91]. Moreover, according to a May 2023 Kyodo poll, 80% of Japanese opposed the GoJ's plan to increase taxation to finance the increase in the defence budget. These factors eventually led the Kishida administration to indefinitely shelve the tax hike, which was originally scheduled for fiscal year 2024 [Kyodo News 2023, 7 May; Jiji Press 2023, 13 June].

3. Inherited troubles: COVID-19, Okinawa and the Fukushima wastewater issue

3.1 The COVID-19 downgrade

In spite of the above, Kishida's support rate slightly rebounded after the government's decision to move away from the COVID-19 pandemic-era restrictions. Regardless of warnings by members of the Japanese scientific community of the lack of science-based explanations of a «rushed» decision [Otake and Osaki Exum 2023, 27 January], in late January, the Japanese authorities proceeded with a downgrade of the syndrome from a Class-II to a Class-V infectious disease. While, on the one hand, any illness falling in the former category, including for instance novel strains of influenza, requires specific governmental control measures, the response to any Class-V infection, such as seasonal flu, is fundamentally entrusted to the choices and behaviour of individuals.

After the announcement, the government swiftly moved to relaxing rules on attending large events and on mask use in public spaces, lifting the isolation mandate for individuals contracting COVID-19 and curbing the isolation period in the case of infection to five days from the onset of symptoms. The decision to wear a mask was finally left to individual judgments, «respecting individual choices». In addition, the GoJ issued a series of recommendations regarding basic infection control measures (such as avoiding the so-called 3Cs, i.e. closed spaces, crowded places and close-contact settings) to be implemented on a voluntary basis by individuals or organisations [GoJ MHLW 2023].

3.2 The re-emergence of friction between Tokyo and Okinawa, and the China factor

Another long-standing issue, that of the relocation of the US Marine Corps Futenma air base from its current location in Ginowan to Nago, Okinawa, re-emerged during the first months of 2023. Okinawa Prefecture Governor Tamaki Denny, who was elected in 2018 on a political platform opposed to US base relocation and expansion, has vigorously refused to implement the central government's plan to relocate the military facility ever since. Since 2021, his prefectural government has blocked a design change to the base construction plan allowing for land reclamation works on the Henoko coastline, causing a legal battle with the GoJ. In March 2023, the Naha branch of the Fukuoka High Court ordered the prefectural government to approve the design changes. Tamaki refused to abide by the sentence, appealing to the constitutional right to local autonomy. He then brought the case to the Supreme Court [Endo 2023, 4 September].

In July, the Okinawa governor flew to Beijing for a five-day visit along with a delegation of Japanese politicians and businessmen seeking to promote Japan-China exchanges. He was received by PM Li Qiang. In an inter-

view with the People's Republic of China (PRC) public broadcaster CCTV/CGTN, Tamaki stressed that the Japan-US security system and Japan's defence capabilities needed to be kept «within limits» and reiterated that people in Okinawa were carrying a huge burden given the massive US military presence on the archipelago [CGTN 2023, 7 July]. Tamaki's visit sparked a heated reaction from right-wing conservative commentators, who accused him of surrendering Okinawa to China [e.g. Nakashinjō 2023, 21 September; Sakurai Yoshiko 2023]. In an early June speech reprinted on the front page of the *People's Daily*, China's President and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping made oblique references to the Ryukyu Kingdom (the pre-modern name of the Okinawa prefecture) as a node of trade and diplomatic interactions with mainland pre-modern imperial China and specifically with the city of Fuzhou, where he had served as secretary of the local CCP branch. Xi's words created doubts about Beijing's intention toward Okinawa against the backdrop of the PRC-Japan dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and especially of Japan's growing vocal commitment to the security of Taiwan [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2023, 5 July].

Later in September Japan's Supreme Court upheld the Fukuoka High Court decision, but Tamaki staunchly refused to implement it and instead took the issue to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. There, he emphasised that the Japanese government was «imposing» the construction of a new US military base in contempt of the Okinawans' opposition to the construction of new military facilities on the island, and of the island's natural environment [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2023, 20 September]. Nonetheless, in December the Fukuoka High Court issued a ruling requiring the prefectural government to swiftly approve the design changes to the Henoko facility for «public interest» reasons connected to the risks involved in maintaining the notorious Futenma air station. In the light of these facts, the GoJ announced that it would act in administrative subrogation and overrule the prefectural government's refusal and proceed with the application of the Supreme Court Sentence. This was the first such case since the GoJ resorted to execution by proxy to approve the use of local land for US military bases on behalf of the prefectural government in 1996 [Mainichi 2023, 17 December].

3.3 «Succeeding where Abe did not»: the Fukushima N.1 wastewater issue and the reversal of the post-3.11 energy policy

In contrast, the government's decision in August 2023 to allow Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), Japan's largest power utility and operator of the disaster-hit Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant, to discharge tritiated water in the Pacific Ocean was met with only marginal opposition. In the year before the decision, the GoJ had contracted Japan's top advertising agency, Dentsū, to set up a € 7 million multimedia campaign to win over popular scepticism about the safety of the operation and its possible effects on public

health [Makiuchi 2023, 18 March]. This was a major part of the Fukushima No. 1 decommissioning process. The treated water discharge plan was originally announced by the GoJ in April 2021 and it was later submitted to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for a technical review. The plan aims to gradually reduce the burden of the nearly 1.3 million tons of radioactive water in tanks installed on the premises of the damaged nuclear power plant by discharging it in the ocean in stages. Before being discharged, the water is treated in a radioactive material removal facility called the Advanced Liquid Processing System (ALPS), which removes the majority of contaminants (such as caesium and strontium), but not tritium [TEPCO 2015]. In 2021 IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi appointed a Task Force of experts from several countries, including China, South Korea, Russia, France, the US and the UK, to evaluate the Japanese plan, [IAEA 2023]. After a two-year-long review, in July 2023 the IAEA cleared the wastewater discharge plan as having a «negligible radiological impact on people and the environment» [IAEA 2023, iii]. Nevertheless, as IAEA Director General Grossi specified in his preface to the IAEA final report, the agency's positive assessment of the tritiated water discharge plan did not equate to an endorsement of Tokyo's initiative or recommendation to implement it [*ibidem*].

After receiving the green light from the IAEA, on 24 August TEPCO proceeded with a first discharge of treated water, which was followed by a second in October and a third in November [Yamaguchi 2023, 20 November]. In response, the PRC government imposed a formal ban on all seafood imports from Japan [Murakami 2023], which was followed in October by an analogous measure by the Russian government [*Reuters* 2023, 16 October]. In spite of these restrictions, in 2023 Japanese food exports totalled ¥ 1.45 trillion (nearly € 9 billion). In particular, exports of seafood and sea products such as scallops and pearls to Hong Kong, which enjoys relative trade autonomy from the mainland, surged by 86.9% and 92% respectively over the previous year, largely making up for the plunge in PRC sales [*NHK News Web* 2023, 28 October; Kato 2023, 8 November; Kyodo 2024, 30 January]. Domestically, professional associations in Japan (particularly fishermen) were critical of the decision [*NHK News Web* 2023, 22 August], citing among other factors the perception that the GoJ had done little to avoid economic damage resulting from the diffusion of misinformation and foreign government(s)-backed disinformation [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 20 August]. Nonetheless, Japanese media opinion polls showed that by the end of August a majority of the Japanese public had «understood» the government's decision [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2023, 27 August]. TEPCO and the GoJ expect to continue discharging treated water for the next 30 years [Take and Ishikawa 2023, 24 August].

Against this backdrop the GoJ will go ahead with plans to restart idled nuclear power plants and to build new ones in place of those that are de-

commissioned to help achieve its grand decarbonisation strategy (a cut in carbon emissions of 46% by 2030 compared to the 2013 level), reversing a cautious nuclear policy of more than a decade [Koyama 2022: 1-2; Reynolds and Umekawa 2022, 22 December]. Despite his record low popularity, on several longstanding issues, such as Japan's post-3.11 energy policy and defence posture, Kishida has in effect succeeded where his predecessor Abe did not [Asahi Shinbun Seijibu 2023, 121-122].

4. *The digital marshes of Japan's «new capitalism»*

When he emerged as leader of the LDP in autumn 2021, PM Kishida pledged to work to amend the excesses of capitalism with «redistributive» policies aimed at strengthening the middle class, favouring a massive re-skilling of Japan's working population and promoting digitalisation and a green economy by launching his flagship «new capitalism» (*atarashii shihonshugi*) agenda. With hindsight, this pledge can be seen as an attempt to rhetorically break away from late Abe Shinzō's imprint and his «Abenomics» economic strategy. As of today, however, the emergence of new business models, labour relations and social arrangements pivoting around technological innovation remains unlikely due to structural and contingent obstacles. Nonetheless, the Kishida administration has been able to pass a series of redistributive measures such as wage increases, tax reductions and subsidies despite doubts about their economic sustainability. On the other hand, very little progress has been made on another item at the top of the GoJ's agenda: the digital transformation.

Despite Japan's consolidated image as a technological superpower, the country struggles to keep up with its Asian neighbours, in particular the PRC [Suzuki 2021]. In fact, innovation and digitalisation have been top priorities for the GoJ since the launch of the Society 5.0 initiative in 2015. More recently, in the light of the emerging economic and techno-nationalist priorities associated with Japan's alignment with the US in US-China competition [Park 2023], both the Suga and Kishida governments vowed to invest in the semiconductor industry and accelerate the nationwide transition to 5G communication technologies (and importantly to develop new systems that move beyond 5G/6G, such as open radio access networks). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, former PM Suga Yoshihide launched an *ad hoc* government agency, the Digital Agency (DA) [Kyodo News 2021, 1 September]. In fiscal year 2023, the GoJ allocated ¥ 472 billion (€ 2.96 billion) to innovation and digitalisation [Kōno 2023].

Moreover, investment surged in the attempt to revitalise the national semiconductor industry to maintain an edge in the manufacturing sector, with partnerships with key global actors, such as the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) [Tomoshige 2023]. Nonetheless, accord-

ing to Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIAC) data, 5G mobile traffic amounted to a mere 3-4% of total mobile traffic in the archipelago, revealing Japan's relative underdevelopment in comparison with neighbouring South Korea and China [Horikoshi 2023].

However, the cornerstone of Japan's digitalisation strategy was a national digital identity system called My Number, a 12-digit social security and personal identification number. Particularly after the «digital defeat» of 2020 [Yamamoto and Iversen 2024: 10], when the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the inadequacy of Japanese e-government, the GoJ made an effort to promote the use of My Number. Starting in 2021 under the Suga administration a series of legal measures were taken aimed, among other things, at digitalising administrative procedures and providing integrated services, such as issuing vaccination certifications, national qualifications and residence permits [GoJ DA 2023; Yamamoto and Iversen 2024]. In autumn 2021, the DA started working on integrating the My Number Card with national health insurance, and a year later Kōno Tarō, the minister in charge of Japan's digital transformation, announced the end of health insurance card issuance, leading to a rapid increase in the number of My Number Card users (amounting in 2023 to 60% of the total national population) [Ninivaggi 2023, 21 August; *Tōkyō Shinbun* 2023, 7 December].

Despite continual efforts by the Kishida administration to push digitalisation ahead, the results have been below the government's expectations. More specifically, since May 2023 continual glitches in the national digital identity system have been reported, which have prompted the government to issue public excuses for mistaken user registrations and for failing to associate personal data with user profiles. In addition to causing major service disruptions for hundreds of hospital inpatients, the My Number system troubles dashed public confidence in government service digitalisation and in the need – defended by Kōno, among others – to accelerate it [Okada 2023, 20 May]. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that in the 2023 World Digital Competitiveness Ranking compiled by the International Institute for Management Development (IMD), Japan ranked 32nd among 64 economies for adoption and use of digital technologies for economic development and modernisation of governance, sliding back three positions from 2022 [IMD 2023].

5. *Kishida's political troubles*

5.1. *The Kihara incident*

Despite the above mishaps, the LDP scored several key electoral victories, induced in part by Kishida's perceived foreign policy successes (a surprise visit to Ukraine, a perceptibly successful G7 summit in Kishida's constituency of Hiroshima and a conciliatory bilateral summit with South Korea's Presi-

dent Yoon Suk-yeol). In particular, the conservatives emerged triumphant in the April 2023 round of local elections, securing absolute majorities of local assembly seats in 41 of the 47 prefectures [*Yomiuri Shinbun* 2023, 10 April] and six of the nine contested prefectural governorships, including that of northernmost Hokkaidō, traditionally a stronghold of opposition parties [McCurry 2023, 10 April]. A few days later, LDP candidates won by-elections for lower and upper house seats in Yamaguchi, Chiba and Oita, capturing a seat from the opposition and increasing LDP representation in the Diet by one member [*Nikkei Asia* 2023, 24 April]. The spring 2023 electoral victories reportedly reinforced Kishida's impression that he had overcome the difficulties of the previous year and he could possibly secure a second term as LDP president in September 2024 [*Asahi Shinbun Seijibu* 2023: 123].

In this context, in the majority party the notion that the PM could use his powers to dissolve the Lower House of the National Diet and capitalise on his political successes gained momentum. A conspicuous LDP victory in a snap election could help Kishida cement his leadership of the executive and his party amidst factional competition. Moreover, according to observers, venting the possibility of a snap election no later than June, at the end of the regular parliamentary session, was a political manoeuvre to avert the opposition's attention from the budget approval [Itō 2023, 8 May; *Yomiuri Shinbun* 2023, 17 June]. Only later in June did Kishida deny the possibility of an early dissolution of the Diet [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 15 June]. Nonetheless, the hypothesis that he could dissolve the Lower House and call a snap election later in the autumn still loomed in the majority camp.

However, LDP dominance did not insulate the Kishida administration from gaffes and internal strife. Troubles had already emerged in March, ahead of the April elections, when the MIAC confirmed the authenticity of internal records showing the Prime Minister's Office (*Kantei*) had interfered in the MIAC's oversight of public broadcasting during former PM Abe's tenure. The case caused friction between Takaichi Sanae, Minister of Economic Security and former Interior Minister, and the current MIAC leadership [*The Asahi Shimbun* 2023, 3 March]. It was only in the summer, however, that the cabinet's approval rate fell dramatically to a record negative level; in addition to the abovementioned My Number system glitches, another scandal compounded that fall. In July, the popular tabloid *Shūkan Bunshun* revealed that Kishida's top aide, Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Kihara Seiji, had allegedly shielded his wife from police investigation and possibly detention, in connection with the death of Yasuda Taneo, the woman's former husband. Yasuda had died in «mysterious circumstances» in 2006, having suffered injury to the throat caused by a knife-like object. His death had been dismissed as suicide related to Yasuda's drug abuse [*Shūkan Bunshun* 2023, 5 July; Shimizu 2023, 9 July]. Furthermore, a first re-examination of the case initiated in 2018 was abruptly interrupted by the police without providing Yasuda's family with satisfactory motivation [Nishiwaki 2023, 26 December].

According to *Bunshun*, however, Kihara allegedly admitted that without his protection and influence, his wife «would now be detained» [*Shūkan Bunshun* 2023, 5 July].

After the *Bunshun* revelations, the Yasuda family requested the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department (TMPD) to reopen the case on the ground that the man could have been killed by his then wife. In response, Kishida's top aide avoided meeting the press for several weeks and responded to an opposition interrogation by denying in a written letter having had any role in the Yasuda case. Concomitantly, he sued the tabloid for violations of human rights [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 24 July]. In October, in relation to the Yasuda incident, the TMPD confirmed the lack of any evidence of murder, prompting the Yasudas to appeal to the Public Prosecutor's Office [Nishiwaki 2023, 26 December]. Kihara's *modus operandi* inevitably fuelled speculation of the Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary or the Prime Minister's Office having interfered in the TMPD investigation [*Tōkyō Shinbun* 2023, 2 August].

Kihara, a University of Tokyo graduate and former Ministry of Finance bureaucrat turned politician, was considered to be PM Kishida's right-hand man and an «indispensable» policy advisor [Nemoto 2022, 15 January]. A Diet member since 2005, he had held various positions in the Abe and Kishida governments, as parliamentary secretary and Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs (2013-2016) – with Kishida as Foreign Minister (FM) – and, more recently, advisor (*hosakan*) to the PM and Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary (since 2021). Significantly, in 2022, his name had already been associated with the Unification Church (UC) after *Bunshun* revealed that he had received support for re-election as MP from a UC-affiliated organisation [*Shūkan Bunshun* 2022, 29 September].

5.2. *Kishida's weakness exposed: the September 2023 cabinet reshuffle*

Against this backdrop, on 13 September Kishida resorted to a cabinet reshuffle. Of the newly appointed 19 ministers, only six had previously served, Chief Cabinet Secretary Matsuno Hirokazu, Minister of Finance Suzuki Shun'ichi, Minister for the Economy, Trade, and Industry Nishimura Yasutoshi, Minister of Economic Security Takaichi Sanae and Ministry for Digital Transformation Kōno Tarō, while 11 others were appointed for the first time. In a show of inclusivity, the new cabinet also featured five women ministers, a record since 2014. One of them, Kamikawa Yōko, a former Justice Minister, took over as FM replacing one of Kishida's key allies, Hayashi Yoshimasa. Hayashi, nonetheless, was a potential contender for the LDP presidency (see below) and therefore the prime ministership. Concomitantly, Kihara Minoru, a former Special Advisor to late PM Abe for national security, vice-secretary general of the LDP national security committee and a senior member of a pro-Taiwan parliamentary association (*Nikka giin kondankai*), was appointed Defence Minister [*NHK News Web* 2023, 13 September].

There are few doubts that the promotion of several «new faces» to cabinet positions was aimed at reversing the government's plummeting approval rate. However, in the Japanese political context cabinet reshuffles usually have deeper implications. Most significantly, they are revealing of the intraparty balance of power and of the influence of LDP factions on the Prime Minister's decisions. In a seminal 2012 essay, Ono pointed out that, in the context of intraparty competition among different factions, since the 1960s LDP leaders, with few exceptions, have tended to be relatively weak and so to allocate more cabinet portfolios to opposing factions as a form of «selective incentive» [Ono 2012: 13]. Mogaki [2023], among others, argues that the PM attempted to solidify his leadership of the party ahead of the 2024 LDP presidential election. In effect, noting the decline in public support, Kishida needed to contain possible internal defections and challenges, but at the same time he hardly succeeded in setting himself free of Abe and LDP Vice-President Asō Tarō's sway in the government's decision-making process. As the Japanese press noted, since the installation of the first Kishida cabinet in October 2021 a power-sharing arrangement has emerged in the party and the Kishida administration, with Asō, LDP Secretary General Motegi Toshimitsu and Kishida forming a sort of «triumvirate» (*santō seiji*) [*Sankei Shinbun* 2022, 23 October]. Therefore, following Ono's abovementioned interpretation, in this power structure the PM would be the weakest link.

The September 2023 cabinet reshuffle seemed to confirm this hypothesis. Four ministers were appointed from each of the LDP's two largest factions at the time, the Seiwa Seisaku Kenkyūkai (Seiwakai), also known as the «Abe faction» given late PM Abe's affiliation with the group, and the Shikōkai. The first of these, with its 98 MPs at the time, was led by a collegial leadership including former Minister for the Economy, Trade, and Industry and Abe Shinzō's closest aide and friend Hagiuda Kōichi; the second (56 MPs) has been led by LDP Vice-President Asō Tarō since its foundation in 2017. Three more were chosen from Motegi's faction, the Heisei Kenkyūkai (53 MPs), and only two posts were allotted to Kishida's own faction, the Kōchikai (46 MPs). In concomitance with the new cabinet appointments, Kishida moved on to promote former Minister of Agriculture Moriyama Hiroshi and former Minister for the Economy, Trade, and Industry Obuchi Yūko as chairman of the Election Strategy Committee and chairperson of the Party Organisation and Campaign Headquarters respectively in an attempt to promote intraparty unity [Fujiwara 2023, 18 October]. Against this backdrop, scandal-hit Kihara Seiji, who had not been affected by Kishida's first cabinet reshuffle in August 2022, was eventually sidelined from his role as deputy chief cabinet secretary and «demoted» to a party role – LDP acting senior secretary-general (*kanjichō dairi*) [*NHK News Web* 2023, 13 September; *Yomiuri Shinbun* 2023, 13 September].

5.3. The «*purge*» of the Abe faction and the LDP- Kōmeitō frictions

Despite these attempts at rebuilding public confidence, in early December the government and the LDP faced another political storm. In November 2023 after months of speculation incited by an article in *Shinbun Akahata*, the Japanese Communist Party newspaper, Japanese media revealed that the Tokyo District Public Prosecutor's Office Special Investigation Department (*tokusōbu*) was investigating possible violations of Japan's Political Funds Control Law. Evidence of financial misreporting by several LDP factions, particularly the Abe and Nikai factions, and even Kishida's, had emerged. According to the prosecutors, in the period 2018-21 dozens of LDP lawmakers had pocketed and distributed to fellow party members several hundreds of millions of yen in kickbacks from the sale of tickets for fundraising parties. Party tickets (*pāti-ken* or *pa-ken*) are a common tool used by LDP lawmakers in all the factions to raise funds from individuals and organisations bypassing the national regulations on political financing. In practice, lawmakers receive from their faction offices a number of tickets to sell to supporters and donors. The price of a banquet ticket is set at ¥ 20,000 (the equivalent of circa € 125). Organisers tend to arrange food and beverages only for a portion of the ticket purchasers, as vouchers are merely surrogate donations. Ticket holders have the chance to take part in banquets in the presence of high-ranking LDP officials and possibly lobby for favourable policies. According to the current regulations, contributions up to ¥ 20,000 are anonymous, while only those above that threshold need to be reported with the donor's name. Each faction establishes a sales target which is proportional to the individual member's party rank. In this scenario, LDP members who sell more tickets than others may see their standing in their faction grow. In principle, surplus profits should be returned to the party. However, as revealed by the Japanese media on the basis of testimonies by former faction affiliates and secretaries, dozens of LDP politicians appropriated funds with the acquiescence of faction accountants and leaders, possibly to use them for campaigning purposes [*Tōkyō Shinbun* 2023, 25 November; TBS News DIG 2023].

Fearing direct involvement in the investigation, Kishida claimed that the misreporting was a «clerical» error, but announced his resignation as chairman of the Kōchikai in late November 2023 [*Tōkyō Shinbun* 2023, 25 November]. After a series of self-incriminations by cabinet members such as Minister for Regional Revitalisation Jimi Hanako and Minister for Internal Affairs and Communication Suzuki Junji admitting to misreporting donations and transfers of political funds, the LDP's largest faction, the Seiwakai, came under public scrutiny for alleged misconduct. Lawmakers in this faction had reportedly withheld more than ¥ 100 million (approximately € 630,000) in undeclared political funds over five years. The chair of the faction leadership committee, Shionoya Ryū, went as far as to admit that kickbacks had been taken by members of the faction, only to backtrack a few hours later [*'Pāken «kikkubakku» ichiji'* 2023].

Among those accused of appropriating political funds illegally were Chief Cabinet Secretary Matsuno and Minister for the Economy, Trade, and Industry Nishimura. The scandal rapidly snowballed, leading to the resignation in mid-December of Matsuno and all the cabinet members associated with the Abe faction, including Nishimura, MIAC's Suzuki and Miyashita Ichirō, Minister of Agriculture [*The Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 12 December]. In addition to cabinet members, prominent Abe faction leaders, namely LDP Policy Research Council Chair Hagiuda Kōichi, Diet Affairs Committee Chair Takagi Tsuyoshi and LDP Secretary-General in the House of Councillors Sekō Hiroshige also resigned from their party roles. The news came out only a few days before prosecutors raided the Abe and Nikai factions' offices. Meanwhile, the total sum allegedly pocketed by members of the Abe faction skyrocketed to ¥ 500 million (around € 3.1 million) [*NHK News Web* 2023, 19 December]. Against this backdrop, LDP-Abe faction officials pledged full cooperation with the authorities while opposition lawmakers, who had grilled their majority counterparts on the issue for weeks, urged the government and LDP to provide the public with clear explanations. Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) leader Izumi Kenta publicly requested the PM to «take responsibility» for the scandal, stressing that «public criticism was inevitable». Later in December, the four ousted cabinet members and LDP leaders asked to be heard by the Prosecutor's Office on the matter [*NHK News Web* 2023, 21 December].

At any rate, this wave of resignations led to a fresh cabinet reshuffle, which notably resulted in re-appointment of Hayashi Yoshimasa to the key post of Chief Cabinet Secretary, succeeding Matsuno. A prominent member of the Kishida faction and heir to a political dynasty, Hayashi, 62, enjoys a strong reputation as a bright policymaker and straightforward communicator, the ideal person to favour a reorganisation of the political system after the kickback scandal [*NHK News Web* 2023, 13 December]. Interestingly, Hayashi was not the first choice for the post. In fact, he had been ousted from government in September, reportedly due to an internal power struggle with Kishida [*Hokkaidō Shinbun* 2023, 2 November]. Not surprisingly, the *Asahi Shinbun* revealed that former Defence Minister Hamada Yasukazu, an LDP lawmaker with no ties to any faction, had been approached by the PM's staff before Hayashi, but had declined the offer [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 13 December]. Nonetheless, the most visible result of the kickback scandal was a slide in the cabinet's approval rate to a new historic low, forcing Kishida to further rethink internal party arrangements and possibly prompting fresh intraparty competition.

In addition, the LDP kickback scandal seemed to be increasing the political friction between the LDP and its junior coalition ally, the Kōmeitō (NKP). Following the above-mentioned events, party Vice-President Kitagawa Kazuo expressed criticism of the LDP and demanded a discussion on the role of factions in Japan's largest party and measures to pre-

vent the recurrence of similar scandals [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 13 December]. Difficulties in the LDP-NKP coalition emerged in late May, when the NKP announced its intention to field a candidate in one of the ten new electoral districts created in view of the 2025 Lower House elections. Against a backdrop of disaffection among the electorate and the rise of local opposition by Nippon Ishin in the Osaka and Hyogo constituencies, the NKP identified the newly established Tokyo 28th District (East Nerima) as the key district in their election strategy. LDP officials, however, opposed the plan. In response, NKP Secretary-General Ishii Keiichi declared that the party would not endorse any LDP candidate in single-seat districts in Tokyo [Nobira 2023, 26 May]. Consequently, relations between the two coalition partners froze [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2023, 14 August]. Eventually, the two parties reconsidered their respective veto positions and signed an election cooperation agreement in early September [Kuniyoshi 2023, 4 September].

Later, in mid-November, the third and most influential president of Sōka Gakkai (the NKP's religious parent organisation), Ikeda Daisaku, passed away, leaving an important legacy in Japan's religious and political life. As Sakurai Yoshihide states [2023, 15 December], Ikeda had special influence on the religious group and the NKP, but died at 95 without clearly designating a successor. This factor, combined with changes in the social and age composition of the Sōka Gakkai followers (around 8.3 million people, many of whom were second- or even third-generation believers), will possibly contribute to a continuing shrinking of the NKP's support base, reducing its attractiveness as a coalition partner in the eyes of LDP officials.

6. *Leaving Abenomics behind?*

In the context of the pandemic receding in February 2023, the Kishida administration proceeded with the nomination of a new Bank of Japan (BoJ) Governor who would take over from Kuroda Haruhiko, the longest serving BoJ Chief in Japan's post war history. It did this amidst widespread public preoccupation about the state of Japanese public finances [Nakamura *et al.* 2022], and more broadly the Japanese economy. According to a Nikkei-Tokyo University opinion poll, «restoring a positive business climate» (*keiki kaifuku*) topped the list of policy priorities for the Japanese public [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2023, 26 February].

After Deputy Governor Amamiya Masayoshi refused to take on the role, Kishida's choice fell on the economist Ueda Kazuo. The main challenge facing Ueda was to gradually put an end to the 10-year-old expansionary monetary policy, a major pillar of the GoJ-BoJ Abenomics strategy since 2013 and revive cooperation between the central bank and the government on price stabilisation [Onozawa 2023, 11 February]. In particular, before his installation as BoJ Governor, Ueda signalled his intention to depart from

the Abenomics era policies and review the yield curve control (YCC) (i.e. acquiring an unlimited quantity of long-term government bonds while setting limits to the oscillation of interest rates) and eventually phase it out by the end of 2023 [Hedder 2023, 8 November]. Combined with exogenous factors related to a global recovery in demand and economic activity after the lifting of COVID-19-related restrictions, supply chain disruptions and the economic effects of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the measure put in place by former BoJ Governor Kuroda has resulted in a historic domestic inflation rate increase [Buss *et al.* 2023; Thorbecke 2024; Ueda 2023: 4].

The end of the remaining COVID-19-related restrictions had a positive impact on the public perception of the business climate in the world's third/fourth largest economy (the depreciation of the yen allowed Germany to surpass Japan in nominal GDP terms by the end of the year). According to the Cabinet Office's monthly «Economy Watchers» survey, the average diffusion index (DI)¹ rose to 52.0 in February, two points above the 50-point threshold and 3.5-points more than the previous month [GoJ Cabinet Office 2023a]. Among the factors contributing to this phenomenon was a slight growth in domestic demand following the end of restrictions on events and concerts, an increase of inbound tourism and new investments in the manufacturing sector. In the context of the 2022-23 economic rebound, major listed Japanese companies reported record earnings, encouraged by strong performances by the automotive and service industries [Matsuo 2023, 15 September; *The Japan News* 2023, 27 November].

In this economic conjuncture, in a major shift from the era of prolonged deflation since the mid-1990s, prices also rose. Since June 2022, core inflation in Japan has been on the rise well above the GoJ and BoJ's expectations, reaching a record 3.8% in December 2022 and then stabilising in the 2.8-3.2% range throughout 2023. In response to soaring consumer prices, in early 2022 the GoJ introduced specific measures to control fuel prices and a year later established a subsidy programme to reduce energy and gas bills [*Kyodo News* 2023, 24 October]. In addition, several companies gave in to continuing government lobbying and announced wage increases. Since the first half of 2023, several big companies – such as Fast Retail, owner of the Uniqlo apparel brand, the gaming company Nintendo, the beverage giant Suntory, Canon, and the world's largest carmaker, Toyota, announced considerable pay rises in 2023. Particularly relevant was that by

1. The DI is an aggregative statistical tool measuring the degree of propagation of economic expansion and the proportion of single improving (or receding) component indicators. The DI takes values from 0 to +100. A threshold value is established at 50. Specifically, in this case, the survey's aim is to monitor consumers and business confidence or lack thereof in the local and national economy. A perceived improvement or stability of the economic situation is attributed to values from +0.5 to +1. Decline is instead assessed as 0. The survey participants are household members, workers and business operators.

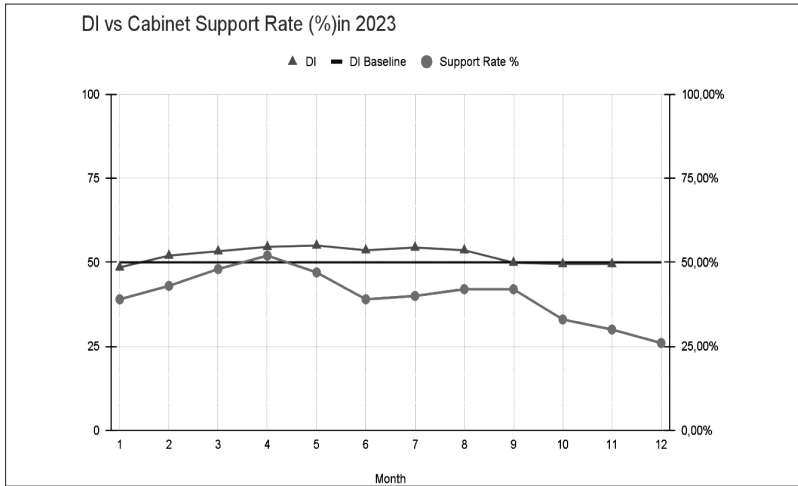
Toyota, which surprisingly decided on the highest wage hike in decades for nearly 70 thousand workers [Inagaki 2023, 28 March]. Furthermore, the traditional spring wage negotiations (*shunto*), which kicked off in February 2023, led to a base pay increase of 2.1% and the headline wage growth was up by 3.58% on the previous year, the highest since the early 1990s [Buss *et al.* 2023]. According to Bloomberg data, nominal wages in fact increased in 2023 by 1.2% over the previous year [Yokoyama 2023, 7 November].

Nonetheless, wage increases have not been on a par with the rise in consumer prices. With food prices up by more than 8.5% on the previous month in September and service prices generally rising due to wage increases, Japanese consumers' purchasing power contracted and, as a result, so did consumer spending [Thorbecke 2024].

Despite relative price stabilisation in the second half of 2023, the BoJ still considered the trend too feeble to proceed with a policy change, given the permanence of economic 'uncertainties' both domestically and abroad (rising import prices and inflation, a weakening yen, rising US and eurozone bond interest rates) [Ueda 2023: 6]. In an address to the Keidanren, Japan's main big business federation, Governor Ueda pledged to continue with monetary easing unless the «virtuous cycle between prices and wages intensifies» favouring price stability at 2% «in a sustainable and stable manner» [Ueda 2023: 6]. Therefore, by December 2023, no significant change in the decade-long BoJ negative interest rate policy had materialised.

Naturally, the economic trends had an impact on government initiatives. In October 2023, the GoJ announced its intention to phase out petrol subsidies and halve its support for utility bills [Kyodo News 2023, 24 October; Nikkei Asia 2023, 29 November]. Later in November, the Diet approved a ¥ 13 trillion supplementary budget to tackle inflation. The package included a ¥ 70,000 (around € 440) allowance for low-income families, energy bill subsidies and a one-year income tax cut (slightly more than € 250 for citizens and permanent residents). Despite political convergences during the vote in both houses of the Diet between the LDP-NKP majority and factions in the opposition, concerns about the long-term effects of Kishida's economic stimulus and its negative impact on Japan's public debt grew. Of the ¥ 13 trillion, 8.8 would in fact be financed with government bonds [Nikkei Asia 2023, 29 November]. This decision had natural consequences on the public's perception of the economy measured by the DI, and on the government's already precarious approval rate. In effect, triangulating Cabinet Office data on the DI trend with major opinion polls monitoring the administration's support rates, it is possible to identify a correlation between the two indicators [GoJ Cabinet Office 2023b; GoJ Cabinet Office 2023c; Nihon Keizai Shinbun 2023, 18 December]. Both peaked between April and May, coinciding with Japan's international exposure during the G7-related ministerial and summit meetings (see *infra*). However, while the DI gradually decreased and stabilised around the 50-point baseline in the second half

of 2023, the cabinet's support rate rapidly fell below 40% in June, to end at 26% in December (see the graph below).



Elaborated by Marco Zappa based on GoJ Cabinet Office 2023b, 2023c and Nikkei 2023.

7. Demography and immigration challenges

In the light of the above, current and future economic policymaking will need to consider structural changes in Japanese society. First, Japan's current demographic trends point to a 30% population decrease by 2070 [National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2023b]. According to official figures, in 2023 the number of births fell below the 800,000 threshold, a 5.1% decrease on the previous year. Faced with an increasingly greying population (the proportion of over-65s is 29.1%) ['Oiru Nihon: josei' 2023], the GoJ has launched a series of measures to prevent labour shortages and revert Japan's declining birth rate.

Concerning the first item, in May 2023 the GoJ issued reform guidelines highlighting the need to promote measures aimed at (a) expanding the workforce by integrating different worker demographics, particularly skilled and non-skilled foreign labourers; (b) adjusting the domestic workforce to the emerging demand for new skills in the digital and green sectors; (c) promoting equality among workers, overcoming differences between standard and non-standard employees. In this sense, future labour reforms should be centred around reskilling and upskilling Japanese workers, inter-company mobility and job-based employment [Zou 2023].

In addition, the GoJ pledged to increase its social security spending in the area of childbirth and childcare allowances [GoJ MOF 2022]. To better coordinate the response to the key issue of the nation's demographic crisis, based on a June 2022 act, the Kishida administration introduced a new government agency, the Children and Families Agency (Kodomo Katei Chō, CFA hereafter), and increased the lump sum allocation for childbirth and daily care to help families with children. On the one hand, establishing the CFA was a further addition to the political legacy of the embattled PM Kishida. More specifically, its instalment under the *Kantei's* jurisdiction was a move to streamline planning and decision-making processes related to reversing the country's low birthrate, the fight against child poverty and abuse, and other family-related issues. After Ogura Masanobu's brief tenure as minister in charge of the CFA, since the September 2023 cabinet reshuffle the post has been held by Katō Ayuko, daughter of a former LDP secretary-general, Katō Kōichi (1995-98), and a former secretary to LDP lawmaker Noda Seiko.² On the other hand, the above economic measures were quickly dismissed as ineffective against the hindrances to childcare and other issues related to child welfare [Iwamoto 2023, 3 April]. In addition, they were deemed inadequate against female income precarity and the lack of day care facilities in large urban areas, and neither did they include «non-traditional» couples in their scope [Piser 2023, 23 October].

Related to the previous point are a series of changes to the country's immigration policies. The numbers of foreign residents and workers in Japan climbed up to historic record levels in 2023, with the former at 3.2 million and the latter at slightly more than 2 million [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2023, 13 October; Shinozaki 2024, 26 January]. The end of COVID-19-related restrictions played an important role but steps taken by the GoJ partially contributed to this result. Considering the country's growing workforce demand, in 2023 Tokyo approved expansion of the scope of the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) system. The SSW system is a programme launched in 2019 to tackle skilled labour shortages in specific sectors of the Japanese economy ranging from nursing, fisheries and agriculture to construction, building cleaning, car repair and maintenance, and shipbuilding. The system involves two visa types: (a) Type 1: a five-year limit visa with no possibility for the visa holder to bring his/her family, and (b) Type 2: an unlimited visa with the possibility to bring the family for foreign workers with more proficient skills in those specific industries [GoJ MOFA n.d.]. In the light of government data forecasting a need for nearly seven million foreign workers by 2040 to keep up with Japan's current economic output targets,

2. Noda competed against Kishida for the LDP presidency in 2021. She ran on a platform that highlighted the need for urgent measures to tackle the demographic crisis. Between October 2021 and August 2022, she was the Minister in charge of child affairs and was responsible for the CFA Establishment Act, which was passed by the Diet in June 2022.

the SSW has offered thousands of lower skilled foreign workers a pathway to permanent residence in Japan, but several restrictions, such as exams and a Japanese language proficiency requirement, are still in place. As a result, as opposed to the soaring number of type 1 SSW visa holders since its inception in 2019 (more than 173,000 people, with an increase of 40,000 on the previous year), only 12 people (7 from the PRC and 5 from Vietnam) received a type 2 SSW visa, as per data from June 2023 [GoJ Immigration Service Agency 2023; *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2023, 13 October; Rehm 2023].

Furthermore, in November 2023, the GoJ announced a halt to the infamous Technical Intern Training Programme (TITP, *Ginō jissshū seido*) and the introduction of the Training and Employment Programme (*Ikusei shūrō seido*, authors' translation) in its place. With the introduction of the new programme, the GoJ pledged to reduce the economic and financial burden on interns in coordination with host firms, to link the new programme with the SSW and to increase the attractiveness of the programme in an economic context characterised by inflation and a weak yen [*NHK News Web* 2023, 24 November]. The TITP has been repeatedly criticised over the years both domestically and internationally for being a smokescreen for human trafficking [U.S. Department of State 2023]. On top of the labour-intensive and sector-specific SSW system, the GoJ continued to look for foreign talent with highly specialized skills, including recent graduates of highly ranked academic institutions, under the J-Skip and J-Find visas, respectively, but with mixed results.

Concomitantly, amendments to the current Law on immigration and refugees introduced new rules authorising deportation for asylum seekers whose application has been turned down twice [Tian 2023]. These pieces of legislation were criticised by opposition parties, academics and activists both in Japan and abroad for heightening the risk that applicants could be returned to their countries of origin in a situation that their livelihoods are threatened, infringing international human rights and the principle of non-refoulement [Kasai 2023]. Given, on the one hand, the political sensitivity of the issue, in particular for the LDP right wing and the conservative part of public opinion and, on the other, growing pressure from the business community aimed at favouring the arrival of needed foreign workers, it is likely that policies in this domain will continue to be low-profile but incremental as they have been for the last decade [Higuchi 2023].

8. Japan's diplomatic and security strategy in 2023: building minilateral ententes to negotiate from a position of strength

Moving on to diplomacy and security, the year under review saw strategic outreaches by the Japanese government, from its immediate East Asian neighbours all the way to European players, along the lines described in

earlier articles [e.g. Wallace and Pugliese 2023]. Minilateral diplomacy aimed at purposeful multi-layered security ententes, often on an *ad hoc* basis, worked in lockstep with the US government's regional efforts. The aim was to balance China militarily, counter its regional and global diplomatic and economic influence, and do so «by taking full advantage of comprehensive national power, including diplomatic, defence, economic, technological, and intelligence/information capabilities» [‘Kokka anzen hoshō senryaku’ 2022, p.4].

Recent scholarship has highlighted the revolutionary quality of Japan's 2022 strategic documents for its security and defence posture, in coordination with Washington [Hughes 2024; Teraoka and Sahashi 2024]. Aside from China balancing, a much less appreciated aim was to cage in the resurfacing of US unilateral and insular instincts, which were evident in the first Trump administration, with a set of deepened, routinised and institutionalised alignments with US allies and partners. More importantly, the Japanese government was clearly prioritising the geopolitics of the first island chain, and first and foremost the preservation of the status quo across the Taiwan Strait.

Specifically, 2023 witnessed three noteworthy developments: a) a bolstered US-Japan alliance and parallel changes in Japan's force posture, suggesting Japan's support for Taiwan's security; b) a resumption of bilateral summit diplomacy with the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the unveiling of an ambitious US-Japan-ROK minilateral with security implications that go beyond the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's nuclear and, especially, missile stance and extend to the first island chain (with Taiwan front and centre); and c) a set of multi-layered security ententes between Japan and «like-minded» European players, starting with NATO and its biggest member states, one that allowed a joint response to China and deepening security and defence technology partnerships, with potential implications for a Taiwan contingency scenario. Therefore, apart from Japan's rearmament and a bolstered US-Japan alliance, 2023 saw successful US-led efforts to deepen networked modular security ententes, not just in the Asia-Pacific hub-and-spokes alliance system [Dian & Meijer 2020] but also through active contributions by US allies in Europe.

The Japanese and US governments acted in the conviction that Chinese policymakers respected strength, and diplomacy was necessary to avoid conflict. In 2023 the Japanese government resumed dialogue with the PRC, by promoting confidence-building measures such as a hotline between their defence authorities [Ministry of Defense 2023]. This ran in parallel with the US-China diplomatic activism witnessed in the course of the same year. The year under review also witnessed economic competition, and techno-economic containment, walking hand-in-hand with a degree of engagement, specifically economic measures aimed at stifling China's technological catch-up and competing with its regional influence. In short, the Japanese

and especially the US governments were able to gradually change the security and economic environment around China to influence its behaviour. Given space limitations, this article concentrates on developments in traditional security with a focus on Japan's immediate neighbourhood and active cajoling, by both the US and Japan, of Europe's security engagement. The next section explores these dynamics, and it does so by highlighting the relational and contextual factors behind Japan's foreign and security policy. No country is an island, after all, not even an island country.

9. Caging China with US-blessed diplomatic resets and deepening security ententes

Prima facie, Sino-Japanese relations in 2023 continued to register acrimony and tension, arguably also in the light of Japan's moves on Taiwan. After all, the Japanese government coupled its security embrace of Taiwan with diplomatic rhetoric – as was recounted in last year's review [Wallace and Pugliese 2023, p.88] – that suggested ambiguity over its previously strongly stated «One China» policy. Multiple foreign diplomats suggested to one of the authors that Japanese government officials insisted that Japan never spelt out its «One China» policy, hence their insistence on specific ambiguous wording in recent G7 documents [Foreign diplomats, interviews, 2022 & 2023]. This narrative is, however, a simplification, as the section devoted to Taiwan will show (see Section 10). In this context, then, it is best to understand China's ambiguous signalling concerning Okinawa during 2023.

Moreover, the Chinese government's decision to ban imports of all fishery products because of the release of treated wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear plant, which started in August 2023, went hand in hand with a spread of misinformation and disinformation seemingly backed by, if not the Central Propaganda Department, portions of the Chinese party-state apparatus [*The New York Times* 2023, 31 August; *Yomiuri Shinbun* 2023, 14 July]. While ultimate evidence is hard to garner, some Chinese agencies might have targeted both domestic *and* foreign audiences, including Japanese ones, to sow doubt, a notable evolution in Chinese propaganda aims and means. However, the messages from Beijing were mixed and evolving, suggesting a potential split in the government and hinting at a potential resolution in the near future. Chinese government officials brought up the dumping of treated nuclear wastewater in multilateral bodies, such as the UN Human Rights Council and the International Atomic Energy Agency [*Xinhua* 2023, 15 September; The State Council Information Office 2023]. Chinese representatives, nonetheless, avoided criticising Japan at the end of the year, especially at the bilateral or trilateral level with South Korea [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 26 November]. Moreover, on 15 August, the day associated with the end of Japan's war of aggression and empire, a lack of

victimisation narratives in authoritative Chinese legacy media, such as the People's Daily, suggested the Chinese government was willing to gradually rebuild its relationship with its neighbour. In short, the road was being paved for a timid tactical détente that would parallel the stabilisation of US-China relations at the summit level. In terms of diplomatic visits and summit diplomacy, however, policymakers in Beijing clearly prioritised the stabilisation of US-China relations over those with Japan and South Korea.

Aside from power politics, the resumption of diplomatic engagement in 2023 was for a variety of reasons. US-China diplomacy – already set in motion at the end of 2022 with the Xi-Biden bilateral on the fringes of the G20 summit in Indonesia – was held ransom by bilateral politicisation, spirals of mistrust and especially intra-US polarisation, all of which were evident in the February 2023 spy balloon brouhaha [Heer 2023]. Willingness on both sides of the Pacific Ocean to stabilise relations was probably connected with tense cross-strait relations and the looming January 2024 presidential and legislative elections on the self-governed island. Still, China's grappling with political and economic headaches throughout the year probably hastened momentum towards the stabilisation of US-China and, to a lesser extent, Japan-China relations. The rapid (and opaque) dismissal of the newly appointed Ministers of Foreign Affairs and of Defence, and a series of purges of past and current top brass of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Rocket Force, testified that not all was politically stable in Xi's China. Economy-wise, the worsening geopolitical environment compounded the malfunctioning of two of the three Chinese engines of growth: investments and domestic consumption (the other engine being exports). Diminishing investments, especially foreign direct investment (FDI), were a by-product of US-China strategic rivalry, along with Xi's policies that prized «security», regime stability and therefore Communist Party of China-led «control» over economic performance. These policies were exemplified by the revised Counter-Espionage Law of April 2023 [Menegazzi 2024] and arbitrary enforcement of domestic legislation, including the imposition of exit bans on local and potentially foreign businessmen [*Financial Times* 2023, 25 September].

Certainly, China still attracted capital inflows in its high-tech sector, especially its electric automobile industry, and retained substantial investment stocks thanks to its market scale and demonstrated ability to climb up international value chains notwithstanding US-led tech curbs [*Financial Times* 2023, 6 February]. Nevertheless, FDI inflows into China in 2023 slumped to US\$ 33 billion, a roughly 80% decrease relative to the previous year [*Bloomberg* 2024, 18 February]. More poignantly, this was the lowest figure since 1993, when economic globalisation re-embraced China, and following Deng Xiaoping's 1992 Southern Tour that confirmed and reinforced China's «Reform and Opening Up» economic policies. Moreover, patterns of new foreign investment in China suggested that it aimed at the Chinese market rather than (re-)exporting. Earlier economics-led globali-

sation had given way to (geo)political «de-risking» and widening economic balkanisation. According to official statistics, Japanese companies «added the least amount of net new money in 2023 in at least a decade, with only 2.2% of new Japanese overseas investment going to China. That was less than what was channelled into Vietnam or India, and only about a quarter of the investment into Australia» [*Bloomberg* 2024, 18 February]. Poor returns on capital, given low interest rates in China, were just one part of the reason behind the plunge in FDI inflows in the People's Republic. At the same time, the imposition of barriers and domestic controls suggested that profits made in the Mainland were reinvested there – hinting at a progressive insulation of foreign business activities in China from global ones.

Moreover, the prolonged real estate crisis and slack labour market sapped the second engine of growth, consumer confidence. Nonetheless, current account surpluses, pre-existent investment stocks and mid-year budget expansion suggested China's GDP grew in 2023 by roughly 5.2%, although these official figures were disputed by economists, with projections as low as 1.8% growth [*Financial Times* 2024, 6 February]. In fact, authoritative China watchers suggested as low as no growth altogether, a factor that might even lead to substantial political instability in the People's Republic.

Apart from Chinese policymakers' willingness to soothe the country's economic woes and to buttress regime stability, the most salient driver behind a degree of stabilisation was the Biden administration's successful revival of a multi-layered network of *ad hoc* coalitions of variable and modular geometry. While retaining some of the Trump administration's unilateralism, notably in economic policy, its successor more actively cajoled and leveraged allies and partners for «integrated deterrence», with specific emphasis on regional counterparts. Security-focused minilaterals thus functioned as «force multipliers» and aimed at balancing and containing China, to negotiate with Beijing «from a position/situation of strength», as per the thinking of the Biden's National Security Council [The White House 2022]. This policy was not unlike Japan's tested logic in dealing with China, at least since the advent of Abe Shinzō, and one that was publicly appropriated by Kishida [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023a]. In fact, the key strategist behind much of Biden's «China» (or, rather, Asia) policy, Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific at the National Security Council Kurt Campbell, who had crafted the Obama administration's «Pivot to Asia» and who was nominated as Deputy Secretary of State in the Autumn of 2023, embodied the logic of power politics-based diplomatic stabilization. At any rate, important portions of such policies qualified as a consensus matured over years by the deeply networked US-Japan security policy community [Bochorodycz 2023].

Thus, military exercises at the bilateral and minilateral levels went hand in hand with deepening strategic partnerships with Asian (and extra-regional) actors and the pursuit of greater intelligence sharing, co-man-

agement, interoperability, access to respective military bases (and logistical support) and modernisation of armed forces. Against this backdrop, the US-Japan alliance defined US power projection, which emerged as the main instrument of deterrence in the Asia-Pacific. This process – which had been set in motion ahead of Obama’s «Pivot», already by 2005-06 under the George W. Bush administration [Silove 2016] – now acquired more distinctive power political qualities. The marked geopolitical turn of these partnerships was a byproduct of a shift in favour of a «Strategy of Denial», as per the thinking of then US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development Elbridge Colby, a key Trump administration policymaker. According to the penholder of the 2018 US National Defense Strategy, the US had to double its efforts at balancing China, enlist US allies and partners across the first island chain to buttress deterrence capabilities towards the People’s Republic – including in Taiwan and Southeast Asia – and avoid a potentially domino-like process of subordination to Beijing [Colby 2021].

For instance, in 2023 the force posture and military doctrine changes in Japan, specific to Taiwan (see below), proceeded along with increases of US basing rights in the Philippines and trilateral military cooperation with Manila, with a Japan-Philippines reciprocal access agreement on the horizon. Moreover, the US government was providing Taiwan with weapons, training and ways to bolster resilience along with its new-found emphasis on asymmetric deterrence along the first island chain, while eliciting coalition-building with and among third parties there. Direct testimonies from the US Department of Defense suggested active US cajoling for European security contributions to Taiwan, notably with training in cyber defence, humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR, where preparedness for natural disasters is fungible for «man-made» disasters too), civil defence, arms and/or components sales and deployments across the Taiwan Strait. Also advocated was a revival of the local defence industrial base to provide logistical support and ammunition – even just indirectly so, via triangulation – in the event of a contingency [US Department of Defense officials, Interviews, Washington DC, 6 February 2024]. Growing European political and security engagement in the region in 2023 and 2024 testified to this logic and to a successful US-led push [Pugliese 2024], as the rest of the review will suggest. But the most consequential development was in the US-Japan-Taiwan link.

10. *Drivers behind Japan’s embrace of Taiwan*

As was recounted in reviews in previous years, the Japanese government has stepped up its game on Taiwan in recent years. It has worked in lock-step with the United States and «like-minded» players to enlarge the self-governing island’s international space through initiatives such as the

Global Cooperation and Training Framework, and likely favoured Diet members' diplomacy there, with as many as 120 Diet members visiting the island in 2023, while less than ten visited China [*Taipei Times* 2024, 4 March]. Moreover, the GoJ provided public goods such as vaccines and highlighted the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, for example during the 2023 G7 summit in Hiroshima. Apart from deep historical ties [Pelaggi 2022, Ch.3], shared democratic values and sustained people-to-people contacts, Taiwan is Japan's third largest trading partner for both exports and imports (after China and the US), and is Japan's most important semiconductor supplier by a wide margin [*Taipei Times* 2023, 10 April]. Therefore, also in the light of the deterioration in Sino-Japanese and cross-strait relations, the Japanese government has raised its engagement with Taiwan [Zakowski 2023].

From a geopolitical standpoint, Japan and the US benefit from the preservation of the status quo across the Taiwan Strait because it bottles up China's advance into the seas around the first island chain and facilitates tracking of Chinese military assets venturing beyond it, including inter-continental ballistic missiles, ships and submarines [Morimoto and Ohara 2022, i-vi]. In fact, Japan has been discreetly overhauling its security regime and force posture to preserve a certain balance of military power, even just asymmetrically, to deter Chinese aggression. Japanese December 2022 strategic documents and joint statements by Japan and the US in 2023 suggest that the transpacific allies were working in lockstep in the security domain.

There is broad continuity and a modicum of consistency behind Japan's moves, but this review emphasises a change in Japan's posture – a change that is often under-appreciated, with limited exceptions [Fatton 2024]. Tokyo's ambiguous «One China» framework «recognizes the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1972], but some scholars argue that the Japanese government has *de facto* followed a «Two Chinas» policy with its sustained informal relations with the Republic of China, Taiwan [Liff 2022; Matsuda 2023]. This is also the version quietly stated by Japanese diplomats in recent years. It has been especially salient since the late 2010s. In the authors' opinion, however, this stance is a more recent political construct aimed at opening up space for the self-governed island, and one that feeds Chinese insecurity. Certainly, according to the 1972 joint communique that was signed when Japan established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, Tokyo «fully understands and respects [Beijing's] stand» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1972]. This language is typical of the ambiguity embedded in many countries' «One China» policies.

However, Tokyo wanted to reassure Beijing back in 1972. Chinese policymakers proposed a gentlemen's agreement during negotiations to normalize relations with Japan. According to Beijing's suggestions, the Japanese government would have acknowledged that «Taiwan is the territory

of the People's Republic of China and the liberation of Taiwan is a domestic issue for China», so much so that Tokyo would have expected China's «due consideration» of Japanese economic interests there «when Taiwan is liberated» [Tacit Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of Japan 1972].³ Instead, Tokyo refused to craft such a secret document, but conceded to an oral statement concerning «Japan-Taiwan relations in the context of the normalization of Japan-China relations», according to which the Japanese government refutes the existence of «Two Chinas» and has no intention of supporting «Taiwan's independence movement» [Inoue 2011, 535]. This statement was made right ahead of the signature of the aforementioned joint communique by then Foreign Minister Ōhira Masayoshi, the key political negotiator and one of Japan's most elaborate and visionary politicians, especially on foreign policy matters [Zappa 2022].

In short, «the issue of confrontation between the government of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan is *basically* (italics added) a China domestic matter»,⁴ as per Ōhira's response (*tōben*) to a Diet interpellation, a *de facto* policy.

This basic principle, however, ceases to exist when force is used on Japan's doorstep. This was mentioned in testimony by one of the key diplomats behind the Japan-China diplomatic negotiations in 1972 [Kuriyama 1999]. Certainly, the importance of peace and security in Japan's immediate neighbourhood was spelt out, among other documents, in the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the US and Japan – specifically Art. VI – and reinforced in the 1969 Nixon-Satō joint communique. Moreover, international lawyers have argued that «attempts to solve the problem of Taiwan otherwise than by peaceful means must now constitute a situation 'likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security' under Article 33 of the [UN] Charter. Although the PRC denies that there is a 'juridical boundary' between the parties, [the] suppression by force of 23 million people cannot be consistent with the Charter» [Crawford 2007, 220-1].⁵ The reiteration of the «importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait» in bilateral and multilateral statements by «like-minded partners», and in private bilateral meetings with Chinese government officials is buttressed by this logic and reinforces the point [High-ranking Australian

3. N.B. The title of the document is a misnomer because it was a Chinese suggestion during negotiations, one that was reportedly not agreed upon. Act on Access to Information Held by Administrative Organs. Also available in the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Obtained by Yutaka Kanda and translated by Ryo C. Kato. Giulio Pugliese is indebted to Jeffrey Hornung for this source.

4. Foreign Minister Ōhira Masayoshi's Response to Diet Interpellation (*tōben*) 8 November 1972, cited in [Matsuda 2023, 182-3].

5. Giulio Pugliese is indebted to Aurelio Insisa for this authoritative point.

policymaker, testimony, Washington DC, 7 February 2024]. Therefore, from a legal standpoint, a kinetic attack or a blockade of Taiwan, one that either endangers Japanese security and suppresses by force (or starvation) Taiwanese citizens, would overrule the earlier promises made in 1972 by the government of Japan. However, it is worth stressing the evolution of Japan's policy stance to better grasp the action-reaction dynamics across the Taiwan Strait, as evidenced by the Japanese government's current reticence to publicly acknowledge it has a «One China» policy.

The rapidly shifting military balance – one that may tilt in China's favour vis-à-vis Taiwan – has been translated into more assertive PRC actions across the strait, sometimes reactively so. Similarly, the important strategic changes and previously unthinkable vocal stance from Tokyo's end, one that is at times in tension with Japan's previous pledges, has sometimes preceded and sometimes reacted to Chinese actions. This relational logic is key to understanding the negative spiral in cross-strait tensions. Along with the upgrading of Taiwan's description as «an extremely crucial partner and an important friend» in Japan's official diplomatic bluebook, influential politicians, retired officers and the top brass of the military have concomitantly raised awareness of the sense of crisis across the strait to drive the political agenda and legitimise major moves in Japan's security regime [Iwata *et al.* 2023]. Notably, in 2021 then Deputy Prime Minister Asō Tarō signalled that if Taiwan were invaded, Japan would come to its defence along with the US, while the late Abe Shinzō quipped in his new-found capacity as a Diet member that a «Taiwan contingency is a Japan contingency» [*Kyodo News* 2021, 6 July; *Kyodo News* 2021, 1 December]. In 2023 former Defence Minister Onodera Itsunori argued that Japan would fight alongside the US, which was echoed by serving Vice-Minister of Defence Ino Toshiro [*NHK* 2023, 15 May; *The Telegraph* 2023, 23 July].

Top bureaucrats and uniformed officials who had served under the Abe administration, in particular, were especially vocal and prolific on this front, specifically in TV interviews, a growing number of publications and public and heavily mediated tabletop exercises organised by a number of think tanks. These statements and the broader public discourse on a Taiwan contingency are notable and, this analysis suggests, they portend to a clearer Japanese commitment to protect Taiwan and an expansive interpretation of Japan's security interests, something that is not fully appreciated in the policy and academic literature. The year under review thus provides a window on the Japanese government's recent and planned contributions to the defence of Taiwan; one that emphasises deterrence, sometimes at the expense of reassurances.

As the Wall Street Journal revealed in 2023, «American and Japanese military officials have been working on a plan for a conflict over Taiwan for more than a year [and] Washington has nudged Tokyo to consider roles for the Japanese military such as hunting for Chinese submarines around Tai-

wan» [*The Wall Street Journal* 2023, 15 July]. Until the 2020s Japan and the United States only had an operational plan (OPLAN 55) to deal with a military crisis in the Korean peninsula, but, as the afore-mentioned Art. VI in the US-Japan alliance treaty and the Nixon-Satō communique suggest, the alliance was also aimed at the «Far East» writ-large. At any rate, the ability of the Japanese executive to initiate a new joint operational plan without new US-Japan defence guidelines is worthy of note.

Moreover, when Japan's three landmark strategic documents were announced in December 2022, commentators suggested that the narrow timeline for a fully functional unified command of the Japan Self-Defense Forces was due to an anticipated Taiwan contingency [Iwata *et al.* 2023; Iwata 2023, 176-90]. In short, this was not a bureaucratic timeline but a strategic one centred on Taiwan as the main risk requiring attention, not unlike US Department of Defense (DoD) thinking dating back to at least 2019-20 [Esper 2022, 513]. The US DoD was already coordinating with Japanese counterparts back then, in fact [*Ibidem*, 540]. In 2023, this «timeline» was compressed [*The Japan News* 2023, 6 September]. Japan's new joint command structure – with a commanding officer in charge of overseeing and guiding the operational integration of the three services during emergencies, also by leveraging new domains such as cyber and space – would further buttress coordination with the US. In short, seamless integration allowed better «integrated deterrence» across domains and in closer cooperation with its traditional ally. The new joint command structure was planned for 2024.

Successive US governments were the leading engines of change behind the networked geopolitics of the first island chain, starting with the Trump administration [Esper 2022, 511-6, 535-41]. In fact, a senior Taiwanese diplomat told one of the authors that «Japan has not been a pioneer [on this matter]» [High-ranking Taiwanese government official, 24 February 2023]. In conjunction with this, the Biden administration successfully interlocked its alliances to enlist, among others, the cooperation of the South Korean government in coordinating with the US and Japan, as well as NATO countries. The joint Japan-US preparation for a Taiwan contingency – i.e. a set of combined operational plans for a Taiwan conflict – and the promise of a standing bilateral joint military planning and coordination office in Japan to work in tandem with the aforementioned JSDF unified command were destined to become key undertakings and an important step in alliance integration. The US-Japan alliance was front and centre of the new geopolitics of the first island chain. As the above preliminary (and necessarily incomplete) historical sketch shows, the changes evident by 2023 were set in motion *ahead* of China's worrisome cross-strait sabre-rattling, such as that witnessed in 2022, thus feeding Chinese assertiveness and suggesting that the action-reaction dynamics were in full swing.

Finally, and in line with this article's main narrative, it was the Abe government that planted the seeds for Japan's greater contribution to the US-Japan alliance and potential security intervention in a Taiwan contingency scenario. The next section will detail this issue.

11. *Linking Taiwan with Japan's security: legal and strategic revolutions come to fruition*

Japan's 2023 decision to post a serving Japan Ministry of Defense (MOD) official and a retired JSDF officer to Japan's representation office in Taipei (the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association) suggested more preparation for contingency planning, including liaising with Taiwanese and US counterparts [*Reuters* 2023, 13 September]. Along with the appointment of a proper Defence Attaché, reporting also suggested Japanese (and South Korean) intelligence assistance to the self-governing island [*Financial Times* 2023, 8 June].

The consensus among scholars and practitioners is that Japan has over-prioritised its immediate political concerns, for instance by preparing for a potential evacuation of its citizens, ahead of bigger strategic imperatives. This review instead finds that Japanese policymakers have linked the security of Taiwan with Japanese security, and especially in 2023. This is evidenced by the above statements by heavyweight politicians and the little-understood legal framework allowing these statements (although one of the authors indicated the *revolutionary* quality of the 2015 legislation back then. See Pugliese 2016) and recent strategic moves in the US-Japan alliance. It is worth going over these legal factors one more time and doing so through the lens of a cross-strait contingency.

In 2014, the Abe government achieved constitutional reinterpretation through executive fiat, one that allowed for the right to collective self-defence (CSD). That is, military responses in defence and support of «a foreign country that is in a close relationship to Japan» that comes under attack. This definition allows CSD of its treaty ally, the United States of America, and other like-minded states, such as Australia and European countries, with which Japan has no formal alliance treaties. It is worth stressing that, according to Kishida's own Diet testimony in 2015 when he served as Foreign Minister, this may even apply to semi-sovereign states, such as Taiwan [Kutsunegi 2015: 36-7]. The recent language in Japan's diplomatic bluebook on Taiwan, describing it as «an extremely crucial partner and an important friend» of Japan, thus acquires an important meaning in the context of the above changes in favour of CSD.

At the same time, and poorly understood at the time, the 2014 Cabinet Decision and subsequent security legislation linked the Japanese Constitution's war-renouncing Article 9 with Article 13, which is concerned with

the rights to individual dignity and public welfare.⁶ It did so to expand what constitutes «Japan's survival», meaning self-defence, by stating: «self-defence measures are only intended to deal with the urgent and unjust situation in which people's right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness will be/may be completely overthrown by an armed attack by a foreign country, and to protect these rights of the people» [Cabinet Office of Japan 2014]. Similar considerations would also apply in the event that «friendly country/ies» come under attack and the attack would impact «Japan's survival», defined along the above broad lines. Key bureaucrats working for the Abe government and National Security Secretariat later introduced such language in the Peace and Security Legislation drafts, which were passed by the Diet in 2015. Scrutiny by the opposition parties created little to no effect as the LDP did not change the wording despite months of deliberations.

In fact, the Japanese government's preference for rhetorical understatement and lack of vigorous, clearer Diet debates has obfuscated the degree of policy change. Indeed, if US forces were to intervene in a Taiwan scenario and were attacked by China, Japanese decision-makers may now invoke a «survival threatening situation» to dispatch military assets in defence of US forces and, unless the attacker desists by sparing Japan's Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), enter a conflict with China. Under this same piece of legislation, in less dire situations, defined as those «situations that have an important influence» on Japan's peace and security, the JSDF may instead provide rear area support – including the provision of weapons, ammunition and fuel – and possibly engage in search and rescue. At the same time, given substantial US forward deployment in Japan and the importance of access to US and/or Japanese military facilities, if not civilian ones, the difference between the two scenarios in a kinetic military crisis involving US-China confrontation is likely to be irrelevant. Japan – and especially Okinawa – would almost certainly become a target, and hence a belligerent, either way. Tokyo may altogether deny support for US forces, but that would end the US-Japan alliance, favour Chinese irredentism and, in all likelihood, a domino-like effect of subordination to Beijing by regional players. Therefore, for Tokyo this is a highly unlikely call, especially in the short-to-medium term. In fact, a well-attended tabletop exercise organised by a Japanese think tank suggested that the government would, despite

6. It did so by referencing an obscure document produced in 1972 by the same Cabinet Legislative Bureau (CLB) that then denied the government of Japan the right of collective self-defence (CSD) up until 2014. The government-led constitutional reinterpretation was also made possible thanks to an advisory body to the Prime Minister made up of almost exactly the same members that had pushed for CSD back in 2006-08, with the blessing of the ephemeral first Abe administration, and thanks to the appointment of a like-minded diplomat, a first, to head the CLB. Strong *Kantei* coordination allowed a swift passage of the re-interpretation. On conventional interpretations of Article 13, see Hook and McCormack [eds.] [2001: 165-6].

some hesitancy, invoke a «survival threatening scenario» because «Japan's survival is threatened by an armed attack on another country with which it has close relations» [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2022, 9 September; Iwata *et al.* 2023]. This demonstrates why the Abe administration's legacy in Japan's security policy ought to be considered transformational. Without the constitutional reinterpretation and accompanying legislation, Japan would have lacked the legal capability to use its weight – military and otherwise – in the US-led deterrence mix in a Taiwan contingency.

Kishida's government has built on the legacy of his predecessors. Recent major developments in force posture and military doctrine confirm the interlinkage between Japan's and Taiwan's security. Ever since the 2010 National Defence Policy Guidelines, Japan has revamped its military force posture on its southwestern islands, the Ryukyus/Nansei Islands (constituting Okinawa Prefecture), by establishing an amphibious rapid deployment brigade, deploying radar, short- and mid-range missile units and ballistic missile defence (BMD) at sea, along with anti-submarine weapons. Given the proximity of the Okinawan islands to Taiwan and the inability of Japan's BMD system to cope with China's missile capabilities, the government is bolstering these remote islands with stand-off defence capabilities. Tokyo is improving the surface-to-ship guided missiles already deployed in Okinawa by expanding their reach fivefold to 620 miles, introducing medium- to long-range cruise missiles and developing hypersonic glide missiles [*CNN* 2023, 12 April]. These moves were spelt out in the Kishida government's three strategic documents, which were unveiled after a long gestation in December 2022, and which aimed at deterrence by denial *and* by punishment [Wallace and Pugliese 2023].⁷ Japan signalled its ability to indirectly support Taiwan with anti-mine and anti-submarine warfare capabilities, to beef up Taiwan's civil defence through cooperation in the cyber, geo-economic and cognitive warfare domains, and to respond to Chinese missiles tipped with tactical nuclear warheads, which would aim at keeping Japan at bay in a potential Taiwan contingency. The introduction of these offensive strike capabilities, the acquisition of which Japan hastened by a year in late 2023 [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 5 October], and the major increase in Japan's military budget was prepared on the ground laid by the Abe government's earlier security reforms, and was high on the agenda of late Abe himself [Pugliese and Maslow 2020].

Endowing Japan with strike capabilities is premised on the assumption that having the option to go on the offensive «will complicate the opponent's tactical and strategic calculations» according to a statement by then Minister of Defence Hamada [Defense Minister Hamada 2022]. Put simply, Japan will have enhanced its options to engage in retaliatory operations

7. The author of this section is indebted to Corey Wallace for many thoughtful insights.

against the territory of another nation and target enemy bases, including command and control centres. While the focus is on undermining the PLA's operational capacity, these capabilities could be both punishment- and denial-focused, and weapons such as the extended-range Type-12 can be valuable for both offensive operations in foreign territory and «defending in depth» by threatening from a variety of launch points Chinese ships operating around Okinawa or Taiwan – or even forces landing on smaller islands in the East China Sea, such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Therefore, Japan's strategy in some way resembles China's own Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD),⁸ and while its emerging capabilities are chiefly aimed at homeland defence, it should be clear that Japan's stand-off capabilities will be useful in a Taiwan contingency to support the United States and (even just indirectly) Taiwan, as in the above scenarios, while Japan and the US keep a potential Chinese retaliation at bay.

Finally, Japan's interlinkage of its own security with Taiwan's is evident in specific US-Japan alliance developments in 2023. On 11 January 2023 a Japan-US «2+2» meeting of foreign and defence ministers was held in Washington DC and both governments announced that «the 12th Marine Regiment would be reorganised into the 12th Marine Littoral Regiment by 2025» a move aimed at «strengthen[ing] Alliance deterrence and response capabilities by positioning more versatile, resilient, and mobile forces with increased intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, anti-ship, and transportation capabilities» [U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Japan 2023]. This initiative dovetailed with expansion of the US-Philippines Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement to allow four new US bases in key places along the first island chain, with more possibly in store to allow rotational deployments [*Naval News* 2023, 9 April]. Effectively, the Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR), made up of circa 1800-2000 servicemen, will split into smaller teams of 50-100 soldiers to allow intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) of Chinese activities in the East and South China Seas by deploying unmanned surface, underwater and aerial vehicles [Iwata *et al.* 2023: 89-91]. Hence, in a contingency these US amphibious teams in Japanese and Philippines territory may distribute maritime operations (i.e. disperse lethal forces) with anti-ship missiles and low-altitude defence systems, all while theoretically hopping from island to island every 48 to 72 hours to avoid Chinese attacks, while continuing to conduct ISR and fight [Iwata *et al.* 2023: 89-91]. These so-called «stand-in forces» (i.e. within the first island chain), which will have to rely on Japanese military and/or civilian facilities, may well disrupt an eventual Chinese blockade or amphibious landing on Taiwan. In addition, Japan would finance the dispersion of US Marines across the first and second island chains, including the long-promised pro-

8. But with the appropriate caveats: China has short- to long-range ballistic missiles along with a growing number of nuclear warheads (although Beijing has a «no first use» policy). Japan has neither ballistic missiles nor nuclear warheads.

vision of roughly 35% of 8 billion USD for the construction and revamp of a US military base on Guam [Toropin 2023]. Although recent scholarship claims otherwise [O’Shea 2024], the above suggests that the contribution of US Marines to deterrence might become more relevant in the near future.

In effect, these capabilities work in tandem with allies and other US military forces that will have to operate beyond the first and second island chains due to threats posed by China’s aircraft carriers and «Guam killer» ballistic missiles. In fact, Japan was reportedly preparing for military exercises involving its aircraft carriers all the way to northern Australia [Japanese participant, Japan-US-Europe Trilateral Dialogue, Brussels, 7 November 2023]. This further demonstrates that the Japanese government has gone to great lengths to integrate its own security with deterring a kinetic attack across the Taiwan Strait. This is under-appreciated in the literature on Japan’s recent moves. Likewise, earlier analyses that insisted on a *longue durée* view of post-Cold War Japan’s security trajectory are misplaced because they fail to appreciate the quiet yet transformational expansion of Japan’s security architecture that took place around 2014-15. The most fruitful seeds, those allowing the deployment of strike capabilities and military intervention in a Taiwan contingency, were planted by the Abe administration. Kishida was walking in Abe’s footsteps, due to the worsening security environment, his low popularity, his lack of policy vision(s), and the enduring influence of nationalist factions in the LDP.

In short, Japanese policymakers have signalled that the government of Japan would intervene in a Taiwan contingency in support of the United States. During a noteworthy visit to the self-governed island on 8 August, the powerful LDP Vice-President and former Prime Minister, Asō Tarō, best expressed this reasoning. He argued that the preparedness to fight of Japan, the US and other like-minded partners would elicit deterrence effects on China [*Sankei Shinbun* 2023, 8 August]. Nevertheless, the ultimate decision to intervene will be a political one that will also take into account Chinese retaliation on Japanese soil and citizens. Moreover, while it is true that circa 18 thousand long-term Japanese residents in Taiwan (plus businessmen and tourists) and economic interests will need to be shielded in a potential contingency scenario, the People’s Republic hosts a markedly larger number of Japanese citizens, with circa 104,000 long-term residents [National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2023a], not to mention assets and business interests. This factor will necessarily complicate the Japanese government’s calculations.

Finally, and as is evident from the above, Japanese citizens have never fully understood or partaken in the deliberations leading to the afore-mentioned legislative and strategic revolutions. They were introduced by stealth. Early understatements by policymakers were deliberate because the Japanese public still retains a strong anti-militarist ethos. While a sense of insecurity rose sharply following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, especially among

Japanese decision-makers [O’ Shea and Maslow 2024], Japanese public support for heightened defence procurement dwindled in 2023, and overwhelmingly prioritised welfare over warfare [NHK 2023, 13 February]. Only a deadly crisis, one with a substantial number of Japanese casualties and clear Chinese responsibility, may fully mobilise the Japanese population at large and bring about effective determination capable of withstanding the painful consequences, including economic ones, brought by China’s likely counterstrategies of attrition and exhaustion of its rival’s will to fight. For instance, in a Taiwan blockade scenario Japan’s military action may not be taken for granted.

China’s more assertive foreign and security policy is aimed at securing its territorial and maritime claims, sometimes reactively so. Its gradual regional revisionism notwithstanding [Termine and Natalizia, 2020], a former very high-ranking Japanese policymaker acknowledged to the author of this section that the foreign policy posture of the People’s Republic has been relatively risk averse [Former high-ranking Japanese policymaker, interview, 20 December 2023]. In the authors’ assessment, the Japanese government, among other actors, benefited from publicising China’s activities. As was recounted in last year’s review [Wallace and Pugliese 2023], the government of Japan (especially the defence establishment, which was behind the formulation of the new strategic documents) insisted on the linkage between Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine and China’s irredentism across the Taiwan Strait. It did so to legitimise Japan’s new-found changes in force posture and military doctrine – echoing strategic narratives by the US and Taiwanese governments – and to mobilise and coalesce domestic and international support, especially by Europe. But Japan’s landmark strategic changes and documents which focused on Taiwan and the first island chain, were a long time in the making. Had it not been for the COVID-19 pandemic and Abe’s sudden resignation, we would have probably seen some of these developments already by 2020 [Pugliese and Maslow 2020].

By mid-2023, the quest for a degree of stability in Sino-Japanese relations translated into notched down publicity accorded to Chinese activities across the strait. The actual activities, however, did not considerably abate. For instance, aerial incursions across the symbolic median line, which spiked following US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan, persisted in 2023. Japan’s information policy reflected that in Washington DC, where the national security establishment engaged in message discipline in early 2023 [Reuters 2023, 12 January] and Biden put an end to his earlier frequent and – in all likelihood – well-planned [Rogin 2022, 13 October; Sanger 2024, pp.284-5] «lapsus linguae» that reaffirmed his commitment to Taiwanese security, a less than ambiguous «strategic ambiguity» that reinforced action-reaction cycles across the strait [Insisia 2023; Sciorati 2023]. Finally (and notably), earlier US government messaging which suggested direct access to Xi Jinping’s aggressive thinking on Taiwan

[*Bloomberg* 2023, 17 October] gave way in 2023 to nuance, to the point that in 2024 a State Department official told the author of this section that «we don't know what is in Xi Jinping's mind» [US State Department official responsible for the Asia-Pacific, Interview, 6 February 2024]. In the US too, earlier stark messaging about a narrowing window for a Chinese invasion was probably propagated to allies and domestic public opinion to elicit support, legitimise landmark security changes and rally coordination over a Taiwan contingency.

As a result, diplomatic exchanges and the (re-)establishment of avenues for dialogue and confidence building, including between Japan and China [AP 2023, 16 May], marked not only an evolution in the Chinese government's thinking in 2023 but also a change in the US and Japanese governments' thinking. Given the ongoing arms race and the all-encompassing rivalry, however, the timid tactical détente was a means to avoid US-China strategic rivalry derailing into hot confrontation. Given these premises, and the domestic political dynamics in the US and China, it looked like wobbly stability.

12. *Japan-South Korea cooperation through the prism of US-led minilateralism*

Apart from the US-Japan alliance's preparations for a Taiwan contingency, minilateral diplomacy branched out to the Republic of Korea (ROK), also known as South Korea. The ascent of the conservative Yoon Suk-Yeol presidency translated into a stronger ROK alignment with the US and its aims. In fact, an ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy was announced in December 2022. Yoon Suk-Yeol specifically assigned its development to the North America Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, suggesting a desire to align with Washington [High-ranking European diplomat, interview, South Korea, 7 November 2022]. Aided by his forceful character as a former prosecutor, Yoon abandoned Moon Jae-in's engagement policy with the DPRK and aligned more fully with the United States on the China and Russia dossiers, so much so that South Korea «indirectly» supplied more artillery shells to Ukraine than all the European countries combined [*Yonhap* 2023, 5 December]. South Korea was, along with Japan [Wallace and Pugliese 2023], one of the first East Asian countries to side with the US and NATO after Russia's invasion of Ukraine; but Yoon has notably shied away from pledging direct military assistance to Ukraine, in favour of reinforcing non-lethal and humanitarian aid, whilst continuing to supply military assistance via third parties, such as Poland and the United States. Yoon's decision to tilt to one side was not a foregone policy choice given the influence and leverage that Russia and China may exert over their neighbour, North Korea. Given that China is also the ROK's most important economic market, this move cemented the idea of a progressive

rift among competing blocs following Russia's 2022 war of aggression in Ukraine [Brands 2023, 4 June; Gates 2023].

More importantly, and with active US intercession under the Biden administration, the South Korean government took the initiative in perhaps its hardest foreign policy call: reprising dialogue with Japan. This had soured in a negative spiral of disputes over the legacy of the Japanese Empire and colonisation of Korea, which was compounded by Japan's economic retaliation, especially in 2019 [Pugliese and Maslow 2020, 145-6]. Kishida's mellower public persona and more conciliatory political background compared to his immediate predecessors in the *Kantei*, not least the late Abe Shinzō, partly smoothed the road. However, there were no meaningful concessions on the Japanese government's side, because of Kishida's unpopularity in most of 2023 and, crucially, the weight of nationalists in the LDP.

Therefore, on 6 March 2023, the South Korean government unilaterally relinquished reparations from Japanese firms implicated in forced labour during Japan's colonisation of the peninsula, and instead set up a foundation voluntarily supported by Korean businesses that benefitted from Japanese grants and soft loans awarded on the occasion of the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea [*Yonhap* 2023, 6 March; *Korea Times* 2015, 21 June]. The Japanese government simply reiterated the language of contrition dating back to the 1998 joint declaration by the heads of the two executives. While ten of fifteen claimants accepted the alternative compensation plan, the unilateral concessions and decision to cement Japan-South Korea relations by Yoon – one that was reportedly also informed by his father's experience and wishes – were deeply unpopular back home, with mass protests in Seoul led by the opposition party. These concessions further reduced the president's popularity and questioned their tenability [*NHK* 2023, 18 May; *Reuters* 2023, 13 April].

These conciliatory moves paved the way for substantial Japan-ROK cooperation. First and foremost, they prompted Japan to remove its 2019 export controls on three essential components to produce semiconductors and displays. This, in turn, allowed Seoul to end its own retaliatory curbs and a WTO dispute complaint against Japan. Second, Yoon visited Tokyo, and a bilateral summit, qualified by successive informal talks, reactivated and deepened diplomatic engagement between the two countries. This was the first official summit between the leaders of the ROK and Japan in 12 years. Third, the South Korean government declared that it «normalised» the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), which it had previously frozen because of Japan's economic coercion back in 2019 [*Asahi Shinbun* 2023, 22 March]. Last and more importantly, the stabilisation of Japan-ROK relations – two major US allies – ushered the way for landmark trilateral US-Japan-ROK cooperation, as was evidenced by a Camp David summit on 18 August. There, too, minilateral cooperation expanded horizontally to include cooperation in diplomatic, educational, and technological fields, but the key

«integrated deterrence» outcomes were in security, through expanded intelligence sharing, missile defence and strengthened cybersecurity coordination. Importantly, the three documents released at the summit aimed at regularising security consultations, at routinising trilateral meetings, both at the summit and working levels, at routinising trilateral military exercises, and at diversifying and expanding their remit beyond North Korea to include food security, economic security and, importantly, China [The White House 2023a; The White House 2023b; The White House 2023c].

What transpires from these three documents is as follows. First and foremost, the US government aimed at an institutionalisation of US-ROK-Japan cooperation, thus interlocking the region's most powerful, prosperous, and technologically advanced US allies. It did so with an eye to binding South Korea and Japan in cooperation in the future, as successive governments in either country may not be as sympathetic to their counterparts as the current ones (especially Yoon's). The routinisation and institutionalisation of trilateral cooperation and coordination also aimed at damage limitation in the event of a potential Trump comeback, which might prioritise his own interests at the expense of trilateral coordination. The Japanese government was especially fearful of a reprise of US concessions to North Korea and US summit diplomacy with it [Howell, 2023]. Second, regularised avenues for dialogue were deepened at multiple levels: from Director-General level up to summit meetings, which will be held at least once a year. Third, and relatedly, the scope of trilateral cooperation expanded notably across agencies, given the multi-layered nature of the challenges and opportunities faced by the three countries. The inauguration of a Japan-US-ROK Indo-Pacific Dialogue and of a trilateral framework for scientific cooperation, including defence technology, testified to this logic [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2024; National Nuclear Security Administration 2023]. Cooperation, however, promised to go deeper with new dialogues and plans for cooperative and coordinative frameworks aimed at combating North Korea's cyber activities – a major source of income for the North Korean nuclear programme [Howell 2023] – stifling disinformation, and promoting humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), government financing across the Indo-Pacific (starting with the Pacific islands) and maritime, space and economic security, including the establishment of an early warning system of potential disruptions to supply chains. Fourth, the most publicised development was a strengthening of intelligence sharing, notably by allowing a trilateral real-time system that linked the three countries' radar tracking of missiles flying from North Korea, with potential implications also in a Taiwan contingency scenario [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2023, 19 December]. Given Yoon's willingness to tilt to one side, the interlocking of the US hub and spokes system along the first island chain would therefore have implications for coercive diplomacy and deterrence towards China as well as the DPRK.

While the momentum was clear, some of these mechanisms would be put to the test – especially the pledge to consult – as North Korea’s bellicose behaviour toward its southern neighbour was accompanied by Kim Jong-un making overtures to Japan [Voice of America 2024, 18 January]. At the end of the year the South Korean Supreme Court upheld decisions by lower courts to order compensation by the Japanese industries responsible for wartime labour [Nikkei Asia 2023, 28 December]. Moreover, it was clear that the Japanese government was still watchful about domestic political developments in South Korea [Koga 2023]. Also for this reason, Tokyo was unlikely to allow South Korea in the G7 framework on a more regular basis. At the same time, renewed emphasis on trilateral exercises, although some of these were signals with few deterrence implications, and Japan-South Korea cooperation on evacuation of their citizens from Gaza and the Middle East symbolised a reset of the testy bilateral relationship [Wright and Guarini 2023, 8 November].

13. *The Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic alignment: the blossoming of Japan-NATO relations*

Although with different scope, emphasis and working levels – similar multi-layered, bilateral or unilateral cooperation among «like-minded partners» gained traction in 2023 in the «G7 Plus» and between the EU and/or NATO and Asia-Pacific counterparts, first and foremost Japan, the ROK and Australia. Similarly to the ROK-Japan-US trilateral cooperative framework, the Biden administration facilitated (or more simply allowed) a deepening of such ententes, some of which had or would acquire a life of their own. The NATO-Japan partnership was but one example of these dynamics. Given space limitations, this review only fleshes out some of these notable developments, while citing analysis of the growing momentum at the EU-Japan level elsewhere [Pugliese 2024]. Starting with the Trump administration, the US government included China as part of NATO’s remit to socialise, co-opt and enlist its European allies in the strategic competition it prioritised. Apart from providing regular avenues for sharing US intelligence on, for example, China’s growing nuclear stockpiles and sabre-rattling across the Taiwan Strait, the US government elicited intelligence sharing from regional allies and cooperation on traditional security items that would not contravene NATO’s geographical mandate because of their transnational nature. These include cybersecurity, disinformation, space security, cooperation on defence technology, the military industrial base and risks associated with dual-use technology in strategic sectors, such as telecommunications and surveillance. Under the Biden administration and following Russia’s war in Ukraine, momentum for an alignment became evident as European views on China soured, US leverage grew and

reciprocity between European and Asia-Pacific «like-minded partners» blossomed, as these states supported Ukraine financially, diplomatically and militarily [Pugliese 2024].

Therefore, the language on China in the July 2023 NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué was particularly forceful: «The People's Republic of China's stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values. [China's policy] strives to subvert the rules-based international order, including in the space, cyber and maritime domains» [NATO 2023a]. NATO also started to look at Taiwan contingency scenarios with the aim of «strongly discouraging China from taking any actions that will change the status quo» [*Nikkei Asia* 2023, 13 November], perhaps also through indirect assistance/triangulation and small steps towards creating a global defence supply chain. According to a US defence practitioner, war games considered NATO countries' contributions in contingency scenarios concerning Taiwan, with a preference accorded to light contributions, such as sanctions, the provision of military assistance via triangulation or the ability to fill the military vacuum left by the deployment of Europe-based US forces to East Asia [US defence practitioner, interview, track 1.5 dialogue, 7 November 2023]. G7 countries constituted the marrow of these contributions and Japan's successful presidency of this multilateral grouping testified to stronger alignment on the China dossier. These were all noteworthy developments for NATO, a trans-Atlantic alliance.

The Japanese government has shown interest in buttressing the NATO-Japan security bridge, at least since the mid-2000s. However, it was the Biden administration, the worsening security environment in Europe and East Asia and the interlinkage of the two theatres that hastened the construction of the bridge [Brummer and Yennie Lindgren 2023]. For instance, feisty US Ambassador Rahm Emanuel hosted regular meetings with NATO ambassadors in Tokyo and was seen accompanying eight NATO allies' ambassadors posted in Brussels to a courtesy call on Foreign Minister Kamikawa during their visit to Japan [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023b]. The eight governments they represented were probably the keenest to enhance Japan-NATO relations, starting with NATO's most important member, the United States. In fact, the NATO summit in Vilnius, in which Prime Minister Kishida participated along with leaders from the other Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific «like-minded» countries (aka the «Asia Pacific 4», or «Indo Pacific 4», namely Japan, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea), was the second in which invitations were extended to these players following the historic first time in Madrid in 2022. In Vilnius, Japan and NATO unveiled an Individually Tailored Partnership Programme, which vowed cooperation in 16 areas [NATO 2023c]. There, NATO's Secretary General reaffirmed the alignment of the Indo-Pacific with the Euro-Atlantic and Japan's importance by stressing that «security is not regional, but global» and that no partner is closer than Japan to NATO [NATO 2023b].

While the entente on China grew within Europe, diverging priorities persisted. Major Western European players, first and foremost Macron's France, snubbed Tokyo's and the United States' efforts to have a NATO liaison office in Japan [Matsumura 2023, 19 December]. This office, reportedly to be manned by one officer, was probably going to add little of substance [Moller 2023, 12 June] but its symbolism might have poked a finger in China's eye. In fact, the decision to do without the liaison office allowed NATO countries such as France to present themselves as honest brokers to Beijing, take advantage of profitable trade deals with China (especially in France as its President travelled to Beijing in April 2023, and the two countries would celebrate 60 years of diplomatic relations in 2024) and even suggest a «third way»-approach that, while not equidistant between the US and China, was not fully aligned with the US-led competitive strategy [Barré 2023, 9 April].

Apart from political sloganeering that catered to domestic audiences, this «third way» stance might have reassured South and Southeast Asian countries and other third parties about the merits of seeing these European players as responsible multilateral actors. First-hand evidence suggested that Europe's alignment with the US and NATO's gaze eastward worried some Southeast Asian players fearful of the crystallisation of blocs, with potential implications for lucrative military procurement contracts [European diplomat, interview, Da Nang, Vietnam, 16 November 2022]. Contemporary arms deals are often buttressed by political alignment, especially in the light of the need to keep servicing and spare parts flowing. Therefore, growing European security engagement in the region – one that was undergoing economic growth as a whole – reassured local actors willing to resist Chinese assertiveness, but which were concomitantly fearful of provoking a reaction by Beijing or being dragged into a confrontation between blocs. At the same time, authoritative testimonies from European diplomatic quarters, including French ones, suggested a strong institution-wide alignment with the US diagnosis on Xi's China [High-ranking French diplomat, interview, 27 January 2023; EU officials in charge of security, interview, 24 October 2022; EU official, interview, 9 March 2023]. China's «sitting on the fence» over Russia's war in Ukraine, often misperceived as a steady alignment (if not an alliance), and US leverage compounded these dynamics. Representative of a seemingly growing Euro-Atlantic alignment on China, in 2023 Germany produced a hard-nosed China strategy and the Italian government quietly pulled out of a moribund 2019 Belt and Road framework MoU [Boni 2024; Andornino 2023]. In late 2023, the Italian government also announced the deployment of an aircraft carrier battlegroup to the region in 2024. A more fine-grained analysis of some of these Western European players' policies on China, however, suggested that pragmatism was alive and well in Rome [Dell'Era and Pugliese 2024].

According to expectations set up in the 2022 US National Security Strategy, according to which «US interests are best served when our Euro-

pean allies and partners play an active role in the Indo-Pacific», and earlier testimonies, European member states, including Italy, showed growing engagement in the region. Direct testimonies suggested that while the US was the most pressing behind this presence, especially since the advent of the Biden administration, Japan was welcoming but less insistent [Italian diplomat, interview, 30 January 2024]. The two transpacific allies effectively swapped sides, perhaps also because states such as Italy were chiefly interested in the region's rich procurement market, and thus were in competition with Japan's defence exports. Indonesia is one such case [*Defense News*, 2023, 27 October]. A continued focus on the so-called «Enlarged Mediterranean» notwithstanding [Coticchia and Mazziotti di Celso, 2024], the Italian government signed a strategic partnership with Japan in 2023 and extended its 21st century naval diplomacy all the way to East Asia, which was arguably already in the making under the Draghi government. This also served as a political tool to emphasise the principles of free trade, freedom of navigation and overflight among allied nations, to buttress Italy's credentials as a «like-minded» country and to showcase (and export) Italian military platforms and components to regional players [Abbondanza 2023]. Thus, this endeavour aimed to enhance cooperation in both Italian and international security realms, showcasing Italy's capabilities and soft power projection. Nevertheless, the aim was distinctively techno-economically orientated. It facilitated the political groundwork for advancing new platforms, technologies and systems, such as in the Italy-Japan-UK Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) framework, which aimed to develop a sixth-generation combat aircraft endowed with the potential to positively impact the broader economy. In December 2023, the three countries agreed to establish an intergovernmental organisation to manage the GCAP. Looking ahead, the partnership between Italy and Japan in aerospace investment and research and development appears promising, with potential benefits extending to defence, land observation, climate change mitigation and disaster response, areas where the two nations share common interests.

In any case, the interlinkage between the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic was more evident in 2023. Cooperation on cyber-defence, for instance, gained momentum. Japan cemented its late 2022 membership in the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Estonia with participation in a signature NATO cybersecurity exercise, one that entailed coordination with NATO countries to «respond to attack scenarios on virtual national critical infrastructure as well as targets and structures of a military nature» [C4ISRNET 2023]. Hinting at Japan's deepening entente in the cyber and hybrid threats domain, and its engagement with Central and Eastern Europe more broadly, Estonia's premier think tank, the International Centre for Defence and Security, launched the newest Japan Chair in 2023 with funding from the Government of Japan [ICDS 2023].

More importantly, and after a prolonged tug of war, at the end of the year the LDP and the Kōmeitō reached an agreement to relax the self-imposed arms exports rules to allow exports of foreign licensed but Japan-produced defence products, including PAC-3 missiles, to replenish US stocks. This was a notable development that suggested support for Ukraine (and, less noted, Israel) via US triangulation, and an expectation of reciprocity from European counterparts in future contingency scenarios closer to Japan's shores. The potential further relaxation of Japan's export rules went hand-in-hand with enmeshment in techno-economic cooperative frameworks with «like-minded» counterparts, for both economic and strategic gains. The standardisation of defence products, such as ammunition, and the need to foster a global defence industrial base with steady supply and demand for them were also high on the NATO agenda along with counterparts in the so-called Asia-Pacific 4 (or Indo-Pacific 4) grouping, first and foremost Japan and South Korea. Nevertheless, competitive dynamics in the arms industry probably hindered substantial cooperation on that specific agenda item.

14. *Conclusions*

As was clarified above, in the realms of security and diplomacy the Kishida administration has by and large followed the policy pathway established by late Prime Minister Abe Shinzō a decade ago. Domestically, however, Kishida has endeavoured to establish his own political legacy while coping with that left by his cumbersome predecessor. The effort has produced scant results. For instance, since July 2023 the BoJ under new governor Ueda has refrained from ending the decade-old expansionary monetary policy set by former governor Kuroda and Abe. In addition to this, Kishida's main policy goal, the establishment of a new form of capitalism, risks being yet another empty slogan in the face of largely demobilised and historically sceptical public opinion. The establishment of the CFA to tackle children and family-related issues, and proposals for future labour reforms are the most significant additions to Japan's contemporary politics.

In fact, the administration's redistribution targets were far from achieved. By contrast, the government's policies seemed characterised by a lack of a long-term vision and by excessive reliance on «makeshift» economic and political initiatives such as contingent tax reductions and subsidies, and cabinet reshuffles. As a Nikkei editorial pointed out, with such measures «the voters' support will not be restored. The PM should also resolutely tackle difficult issues, deliver results, and thus meet the Japanese people's expectations» [*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2023, 23 October]. In this regard, the graph at the end of section 6 is particularly elucidatory of Japanese voters' political disengagement. While it shows that in 2023 the Japanese public

perceived a moderately positive business climate, public expectations of the government fell consistently. Apart from contingent political scandals, structural factors such as the continual depreciation of the yen following the increase in interest rates in Europe and the US, growing consumer prices and a relative loss of purchasing power by large sectors of the Japanese working population contributed to the public's negative attitude to the government [Tahara 2023, 26 October].

While other large liberal democracies will hold elections in 2024, the next Japanese general election need not take place until autumn 2025. Should the Japanese go to the polls as we write this article in early 2024, they will possibly reconfirm the LDP in power, against a backdrop of widespread abstentionism. According to the country's major media outlets, more than 41% of Japanese voters do not support any political party at all. For those who indicate a preference, the scandal-ridden majority party, the LDP, is still perceived as more trustworthy (30-37%) than other minority political organisations. The main opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) lags 20 points behind, with a support rate of 9.9%, with other minor parties stuck between zero (the People's Democratic Party and the Collaborative Party – Minna de tsukuru tō, formerly known as the Party to Protect the People from NHK) and 5% (Ishin and Kōmeitō, the LDP's junior coalition partner) [*NHK Senkyo Web* 2024; *Hōdō Station TV Asahi* 2024]. In other words, forecasts about political fragmentation due to the rise of new parties in the last decade have not materialised [Krauss *et al.* 2017]. Instead, the current political situation seems to be that of a non-competitive democratic system with a single dominant party maintaining its edge over other possible competitors in the context of growing political disaffection and overt apathy [Scheiner 2007; Howe & Oh 2015; Kasai 2018]. Hence, the current backsliding of the LDP does not seem likely to lead to a pre-2009 situation and to a noticeable exodus of consensus on an opposition party able to exploit the emerging social and economic disparities in Japanese society [Chiavacci 2010].

If anything, the many failed attempts at rebuilding trust in his administration and legitimacy have undermined Kishida's legitimacy as the incumbent LDP leader and will possibly induce a leadership change in Autumn 2024, when the election of the LDP president is scheduled. As opposed to the late Abe, who enjoyed high approval rates and influence in his party and the governing coalition, PM Kishida has reportedly been the weakest link in the LDP internal balance of power. His inability to dissolve the Diet has been a testimony to his low approval rate and fractures within the majority camp [Shiota 2023]. Nonetheless, he was able to capitalise on his foreign policy successes (e.g. the Hiroshima G7) to make up for the growing popular disaffection. In the light of this, a partial reputation recovery and even a victorious snap election ahead of the LDP party leadership ballot in September 2024, though remote, cannot be completely ruled out [Shiota 2023].

In foreign and security policy, the year under review saw a growing alignment and interlocking of US-led multilaterals, with Japan playing a successful role as an aggregative power. This strategy also walked in the footsteps set by the Abe administrations, especially since Abe's comeback in 2012. Interestingly, the «Indo-Pacific» alignment of Europe and regional players was evident in 2023 in the economic security agenda, now qualified with the new «de-risking» buzzword that gained traction in 2023, especially following a speech in March by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. Whatever the EU's merits in introducing «de-risking», the slogan nonetheless resonated with the oft-referred «resilience», «geo-economics», «strategic autonomy/strategic indispensability», if not «de-coupling», all of which were symptomatic of the sorry geopolitical Zeitgeist further compounded by Russia's full-fledged offensive in Ukraine and the 2023 Israel-Palestine war, among a growing number of conflicts and crises.

In fact, there were nascent cooperative frameworks in the «G7 Plus» countries, for instance, to coordinate against economic coercion or, more clearly, in the sustainable infrastructure agenda to woo the so-called «Global South» a misnomer for a wide range of emerging economies and developing countries and one that kept bubbling up in security and strategic contexts, including the 2023 Shangri-La Dialogue. In fact, Japan's attempt at walking the diplomatic tightrope in its response to the 7 October Hamas terrorist attacks and the Israeli government's ensuing punitive vendetta in Gaza aimed at cementing burgeoning strategic engagement in the Middle East, wooing Global South states, Muslim-majority swing states in particular, while *de facto* supporting the US stance. The fear was that China could enlarge its rostrum of partners, for instance through the BRICS forum, which underwent a considerable expansion in 2023.

The Japanese government's decision to follow the October 2022 US expansive China-wide embargo on advanced semiconductors, and on the technology, human capital and know-how necessary to produce them, compounded China's largely home-made economic woes. After all, the United States remained the world's single largest economic market – with a share of global GDP unchanged from 1980 or 1990. It also retained the world's ten most valuable companies, was poised to lead in the digital transformation and had recently turned into the world's largest oil and gas producer [Zakaria 2024]. US structural power in technological nodes and shared aims with Japan in the China balancing and de-risking agenda allowed substantial coordination in cooperative government financing initiatives aimed at denying China a sphere of influence while engaging in shared industrial policies, as in the analyses in reviews of previous years. These initiatives trailed the increasingly regional military role for the US-Japan alliance, within and beyond the first island chain [Bradford 2021; Bradford 2022].

These coordinated alignments, and China's domestic political imbroglios and economic woes, further facilitated the path towards tactical

US-China and Japan-China stabilisation. Space limitations have prevented us from analysing Japan's «new plan» for its Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategic narrative (complete with 51 PowerPoint slides, but notably no actual policy document, to allow for diplomatic flexibility), its wooing of the Global South [Hosoya 2023; Takenaka 2023], its revised Development Cooperation Charter and the introduction of Official Security Assistance. Suffice it to say, however, that these were in line with the analysis in this and previous reviews. They were aimed at balancing, containing or competing with China by harnessing all tools of Japanese statecraft to that effect, possibly by preserving stable relations. The Japanese government, nonetheless, tried to recover its agency as an aggregative power that also successfully reconceptualised and renegotiated geographical boundaries, such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, and to export it abroad [Tamaki 2024; Pugliese 2024]. In any case, the ongoing arms race – not just in East Asia, but across the Indo-Pacific – and the looming elections in 2024 in the US and much of the world promised that the contextual factors facing Japan's international relations remained in flux and full of incognita.

Nevertheless, as events unfold, security developments within and across the first island chain – such as those highlighted in Japan, the US-Japan alliance, Japan-Taiwan relations and among the ROK, the US and Japan – suggest that Japan is on the front line of the new geopolitics of East Asia, and is the place to watch to understand the direction of travel of US-China strategic rivalry.

LIST OF INTERVIEWS USED IN THIS ARTICLE

The fully anonymised text of these interviews is in the possession of Giulio Pugliese and can be obtained from him

EU official, interview, 9 March 2023

EU officials in charge of security, interview, 24 October 2022

European diplomat, interview, Da Nang, Vietnam, 16 November 2022

Foreign diplomats, interviews, 2022 & 2023

Former high-ranking Japanese policymaker, interview, 20 December 2023

High-ranking European diplomat, interview, South Korea, 7 November 2022

High-ranking French diplomat, interview, 27 January 2023

High-ranking Taiwanese government official, Taipei, 24 February 2023

Italian diplomat, interview, 30 January 2024

US defence practitioner, interview, track 1.5 dialogue, 7 November 2023

US Department of Defense officials, interviews, Washington DC, 6 February 2024

US State Department official responsible for the Asia-Pacific, Interview, 6 February 2024

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HONG KONG 2023: THE NEW CHINESE PROVINCE

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Three years after the implementation of the National Security Law (NSL) in 2020, time is ripe to affirm that the Hong Kong Special Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China (HKSAR) has completed its full integration into the Chinese political and economic system. This article argues that all along 2023 media freedom regression emerged as prodromic to a more institutionalized erosion of political freedom and consequent adaptation to Beijing standards. Within this new framework, a series of political and economic decisions were taken to facilitate Hong Kong full integration into the Chinese system. After discussing the logic behind this evolution, the article explains to what extent Hong Kong has progressively aligned its vision and strategies to those of the People's Republic of China, ending up formally endorsing security as a more important objective than economic development.

KEYWORDS – Hong Kong; China; National Security Law; Censorship; Freedom; Article 23; Trials; Elections.

1. Introduction

The essay explores the developments which occurred in the Hong Kong Special Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China (HKSAR) in the fields of politics, media, domestic economy, and international relations in 2023. The first section, analysing the very first consequences of the implementation of the National Security Law (NSL) on both political and mediatic landscape, establishes 2023 as a year of political freezing for Hong Kong. A year in which the China Communist Party (CCP) confirmed Hong Kong's destiny as being transformed into an average Chinese province, where any sort of freedom had to be subdued to China's collective interests, and in particular CCP's interests. The second section provides an assessment of the current economic situation, taking into consideration both local authorities' attempt to emphasize promising economic and financial foundations and China's interests in starting to systematically take advantage of Hong Kong's business reputation to better advance national economic interests abroad. The concluding section situates these developments within a broader perspective of Hong Kong international projection and explores a realistic scenario describing its near future.

2. *Hong Kong National Security Law: new priorities for media and politics*

2023 opened and closed with a series of symbolic trials, meant at preparing the conditions for proceeding with the implementation of Hong Kong's own national security law. Indeed, towards the end of 2023, the Hong Kong government accelerated the debate on the adoption of its own national security law under Article 23 of the Basic Law. The latter was indeed approved on 23 March 2024 [Ho 2024, 19 March].

In 2003, the Hong Kong government already attempted to introduce Article 23 legislation, but some 500,000 Hong Kongers protested, and the bill was scrapped. This event became a powerful symbol of citizen power within local civil society at the time [Lau 2024, March].

On 30 January 2024, the government released a consultation document outlining the risks to national security, as well as the principles underpinning the legislation, and containing international comparisons as well as a final chapter on «gaps and inadequacies» to be filled [Davidson 2024, 30 January].

Article 23 of the Basic Law, approved on 19 March 2024, requires the government to pass local laws to prohibit seven offenses: treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the central people's government, the theft of state secrets, foreign political organizations or bodies carrying out political activities in the region, and political organizations or bodies in the region establishing links with foreign political organizations or bodies. The Chief Executive has also clarified that Article 23 will work in concert with the existing National Security Law, making sure that the latter would always prevail in case of inconsistencies.

The implementation of this new law is destined to further reduce an already limited space for action for both mediatic debate and alternative political opinions.

2.1. *The power of mediatic procedures*

The media freedom regression Hong Kong started experiencing in 2021 and 2022 continued in 2023. Journalists' and activists' trials were at the centre of Hong Kong mediatic life in 2023, and government pressures also pushed local newspapers to keep a lower mediatic profile. For example, *Ming Pao* decided to suspend publishing contributions by the prominent political cartoonist Wong Kei-kwan, known as Zunzi, without offering any explanation, while the investigative news platform *FactWire* became the fourth news outlet to cease operations since the law's enactment, following the demise of *Apple Daily*, *Stand News*, and *Citizen News* [Hong Kong Free Press 2023, 11 May].

Free journalists' access to Hong Kong also seemed to be more and more at risk. In June, freelance journalist Yoshiaki Ogawa was detained overnight and questioned when he attempted to enter Hong Kong, then

forced to return to Japan [Benoza 2023, 30 June]. The journalist had previously followed the Occupy Central movement in 2014 and covered the 2019 protests in Hong Kong. After Ronson Chan Ron-sing was re-elected as chairman of the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) in June, the latter confirmed a new decrease in the membership of the association, currently counting only 220 full members. On the same occasion, after confirming the importance of freedom of the press and freedom of speech in Hong Kong, Ronson also specified that the HKJA had no intention to confront the government in any way.

Freedom of information has also been curtailed by increased censorship. For example, Hong Kong Public Libraries have been systematically encouraged to remove books considered in opposition to the interests of national security, including those by pro-democracy activists and politicians [Wong 2023, 30 May]. Also, on 5 June, the Hong Kong SAR Government's Department of Justice (DoJ) applied to the High Court for an injunction to prohibit, on national security grounds, four types of unlawful activities related to «Glory to Hong Kong», the protest anthem which became famous during the 2019-20 protest. Hence, the intent of inciting secession, acting seditiously, insulting China's national anthem were prohibited, and arising emotion for the "independence of Hong Kong" which might indirectly favour criminal activities [Wong 2023, 7 August]. The authorities noted that a slogan contained in the song was previously ruled by the court as «secessionist» and that the song itself was «mistakenly» presented as the Chinese national anthem. The DoJ said the injunction would not have any extra-territorial or retroactive effects. In August, the Court of First Instance of the High Court made the decision to refuse granting an interim injunction not because the activities in questions are legal, but because the court considered that such activities already constitute criminal offences even without the injunction. Pro-establishment lawmakers immediately criticized the Court's decision and urged the government to appeal or amend relevant laws to deal with the song.

In sum, 2023 confirmed media freedom regression as prodromic to a more institutionalized erosion of political freedom and consequent adaptation to Mainland standards.

All along 2023, 47 pro-democracy politicians and activists went to trial under the NSL.

55 pro-democracy politicians and activists were arrested in Hong Kong in January 2021 under the NSL. However, only 47 of them have been subsequently formally charged with «conspiracy to commit subversion». 31 had pleaded guilty and the remaining 16 did not [Pang 2023, 29 May].

On 6 February, the day marking the official start of what has been recognized as the largest NSL trial organized in Hong Kong, scheduled to last for three months, two more defendants changed their plea to guilty. Among the 47, 34 remained in custody and 13 were released on bail. The

34 in custody had been in detention for almost two and a half years by the end of 2023.

Several months after the first verdicts were officialised, it has become clear that they should be assessed as divided into two major streams, resulting from either exemplary or political trials.

Exemplary punishments have mainly been the result of cases that have been resolved by referring to sedition law. Colonial-era sedition offences remained in use in Hong Kong, and several convictions have been formulated under this frame. It seems appropriate to state that the court decided to punish ordinary people for misbehaviours dating back to the 2019 demonstrations. The aim was to set an example and avoid that similar episodes could occur again within the Hong Kong society.

For example, on 5 February, delivery worker Wong Chun-kit was sentenced to eight months in prison for publishing online content supporting Hong Kong independence. Prosecutors said Wong had posted more than 100 seditious messages, including phrases such as «Liberate Hong Kong», and had endorsed initiatives «supporting acts of insulting the national anthem». The prosecutor further specified that Wong Chun-kit spread the messages with an «extremely high level of penetration», which constituted «actual and potential threats to public safety» [Wong 2023, 5 January].

On 20 March, both Christian pastor Alan Keung Ka-wai and ex-policeman Chui Chun-man were sentenced to ten months in jail. The former was judged guilty of «selling seditious publications», such as books relating to the 2019 protests, targeting Hong Kongers who previously sympathised with protesters, with the aim of favouring a «resurgence» of anti-government sentiment. The latter was judged guilty of posting seditious comments on the official Hong Kong Police Facebook page aimed at «inciting hatred and public discontent against the police», with the aim to undermine the credibility of the Hong Kong Police Force [*The Standard* 2023, 27 February].

On 29 March, Wong Ho-cheong, former council member of the dissolved Chinese University of Hong Kong Student Union, was sentenced to five months in jail. Wong Ho-cheong was also accused of writing online posts inciting hatred against the CCP and the SAR's police and judiciary. He was also found to have promoted children's books ruled «seditious». Although the prosecutor admitted that Wong Ho-cheong's messages had «limited influence», his actions were nevertheless described as «setting a time bomb» since they could have incited sympathizers of the 2019 protests to commit further criminal acts [Wong 2023, 27 March].

All these sentences, which found ordinary citizens guilty of committing actions that any other protester could have committed, appear to have been particularly harsh on purpose, to create an atmosphere of fear and dissuasion within local civil society.

Official prosecutions against pro-democracy politicians and activists, instead, were postponed to a later moment of the year. The pro-democracy

defendants included, among others, well-known activist Joshua Wong, 26, labelled an «extremist» by China's state media, and Benny Tai, 54, a former law professor and co-founder of the 2014 Occupy Central movement, as well as two former MPs, Claudia Mo and Au Nok-hin [Schaeffer 2023, 6 February]. They might all face life in prison if they are found guilty of «conspiracy to overthrow state power» for having organized an unofficial primary consultation in July 2020 intended to select opposition candidates for the legislative elections.

According to prosecutors, the defendants sought to gain a majority in the city's partially elected Assembly to threaten to block the budget vote if the government refused to meet the «five demands» of 2019 pro-democracy protesters. Among these demands, there were the request of an independent investigation into alleged police brutality against protesters and universal suffrage for local elections. According to the prosecution, activists intended to potentially force the resignation of the then pro-Beijing chief executive of Hong Kong, Carrie Lam. Actually, Hong Kong Basic Law allows the chief executive to dissolve the assembly if the budget is vetoed. However, if the newly elected deputies veto the budget again, the chief executive is expected to resign.

All these activists were already heard and convicted for numerous infractions during the year. So, for example, on 17 April Joshua Wong was sentenced to further three months in prison after being convicted of violating the Police Doxing Injunction and an anonymity order, for publishing an online post in August 2020 revealing personal details of the police officer who shot a protester in Sai Wan Ho district in Hong Kong in November 2019 [Chau 2023, 17 April]. However, the final trial against the pro-democracy activists began only in late November and, at the closing of the year under review, no final decision had been formalized.

It is relevant to highlight in this context that, on 23 May, Chief Executive John Lee announced as «unrealistic» the idea to set a time frame for closing police investigations. Indeed, according to Hong Kong Police statistics, at least 10,279 people were arrested in relation to the 2019 anti-Extradition Bill protests. Although, by the end of the year under review, 2,915 of them had already been charged and 1,391 convicted, about 7,000 arrestees were still on police bail pending investigation. Local media have speculated that the Hong Kong Police Force might decide to drop most of these cases [Gov.UK 2023]. However, no official statement on investigations schedule has been released so far.

One last procedure that is worth mentioning is the one targeting Jimmy Lai (Lai Chee-ying). The 76 years old Hong Kong businessman of British and Taiwanese nationality is the founder of the Giordano clothing store chain, the media company Next Digital and the popular newspaper Apple Daily. He had become a major contributor to Hong Kong's pro-democracy camp, particularly the Democratic Party. For this reason, his companies have

been banned in China. Put behind bars on 10 August 2020, Lai's release on bail has been regularly refused by Hong Kong authorities. Officially placed in incommunicado detention on 3 December 2020, Lai was first sentenced to 14 months in prison in April 2021 then, shortly after, to an additional five years and nine months for fraud [BBC 2021, 16 April].

Jimmy Lai is currently accused by the Chinese and Hong Kong authorities of foreign collusion, a charge which could earn him life imprisonment. Initially scheduled for December 2022, the trial was postponed twice for procedural reasons. To prevent Jimmy Lai from being defended by British lawyer Tim Owens, the Chinese government granted new powers to Chief Executive John Lee in 2022 to challenge foreign lawyers in cases related to national security [Wong 2023, 9 January]. It is therefore a great local lawyer, Robert Pang, who heads the defence of Jimmy Lai.

The trial against the Jimmy Lai formally started on 18 December and, at the end of the year under review was still ongoing. It makes sense to think that local authorities are determined to condemn the press mogul for seditious links with the United States and for having sought to sow chaos in Hong Kong in 2019.

2.2. *Testing a new relationship with Beijing*

When the proposal for reducing from 452 to 88 the number of directly elected seats for District Councils was formalized on 25 April, the Hong Kong SAR Government made clear that political freedom was meant to further shrink in 2023 [Wu 2023, 12 December].

Sudden changes at the head of the Central Government Liaison Office (CGLO) and the creation of a Hong Kong and Macao Work Office of the CCP Central Committee, moving responsibility for Hong Kong from the State Council to the CCP, further contributed to increase Beijing's leverage on Hong Kong policy.

The District Council reform was introduced by Chief Executive John Lee as an inevitable change aimed at restructuring the councils to respect the «patriots administering Hong Kong» principle. When, on 2 May, the Chief Executive disclosed reform details, it became clear that its main goal was to limit Hong Kong's citizens capacity to support anti-establishment candidates. District Councils, which used to have a consultative role in the governance process, advising the government on public facilities, services, and funds, were largely elected by popular vote. Today, directly elected candidates represents less than 20% councillors, and the possibility that the number of their seats will be further reduced in the forthcoming years is realistic.

On 30 May, the District Councils Amendment Bill 2023 was published in the Government Gazette, confirming that only 20% of seats would be directly elected, 40% decided by various district-level organizations, and the remaining 40% appointed by the Chief Executive himself. Also, the new law

imposed that all councils be chaired by designated government officials, instead of elected District Councillors [Leung 2023, 6 July].

Seeing its margin for manoeuvre further reduced, if not abolished, Hong Kong's second largest pro-democratic political party, the Civic Party, voted to disband.

The appointment, on 14 January, of Zheng Yanxiong, formerly director of the Office for Safeguarding National Security of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong SAR (OSNS), as director of the Central Government Liaison Office in Hong Kong marked another clear move confirming security as the main priority in Xi Jinping's vision for Hong Kong [Yu 2023, 16 January].

The OSNS was established in 2020 to secure the CCP with the capacity of openly conduct intelligence operations in Hong Kong and prosecute crimes without being bound by local law. When the new structure was created, Zheng Yanxiong, former secretary-general of the CCP in Guangdong province and fluent Cantonese speaker, was chosen as director, while Li Jiangzhou, a veteran of the Ministry of State Security (MSS), in a recent past director of the Ministry's Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan office, and Sun Qingye, a senior MSS official, were picked as deputy directors [Payette 2020, 9 July].

The fact that, after his appointment as CGLO director, Zheng Yanxiong kept the role of national security adviser to the OSNS was a further proof of Beijing's intention to guarantee maximum coordination between CGLO and OSNS. A commitment that the CCP confirmed once again in July 2023, when Dong Jingwei, another former MSS officer, was sent to Hong Kong to replace Zheng Yanxiong. Zeng's operational capabilities had been significantly limited by Washington-imposed sanctions in response to the crackdown on all forms of opposition that accompanied the implementation of the National Security Law in Hong Kong on 1 July 2020.

Dong Jingwei made his first public appearance to detail his security plans for Hong Kong on 2 October [*Intelligence Online* 2023, 10 October]. In this occasion, Dong specified that Hong Kong was expected to simultaneously achieve three objectives with different strategies. First, reinvigorating its economic growth and prestige as an investment hub. Second, continuing the transition to ever deeper integration with the rest of China. Third, guaranteeing that these two missions would not be hindered by security concerns or threats.

The three missions have been formally entrusted to different entities. Economic recovery has been put under the responsibility of Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu; Zheng Yanxiong has been charged of the coordination with Beijing; finally, Dong Jingwei, in addition to his internal security mission, has been instructed to step up counterespionage.

Hong Kong continues to be regarded by Beijing as a problematic place at risk of foreign infiltration. Since the CCP seems persuaded that the special

administrative region's economic recovery might further encourage such a dynamic, Beijing appears to be convinced that more attention and resources are needed to prevent this from happening. Dong Jingwei's long experience in the world of intelligence, which has seen him rise to the top of China's security apparatus in less than ten years, has made him the best-placed official to prevent this scenario. Dong became head of the MSS's political department in 2017, following a wave of promotions that launched the careers of many of Xi Jinping's Hebei-based loyalists. A year later, Dong became vice-minister of MSS, a position he held until his arrival in Hong Kong.

In this context, it cannot be surprising to see Chief Executive John Lee regularly leading delegations of the Hong Kong SAR Government and the Legislative Council to visit the Greater Bay Area, including Shenzhen and Guangzhou. The first mission organized in April inaugurated what is expected to become a new regular habit in creating synergies among Chinese officials and business representatives in the region [Ouyang 2023, 24 May].

Finally, in March 2023, the CCP formed a new Hong Kong and Macao work office to replace the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office (HKMAO) of the State Council. The new entity, operating under a dual name, HKMAO and Hong Kong and Macao Work Office, was responsible to the CCP and not to the State Council, as its predecessor. This move, confirmed that the agency created in 1978 to promote cooperation and coordination of political, economic, and cultural ties between China and the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau would become a *de facto* secretariat of the already existing Central Leading Group on Hong Kong and Macau Affairs of the CCP. It also made crystal clear that all leverage in terms of internal appointments was now in the hands of the Standing Committee on the Politburo, ending a long term tradition which had granted the latter a more indirect power on HKMAO.

This formal change was prodromic to the organization of the visit of HKMAO Director Xia Baolong to Hong Kong from 13 to 18 April. On 16 April, Xia visited the Legislative Council and conducted a closed-door meeting with all 90 members. It was the first ever conducted by a mainland official in the city [Lin 2024, 22 February].

While Xia Baolong did not make any public remarks during his stay, other than brief greetings to the press at various events, on 18 April, Chief Executive John Lee offered a summary of his key message, citing central authorities «six hopes» for Hong Kong. Amongst them there were safeguarding national security and the rule of law, as well as maintaining stability, harmony, and prosperity to fully support Hong Kong's economic development.

3. Reinventing the Hong Kong economy

Hong Kong underwent significant economic shifts in the past year, presenting a stark departure from the challenges of 2022. Differently from what was happening in the political domain, where the level of controls and con-

straints was rapidly increasing, over 2023 the Chinese leadership proved to be more interested in adopting new strategies to relaunch local economy.

Aimed at providing a reliable evaluation of Hong Kong economic performance in 2023 and elaborating scenarios concerning its evolution in 2024, this section will first assess key economic indicators. These include GDP growth, consumer prices, foreign direct investment (FDI), and capital markets. Subsequently, it will scrutinize government's responses to Hong Kong contemporary economic challenges, as outlined in the 2023-24 Budget and Policy Address. This section also aims at discussing the evolution of Hong Kong external economic projection, focusing in particular on a trend that already started a few years ago, that is the progressive rise of Singapore as most favourite destination for FDI in Asia.

3.1. *GDP Growth Dynamics: A Beacon of Economic Strength*

In the year under review, Hong Kong's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) emerged as a beacon of economic strength, showcasing resilience and adaptability in the face of various challenges. The third quarter of 2023 witnessed a remarkable year-on-year growth of 4.1% in real terms, marking a significant uptick from the earlier quarters of the year, which recorded increases of 2.9% in Q1 and 1.5% in Q2. This positive trajectory not only surpassed expectations but also underscored the effectiveness of economic policies and adaptive strategies [HKEO 2023].

Several factors contribute to this robust GDP growth. Firstly, a rebound in global trade stimulated Hong Kong's export-oriented economy, fostering increased economic activity. The strategic positioning of Hong Kong as a financial hub, coupled with its efficient logistics and well-established trade networks, played a pivotal role in capitalizing on global economic recoveries. Additionally, the city's commitment to innovation, as highlighted in recent government initiatives, propelled key sectors like technology and finance, further contributing to GDP expansion [Reuters 2023, 10 November].

The Hong Kong government's strategic approach to sustaining economic growth was evident in its timely adjustments and interventions. The adjusted economic growth forecast of 3.2% in real terms for 2023 reflected a proactive stance, ensuring that the economic engine remained fuelled amid a changing global landscape. The government's agility in responding to externalities, combined with the resilience of local businesses, created an environment conducive to sustained economic expansion.

Amid a dynamic economic landscape, consumer prices in Hong Kong exhibited stability. In October 2023, overall consumer prices rose by a modest 1.7% compared to the previous year, slightly lower than the corresponding increase of 1.8% in September 2023. This indicated a measured and controlled inflationary environment, aligning with the government's forecasts of underlying consumer price inflation at 1.8% for the entirety of 2023 [HKTDC 2024].

The Hong Kong government's ability to contain inflation amidst global uncertainties is noteworthy. A multifaceted approach, including prudent monetary policies and strategic fiscal measures, was instrumental in maintaining price stability. The government's commitment to ensuring that inflation remained within manageable limits reflected a keen awareness of the impact of price fluctuations on the broader economic landscape, particularly on the purchasing power of consumers.

In the context of the global economic scenario, where inflationary pressures have been observed in various economies, Hong Kong's ability to keep consumer prices in check was proof of the appropriateness of its economic management strategies. The government's forward-looking policies, coupled with a responsive financial system, contributed to sustaining consumer confidence and domestic demand, further fortifying the resilience of Hong Kong's economic foundation [HKTDC 2024].

The synergy between robust GDP growth and stable consumer prices showcased Hong Kong's adeptness at achieving a delicate balance in economic indicators. The positive growth trajectory seemed proof of a renewed vibrancy of Hong Kong's economy, driven by global trade, strategic sectors, and innovative endeavours. Simultaneously, the measured approach towards inflation containment underscored the government's commitment to ensuring economic stability and safeguarding the interests of consumers.

3.2. Foreign Direct Investments and Capital Market

Hong Kong's standing in global Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows is nothing short of impressive. The UNCTAD World Investment Report 2023 reveals that FDI inflows to Hong Kong reached a substantial US\$ 117.7 billion in 2022, firmly securing Hong Kong's place as the world's 4th most favoured destination for foreign investments [HKTDC 2024]. This global ranking positioned Hong Kong in the company of economic powerhouses such as the United States, Mainland China, and Singapore, highlighting its attractiveness to international investors.

Several factors contributed to Hong Kong's remarkable FDI inflow dynamics. Firstly, its strategic geographical location as a gateway to China and other Asian markets makes it an ideal investment destination. The city's well-established legal and financial infrastructure, coupled with a business-friendly environment, further enhances its appeal. The Belt and Road Initiative and the Greater Bay Area development also play pivotal roles, attracting investments and creating opportunities that bolster Hong Kong's global standing [HKTDC 2024].

Equally significant was Hong Kong's prowess in FDI outflows, where it secured a notable 7th position globally. Outflows totalling US\$ 103.6 billion underscored the city's role as a global player in international investments [HKTDC 2024]. While the United States, Japan, and China lead in outflows, Hong Kong's substantial presence in this arena reflected its

role not just as a destination but also as a source of capital on the global investment stage.

Hong Kong's outbound investments contribute to global economic dynamics, fostering international collaborations and business ventures. The city's outflow dynamics signify a diversified and globally engaged investor base, with Hong Kong-based enterprises actively participating in ventures across various industries and regions.

As of March 2023, Hong Kong's stock market stood tall as the 4th largest in Asia and the 7th largest globally, boasting an impressive total market capitalization of US\$ 4.7 trillion. This resilience speaks volumes about the city's financial strength and its pivotal role in global capital markets [BNP Paribas 2023].

The resilience of Hong Kong's stock market can be attributed to several key drivers. Firstly, its status as a global financial hub attracts a diverse range of investors, ensuring liquidity and stability. Additionally, the city's robust regulatory framework and transparent market practices instil confidence among market participants. The strategic initiatives by the government and financial institutions to enhance market efficiency and attractiveness have also contributed to its resilience.

Hong Kong's performance as the 4th largest IPO fundraising market globally further cemented its status as a global fundraising hub. In 2021 alone, the city raised a staggering US\$ 12.7 billion through initial public offerings, showcasing its ability to attract capital and support companies in their growth journeys [BNP Paribas 2023].

The success of Hong Kong's IPO market has not only provided companies with access to capital but has also fostered innovation and entrepreneurship. It signifies a vibrant ecosystem that encourages businesses to go public, contributing to economic growth and job creation.

3.3. Economic outlook and challenges: navigating a delicate balance between government initiatives and formal policy addresses

Hong Kong's economic landscape in 2023 suggested a positive trajectory, marked by GDP growth and strong market performance. However, challenges persisted, notably the weakening external demand and a significant tightening of monetary conditions. Rising interest rates since March 2022 have impacted domestic demand, particularly affecting the property market. Fiscal policy remained expansionary, contributing to a delicate balance in sustaining economic recovery.

Despite sound macroeconomic fundamentals and well-regulated services, Hong Kong faced challenges, such as a declining investment ratio, and demographic concerns, including talent shortages and an aging population. Authorities were responding proactively, introducing initiatives to attract investments and talents, with a focus on innovation, digitalization, and technology development [Reuters 2023, 10 November].

In the dynamic landscape of Hong Kong's «economic rejuvenation», as requested by Beijing, the government has formalized its commitment to steer the course toward resilience and growth. The amalgamation of measures from the 2023-24 Budget and the Policy Address 2023, spearheaded by Financial Secretary Paul Chan and Chief Executive John Lee respectively, seemed to encapsulate a strategic vision aimed to fortify the city's economic foundations.

Financial Secretary Paul Chan's, unveiling of the 2023-24 Budget, unfolded a comprehensive set of measures aimed at bolstering economic resilience. Among the key initiatives, there was the issuance of electronic consumption vouchers, totalling HK\$ 5,000, distributed in instalments to eligible Hong Kong residents. This targeted injection of funds directly into the hands of consumers was designed to stimulate domestic spending, providing a crucial boost to various sectors of the economy [HKTDC 2024].

Recognizing the pivotal role of entrepreneurship in driving economic vitality, the budget allocated additional funding of HK\$ 550 million to the Hong Kong Trade Development Council (HKTDC) over five financial years. This financial infusion was strategically directed to support entrepreneurs, enabling them to capitalize on emerging opportunities arising from the Belt and Road Initiative and the Greater Bay Area development. The emphasis on entrepreneurial endeavours aligned with Hong Kong's commitment to remaining at the forefront of global economic trends.

Furthermore, an injection of HK\$ 500 million into the Branding, Upgrading, and Domestic Sales (BUD Fund) was accompanied by the launch of «BUD Easy», to expedite application processing. This initiative aimed to streamline and facilitate the application process, making it more accessible for businesses to leverage the fund for branding, upgrading, and expanding their domestic sales [HKTDC 2024].

The budget placed a strategic focus on advancing research and development, particularly in cutting-edge fields such as life and health technology and microelectronics. With an allocation of HK\$ 6 billion for universities and research institutes to establish thematic research centres, the government aimed to catalyse innovation and technological advancements [HKTDC 2024]. The creation of a Microelectronics Research and Development Institute further underscored Hong Kong's commitment to enhancing collaboration among academia, research and development centres, and industry players in the realm of microelectronics. From a strategic perspective, the huge allocation of funding resulting in the creation of this unit also aimed to achieve the broader PRC's goal of decreasing its dependence on semiconductors manufactured in the United States and Taiwan.

Chief Executive John Lee's 2023 Policy Address also aligned with the government's commitment to steering Hong Kong toward strategic socio-economic horizons. The address outlined initiatives that transcend-

ed traditional boundaries, fostering collaborations and positioning Hong Kong as a hub for high-quality enterprises.

A standout initiative was the contemplation of collaboration between the Hong Kong Investment Corporation Limited and the Guangdong Provincial Government through the GBA Investment Fund. This collaborative effort aimed to fund projects within the Greater Bay Area (GBA) that promised both social and economic benefits. The focus on collaboration within the GBA showcased Hong Kong's commitment to regional integration and capitalized on the collective potential of the area [HKTDC 2024].

To strengthen connections and cooperation with ASEAN and Middle Eastern markets, the policy outlines planned to establish additional business and trade offices along the Belt and Road (B&R). This strategic move aimed not only to facilitate economic partnerships but also to promote Hong Kong's aspirations to enhance its position in regional economic frameworks, including the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

John Lee's vision extended to fostering a «headquarters economy», attracting high-quality enterprises both domestically and internationally [HKTDC 2024]. Leveraging the dual circulation initiative, measures such as capital account-related investments were explored to facilitate the establishment of Mainland enterprises in Hong Kong. This initiative represented a strategic approach to position Hong Kong as a preferred destination for businesses seeking a stable and innovation-friendly environment.

3.4. *China's ambitions in Hong Kong: a focus on 2023 financial evolutions*

In 2023, China confirmed its intention to further tighten its control over Hong Kong's financial system. Hong Kong is part of China and, consequently, it is natural for the CCP to establish a firm control over its financial system. Nonetheless, the trend that emerged in 2023 was less a control over Hong Kong's financial system than a systematic subordination of Hong Kong's priorities and policies to those of China. At the ideological level, this move was justified in an article published in December 2023 in *Qiushi*, the Communist Party's official theoretical journal. The article explained the guidelines to lay the foundations of a «finance with Chinese characteristics», anchored to the principles of a sinified Marxism and aimed at transforming China into a great financial power [*Qiushi* 2023, 1 December]. This statement signalled a shift toward reinforcing the influence of President Xi and his thought on various financial institutions, including banks, pension funds, and insurers in China.

This ideological shift was viewed as a significant departure from the previous trend of encouraging innovation and profit-maximizing endeavours in the financial sector. Barry Naughton suggested that the financial sector was now expected to align more closely with government policies, indicating a move away from market-oriented reforms.

International banks with substantial operations in mainland China, such as HSBC, BNP Paribas, and JPMorgan Chase, have fallen under the purview of Beijing regulators. Not surprisingly, some financial institutions have been scaling back their operations, with Citibank selling its consumer wealth management business in mainland China to HSBC [*The New York Times* 2023, 5 December].

President Xi's assertive control over finance aligned with a broader trend of reversing liberalization that had been gradually taking place for almost four decades. The *Qiushi* essay emphasized a dedication to centralizing and unifying party leadership over financial work, consolidating political influence over economic and financial matters.

Despite these changes, the statement fell short of providing specific solutions to address China's financial challenges, including rising debt, widening budget deficits, and the insolvency of major borrowers in the real estate sector. Moody's recent downgrade of China's credit outlook to negative reflected growing concerns about the country's financial stability [*The New York Times* 2023, 5 December].

As China continued to navigate economic complexities, the ideological stance outlined in *Qiushi* underscored President Xi's commitment to tightening control over Hong Kong's financial landscape. The lack of specific policy prescriptions and the delay in a long-expected party committee gathering for the Third Plenum have raised questions about the challenges ahead and potential disarray in economic policymaking. Vice Premier He Lifeng, head of the Central Financial Working Committee, who was playing a pivotal role in shaping China's economic policies, emphasized the intertwining of political and economic considerations in the nation's financial landscape.

3.5. Hong Kong's external economic projection

In 2022, Hong Kong's total merchandise trade amounted to HK\$ 9,459.1 billion. Key trading partners encompassed Mainland China, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the European Union (EU), and the United States. Hong Kong's role as a vital contributor to global trade was underscored by its dynamic partnerships with these influential economies.

Hong Kong's commitment to free trade was exemplified by its proactive approach to expanding its network of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). By the end of the year under review, Hong Kong had signed eight FTAs with diverse economies, including China, New Zealand, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) member states, Chile, Macao Special Administrative Region, ASEAN, Georgia, and Australia [CEDB 2023].

The European Union stands out as a crucial trading partner for Hong Kong. The strategic alliance was strengthened by FTAs and Investment Agreements (IAS). With a total of 23 IAS signed with 32 foreign economies [CEDB 2023], Hong Kong's concerted efforts aimed to facilitate two-way in-

vestment flows, providing assurances to overseas investors while safeguarding the interests of Hong Kong investors in international markets.

All along 2023, the Middle East also emerged as a new focal point for Hong Kong business strategy. In a noteworthy departure from what could be described as a traditional historical neglect, Hong Kong businesses have shifted their focus towards the Middle East, propelled by the deepening economic and trade ties facilitated by the Belt and Road Initiative. Chief Executive John Lee's diplomatic missions to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates resulted in significant strides, including the signing of memoranda of understanding. These agreements reflected a commitment to cooperation on economic diversification, sustainable development, and foreign investments [HKTDC 2023].

Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development Algernon Yau has regularly emphasized the potential for mutually beneficial cooperation between Hong Kong and Middle Eastern countries. Hong Kong is strategically positioned to contribute substantially to projects in finance, logistics, innovation, and technology (I&T), and urban and infrastructure management in the Middle East. Additionally, the growing interest from Middle Eastern stakeholders in the development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area highlighted Hong Kong's increasing appeal as a gateway to the larger Chinese market.

Notably, Hong Kong became the UAE's seventh-largest export market in 2023, marking a significant improvement in the bilateral partnership. Negotiations for an investment promotion and protection agreement with Saudi Arabia, initiated after the Chief Executive's delegation visit, indicated a positive trajectory in economic relations. The establishment of a Hong Kong economic and trade office in Dubai since 2021 has contributed to enhanced regional trade ties [HKTDC 2023].

Following the conclusion of the 8th Belt and Road Summit, Hong Kong was poised to capitalize on its outcomes to further enhance ties with BRI economies and foster people-to-people and cultural connections. Hong Kong's active integration into overall national development remained evident, with sustained participation in joint BRI construction and deepened cooperation with Middle Eastern countries across various sectors [HKTDC 2023].

The strategic aspect of this economic rapprochement also deserves further attention. The rapid economic growth in the Gulf Cooperation Council states aligned with China's successful mediation in restoring diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Hong Kong sees a substantial opportunity to contribute to the economic diversification efforts of Middle Eastern countries. According to David Sit of the Hong Kong Trade Development Council, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are actively developing non-oil sectors, showcasing marked improvements in these new sectors [HKTDC 2023]. Examples such as Jacky's Group of Companies

and Crystal Palace Lighting highlight how businesses are expanding into the Middle East, contributing to local economic transformation and showcasing Hong Kong's potential to facilitate business ties among the Middle East, China, and wider Asia. A new economic strategy seems emerging, which sends Hong Kong on a scouting trip to countries that Beijing deems interesting, in the hope that Hong Kong's reputation as a business-oriented reality will help to open the doors, at a later date, to Chinese economic players.

3.6. *Singapore vs Hong Kong*

In the ever-evolving landscape of Asian FDIs, Singapore continued to emerge as a formidable contender, potentially surpassing Hong Kong as the most favoured destination. Notable names in the finance industry, including billionaire Ray Dalio, have established a presence in Singapore, and finance moguls like Ken Griffin and Steve Cohen are actively expanding their teams in the city-state. Singapore is making significant strides in the wealth management sector, attracting substantial foreign assets. The influx of finance professionals escaping Hong Kong's stringent Zero-COVID policies further boosted Singapore's appeal in 2023 [*TIME* 2023, 6 October].

Singapore's asset management industry has witnessed exponential growth, with wealth overseen doubling to approximately US\$ 4 trillion in just six years. Notably, around 80% of this wealth is of foreign origin. BlackRock Inc. and the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan are among the major players expanding their presence in Singapore. Even Swiss banks have established substantial operations in the city-state; in particular UBS Group AG, which has made Hong Kong the firm's largest operational basis in Asia [*OnDemand International* 2023; *TIME* 2023, 6 October].

Singapore is projected to experience a 9% growth in foreign wealth over the next five years (2023-2028). The city-state's appeal lies in its political stability, highly educated workforce, low tax rates, and incentives for multinational firms to establish Asian headquarters [*TIME* 2023, 6 October]. Moreover, Singapore's strategic location in Southeast Asia enhances its attractiveness to investment managers focusing on the region and doubting on the one hand that China will remain their major focus in the region, and, on the other, that Hong Kong can serve as the most convenient location from where to mediate all interests in Asia, China included. It seems consistent to assume that the approval of Hong Kong new National Security Law as well as the inclusion of Article 23 in the Basic Law in March 2024 are inevitably going to further accelerate the exodus from Hong Kong, no matter the initiatives the local government will conceive to stop this trend. The uncertainty about Hong Kong future is, in fact, making this trend highly possible.

4. Conclusion

Although before and during the pandemic it was still somehow legitimate to take into consideration the possibility that Hong Kong would retain a minimum of autonomy, despite the implementation of the National Security Law, today the fate of the former British colony appears to be starkly different.

If 2022 can be considered the year of censorship tightening and legal framework strengthening, aimed at controlling and punishing all forms of dissent, 2023 should rather be described as the year marking the beginning of political change for Hong Kong. If, on the one hand, the approved political and administrative reforms confirm a clear intent to favour the centralization of decisions in the hands of a government which, in turn, is increasingly dependent on Beijing, on the other, it is clear how, from an economic and financial point of view, Hong Kong was called upon to harmonize objectives and strategies with the more general vision of China.

To facilitate the transition, Hong Kong was equipped with a new Hong Kong and Macao affairs Office (HKMAO), which directly depends on the CCP, and that is coordinated by fonctionnaires emanating from the Chinese intelligence apparatus.

As it has happened on mainland China, security through surveillance is now considered a priority over economic development and financial gains. The more time passes, the more Hong Kong finds itself governed with the same vision and strategies as any other Chinese province. For this reason, it is realistic to imagine that this evolution will continue in the near future. Until complete assimilation.

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TAIWAN 2023 AND THE 2024 ELECTIONS:
A DPP PARTIAL VICTORY AFTER A CONTESTED ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN*

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The year in review was marked by a year-long electoral campaign for the presidential and legislative elections eventually held on 13 January 2024. The candidate of the Democratic Progressive Party, Vice-President Lai Ching-te, won the presidential race, beating the Kuomintang candidate Hou Yu-ih and the Taiwan People's Party Ko Wen-je. Yet Lai's party lost the majority in Taiwan's unicameral parliament, the Legislative Yuan, for the first time since 2016, whereas the Kuomintang obtained a majority of seats without, however, reaching an absolute majority itself. The attempts by both the Kuomintang and Beijing to frame the elections as a choice between «war and peace», portraying the DPP as solely responsible for the ongoing tensions in the Taiwan Strait, were not successful. Similarly, Beijing's own pressure playbook once again failed to shape a Taiwanese electoral contest in its favour. Yet the DPP's dwindling electoral performance, reflecting an inability to address structural issues of the island's economy, revealed inherent weaknesses in its own playbook to remain in power – especially as Ko's Taiwan People's Party searches for votes in similar constituencies. Outside of the domestic arena, Lai has promised continuity with the Tsai administration, which has continued to enjoy incremental support from Western and regional liberal democracies. Sceptical voices over the need to support Taiwan vis-à-vis China from both America and the European Union, as well as the slow pace in the development of trade relations, have however sown doubts in the solidity of support for Taiwan.

KEYWORDS – Taiwan; China; Cross-Strait relations.

1. Introduction

This essay explores the developments that occurred in the Republic of China (Taiwan) – henceforth ROC – in the fields of cross-Strait relations, international politics, domestic economy, and politics in 2023, as well as the results of the general election held on 13 January 2024. The first part of the essay provides a snapshot of the electoral results. The second examines

* Taiwanese and Chinese people's names and place names are Romanized in Hanyu Pinyin, with the exception of Taiwanese people's names and place names that have other commonly used spelling. Traditional Chinese characters are used for sources and people's names from Taiwan. Simplified Chinese characters are used for sources and people's names from the People's Republic of China.

the unfolding of the electoral campaign with a focus on the presidential elections. The third covers the evolution of the triangular relation between Taipei, Beijing, and Washington. The fourth assesses developments in Taiwan's external relations with European and Indo-Pacific actors. The fifth provides a snapshot of the major economic indicators for the year under examination. Finally, the conclusion sums up the findings of this article.

2. The results of the 2024 elections

On 13 December 2023, Taiwanese voters elected the new president of the Republic of China (ROC) and the new members of the unicameral parliament, the Legislative Yuan (LY). William Lai Ching-te (賴清德), vice-president during Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) second term and candidate of the Democratic Progressive Party (民主進步黨, DPP), won the presidential election with 5,586,019 votes, 40% of the total. Lai recorded 2,584,212 fewer votes than Tsai in 2020. In contrast with Lai, Tsai had also obtained a 57% share of the popular vote in the previous electoral round. Lai won a contested three-way presidential race against the Kuomintang's (國民黨, KMT) candidate, the mayor of New Taipei, Hou Yu-ih (侯友宜), and the candidate of the Taiwan People's Party (台灣民眾黨, TPP), the former mayor of Taipei, Ko Wen-je (柯文哲). Hou obtained 4,671,021 votes, amounting to 33.4%. Ko instead came third, with 3,690,466 votes, amounting to 26.4% [CEC 2024a]. Lai's victory meant that a political party in Taiwan was able to elect its presidential candidate for the third consecutive time since the completion of the democratization process on the island in 1996.

Despite the victory of its candidate in the presidential election, the DPP failed to win a parliamentary majority for the first time since 2016. As in previous rounds, the legislative election was contested with a mixed system. Taiwanese voters elected 73 district legislators with the first-past-the-post system, 34 legislators-at-large with a party-list proportional system, and six legislators for indigenous constituencies with a single non-transferable system [Huang 2017]. The KMT resulted as the largest party in the LY, obtaining 52 of 113 available seats, in contrast to the 38 seats won in 2020. In detail, it elected 39 district legislators, accounting for 39.96% of the total share (5,401,933 votes). It also elected 13 legislators-at-large, accounting in this case for 34.58% of the total share (4,764,293) [CEC 2024b]. The 2 LY legislators, elected as independent members, a district legislator and an indigenous-constituency legislator, also caucused with the KMT, constituting a 54-seat-strong bloc, which, however, was still 3 seats short of the 57-seat threshold for a parliamentary majority. On its part, the DPP, while still obtaining the highest number of votes for a single party, elected only 51 legislators, against the 61 elected in 2020. Forty-eight were elected as district legislators (6,095,276 votes, 45.09%), while

the other 13 were elected as legislators-at-large (4,981,060 votes, 36.16%) [CEC 2024b]. The TPP resulted as the third force also in the legislative election, winning 8 seats – three more than in 2020 – all of them being legislators-at-large (3,040,334 votes, 22.07%). It failed, however, to win any seat among the district legislators, gaining only 403,357 votes (2.98% of the total share) [CEC 2024b].

The election's result suggested that the TPP would then force either the KMT or the DPP to reach a compromise to elect the new LY president (a position equivalent to that of the «speaker» in the political systems of the Anglosphere). Yet, the KMT was ultimately able to elect its 2020 presidential candidate, former Kaohsiung mayor, and deep-blue firebrand Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜).¹ TPP legislators abstained from the second round of voting (in which only a plurality of votes, rather than the majority, was necessary) after having pro forma supported the candidature of their representative Huang Shan-shan (黃珊珊) [Hsiao 2024, 1 February]. The KMT's control of the LY presidency, tasked with «presiding and overseeing the meetings of the Legislative Yuan and of the various legislative committees» [L&RD], was expected to impact the DPP's legislative agenda for the next four years. The DPP's defeat in the legislative election, however, will not result in a «co-habitation» scenario, as in the case of other semi-presidential systems like the French Republic, as the nomination of a premier (officially the «President of the Executive Yuan») is a prerogative of the president of the Republic [Fell 2018: 54-61].

3. *A year-long countdown to the elections*

The ruling DPP entered 2023 in a difficult position, primarily because of the state of the Taiwanese economy. After an ebullient 2021, Taiwan's economy entered troubled waters in 2022. Rising energy prices and inflationary trends driven by the war in Ukraine and the sputtering recovery of the global economy after the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the long-unsolved structural issues of the Taiwanese economy. They include low wages, high living costs, with particularly pressing social issues stemming from scarce access to the real estate market for youth and labourers,

1. In the jargon of Taiwanese politics, the term «blue» is associated with the KMT and KMT-adjacent political actors and constituencies. More broadly, the term is associated with a Chinese national identity and positions on cross-Strait relations that range from amity with China to unification with Beijing. Those who support unification are defined as «deep-blue». The term «green» is associated instead to the DPP and DPP-adjacent political actors and constituencies. The «green» share a Taiwanese national identity and display positions over China ranging from maintenance of the status quo to Taiwan independence. See: Rigger 2016, More recently, the «white» has been used in relation to the TPP.

insufficient public transportation infrastructure, lingering inequalities in the education system, and inadequate measures for the social care of infants and the elderly [Yu 2023, 20 December]. The public's understandable focus on economic issues, in fact, shifted the electoral contest to a terrain favourable to the two leading opposition parties, the KMT and the TPP. This trend was already visible in the trouncing the DPP experienced in the November 2022 local elections, in which it was soundly beaten by the KMT.

Similar concerns among the Taiwanese electorate had emerged already in the lead-up to the 2020 elections. Against the backdrop of Chinese multi-domain pressure targeting Taiwan since Tsai's victory in 2016, the KMT had been initially successful in portraying the DPP as ultimately responsible for increasing tensions in the Strait and the negative repercussions suffered by the Taiwanese economy, enjoying an early lead in the polls prior to the summer of 2019. It had done so by exploiting the public's uncertainty over the actual nature of the so-called «1992 Consensus». This is a formulation endorsed by both the CCP and the KMT, which states that both the Mainland and Taiwan belong to «One China», even though the KMT's own version states that this «One China» is the ROC, not the PRC. The 1992 Consensus regulated relations between Beijing and Taipei during the Ma Ying-jeou presidency, which the DPP has refused to abide by since it came back to power [Wang 2019], while glossing over Beijing's own continuing, subtle shifting of the content of the «consensus» itself [Insisa 2021]. However, the candidature of a political figure catering to the most pro-China, most conservative constituencies of the KMT electorate such as Han Kuo-yu, and, above all, the Taiwanese public's revulsion for Beijing's repression of the 2019-20 Hong Kong protests [Chong *et al.* 2023], paved the way for Tsai's triumphant election and for the DPP's continuing control of the LY majority in 2020. Furthermore, these trends certified the diminished stature of the KMT in the presidential elections, a context in which security concerns about China more profoundly shape electors' choices. In this situation, the KMT was unable to leverage its local networks of patronage, which continue to make it competitive in legislative and county-level elections [Fell 2018: 132-149].

Scepticism toward Beijing and limited outreach of the KMT among an electorate for whom historical, socio-cultural, and political ties with China have scarce salience remained established trends of the Taiwanese electoral landscape throughout 2023 and at the ballot in January 2024 [Lee *et al.* 2023]. What changed, however, was growing disillusionment among the electorate that enabled Tsai's and the DPP's victories in 2016 and 2020, for the DPP's inability to address structural issues that plagues Taiwan's socio-economic condition, in particular housing and low wages. This discontent was effectively captured by Ko Wen-je and his electoral vehicle, the

TPP, a personalist populist party.² Ko had decided to sit out the presidential elections and to only field candidates for the legislative elections in 2020. He decided however to run in 2023, officially launching his campaign as the TPP presidential candidate on 17 May. As early as 2019, Academia Sinica scholar Lin Thunghong had highlighted how Ko had been capable of mobilizing the «losers of globalization» within Taiwanese society, namely small business owners and local youth who have been the most affected by «growing social inequality and fewer economic opportunities» [Klein *et al.* 2022].

Thus, the DPP continued to emphasise Beijing's intentions to alter the status quo and the threat that its plans pose to the island's autonomy, attempting to shift the focus from the domestic economy to security. On its part, the KMT largely adopted the same playbook as in 2020, presenting itself as the only party capable of both avoiding war and relaunching the local economy because of its close relations with Beijing based on the «1992 Consensus». Differently put, the KMT essentially promised to turn back the clock of cross-Straits relations to the second Ma term (2008-2012) [Insisa 2021], a period in which Taiwan appeared to be able to enjoy the fruits of amicable relations with China without having to commit to unification. Ko's message did not stray far from that of the KMT, but with a crucial difference. While the KMT's cross-Straits policy suffered from the self-imposed straightjackets of the 1992 Consensus and the defence of Chinese nationalism, Ko could do away with such unpopular constructs. He promised instead apparently common-sense but ultimately vacuous solutions to the dilemma of managing relations with the Xi administration [Mazzetta 2023]. This approach allowed focusing on the economy and on the plight of low-wage workers and especially urban youth, «betrayed» by the DPP technocratic rule but unwilling to vote for a gerontocratic, pro-China KMT.

The path towards the nomination was relatively straightforward for both Lai and Hou. Following President Tsai's resignation from the party chairpersonship after the DPP defeat in the nine-in-one local elections in November 2022, Lai was elected the new Chairperson of the party on 15 January, a clear signal that he would run as the DPP presidential candidate a year later. In his first speech as chairperson, Lai immediately emphasized how, under his guidance, the party would continue to follow the so-called «four adherences» (四個堅持) outlined by President Tsai in 2021 – a formula

2. A personalist party is one in which: 'the central figure is the leader' and 'organizational structures and procedures are nearly irrelevant for the functional operations usually associated with parties'. See: Kostadinova & Levitt 2014, 500. While there are competing definitions of populist parties, Weyland fleshes out the nexus between personalism and populism in the following terms: 'populism is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers'. See: Weyland 2001, 14.

aimed at preserving the current political status quo across the Strait [DPP 2023]. In other words, Lai promised that his presidency would continue to follow the path set by Tsai in handling cross-Strait relations, thus refusing to enter any negotiation aiming to subordinate Taiwan to the People's Republic of China (PRC), but at the same time implying that Taipei would not attempt to move towards independence.

Lai's intention to guarantee continuity with the past was signalled to domestic constituencies as well as to Chinese, and Western (especially American) decision-makers. More specifically, Lai's first speech was an attempt to pre-emptively defang accusations from political adversaries in Taiwan and to assuage the potential doubts of foreign countries, primarily the United States, that had deepened relations with Taipei under Tsai, given his explicit pro-independence positions in the past. Prior to his rise to the higher echelons of Taiwanese politics, Lai had stated to be a «political worker for Taiwan independence» [Insisa 2018:137]. None of these moves, however, changed Beijing's public perception of Lai as a de facto pro-independence candidate, as showed by its propaganda system [Wang 2023, 1 May].

Eventually, Lai was announced as the presidential candidate on 12 April. A first challenge for his campaign emerged as early as June when a former DPP staffer, Chen Chien-jou (陳汗琰), accused a division head of having silenced her attempt to report a case of sexual misconduct within the party, leading to a wave of similar allegations by other party members. The DPP majority in the LY swiftly responded to this major challenge with a series of amendments to the sexual harassment prevention laws in order to control the damage [Wang J. 2023, 16 August].

The KMT waited instead until 17 May to formalize the nomination of Hou Yu-ih as its presidential candidate, even though he had been the front-runner since autumn 2022. Earlier in March, the party Chairman Eric Chu Li-lun (朱立倫) announced that, in an attempt to select a candidate with broad electoral appeal, the KMT had foregone the presidential primaries [Shih & Chin 2023, 23 March]. This rather paradoxical decision was due to the fact that, in the past, presidential primaries had selected two profoundly inadequate candidates with scarce appeal outside the most «deep-blue» constituencies: Hung Hsiu-chu (洪秀柱) in 2015 and Han Kuoyu in 2019. In the months prior to the nomination, the KMT's shuttle party diplomacy to China was especially active. Vice Chairman Andrew Hsia Liyan (夏立言) visited China in February, meeting with the new Director of the Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) of the State Council, Song Tao (宋濤). During the meeting, Hsia and Song reaffirmed the cooperation between the two parties based on the common political foundation of the «1992 Consensus» [TAO 2023a]. A few days before Hou's nomination, the other KMT vice chairman, Sean Lian Sheng-wen (連勝文), also met with Song, once again reaffirming the «consensus» as the linchpin in the relation between Beijing and the KMT [TAO 2023b]. Hou himself expressed his support for

the «consensus» on 3 July [*Xinhua* 2023, 3 July]. Simply put, after the timid attempts by former-Party Chairman Johnny Chiang Chi-chen (江啟臣) to steer the KMT beyond a conceptualization of cross-Strait relations increasingly unappealing to the Taiwanese public in 2020 [Hille 2020, 6 March], the KMT resorted to turning back the clock and proposing the same message that drove it to electoral defeat in 2016 and 2020. In doing this, the party ignored in particular the relatively subtle but meaningful shifts in Beijing's interpretation of the 1992 Consensus since the Ma years – from a baseline to manage relations with Taipei to a precondition for maintaining economic ties to a commitment to unification under the «one country, two systems» framework [Insisa 2021].

By the end of August, the electoral race was shaken up by Foxconn tycoon Terry Gou Tai-ming's (郭台銘) announcement on 28 August that he would launch a new presidential bid as an independent candidate. Gou had already launched a presidential bid for the 2020 elections, being defeated by Han Kuo-yu in the KMT presidential primaries. While Gou never polled high enough to be competitive, his announcement posed a particular challenge for Hou, as both candidates would arguably compete for the same conservative, Chinese nationalist constituencies. The first TVBS poll conducted after Gou's announcement saw Lai at 30%, Hou at 19%, Ko at 23%, and Gou at 14% [‘TVBS’ 2023a].

Between July and August, Lai and Hou took similar steps in engaging with the US. On 4 July, an opinion column under Lai's name appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*. The opinion piece outlined a «four-pillar plan» for maintaining «peace» in the Strait: shoring up deterrence, improving economic security by diversifying supply chains away from China, fostering economic and political relations with other democratic countries, and managing cross-Strait relations with «pragmatism and consistency» [Lai 2023, 4 July]. An article under Hou's name appeared instead on the web edition of the magazine *Foreign Affairs*. The article outlined a «three-D» strategy consisting of «deterrence, dialogue, and de-escalation», reiterating support for the KMT's understanding of the 1992 Consensus and inflating the risk of a push for Taiwan independence by the DPP, as well as accusing the ruling party of being responsible for current cross-Strait tensions and for a «precipitous and impractical» energy transition [Hou 2023, 18 September]. Both Lai and Hou also visited the US prior to the elections. Lai arrived in the country in August in his capacity as vice president for a stopover visit on the way to one of the ROC's few remaining diplomatic allies, Paraguay. In Washington, he publicly met personnel of the American Institute in Taiwan, the US' «unofficial embassy» in the island [Hamacher & Lee 2023, 17 August]. Hou visited the US in September, four years after his predecessor as KMT presidential candidate, Han Kuo-yu, had made the path-breaking decision to renounce the traditional pre-electoral visit to the US [Hsu *et al.* 2023, 20 September].

As the electoral campaign entered its most heated phase, former President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) took the central stage to engineer a DPP defeat by uniting the other candidates. Ma's attempt to directly shape the public debate was evident on 2 October when he announced that he would boycott the annual ceremony for the ROC National Day, commonly known as the «double-ten» event, over the Tsai administration's decision to use the English title «Taiwan National Day» for the new logo without mention of the ROC [Chung 2023, 2 October]. The former President was eventually joined in his boycott by the KMT presidential candidate. This was a two-pronged manoeuvre, on the one hand pressuring deep-blue independent candidate Terry Gou to drop the race, and on the other to convince Ko, the TPP candidate, to join the KMT in a «blue-white» electoral alliance. The negotiations monopolized political conversations in Taiwan for much of October and November. An agreement between the parties repeatedly seemed on the verge of being finalized, with the two parties having agreed on a complex roadmap to establish who would run as president and who would run as vice president based on the evaluation of multiple polls [Kuo & Kuan-ting 2023]. The negotiations, however, ultimately collapsed on 23 November, the day before the deadline to register candidatures, after a farcical meeting broadcasted live from the Grand Hyatt hotel in Taipei which involved former President Ma Ying-jeou, KMT Chairman Eric Chu, and the three candidates – Hou, Ko, and Gou [Hou & Creery 2023, 23 November].

The electoral alliance's collapse was particularly damaging for Ko. His trajectory from green-leaning independent candidate towards positions close to the blue camp had been years in the making. Yet, moving towards an agreement with the KMT fleshed out the ideological void behind his personalist populist political project [Shi 2023, 15 November]. The anti-DPP combine failed as Ko realized that the roadmap for nomination agreed on 15 November favoured Hou and that he would run as vice president of a KMT candidate [Roctus 2023, 4 December]. Ko's chances to win the 2024 presidential elections, already dim, petered out after the breakdown of negotiations with the KMT, leading him, a month before voting, to state «in my heart I am deep green» and to vow to continue the approach of the Tsai administration on national defence issues, in an attempt to recapture votes from green constituencies [‘Ko Wen-je’ 2023]. The breakdown of the opposition talks was also followed by the announcement of Gou's withdrawal from the presidential race. Noticeably, rumours about this choice had been swirling since October, when Chinese authorities had started investigations for tax and land irregularities by his company Foxconn in Mainland China [Lee & Blanchard 2023, 23 October].

These developments effectively turned the contest for the presidency into a two-way race between Lai and Hou. As the deadline approached and the anti-green alliance collapsed, the DPP and the KMT made mirroring

choices for their respective vice presidential candidates. The DPP chose the de facto ambassador of Taiwan in the US, Hsiao Bi-khim (蕭美琴), a popular choice in «deep green» environments who enjoyed particularly positive press from mainstream Western media [*The Economist* 2023, 13 December]. The KMT instead chose popular pro-unification media commentator Jaw Shaw-kong (趙少康). Jaw's selection was also coupled with the choice of Han Kuo-yu to lead the list of KMT at-large candidates. The party's reliance on deep-blue figures showed an electoral strategy aiming at mobilizing the party's traditional base notwithstanding the opposition of the majority of the Taiwanese public to pro-unification positions [ECS 2023]. This strategy relied on the assumption that the KMT would not need to move to the centre given the split of historically green constituencies between the DPP and the TPP.

The first TVBS poll after the official registration of candidates appeared to validate the KMT's choice, with Hou closely trailing Lai, standing at 31% against 34% in a poll with a 2.3% margin of error [*'Dengji canxuan'* 2023]. Indeed, throughout late 2023, the KMT enjoyed considerable momentum in opinion polls. Message coordination with Beijing played a crucial role, as both KMT candidates and Chinese officials and media successfully framed the election as a choice between «war and peace», with the DPP as the main culprit for current tensions with Beijing [Blanchard 2024, 3 January; Woo & Pomfret 2024, 11 January]. On the back foot, the DPP and especially its candidates in the legislative election shifted the focus away from Taiwanese nationalist and anti-China rhetoric to assuage non-partisan voters [Hewitt *et al.* 2024, 12 January]. The last Formosa poll before the pre-electoral silence gave Lai a 4.3% lead on Hou, while the last TVBS poll gave him a 3% lead [*'Meilidao'* 2023; *'TVBS'* 2023b]. Ma Ying-jeou involuntarily helped the DPP with an interview with *Deutsche Welle* released on 3 January 2024. Ma stated that «no matter how much you defend yourself you can never fight a war with the Mainland – you can never win. They are too strong, much larger than us. So, we should use peaceful means to reduce the tensions», thus openly disagreeing with Hou's own promise to raise military spending. Furthermore, Ma argued, in a tone-deaf manner given the Taiwanese public's attitudes towards China, that in cross-strait relations, «you need to trust Xi Jinping» [Walker 2024, 12 January].

Ma's interview was released during the period of pre-electoral silence, so it was not possible to assess the direct impact on voter intentions. Yet Hou's public disavowal of Ma and reiteration that he did not intend to enter unification talks with China in case of victory, as well as the KMT decision to exclude the former ROC President from the party's end-of-campaign rally were evidence of the perceived damage that his statements inflicted on the party [Shan 2024, 12 January].

4. Cross-Strait relations and the role of the United States

China's attempts to shape Taiwanese politics and the choices of the island's elites and public throughout 2023 did not qualitatively change compared to previous years. Recent scholarship has applied the «hybrid influencing» framework to explain Beijing's modus operandi [Aukia 2023; West & Insisa 2024]. Hybrid influencing, definable as an actor's orchestrated execution of multiple activities across different domains to attain their goals, creates a context where kinetic warfare is relegated to the far end of the operational spectrum, while still resulting in a cognitive environment haunted by the threat of military force [Salonius-Pasternak 2017; Cederberg *et al.* 2017]. In contrast with other similar framings used to explain China's modus operandi in relation to Taiwan, hybrid influencing has the advantage of comprehensively explaining Beijing's attempts to uphold a credible military threat while at the same time continuing to pursue influencing operations.

Economic statecraft, lawfare (the instrumental use of legal tools to achieve political objectives), and more broadly «hybrid» activities played, as in previous years, an important role in Chinese attempts to exercise pressure over Taiwan. On 5 January, it was announced that ferry links between Fujian and the Taipei-controlled outlying islands of Kinmen and Matsu would resume after a pandemic-era suspension. Yet, by February, Taiwanese authorities had announced that Chinese civilian vessels had damaged undersea cables connecting the islet of Tungyin to Matsu, and Matsu itself to Taiwan, impeding access to the internet among these communities [Wang J. 2023, 7 March]. As in similar cases in the past both on the Taiwan Strait and in the South China Sea, the involvement of civilian vessels suggests a «grey zone operation». On 14 March, Honduras announced the switch of diplomatic relations from the ROC to the PRC, leaving Taipei with only 13 diplomatic allies. Nauru followed suit in January 2024 immediately after Lai's election.

On 21 August, Chinese authorities banned the import of Taiwanese mangoes, citing the presence of pests, in line with previous acts of economic statecraft targeting Taiwanese producers. The following month, on 12 September, Beijing launched a new set of measures aiming to foster Taiwanese investments in Fujian [SCIO 2023]. However, the following day, the Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) announced a review by the PRC Ministry of Commerce (MoC) of the preferential tariffs granted to Taiwanese goods under the Economic Comprehensive Framework Agreement (ECFA) signed in 2010 for «unfair trade barriers» [Shen & Wu 2023, 27 December]. The saga continued until December when the PRC MoC announced the conclusion of its investigation and the re-imposition of tariffs on Taiwanese chemical products that had been removed following the ratification of ECFA. These moves were coupled with the threat to further remove products from the ECFA early harvest list [Shen & Wu 2023, 27 December]. At the same time,

however, Beijing announced the lifting of the ban imposed the previous year on the trade of groupers from selected Taiwanese fisheries [Blanchard 2023, 22 December].

Two more issues must be considered to provide a comprehensive picture of Chinese hybrid influencing in 2023. The first concerns alleged Chinese efforts to shape Taiwan's information environment as the 2024 elections approached. Multiple reports and articles chronicled widespread, systematic, AI-supported, and AI-generated disinformation efforts. These information operations aimed at swaying voters towards the KMT, mainly by (1) spreading fake news against the Tsai administration and the DPP candidates, (2) emphasizing the «unreliability» of the US as a de facto guarantor of Taiwan's security, (3) providing a distorted image of the electoral competition through fake polls [Köckritz 2023; Zhang 2024]. Taiwanese authorities responded with explicit condemnation of China's electoral interference, highlighting its hybrid nature beyond the narrow information domain [Blanchard 2023, 4 October]. Such assessments were also confirmed by Google's Threat Analysis division close to election day, when, on 1 December, it warned of a massive increase in Chinese cyberattacks on Taiwan in the last six months [Gallagher 2023, 29 November]. As discussed in the previous section, by the last few months of the Taiwanese electoral campaign, the message of Chinese authorities appeared to be closely coordinated with that of the KMT, framing the election as a choice between «war and peace». For instance, on 26 October, a PRC Defence Ministry spokesperson warned that DPP authorities were pushing Taiwan towards «a dangerous and dreadful war» [PRC MoD 2023].

The second issue concerns China's military activities targeting Taiwan, a process in which the action-reaction at the heart of the triangular relation between Taipei, Beijing, and Washington is displayed in full sight. As early as November 2022, the Biden administration had publicly expressed its intention to set «guardrails» in Sino-American relations after the extreme tensions that had emerged, particularly following Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei in 2022, which had led to the most extensive and sensitive military activities by the People Liberation Army (PLA) since the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis between 1995 and 1996. Yet, this tactical détente between the two superpowers was months in the making and started to become more concrete only by the second half of 2023 [Gupta 2023]. On 20 January, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken publicly stated that China was no longer comfortable with the status quo on the Strait [US DoS 2023], while on 17 February, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China Michael Chase visited Taiwan. On 30 March, President Tsai arrived for her last transit visit to the US as ROC President while en route to a tour of the island's diplomatic allies Belize and Guatemala. In the US, Tsai met members of the US Congress, the governor of New Jersey, and, above all, Pelosi's successor, the Republican Kevin McCarthy. The PLA's response, while still forceful, was

carefully calibrated and subdued compared to the previous year [Lin *et al.* 2023]. Still, on 10 April, Taiwanese authorities announced a record-breaking detection of PLA aircraft and ships around Taiwan [‘Taiwan ADIZ’].

Even as Washington and Beijing lowered tensions in the second half of the year, the action-reaction dynamics continued. On 18 September, Under Secretary of Commerce for Standards and Technology Laurie Locascio led a new US delegation to Taipei. On the same day, Taiwanese authorities registered a new high of 103 PLA aircraft (30 fighter jets) and 9 vessels surrounding the island [‘Taiwan ADIZ’]. Moreover, only three days earlier, Chinese authorities had sanctioned US defence companies Northrop Grumman and Lockheed Martin for their role in US weapons sales to Taiwan [Cash & Lee 2023, 15 September]. On 27 September, a TAO spokesperson framed PLA’s military drills as a way to oppose the ‘arrogance’ of Taiwanese ‘separatists’ [TAO 2023c]. Finally, at a press conference held on 16 November, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi (王毅) remarked, in the wake of the meeting between Chinese leader Xi Jinping (习近平) and US President Joe Biden at the APEC summit in San Francisco, that the ‘Taiwan question remains the most important and most sensitive issue in China-U.S. relations’ [PRC MFA 2023]. Close to the election, on 20 December, US ‘current and former’ officials leaked to the press that Xi had ‘bluntly’ told Biden that ‘Beijing will reunify Taiwan with mainland China but that the timing has not yet been decided’ [Welker *et al.* 2023, 20 December].

Against this backdrop, Tsai’s administration and the DPP made progress in its defence policy, certainly with an eye on the coming elections. On 20 January, the DPP-majority Legislative Yuan passed a budget including US\$ 19.1 billion spending tally on defence, amounting to an 11.3% rise in defence spending on a year-by-year basis. The year in review saw instead the executive led by Prime Minister Chen Chien-jien (陳建仁) requiring a further 7.7% rise in the defence budget for a total of US\$ 13.9 billion, together with an additional US\$ 2.97 billion special budget for the purchase of weapon systems [Nakamura 2023, 24 August]. The ROC Armed Forces also staged ‘larger, louder, better-coordinated’ military exercises for its annual Han Kuang event, with the Tsai administration infusing a renewed sense of urgency into the population [Wang J. 2023, 28 July], while on 21 September, they unveiled their first indigenous, Hai Kun (Narwhal) class, diesel-powered submarine, announcing its deployment in May 2024 [Hille 2023, 28 September].

The bilateral, unofficial relations between Taiwan and the US continued to progress, especially in the economic dimension, but also faced some problematic developments. On 14 January, talks for the US-Taiwan 21st Century Trade Framework, the new free trade agreement between the two parties, began in Taipei. Conducted by the respective de facto embassies, the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) and the Taiwan Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO) in Washington, the talks led to the

signature of a first agreement covering customs administration and trade facilitation, good regulatory practices, services domestic regulation, anticorruption measures, and small and medium-sized enterprises in June [OUSTR 2023]. The legislation was eventually approved by Biden on 7 August. Additionally, on 22 December, President Biden signed into law the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for the 2023 fiscal year. It included multiple provisions in support of the Republic of China Armed Forces (ROCAF). Section 1313 of the NDAA, in particular, authorized the Commander of USINDOPACOM (the American unified combatant command in the Indo-Pacific) to «carry out military exercises with Taiwan» [United States Congress 2023; The White House 2023b]. As a result, by February 2024, US Army Special Forces advisers arrived in the outlying Kinmen and Penghu Islands where ROC Army counterparts are stationed [Hong 2024, 5 February].

However, the deadlock within the US House of Representatives caused by the Republican majority's request to tie aid to foreign partners to a bill on border security, which was in fact responding to the opposition of the party's «MAGA» wing to any kind of bipartisan legislation, delayed further American support for Taiwan. A US\$ 2 billion request for supplemental funding for the Indo-Pacific, which would also cover Taiwan, failed to go through before the end of the year. Furthermore, the presumptive nominee of the Republican Party for the presidential elections, former President Donald Trump refused to guarantee US protection of the island in case of a Chinese attack, simply stating that it had taken away «our chip business», a reference to the delocalization of the American semiconductor manufacturing sector by the turn of the century [Moriyasu & Satoh 2023, 30 January]. Crucially, Trump's ambiguity certainly bolstered Chinese messaging about the unreliability of the US as a de facto security guarantor for Taiwan.

5. Beyond Beijing and Washington: Taiwan in 2023 international politics

Throughout 2023, despite the absence of formal diplomatic relations, the Tsai administration continued to strengthen ties with other liberal democracies in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. The year began with a significant visit by the Chairman of the Alliance of Democracies Foundation and former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, on 3 January. Rasmussen emphasized the struggle against autocratic powers which Ukraine and Taiwan share [Lee 2023, 4 January]. In a notable diplomatic move, Czech President-elect Petr Pavel held a phone call with Tsai in the same month, marking a path-breaking decision by a European elected head of state and underscoring the Czech Republic's pivot away from China in recent years [Blanchard & Muller 2023, 31 January]. However, perceptions of Taiwan's reliance on a wide Euro-Atlantic front were challenged by an

interview with French President Emmanuel Macron, conducted during his return from a state visit to China and released by the French newspaper *Les Echos* on 9 April. In the context of discussions on Europe's «strategic autonomy», Macron argued against any «acceleration» of the Taiwan issue due to the «American rhythm» and «Chinese overreaction» [Barré 2023]. Despite Macron's position, subsequent G7 communiqués issued in April, May, and December emphasised the group's interest in stability in the Taiwan Strait, opposition to unilateral changes to the status quo, and support for Taiwan's participation in international organizations [JMOFA 2023a; JMOFA 2023b; European Council 2023].

In 2023, Taiwan's unofficial relations with Germany experienced significant momentum, marked by the first visit to the island by a member of the German cabinet since the 1990s. Minister of Education and Research Bettina Stark-Watzinger visited Taiwan on 21 March [‘German minister’ 2023]. This renewed engagement was largely driven by the US\$ 8.3 billion investment by TSMC, the giant Taiwanese multinational semiconductor contract manufacturing and design company, to establish a semiconductor foundry in the German city of Dresden. This investment was approved by TSMC in August and cleared by Taiwanese and German authorities in October and November, respectively [Pasquini 2023, 7 November]. Taiwan's relations with Italy also witnessed notable developments, including the opening of a second representative office in Milan, Italy's financial hub, and the first visit of an Italian delegation of elected representatives to the island since 2016. However, Italy's engagement with Taiwan remained cautious due to ongoing negotiations with Beijing regarding Italy's withdrawal from the Belt and Road Initiative [Insisa 2023a]. A planned delegation from the ruling Brothers of Italy party in April was cancelled, but eventually, two senators from the League, a junior partner in the ruling coalition, visited the island, emphasizing that their visit was of a personal rather than institutional nature [Pompili 2023, 15 June]. Taiwan-EU relations also saw incremental progress, although Taipei's hopes to establish a trade- and technology-focused framework with Brussels, thwarted by the von der Leyen Commission in 2021 [Birmingham 2021, 17 November], were not revived. High Representative Josep Borrell, a few days after Macron's interview for *Les Echos*, stressed that «any attempt to change the status quo by force would be unacceptable» [Yew & Lee 2023, 14 April]. Taipei and Brussels held their second Trade and Investment Dialogue [European Commission 2023] and their ninth Taiwan-EU Industrial Policy Dialogue [Lin 2023]. Furthermore, the EU Parliament, known for its clear support for Taiwan, passed two resolutions in December, advocating for a comprehensive upgrade of relations with Taiwan and rebuking China's behaviour in cross-Strait relations [EP 2023a; EP 2023b].

In 2023, Taiwan made also notable progress in its efforts to expand trade and financial ties with major Western democracies. In November,

Taiwan signed the Enhanced Trade Partnership with the UK [UK Gov 2023], and in December, it reached an investment protection agreement with Canada [Tseng & Teng 2023, 22 December]. Notably, both the UK and Canada are members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a transregional mega free trade agreement led by Japan. Taiwan has long sought access to the CPTPP but has faced challenges due to Japanese caution and Chinese pressure [Insisa 2023b]. Relations with Japan did not witness significant public developments throughout the year. However, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio emphasized in a statement issued before the Hiroshima G7 Summit that peace in the Taiwan Strait concerns Japan and the international community [Oba & Obe 2023, 10 May]. Expanding to other American allies in the Indo-Pacific, it is worth mentioning the Joint Statement of the Leaders of the US and the Philippines issued on 1 May. In a ground breaking move for Manila, the statement echoed the language used by the G7 regarding Taiwan [The White House 2023a]. Manila's decision to align with the G7 language on Taiwan can be understood in the context of its pivot away from Beijing towards Washington under the Marcos presidency and the resurgence of territorial disputes with Beijing in the South China Sea [Sutter & Huang 2024: 90-91; Ayson and Reyes 2024].

6. *The Taiwanese economy in 2023*

Major economic indicators for 2023 show the continuation of many negative trends that began in 2022, highlighting a sputtering economy that complicated the electoral prospects of Lai and the DPP. National statistics estimated that Taiwan's GDP grew by 1.4%, in contrast with the 2.59% recorded in 2022, and the lowest since 2009, during the global financial crisis [DGBAS 2024]. Both total exports and total imports saw sizable contractions. Exports decreased by 9.8%, standing at US\$ 432.4 billion, while imports saw a collapse, decreasing by 17.8% and standing at US\$ 351.9 billion. The trade balance recorded thus a US\$ 80.56 billion surplus, for an annual change rate of 56.9% [MF 2024]. Exports to Mainland China and Hong Kong decreased by 18.1%, amounting to US\$ 152 billion and covering 35.2% of all exports (in contrast with the 33.4% of the previous years). Exports to the US instead increased by 1.6%, amounting to US\$ 76.2 billion and covering 17.6% of all exports (in contrast with the 21.3% of 2022) [MF 2024]. Imports from Mainland China and Hong Kong stood at US\$ 71.5 billion, contracting by 16.1% and amounting to 20.4% of the total, while imports from the US contracted by 10.9%, with their value standing at US\$ 40.6 billion and constituting 11.6% of the total [MF 2024]. Industrial production decreased by 3.99% compared to 2022, with a 4.19% decrease in the critical manufacturing sector [MEA 2024b].

Foreign direct investments (FDIs) in Taiwan amounted to US\$ 11.2 billion for a total of 2310 projects, thus recording a 15.4% decrease in the total amount invested and a 9.98% decrease in the number of cases [MEA 2024a]. FDIs from China amounted to US\$ 29.6 million, recording a 23.3% decrease on a year-by-year basis. Taiwan's outward investments amounted to 896 projects for a total of US\$ 26.6 billion, recording a 176.4% increase compared to 2022. The outward investments to Mainland China decreased by 11.8%, amounting to US\$ 3 billion – 39.8% less than in 2022 [MEA 2024a]. Estimates of the labour force saw a 3.3% unemployment rate, in contrast with the 3.51% recorded the previous year [NS 2024], while inflation remained high for Taiwanese standards, with the Consumer Price Index recording a 2.5% rise on a year-by-year basis [Pan & Huang 2024, 5 January].

7. Conclusion

William Lai's victory in the presidential elections confirmed that a majority of the Taiwanese public is still sceptical about engagement with China and the KMT's handling of the island's security. Above all, the Taiwanese public appeared to prefer the unresolved continuation of the fragile status quo in the Strait – and understandably so. However, the DPP's defeat in the legislative elections and the consequent loss of the majority in the LY show that a value and security-driven agenda alone is not sufficient in the long term. Both the KMT and, in particular, a populist party such as the TPP, have been able to capitalize on the DPP's inability to solve Taiwan's long-standing economic issues – even though the only solutions they both propose rely on vague promises of rapprochement with Beijing that ignore the Chinese Communist Party leadership's own calculus and aspirations for unification. The domestic situation draws parallels with Taiwan's predicament in external politics. The year 2023 saw concrete developments in trade relations and in the struggle against isolation in international politics, yet no real breakthroughs have been achieved, nor do they appear realistic – possibly with the exception of the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st Century Trade, which is still in its early stages. In fact, the isolationist push of «MAGA» Republicans and the possibility of a second Trump presidency, as well as cautious calls from a champion of Europe's «strategic autonomy» such as Macron, sow doubts on the solidity and durability of the Euro-Atlantic democratic front that has been gradually strengthening its support for the Tsai administration, particularly in its second term. But above all, these developments cast a long shadow over the coming term of President-elect Lai.

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THE PHILIPPINES 2022-2023: A TURBULENT START FOR THE NEW ERA
OF MARCOS LEADERSHIP

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This article provides a two-year analysis of events spanning the country's leadership transition from the 2022 national elections to the initial year of the new administration. The electoral triumph of Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio's UniTeam alliance marked the resurgence of the Marcos family and the continuation of the Duterte family's grip on national politics. The alliance's overwhelming victory led to the emergence of a supermajority bloc in Congress and the occupation of key leadership positions by their kins and allies. However, Marcos Jr.'s presidency was immediately confronted by challenges posed by post-pandemic recovery, geopolitical complexities, and unpopular policy decisions. The manner in which the Marcos Jr. presidency confronted such challenges caused a significant decline in its popularity. This article explores the dynamics of the UniTeam alliance between Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio, formed out of the absence of a continuity candidate from the then-ruling party, and sought to consolidate dominant political forces and mobilize broad electoral support for their joint victory. The lack of genuine programmatic unity in their alliance proved detrimental as Marcos Jr.'s sudden policy deviations led to internal conflicts, exposing the fragile nature of this purportedly formidable alliance. Marcos Jr.'s departure from Duterte's pro-China foreign policy in favour of the United States, his admission of abuses in Duterte's war on drugs and abandonment of his predecessor's illiberal tactics, and his adoption of a softer approach to the communist insurgents with the revival of the peace talks substantially overturned Duterte's legacy. The tensions within the winning coalition revealed cracks and resulted in power struggles within the legislature's supermajority bloc. These key developments one year into the Marcos Jr. administration contribute to the growing volatility in the Philippine political landscape.

KEYWORDS – Philippines; presidential elections; Marcos Jr.; Duterte; UniTeam.

1. Introduction

The Philippines witnessed significant changes in 2022 and 2023 with the highly anticipated national elections and the inaugural year of a new administration. As Rodrigo Duterte's presidential term came to an end, his

political strategy aimed at securing his populist legacy and the continuation of his economic, political, and foreign policies. Reaching these goals was made difficult by the absence of a clear continuity candidate within Duterte's internally fragmented dominant political party. The ensuing vacuum paved the way for political manoeuvring and the formation of shadow alliances, culminating in the overwhelming electoral victory of a tenuous political coalition, which brought the once-overthrown Marcos family back to power.

The article consists of two main parts, the first of which delves into the aftermath of the 2022 national elections. The proclamation of Ferdinand «Bongbong» Romualdez Marcos Jr. and Sara Zimmermann Duterte-Carpio as the president and vice president symbolized a dynastic political victory, drawing support from their respective strongholds in the northern and southern regions of the Philippines. This further translated into the control of both the executive and legislative branches, with critical posts occupied by allies and family members, forming yet another supermajority bloc. Marcos Jr. leveraged this massive support from the legislature to advance his national development plans. Nevertheless, his first year in office grappled with challenges from the lingering effects of the pandemic and pressing geopolitical concerns. His unpopular policy decisions in addressing inflation and supply shortages, along with frequent foreign travels and resignations from political appointees, resulted in the decline of public confidence, as shown by the significant drop in the new President's approval ratings.

The second part of the article examines the political dynamics of the *UniTeam* alliance and its implications for the Marcos Jr. administration. Established out of the internal strife within former President Duterte's dominant political party, the alliance of convenience between Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio materialized as a strategy to secure victory in the 2022 national elections. However, an unforeseen shift occurred as Marcos Jr. deviated from Duterte's established policies on foreign relations, human rights, and anti-insurgency campaigns. This departure from Duterte's legacy caused cracks within the supermajority bloc and led to power struggles within the *UniTeam*. The legislature became a battleground riddled with alleged leadership coups, the sudden demotion of a top official, and impeachment rumours. This was accompanied by scrutinizing the vice president's confidential funds in budget deliberations, a slew of resignations from Duterte's political party, and rumours of destabilization plots against the Marcos Jr. administration.

The article's conclusion recalls the key events that defined Marcos Jr.'s initial year, notably his policy divergence from Duterte and the power struggle that ensued within his governing coalition. It also reflects on his attempt to restore his family name and establish a new era of Marcos leadership, an endeavour whose intended societal outcomes remain unrealized, driving the new administration's initial year into an area of turbulence.

2. *Marcos-Duterte Return to Power, Redemption, and Challenges*

2.1. *Dynastic Consolidation Post-2022 Elections*

The 2022 national elections can be characterized as a dynastic political victory, particularly for two families committed to vindicating and perpetuating their political legacies – the Marcoses and Dutertes. Ferdinand «Bongbong» Marcos Jr. and Sara Zimmerman Duterte-Carpio secured the absolute majority of votes in the presidential and vice-presidential contests, averaging almost 60% [Buan 2022, 10 May]. Following their landslide victory, members of their respective clans obtained coveted national and local government positions. Marcos Jr.'s eldest son, Ferdinand Alexander «Sandro» Marcos, his cousins Angelo Marcos Barba and Martin Romualdez, along with Romualdez's wife, Yedda Romualdez, were elected to the House of Representatives. They joined the new President's sister, Senator Imee Marcos, in the legislative arena. The Marcos family further solidified its presence in the northern Philippines, with Marcos Jr.'s nephew, Matthew Marcos Manotoc, re-elected as governor of Ilocos Norte and his cousin-in-law and wife of former president Ferdinand Marcos Sr.'s nephew, Cecilia Araneta Marcos, as vice governor [GMA News 2022, 11 May]. The Duterte family maintained its political stronghold in the south, with Sebastian «Baste» Zimmerman Duterte becoming mayor and Paolo «Pulong» Zimmerman Duterte being re-elected as the 1st district representative of Davao City.

The electoral outcome holds historical significance on two fronts. In a country that utilizes the plurality system or first-past-the-post system for the election of top executives, winning by attaining the absolute majority vote is a quite rare occurrence [Wong 2022, 7 February]. Unprecedentedly, both Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio managed to secure the absolute majority of the votes, rendering their victory indisputable and, by extension, legitimate.

Another pivotal aspect of Marcos Jr.'s presidential win is the controversial history associated with his family. He is the son of Ferdinand E. Marcos Sr. whose authoritarian regime imposed martial law and precipitated economic collapse through a debt-driven growth strategy, allegedly plundered the public coffers, and perpetrated widespread human rights abuses [Manapat 1991; Chaikin & Sharman 2009]. Among the authoritarian regime's notable human rights violations included the curtailment of freedom of speech and assembly, enforced disappearances, mass arrests, and tortures of accused dissidents [Coronel 2022]. The overthrow of Marcos Sr.'s dictatorial and kleptocratic rule in 1986, through the EDSA People Power Revolution, resulted in his exile to Hawaii and the installation of Corazon Aquino as president.¹ Marcos Jr.'s election to the presidency, co-

1. EDSA is an acronym standing for «Epifanio de los Santos Avenue», a limited-access circumferential highway around Manila, where Camp Crame, headquarters of the Philippine National Police, and Camp Aguinaldo, headquarters of the Armed

inciding with the 50th anniversary of his father's martial law declaration, fuelled observations about the resurgence of nostalgia for strongman rule [Pitlo 2022, 10 May].

Political scholars and analysts have proposed multiple explanations for the high voter turnout that characterized the 2022 elections. One of them emphasized a younger voting demographic joined to a weakened national history education, challenging the prevailing «never forget» anti-martial law slogan and rendering a substantial portion of the electorate susceptible to the narrative presented by Marcos Jr. during his campaign [*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2022, 9 February; de Guzman 2022, 10 May].

A comprehensive study on the 2022 elections identified three primary reasons for voting in favour of Marcos Jr.: support for former President Rodrigo Duterte; nostalgia for martial law; and ethnolinguistic identity, particularly in areas where the influence traditionally held by the Marcoses and Dutertes was stronger [Dulay *et al.* 2023]. Another contributing factor was the strategic use of Marcos mythmaking [Arguelles 2022], involving the construction of a political narrative resonating with the Marcos loyalists, fostering authoritarian nostalgia, and perpetuating and spreading historical misrepresentations already prevailing through generations of dynastic rule in regional strongholds. This narrative gained traction through online platforms, social media, and other disinformation networks [Claudio 2022, 15 May; Devlin 2022, 7 May]. Local government also proved to be a strong source of support for Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio, with endorsements from governors and local government executives, often hailing from influential political clans in vote-rich provinces [Quismorio 2022, 11 April].

Whether attributed to one or a combination of these factors, the overarching conclusion remains consistent – the return to power of the Marcos family and an opportunity for exoneration from Marcos Sr.'s and Rodrigo Duterte's political misdeeds. Marcos Jr. called for unity in his presidential campaign, and asked to be judged on the basis of his actions rather than his family history [Lema and Dela Cruz 2022, 11 May]. However, his pursuit of «unifying leadership» manifested as a consolidation of dynastic powers within the executive and legislative branches of government. His initial cabinet appointments included former department chiefs from the Marcos Sr., Arroyo, and Duterte administrations. He also appointed Duterte-Carpio as education secretary, raising concerns about potential historical distortion and whitewashing, particularly regarding the Marcos dictatorship and martial law. Martin Romualdez, a notable cousin of the new President, assumed the role of Speaker of the House of Representatives, while Sandro Marcos,

Forces of the Philippines, are located. These two bases were seized by opponents of former president Ferdinand Marcos Sr.'s authoritarian regime in 1986, triggering the three days of peaceful demonstrations that led to the downfall of Marcos's dictatorship. These events went down in history as the EDSA People Power Revolution.

ected the 1st district representative of Ilocos Norte in 2022, was appointed House Senior Deputy Majority Leader. On her part, Imee Marcos, the new President's eldest sister and a member of the Senate, chaired four critical standing committees in the Senate: foreign relations, social justice, electoral reforms and people's participation, and cooperatives. With the lower house of Congress dominated by the Marcos family and their allies and the Senate featuring only a two-member minority bloc, it is arguable that Marcos Jr. has not only maintained but even surpassed the scale of former President Duterte's supermajority bloc [Gomez 2022, 13 May]. Marcos Jr.'s strategy of establishing supermajority blocs in both houses of Congress aimed to secure support for his priority legislations. Nonetheless, alliances based on patronage rather than programmatic unity or party lines prove to be structurally fragile when conflicting interests arise [Hutchcroft 2020].

2.2. *The Marcos Family's Revival and Quest for Redemption*

In what appears to be a «redemption arc», a series of initiatives and pivotal decisions concerning the Marcos family unfolded during the initial year of the new administration.

Within the first year of his presidency, Marcos Jr. introduced his «*Bagong Pilipinas*» (New Philippines) governance framework. This initiative, designed to herald a new era of national development, closely resembled his father's «*Bagong Lipunan*» (New Society) vision, which emphasized strengthening economic, financial, and trade agencies, promoting agricultural development, and fostering foreign investment [Teehankee 2023]. Aligning with his father's development agenda, Marcos Jr. prioritized agriculture, initially appointing himself as the head of the agricultural department. His objectives included ensuring food security, improving nutrition, enhancing food affordability for Filipinos, and mechanizing agriculture [Cariaso 2023, 24 July]. Plans were also underway to revive and enhance Marcos Sr.'s *Masagana 99* (Abundance 99) credit program, which was discontinued in 1984 due to a minimal number of farmer beneficiaries and adverse effects such as heavy debt burdens and rural bank closures [Corrales 2023, 2 June].

A key component of Marcos Jr.'s strategy for post-COVID-19 economic recovery involved attracting foreign direct investments (FDIs) and strengthening of state-private sector partnerships. Following his father's playbook, Marcos Jr. appointed technocrats and business executives to key economic positions. The constant association of the state with economic elites, however, raised concerns about a potential return to crony capitalism, reminiscent of Marcos Sr.'s intertwining of state and business interests.

Duterte-Carpio, in her role as education secretary, also took part in efforts to rehabilitate the Marcos family name. The Department of Education (DepEd) faced scrutiny during the budget hearing because it had issued a memorandum directing the alteration of «*Diktadurang Marcos*» (Marcos

Dictatorship) to «*Diktadura*» (Dictatorship) in the new curriculum. Critics argued that this move omitted accountability and bordered on state-sponsored disinformation despite DepEd's justification of thematic generalization. [Abad 2023, 28 September].

Two significant court decisions were also issued in the first year of Marcos Jr.'s presidency, addressing allegations of ill-gotten wealth and corruption during his father's dictatorial rule. The first was related to the contentious coco levy fund, amassed from taxes imposed on coconut farmers by Marcos Sr. and his associates from 1971 to 1983. This fund, totalling PHP 9.8 billion (USD 175.6 million), was intended to develop the coconut industry. However, the fund was reportedly misappropriated for businesses owned by Marcos's cronies. Following the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship, then President Aquino established the Philippine Commission on Good Governance (PCGG), mandated to seize ill-gotten wealth acquired by the Marcos family and their associates. A month into Marcos Jr.'s presidency, the *Sandiganbayan*, namely the Philippines' special anti-graft court, upheld the dismissal of a forfeiture case against three firms created from the coco levy fund, citing the PCGG's failure to present meritorious arguments and complete pretrial work since its inception in 1987 [Marcelo 2023, 3 August]. Moreover, Marcos Jr.'s predecessor, former President Duterte, signed Executive Order No. 172, releasing funds through Republic Act No. 11524 for the intended purpose of coconut industry development, raising concerns about potential misuse under the current administration [DA Press Office 2022]. Another historically significant ruling involved the Supreme Court's dismissal of a case concerning the allegedly ill-gotten wealth of the Marcoses, valued at PHP 1.05 billion. The Supreme Court confirmed a Sandiganbayan decision, taken in September 2019, dismissing the complaint against the Marcoses for insufficient evidence [Chi 2023, 19 July].

2.3. *Challenges Confronted in the First Year of Administration*

Among the many challenges confronting the new presidency, particularly important were a significantly volatile economy and pressing issues in agriculture, despite the latter being the administration's top priority. The country's average inflation rate from January to November 2023 stood at 6.2%, surpassing the 2-4% target set by the administration [Rivas 2023, 5 December]. Although the rate gradually decreased, it remained elevated due to the lingering effects of *El Niño* and geopolitical conditions. Agricultural challenges – including shortages, price hikes, alleged importation irregularities, and hoarding cases – marred Marcos Jr.'s inaugural year. Criticized by farmer groups for the new government importation plans, an unreasonable price ceiling, and failure to address inflationary prices, Marcos Jr. eventually stepped down as agriculture secretary on 3 November 2023, appointing fishing tycoon Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. as his successor [Mangaluz 2023, 3 November].

The Maharlika Investment Fund (MIF), Marcos Jr.'s sovereign wealth fund flagship program, faced scrutiny on multiple fronts. The Maharlika Investment Fund Act of 2023 aimed to foster socioeconomic and accelerated infrastructural development. However, critics questioned its unclear objectives, unproven effectiveness, feasibility, and potential impact on the country's financial stability and post-pandemic recovery [Romero 2023]. Despite such criticisms, the administration pushed forward with the MIF, facilitated by the overwhelming approval of the supermajority bloc in the legislature [Tamayo *et al.* 2023, 1 June].

Marcos Jr. also faced criticism because of the frequency and cost of his overseas trips, designed to attract foreign direct investments and support for the MIF. The number of trips nearly doubled from 6 in 2022 to 11 in 2023, covering 9 countries. Moreover, his travel fund increased significantly from PHP 403 million (USD 7.2 million) in 2022 to PHP 1.408 billion (USD 25.2 million) in 2024 [Manahan 2023, 16 August; Laqui 2023, 27 December]. These foreign trips were perceived as expensive junkets, despite government explanations that they had resulted in PHP 4 trillion (USD 71.6 billion) worth of investment pledges – many of which, nonetheless, had yet to materialize at the end of the period under review [de Leon 2023, 27 December].

In the first year, the above-listed problems took a toll on the Marcos Jr. administration, leading to the resignation and replacement of several key administration officials [Corrales 2022, 5 October] and a significant drop in approval ratings for both Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio. In a survey conducted by Pulse Asia for Q3 2023, Marcos Jr.'s approval rating dropped to 65% from 80% in the previous quarter. Duterte-Carpio's approval rating also decreased by 11% to a total of 73% [de Leon 2023, 2 October].

3. *Premature Cracks and Power Struggle in the UniTeam*

3.1. *The Making of the UniTeam: Party Politics, an Alliance of Convenience, and Political Opportunism*

The political turmoil that ensued less than a year after Marcos Jr. assumed the presidency can be traced to the flaws that had existed since the formation of his unforeseen coalition Duterte-Carpio, which resulted in the *UniTeam* alliance's overwhelming victory in the 2022 national elections. The same factors that resulted in the formation of arguably the most formidable presidential tandem the Philippines had ever seen in its post-EDSA period brought about the premature unravelling of the *UniTeam* alliance. They were weak party politics, an alliance of convenience, and political opportunism.

Marcos Jr.'s historic majoritarian victory cannot solely be attributed to his own political machinations. Several months prior to the general elections, the internal strife that plagued the then-ruling *PDP-Laban* resulted

in Marcos Jr.'s triumphant return to power, as the party then in power was deprived of a standard-bearer who could ride on former President Duterte's substantial popularity. The *PDP-Laban*, chaired by Duterte, was divided into two factions: one led by Duterte-loyal party officials and the other by members who supported Senator Manny Pacquiao's presidential ambitions [Manahan 2022, 22 March]. This pre-election development was not entirely new in the Philippines, where intra-party factionalism is a recurrent consequence of its weak political party system [Teehankee 2020]. Duterte initially planned his daughter's presidential run paired with his former aide, Senator Bong Go, who filed his certificate of candidacy for vice president [Ferrerias 2021, 3 October]. The strife ultimately prompted Pacquiao to run under the PROMDI (Progressive Movement for the Devolution of Initiatives) Party, while Duterte-Carpio distanced herself from her father's fragmented party.

Before the official certificate of candidacy filing for the 2022 national elections, pre-election surveys consistently positioned Duterte-Carpio as the frontrunner. She continued to lead Marcos Jr. by 5% in September 2021 ['September 2021 Nationwide' 2021]. However, Duterte's daughter defied popular expectations. She ultimately decided to run for vice president after joining *Lakas-CMD*, the political party of former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, as Marcos Jr. remained steadfast in his presidential ambition. The establishment of the *UniTeam* formalized the alliance of two of the most dominant Filipino political clans, which had occupied the Malacañang Palace in distinct periods: the Marcoses from 1965 to 1986 and the Dutertes from 2016 to 2022. Their partnership was viable, albeit unexpected, given that former President Duterte was openly critical of Marcos Jr.'s leadership capabilities [Buan 2021, 19 November].

With no prior record of substantive political collaboration between Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio, the *UniTeam* was thus evidently formed as an alliance of convenience aimed primarily at capturing the Philippines' highest political positions by consolidating dominant political forces. Except for former President Noyonoy Aquino's Liberal Party, the *UniTeam* consisted of four major political parties led by influential families, which had held the Philippines' top political seat from the Marcos dictatorship to the post-EDSA period: Marcos Jr.'s *Partido Federal ng Pilipinas*, Arroyo's *Lakas-CMD*, Duterte-Carpio's *Hugpong ng Pagbabago*, and former President Joseph «Erap» Estrada's *Pwersa ng Masang Pilipino*. These forces strategically merged to share the post-elections political spoils – Marcos Jr. secured his family's revival; Duterte-Carpio maintained the Dutertes' grip on national politics; Arroyo, who once aspired to reclaim the speakership under Marcos Jr., flexed her sustained political muscles by serving as the vital powerbroker behind the *UniTeam*; and, former presidential son Jinggoy Estrada returned to the Senate after being released on bail from graft charges.

Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio's partnership was clearly an opportunistic manoeuvre amid a fiercely contested presidential and vice-presidential

race. Duterte-Carpio averted clashing with Marcos Jr. by settling to run for vice president. Joining forces prevented other formidable presidential contenders, including former Vice President Leni Robredo and former Manila Mayor Isko Moreno, from gaining ground. The ethnolinguistic roots of the leaders of the alliance, which consistently emerge as a significant element in mobilizing votes in Philippine politics [Teehankee 2010], greatly contributed to the outcome of the 2022 presidential elections. The President, who hails from Luzon's Ilocos Norte province, inherited the Vice President's electoral strongholds in the Visayas and Mindanao. On the other hand, the Davao native Duterte-Carpio benefitted from Marcos Jr.'s popularity in the vote-rich provinces of Luzon and the National Capital Region (NCR).

The partnership also capitalized on the country's preference for a personality-based rather than a program-based electoral campaign. Amid the intense partisan divide wreaking havoc on Philippine society – intensified by the Marcos family's revival and Duterte's divisive leadership – Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio adopted a simplistic yet vague «unity» campaign slogan, hence the name *UniTeam* for their alliance. While such a message resonated with millions of Filipinos and propelled them to the country's top political seats, the *UniTeam* alliance, founded on electoral expediency and political opportunism, soon revealed cracks in the early years of the Marcos Jr. administration due to policy divergence and power-sharing disputes.

3.2. *Policy Divergence and Overturning Duterte's Legacies*

Considering how the *UniTeam* was constituted, Marcos Jr. was widely expected not to reverse most of Duterte's controversial governance agendas. However, in the first year of his presidency, the Philippines saw varying degrees of reversals in at least three policy areas that defined the Duterte administration: (1) China-centric foreign policy; (2) deteriorating human rights situation and withdrawal from the International Criminal Court (ICC); (3) and repressive anti-communist campaign.

One of Duterte's defining policy legacies that Marcos Jr. was assumed to follow was the pivot to China, as both his parents played a role in normalizing diplomatic ties with China in the 1970s. Marcos Jr. also held multiple meetings with the Chinese ambassador before the beginning of his term. However, Marcos Jr. immediately shifted away from Duterte's foreign policy as the Philippines revitalized its ties with the US amid the increasing tension in the West Philippine Sea.

Various factors influenced Marcos Jr.'s departure from Duterte's pro-China stance. Much of China's promised investments and infrastructure projects did not materialize during his predecessor's term [Lee 2020, 7 September]. Moreover, Duterte's appeasement did not stop China's maritime incursion in the West Philippine Sea and its constant harassment of Filipino fishermen, sparking an increasingly stronger anti-China sentiment from the Filipinos [Tomacruz 2020, 21 July]. Contrary to his predecessor,

Marcos Jr. embraced the US while performing a delicate balancing act with China. In an apparent attempt to deter China's aggression, his administration announced the addition of four Philippine military bases accessible to US forces via the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in April 2023 [Limpot 2023, 22 March]. During Marcos Jr.'s visit to the White House the following month, US President Joe Biden assured him of the US «ironclad» commitment to defend the Philippines in case of an armed attack, as guaranteed in the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty [Gardner 2023, 2 May].

Aside from China's anticipated criticisms, Duterte and his allies emerged as the most vocal domestic critics of Marcos Jr.'s foreign policy shift. The former President asserted that if US forces were granted access to Philippine military bases, China could strike the country in case of an armed conflict with the US. He also advanced an unsubstantiated claim that such locations might be used to store US nuclear warheads. Senators Ronald «Bato» Dela Rosa and Robinhood Padilla, two of Duterte's staunchest allies in the Senate, also questioned the presence of US forces on the grounds of national sovereignty and self-reliance [Cupin 2023, 12 September].

The effects of Marcos Jr.'s foreign policy shift became more evident heading into his third year in office, as it prompted heightened geopolitical tensions with China, resulting in escalating maritime hostilities. The Philippines responded by reinforcing its defence capabilities and alliances, particularly with the United States and Japan. China's assertive stance in the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) hindered joint exploration efforts in oil and natural gas reservoirs while also impeding Filipino vessels tasked with resupply missions. Complicating matters further was the discovery of a «gentlemen's agreement» between former President Duterte and Chinese President Xi Jinping. The purported agreement implied submission to Chinese dominance by maintaining the «status quo» in contested territories and refraining from constructing military installations in exchange for non-interference in resupply missions to the naval vessel BRP Sierra Madre, beached near the Second Thomas (Ayungin) Shoal [Tajima and Royandoyan 2024, 19 April].

Diplomatic tensions gradually turned into national security concerns with the entanglement of Chinese nationals in Philippine political and military affairs. Heightened scrutiny arose over the reported influx of Chinese students enrolled in a university in Cagayan province, an area with identified EDCA sites [Mendoza 2024, 17 April]. Concerns deepened with increasing instances of criminal activity following the arrests of Chinese fugitives using Filipino identities, the continued proliferation of illegal Philippine Offshore Gaming Operations (POGOs), and human trafficking. Furthermore, the ongoing Senate inquiry into the dubious citizenship, identity, and activities of the incumbent town mayor in Tarlac province, allegedly

involved in a sophisticated POGO network operating within her jurisdiction, unveiled suspicious surveillance and hacking activities along with intricately constructed underground tunnels within the property [Ombay 2024, 7 May]. These developments, along with calls for the expulsion of Chinese diplomats over wiretapping and misinformation charges involving unofficial communications [Cupin 2024, 10 May], fuelled speculations of China's infiltration of domestic affairs, thereby compromising national security and encroaching upon Philippine sovereignty.

Another source of policy friction was the issue of human rights rooted in the Duterte administration's infamous war on drugs. Both Marcos Jr. and Duterte have faced severe allegations of human rights violations, with the former ignoring conversations on the atrocities committed during his father's dictatorship. Nonetheless, Marcos Jr. was evidently aware of the political repercussions of sustaining Duterte's illiberal tactics, given that his family's redemption also hinges on denying the excesses of the martial law regime. In an apparent swipe at his predecessor's flagship policy, Marcos Jr. admitted the «abuses» that occurred during the war on drugs [Gregorio 2023, 5 May]. He made this remark while attending a forum in the US, the country that gained most of Duterte's indignation for frequently calling out his violent anti-narcotics campaign.

Former Senator Leila De Lima's release from detention was by far the most significant development on this issue. Arguably the staunchest critic of Duterte's war on drugs, the former justice secretary-turned-senator was imprisoned in 2017 for her alleged involvement in drug trafficking within the country's national penitentiary. She has been cleared of two of the three drug charges brought against her by the previous administration, and in November 2023, bail was granted for her remaining case. Her successive court victories occurred concurrently with the subsequent retraction of testimony from over a dozen witnesses. Star witness Rafael Ragos also named Duterte's former Justice Secretary Vitaliano Aguirre and other high-ranking officials as among those who pressured him to testify against De Lima [Buan 2023, 21 November]. After her release, the court also received a letter from 7 witnesses claiming that their «forced participation» in her case was due to «unimaginable threats» to their lives [Hicap 2023, 22 November]. These developments further strengthen the notion that De Lima was a victim of political persecution for probing Duterte's war on drugs.

Marcos Jr.'s apparent departure from Duterte's illiberal tactics offered a favourable circumstance for De Lima's release. Since assuming office, the new President has not shown any inclination to subvert judicial independence. Marcos Jr. administration has subsequently gained from these developments, which are seen as an attempt to restore the Philippines' international image tarnished by Duterte's blatant disregard for the rule of law. A week after the court allowed De Lima to post bail, Marcos Jr.

also revealed that his administration is studying whether the Philippines should re-join the International Criminal Court [Mangaluz 2023, 24 November]. This might be seen as a further jab at Duterte, who steered the country's withdrawal from the Rome Statute in 2018.

Lastly, Marcos Jr. also reversed his predecessor's hard-line approach to the Philippines' decades-long communist insurgency by reviving the Government's peace talks with the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP). Duterte first issued a presidential proclamation in 2017 terminating the peace talks with the NDFP, and at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, verbally ordered security forces to «finish off» communist rebels [Regencia 2021, 6 March]. Just after granting amnesty to some insurgents in November 2023, the Marcos Jr. administration agreed with the NDFP to revive the peace talks, which the president called an «optimistic step» towards peacefully ending the insurgency [Geducos 2023, 29 November].

In her first public rebuttal of Marcos Jr., Duterte-Carpio denounced the Philippine government's renewed negotiations with communist rebels, calling it «an agreement with the devil» [Servallos 2023, 5 December]. She also publicly opposed the President's amnesty measures. Instead, she appealed to continue the projects implemented by the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), where she serves as co-vice chair. This Duterte-era task force was originally founded to provide a comprehensive and sustainable solution to the communist insurgency through infrastructure development, livelihood programs, social services, and financial and livelihood assistance to former rebels and their families but has gained notoriety for its red-tagging activities.² While Marcos Jr. refrained from responding to his vice president's remarks, Duterte-Carpio's public opposition to the new President's peace plan further fuelled speculations of the widening rift confronting the *UniTeam*.

3.3. *Supermajority, destabilization attempts, and consolidation in the House of Representatives*

The power struggle within the *UniTeam* mainly unfolded in the House of Representatives. In the Philippine political setting, wherein a deeply entrenched patronage system is an enduring feature, the legislature's composition always projects the extent of the president's political strength and influence. Given the lack of party loyalty and the absence of any institutional constraint on party-switching, it is a regular occurrence for Filipino politicians to join the winning presidential candidate's party after each election cycle to obtain access to patronage [Teehankee 2012]. This trend is typically witnessed in the country's lower house, wherein the ties between district

2. In the Philippines, red-tagging pertains to the act of labelling individuals or groups as members or supporters of the communist insurgency.

representatives and their constituents are mainly grounded on the constant distribution of patronage benefits [Kasuya 2009].³

As expected, being the Philippines' first post-EDSA majority president, Marcos Jr. swiftly commanded a supermajority in Congress at the start of his term. Veteran senator Juan Miguel Zubiri, who was part of the *UniTeam* 2022 senatorial slate, was elected Senate President, while Marcos Jr.'s first cousin, Martin Romualdez, was elected House Speaker. Explicitly endorsed by the President, Romualdez's overwhelming election – with 283 out of 315 votes (89.9%) – highlighted the consolidation of the country's dominant political forces behind the Marcos-Duterte coalition [Gregorio 2022, 25 July].

With numerous politicians jumping on the presidential bandwagon, the *UniTeam* appeared to be a formidable governing alliance until fractures surfaced just before Marcos Jr. completed his first year in office. They started to appear when Arroyo was demoted from her role as the House's Senior Deputy Speaker in May 2023, because she was suspected of planning a coup to grab the House leadership. She publicly dismissed the accusation as «needless politicking» [De Leon 2023, 19 May]. She admitted that she aspired to the House Speakership when Marcos Jr. won but soon relinquished her plan when the President favoured Romualdez. Just two days after Arroyo's demotion, Duterte-Carpio resigned as a member of the Romualdez-led *Lakas-CMD* in an apparent sign of protest.⁴ In response, Romualdez stated that the House was «in order» and, without naming anyone, said destabilization attempts against its leadership should be «nipped in the bud» [Porcalla 2023, 22 May].

The apparent rift became even more pronounced at the height of the congressional deliberations for the 2024 national budget. Duterte-Carpio requested PHP 650 million (USD 11.6 million) in confidential and intelligence funds (CIF) for the Office of the Vice President (OVP) and the Department of Education (DepEd). Such a request triggered widespread scrutiny since CIF is not subject to the Commission on Audit's (COA) rigorous auditing process, and the primary mandates of OVP and DepEd are not security related. Amid the public backlash, Duterte-Carpio branded the CIF critics as «enemies of the state» for «going against peace», which she explained was the reason for allocating such funds to her offices [Chi 2023, 5 October]. In October 2023, a small committee in the House in charge of appropriation amendments unanimously approved the realignment of the CIF of several civilian agencies, including the OVP and DepEd, to those in charge of national security affairs [Mantaring 2023, 10 October]. This move

3. Except for the 20% of seats allocated to party-list representatives, the Philippine House of Representatives follows a single-member district plurality election rule.

4. Romualdez was the President of *Lakas-CMD*, while Arroyo was its Chairman Emeritus. With Arroyo widely considered her political mentor, Duterte-Carpio joined *Lakas-CMD* in preparation for teaming up with Marcos Jr. for the 2022 presidential elections.

by the lower chamber drew the ire of former President Duterte, who publicly called the House the country's «most rotten institution» [Inocencio 2023, 6 November]. Suspecting Romualdez of politicking for a future presidential bid, Duterte also threatened to scrutinize how the House Speaker spent public funds if he decided to run for president [Antonio 2023, 11 October].

The former President's tirades against the House further pushed Marcos Jr.'s allies to consolidate behind Romualdez. The House members adopted House Resolution No. 1414, «upholding the integrity and honour» of the lower chamber and «expressing appreciation and solidarity» to the House Speaker [Quismorio 2023, 6 November]. Adopting the resolution also served as a loyalty check for Marcos Jr.'s allies, which Arroyo seemingly did not pass. She was one of the two deputy speakers who failed to sign the resolution, the other one being Davao City representative Isidro Ungab, one of the staunch supporters of the Vice President. Both Arroyo and Ungab were removed from their posts by the House members. Moreover, Senior Deputy Speaker Aurelio Gonzales, a top official in the House, also resigned from Duterte's *PDP-Laban*.

Duterte-Carpio ultimately retracted her request for PHP 650 million (USD 11.6 million) CIF in the proposed 2024 national budget in an apparent bid to save face amid the public backlash, her family's diminishing influence in Congress, and Marcos Jr.'s inaction in defending her from critics.

While the Vice President's move temporarily eased the political tension, the power struggle that prematurely erupted in the country's lower house exposed the cracks in the Marcos-Duterte governing coalition. In November 2023, rumours of a potential impeachment against Duterte-Carpio even circulated in Congress, which grabbed the national media's attention, causing Marcos Jr. to deny plans to oust the Vice President during an interview with reporters. At about the same time, an alleged destabilization plot also broke the headlines, prompting the Chief of Staff of Armed Forces to warn active military personnel against joining in any efforts to destabilize the Marcos Jr. administration.

It remains to be seen if the divisions within the *UniTeam* will further widen as the country gears up for the 2025 midterm elections, during which the Dutertes and their remaining allies might be forced to play the role of the opposition. Currently, this political fiasco revealed that while Romualdez presides over the House of Representatives, the loyalty of the country's dominant political forces stays with the President, despite occasional attacks from his predecessor, who previously commanded a supermajority in Congress during his term.

4. Conclusion

The Marcos Jr. and Duterte-Carpio's *UniTeam* alliance for the 2022 presidential election brought expectations that the new administration would

advance Duterte's legacies. However, Marcos Jr.'s sudden reversal of his predecessor's controversial governance agendas became the defining narrative of his administration's initial year, which led to a subsequent power struggle within the winning coalition.

As argued in this article, there were three major areas in which Marcos Jr. facilitated a departure from the previous administration's policies: foreign relations, human rights, and anti-insurgency campaign. Duterte's appeasement of China at the US' expense, contempt for human rights, and hardline approach toward communist insurgents were largely explicable through the lens of the populist strongman leadership he established during his term. However, Marcos Jr.'s efforts to rebrand his family's brutal legacy and distance himself from Duterte's illiberal politics necessitated a departure from his predecessor's controversial governance agendas mentioned above, which could jeopardize his vision for a united Philippines and his family's quest for redemption. The most notable policy Marcos Jr. actively reversed upon assuming office was Duterte's widely unpopular pivot to China. Under the pretext of preserving the status quo, his predecessor had adopted a soft and accommodating stance toward China, causing the Philippines further to lose its grip over the West Philippine Sea and face various national security concerns over the alarming influx of Chinese nationals linked to suspicious activities. In response to the escalating maritime tensions, Marcos Jr. pivoted back to the US, drawing strong criticisms from Duterte himself.

As discontent among Duterte and his remaining allies grew over Marcos Jr.'s policy reboot, a schism also emerged among the *UniTeam's* key actors, notably between Romualdez and Duterte-Carpio. The subsequent power struggle that erupted in early 2023 led to the further consolidation of pro-Marcos forces at the expense of the Dutertes. Such developments would shape the Philippines' political landscape heading into the 2025 midterm elections – a de facto referendum on the Marcos Jr. presidency.

However, Marcos Jr. faced a much deeper leadership challenge beneath the apparent clash of the Philippines' most influential political clans. The results of the 2022 presidential elections may be perceived as a political reward for his family's protracted endeavour to reclaim the country's top political post. Nonetheless, complete redemption remains in limbo, as the ultimate judgment will depend on the outcomes and legacies the new Marcos regime will produce by 2028. The Marcos family's political resurgence was mainly fuelled by their supporters' convictions that the martial law's excesses were inconsequential to the country's future or that Marcos Sr.'s stint in Malacañang Palace⁵ was the country's «golden age». By embracing a new era of Marcos leadership, the majority of voters decided that Marcos Jr. could navigate the Philippines out of the many pressing problems

5. The Philippine President's official residence and workplace.

left behind by the COVID-19 pandemic and his predecessor's ineffective policies, such as the soaring prices of essential commodities, ballooning national debt, and troubled foreign relations. Nevertheless, despite dedicating his initial year in office to laying the groundwork for his «*Bagong Pilipinas*» (New Philippines) vision, significant socioeconomic changes that would improve the lives of ordinary Filipinos failed to materialize, driving Marcos Jr.'s administration toward an area of turbulence.

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In 2023, public discourse in Malaysia was dominated by identity politics, framed around the imperative of safeguarding Malaysia's national core. These dynamics obscured the intricate interplay of geographical, socio-demographic and economic marginalization, further polarizing voter preferences across the country. Within this framework, the newly appointed unity government struggled to promote reforms aimed at revitalizing the Malaysian economy and ensuring a fairer distribution of benefits, beyond existing ethnic-based policies. The Anwar administration progressively aligned its political narrative with the established discursive patterns of Malaysian political culture, averting public questioning of existing governance and political practices. In foreign policy, the Prime Minister leveraged his image as a Southeast Asian and Muslim leader to bolster Malaysia's relations with ASEAN countries and with the Muslim world. Within the latter in particular, Malaysia adopted a clear stance, notably through his outspoken condemnation of Israel and open support for the Palestinian cause.

KEYWORDS – Identity politics; Malaysia Madani; 3R; social disparities; unity government.

1. Introduction

In Malaysia, the year 2023 witnessed a growing trend in public debates being shaped by racially and religiously framed narratives, echoing the tones set in 2022 during the 15th general election (GE-15) campaign [Saleem 2023]. A Malay-centric rhetoric surfaced in the political discourse of the newly installed unity government led by the Pakatan Harapan (PH), an alliance of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party, PKR) and other smaller parties. Besides the PH, the unity government comprised three other coalitions: the Gabungan Parti Sarawak (Sarawak Parties Alliance, GPS), the Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (Sabah People's Alliance, GRS) and the Barisan Nasional (BN), led by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), a Malay nationalist party. On the opposition side, the Parti Pribumi Bersatu (Malaysian United Indigenous Party, Bersatu) and Parti

* The writing of this article was realized under the framework of the Research Project of National Interest (PRIN 2017) "Genealogies of African Freedoms" (cod KFW5RJ-004), at the Research Unit of the University of Pavia.

Islam Se-Malaysia (Islamic Party of Malaysia, PAS) – the main parties within the Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance, PN) coalition – continued to advance their hard-line brand of Malay religious nationalism.

The dominance of identity politics emerged in the context of increasing public disillusionment with long-unmet promises of reform to tackle widespread corruption, boost economic development and uplift the living conditions of the downtrodden sections of society. In this particular scenario, analysts and observers of Malaysian politics warned that, if not contained, the normalization of polarizing political narratives could alter the country's socio-political landscape for the years to come [Leong 2023].

In fact, appealing to racial and religious themes in Malaysian public discursive repertoire is longstanding. Similar dynamics have shaped political debate, state interventions and economic policies since the country's independence in 1957. In particular, Muslim-Malay dominance has provided the basis of political legitimacy along the principle of 3R – an acronym standing for «race, religion, royalty». The 3R concept encapsulates the racial-religious underpinnings of Malaysia's consociational state. It defines a political discourse that endorses Muslim-Malay primacy while also promising to address the ethnic-based socio-economic inequalities inherited as a legacy of British colonial policies [Rajandran and Lee 2023: 5]. Since independence, economic imbalances have negatively affected the Bumiputera («sons of the soil») – a Malaysian term describing the Malay majority and other indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia – compared to ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities. In the aftermath of independence, the sharp socio-economic disparities led to socio-political unrest, with racial riots erupting in 1967. As a response, the state introduced the Bumiputera agenda¹, a policy of affirmative action favouring the Malay majority and other minoritarian indigenous communities. The Bumiputera agenda reinforced the conflation of Malay identity and Muslim faith, already enshrined in article 160 of the Constitution.

In addition, throughout Malaysia's post-colonial history, allegiance to Malay royalty has served as a foundational element of national identity. Nonetheless, this principle has not invariably dictated government policies over time, nor has it uniformly underpinned political strategies and positioning [Hamid and Zawawi 2023: 25].

Notably, in the aftermath of GE-15 and leading up to the 2023 state elections², the 3R has assumed new significance, with identity discourses

1. On the origin of the Bumiputera agenda see [Mangiarotti 2022: 230-31].

2. Each of the thirteen states of the Malaysian federation possesses a legislative assembly and an executive council led by a Chief Minister. State elections are organized every five years, usually coinciding with federal elections. However, in August 2023, only six states conducted elections, namely Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, Penang, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan. These states had opted not to dissolve their assembly in 2022, when federal elections were held.

appearing pivotal in mediating access to political power [Leong 2023]. At the same time, however, the fault lines of social disparity manifested across multiple interlocking factors.

To trace the contours of these developments, this essay sets out to examine some key events that marked the year 2023, aiming to disentangle ongoing socio-political trends in Malaysia. It highlights how, in 2023, the framing of social disparities through race and religion-centred discourses obscured the reality of disenfranchised social groups, not only across class and ethnicity but also in terms of their geographical locations on the fringes of Malaysia's socio-political landscape [Washida 2023].

The first part of the essay deals with domestic politics. It examines how the multi-coalition unity government that was formed after the November 2022 polls dealt with the challenges posed by internal political heterogeneity. This part also analyses how a politics of Malay identity shaped the campaign leading up to the 12 August state elections and assesses its impact on the unity government's manoeuvrability amidst a public debate increasingly polarized along ethno-religious nationalist themes.

The second part focuses on the government's economic agenda. It analyses the Madani economy, an ambitious framework which re-envisioned a familiar theme of Anwar's political narrative, aiming to tackle deepening socio-economic cleavages.

Finally, the article surveys some major issues on the international front, with a particular focus on Malaysia's outspoken stance regarding the Israel's war on Gaza.

2. *Unity government at test*

At the onset of 2023, keenly aware of the uneasy foundations of his unity government [Saleem 2023], Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim took steps to consolidate his position. He began his mandate with a motion of confidence in parliament to establish his majority, followed by the presentation of a Memorandum of Understanding that bound coalition partners to the unity government [Hutcinson 2023].

Then, in January 2023, Anwar presented the slogan «Malaysia Madani», articulating a vision for government policies aimed at addressing present and future economic, social and political challenges. Since independence, slogans have been used by prime ministers as a branding tool, setting the administration apart from their predecessors. The new narrative was meant to replace former Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob's «Keluarga Malaysia» [Malaysian family], which fostered a vision of unity and social peace [Mangiarotti 2022: 228-231]. Madani is an Arabic term, derived from the name of the city of Medina, which broadly translates as «civilized». Malaysia Madani stands in continuity with other slogans coined by other prime ministers, such as Abdullah Badawi's «Islam Hadhari» [civilizational Islam]

and Najib Razak's «Islam Wasatiyyah» [moderate Islam]. All of them have sought to promote a vision of society based on Islamic values in opposition to the Islamist conservatism propagated by PAS [Musa 2023: 9].

Despite the enticing rhetoric rooted in good governance, progress and humanity embedded within the Malaysia Madani tagline, electoral concerns and political calculations took precedence over promises of political and social revitalization. During the first half of 2023, parties in the ruling coalition and the PN opposition devoted most political efforts on garnering support from Malay voters in anticipation of the 12 August state elections. Ethnic Malays dominate most electorates within the six states that headed to the polls, with Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu considered to be the country's «Malay heartland»³. Meanwhile, the governing coalition attempted to strike a balance between the necessity to reassure public opinion about its Muslim-Malay foundations, while also living up to its image as a pluralist, reform-oriented administration.

2.1. *UMNO: an unruly ally within the ruling coalition*

An obvious challenge to the viability and reputation of the Anwar administration has been the uneasy association between PH and the UMNO-led BN. In November 2022, as the outcomes of GE-15 resulted in a hung parliament, the then Agong [Malaysia's constitutional monarch] encouraged and approved the alliance between the two coalitions, former staunch political rivals, to form the unity government [Saleem 2023].

The UMNO governed the country uninterruptedly for 61 years until suffering a historic defeat in the 2018 national elections. The party's electoral decline is linked to a history of corruption scandals and entrenched clientelism. Despite the repeated calls for internal rejuvenation coming from its traditional grassroots electorate, by 2023 the distance between UMNO's leadership and these groups appeared to have widened further.

In January 2023, party President Ahmad Zahid Hamidi announced a «large-scale cleansing of the party» to target internal «saboteurs» [‘A large scale party cleansing’ 2023]. Supposedly aimed at bolstering UMNO's credibility as a dependable government ally, the measure resulted in the silencing of some prominent internal critics, including senior party leaders [Chin 2023]. Each had voiced their opposition against Zahid's choice to form an electoral alliance with the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP). Due to its overtly liberal-progressive agenda, furthering good governance, anti-corruption and socio-cultural pluralism, DAP has traditionally been viewed as an opponent of UMNO, particularly among the latter's Malay vote base.

3. With the notable exception of Penang, a small, wealthy and highly urbanized state with large ethnic Chinese (44.5 per cent) and ethnic Indian (9.7 per cent) populations [Hutchinson 2023, 23 November].

Hamidi's efforts to align UMNO with the agenda of the unity government proved insufficient to quell public distrust, particularly amid the corruption scandals involving Hamidi and other prominent party members. Hamidi was facing prosecution on 47 charges related to a corruption and money laundering case linked to a charity he established with the stated purpose of eradicating poverty [*Al Jazeera* 2023, 4 September]. The legal charges against the President emerged as fellow party member and former Prime Minister Najib Razak was serving a 12-year prison sentence for his involvement in the 1MDB state fund corruption scandal [Lemière 2023b].⁴ In September 2023, an unexpected court decision withdrew charges against Hamidi and halted his prosecution. The move elicited anti-government protests across major cities; Prime Minister Anwar was accused of betraying his anti-corruption stance by helping Hamidi in exchange for political support [*Associated Press* 2023, 16 September].

Despite internal challenges, UMNO's participation in the unity government has yielded some mutually beneficial outcomes [Ostwald 2023]. As identity discourses gained traction across the political spectrum, the party's image as the traditional champion of Malay nationalism provided voters with an alternative to the more extreme Islamist ethno-nationalist stance promoted by the PAS and BN alliance [Rahim 2018].

2.2. *A tightrope walk*

In 2022, political polarization along racial lines became a key feature of the run up to GE-15 [Saleem 2023]. As the unity government took office, the political climate appeared stiffened around divisive 3R tropes. On the one hand, UMNO intensified a rhetoric of Muslim-Malay dominance to counter the growing appeal of rival PAS among young rural voters. On the other, the PH coalition led by Anwar Ibrahim's People's Justice Party (PKR) diluted its reformist platform in response to accusations of undermining Malaysia's religious and cultural foundations⁵. In this regard, PH sought to enhance its appeal among Malay voters, particularly those who may be wary of the coalition's position on multiculturalism and inclusivity.

Assuming the positions of prime minister and finance minister, Anwar assembled a politically disparate cabinet in a bid to reconcile the political vision of PH and that of the other parties within the ruling «coalition of coalitions». The diverse and sometimes conflicting nature of the unity gov-

4. Concerns about the unity government's ability to carry out its anti-corruption and reform agenda have been further reinforced in February 2024, after the Malaysian Pardons Board, led by the outgoing Agong, halved Najib's sentence to six years.

5. During an interview with Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) on 7 January 2023, Anwar said: «sometimes these politicians will say that if Anwar becomes prime minister then Islam will be ruined, secularism and communism will gain a foothold, and LGBT will be recognised. This is a delusion. Of course, it will not happen and God willing under my administration this is not going to happen». [*New Strait Times* 2023, 7 January].

ernment's political groupings triggered speculation regarding the prospects of its survival [Jamaluddin 2023].

In a move that many considered potentially self-defeating, Anwar appointed his friend Hamidi as one of two deputy prime ministers. The nomination, which came despite the legal issues haunting UMNO's reputation, aimed at consolidating the unity government by securing UMNO's support. Hamidi's appointment was thus motivated by pressing realpolitik imperatives but cast a shadow over Anwar's commitment to anti-corruption, a foundational theme of PH's political platform.

As debates about the viability of Anwar's diverse cabinet grew, he also endeavoured to uphold PH's inclusivity principles, with moves designed to cater for areas of the country historically marginalised by peninsular-centred nation-building policies. In this regard, he appointed Fadillah Yusof of Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), who thus became the first deputy prime minister from Borneo in the country's history. In addition, Eastern Malaysian MPs obtained relevant portfolios within the unity government, aiming to ensure consensus among East Malaysian voters in exchange for increased political representation and relevance [Mishra 2022, 24 December].

As state elections approached, Anwar found himself walking a tight-rope between expectations of his largely urban voter base – shaped around his long-cultivated image as a reformist and progressive leader – and the pressure of conservative pro-Malay forces questioning the legitimacy of his political power against the dictate of «race, religion, royalty».

In this context, the consolidation of a politics of Malay identity in public discourse overshadowed the multiple interlocking lines of socio-demographic and economic marginalization that have increasingly deepened social cleavages and influenced voters' preferences in Malaysia.

2.3. State elections



Figure 1. Malaysia states' map. Source: Wikimedia commons.

In the first half of 2023, less than a year since the last general election, Malaysia's political parties were gearing up for another electoral showdown. The two affluent states of Selangor and Penang were set to cast their votes

alongside Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu, three of the country's five poorest states. In addition, elections were held in Negeri Sembilan, a coastal state with sharp internal variations in terms of economic development and socio-demographic distribution [Zhang and Chin 2023]. In the polls, the PH-BN alliance faced the federal opposition alliance Perikatan Nasional (PN). At the time, each coalition held three of the six states.

The ruling coalition fell short of showcasing to the public a convincing political narrative. This deficiency was considered especially detrimental as a substantial portion of voters hailed from rural, young and economically disadvantaged segments. These demographics have been less inclined to support PH and BN, and the lack of an appealing and coherent programme from these parties further diminished their chances of gaining favour among these groups [Welsh 2023]. Furthermore, thanks to the Constitutional Amendment Act 2019 (CA2019), which lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 [Saleem 2021], a large portion of the electorate in the six states comprised those aged 18-21. In the 2022 general election, PAS was able to gain traction among this very age group, especially in the rural heartland. For these reasons, state polls were seen as a litmus test for Anwar's administration [Pathak 2023, 28 July].

PH and BN appeared focused on reassuring voters about their roles as guardians of Malay-Muslim dominance. Anwar invested much political capital in presenting himself as a Muslim-Malay leader committed to upholding the Bumiputera agenda [Hutchinson 2024]. Remarkably, although during its first six months the government had implemented policies aimed at tackling the country's deepening socio-economic challenges, these measures' potential long-term effects remained at the margins of the electoral message of the PH-BN alliance. Instead, preoccupations that the so-called «green wave» – meaning the rise of Islamist PAS at the expense of a declining UMNO – would gain further momentum dominated public debates. Representatives of the ruling coalition devoted much effort in projecting the PN opposition as fuelling a dangerously extremist 3R narrative, threatening to undermine Malaysia's multicultural fabric. One month before the polls, a statement by Anwar during a press conference confirmed the increasing dominance of polarizing narratives in public debate:

to anyone who disobeys the law and challenges the constitution sowing seeds of division, the consequences not only from the government but also other parties, and also from discussions with a few of the Malay rulers is for this country to be saved from these clusters of people who are so desperate for power that they are willing to sacrifice the wellbeing of the people by causing chaos and discontent [...] consider this a final warning from the government [*New Strait Times* 2023, 11 July].

While the Prime Minister's remark was addressed at the entire political spectrum, it was implicitly calling out PN and its use of a divisive eth-

no-religious nationalist rhetoric in its campaign. Anwar's warning followed a number of statements by other political leaders mentioning the instrumental deployment of 3R narratives as detrimental to the country's stability and intercommunal relations.

In the end, the August state elections did not substantially alter the political equilibrium, although they confirmed some underlying trends. The ruling coalition kept the opposition at bay, maintaining its hold on Negeri Sembilan, Penang, and Selangor. The outcome can be partly ascribed to the remarkable growth of the DAP, which won 47 out of 48 of the seats it contested. The DAP had consistently positioned itself as a bastion of multiculturalism and civil rights. Its convincing performance in the state elections sheds light on the liberal electorate's growing concern over the identitarian bent displayed by several parties across the political spectrum.

The results also revealed the fault lines in the governing coalition's political narrative. As noted, the failure to effectively communicate key measures, particularly those aimed at empowering youth [Pathak 2023, 28 July], must be contextualized against the backdrop of a growing crystallization of the political debate around the theme of religious-racial belonging. In this context, pressing socio-economic issues affecting significant segments of the Malay electorate appeared to resonate more with PN's sectarian rhetoric than with PH's more transversal promises of equity and redress. In these circumstances, voters' support for the main coalition within the unity government was framed largely as against the opposition rather than as an endorsement of PH's platform of democratic reform.

Besides capitalizing on the steady decline of UMNO's popularity [Wong 2023], PAS has spent decades cultivating a support base among young Malay voters in the poorest states.⁶ The party's political narrative blends religious messages and moral values, while prioritizing the economic grievances of impoverished Malays in geographically neglected areas. Moreover, the party has been able to garner legitimacy in certain urban wards and outside its traditional rural strongholds, because past governments have failed to deliver on electoral promises. PAS has directly addressed the expectations of disenfranchised and impoverished voters, both Malay and belonging to neglected minorities.

The precarious political equilibrium among the different factions within the governing coalition benefitted from the anti-hopping law passed immediately before the November 2022 national elections, which prevented continuous defections within political parties [Subhan 2023]. However, in the post-election scenario, Anwar appeared increasingly preoccupied with strengthening Malay support for his leadership and the unity government

6. According to Altaf Deviyati Ismail, PAS' successes in the national and state elections must also be attributed to the decade-long effort in creating an ecosystem of educational, religious and communal spaces where the seeds of religio-political revival have assiduously been cultivated [Deviyati 2023].

[Lemière 2023a]. The state elections thus reinforced the political polarization to the detriment of the unity government's reform agenda.

2.4. «*Malaysia Madani*»: *A tenuous political narrative*

Presenting his «*Malaysia Madani*» slogan on 19 January 2023, Anwar said:

Madani means we must have good values and prioritise good governance and ethics. This will be crucial as we face 2023. Madani will be the approach we take where we disregard race, religion and political affiliations so everyone can have a fair chance» [*MalayMail* 2023, 19 January].

Madani has been an underlying feature of Anwar's political narrative since he first introduced the concept in 1995, when he was Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. Deeply rooted in Islamic principles of social justice and equality, the first conceptions of Madani encompassed a number of values including tolerance, freedom of thought, moderation, pragmatism and reciprocity [Musa 2023].

As the political philosophy underlying Anwar's unity government, the Madani 2.0 advocates sustainability, care, creativity, inclusivity, respect and kindness to address inequalities stemming from racial and religious divisions. This should primarily translate into measures for wealth distribution, good governance and anti-corruption [Musa 2023].

The concept has been considered a potentially innovative approach for Malaysia's social reconciliation and economic recovery [Lee 2023]. However, certain government actions have rendered Anwar's Madani narrative rather tenuous, especially on issues concerning vulnerable and minority groups.⁷

Notably, civil society organizations have harshly criticized the government's proposed amendments to citizenship regulations. Originally meant to tackle a law that prevented a woman to pass on Malaysian citizenship to her children born overseas, the bill also included amendments that removed other protections against statelessness [Lawyers For Liberty 2023, 24 June]. According to the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia, these amendments «could adversely affect vulnerable groups like children born out of wedlock, stateless children adopted by Malaysian parents, and foundlings». The government, however, responded to the pushback by adducing limited leeway on the matter, with the final outcome resting in the decision of the Conference of Rulers [Tong 2023, 10 July].⁸

7. Critics have also remarked that the concept of Madani had previously been used by Islamist groups to propagate conservative and exclusionary views of Malaysian society [Aznan *et. al.* 2023].

8. The Conference of Rulers comprises the rulers of the nine Malay states and four governors from states lacking a hereditary ruler. The Conference has a number of functions, including electing the Agong (King) and approving certain amendments to the Federal Constitution.

The Anwar administration also displayed an increasingly conservative approach to civil liberties issues, suggesting a departure from PH's traditional progressive stance. In August, the government banned a series of LGBTQ-themed Swatch watches for «promoting, supporting, and normalizing the LGBTQ+ movement that is not accepted by the general public in Malaysia» [Strangio 2023, 11 August]. The ban was issued amid a growing crackdown on queer culture in Malaysia.

Especially in the run-up to state elections, the escalation of nationalist Muslim-Malay rhetoric appeared to influence the government's approach to several other social issues, including group-targeted policies.

On 5 August, during a question-and-answer session at Penang Matriculation College, an Indian student confronted Anwar regarding the flaws in pro-Bumiputera ethnic quotas in education. The student asked:

When will the quota system be abolished and replaced by a meritocracy system? My friends and I, as well as others that are not known, are affected by this quota system, all because they don't have Bumiputera status [Hwok-Aun 2023].

Despite the student's efforts to elaborate on her question, a visibly irritated Anwar interrupted her, claiming he has already addressed similar inquiries in previous sessions. He further accused her of being unfair to disadvantaged Bumiputera students and insisted she should have instead brought up specific cases of non-Malays being denied access into public universities [Ibidem].

Political opponents and several social media users criticized Anwar for essentially cutting off the student [Haizan 2023, 7 August], with the PN opposition demanding an apology from the Prime Minister [*Malaysia Now* 2023, 6 August]. This exchange underscored how group-based divisions persisted in dominating public discourse, despite the government's rhetoric of social harmony and cooperation. Yet, social cleavages have seldom been explicitly addressed in relation to the longstanding and emerging socio-economic disparities as well as issues of ethnic minority underrepresentation within Malaysia's changing social landscape.

Political discourse in 2023 revolved around the issue of social polarization and identity politics on the one hand and preserving Malaysia's core on the other. In these circumstances, any attempt to openly interrogate the current state of governance apparatus and political practices was shunned as sensitive or politically volatile. This trend highlighted the problematic way in which political power relates to the interlocking dimensions of race, community, as well as socio-economic and demographic factors.

3. *The Madani economic policy*

Despite the predicaments of politicized discourse, the Madani concept has provided the government with a blueprint for economic reform.

In mid-2023, Anwar launched the «Madani economy» framework, aiming to align the policies with the moral values underpinning government action. Against the challenges linked to the country slowing economic growth, heavily affected by a dwindling export industry and rising food inflation, the new scheme aimed to boost the country's wealth and position Malaysia as a leading Asian economy, while also guaranteeing a just re-allocation of the benefits. Within this framework, the government proposed seven key performance indicators to assess its economic mid-term targets within a 10-year period [Ministry of Finance Malaysia 2023a].

The presentation of the Madani economy plan was followed in October by the tabling of Budget 2024. Themed *Economic Reform, People's Empowerment*, the scheme allocated some MYR 393.8 billion (US\$ 82.4 billion). Among the various policy priorities, measures such as revenue protection, progressive taxation and reduced subsidies for the more affluent classes resonated with the Madani philosophy. The Budget is rooted in Anwar's vision of a «humane economy», a concept he developed over the course of his long political career. Based on the goal of creating a more equitable society, Anwar's humane economy complements «efficiency with welfare, growth with redistribution, and development with compassion», linking economic reform with moral and social renewal [Teik 2020: 23]. During his Budget 2024 presentation speech, Anwar proclaimed:

the economic policy is supposed to be geared towards growth and economic flattening. However, a huge amount of subsidies has benefitted the rich. It is hoped that by improving the leakage of subsidies, the proceeds can be distributed to the Rakyat (citizenry) including the increase in wages of the working class [Ministry of Finance Malaysia 2023b].

Overall, the Madani economy framework provides a roadmap for policymaking that could effectively enhance the country's economic standing while also uplifting the socio-economic conditions of the downtrodden [Tham 2024, 23 January]. However, the government's capacity to deliver on its reform planks remains to be seen. According to a report by the economic magazine *The Edge*, based on the 2019 data of the Department of Statistics of Malaysia, the vast majority (71.6 %) of households earning less than RM 3000 a month are Bumiputeras, compared to the 18.8 % Chinese, 7.4 % Indian and 1.4% households of other ethnicities [Yeap 2020, 12 August]. According to Sophie Lemière,

all indicators point toward the same ethnic and geographical directions: Malay communities in states located along the eastern and northern coast, as well as communities living in East Malaysia (specifically Sabah), remain economically more vulnerable than those in urban peninsular Malaysia [Lemière 2023b].

The nexus of ethnicity and geographical location in determining disparities and inequalities has been a major challenge to the government's

economic policy, especially in the context of a political debate locked in racially and religiously framed narratives. To follow up on its promise to tackle structural socio-economic disparities, the government needs to take regional inequalities into account besides ethnicity-based policies [Rongen *et al.* 2023]. Yet, a similar move is likely to be perceived as a threat to the interests of ethnic Malays, who constitute the major recipient of redistributive policies under current affirmative action policies.

Similar to Malaysia Madani's political narrative, the unity government's economic programme has struggled to translate political discourse into bold reform measures, which, nonetheless, could easily trigger opposition and calls for the government's removal. Anwar has seemed keenly aware of the risk of losing further traction among the Malay lower classes, especially with a public debate polarized along racial-religious lines.

4. *International scenario*

On the international front, the Anwar government has focused on three main priority areas [Tan 2023].

First, it has sought to strengthen relations with ASEAN member states and to boost Malaysia's role as a strategic player in the region, by pursuing an active agenda of diplomatic visits. In these contexts, besides promoting bilateral and multilateral cooperation, Anwar repeatedly spoke out on the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar. During visits to Thailand and the Philippines in early 2023, he urged ASEAN governments to condemn the junta's human rights violations in order to uphold «the cause of justice and the rule of law» [Anwar Ibrahim 2023, 2 March]. As pragmatically, he sought to tackle the inflow of Myanmar refugees into Malaysia [Gomez 2023, 2 March].

Second, Anwar's foreign policy has prioritized the Middle East, with the aim of enhancing his standing as a dependable leader within the Muslim world. The PM's approach has relied on the Madani philosophy, promoting Islamic values in both domestic and international politics. In particular, Anwar has consciously emphasized his personal and political affinity with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Anwar has also taken a clear stand vis-à-vis Israel's war on Gaza. Soon after taking office, he responded to Hamas's congratulatory messages by reaffirming Malaysia's support for the Palestinian cause. While Malaysia has never entertained diplomatic ties with Israel, it has hardened its position in the wake of the Gaza crisis, with Anwar becoming one of Israel's most vocal critics in the international political arena. On 20 December, he announced that Israel-registered ships and foreign vessels heading to Israel would be banned from Malaysian ports. He presented the measure as a response «to Israel's actions that ignore basic humanitarian principles and violate international law through the ongoing massacre and brutality against Palestinians» [*Al Jazeera* 2023, 20 December].

Thirdly, Anwar's unity government reaffirmed the country's non-alignment strategy vis-à-vis major power rivalry. Nonetheless, the administration has improved bilateral relations with China, through several high-level meetings with Chinese officials and visits to Beijing in March and in September [Tan 2023]. While the disputes in the South China Sea remain a point of contention between the two countries, Anwar has showcased a rather conciliatory attitude. This approach has drawn criticism from the PN coalition, which has accused the unity government of prioritizing economic projects that would enhance China's influence in Malaysia at the expense of the broader national interest.

5. Conclusion

In 2023, despite facing challenges from a heterogeneous coalition and from the polarization of public debate, the unity government managed to maintain its hold on power. While many observers considered the August state elections a litmus test for the soundness of the government, these contests also served as significant indicators of major socio-political developments in the country.

The Anwar administration's stance on critical issues regarding economic and social disparities was influenced by the consolidation of identitarian discursive repertoires. Anwar strategically aligned his rhetoric with the established discursive patterns of Malaysian political culture, projecting himself as a Muslim-Malay leader embodying national moral values. In this context, his Malaysia Madani slogan, rooted in Islamic moral principles concerning social justice and civilization, hardly superseded the communal logics governing socio-political relations. The government thus faced limitations in its ability to manoeuvre, especially when revisiting ethnic-based policies, which no longer reflect today's complex intersections of race, geographical origin and demographics underlying economic and social disparities.

In foreign policy, Anwar leveraged his image as a Southeast Asian and Muslim leader to enhance Malaysia's relations with ASEAN countries, China and with the Muslim world. Within the latter in particular, Anwar adopted a clear stance, notably through his outspoken condemnation of Israel and his relationship with the Palestinian leadership of Hamas.

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VIETNAM 2020-2023: COVID PANDEMIC RECOVERY, UNPRECEDENTED
LEADERSHIP TURNOVER, AND CONTINUED MULTILATERALISM

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The years 2020-2023 in Vietnam witnessed three overarching trends. First, on the domestic front, Vietnam succeeded in managing the COVID crisis with overall net economic growth, while witnessing unprecedented change in the character of top political leadership. Second, the period saw the passage of landmark free trade deals, namely the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA). Finally, on the foreign policy front, Vietnam strengthened its diplomatic ties with the United States in upgrading the latter's status to the highest diplomatic level, a comprehensive strategic partnership. In so doing, Vietnam continued its pursuit of multilateralism to enhance the country's international political relations and facilitate its response to ongoing maritime security issues in the South China Sea.

KEYWORDS – COVID-19; Pandemic; Free Trade Agreements; Leadership Turnover; Multilateralism.

1. Introduction

The 2020-2023 period witnessed three overarching trends in Vietnam. First, on the domestic front, Vietnam succeeded in managing the COVID-19 crisis with overall net economic growth, while witnessing unprecedented change in the character of top political leadership. The country's party chief, General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng, won a third term beyond the two-year term limit, while some senior leaders, such as former president Nguyễn Xuân Phúc, resigned. Second, the period saw the passage of landmark free trade deals, namely the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA). Finally, on the foreign policy front, Vietnam strengthened its relations with the United States in upgrading the latter's status to the highest diplomatic level, a comprehensive strategic partnership. In so doing, Vietnam continued to implement its longstanding foreign policy doctrine of multilateralism, which aims to enhance the country's international relations and facilitate its response to ongoing security issues, including maritime conflicts over the South China Sea.

2. *Domestic Affairs*

2.1. *The COVID-19 Pandemic in Vietnam*

The period from 2020 to 2023 was dominated by responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Vietnam, by objective measures, responded relatively well in the pandemic's early stages. In the first year of 2020, when news first broke of coronavirus infections in neighbouring China, Vietnam stood out on the world stage for its effective management of the health crisis. Thanks to rigorous testing, quarantining, tracing of infected persons, among other measures, the country not only flattened the coronavirus curve, but it also achieved virtually no deaths and community transmissions in the first half of the pandemic year. Given that it takes merely ten days for the number of infections to exponentially increase ten-fold, it is remarkable that, by March of 2020, Vietnam had only slightly over 200 cases. This stands in stark contrast to the rest of the world which, in the same period, witnessed hundreds of thousands of infections, not to mention deaths [WHO 2023]. Whereas other countries underwent lockdowns, Vietnam remained internally open for business in the early phase of the pandemic; the country was, in fact, the only economy in Southeast Asia demonstrating net growth in 2020 [General Statistics Office 2021a]. Kidong Park of the World Health Organisation praised Vietnam's impressive results attributing its success, in part, to the country's decade-long investment in building health-sector capacity, early activation of the health risk warning system, effective logistical coordination, and «strong» local and national leadership [United Nations 2020].

By the middle of 2021, however, with the arrival of the highly contagious Delta variant, considered the fourth COVID wave, the country now faced a different situation. Its earlier health measures were insufficient in dealing with a more formidable, ever evolving, microscopic adversary. Outbreaks rapidly spread to 30 cities and provinces, including the northern regions of Bac Ninh and Bac Giang; at the same time, in Ho Chi Minh City, the pandemic broke out rapidly with over 20 infection chains. By 31 May 2021, municipal authorities ordered lockdowns. The country nevertheless witnessed an explosive increase in the number of infections and deaths. The data were sobering. By 24 January 2022, for instance, Vietnam witnessed a total of 2,155,784 infected cases of which 2,149,095 came from the fourth wave (99.7%) and from which 36,849 patients died [Nguyen 2022, 31 January]. Public opinion of the country's leadership also plummeted at this time; public criticism of the government dwarfed public support [Luong 2021]. Finally, the lockdowns impacted Vietnam's economy. Vietnam's GDP dropped 6,17% on the year for the July-September 2021 period due to strict lockdowns [Onishi 2021].

The government realized that in such circumstances it had to reassess its pandemic strategy. A policy of zero COVID, which would virtually halt all economic and societal activity, seemed untenable. The government,

therefore, shifted from a strategy of «zero COVID» to that of «safe, flexible adaptation» («không Covid»; «thích ứng an toàn, linh hoạt») [Văn 2021, 4 January]. Towards that end, according to Resolution 128 (*Nghị quyết* 128) [Tuần 2021, 13 October], the Vietnamese government modified its COVID pandemic approach in two ways. First, it abandoned the idea of «zero COVID», which China's Xi Jinping in contrast was relentlessly pursuing, even at enormous economic and societal costs [*The Economist* 2022, 1 December]. Instead, Vietnam adhered to a multi-tiered classification system whereby different communities and regions were evaluated based on their disease risk levels. Commercial activities and everyday life were also curtailed, though not prohibited outright, depending on a region's risk level [Tuần 2021, 13 October]. Second, Vietnam pursued a robust campaign of international vaccine diplomacy. Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính contacted his counterparts in 16 other countries, reached out to leaders of 22 nations and 10 international organizations. The fruit of such diplomacy became evident when the United States, in July of 2021, donated approximately two million doses of the Moderna vaccine to Vietnam [WHO 2021]. By August of the same year, France agreed to donate 670,000 vaccine doses; Poland, 501,000 doses; and the two leading vaccine producers, AstraZeneca and Pfizer, pledged to speed up efforts to deliver more vaccines to the country [Minh 2021, 26 August].

Prior to the onset of the highly contagious Delta variant, the Vietnamese government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic was remarkable for two key reasons. First, as one of the most secretive political bodies in the world [*The Economist* 2024, 27 March], the Vietnamese Communist leadership supported a fully transparent response in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. As remarked by Dr. Nguyễn Tô Như, director of the Global Health Security Program of PATH, a US-based non-governmental organization, Vietnam's Ministry of Health had thus far been «very transparent» (*rất minh bạch*) in sharing and updating its COVID-19 information and situation [BBC in Vietnamese 2020, 10 March]. Unlike in the case of China and Xi Jinping's face-saving move to backpeddle on an ineffective zero COVID-19 policy [Wolfe, 2022, 7 September], Vietnam's prime minister Phạm Minh Chính acknowledged that, on the issue of vaccine diplomacy, the question of «face-saving» was irrelevant to the pragmatic objective of procuring enough vaccines [Hiệp 2022, 22 January]. Simultaneously, prior to the lockdown, the government's measures had also been met with general compliance by the Vietnamese population. Studies show that the Vietnamese adhered to high measures of personal preventive behaviour, such as physical distancing, mask wearing, body temperature checks, as well as community preventive behaviour, such as avoiding large crowds, minimizing inessential travel, and so forth [Nguyen *et al.* 2020]. This behavioral compliance, in turn, indicates a measure of public trust in the government's policies [Văn 2021].

Amid the prior unprecedented healthcare crisis, however, two major corruption scandals shook the country. The first involved the selling

of medical COVID testing kits. A private medical firm, Viet A Technology Corp, colluded with some officials to produce coronavirus test kits for the state health system but sold them at inflated prices. The company sold 4.5 million COVID test kits in Vietnam at three times the real cost, generating about € 45,9 million [Hoang *et al.* 2021, 20 December]. The corruption led to the sentencing of the CEO of the Viet A Technology Corp, Phan Quốc Việt, to twenty-five years in prison [Trong 2023, 29 December].

The second corruption scandal involved the repatriation of Vietnamese during the pandemic. By March 2020, Vietnam had suspended all international commercial flights. At the same time, the country was actively helping its citizens worldwide to safely return home. From April 2020 to January 2022, Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs approved about 772 flights to repatriate Vietnamese citizens [Sa 2024, 24 April]. In August 2020 alone, the government was able to bring home 21,000 Vietnamese from 50 countries and territories [*Việt Nam News* 2020, 6 August]. The explosive demand to return home by Vietnamese abroad during the pandemic, coupled with the near worldwide suspension of international travel, created a profitable albeit ethically questionable occasion. Some Vietnamese officials, in charge of such repatriation efforts, exploited the occasion in demanding exorbitant fees and bribes from Vietnamese business people and other citizens. An investigation later uncovered hundreds of such bribes worth a total of 165 billion VND (about € 6,1 million) [Hoàng 2023, 11 July]. The bribery scandal led to the trial and sentencing of 54 suspects [Sa 2024, 24 April].

By the early months of 2022, Vietnam, like other parts of the world, gradually began to recover from the COVID pandemic. Vietnam now had a sufficient supply of vaccines. As of December of 2021, the country had already administered over 152 million vaccine doses and succeeded in fully vaccinating 70% of its population, consistent with the target set by the World Health Organization (WHO) for all countries in the world to achieve herd immunity [WHO 2022]. As a result, on 15 March 2022, Vietnam officially reopened its doors, recommencing international commercial flights [Vietnam News Agency 2022, 15 March]. To help reboot the tourism sector, as of 15 August 2023, Vietnam granted 90-day e-visas to citizens of all countries and territories [Phong 2023, 27 June].

2.2. *Unprecedented Change in the Character of Top Political Leadership*

The period from 2020-2023 also witnessed unprecedented change in the character of top political leadership. The country's four top leadership positions are known colloquially as the «four pillars» (*tứ trụ*): general secretary («party chief»), president, prime minister, and national assembly chair. On 26 January 2021, at the 13th national congress of Vietnam's ruling communist party, Nguyễn Phú Trọng was re-elected for an unprecedented third term as party chief, that is, general secretary of the Communist party, the country's most powerful role. Nguyễn Xuân Phúc was

elected as president, the second highest position; Phạm Minh Chính as prime minister, the third highest position; finally, Vương Đình Huệ as chairman of the National Assembly.-

Previously, in 2016, at the 12th National Congress, nineteen members were elected to the Politburo. By late 2020, however, this number dwindled to five due to the death of President Trần Đại Quang, the ill health of Đinh Thế Huynh, and the disciplinary action against two other leaders, Hoàng Trung Hải and Nguyễn Văn Bình, and the expulsion of Đinh La Thăng. Hence, five positions became vacant. Due to the death of president Trần Đại Quang in 2018, Nguyễn Phú Trọng assumed for his second term the simultaneous role of general secretary and president, which is primarily a ceremonial role [Thayer 2022].

At the 13th National Congress, nine members of the Politburo were expected to retire since they were over 65, one of whom was supposed to be General-Secretary-cum-President Nguyễn Phú Trọng. He had groomed a successor, Trần Quốc Vương, who ultimately failed to receive sufficient votes during a straw poll. As a result, Nguyễn Phú Trọng engineered an unprecedented third term as general secretary, beyond the two-year term limit [Pearson 2021, 31 January].

The anti-corruption drive was masterminded by Nguyễn Phú Trọng, who succeeded Nguyễn Tấn Dũng, the prime minister from 2006 to 2016. Under Trọng's tenure, the country spearheaded a relentless anti-corruption campaign that led to the demotion, resignation, and reshuffling of leadership at the highest levels. In December 2022 in the wake of the anti-corruption campaign, two deputy prime ministers – Vũ Đức Đam and Phạm Bình Minh – were held responsible for pandemic-related corruption scandals. Nguyễn Xuân Phúc resigned as president, the first top member from the Vietnamese Communist Party leadership to do so. Phúc was replaced by Võ Văn Thưởng who was sworn in as the new president.¹ On the one hand, the campaign was a means to root out the corruption that could undermine the legitimacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). On the other, the campaign also appeared to be a means to eliminate real or perceived political enemies, as well as allies of the former Prime Minister, and so suggested an internal power struggle within the CPV [Strangio 2020, 7 September].

3. Economics

3.1. Steady Economic Growth Despite COVID-19

On the economic front, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020-2023 witnessed a trajectory of net growth. In 2020, Vietnam's GDP grew at

1. As of March 2024, the recently sworn in president, Võ Văn Thưởng, was forced to resign, leading to further unprecedented change in top political leadership.

2,91%. Although such a rate was lower than the previous year's 7,02% [General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2021a], Vietnam was still one of the few countries in the world, and the only one among Southeast Asian nations, to achieve net positive GDP growth in 2020, when Covid sent the world's economies tumbling or halting to a standstill [Nakano and Onishi 2020, 19 November]. In 2021, the country's GDP grew in the first and second quarters, decreased by 6,02% in the third quarter, only to recover in the fourth quarter with a growth of 5,22%. The decrease in GDP in the second quarter of 2021 was the country's first recorded period of contraction since economic liberalization in 1986. The reasons for the contraction were attributed to COVID outbreaks in the southern region, especially Ho Chi Minh City, the country's economic engine [General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2021b]. In 2022, the economy experienced again net growth, with the fourth quarter GDP rate of 5,92% [General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2022]. Finally, the year 2023 also saw overall economic expansion with a GDP growth rate estimated at 5,05% ['Vietnamese economy expands' 2023].

Analysts have suggested that Vietnam's unusual economic growth in 2020 stemmed from an exports boom. While COVID led to a slowdown in certain sectors, especially the service industries, the economy was buoyed by the exports of high-tech electronics resulting from COVID pandemic constraints that required people to work from home [Dabla-Norris and Zhang 2021]. Other researchers have further maintained that Vietnam's exports boom was, in fact, a consequence of the ongoing trade wars between the United States and China. Amidst the rivalry between the two great powers, Vietnam benefitted as US and EU companies sought alternative supply chains [Thanh 2021: 411-419].

3.2. Increase in Free Trade Agreements

The 2020-2023 period saw the passage of two landmark trade deals: the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA). Previously, in 2018, Vietnam had already become a member of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), an agreement that salvaged portions of the ambitious Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that nations had been negotiating for the past decade until Trump withdrew the United States from it. Vietnam's membership in trade agreements reflected the country's increasing trend towards global economic integration.

The year 2020 saw the passage of the RCEP, a trade agreement spearheaded by China, of which Vietnam was a signatory. The trade agreement was signed in Hanoi on 15 November by fifteen Asian countries, including the ten nations of ASEAN, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. India pulled out the year before. Less ambitious than the CPTPP and the now defunct TPP, the RCEP focuses on eliminating tariffs by about

90% over a twenty-year period but with many significant exceptions, such as agriculture [*The Economist* 2020, 15 November]. Further, as Dian and Menegazzi correctly foresaw, the RCEP in no way addressed labour and environmental standards; rather it established a commercial template favourable to China's norms, placing Beijing's symbolic footprint on the Asian region [Dian and Menegazzi 2018].

The second significant trade agreement was the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA). Five years in the making, the EVFTA came into force in August 2020 and would gradually eliminate tariffs on 99% of goods traded between the two sides. The EU is Vietnam's second largest export destination after the United States; likewise, Vietnam is, after Singapore, the EU's second largest trading partner in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with traded goods worth € 45,5 billion in 2019 alone. The trade agreement will lower the barriers for commercial ventures, allowing both sides to tap into each other's emerging markets [European Commission 2020].

At the same time, embedded in the trade agreement were a series of mutual social commitments. In 2019, different stakeholders – including the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL), the country's national trade union centre – played a significant role in pressing the party-state to ratify some of the fundamental conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the adoption of a new labour code [Mocci 2019]. These important labour revisions, acknowledged by the EU, became integrated in the trade agreement along with other social, climate, and environmental commitments. Importantly, the trade agreement stipulated the involvement of independent civil society in monitoring the upholding of these commitments [European Commission 2020].

The issue of independent civil society, however, is troubling in the case of Vietnam. The glittering stories of its economic success and development, coupled with its geopolitical position as an alternative supply chain to China, have helped Vietnam attract international investments. The economic success, nonetheless, belies a disturbing trend in which the state has tightened its grip on associational life. Vietnam, in recent years, has shut down prominent non-profit organizations and jailed human rights activists and environmental reformers on trumped-up charges of tax evasion. [Head 2023, 28 September; Sidel 2023]. In so doing, Vietnam has narrowed the space for independent civil society, which would otherwise contribute to the monitoring and upholding of commitments in the EU-Vietnam free trade agreement.

The efficacy of the EU's attempt to tether free trade agreements with other social and environmental obligations is, therefore, a wager. As some analysts note, despite the EU's landmark free trade agreement with Vietnam, its successful implementation has yet to be seen [Marslev and Staritz 2023]. Nevertheless, the EVTA is the most comprehensive and ambitious

trade agreement the EU has made with a developing country and the second trade agreement, after the one with Singapore, that the EU has made with an ASEAN member.

4. *Foreign Policy*

4.1. *The South China Sea Conflict and Multilateralism*

The dispute over the South China Sea remained an ongoing problem. Since at least the early decade of the millennium, China has sent its vessels into the maritime waters that Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations have consistently claimed belong to its territorial sovereignty. In fact, in 2016 the European Permanent Court of Arbitration concluded that China's claims over the South China Sea have no basis in international law [Permanent Court of Arbitration 2016]. Despite the international legal verdict, China has seized the Paracel and Spratly islands that Vietnam insists belong to its sovereignty, forcibly establishing military bases [*The Guardian* 2022, 21 March]. In the 2020-2023 period, the South China Sea conflict persisted, as China brazenly continued conducting military drills in Vietnamese maritime waters [Nguyen 2020, 1 October]. While the Vietnamese government has sought to resolve the problem through diplomatic channels, the ongoing conflict has nevertheless made clear to Vietnam that the South China Sea dispute remains one of its top security concerns [Nguyen 2020]. In response to such concerns, consistent with its longstanding foreign policy of multilateralism, Vietnam has increasingly strengthened ties with other nations, in a bid to counterbalance China's power. [Dung and Son 2023].

In the 2020-2023 period, one significant development on the diplomatic front was the strengthening of the US-Vietnam partnership. On 10 September 2023, Vietnam upgraded its relations with the United States to a «Comprehensive Strategic Partnership», the highest level of diplomatic partnership. In Vietnamese foreign policy, three such levels exist. In increasing rank-order, they are: comprehensive partnership (*quan hệ toàn diện*), strategic partnership (*quan hệ chiến lược*), and comprehensive strategic partnership (*quan hệ chiến lược toàn diện*) [An 2023, 10 September]. For the past ten years, the United States remained at the lowest level, the «comprehensive partnership». Previously, Vietnam conferred the highest diplomatic level on only four other countries: China (in 2008), Russia (in 2012), India (in 2016), and South Korea (2022). With Biden's visit to Vietnam after the G20 Summit in 2023, Vietnam catapulted the US' diplomatic status to the highest level.

The status upgrade yields tangible political benefits for Hanoi. Some analysts, at first, expressed concern that conferring such status on the United States could lead to backlash from China [Guarascio 2023, 23 March]. The benefits, however, of Vietnam's enhanced partnership with the U.S.

outweigh potential costs. Not only will the «comprehensive strategic relationship» boost Vietnam's economy, diversifying the country's markets, but it will also bolster regional maritime security. It does so by upgrading Vietnam's maritime domain awareness and infrastructure, thereby combatting, among other problems, illegal incursions into Vietnamese waters [U.S. Mission Vietnam 2023]. Finally, as some analysts have observed, 2023 was the optimal time for Vietnam to upgrade its diplomatic status with the United States. Should the intense power struggle between the U.S. and China deteriorate in the near future, it would be far too late by then for Vietnam to enhance security ties with the US, lest it be accused of favouritism by China [Hiệp 2023]. In fact, Hanoi had just upgraded the diplomatic status of the U.S. when, in December 2023, it warmly received China's Xi Jinping. The outcome of the two-day visit was a joint declaration of cooperation between the two nations on wide-ranging matters from infrastructure and rail links, defence and security, to trade and investment [Reuters, 14 December]. Hanoi's engagement with both Washington and Beijing is consistent with its strategic doctrine of multilateralism: there is no contradiction in hedging one's bets against an uncertain future. Therefore, Vietnam's enhanced diplomatic partnership with the United States represents a strategic win for Hanoi in strengthening Vietnam's international relations and facilitating responses to ongoing maritime security issues in the South China Sea.

5. Conclusion

The 2020-2023 period in Vietnam, therefore, witnessed three overarching trends. First, on the domestic front, Vietnam successfully managed the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite some economic challenges in the second quarter of 2021, when the country saw for the first time an economic contraction due to forced lockdowns arising from the highly contagious Delta variant, the country was still able to weather the proverbial pandemic storm; it achieved net positive GDP growth rates for every year during the period of this study. The second salient domestic development in the 2020-2023 period was the profound change in the character of political leadership. The country's party chief, general secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng, won an unprecedented third term beyond the two-year term limit. Also unprecedented during this time was the turnover in senior political leadership, namely the resignation of the then president, Nguyễn Xuân Phúc, and his replacement by Võ Văn Thưởng.

Second, on the economic front, Vietnam saw the passage of two landmark free trade agreements. The first agreement, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), spearheaded by China, facilitates trade in the Asian region by gradually eliminating tariffs over two decades and helps to solidify China's imprint on the region. The second agreement

is the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA). Like the RCEP, the EVFTA helps to gradually eliminate tariffs on both sides. But unlike the RCEP, the EVFTA includes a series of commitments, aimed at upholding of labour, climate, and environmental standards. These two landmark agreements were in addition to Vietnam's prior membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). All these free trade agreements reflect Vietnam's increasing trend towards global economic integration.

Finally, on the foreign policy front, Vietnam enhanced its diplomatic partnership with the United States. Vietnam did so by upgrading the United States' status from the third-tier level of «comprehensive partnership» to the highest-tier designation of «comprehensive strategic partnership». This upgrade in the United States' diplomatic status strengthened Vietnam's international relations and facilitated its response to ongoing security issues in the South China Sea.

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CAMBODIA 2022-2023: SECURING DYNASTIC AUTOCRACY

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2023 was an historic year for Cambodia. Following elections widely deemed not to be fair and free, Prime Minister Hun Sen handed over power to his son Hun Manet. In doing so, he ended his 38-year premiership, and secured the transformation of Cambodia into a dynastic autocracy. The transformation was enabled by a variety of factors. The country started to recover from the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic, with tourism and exports starting to grow again, enabling the ruling party to reaffirm their position by securing the economy. Domestically, human rights continued to be rolled back, particularly for the political opposition, with a series of mass trials, threats of violence, and the creation of new legislation further narrowing control of the nation to the ruling party. Regionally, Cambodia's chairmanship of ASEAN, which ended in 2022, and hosting of the Southeast Asian Games in 2023, secured the country's place as an important political actor. While Hun Sen continued to switch allegiance between China and the US, the initial months of Hun Manet's rule have seen him secure relationships with both, as well as Vietnam. As we move on in 2024, what Hun Manet's rule will mean for Cambodia remains uncertain, but it looks likely that he will follow in the pattern already set, solidifying the dynastic autocracy of the CPP through trade, investments (social and economic) and legislation.

KEYWORDS – CAMBODIA; AUTHORITARIANISM; DYNASTY; HUMAN RIGHTS; ASEAN; CHINA; US; VIETNAM; TRADE; ECCG.

1. Introduction

The years between 2022 and 2023 were historic for Cambodia. The handing over of power from Prime Minister Hun Sen to his son Hun Manet saw a new era in Cambodian politics, marking the long-coming transformation from illiberal democracy to dynastic autocracy.

This transformation has been made possible through a variety of mechanisms. On a positive note, the economy started to recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and there were some positive demographic developments related to that. After a substantial dropoff in 2020 and 2021 (related to pandemic shutdowns), education levels were once again rising. In 2021-2022, the median number of years of schooling for women was 3.8 years (up from 1.1 years in 2000), and 4.8 for men (up from 2.5) [NIS 2023b: 12], and by 2022 the literacy rate for Cambodia had risen

to 84% of adult men [CEIC Data 2023a], and 79% of adult women [CEIC Data 2023b]. The significant increase won the country a Literacy Award from the World Literacy Foundation [Reuy 2023, 5 April]. Health likewise showed improvement. COVID-19 remained contained (since the beginning of the pandemic, Cambodia has reported 138,978 infections and 3,056 deaths from COVID-19 [World Health Organization 2023]), and its vaccination programme has been widespread, with over 80% of the population fully vaccinated by the end of 2023. Meanwhile, life expectancy rose, and infant mortality dropped [NIS 2023a].

On the political front, things were not so positive, with concerns remaining about democracy and human rights in the Kingdom: both aspects central to maintaining the ruling party's position and enabling the political transformation. International relations remained balanced primarily between China and the US, but, in the review period, Cambodia asserted its political competency regionally as well. The successes noted above have contributed to the perceived efficacy and legitimacy of the CPP, while the further roll back of democracy and human rights have ensured a lack of political opposition. It remains too early to ascertain categorically what Hun Manet's rule will mean for Cambodia, however, it seems likely that he will continue to enjoy the benefits provided by the dynastic autocracy while also looking at other avenues than his father to secure the rule of his party.

2. Domestic affairs: elections and the securing of a dynastic autocracy

2.1. Commune and a general election

Following the general election (on July 23), on 22 August 2023, after 38 years in power, Hun Sen handed over the premiership to his son, Hun Manet. The move, which happened with little protest or objection, ended the rule of Asia's longest-standing «elected» leader, and completed the transformation of Cambodia to a dynastic autocracy. This had been long coming, with senior CPP officials moving their children and other family members into positions of authority over the last few years, and Hun Sen declaring that Hun Manet could be the next Prime Minister back in 2018. Although stepping down as leader, Hun Sen gave himself the position of President of the Cambodian People's Party and remains central to decision-making and control. In early 2024, he was «unanimously voted» as President of the Senate, with two former senior CPP advisors voted in as vice-presidents [Nitta 2024]. As political scientist Sophal Ear has commented, he remains just behind the scenes, in a position where he could step back into power should he decide [CNA 2023].

Commune elections, which take place the year before general elections, are usually seen as indicators of the general election result. In 2022, the CPP won 74% of the popular vote, and thousands of official positions.

The Candlelight party – a reformed faction of the Cambodian National Rescue Party that had been dissolved in 2017 – won 22% of the vote and looked set to have similar results in the general election.

However, in direct parallel to the 2018 elections, the run up to the 2023 elections saw a plethora of actions taken to restrict democratic freedoms and political opposition, to ensure the CPP's continuing reign. In February, the Voice of Democracy [VoD] – the only independent media outlet remaining in Cambodia – was shut down. This followed the removal of licenses from the Bayon Times, Khmercovertv, and Cambodia Today in March 2022, after they published stories about government corruption [Freedom House 2023]. In May 2023, two months before the elections, the Candlelight party – the only viable opposition party – was banned from participating for allegedly not having the correct paperwork. This left the CPP as the only viable party. In addition to preventing the party from running, threats of violence, imprisonment, and even death, were made against opposition lawmakers and activists, and moves to limit them extended to threatening diplomatic allies offering the opposition space: in January 2023, Hun Sen stated that if Malaysia was to allow Sam Rainsey to visit, «the two governments can't work together» [Benar News 2023, 6 January]. As well as these moves, several laws were rushed in, furthering controls on the voting population and aiming to control future results. For example, those spoiling papers were threatened with legal action (and indeed, on election day (July 23), two people were arrested for this). Even before the election took place, Hun Sen announced he would pass over the leadership to his son Hun Manet, leaving the world in no doubt of the result of the election.

As the elections came closer, numerous international bodies, including Human Rights Watch [2023] and ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights [2023], raised concerns about the process. This followed a pattern of increasing international unease about politics and freedom in the Kingdom. In February 2023, the Democracy Index from the Economist Intelligence gave Cambodia a score of 0.00 for electoral process and pluralism [EIU 2022] and, after he posted a video threatening violence to the opposition, the oversight board of Facebook recommended a suspension of Hun Sen's accounts [Peck and Cheang 2023, 29 June]. After the voting ended, stories abounded of coercion, electoral fraud, intimidation, and corruption, and the international community largely denounced the election as undemocratic and unfair. While only the US made a formal statement, international dissatisfaction was noticeable. The CPP dismissed this, and as proof of the validity of the elections, cited high voter turnout (84%), the presence of international observers, and the fact that 18 registered parties participated. Many of the observers were allies of the Cambodian government, and while there were 18 parties registered, commentators noted that 17 of these did not have enough support to pose a viable threat to the CPP [Ear 2023].

That said, unlike in 2018 (when the CPP won all 125 seats in the National Assembly), at this election 5 seats were conceded to FUNCINPEC: the only other party that has existed since the 1993 elections overseen by the UN. Beyond providing a legitimating example of alternative voting, with the banning and dismantling of the latest opposition party, this concession towards democracy will have little effect. The Cambodian population appears exhausted by the whole process. The elections and the handover of power to Hun Manet occurred with no public protest, and, seemingly tired of the ongoing onslaught against them, in the months before the elections, a number of high-profile opposition lawmakers defected to the ruling party [Kelliher & Ouch 2023, 2 July]. The CPP is set to rule with little or no opposition for at least the foreseeable future.

2.2. *Hun Manet's rule: his father's son?*

Prior to coming to power, opinions were divided on what Hun Manet's rule would bring. Some commentators were hopeful that his age (46), and western education (an undergraduate degree from West Point Academy and a PhD from the University of Bristol in the UK), would bring a more liberal and reformist approach to leadership. Indeed, in his early months, as well as making visits to key foreign allies (including China, the US, and Vietnam), he has promised to improve education and the economy, and made some promising appointments to senior political roles, including Un Kheang to the role of Secretary of State of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MFAIC) – a professor of political science who has published books criticising Cambodia's move towards authoritarianism and its dependence/close ties with China.

Other commentators, however, have noted that Hun Manet had never publicly opposed his father or his father's violent rule, and had enjoyed the benefits the consolidation of power has brought to the family [Baldwin 2023, 20 July]. While the actions mentioned above appear promising, there have also been indications of an approach similar to his father's. In the weeks shortly after his appointment, he swelled the ranks of official advisors and ministerial posts, appointing over 1,400 secretaries and undersecretaries - more than double the number of his father's previous mandate [Strangio 2023, 24 August]. Many of the new appointments are alleged to be relations of senior CPP members, and over 170 of the appointees are personal advisors and assistants to the PM [Strangio 2023, 24 August]. In another move paralleling his father's rule, on 1 January 2024, Hun Manet announced a new national holiday – «Peace Day in Cambodia», to be held on 29 December from this year on. The date, which had previously been labelled as «Win-Win Policy Day», marks the end of fighting between the Cambodian government and the Khmer Rouge forces in 1998, brought about by Hun Sen's Win-Win policy. The designation of this date follows the inauguration of the Win-Win monument in 2018, and the designation of 7 January

as «Victory over Genocide Day», a national holiday, in 2023. While creating this new holiday, Hun Manet called for research and collation of Win-Win policy documents, and their dissemination as part of Cambodian students' education «so that they appreciate the issue better» [Va 2024, 4 January].

The mobilisation of the Cambodian genocide to legitimate and secure the CPP's rule follows a pattern set by the CPP over the decades. Critics have labelled the new holiday as Peace Day «for the Hun family», noting that not only were the Paris Peace Accords more critical to the establishment of peace, but also that Hun Manet's decisions extended Hun Sen's long-standing rhetoric of the CPP, and Hun Sen in particular, being saviours of Cambodia [Va 2024, 4 January]. Indeed, Hun Sen, and now, it seems, Hun Manet, have, over the years, created national memorials and holidays reifying this rhetoric, establishing it within the national annual calendar and as a state-founding myth. Continuing this trend puts Hun Manet firmly into the CPP and Hun Sen's mode of leadership, affirming the political maneuvers which made the transformation to autocracy, and now, a dynasty, possible.

2.3. *The closure of the ECCC, the Cambodian judiciary, and human rights*

In September 2022 the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) – the UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal – ended its judicial proceedings with its finding on the appeal of Khieu Samphan for case 002. In this final case, the court upheld the 2018 conviction of genocide and crimes against humanity committed during the Khmer Rouge's rule from 1975 to 1979. While it has been heralded for its innovative hybridity and extensive outreach programme, the legacy of the court is somewhat mixed. Only 3 people were convicted during its 16-year activities (Kaing Guek Eav, Nuon Chea, and Khieu Samphan), and it was criticized throughout for lack of impartiality, government interference, and corruption. Its limited remit (of both time frame and personnel) came under scrutiny, as did the cost and the overall relevance to the Cambodian population. While some Cambodian officials state that it has improved the Cambodian judiciary overall, the evidence seems to indicate the opposite. In fact, while the court ran, human rights continued to be rolled back, impunity for the elite continued, and the ruling party's hold on Cambodia became stronger. If anything, the courts shielded the CPP and the judiciary from taking action to reform by providing a smoke screen of apparent judicial responsibility.

The 2022 corruption index published by Transparency International placed Cambodia 150th out of 180 countries, the lowest-ranked country in ASEAN except Myanmar, and the third lowest in the Asia-Pacific region [Transparency International 2023]. This was, however, an improvement on the previous year (23/100), and, overall, there have been slight improvements in the five years between 2018 and 2023, with Cambodia's score rising from 20/100 to 24. In their report, Transparency International noted that

there has been progress made in dealing with small-scale corruption and, indeed, the problem lies, as ever, at the elite level of officials and wealthy individuals across Cambodia. A report on human trafficking published by the US State Department [2023] downgraded Cambodia from second to third tier, stating that while the government had arrested, prosecuted, and convicted some smugglers, «endemic corruption continued to impede overall law enforcement operations, holding traffickers accountable, and victim service provision» [154]. They noted, in particular, that credible reports of officials involved were not investigated, thereby failing to protect victims in the country or overseas [154]. These were not the only workers whose rights were infringed upon. For example, in August 2022, workers at Naga World, an integrated casino-hotel in Phnom Penh, were arrested after striking, and women who participated in the strike reported being assaulted by the police [Freedom House 2023]. Meanwhile, union leader Chhim Sithar was arrested while striking in January 2022, re-arrested in November, and remains in custody to date.

In the move towards entrenching the CPP's autocracy, political opposition and democratic freedoms saw the brunt of human rights violations. A series of mass trials of opposition lawmakers took place across 2022. In March, 19 members of the CNRP were sentenced to between five and twenty years for charges including incitement and conspiracy. In September, another mass trial began, this one for conspiracy to commit treason [Strangio 2022, 16 September]. In October, Sam Rainsey, although in self-imposed exile in France, was sentenced to life imprisonment for allegedly planning to cede Cambodia to a foreign power. In March 2023, Kem Sokha, deputy leader of the former Cambodian National Rescue Party, who had been arrested in 2017 under accusations of treason, was sentenced to 27 years imprisonment and a lifetime ban on political participation. In January 2023, 122 opposition members were charged for various offenses. In total, over 150 opposition lawmakers have been charged and/or imprisoned, since 2021. While many were hopeful that Hun Manet's accession to power would see a reduction of such acts, this has not been the case. October 2023 saw Candlelight party leader Thack SETHA imprisoned for posting criticism of Hun Sen on social media, and other opposition lawmakers given prison sentences and banned from political participation for five years, making them ineligible for the next elections. Due to ongoing concerns, in October 2023, the UN decided to extend the remit of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation on Human Rights in Cambodia [UN 2023].

Meanwhile, further legislation was passed putting increasing control into the hands of the ruling party. This included a law allowing a Prime Minister to be appointed without parliamentary approval (passed in August 2022, and largely thought to be in preparation for the handover of power from Hun Sen to Hun Manet). At the same time, press freedom was reduced: in 2023 Cambodia was ranked 147th out of 180 in the World Press

Freedom Index and 142nd in 2022 [Reporters without Borders 2024] - a marked reduction from 2017, when it was ranked 132nd. All in all, human rights protections remained poor and continued to be attacked, aiding the political transformation, and further entrenching the dynastic rule of the CPP by making criticism and critique all but impossible.

3. The economy and foreign relations: regional assertion, global pragmatism

One of the areas that has helped maintain the ruling party's position over the decades has been steady economic growth and security. Under their rule poverty levels were declining year by year, and, pre-pandemic, Cambodia had been well on its way to achieving middle income status. The loss of jobs and income caused by the pandemic, however, slowed this, and its primary industries: agriculture (particularly rice exports), the garment industry, and tourism, suffered substantially in 2020 and 2021. In addition, global interest rates, China's zero COVID policy (limiting tourism), and other geopolitical events such as the Russia-Ukraine war, have limited its recovery and growth.

However, in the last two years, Cambodia's economy has slowly been recovering. By the end of 2022, economic growth had risen to 5.2% (from 3% in 2021), and while this was still significantly lower than its pre-pandemic level of 7% in 2019 [International Monetary Fund 2023], the poverty rate in 2022 had reached 16.6%, a substantial decrease from its 2014 level of 36.7% [UNDP 2023: 15]. Child poverty has also more than halved, from 42.7% in 2014, to 20.5% in 2021/2022 [UNDP 2023: 15]. The story, is, however, variable: in the province of Preah Vihear and Stung Treng the poverty level in 2022 was 34.6%. The new Prime Minister has focused on the recovering economy, announcing that Cambodia aims to become a country of upper middle income by 2030, and high income by 2050. Although commentators are mixed on whether this is possible, Cambodia's post-pandemic recovery is looking promising, and if the 2030 target seems feasible over the next year or two, it will certainly strengthen the ruling party's claim to economic success, bolstering their rule.

Manufacturing for exports was the first industry to begin recovery, although the levels remained lower than hoped, primarily due to global interest rates and the cost-of-living crisis across the globe. While there was an initial upsurge in 2022, the Asian Development Bank reported that export of garments, footwear, and travel items had declined by 18.6% in the first half of 2023 compared to 2022. To overcome this shrinkage, the government reportedly had to tap into its savings to deal with a US\$ 412 million deficit [Suy 2023, 14 December]. Despite this, export of garments, footwear, and travel items still made up over 60% of Cambodia's exported goods, equalling 10% of the nation's total income [Medina 2023, 4 October]. Other industries, however, including automotive, solar panels, furniture and, unu-

sually, bicycle exports (in 2022 Cambodia became one of the world's top five bicycle exporters), rose [ADB 2023].

Following a catastrophic year for tourism in 2021 (with only 196,495 people, the lowest recorded figures of tourists since 1994), in March 2022 Cambodia eased many of its COVID-related requirements (including the requirement for proof of a negative PCR test) and reintroduced the «Visa on Arrival» service that had been suspended in 2020 [Ministry of Health 2022, 17 March]. Perhaps in part because of this, 2022 showed a significant increase in tourist numbers, with 2,276,626 international visitors arriving. Numbers rose again in 2023: by September, over 3 million visitors had arrived from overseas [Ministry of Tourism 2023]. There is still some way to go, however, before tourism reaches the pre-pandemic levels of the 6,610,592 international visitors seen in 2019 [Ministry of Tourism 2022]. While China's zero-COVID policy has limited tourists from there, visitors from other parts of Asia are once again topping the numbers of visitors to Cambodia, with the highest numbers in 2023 coming from Thailand and Vietnam [Ministry of Tourism 2023].

Following some vacillations, inflation was eased to 2.9% by December 2022 due to the stabilization of energy and food prices [World Bank 2023]. Minimum wage for garment and textile workers was increased to US\$ 200pcm, up from US\$ 194 pcm in 2022 [Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training 2024]. Despite this, microfinance continues to be a problem for much of the population. Almost 3 million people are in debt due to microfinance loans. Numerous studies have found that rather than bolstering small businesses and local communities, microfinance often leads to inescapable cycles of debt. The result in Cambodia has been forced land sales, the removal of children from school so they can go to work, and a rise in the number of deaths by suicide [Brook 2023, 11 November]. As a result, in 2023, the four companies that control the majority of the Cambodian market were put under review, and an investigation was opened by the International Finance Corp's watchdog [Brook 2023, 11 November]. The financial position within the country is part of a wider trend that maintains Cambodia's elite and enables them to continue their rule with impunity. While Hun Manet has made a statement to address corruption within public administration, there has been no statement regarding either micro-finance or inequality overall. Indeed, in a statement on the launch of the Cambodian Financial Technology Development Policy 2023-2028, the PM encouraged banks to increase loans to micro, small, and medium size businesses, and urged the National Bank to ease some regulations on banks and microfinance providers [Hun 2023].

3.1. *China-US-Vietnam relations and trade*

Hun Sen was always a political pragmatist, and as such, Cambodia has long shifted between China and the US, aligning with each as deemed most

useful at the time. As Pich and Aun state in their assessment of Cambodian foreign relations, «the principles of non-interference, permanent neutrality, non-alignment, peaceful coexistence with neighbours, territorial integrity and national sovereignty, as enshrined in Article 53 of Cambodian constitution, continue to serve as a roadmap for Cambodia’s foreign policy direction» [Pich & Aun 2023]. In 2022, attention was directed towards the US, while in 2023 it swung back to China. These moves most likely related to the ASEAN chair in 2022, and the Cambodian general elections in 2023. This political pragmatism was no doubt part of what has ensured the ongoing leadership of the CPP, with the Hun family at the helm. Because both China and the US view Cambodia as strategically important [Kin 2023], over the decades it has become clear that few, if any, actions of the CPP will threaten these foreign alliances in the long-term. As such, these states have both, inadvertently (or not), supported the solidification of dynastic rule by the CPP.

Despite identifying several barriers to trade (including high levels of corruption, lack of transparency in customs and excise, irregularities in government procurement policy, lax counterfeit laws, and foreign investment barriers [United States Trade Representative 2023: 53-55]), the US was Cambodia’s largest trading partner during the review period. There had been some tension between the two states following the 2018 elections, but by 2022 the relationship was back on firm ground, with the US Department of State [2022] declaring that «our two peoples share an enduring friendship». In 2022, US\$ 446 million worth of US goods were imported into Cambodia, a 7.3% increase from 2021. Meanwhile, Cambodia exported US\$ 12.2 billion of goods to the US, an almost 40% increase on the previous year, and Cambodia’s FDI in the US was US\$ 8 million [United States Trade Representative 2023]. In August 2023, the Cambodian government requested that the US Generalized System of Preferences, which had ended in 2020, be renewed, to allow Cambodian products to be exported duty-free to the US [Rim 2023]. This was still under consideration as we went to press.

As well as being the largest trading partner, in the financial year of 2022¹ the US allocated US\$ 100.5 billion aid to Cambodia [Lum 2022]. Although following the July 2023 elections relations cooled, with the US withholding US\$ 18 million in aid to the country, following a meeting of Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Manet and US Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland at the UN General Assembly on 22 September, by October this aid was restored. A spokesperson from USAID stated that this reinstatement was «part of our commitment to helping advance a brighter and healthier future for the people of Cambodia in a more prosperous, democratic, and independent country where all voices are heard» [Meyn & Noy 2023, 3 October].

1. In Cambodia the financial year coincides with the solar year.

Despite this re-asserted alliance, the US is wary of Cambodia's relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC). As well as re-declaring their friendship, USAID's statement in October 2023 urged Cambodia not to allow any other country to have control of its territory, «including at Ream naval base» [Meyn & Noy 2023, 3 October]. Before this, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022, passed in Congress on 14 March 2022, made possible the suspension of support to Cambodia if harassment and violent suppression of the opposition did not end, but also included a provision enabling aid to Cambodia to be limited if the secretary of state believed the country was not maintaining sovereignty against the PRC [CAA 2022].

These concerns arise from the substantial financial, but also military, investment by the PRC into Cambodia, and assumed political influence related to this. China owned over 40% of Cambodia's foreign debt in 2022 [World Bank 2023], and over two-thirds of the US\$ 2 billion Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to Cambodia in 2023 came from the PRC. This investment is centred on infrastructure projects such as highways, solar energy, and automotive manufacturing [Dettoni 2023, 11 December]. Of particular note were the inauguration of the Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville expressway in October 2022, and Siem Reap-Angkor International Airport in October 2023. Both are part of China's Belts and Roads Initiative, and the airport was the first built under the «build-operate-transfer» model [Cheang and Simith 2023, 16 November]. Its inauguration was seen as positive for Cambodia's economic recovery, as well as a means of strengthening the political and economic ties between the two nations. A second Chinese-funded airport, in Phnom Penh, is due to open in 2024.

The most concerning aspect of China's assistance to the Southeast Asian country for the rest of the geopolitical landscape is regarding the military. In 2023, the Golden Dragon joint military exercise, suspended in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was restarted and attended by over 3,000 military personnel from both nations as well as dignitaries from several ASEAN countries. This followed the beginning of upgrades to Ream naval base, which started in June 2022, funded by China. Rumours abounded as to China's intent with the base. Confirmed plans include a deep-sea port and access for the Chinese military [Hutt 2023, 14 December], however, very little else has been made public. Satellite images taken in 2023 indicated the construction of a new pier similar to one at the People's Liberation Army Support Base in Djibouti, the PRC's only other overseas military base [Sevastopulo 2023, 24 July]. According to Craig Singleton, Senior Fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, and China Program deputy director, this pier can support any warship in the Chinese arsenal [Narin and Noy 2023, 26 July]. This has raised concerns, particularly for the US. However, both Cambodia and China have repeatedly stated that the improvements are being made to improve Cambodia's capacities, and not as an intended outpost for the PRC.

Despite their close ties, and while some critics have viewed Cambodia as a puppet of China, the People's Republic of China does not appear to interfere with Cambodia's domestic politics. The differing stances over the Russia-Ukraine war indicate that Cambodia remains autonomous, if still intricately entwined with China politically and economically. Rather, China's support seems to have enabled Hun Sen and the CPP to consolidate their control and power – a mutual non-interference policy that benefits both. It is yet to be seen how Hun Manet will manage this relationship, although China was one of the first countries he visited after his appointment to PM.

Meanwhile, economic and political ties remained close between Cambodia and Vietnam, and Vietnam continued as the third largest trading partner, and one of the top five investors in Cambodia. In 2022, trade between the two nations totalled US\$ 10.7 billion [AP 2023, 11 December], and by October 2023, their bilateral trade had reached US\$ 7.1 billion [Vietnam News Agency 2023, 12 November]. According to a report by the Vietnamese News Agency, in a meeting with Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh in November 2023, Hun Manet proposed furthering ties between the two nations [Vietnam News Agency 2023, 12 November]. This seems to have paid off: so far in 2024 both tourism and trade from Vietnam to Cambodia have reportedly increased [Hin 2024]. In addition, as part of the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle, Vietnam has invested over US\$ 1.7 billion in 44 projects in the nation. While this agreement aims to strengthen relationships between the nations in general, one of its stated aims is to connect the three economies, to improve overall competitiveness and «close the development gap with other ASEAN members» [Linh 2024].

Despite consolidating the relationships with these three states, the CPP did not sit on its laurels. As well as the free trade agreements coming into force with China and Korea in 2022, so too did the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which Cambodia is signatory to. As a free trade agreement between 15 countries across Asia and the Pacific, representing 30% of the global population and 30% of global GDP, this agreement has created the world's largest free trade agreement area [Zhu, Chen & Yao 2022]. Cambodia also sought to extend relations to other countries, with former Foreign Minister Prak Sokhohn making visits to Morocco and Egypt in March 2023 towards this end [Pich & Aun 2023]. The new PM has continued the path of diversification, making visits to France, Malaysia, and Japan to name but a few. While some have said that the number of leaders welcoming Hun Manet and other CPP officials after the handover of power is a sign of hope and a chance to start afresh, for many it shows that Cambodia's dynastic autocracy is internationally accepted and secure.

3.2. *Regional relations: ASEAN and the Southeast Asian Games*

Cambodia proved itself to be a strong political player in Southeast Asia during 2022 and 2023. In January 2022, Cambodia took over the Chair of

ASEAN for its third turn at the leadership. Numerous challenges faced this role, including dealing with political tensions in Myanmar, tensions related to the South China Sea, tense US-China relations, and the Russia-Ukraine war. Hun Sen's approach was to «prioritize initiatives aimed at strengthening ASEAN community-building and ASEAN unity», emphasizing collective approaches to dealing with issues [Lin 2023: 90]. Cambodia oversaw several key initiatives and the publication of critical statements as part of its stewardship. This included the ASEAN Leaders Vision Statement (setting out aspirations and interests of the ASEAN states), the ASEAN Leaders Statement published on 55th Anniversary of ASEAN (laying out ASEAN's key principles, including community building), advancing ASEAN's interests in the Indo-Pacific, and overseeing the agreement, in-principle, of membership for Timor Leste, as the 11th member of ASEAN, with rights for representatives to observe future meetings. Cambodia oversaw summits with key external relations during its stewardship, including the US, the EU, Canada and India, as well as the 17th East Asia summit. «India and the United States were both granted Comprehensive Strategic Partnership status with ASEAN» [Lin 2023: 96]. In May 2023, the first ever US-ASEAN Special Summit was held in Washington [Gallagher 2022].

One contested aspect of Cambodia's stewardship was relations with the military junta of Myanmar. Despite protests from within Myanmar and beyond, early in his chairmanship Hun Sen travelled to Myanmar and met with Snr. General Min Aung Hlaing [*Radio Free Asia* 2022, 7 January], shortly afterwards inviting him to the upcoming ASEAN summit [*Reuters* 2022, 25 January]. Cambodian foreign minister Prak Sokhonn visited Myanmar twice during the year, and while General Min Aung Hlaing was banned from an October summit, a representative was invited in his stead. The approach caused tension within ASEAN, and while some progress was made in securing humanitarian aid in Myanmar [Lin 2023], such engagement raised criticism of legitimating, and thereby strengthening, the regime [Kumar 2022, 14 January].

Meanwhile the ASEAN stance on the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 received much praise. While chair of ASEAN, Cambodia co-sponsored two UN resolutions: one in March calling for Russia to withdraw from Ukraine [United Nations 2022a], and one in October condemning the annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts [United Nations 2022b]. While Cambodia's role in this took some by surprise (due to its condemnation of former ally Russia and its call to uphold international law), the stance was consistent with Hun Sen's view of sovereignty, which has always supported non-interference. As part of this, Cambodia used the chair's prerogative to invite president Zelensky to speak at an ASEAN forum, ensuring the Ukrainian voice was heard in the region [Lin 2023]. Phnom Penh also oversaw the accession of Ukraine to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in November 2022; the 7th country to accede un-

der Cambodia's chairmanship after Denmark, Greece, the Netherlands, Oman, Qatar and the UAE [ASEAN Secretariat 2023]. That said, despite Cambodia's open support of Ukraine, in July 2023 Hun Sen issued a firm statement in opposition to distribution of cluster bombs from the US to Ukraine. This was a direct result of Cambodia's own experience of cluster munitions, which continue to maim and kill hundreds of Cambodians to date, more than 40 years after they were laid. Hun Sen openly called on NATO and US allies to prevent the distribution, stating that it would be a tragedy for the Ukrainian people [Son 2023].

In negotiating and overseeing such proceedings, Hun Sen showed that he was more than just an autocratic strongman: rather he proved that he and his party could be astute, forward-thinking political leaders. This was further supported by the (mostly) successful hosting of the 32nd Southeast Asian Games in May 2023. Hosting a mega-event such as an international sports competition not only provides an opportunity to showcase the country, but also the economic, administrative, and infrastructural capacities of the host nation.

The facilities built for the Southeast Asian Games, primarily funded by China, included a 60,000-seater stadium and a multi-purpose sports complex with an Olympic size pool, running track, tennis courts, and accommodation for the athletes. Bringing employment and volunteering roles to almost 7,000 people, the games provided much needed positive news for Cambodia, following the previous few challenging years. Although there were some tensions (the flags from Vietnam, Indonesia, and Myanmar were displayed upside down, for example), and complaints about poor quality facilities, the games were seen as a success, at least in Cambodia. Much like the (mostly) successful leadership of ASEAN, the games provided an opportunity for soft diplomacy; a chance to bolster their international reputation as well as providing regeneration and development opportunities; vital in a year when Cambodia's political reputation, particularly once the elections came about, was at its lowest almost certainly since the 1997 coup in which the CPP took overall control of the country.

4. Arts, culture, and international decolonization

One final aspect is worth mentioning in the consideration of 2022 and 2023 for Cambodia's place in the global sphere. In 2022 and 2023, several priceless looted antiquities were returned to the kingdom, including three bronze statues dating back to the Champa Kingdom. The statues had been bought for over US\$ 1.5 million by the National Gallery of Australia in 2011. Looting of ancient treasures has been common in Cambodia since French colonial times, but the insecure years from the 1960s to the 1990s

saw its escalation, and it is thought that, during those decades, over 4,000 statues were stolen and sold abroad [Ford & Worthington 2023, 2 August]. Many of the more valuable ones passed through the hands of international art dealer and collector Douglas Latchford. Looted antiquities sold by him were returned from across the US [Cohen 2022, 9 August] and the National Gallery of Australia [Ford and Worthington 2023, 2 August]. Also, in December 2023, New York's Met Museum agreed to return more than a dozen artefacts thought to be the result of trafficking [Campbell 2023, 16 December].

These returns mark a renewed attention not only to culture and the arts in Cambodia, but to international geopolitical norms inspired by the values of decolonization. The renewal of the arts and the media attention the repatriation of such antiquities potentially herald the beginning of a different kind of regional and international cooperation. What this means for the new dynasty is yet to be seen, but claiming legitimacy through ancient (and sometimes supernatural) continuation was already a rhetoric of Hun Sen and other CPP officials. Given his more contemporary political sensitivity, continuing such repatriations is likely to be looked upon favourably by the new PM. It will also appeal to those in Cambodia (and wider afield) in support of ongoing decolonization and deimperialization, and, as such, may provide a useful means for maintaining, or growing, political legitimacy for the 'new' CPP.

5. Conclusion: a view of what's to come – same same, not different.

2022 and 2023 were significant years for Cambodia, not only in the historical political handover of leadership (marking the completion of political transformation to dynastic autocracy), but also because of its regional competence, economic recovery, and re-establishment of relations with China, the US, Vietnam, and others. As we move on in 2024, the patterns set in the last few years look likely to continue. China and Cambodia consolidated their relationship through the joint launch of the year of people-to-people exchange, aiming to promote tourism and connectivity, while the US affirmed its relationship with Cambodia by means of diplomatic meetings starting at the beginning of the year. Prime Minister Hun Manet blamed foreign media for the collapse of Sihanoukville's development, while despite a statement by the PM in December 2023 affirming the ban of hydro dams on the Mekong, this year, feasibility studies related to two hydropower dam projects on the Mekong River began to be conducted by companies owned by Cambodian tycoon Kith Meng. In January, opposition leader Kem Sokha's appeal was denied, union leader Seng Theary was detained, and Hun Sen, who remains powerful despite handing over the prime ministership to his son, reportedly filed a complaint against human rights ad-

vocate Soeng Senkaruna, demanding US\$ 500,000 in damages. While some were hopeful that Hun Manet's rule would be more liberal and transformative than his father's, his political record during 2023 and the beginning of 2024 suggests that he is set to repeat Hun Sen's patterns and cement the dynastic autocracy of the nation.

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MYANMAR 2023: NEW CONFLICTS AND COALITIONS RESHAPE WAR
NARRATIVE, CHALLENGING AN EMBATTLED JUNTA

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The crisis in Myanmar continues to eschew easy categorisations or even a simple meta-narrative of the post-coup dynamics. The complexities on the ground, including the fluidity of context-specific alliances and conflict dynamics, have come to encompass an ever-growing number of regions across the country. In 2023, as in the preceding years, the Myanmar Armed Forces failed in their efforts to consolidate power and continued to lack control of both people and territory. While there were continuities across recent years, which perhaps suggests a sense of tragic and protracted déjà vu, 2023 was not just another year of 'much of the (grim) same'. The greatest novelty was the escalation of violence in Shan State, which had previously avoided much of the anti-coup armed resistance, and the rekindling of violence in Rakhine State. Operation 1027 saw an emerging coalition of ethnic armed organisations and even People's Defence Forces in Shan State in October 2023 take on the military and expose its vulnerabilities. While this may seem optimistic in current circumstances, the military appears increasingly embattled, and its forces are spread thin. Cyclone Mocha further deepened the humanitarian crisis, especially in the western coastal areas. International support from Russia and China remains solid, with the cracks within ASEAN and other neighbours coming to the fore. China became more engaged throughout the year, partly to decrease volatility on its borders. Beijing also sought to enhance its leverage over all parties and containing the western alignment of the pro-democracy movement. Overall, coordination among the anti-junta forces increased compared to previous years, but a united front remained elusive.

KEYWORDS – Operation 1027; Cyclone Mocha; China; Rohingya; Shan.

1. Introduction. Beyond a crisis paradigm?

How much can already escalated violence escalate further? Post-coup Myanmar has been pushing this proposition further and further. The dynamics in Myanmar not only eschew easy categorisations (especially binaries), but also a simple meta-narrative of the post-coup dynamics. The complexities on the ground, the fluidity of context- and locale-specific alliances and the dynamics of the conflicts among a dizzying array of ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) driven by territorial ambitions, economic interests and ethnic nationalism have contributed to expose and debunk the myth

of Myanmar as a single polity [Htet Min Lwin and Walton 2023; Loong 2022a; Fumagalli 2023].

In 2023, as in the preceding post-coup years, the State Administration Council (SAC, as the junta calls itself) failed to consolidate power and continued to lack control of both people and territory. There were some noticeable continuities in the political, economic and international realms, not least in the widely perceived stalemate and constant escalation of violence, which suggest a sense of *déjà vu* [Farely and Simpson 2024] alongside the humanitarian crisis resulting from Cyclone Mocha, the handling of which, as in the case of Cyclone Nargis in 2009, was botched by the generals.

Yet, 2023 was not another year of ‘much of the (grim) same’. Conflicts intensified in Kayah State in the first half of the year, but the greatest elements of novelty were the escalation of violence in Shan State in late October, which had previously avoided much of the anti-coup armed resistance due to local factors, and the rekindling of violence in Rakhine.

Operation 1027 saw an emerging coalition of EAOs and even People’s Defence Forces (PDFs) in Shan State in October 2023 take on the military and expose its vulnerabilities, which points to a potential turning point. The losses inflicted on the military and the territorial achievements on the ground provided not only a morale boost across the anti-junta front but added momentum to the operations, which were followed by additional attacks against the generals across the country, particularly in Rakhine State, where tensions had already been made more acute as a result of the generals’ mis-handling of Cyclone Mocha. While any suggestion of a game-changer may sound optimistic in current circumstances, the military appears increasingly embattled, and its forces are spread thin. At the same time, international support from Russia and a gradually more engaged China remains solid, with the cracks within ASEAN and other neighbours coming to the fore. At the same time, the widespread unrest across the country has taken a toll on China-Myanmar economic cooperation, with some projects stalled or postponed and others progressing very slowly, often to the dismay of both parties. The Rohingya issue was also back in the headlines after being sidelined for a few years, although it remains unresolved.

This article argues that there is no easy meta-narrative in today’s Myanmar and that any assessment needs to start from the bottom up, from the rapidly evolving conditions on the ground, with each locality home to distinctive sets of alliances, coalitions, actors, agendas and interests [Loong 2022a; Fumagalli 2022, 2023]. When assessing the course of the war in Myanmar in 2022, last year’s contribution noted that to understand the situation on the ground more accurately, two steps were required [Fumagalli 2023]: one, to dispose of the fiction that Myanmar was, is and should be studied as a single polity [Fumagalli 2023: 262]; and two – and partly following from that – that Myanmar is « home to a variety of constantly

evolving geographies of war » [or warscapes,¹ Fumagalli 2023: 262]. Taken together, these notions challenge the insistent application of concepts originating in the western experience (nation-state; transition) and instead suggest a condition of, if anything, « fragmented sovereignty », conceived of as « multiple, localized autonomous cores of power » [Lund, 2011: 887; Su 2018: 23]. The situation in Shan and Rakhine States in 2023 discussed in this article is a case in point. Thus, as Htet Min Lwin and Walton aptly put it, it is time to rethink not only the applicability of concepts such as nation-state to Myanmar, but also and – more broadly – the significance of notions such as independence, autonomy and sovereignty [Htet Min Lwin and Walton 2023] or loaded concepts such as crisis [Dunford and Adikari 2024] in a context as fragmented and complex as Myanmar. Social science concepts are, perhaps by definition, highly contentious and contested, and the notion of crisis is no different. As Dunford and Adikari note, « the language of crisis flattens people’s diverse experiences of the crisis and the multiple sets of crises that people experience » [Dunford and Adikari 2014: 19]. The people of Myanmar may well « be living amidst crisis – but it does not define them, nor determine their lives or the revolutionary potential of this particular moment » [Dunford and Adikari 2014: 21]. An era of both crisis and disappointment, ridden with tensions and disruptions, the current moment also holds generative potential and is filled with new and innovative possibilities for Myanmar.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, I review the domestic situation in Myanmar, with particular attention to the state of play in key warscapes, most notably those (Shan and Rakhine States) where the level of violence had previously been (relatively) contained. Next, I turn to the economy, where more investors have exited the country, although some, controversially, remain. Sanctions do bite, but they have not engendered a behavioural change. Finally, I discuss the international dimension of Myanmar’s crisis, where the waning of western clout and the increasingly apparent splits within ASEAN have opened key opportunities for Russia, China and other countries (such as Thailand and India) to make inroads and take on a new role in the country. As the international community ponders how to approach the Myanmar crisis, China has revamped its engagement in the hopes of strengthening bilateral relations. The junta’s ‘friends in need’ are gambling on the military’s ability to stay in power in the near future.

1. Warscapes are « sites of a complex and multidimensional agenda of social struggles and life projects » [Nordstrom 1997]. Warscapes are « differentiated arenas, networks and connections of relational spaces in which distinct human trajectories exist » [Korf *et al.* 2010: 385].

2. *Domestic politics*

The year 2022 ended with the conclusion of the sham court trials of deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi, with an additional sentence of seven years added to a cumulative period of thirty-three years – on fifteen charges overall – to be spent in jail [*Nikkei Asia* 2022, 30 December; Ghitis 2023]. Charges included breaching the official secrets law, incitement against the military, violation of COVID-19 measures/restrictions, violating financial regulations, abuse of authority in the procurement of a helicopter and causing a loss to state funds. Although of course Suu Kyi has had long experience with the military's attempts to push her out of active politics, this time, it appears that life in politics really is over for her. Suu Kyi later received a minor pardon, shaving six years off the overall sentence.

In January 2023, the SAC announced that it was extending the state of emergency (initially imposed on 1 February 2021) for another six months. In July, it subsequently extended it again (the fourth such time since the February 2021 coup) on the grounds that the SAC needs more time to prepare for the elections (which Senior General Min Aung Hlaing had announced for August 2023), including the need to update the voters' register and, oddly, carry out another census [*Associated Press* 2023; Faulder 2023; *Nikkei Asia* 2023c, 1 February]. What is questionable is not that a census might be required (the previous one was conducted, among many controversies surrounding the status of the stateless Rohingya population, in 2014), but rather that doing so constitutes a condition for holding elections. The reality, more plainly, rests upon the fact that order has broken down everywhere and the junta controls neither people nor territory.

The military has given no sign of a willingness to compromise, having subsequently dissolved the National League for Democracy following a process of re-registration of Myanmar's political parties in the late winter and spring [*Nikkei Asia* 2023j, 12 April].

Myanmar's humanitarian crisis deepened further in April, as Cyclone Mocha made its landfall in the coastal areas of south-western Myanmar (Rakhine State), where over a million people were affected by the devastation caused by Mocha, the lack of preparation in the lead-up to the natural disaster and the mismanagement and restriction of access to international organisations by the junta [OCHA 2023a]. The SAC's mismanagement of Cyclone Mocha, both in terms of preparations and the handling of the aftermath, served as a reminder of the military's callousness and also gave a sense of *déjà vu*, given the similarities with the military's recalcitrance to international assistance during Cyclone Nargis in 2009. Tensions started to resurface in Rakhine between the military and the Arakan Army (AA), as the tenuous ceasefire in place since 2020 started to look increasingly precarious [Kyaw Hsan Hlaing 2023].

Beyond Mocha, as the year drew to a close, Myanmar showed record displacement and extensive humanitarian disasters confronting the civilian population, with more than 2.6 million people estimated to have been displaced nationwide, including over 600,000 forced to flee since Operation 1027 and a whopping 18 million people estimated to need humanitarian assistance for 2024 [OCHA 2023b].

2.1. *Junta changes tactics, as violence escalates in Kayah, Chin State and the Dry Zone*

Myanmar may have already evolved from a grassroots rebellion to a series of protracted insurgencies waged by a smaller number of armed outfits, some of which are coordinating their actions with each other, while others advance their agenda and operations individually. The sheer diversity of the conditions on the ground have also confronted the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) with significant challenges, as a single approach to tackling the armed resistance has not worked so far. Since the coup, the junta has faced an axis of resistance from southeast to northwest [*Frontier Myanmar* 2023a, 9 January; 2023b, 23 January]. This changed in 2023, as new challenges arose for the military in the northeast (Shan State) and southwest (Rakhine), which forced the junta into major military operations along both axes.

The regime's main post-coup strategy focused on breaking the partnerships of the EAOs deemed to be more closely aligned to the National Unity Government (so, for example, the Karen National Union and the Karenni National Progressive Party), while dedicating relatively fewer resources to combating the smaller and more poorly armed PDFs, for which the SAC relied primarily on scorched-earth tactics [Michaels 2023a, 2023b, 2023c]. This was based on the assessment that coalition-building and coordination appeared to be a challenge too substantial for the anti-military resistance, so a traditional divide-and-rule would suffice. In practical terms this meant, at least until the summer, that the SAC would offer dialogue and concessions to EAOs that would not support the PDFs and the NUG, while punishing the others with air strikes and artillery, hence the considerable violence in Kayin, Kayah and Kachin States.

In March 2023, the junta launched a large-scale offensive to dislodge Karenni fighters from their strongholds, albeit with only mixed results [Michaels 2023d]. Both the pro- and anti-junta fighters focused on the key roads and strategic junctions to force the disruption of each other's supplies [Michaels 2023e]. In June 2023, the pro-junta front reported mass defections (over 600 fighters) among the military-aligned Border Guard Forces in Kayah State [Hkun Sett *et al.* 2023], and over the summer, anti-junta forces managed to establish a form of parallel authority (the Karenni State Interim Executive Council) in this small state in eastern Myanmar. Since 2021, Kayah has been one of the main battlegrounds in the war against the mili-

tary regime, where resistance has been led by the veteran EAO Karenni National Progressive Party, and where several anti-junta forces have managed to take control of large portions of territory, while showing a high level of coordination among different groups relative to anywhere else in Myanmar. Kayah State matters strategically to both the resistance the regime as a link between resistance strongholds to the south and north, as well as a potential launching pad for attacks against the capital Nay Pyi Taw [Michaels 2023f and 2023g].

Overall, the coup shattered the stability in this small and remote state and reignited the resistance among the Karenni people. The KNPP has provided arms and training to local PDFs, and later they all combined in the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force, one of the strongest EAOs since the coup [Michaels 2023f, 2023g].

2.2. *Shan State and Operation 1027*

Fragmenting the anti-junta resistance has been the military's main strategy in the aftermath of the 2021 coup. To that end, the junta has relied on the use of air strikes and heavy artillery and, politically and economically, on China's support, as discussed in section 4.2 below. Ensuring coordination, both operational and strategic, among the anti-military forces has been a tall order both before and after the coup, as many EAOs pursued their own individual territorial or economic interests, with little interest in country-wide issues or approaches.

Such a predicament in which anti-coup forces have been mired began to change in the most unlikely of places: Shan State. Shan is a fractured state, with organisations as much at war with the military as with each other. An important umbrella grouping is the members of Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC), which includes seven EAOs. The FPNCC is an alliance formed in 2017 by the AA, KIA, MND-AA, National Democratic Alliance Army, TNLA, Shan State Army-North (the armed wing of the Shan State Progress Party) and the UWSA. All these groups are based in Shan state except for KIA and AA. The AA, MNDAA, TNLA and KIA are also part of the Northern Alliance, which was established in 2016. In 2018, the TNLA, the AA and the MDNAA drifted away from the KIA, as the latter signalled its desire to opt for a bilateral ceasefire with the Myanmar authorities and set up the 3BA in 2019. Until the latter part of 2023, most of Shan State – the largest ethnically defined administrative unit in the country – had been spared much of the junta/anti-military violence, just like Mon State and, to some extent, even Rakhine [Loong 2022b]. The situation in northeastern Myanmar differs from that in other parts of the country in that most of the fighting has not been between the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) and the anti-junta forces, but rather among the EAOs themselves. Up to 2023, the opposition was not just between the MAF and the Kachin Independence Organisation, the Restoration Council

of Shan State, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Shan State Progress Army [Fumagalli 2023: 267]. As Sai Wansai put it, Shan State is home to « deeply entrenched conflicts among a dizzying array of EAOs driven by territorial ambitions, economic interests and ethnic nationalism have prevented most of Shan from joining the anti-junta struggle » [Sai Wansai 2023]. This abruptly changed with Operation 1027, the set of operations carried out by the 3 Brotherhood Alliance (3BA), a coalition of EAOs against the MAF. The 3BA consists of the AA, the MNDAA and the TNLA.

The three groups have all emerged as posing a significant threat to the military over the past ten years. Both the MNDAA and TNLA have long aimed to establish territorial control of the north of the state. The MNDAA has been also seeking to right a perceived historical wrong, as in 2009 the military expelled it from the Kokang Self-Administered Zone and installed border guards from a rival Kokang faction in its place. Current junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing was in charge of that operation. Similarly, the TNLA is an EAO seeking to consolidate its control of an autonomous Ta'ang homeland in Shan State, and it also aims to connect its territory to the Chinese border, adjacent to the Kokang district. Thus, the groups have overlapping interests, which provided an incentive to launch a joint operation. By contrast, AA does not have territorial ambitions in Shan State. Its leadership operates from rebel-held lands on the Chinese border; it has economic interests there, but no territorial aims outside of Rakhine State (with exception of Paletwa township in south Chin State).

The name of the operation comes from the day the operations were launched (27 October). On that day, forces from the 3BA, alongside allies such as the Kachin Independence Army, the Bamar People's Liberation Army and local PDFs launched an offensive in northeastern Myanmar and seized the towns of Chin Shwe Haw, Hpawng Hseng, Panng Hseng and Hseni and Mone Koe, ultimately claiming control of over 100 outposts previously held by the military [*The Irrawaddy* 2023a, 11 November]. Several other resistance forces also participated in the attacks, which brought the fighting close to Mandalay.

The MNDAA spearheaded the offensive; it has claimed two border crossings with China – Mong Ko in Muse township and Chine Shwe Haw in Laukkai township – and claimed that the three main objectives of the offensive were retaking Kokang territory, ending the dictatorship and establishing federal democracy. Operation 1027 constituted the most serious challenge to the military since the February 2021 coup [International Crisis Group 2023c; Maung Maung Oo and Kyin Sin 2023]. As such, it has several important lessons for both the resistance and the military.

First, the MAF never lost so much territory so quickly. Trade routes between Myanmar and China were blocked and large amounts of ammunition and weapons were seized, along with eight armoured personnel carri-

ers and tanks. Anti-regime forces took several towns even outside Shan, including the strategically impactful Kawlin and Khampet in Sagaing region [Myers 2023]. In the case of Kawlin, this was the first time PDF units had captured a district capital, thus demonstrating that resistance forces could seize and hold settlements despite the air supremacy of the MAF. Resistance forces also sought to surround other strategic towns, such as Laukkai and Nwngkhio, and seize other locations near the border with China.

Second, what struck the attention of the warring parties was the statement by the 3BA commenting on the operations: « we are dedicated to eradicating the oppressive military dictatorship, a shared aspiration of the entire Myanmar populace ». As the operation was launched, the NUG expressed its support and announced it would join forces with the 3BA. The NUG appeared to be unaware of the preparation of the offensive, although the PDF battalions were junior partners in Operation 1027, providing important human power, but serving military objectives defined by the EAO commanders [Moon and Dunant 2023].

Third, coalition-building is vital if the resistance is to shift the conflict landscape in the country and take on the strategic initiative against the military. At the same time, while there might be a consensus about what pro-democracy and EAO forces do not want now (military rule), there is no vision of what the day after (military dictatorship) would look like.

Although the operation had immediate cross-state repercussions, one should be reminded of the particularities of Shan State and its local politics.

Overall, local dynamics and a situation in flux demand analytical caution. While, on the one hand, the military is increasingly overstretched despite its air power and artillery advantages, on the other hand, strategic coordination and coalition-building remain a distant prospect, particularly as both the junta and China are keen on the resistance remaining divided.

2.3. *Violence returns to Rakhine*

While the situation in Shan State does not represent an existential threat for the regime, it revealed a series of failures that could prove perilous for the regime. It could also crucially embolden other opposition groups. Facing significant resistance in the east and where it least expected it, the regime was later confronted with additional waves of attacks. A few days after Operation 1027 began, one of the country's largest EAOs, the KIO, led an assault on the northwestern town of Kawlin, an important administrative centre in Sagaing region. Next, on 7 November, resistance forces in Kayah State kicked off Operation 1107 by attacking military targets in the south of the state and, on 11 November, the state capital Loikaw. Third, even more significantly, the AA seized the moment to press its advantage. On 13 November, the AA launched a series of attacks against security forces across several townships of Rakhine State, which marked the end of an informal ceasefire that had endured in Rakhine since November 2020, aside from a

few months of fighting in 2022. In the months following the 2021 coup, the AA had discouraged the population of Rakhine from protesting against the SAC and joining the broader anti-military resistance, including the nationwide strikes and the civil disobedience movement. Despite the significance of operations in the west, the AA was unable to replicate the success of Operation 1027 in Shan, as this most likely pushed the AA to launch its attacks earlier than it would otherwise have done, because it had been expending its resources elsewhere (i.e. in Shan) alongside the 3BA and even in Kachin State, as the AA's understanding of the truce with the military only applied to the territory of Rakhine and not elsewhere in Myanmar.

3. *Economy*

Despite a timidly encouraging mid-year assessment by the World Bank ('a fragile recovery') [World Bank 2023a, later reversed in the end of year report, World Bank 2023b], Myanmar's economy continued to struggle throughout the year, with serious and lasting effects on lives and livelihoods.

Myanmar's economy grew around 3% but still at a far slower pace than before the pandemic [Nikkei Asia 2023b, 31 January]. Household incomes remained weak, which limited the ability of domestic demand to fuel economic growth. The disruption to supply chains, the surge in construction material and costs added pressure to an already high level of inflation. The Myanmar currency, the Kyat, continued on its spiral of depreciation. Logically intended, but oddly executed moves by the Central Bank of Myanmar led to the emergence of three foreign exchange rates, with the official rate of 2,100 kyat to the US\$ (for individuals wanting to sell foreign currency) and the black market (and officially prohibited) one of about 4,000 kyat accompanied by a third rate at about 2,920 kyat, allowed by the CBM and aimed at exporting or importing businesses [Nikkei Asia 2023n, 27 June]. The agricultural sector and the garment industry (the latter spared by the 'everything but arms' approach to sanctions) appeared resilient [Nikkei Asia 2023a, 30 January], but exporters faced challenges from waning external demand, overvalued official exchange rates, exchange conversion requirement, higher costs and reduced availability of imported inputs.

3.1. *Western sanctions*

Western policy towards Myanmar remained the same, despite its questionable efficacy: sanctions and yet more sanctions. The effectiveness of international sanctions towards the country has been subject to extensive enquiry and critique [Jones 2015], and yet 2023 entailed, in this case, more of the same. Western hesitation – or inaction, in fact – was well illustrated by the debates surrounding the United States' 2022 National Defense Authorisa-

tion Act and the BURMA Act encapsulated therein [Fumagalli 2023]. The west is clearly preoccupied with crises elsewhere – in Ukraine, the Middle East and Taiwan. The war in Myanmar paled in terms of western support, as noted last year [Fumagalli 2023].

On 20 July 2023, the Council of the European Union imposed a new round of sanctions against six individuals and one entity « in response to the continuing escalation of violence and rave violation of human rights » [Council of the European Union 2023a]. The new targets included three union ministers for immigration and population, labour and health and sport and two members of the SAC, as well as the ‘No. 2 Mining Enterprise’, a state-owned enterprise controlled by and generating revenue for the MAF. The individuals and assets are subject to asset freeze and, in the case of the individuals, travel bans. On 11 December, the Council added an additional four persons and two entities (including a Union minister, two members of the SAC, the ‘Royal Shune Lei Company Ltd’ and the Star Sapphire Group of Companies’) to EU sanctions in its 8th round of sanctions, for a cumulative total of 103 individuals and 21 entities under sanctions as of 31 December 2023 [Council of the European Union 2023b].

On 31 October, the US Government imposed sanctions on the ‘Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise’ (MOGE), one of the country’s most lucrative enterprises [US Government 2023]. The US imposed a ban on financial transactions involving MOGE in the attempt to disrupt the regime’s access to the US financial system and curtail its ability to perpetrate atrocities, following similar sanctions imposed on MOGE by the EU in February 2022 [Fumagalli 2023]. On 31 October, the UK government also imposed further sanctions on the junta by imposing restrictive measures on 5 individuals and one entity, taking the total to 25 individuals and 29 entities [Gilroy *et al.* 2023]. Although they have not thus far altered the SAC’s conduct, the toughening of the regime of sanctions was not insignificant, in that some non-western countries began adjusting their dealings with the generals. Foreign banks have begun to restrict the state-owned bank’s access to international finance, depriving the junta of much needed currency reserves. Bangladesh, for example, announced it was freezing the accounts of two banks (MICB and MFTB), comprising more than \$1m in asserts [*The Irrawaddy* 2023a]. Singapore’s United Overseas Bank (UOB) also notified Myanmar banks that it would limit their access to funds and would only allow transaction between UOB accounts in early August [*Nikkei Asia* 2023q, 9 August]. In the same month, the junta’s Deputy Finance Minister, Maung Maun Win, blamed the sanctions for the country’s financial instability, claiming that « US sanctions were hurting [Myanmar’s] government’s programmes such as health, education, infrastructure building, importers and exporters » [Marston 2023]. However, just as in the previous cycles of sanctions, the junta and its cronies have become increasingly creative in their efforts to bypass them.

This included, for example, instructions by the Ministry of Energy to the Central Bank of Myanmar (disclosed in a leaked letter date 19 April 2023) to open new bank accounts in various currencies (US\$, Renminbi, Thai Baht) and under different names to handle foreign currencies in lieu of the state-owned enterprise MOGE, under European and US sanctions [Myanmar Now 2023]. Alternatives also included the dissolution of existing companies and the establishment of brand-new ones. This was the case of ‘Shwe Byain Phyu Pool and Gas Co. Ltd.’, a subsidiary of Shew Byain Phyu Group of Companies, a conglomerate and top supplier of fuel to the military, which was dissolved on 10 August [Marston 2023].

Another feature that is affecting the whole territory is the rise of transnational crime and other illegal activities. This has become especially apparent in the northern borderlands, as discussed in section 4.2 [International Crisis Group 2023a]. The trade in drugs is booming in Myanmar, with a return and surge in opium poppy cultivation after a more recent spike in synthetic drugs, methamphetamines and yaba. With the Taliban slashing opium cultivation by 95%, this trade has moved to Myanmar, with the Golden Triangle ramping up production, especially in Shan State [International Crisis Group 2023a].

3.2. *Uncertainties and dilemmas for investors*

The exodus of foreign companies has continued, with skin care business Beiersdorf, telecom giant Ooredoo, petroleum company Puma Energy and ANZ Bank leaving in 2023 [Chau and Oo 2023]. Japan’s Fast Retailing company (Uniqlo), the UK’s Marks & Spencer and Ireland’s Primark also left, although others such as H&M and Adidas continued to order from sub-contractors in Myanmar [Nikkei Asia 2023f, 1 March; 2023i, 30 March; 2023m, 31 May].

Apart from the protracted instability and violence across the country, another issue with the potential for greater negative consequences for the SAC is the energy industry and especially the natural gas sector. Natural gas is the military’s largest source of foreign currency [Nikkei Asia 2023d, 15 February; 2023e, 28 February]; as overseas energy companies pull out of gas operations in Myanmar, the potential for a crisis of dwindling revenues becomes a realistic prospect for the SAC [Nikkei Asia 2023d and 2023e]. ‘PTT Exploration and Production’ (PTTEP), a subsidiary of Thailand’s state-backed company PTT, postponed a project worth US\$ 2bn. PTTEP was a major natural gas development project in an offshore drilling area known as the M3 block. The postponed projects included the building and operation of a thermal power plant, as well as pipelines to transport gas to land. PTT had previously announced (in December 2022) that the PTT oil and retail business, which operates gas stations, would suspend its fuel storage business in Myanmar. The reason for PTT’s caution owes much to the fact that while the Thai government owns 51% of the company’s shares,

the company is traded on the Stock Exchange of Thailand, and therefore the wishes of investors need to be considered.

The assessment by investors of the opportunity and where the balance and trade-off between profits and reputational damage lies is illustrated by the decision of some to stay. Korean conglomerate POSCO, which decided to remain involved in Myanmar, received a warning for its gas exploration projects in the country, as the military-affiliated MOGE is sanctioned by the United States [Jung 2023]. Chevron, which had previously agreed to sell its entire 41.1% stake in the Yadana offshore natural gas field project [*Nikkei Asia* 2023d, 15 February; 2023e, 2023f], Myanmar's largest, to a unit of Canada's MTI energy, struggled to actually exit the market, given that, like other western investors (TotalEnergies), it wished to withdraw in an orderly manner and not hand over their investment to one of the military-aligned entities, such as the sanctioned MOGE [Reuters 2023].

4. *Foreign policy*

As noted in a previous contribution [Fumagalli 2023], the generals might have calculated that they can weather sanctions from western countries precisely because Myanmar's perceived 'isolation' is, in fact 'anything but isolation'. Rather, Myanmar's post-coup foreign policy choices entail less the hedging strategies of more recent years [Passeri and Marston 2023] and more a pragmatic, if cynical, choice whereby it relies on a smaller, select set of 'all weather partners'. As Deputy Senior General Soe Win aptly put it: Myanmar may « have to learn to walk with only a few friends ».

While this author concurs with Htet Min Lwin's argument that the anti-military resistance will be decided on domestic grounds and by domestic actors [Htet Min Lwin and Thiha Wint Aung 2023; Htet Min Lwin and Walton 2023], any chance of success by the resistance also rests upon some degree of support (political or otherwise) from international actors.

The emerging splits within ASEAN and the waning clout of the west suggest that such support is not forthcoming. Divisions among ASEAN members over how to deal with the protracted Myanmar crisis have become increasingly apparent [Choudhury and Kharisma 2023]. In 2023, Indonesia held the rotating ASEAN chairmanship, which also, so far, led to the chair appointing an ASEAN Special Envoy to Myanmar. As in the previous year, very little came out of the Envoy's activities, not least because the generals are not even remotely inclined to compromise – and nor is the anti-junta front, for that matter. Instead, what stood out in 2023 is the willingness of some figures in Thailand to engage the generals more openly than in the past. This was the case of the visit of former Thai Foreign Minister Dom Pramudwinai, who, on the occasion of his visit to Myanmar in July, claimed to have met with deposed and jailed leader Aung San Suu Kyi [*Aljazeera* 2023, 7 November; Moe Thuzar and Seah 2023a, 2023b; Tucker

2023]. There is no way to confirm his account of the meeting, but reportedly Aung San Suu Kyi ‘encouraged dialogue’, a claim that – in light of her own political career and personality – seems dubious at best. Bangkok’s recent 1.5 track diplomacy has divided ASEAN between those – typically authoritarian – members more open to re-engaging with Myanmar and those (including Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore) less willing to compromise with the generals [Fulcrum 2023]. Overall, Thailand – by hosting talks with the junta in March and the former foreign minister’s visit to Nay Pyi Taw in the summer – managed to derail Indonesia’s quiet diplomacy. Similarly, India pushed ahead with its investment projects in the border regions, including the opening of the Kaladan multimodal transit transport project, a decades-long shipping route to increase commerce between the two countries. Delhi and Nay Pyi Taw share border concerns, including an interest in eradicating armed ethnic insurgencies. Furthermore, Indian policymakers are keen that Myanmar not fall deeper into China’s orbit [Marston 2023]. This led to fairly controversial moves, such as the refusal to condemn the military’s crackdown on civilians or the decision to go ahead with senior-level military engagement [Marston 2023].

4.1. *Myanmar’s multi-dimensional ties with Russia*

Russia has emerged as junta leader Min Aung Hlaing’s preferred partner, both before the coup and since becoming Commander-in-Chief in 2011. The relationship strengthened further in the aftermath of the coup and now rests upon several pillars. First, the two countries have provided diplomatic validation to each other [Storey 2023: 3]. In February 2023, Russia and Myanmar celebrated the 75th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations. Post-coup condemnation from the west has provided Russia with a tremendous opportunity to advance its interests in the country. Three of four trips abroad since the coup by the junta leader have been to Russia. Moscow is keen to show that the SAC is not isolated. To reciprocate Russia’s solidarity, the generals have endorsed its invasion of Ukraine, the only ASEAN state to do so. Beyond bilateral ties, Russia has also provided the SAC with multiple other opportunities to break out of (perceived) international isolation, particularly in the multilateral I and organisations where Russia – and China – play a leading role. Myanmar became the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation’s dialogue partner in September 2022 and is expected to apply for membership in the BRICS grouping when, in 2024, this begins accepting new members. Myanmar has also forged closer ties with the Eurasian Economic Union, another Moscow-led organisation, with the aim of negotiating a free trade agreement in the near future. While full membership in either group remains improbable (perhaps with the distant exception of the BRICS group), this diplomatic manoeuvring highlights a level of foreign policy activism that the embattled generals had not been expected to engage in.

Defence is the glue in Russia–Myanmar ties [Storey 2023: 5]. Russia is Myanmar’s largest source of military assistance. Myanmar, in turn, is the only Southeast Asian country to transfer military supplies to Russia for its war in Ukraine, a considerable change from the 1990s, when China was the country’s main arms supplier (and Moscow’s defence industry was in disarray). On 7 November, Russia and Myanmar conducted joint naval exercises in the Andaman Sea, where coup leaders met with Russia’s navy chief [*AJazeera* 2023, 7 November]. The Myanmar Russia Maritime Security Exercise (MARUMEX) involved ships and aircraft and was held in seas 85 nautical miles west of Myanmar coastal port city of Myeik [Peck 2023].

Third, energy is the new, promising area for cooperation between the two countries. The generals would like Russia to provide Myanmar with nuclear power by transferring small modular reactors. In late 2023, Myanmar and Russian officials met to discuss the possible construction of small-scale nuclear reactors, as well as venturing into hydroelectric power and wind energy generation signing various agreements in that regard [Storey 2023: 7; *The Irrawaddy* 2023b, 6 December; World Nuclear News 2023, 11 October].

Among other issues, the 2021 coup turned existing energy generation problems in Myanmar into a full-blown energy crisis [Storey 2023: 7]. Since then, Myanmar has imported crude oil from Russia, which Moscow has been offering to non-sanctioning countries at discounted prices, with imports surging from almost none at all in March 2023 to 8.6 barrels of oil in June 2023. This was not all for domestic consumption, as 70,000 barrels found their way to China via a Chinese-funded oil pipeline from Kyaukphyu in Myanmar to Kunming. Finally, Russia–Myanmar relations have also expanded into commerce and tourism [Storey 2023: 8]. As of early 2024, Myanmar Airways International is making commercial flights from Yangon and Mandalay to Novosibirsk, Moscow, Vladivostok and St Petersburg. Novosibirsk appears to be the hub for flights between the two countries, an interesting issue in itself as the Russian city appears to be home to the company manufacturing the SU-34 fighter bomber and a Rosatom (Russian nuclear energy company) facility.

4.2 *Beijing revamps its engagement, enhances leverage*

The passing of the US Burma Act in late 2022, allowing for the supply of non-lethal assistance to Myanmar’s anti-junta groups, was interpreted in Beijing as an attempt to expand US influence in Southeast Asia and, partly in response, China became increasingly engaged in the country throughout the year [*Frontier Myanmar* 2023g, 26 October].

In December 2022, China’s new Special Envoy for Myanmar, Deng Xijun, held his first meetings with seven of Myanmar’s most powerful EAOs. Several other such meetings would take place over the year. Following two years of ambivalence, China abruptly changed its stance in early 2023 and pursued its interests in ways that ultimately benefited Myanmar’s regime.

Deng essentially expressed two positions – namely, that China would enforce its policy against instability along the border more actively and, second, that the EAOs should distance themselves from the NUG, an entity that China perceives as being too closely aligned with the west. By forcing the EAOs to forego military action and limit any support for NUG and PDFs, China has been de facto helping the regime achieve some of its objectives. Apart from meetings with some of the most China-aligned EAOs, such as the United Wa State Army and the Shan State Progress Party, a more significant meeting was that of 20-23 June 2023 when the leaders of the 3BA held a China-facilitated round of talks with representatives of the SAC in Mongla, in Shan State. While this did not lead to any breakthroughs, especially in light of Operation 1027 later in the year, this meeting signalled China's readiness to engage in its own version of conflict resolution.

As noted, China's strategy has thus far centred on two central elements: stabilising the border, meaning that it has engaged with the EAOs to achieve a de facto ceasefire, which is critical to implementing the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor, and cracking down on some illicit activities. Second, revitalising economic ties is essential not only from a security perspective (preventing Myanmar from becoming a failed state) but also to maintain its position of influence in the country and thus counterbalance the rapid engagement from India and Thailand and, from China's point of view, the United States. China's pro-active engagement can be attributed to the US incorporating of the BURMA act into the National Defense Authorisation Act of 2022 [Fumagalli 2023], a move that China perceived as a direct provocation stemming from great power competition. This provocation was arguably amplified by the NUG's establishment of a representative office in Washington, DC, which indicated US support for the NUG and the broader anti-junta resistance.

During the coup's early days, China kept a pragmatic, open-ended stance – hedging its bets. Beijing engaged the junta but kept its distance. While it may have greenlighted Operation 1027, diplomatic intervention by China is also propping up the junta. By pushing EAOs to limit their support to the anti-military armed resistance, Beijing is helping to slow the evolution of the resistance movement, and may thus eventually ensure the survival of the junta.

In the months preceding Operation 1027 the Chinese authorities had become increasingly exasperated by the extensive online scamming operations taking place in Myanmar's border regions, such as Kokang, the victims of which typically included Chinese citizens. Even more irritating for the authorities in Beijing was the junta's apparent unwillingness to reign in such activities [Strangio 2023]. Despite repeatedly requesting the Myanmar authorities that such centres be shut down and activities cease, it was only in the period between September and December 2023 that military and EAO authorities in both junta- and EAO-controlled areas started to

take serious action which led to the arrest of various junta-aligned criminal kingpins in the Kokang Special Administrative Zone (SAZ, controlled by military-aligned armed groups, Millar 2023) and deportation of about 40,000 Chinese nationals to China before the end of 2023 [RFA 2023c]. Among them was Ming Xuecheng, a former official of the Kokang SAZ and a former member for the pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party. Warrants were also issued for Ming Guoping, a brigade commander in the Kokang SAZ's pro-junta Border Guard Force. While the arrests and warrants were a sign of the Chinese determination to eradicate local online scamming which have trafficked thousands of people into modern-day slavery and defrauded thousands of Chinese nationals of their savings, whether this is a sign of China's change of strategy and a more decisive shift in support of the anti-junta armed groups, as Strangio argues [2023], warrants additional evidence. Rather, my contention is that Beijing's willingness to at least tacitly endorse the actions of the Three Brotherhood Alliance should not be interpreted as a first step towards abandoning the junta. China's interest in ensuring stability on its doorstep remains paramount and this requires leveraging all ties at all times.

In this light should also be interpreted Beijing's continued initiatives to further cement its economic interests in Myanmar. This has primarily taken the form of the expansion of large infrastructural projects and other initiatives falling under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative, most notably the China is a major investor in Myanmar, and the country's main commercial partner. To China, Myanmar's core strategic importance lies in its access to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. China transfers hydrocarbons via pipelines from southwest Myanmar to Yunnan. Transporting goods via Myanmar provides China with shorter routes to markets in Western Asia, Europe and Eastern Africa. If Myanmar is, for these reasons, very important to China, nowhere is more important than the turbulent Rakhine State, in the southwest of the country. If one were to look for evidence of economic ties expanding and deepening this part of the country would be it. The Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone project, located around the city of Kyaukphyu in Rakhine State (about 500km south of the State capital Sit-twe and 400km north of Yangon) illustrates both of the centrality of Chinese investment to the junta's perception of survival, and also the precarious and volatile situation in the country [Abuza 2023]. Kyaukphyu began as a small port for offshore and imported oil, as well as the land terminus for the important Shwe gas field. The joint venture between China National Petroleum Company and the Ministry of Oil and Gas Enterprises (MOGE) constructed a pier and 12 tanks, which commenced operations in 2013. The 750km oil pipeline and the 770km gas pipeline to Kunming became fully operational in 2017. In 2018, the two sides established the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), an infrastructure development

plan including road and rail links, a seaport, all connecting China's Yunnan province to the Sea of Bengal and following oil and gas pipelines along the same route, to bring the projects under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative. Yet, just like in the assessment of the situation in Kokang, even here, an assessment of China's role in Myanmar requires nuance and an appreciation of the complexity of both the bilateral relationship and the situation on the ground. Undoubtedly there is a record of success, with important project completed such as the 750km oil and 770km gas pipelines connecting Kyaukphyu with Kunming, whose projects were agreed in 2007, construction started in 2010 and operations began in 2017 [The Irrawaddy 2023c]. However, other projects were delayed, including the deep seawater port, highways connecting Kyaukphyu with Muse in the northeastern part of Myanmar [The Irrawaddy 2023c]. The causes for such delays were similar, including the effects of widespread unrest, (the resulting) power shortages and transport woes.

While Abuza's assessment according to which China's investments under the umbrella of the BRI are 'still going nowhere' ([Abuza 2023] is probably excessively negative, progress has certainly proceeded at a much slower pace than both sides would have hoped. At the same time, some areas have managed to push ahead with greater determination (energy-related projects), whereas others (industrial parks) have made much slower progress, in comparison. In August 2023 junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing called for the completion of the Kyaukphyu special economic zone (SEZ) and the container port. In an attempt to expedite progress, the junta sought to sweeten the deal for China by signing an addendum to the concession agreement with China's CITIC state-owned enterprise for the Kyaukphyu SEZ in December [Millar 2023]. Although some of the challenges may be specific to the situation in Rakhine State, projects in other parts of Myanmar faced similar headwinds. The Myitsone Dam project in Kachin State, which had been paused already under the U Thein Sein Administration in the face of massive environmental protests remains frozen. Urban Development projects in Yangon and Mandalay are paused as investment dried up. The Kyaukphyu-Nay Pyi Taw highway and the Mandalay-Muse Expressway have been paused. A similar fate has beset the Special Economic Zone in Myitkyina in Kachin State.

4.3. *Return of the Rohingya question*

After years at the very back of international attention, the Rohingya have made their return to international headlines.² About one million Rohing-

2. By discussing the Rohingya issue in the section on Bangladesh and in the foreign policy section, I do not imply that the Rohingya are now 'other to Myanmar'. In my discussion, I primarily focus on inter-state Bangladesh-SAC relations over the repatriation issue.

ya, half of them children, remain confined to 33 refugee camps in eastern Bangladesh, over two thirds of them in the mega-camp of Kutupalong, some 40 kilometres from the Myanmar border [I/SS 2023, 11 December]. Bangladesh and Myanmar authorities have continued their discussions concerning a possible repatriation of a number of Rohingya refugees, something which had been attempted (and failed) a few times since 2018 and which was mediated by China in 2023. Three separate dynamics currently define the 'Rohingya question': the rising insecurity in the camps, the sharp decline in international aid and the stalled repatriation plan. While separate, these issues are closely intertwined, which is further deepening a crisis (for the Rohingya) that is already out of control and has been for some time [International Crisis Group 2023d].

The reality is one of rising insecurity and violence in the camps. At least 76 Rohingya-on-Rohingya murders were committed in 2023 (up to 31 October), which is more than double those in 2022: 91 were recorded 2018-2021. As noted in a recent ICG report [International Crisis Group 2023d], the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) has become increasingly predatory and is asserting power through intimidation and violence. Turf wars have broken out in the camps between competing armed groups and have worsened already dire conditions in the camps [International Crisis Group 2023d]. More than six years after the 'clearance operations' of 2017, which were referred to by a UN official as « a textbook case of ethnic cleansing » [Fumagalli 2018], the relative peace and even more relative precarious stability in the camps that had existed in Bangladesh's over 30 refugee camps up to 2018 has gradually given way to, first, ARSA's hegemonic position up to 2021 and, since then, a growing competition between armed actors, with the Bangladeshi security forces developing links with the Rohingya Solidary Organisation (RSO), a previously dormant military group, founded in the 1980s [International Crisis Group 2023d; *Frontier Myanmar* 2023d, 3 February]. This came with a surge in violence and crime, declining donor support and restrictive Bangladeshi government policies, and this combination is pushing Rohingya refugees towards a crisis point. Several armed groups are currently operating in the refugee camps besides ARSA. The RSO, which, as mentioned, was initially active 1982-1998, emerged in Bangladesh in 2020, with some support from the local security agencies. Other groups include the Nobi Hossain group (also known as the Arakan Rohingya Army), which includes armed criminal groups focused on drug trafficking. Nominally, this is aligned with the RSO and opposed to ARSA. The Munna group is another armed criminal group that was formerly affiliated with ARSA and is known for its drug trafficking. The Islami Mahas is an armed Rohingya group opposed to ARSA and aligned with the RSO; it espouses an Islamist ideology.

Dhaka's approach has remained focused on the repatriation of the refugees to Myanmar, and this focus has been unchanged since 2017. This

is predicated on the fairly questionable assumption that Myanmar can be compelled to accept the returns and that those asked (coerced?) to return may actually be willing to do so and would be safe if and when they do. The Bangladeshi authorities have also continued to restrict the freedom of movement and the ability of Rohingya refugee to work in the country, while placing constraints on local and international aid organisations, thus pushing up the costs of delivering humanitarian assistance. In essence, the refugees in Bangladesh are no closer to returning home. In these less-than-desirable conditions, which are not conducive to the safe return of the refugees to their home countries, the Myanmar and Bangladeshi authorities have been negotiating repatriation plans. Their negotiations are being carried out for different reasons: Dhaka has been very keen on seeing Rohingya refugees leave eastern Bangladesh so as not to further deepen the conditions of an already depressed job market, where the Rohingya (illegally, as they cannot legally work) compete for employment with the local population. Myanmar appears keen to show progress in light of its appearance at the International Court of Justice [Fumagalli 2019]. An initial pilot project would have seen 1,176 refugees return to Myanmar, albeit not to their community of origin. Junta officials spent a week in March 2023 interviewing hundreds of refugees to verify their eligibility for repatriation. In May, it invited a small group of refugees to visit a possible location in Maungdaw township in northern Rakhine, followed by another visit to the camps in Bangladesh. None of the Rohingya listed for repatriation appeared willing to return without guarantees they would (finally) be granted Myanmar citizenship, which has been a key demand for the community for decades.

More talks between the parties continued over the summer, with a new plan drawn up in the first week of September. Another junta delegation visited Rakhine with members of the Foreign Ministries of both Bangladesh and Myanmar. The aim would have been to secure the return of 70,000 refugees by end of 2023 [International Crisis Group 2023d: 18]. Even assuming that the conditions for a safe return had been met, the Rohingya would have encountered a different Rakhine and Myanmar from the ones they had left in 2017. The AA is firmly in control of much of northern Rakhine State. A resurgence of Rohingya armed group activity in northern Rakhine threatened to re-ignite the relations between Rakhine and Rohingya around the middle of 2023, when a number of ARSA members appear to have crossed into Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships after being pushed out of Bangladesh.

Crucially, in light of these competing crises and pressure for funding, there has been a marked decline in the rate of international assistance for the Rohingya currently settled in Bangladesh. The Joint Response Plan, which sets humanitarian objectives, priorities and budgets for Rohingya refugees, saw donors meeting only 46% of the US\$407m budget request for 2023, down from 70% in 2018-2022 [International Crisis Group 2023d].

The UK and the US announced new funding packages in September 2023, but priorities have visibly shifted elsewhere. The only ASEAN country to have contributed to the Joint Response Plan since 2017 has been the Philippines.

5. Conclusion

The events of the past year revealed an embattled junta, whose armed forces are spread increasingly thin across a growing number of warscapes, including in regions that had previously been spared much of the post-coup violence. China's engagement has grown significantly since December 2022, as its tacit greenlighting of Operation 1027 and the multiple meetings with EAO leaders suggest. At the same time, Beijing's support 3BA members did not signal a U-turn in Beijing's tolerance of the junta. Rather, the aim was to contain any perceived western influence (real or imagined) and enhance its leverage on all parties, while seeking to reduce the volatility near its borders. Other countries in the region, such as India and Thailand, have appeared more willing to engage with the SAC.

On the whole, though, as many others have noted [for example Htet Min Lwin and Walton 2023; Htet Min Lwin and Thiha Wint Aung 2023], as the SAC's position becomes increasingly brittle, the battle for the country's future is only just beginning. Coordination among EAOs and anti-junta forces has proved consequential and effective, but there was no sign in 2023 that this was about to be replicated throughout the country.

Collective attention keeps pivoting to the next crisis, and in this context, Myanmar appears to fall increasingly low in the list of global priorities. The situation in Myanmar epitomises the waning influence of western power and political persuasion, both of which have been declining rapidly in recent years, which has opened considerable space for other powers to make inroads and expand their influence.

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INDIA 2023: TOWARDS THE GENERAL ELECTIONS AMID RISING SOCIAL TENSION

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In 2023, India's political parties started preparations ahead of the 2024 general elections. The ruling BJP banked on Narendra Modi's enduring popularity and his virtual monopoly of India's political scene. Particularly important was the year-long spectacle of India's presidency of the G20, which gave the Prime Minister an endless source of visibility. Opposition parties started a difficult process of negotiation to present themselves as unified as possible at the polls. However, decades of competition among them made the process extremely complicated and uphill. The results of nine state elections, where the BJP performed very well, further complicated their task. The only weak link in the BJP's narrative seems to be the economy, which, despite impressive growth, seems to be fuelling inequality and remains unable to generate enough jobs for India's large and aspirational youth.

KEYWORDS – India; elections; democracy; ethnic tension; economic growth; unemployment.

1. Introduction

In 2023, India entered election mode. With the country going to the polls in spring 2024, political parties started preparations, both in terms of finding ways to appeal to voters as well as in terms of striking deals among each other. Moreover, as many as nine states went to polls during 2023, with the BJP obtaining extremely good results. This was discouraging for opposition parties, as they tried to find ways to avoid a third consecutive term of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), on the other hand, continued banking on Modi's popularity as well as on his promise to make India a country respected on the world's stage. This was particularly evident in the «spectacle» which surrounded India's presidency of the G20. These political dynamics are analysed in section 3.

The BJP seemed to be sailing through the electoral campaign with confidence, and most analysts predicted that Modi would be voted back to power. Modi's only weakness seemed to be the economic situation, analysed in section 2. Growth continued to be robust, but a dissection of the

data shows a remarkable growing of inequality and a persistent inability of the Indian economy to create enough jobs. However, it does not seem that enough Indian voters are putting economic consideration at the centre of their electoral decision-making process.

Finally, India's democracy continued its downward journey. This was particularly evident in two domains: first, the restriction of civil liberties; and, second, the erosion of democratic institutions. Both aspects are analysed in section 4.

2. The Indian Economy between high growth, unemployment and financial uncertainty

2.1. Growth and welfare

Analyses of the Indian economy over the last decades sound like a broken record. On the one hand, virtually every analysis shows robust economic growth; on the other, however, they also show very high levels of unemployment or underemployment and distress. The Indian economy in 2023 perfectly fits this decades-long pattern.

GDP growth remained solid, as did forecasts for the forthcoming years. According to the latest official data, in the two quarters for which data are available at the time of writing (April-June and July-September, 2023), the GDP grew by 7.8 and 7.6% (October 2023). Projections for the 2023/24 fiscal year are also solid [*Reuters* 2023, 1 December]. India thus remained firmly at its place as one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Even taking into account the persistent controversies about the country's GDP data – former Chief Economic Advisor Arvind Subramanian, Princeton Economist Ashoka Mody and former chief statistician of India Pronab Sen all raised doubts about the data and/or the methodology underpinning the calculation of the GDP [*Mint* 2023, 19 September; Thapar 2023, 29 November] – it remains that India's economy is sailing through a very challenging international environment, even though probably not as fast as it claims.

On the other hand, however, according to the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy (CMIE), unemployment rose to a 2-year high of 10.09%, largely because of rising joblessness in rural India [*The Wire* 2023, 2 November]. Youth Unemployment stood at 45.4% in 2022/23. Moreover, very worryingly for an economy supposedly in the midst of a «demographic dividend», the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) – namely the share of persons in the population aged from 15 to 64 who are working or actively searching for a job – declined from a peak of 57% in 2000 to 49% in 2022, indicating both a growing reluctance and inability of women (including and especially educated ones) to enter the labour force as well as a growing number of young people (again, often educated) giving up the search for a job [Daniyal 2023, 18 December].

Government data, however, show a very different picture of *increasing* participation in the labour force since 2018/19 and *declining* unemployment. Even taking the official data at face value, these are hardly good news. In fact, the improvement would be mostly due to a growing rural workforce, which represents a reverse structural transformation – workers moving to the low productivity rural sector, instead of the other way around [PIB 2023]. Moreover, the latest Periodic Labour Force Survey shows a huge increase in self-employment, from 52% in 2017/18 to 58% in 2022/23 [Government of India 2023]. This is, in all probability, a profound sign of distress. In fact, entrepreneurial self-employment tends to move much more slowly; distress self-employment, on the contrary, suddenly increases at times of crisis, when people out of employment start selling goods or services informally and without any investment. Corroborating this picture, the official data also show an increase of casual workers, another clear sign of distress.

The paradox of very robust economic growth which fails to create enough jobs has long plagued the Indian economy. According to the *State of Working India Report 2023*, by scholars at Azim Premji University, India adds much fewer jobs per unit of economic growth than other developing countries. In fact, there seems to be no relation at all between economic growth and job creation, as «years of fast GDP growth have, on the contrary, tended to be years of slow employment growth» [Azim Premji University 2023].

One of the implications is that much of the fruits of growth remains concentrated at the top of the income scale, thus limiting the betterment of the living conditions of the majority of the population. Vivek Kaul disaggregated GDP data and showed a consistent pattern of increasing inequality since the COVID-19 pandemic [Kaul 2023, 22 May]. For instance, the sales of 2-wheelers have plummeted since 2018/19 and the sale of entry-level motorcycles has fallen even faster (-38% since 2018/19). On the other hand, car sales increased sharply, almost exclusively driven by increasing demand for large SUV, which, in the year under review, constituted 50% of the market [‘Car Economics’ 2023]. A similar story applied to smartphones (where iPhones and other top-end models increased their market share, while overall sales declined) and travel (where there was a sharp contraction of rail travel, as against a complete recovery of air travel to pre-pandemic levels). Finally, data show a declining demand (and declining sales) for Fast Moving Consumer Goods (toothpastes, soap etc.) in rural areas and a demand for work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) which remains at much higher levels than before the pandemic [Kaul 2023, 22 May]. In short, an x-ray of domestic consumption – which accounts for about 60% of India’s GDP – does not show an image of a very healthy patient and certainly clashes with the glowing headlines about India’s growth story.

In this context, the Budget for the FY 2023/24, presented on 1st February 2023, included some puzzling news, considering that it was the last

full budget before the 2024 general elections. In short, government expenditure went down and there were some rather radical cuts to some of the country's largest welfare schemes. For instance, allocations for MGNREGA – which provides employment on the demand for rural residents – were 33% lower than the Revised Estimates (RE) for the FY 2022/23 [Accountability Initiative 2023a]. The allocation for the Poshan 2.0 scheme – which, since 2021, combined different schemes for the welfare of children, adolescent girls and lactating mothers – was just 1% higher than the previous year's RE and 3% lower than the allocations made four years earlier [Accountability Initiative 2023b]. The Food subsidy was reduced by a whopping 31% over the 2022/23 RE. This was largely due to the rolling back of the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, a scheme launched during the COVID-19 pandemic which allotted, free of charge, 5 kg of cereals per person per month to every National Food Security Act (NFSA) cardholders (about two-third of the population). The move was supposed to be compensated by the Union Government's decision to lift the nominal price that NFSA cardholders pay to purchase their entitlements under the Act (i.e. Rs. 2 per kg of wheat and Rs. 3 per kg of rice). In other words, a family of five will go from having the right to purchase kg 50 of cereals a month for a price between 50 and 75 rupees, to getting kg. 25 of cereals for free. Families will face a huge loss [Accountability Initiative 2023c].

Table 1 – change in allocation of major welfare schemes 2008-2023, in real terms.			
SCHEME	TIME PERIOD	NOMINAL TERMS	REAL TERMS
SSA	2011-12 to 2018-19	23%	-18%
RMSA	2011-12 to 2018-19	36%	-9%
Samagra Shiksha	2018-19 to 2022-23	27%	2%
ICDS Core	2011-12 to 2020-21	11%	-34%
Mission Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0	2021-22 RE to 2022-23 BE	1%	-5%
PM POSHAN	2011-12 to 2022-23 BE	3%	-45%
CPS	2011-12 to 2020-21	378%	187%
TSC/NBA/SBM-G	2011-12 to 2022-23 BE	254%	126%
MGNREGS	2011-12 to 2022-23 BE	150%	34%
NHM	2011-12 to 2022-23 BE	122%	19%

PMGSY	2011-12 to 2022-23 BE	-2%	-47%
IAY/PMAY-G	2011-12 to 2022-23 BE	103%	9%
NSAP	2011-12 to 2022-23 BE	12%	-20%
IGMSY/PMMVY	2011-12 to 2020-21	284%	131%
PM KISAN	2018-19 to 2022-23 BE	5379%	4295%
Food Subsidy	2011-12 to 2022-23 BE	184%	52%
AB-PMJAY	2018-19 to 2022-23 BE	221%	157%
AB-HWCs	2018-19 to 2021-22 RE	30%	11%
NRDWP/NRDWM/JJM	2011-12 to 2022-23 BE	606%	279%
Source: [Accountability Initiative 2023d]. See appendix for a brief description of each scheme. Reproduced with permission.			

Overall, the cuts to social spending are quite radical, also considering that the figures just presented are in nominal terms. Given the high inflation which affected the country over the last two years, the roll back of some of the most important welfare schemes are even more impactful in real terms. In fact, expenditure on five large schemes (covering nutrition, old age pension, maternity benefits and rural employment), declined from 0.49% of the GDP in 2022/23 to 0.36% in 2023/24. In 2009/10, these schemes represented 0.93% of the GDP [Drèze and Khera 2023, 1 February].

This may sound surprising not only because India is going towards a general election; but also because Modi made welfare one of the central planks of its electoral agenda [Aiyar 2019]. An analysis of 19 welfare schemes over the period 2008-2023 reveals that the Modi governments enacted profound remodulation of the «right agenda» [Ruparelia 2013] inherited by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime. As Table 1 shows, while some schemes have been heavily defunded in real terms, others have fared much better. Generally speaking, schemes providing services saw lower or much lower budgetary allocations, while schemes providing tangible goods – housing, toilets, cash and insurance – have been prioritised [Accountability Initiative 2023d]. Incidentally, the latter category includes all of the schemes most closely associated with the Prime Minister [Aiyar & Tillin 2020] and his «welfarist agenda» [Subramaniam and Felman 2021, 14 December].

2.2. *The Hindenburg Report*

In late January 2023, a tsunami hit India's financial market. A small, New York-based, short-selling¹ firm, Hindenburg Research, published a report accusing the Adani Group of «brazen stock manipulation and accounting fraud», constituting the «largest con in corporate history» [Hindenburg Research 2023]. The Adani group's 7 listed companies lost more than US\$ 100 billion in capitalisation over the following weeks. (Hindenburg Research «shorted» Adani companies' stocks before publishing the report, thus profiting enormously from the fall in stocks' prices). Adani Total lost 85% of its market value as of November 2023 [*Business Standard* 2023, 23 October].

The report was explosive for several reasons. First, it was the result of a 2-year investigation, which was taken very seriously by national and international investors. The Adani Group's 400-pages rebuttal, did not calm the markets [Adani Group 2023].

Second, Gautam Adani, before the publication of the Hindenburg Report India's richest and the world's third richest man, was widely known to be very close to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In fact, their two stories were largely intertwined, since the early days of Modi as Gujarat's Prime Minister [Jaffrelot 2021]. When the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the national elections in 2014, Modi flew to Delhi on Adani's private jet.

Third, Modi and Adani's partnership has become increasingly close since 2014. Adani's personal net worth – largely based on the value of his stocks – went from US\$ 7 billion in 2014 to US\$ 120 billion on the eve of the Hindenburg Report [Reed and Parkin 2023, 3 February]. In just three years before the Hindenburg report, the average market value of his 7 listed companies increased by a whopping 819%. In absolute terms, the Adani Group increased its value from US\$ 8 billion in 2014 to US\$ 288 billion in 2022, largely because of a series of large-scale business deals, mostly focused on building infrastructures, both in India and abroad – a key development strategy of the Narendra Modi government [*The Economist* 2023, 23 May]. In other words, Adani emerged as India's «national champion», whose fortunes could not be separated from India's overall growth story. In fact, the Adani Group said as much in its rebuttal to the Hindenburg report, dubbing it a «a calculated attack on India and on the independence, integrity and quality of Indian institutions» [Tranvelli 2023, 4 February].

Fourth, opposition parties attacked the government on the issue. Given that the BJP had won the 2014 elections also on the basis of a fight against «crony capitalism» and corruption in the wake of a series of large scam that had marked the UPA 2 government, this was potentially a very embarrassing situation for the Prime Minister. However, Modi decided to remain largely silent on the issue [Ellis-Petersen 2023, 31 August]. The only

1. Short selling is a trading strategy aimed at profiting from a decline in an asset's price.

veiled reference to the whole saga was during a speech in Parliament, where he said that the trust which «crore of Indians» put on him was his «protective shield» from his detractors [*India Today* 2023, 9 February].

The consequences, however, were not very significant, signalling once again Modi's insulation from otherwise catastrophic political downfalls. Of course, the Adani Group's heavy financial losses persisted for months after the publication of the report, especially after *The Guardian* and *The Financial Times* published previously undisclosed documents, suggesting that the Hindenburg's report was accurate on the most substantial points it had raised [Ellis-Petersen and Goodley 2023, 31 August]. Furthermore, the two newspapers suggested that SEBI (India's regulatory agency overseeing the financial market) had investigated the Adani Group since before 2014, but then lost interest. The Supreme Court ordered an investigation, whose results, after numerous postponements and deferments, were finally presented in November 2023. In short, the Supreme Court asserted that the Hindenburg report could not be taken at face value and that any decision on the matter would have to wait for the findings of the SEBI's investigation [Ananthakrishnan 2023, 25 November]. All of Adani listed companies bounced back. Probably the most serious consequences will be the loss of credibility for India's financial markets and regulatory capacity among international investors. However, it might well be that international investors will forget the whole episode quickly. In November 2023 (even before the Supreme Court's decision), for instance, the United States International Development Finance Corporation announced a US\$ 553 million loan to an Adani-owned port in Sri Lanka, largely to counter China's presence in the island [Parking & Cornish 2023, 8 November].

3. *Towards the 2024 general elections*

During 2023, India entered election mode. This was not only because as many as nine states – where about a fifth of the population lives – went to polls (section 3.1.), but also because of the looming 2024 general election. This set in motion a number of strategies by political parties, which will be analysed in section 3.2.

A second, worrying development of 2023 was the outbreak of violence and social tension in various parts of the country. Section 3.3. will look at the communal riots at the outskirts of Delhi; at the movement to make the state of Uttarakhand «Muslim-free»; and at the large-scale violent confrontation in Manipur.

Finally, the third important development was the continuation of the erosion of democracy, which was especially evident in the realm of civil liberties, to which the following sub-section is dedicated.

3.1. *State elections*

The 2023 state elections were held in three rounds for nine states, the first one in February (Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura), the second one in May (Karnataka), and the third one in November (Mizoram, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Telangana).² The BJP was in power (via majority or coalition) in five of these nine states – Tripura, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Karnataka, and Madhya Pradesh. In the February elections, the BJP alliance with the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT) won the Tripura elections while the BJP-Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) alliance retained power in Nagaland. Furthermore, in Meghalaya, the BJP supported Conrad Sangma and his National People's Party, who were in government during the previous term, playing a crucial role in helping them to remain in power. In the May elections, the BJP lost to Congress in Karnataka. The November elections, the last before the 2024 general elections, had a few surprises. In what was termed as a «tight race» [*Reuters* 2023, 30 November], the BJP retained power in Madhya Pradesh with a full majority. Furthermore, the BJP won Rajasthan – a state where there were little to no signs of anti-incumbency. The most surprising result was from Chhattisgarh. Almost every exit poll [*The Times of India* 2023, 30 November] indicated either a Congress win or a hung assembly. However, the BJP emerged as the party with the majority, winning 54 out of 90 seats. In Mizoram, the Mizo National Front was ousted from power by the Zoram People's Movement. Lastly, the state of Telangana was the only sigh of relief for the Congress, which managed to defeat the two-time incumbent Bharatiya Rashtra Samiti (BRS), the political successor of the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS). Telangana was the second southern state won by Congress in 2023 (after Karnataka). With two states under direct Congress rule, a coalition in Tamil Nadu, a strong footprint in Kerala, it can be argued that the Congress holds considerable power in South India.

Although the state elections are generally not a good indicator of how the general elections are going to pan out, these results did re-affirm that the BJP was very strong in the Hindi heartland and Congress and its INDIA alliance (on which more in section 3.2.) were more firmly rooted in South India. Let us now unpack how these elections unfolded. For sake of simplicity, let's discuss the elections by their macro-regions: Hindi-heartland and the South.

3.1.1. *The elections in the Hindi Heartland*

Even though Rajasthan shows the door to the incumbent every election, there was hope that in the 2023 elections, Congress would defy the pattern as Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot of Congress remained popular [Lodha

2. See the appendix for the details of all election results.

2023, 24 October]. However, the results were rather puzzling. The BJP won 115 assembly seats, secured around 42% of the vote share, and stormed back into power after five years. Let's unpack what went wrong for Congress in Rajasthan. Welfare was one of the principal points of debate in the elections. Gehlot's government launched many ambitious welfare schemes during its term. During 2023, Rajasthan became the first state to pass the Right to Health Bill, which makes treatment free at government hospitals and a select few private hospitals [Khan 2023, 25 March]. Previously, Gehlot also launched the Chiranjeevi Health Insurance Scheme, the Income Guarantee Act, the Workers Security Act, the Inflation relief camps, the Gig Workers Security Act, among others. In short, the Congress government did make a serious effort to implement an ambitious welfare agenda, in what is one of India's poorest states. Lokniti-CSDS surveys show that people did reap benefits from these welfare schemes [Kumar & Kumawat 2023, 6 December]. However, the party was not very successful at translating welfare into votes. The BJP, on the other hand, had an edge over the Congress when it came to conversion of welfare benefits (of central government schemes) to votes. For instance, 45% of the 48% of the voters who reaped the benefits of the Ujjwala Yojna (a Central government scheme) voted for the BJP [Kumar & Kumawat 2023, 6 December].

Some probably crucial factors which shaped electoral outcomes in the state were the in-fighting in the Congress camp, ever since Sachin Pilot's rebellion [*The Economic Times* 2020, 29 December] and allegations of corruption, atrocities against woman, and the exam paper-leaks [*The Indian Express* 2023, 4 November].³ The Lokniti-CSDS survey found out that 57% of the voters believed that corruption in the State had increased in the last five years [Mishra & Singh 2023, 6 December], and, when asked on how important the corruption factor was while deciding their vote, two-thirds of the voters said that it was important. Furthermore, the «majority of the respondents felt that 'paper leak' was a 'very important' factor for them in deciding who to vote for, while seven of every 10 respondents said that rising crimes against women was a matter of concern» [Lodha *et al.* 2023, 6 December]. Lastly, and most importantly, the election was not a straight duel of a chief minister against a chief minister candidate. Instead, it was a battle involving the Prime Minister against a chief minister. In fact, one of the slogans of the BJP was «Modi ki guarantee» – a way to remind voters that promises from local candidates came with a «guarantee» of the Prime Minister [Shastri 2023, 6 December]. Thus, the sum of these factors and Modi's enduring popularity worked well for the BJP and condemned the Congress to yet another electoral loss.

3. There were question paper leaks for several government exams. Recruitment exam for grade III librarians was cancelled in December 2019 due to a question paper leak. Furthermore, the Rajasthan Eligibility Examination for Teachers (REET) level I and II were also cancelled due to the same problem.

The results in Madhya Pradesh were also surprising. The BJP had been in power in Madhya Pradesh for almost two decades and thus naturally feared an anti-incumbency wave. Yet, the BJP managed to retain power and won 163 out of 230 legislative seats, bagging a whopping 48.55% of the vote share. Welfare, in this case too, did not seem to have a large impact. According to the Lokniti-CSDS survey, the beneficiaries of the Central government schemes «voted in a little larger proportion in favour of the BJP» [Borbora & Gyani 2023, 7 December]. Interestingly, even the people who did not benefit from the schemes voted for the BJP. For instance, «among the beneficiaries of the Mukhyamantri Kaushal Samvardhan Yojana, a skill-development scheme, 58% voted for the BJP compared with 33% who chose the Congress, but only 12% reported having benefited from it» [Borbora & Gyani 2023, 7 December].

Allegations of corruption did not harm the BJP much. Even though 62% of the people thought that corruption had increased in the state, less than half of them voted for Congress [Weston & Yadav 2023, 7 December]. Furthermore, 43% still believed that the BJP is an anti-corruption party [Weston & Yadav 2023, 7 December]. All the above is puzzling. A major argument which can perhaps explain these surprising results is that the BJP campaign did not project a single political leader as the chief minister in waiting [Anand Mohan 2023, 8 December]. Rather, the BJP fielded many party bigwigs like Narendra Singh Tomar, Kailash Vijayvargiya, Prahlad Patel, among others. This allowed the BJP to project multiple chief minister faces, which countered the existent anti-incumbency. On the other hand, Congress only relied on Kamal Nath and Digvijaya Singh – both had their own camps and did not involve the central leadership much in the campaign. Moreover, the two veteran leaders in the state probably failed to inspire a sense of novelty in the state's politics.

Perhaps the most shocking election outcome was Chhattisgarh. The Congress was expected to retain power and come back with a full majority. However, here again, the BJP shocked the Congress, and won 54 out of 90 seats with a 46.27% vote share. The issue of welfarism and development took a back seat again, as the BJP focussed the election campaign on corruption. In the first week of November 2023, four days before the first phase of the state elections, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) said that «they were probing an alleged payment of over ₹500 crore over some time to Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel by a betting app promoter» [Palshikar & Prakash 2023, 8 December]. This caused the campaign to turn into a slugfest and Congress's narrative and work on development and welfare were shadowed. As a result, the BJP was ahead among the people who decided to vote during the campaign, scoring 46% of the vote share against Congress's 41% [Palshikar & Prakash 2023, 8 December]. Furthermore, the BJP managed to capitalize on the tribal votes. A third of Chhattisgarh's assembly seats are reserved for Scheduled Tribes (STs), who account for

about one third of the state population. The Baghel-led Congress government had been very vocal when it came to opposing the Uniform Civil Code – a long-standing demand of the BJP, seeking to end differentiated personal laws, based on the religion of the person – and had argued that this law would infringe upon the customary rights of the tribal groups. Nonetheless, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's campaign in Chhattisgarh brilliantly surpassed the Congress in winning tribal support [Paswan 2023, 4 December]. In fact, Modi emphasized the central programs for the development of tribal regions and the rise in the number of tribal people holding important positions in politics, including the presidency of India [Naidu 2023, 6 December]. Modi's persistent outreach, which included re-naming a railway station after a tribal legend and recognizing the venerated tribal figure Govind Guru in his *Man Ki Baat* speech, probably struck a chord with tribal voters [Paswan 2023, 4 December]. The national level tribal community was effectively engaged and acknowledged by these activities. As a result, all 14 Assembly seats that went to the Congress in 2028 in the tribal region of Surguja flipped to the BJP. In another tribal region (Bastar) where the Congress won 11 of the 12 seats in 2018 and managed to win the last one in a by-poll, the party lost eight of the seats [Paswan 2023, 4 December].

Lastly, the choice of chief ministers by the BJP in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh was also very interesting. The BJP announced Vishnu Deo Sai, a tribal leader as the chief minister of Chhattisgarh; Bhanu Lal Sharma, a first-time Brahmin MLA as the chief minister of Rajasthan; and Mohan Yadav, a politician belonging to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), as the chief minister of Madhya Pradesh. All of these chief ministers replaced BJP state stalwarts like two-time Rajasthan chief minister Vasundhara Raje, four-time Madhya Pradesh chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, and three-time Chhattisgarh chief minister Raman Singh. It can be argued that this change of people at the top of state governments across the Hindi heartland highlights the BJP central command's decision to limit the sphere of influence of tall state leaders [Pathak 2023, 14 December].

We can see how these elections, even though shaped by local factors, were national in character. The voters did not reward good governance in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, and did not punish corruption in Madhya Pradesh. The voters voted for the BJP regardless of the benefits they reaped from the Congress and regardless of the qualms they had with the BJP. Interestingly, the Congress did not benefit either from its stance on the need to conduct a nation-wide caste census, like the one recently conducted in Bihar (see section 3.2). The issue was thought to help the Congress bag the votes of the OBCs, but survey results show that the BJP was able to maintain its lead among them. All of this shows that Modi's popularity remains a very important factor in determining the BJP's electoral fortunes.

3.1.2. *Elections in the South*

In 2023, the Congress won two elections in the southern states of Karnataka and Telangana by defeating the incumbents – the BJP in the former state [Prabhu 2019, 23 July] and the BRS in the latter.⁴ The Telangana victory seems particularly remarkable as the Congress managed to defeat not only the two-time incumbent, but also, arguably, the man who led to the creation of Telangana – K. Chandrashekhara Rao (KCR) of the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS). One major factor that helps explaining the Congress's victory in Telangana is the rise of Revanth Reddy as a leader [Reddy 2023, 10 December]. Reddy had been an MLA from the Telugu Desam Party, who joined the Congress in 2017. Apart from the charismatic campaign by Revanth Reddy, anti-incumbency for KCR was unfolding due to corruption and low welfare scheme penetration. In the run up to the elections, there was a growing public discontent concerning the rampant corruption in KCR's government. Around «half the voters in the State felt that corruption had increased over the past five years. Only about a quarter believed that there was a decrease in corruption» [Attri & Mittal 2023, 5 December]. The Congress also benefitted from the lower penetration levels of KCR's welfare schemes. In fact, a significant chunk of voters did not benefit from them. For instance, there were 79% non-beneficiaries of the state government's Double Bedroom Housing Schemes [Prakash & Krishna 2023, 5 December]. Out of this, 41% voted for the Congress while 36% voted for the BRS [Prakash & Krishna 2023, 5 December]. A similar trend could be seen in almost all welfare schemes. The result was that the Congress gained the votes of the majority chunk of the non-beneficiary population [Prakash & Krishna 2023, 5 December].

Telangana was not the only southern state where the Congress found success. Earlier in the year, it defeated its arch-nemesis- the BJP to win the Karnataka Legislative Elections. Congress secured 135 out of 224 seats - a 55 seats jump from its performance in 2018. The Congress managed to microfocus on local issues and rode on the anti-incumbency tide against the BJP. According to Lokniti's survey, 42% and 41% of the voters were either dissatisfied or somewhat dissatisfied with the state government and central government, respectively [Malik & Kumar 2023, 15 May]. Two of the key reasons for this dissatisfaction were unemployment and poverty. Around 30% of the voters thought that unemployment was the biggest issue in the 2023 elections compared to 3 % in 2018 [Attri & Kapoor 2023, 15 May].

4. Although the BJP was the incumbent during the time of the 2023 legislative elections in Karnataka, it did not form government in 2018. A coalition of the Congress and the Janata Dal (Secular) – or (JD(S) – did. However, in July 2019, 17 MLAs belonging to the Congress and JD(S) resigned, and the Congress-JD(S) coalition, then in government, fell. Several of the rebel MLAs joined the BJP after resigning, which suggests that the BJP was behind the fall of the Congress-JD(S) coalition.

Also, 21% of the voters thought that poverty was the biggest issue in the election [Attri & Kapoor 2023, 15 May]. As a result, «close to five in 10 of those who stated unemployment and poverty as the biggest issue in this election voted for the Congress (47% and 48%, respectively) as compared with three in 10 for the BJP» [Attri & Kapoor 2023, 15 May]. Furthermore, corruption also helped the Congress. Out of the 51% voters who believed that corruption had increased, 43% voted for the Congress compared to 30% who voted for the BJP [Palshikar 2023, 15 May]. The problems of unemployment, poverty and corruption badly impacted on the BJP's attempt to play on Hindutva politics in the state. For instance, in February 2022, the BJP state government of Karnataka had issued an order to ban Hijabs in educational institutions [*The Times of India* 2023, 30 April], leading to several right-wing students protesting against Muslim female students wearing Hijabs to college, often physically preventing them to enter their schools. There were also other attempts to push a Hindutva agenda, including an amendment to the legislation regulating cow slaughter. However, the Hindutva card did not strike a chord with Karnataka voters [Veeraraghav 2023, 20 March] as it did with voters of the Hindi heartland.

3.2. *The road to 2024 and the return of quota politics*

While, at the time of writing, the dates for the national elections (due at the latest in Spring 2024) have not been announced yet, most political parties started preparations. At the national level, three processes became apparent during 2023. First, unsurprisingly, the BJP continued to bank on Narendra Modi's popularity and his nationalist agenda. Second, some opposition parties began a difficult process of setting asides their differences, to contest the national elections united against the BJP. Third, the continuing inability of the Indian economy to generate enough jobs, engendered a resurgence of «quota politics» as both the opposition and the ruling party promoted new ways to reserve jobs in the public sector and public universities to different categories of people.

Let's start with the BJP. Perhaps the most notable effort to boost the party's (and, even more so, the Prime Minister's) popularity, was the (rather blatant) attempt to intertwine domestic politics and foreign policy during the India's presidency of the G20 [Hall 2024]. Preparations to use the G20 as a domestic politics platform likely started years before, when India asked Italy to switch the presidency in order to make it coincide with the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Republic (in 2022) and then again when India switched with Indonesia so that the G20 would coincide with the year preceding the general elections (2023). In case anyone was doubting the BJP's intention to bank on the G20 for domestic purposes, the symbol chosen was a lotus (i.e. the BJP's symbol) and Indian cities were inundated by thousands of G20 billboards with the lotus symbol and Modi's picture [Miller and Harris 2023, 20 April].

More than 200 meetings were organised in as many as 56 cities spread across the country, over most of the year, thus securing a continuing and nation-wide publicity for the Prime Minister. That the BJP would make the most of India's G20 presidency was clear from the very first day, when all Indian mobile phones received a text message celebrating the event. Billions of rupees were spent – US\$ 500 million in Delhi only [*FirstPost* 2023, 8 September] – to install millions of flowers, countless murals and billboards, lights and extravaganzas of various genres. In each city – and particularly in New Delhi – an intense effort to «beautify» urban landscape was promoted. When one of the authors of this article visited the capital in January 2023 (just a few weeks before the Foreign Ministers' meeting), South Delhi looked impressively clean and well maintained if compared with the situation prevailing during his previous visit, just a few months before (May 2022).

«Beautification» also entailed, according to media and human rights organisations' reports, the forcible removal of many poor people and the demolition of their shelters and informal economic activities [Bakhsh 2023, 11 September]. When removal was not possible or desirable, the authorities built walls or erected curtains around slums, to hide them from the sight of the delegates. One slum area in-between New Delhi and the airport, for instance, was completely surrounded by green curtains and its residents were not allowed to go out, except late at night, when the police surveillance withdrew [Bakhsh 2023, 11 September].

Overall, the G20 had an enormous resonance on India's media, and the publicity drive which accompanied it helped reinforce one of Modi's key messages since he became Prime Minister: that he is the leader who is making India a respected and powerful nation on the world stage. According to the Mood of the Nation poll conducted in August 2023 (just before the final G20 summit), 61% of the respondents thought that Modi's stature had increased India's standing in the world [*India Today* 2023, 25 August].

This is not the first time that foreign policy – traditionally an electoral consideration only for a tiny slice of the electorate – gains mass relevance under Narendra Modi. The most recent example is the Pulwama terrorist attack which occurred shortly before the 2019 elections. Most probably, India's muscular response to it contributed to the BJP's victory [Gupta and Shrimankar 2019]. In fact, Modi consistently used foreign policy to further his domestic agenda [Hall 2019]. His appeal, to a significant extent, relies on the idea that he is the man capable of making India strong, both domestically and abroad. In other words, Modi has made a consistent attempt to merge foreign policy – and in particular India's status on the world stage – into his idea of nationalism, similarly to what he has been able to do by combining development and (Hindutva) nationalism into a powerful political platform [Palshikar 2017].

Looking at the 2024 general elections, however, it seems clear that the BJP's main electoral idea is to double down on *Hindutva*. This is evident

from the fact that Modi himself consecrated the Ram Temple in Ayodhya on 22 January 2024. The construction of the temple – even though it is far from completed – is possibly the greatest ever achievement of Hindu nationalism. Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged the people of the country to celebrate Diwali in their houses on 22 January [Seth 2023, 31 December]. In their speeches, both Uttar Pradesh's Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and Modi have made it clear that the temple town of Ayodhya is set to witness a «massive infrastructural facelift that would make it an entirely new town» [Pathak 2023, 30 December]. According to Modi this symbiosis of development and tradition is a must for any nation that wants to develop [Matthew, 21 November]. The set for the BJP's electoral campaign seemed to be ready.

Overall, opinion polls show that the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) remains the front-runner. This is due to a combination of genuine popularity on the part of the Prime Minister and continuing erosion of the democratic process. Both developments have tilted the playing field in favour of the ruling party.

Many of the hopes of the critics of the Prime Minister rely on a new coalition of 28 opposition parties formed in the course of 2023, the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA). The coalition does represent a serious attempt by the opposition parties to unseat the BJP, as multi-party contests in a First-past-the-post electoral system had significantly helped the BJP to win a super majority of the seats, although with a minority of the popular vote. Ideally, there will be only one INDIA candidate in each constituency, thus limiting the dispersion of the non-BJP vote. Yet, much will depend on the parties forming the INDIA to strike seat sharing agreements – an incredibly difficult task, given the intense competition between the constituting parties at the state level. Also, it is far from certain that different political parties will be able to convince their voters to «transfer» their votes to other coalition allies, especially if these allies have a history of intense competition at the local level.

The first step towards opposition unity came when 19 parties decided to boycott the inauguration of the new Parliament in May 2023, chiefly because Modi decided to inaugurate it himself and without the President of India, Droupadi Murmu (who, according to the Constitution, is an integral part of the Parliament) [Manoj 2023, 25 May]. The new House of the People – a pet project of the Modi administration, part of a radical rethinking of the entire area in New Delhi, aimed at «decolonising» the architectural landscape [Chandavarkar 2023, 17 August] – was inaugurated by Modi on 28th May 2023. One of the ideas behind the Central Vista project (as the redevelopment of Lutyens Delhi is called) is for Modi to leave behind an enduring legacy, one that marks a clear break from the past and inaugurates – also physically – the «new India» [Sen 2023a].

In the following months, opposition parties met three times in Patna (June), Bengaluru (July) and Mumbai (September), during which the

alliance formally took shape and started defining its agenda. The largest constituent parties of the INDIA are the Congress, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK, Tamil Nadu), the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC, West Bengal), the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD, Bihar), (the Samajwadi Party (SP, Uttar Pradesh) the Shiv Sena (Uddhav Thackeray faction) and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) (both from Maharashtra), the Aam Admi Party (AAP), among others. Overall, at the time of writing, the INDIA has 142 seats in the Lok Sabha and about a 40% of the seats at the state level.

The first cracks in the alliance, however, emerged as the state elections approached. The SP, for instance, accused the Congress of not being willing to compromise on the allocation of tickets in Madhya Pradesh. Similarly, JDU's leader Nitish Kumar complained that the Congress is not willing to discuss opposition unity until after the state elections are over [Sharma 2023, 5 November]. State-level competition is indeed the crucial obstacle in opposition unity and will only intensify in the months to come.

Overall, the degree of opposition unity will depend on how political parties will weight two conflicting interests. On the one hand, the Modi administration may have sent enough warning signals to opposition parties that they might consider a third Modi term as an existential threat. The expulsion of Rahul Gandhi from the Parliament (see below) and the continuing usage of investigative agencies to undermine opposition leaders might indeed constitute existential threats which could make the opposition parties see their own interests as going beyond the short-term compromises necessary to eliminate such threat. On the other hand, however, the pressure that party leaders will face during the ticket-allocation process and the threat by disgruntled politicians to either join the BJP or running as independents – thus jeopardising the effort to minimise the dispersal of the non-BJP vote – might harden the uncompromising stances of the individual parties, especially in a low-trust environment like the one created by decades of fierce competition.

A third development which could have a significant impact on the 2024 elections is what we could call the return of quotas politics, i.e. the revived salience of reservations in legislative bodies and public sector jobs and universities for certain categories of people. Two key developments took place during 2023. First, the government approved a decade-long legislative project, conferring women reserved seats in Parliament and in the states' legislative assemblies. Second, the Bihar government published the results of its caste census, which triggered nation-wide calls for similar exercises.

Decades in the making, the Parliament nearly unanimously approved the Constitution (128th Amendment) bill (known as the Women Reservation bill), finishing a journey started during the first UPA government (2004-09), when a similar bill had been introduced in Parliament. Previous attempts to guarantee a minimal representation of women in legislative bodies dated

back to the 1990s, and indeed the issue was discussed at length also in the Constituent Assembly. The bill was the first to be considered in the new Parliament building.

The bill reserves 33% of the seats in the Lower House and in the state assemblies for women [Sen 2023b]. India has one of the lowest shares of women legislators in the world [Rai & Spary 2019]. Currently, there are 78 women MPs in the Lok Sabha, or 14% of the total (the world's average is 26.5%) [Parline]. This contrasts with the growing participation of women in the political process. In 2019, women's turnout was higher than men's – a notable achievement considering that, in 1962, the gap between men and women voters was about 17 percentage points [Jain 2021, 26 November].

The passage of the bill was rightly celebrated by the government as a major achievement. Politically, women are a key constituent of Modi's BJP [Spary 2020]. Moreover, the move might also contribute to the betterment of India's performance on goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals, which measures, among other things, the share of women legislators at the national and local levels.

However welcome the passing of the bill was, the Women's Reservation Act, 2023, lacks teeth, to be truly effective, at least in the short term. First, the quota will apply only after the next delimitation of the constituencies. This not only needs fresh census data – the 2021 census was inexplicably delayed – but it will also have to wait until at least 2026, when the delimitation of constituencies can legally be executed. The last time that the number of seats allocated to each state was done (the crux of the delimitation process) was 1971, after which two moratoria (in 1971 and 2002) stopped the process for 55 years (the 2002 extension is set to expire in 2026) [Dharanidharan and Wong 2023, 5 June]. In other words, as Home Minister Amit Shah himself made it clear, the act will be implemented only after 2029 [Singh, Vijaita, 2023, 20 September].

Moreover, the delimitation – to reiterate, a legislative requirement for the reservation to be implemented – is a very delicate political process, as changes in population since 1971 have seen the southern states to stabilise their population⁵ much more quickly than the northern states, thus making inter-state imbalances in representation even more severe. For example, according to projection, the five southern states – Karnataka, Kerala, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu – should have an increase of 17 seats in the Lok Sabha. On the other hand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra might see an increase of 105 seats [Bharati 2023, 21 September]. (The new Parliament building can accommodate 888 MPs). In other words, states which, because of more effective policies and faster economic development, managed to stabilise their popu-

5. The expression «stabilize the population» refers to the process which ensures that a population size remains relatively constant, without any significant negative or positive fluctuation.

lation, will be effectively penalised, by losing a substantial share of their representation in national politics. Needless to say, this is a very delicate matter. To go back to the women's reservation bill, it is unclear at the moment – and for the foreseeable future – how and when the delimitation exercise will be carried out – and with what implications. One thing that might have crossed the mind of the BJP leadership is that with the substantial expansion of the number of seats in the party's stronghold (the Hindi belt) due to the delimitation, the consequences on the party's internal functioning will be limited, whereas it will force southern regional parties to sideline some stalwarts (or their sons) – a risky process.

A second unresolved question in the bill is the matter of within-quota reservation for the OBCs. One fear is that, in its absence, upper caste women will corner most of the reserved seats. This had in fact been one the key stumbling blocks in previous attempts to legislate quotas for women. Significantly, several opposition parties raised the issue during the parliamentary debate, but their concerns were ignored [Phukan 2023, 20 September].

A much more controversial development was the renewed salience of caste-based quotas, triggered by the publication of the Bihar's caste survey report. The last time that castes had been counted (except for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs)), was 1931. In fact, the results of the nation-wide Socio-Economic Caste Census (conducted in 2011) were never made public.

The Bihar's census revealed a widely expected outcome: the share of the OBCs in the state was 63% of the population, whereas the upper caste share was just 15.5% [Singh, Santosh, 2023, 3 October]. The publication of the report immediately raised the issue of caste-based reservation in the legislature as well as in public sector jobs and universities. The existing quota was 27% for the OBC, which is less than half of their share of Bihar's population.

The issue is technically complicated and politically explosive. As far as the technical aspect is concerned, the Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that a (rather arbitrary) cap of 49% quota applies. Given that, nationally, 16% and 8% of the spots are reserved for SCs and STs, respectively and 27% for OBCs, the Supreme Court rulings have blocked any attempt to extend reservations – except in Tamil Nadu, where quotas covering about 68% of the population pre-date the Supreme Court's ruling. However, in 2019, the Indian government reserved 10% of seats and jobs to so-called Economically Weaker Section (EWSs), introducing for the first time an economic (rather than caste-based) system of reservations – even though, in practice, it applies to the upper castes only [Maiorano 2020]. This means that the 50% ceiling has been effectively breached, although it is unclear whether a purely caste-based extension of the reservations would pass the Supreme Court's scrutiny.

In a year preceding a high-stake election, however, it is the political value of the quota conundrum that matters most. The debate on quotas

has implication for both the ruling party and the opposition, which need to calculate risks and benefits on the basis of national as well as state-level considerations.

For the BJP, expanding the reservations was a sensitive political issue, similar to that in which the party found itself in the early 1990s, when V.P. Singh extended reservations to the OBCs. At that time, the response of the BJP – whose social base, back then, was predominantly constituted by the upper castes in North India – pushed on the Hindutva pedal and on the Ram Mandir issue to unify the Hindus. The situation was somewhat similar today. On the one hand, the party must respond somehow to the demand for broadening reservations – also considering that the OBCs have become a key constituency of Modi's BJP (along with its traditional upper caste base) [Maiorano 2019]. On the other hand, the government was preparing to inaugurate the Ram Temple in Ayodhya in January 2024, just a few months before the general election.

In the period under review, Modi's response was muted – he ignored the issue for some time, also keeping in mind the RSS' opposition to expanding reservations. When he did speak on the issue, he made the somewhat convoluted argument that conducting a nation-wide caste census would promote majoritarianism and hurt religious minorities [Naidu 2023, 4 October]. Home Minister Amit Shah, on the other hand, underscoring how sensible and intractable the issue was for the BJP, also said that the party «never opposed» a caste census and that it required «careful thought» [Tiwari 2023, 4 November].

The INDIA Alliance pushed the issue and promised to lift the 50% quota cap and conduct a nationwide caste census; a position captured by Rahul Gandhi's slogan «*jitni abadi, utna haq*» (which roughly translates as «rights proportionate to population»). The Congress party also promised a caste census in Rajasthan, ahead of the state elections in November 2023. Other constituent parties were also on board, starting from Nitish Kumar's RJD and other «Mandal parties» of North India, for which the demand make ideological and political sense [Phukan 2023, 2 October].

The issue was delicate for the opposition as well, though. Mamata Banerjee, chief minister of West Bengal, has been a vocal opponent of the census, even vetoing its inclusion in the INDIA Mumbai resolution in September 2023 [Marpakwar 2023, 2 September]. Banerjee's opposition probably stems from the fact that her own party received a substantial share of the upper caste vote at the 2021 state elections (42% as against the BJP's 46%). Pushing for reservation might lead to a considerable transfer of upper caste vote to the BJP [Sardesai 2021, 6 May].

Even Congress's chief ministers were wary of opening the Pandora's box. For instance, in the period under review Karnataka's Congress Chief Minister Siddaramaiah refused to release the results of the state caste census, conducted in 2015, presumably fearing to hurt the dominant Vokkaliga

and Lingayat communities. Both communities voted in substantial numbers for the Congress at the 2023 state elections, contributing significantly to its victory [Deb 2023, 17 October]. The BJP too was struggling with the need to combine a national and a state-level policy. For instance, Modi quite explicitly backed Rahul Gandhi's «*jitni abadi, utna haq*» proposal, when talking to Madigas (a Dalit community) in poll-bound Telangana [Singh, D.K., 2023, 20 November].

To complicate things further, state governments were under pressure to provide incentives to private employers who hired «locals» – such policies have been adopted or proposed in numerous states such as Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Punjab, Gujarat and Maharashtra [The Times of India 2021, 16 April]. Such reservations in the private sector, however, put further pressure on an already unfavourable job market, thus fuelling demands for reservations in the public sector. In fact, several states saw large-scale protests demanding caste-based quotas in recent years, including Maharashtra, Karnataka, Gujarat and Haryana, among others. In some cases, there have been counter-protests by OBCs – whose share of reserved jobs would decrease if other communities were included in the OBC category. For instance, Maharashtra had to deal with a series of protests by the Maratha and the Lingayat communities, both asking for reservations, as well as by OBCs groups resisting the move [Deshpande 2023, 20 November; India Today 2023, 31 October].

In short, all political parties were in front of complex political choices, which would inevitably leave many disgruntled voters behind. The results of the state elections of December 2023 – when the Congress lost badly precisely where quota politics were supposed to work best, namely in the Hindi belt – caused some rethinking within the Congress and the INDIA alliance. In any case, no reservation policy will solve the real crux of the problem – India's economic inability to create enough jobs to a large, growing, and aspirational youth.

3.3. *Rising social tension*

One of the consequences of the persisting lack of employment opportunities for India's youth is the presence, across the country, of a standing «army» of young and often frustrated people, a small section of which is prone to be involved in violence. While conflict is a recurring feature of India's political life, three developments stood out, for different reasons, during 2023: first, the communal riots in Nuh (Haryana), at the outskirts of Delhi; second, the acceleration of a movement to chase away Muslims from Uttarakhand; and third, the large-scale violence in the state of Manipur.

The riots in Haryana in a way followed what has become a familiar script. Similarly to the way in which Ram Navani's processions have been weaponised by radical Hindu groups in recent years [Scroll.in 2023, 31 March], the Nuh riots originated from a religious procession organised by

the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), an organisation part of the RSS's umbrella. The procession had passed through Nuh – one of the few districts in the country with a Muslim majority – for the past three years. In 2023, however, a radical, self-appointed, cow vigilante (known as Monu Manesar) – who was absconding from the police for murder – posted a video where he announced that he would be present at the procession. The video sparked off reactions from local Muslims. On the day of the procession (31 July), a mob attacked the procession with stones and rudimentary incendiary weapons [Dhankhar 2023, 2 August]. A few thousand Hindus found shelter in a local temple, which was surrounded by rioters for hours before the police dispersed the crowds. Hindu shops were looted and destroyed. The events led to retaliation by a violent Hindu mob in nearby Gurugram – the capital's financial and technological hub – where a Mosque was attacked, the local imam killed and economic ventures owned by Muslims looted and destroyed. The state, once violence was brought under control, proceeded with arresting hundreds of people. Like in the case of the Delhi riots of 2020 [Mairano 2021], most of the arrested were Muslims, who on their part found it «impossible» to file a complaint against radical Hindu groups [Raj 2023, 14 August]. The state government also ordered and executed the destruction of «illegal» properties of (mostly Muslim) residents [Aafaq 2023, 14 August].

While the chain of events is sadly familiar – provocation, reaction, counter-reaction, restoration of order, partisan state action – a very worrying novelty was the usage of firearms and their open display. This is the second major riot – the first being the one in Delhi in 2020 – where most of the killed had gunfire wounds [Bhardwaj 2020, 28 February]. Moreover, armed violence was most likely pre-planned, as both those taking part in the procession and those who attacked it were armed with guns, incendiary weapons, stones, sticks and swords. Even a member of Modi's Cabinet, Minister of State Rao Inderjit Singh, criticized as «wrong» the open display of arms at the VHP procession [Siwach 2023, 2 August]. Moreover, videos emerged in which people wearing a Bajrang Dal (an VHP's sister organisation) t-shirt opened fire with a rifle, with armed police personnel standing right behind, not intervening [Siddiqui 2023, 4 August]. Other videos showed militants openly carrying automatic weapons, in what was an unprecedented and blatant display of illegal firearms [Anwar and Jha 2023, 2 August]. Finally, the open usage and display of weapons seems to suggest that repeated calls over the last few years by radical Hindu leaders, including members of the BJP, to get weapons for «self-defence» [*The Indian Express* 2023, 7 October; *Scroll.in* 2023, 7 January] is perhaps slowly becoming a reality. In fact, in the wake of the Nuh's riots, Hindutva outfits in Haryana, promptly asked for guns, supposedly to protect themselves [*Scroll.in* 2023, 14 August].

In Uttarakhand, mostly bloodless tension has been growing for a few years, as attempts by radical Hindu groups to make the state the «Holy

Land» of Hindus gathered pace. This was not a new project, but recent events represent a marked acceleration. The main objective of the movement was to make the state «Muslim-free», as participant at a rally in the city of Puroala chanted on 29 May 2023 [Mander 2023, 3 November]. In several towns across the state, Muslim families were indeed forced to leave [Mittaland and Jafri 2023, 31 July].⁶ Posters appeared on Muslim-owned shops warning «love jihadis» to leave; Hindu landlords renting out properties to Muslims were pressured to evict them or face social boycotts; tens of Muslim shrines were demolished; the police was asked to enforce more strictly Haridwar's bylaws, prohibiting non-Hindus to settle there; calls to extend the ban to other holy towns and sites were made; local authorities and politicians – including Congress members – participated in rallies where Muslims were warned to leave their hometowns.

The BJP-ruled state government, led by Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami (a life-long RSS member), hardly concealed their support to the movement. Not only did references to Uttarakhand as the Dev Bhoom (Land of the Gods) made their way into official parlance and documentation [Mander 2023, 3 November], but the state tightened laws increasing penalties for forced conversions and launched «background checks» on people coming from outside the state, supposedly to curb «love jihad» [Mishra 2023, 10 June]. The latter is a consistent demand by Hindutva outfits, who claim that people from «a certain community» are increasingly moving to the state to change the demography of Uttarakhand and launch various forms of «jihad», including «love», «land», «trade» and «shrine» jihads [Mittaland and Jafri 2023, 31 July]. The state administration was also very reluctant to act against speakers at the 2021 Dharm Sansad, where extremist Hindu leaders explicitly called for the mass murder of the Muslims [Mander 2023, 3 November]. In short, Uttarakhand is seeing perhaps the most advanced and thorough attempt to transform the state into a Hindu Rashtra – one where Muslims have no place.

Finally, violence on a large scale engulfed the north-eastern state of Manipur, beginning in May 2023. This was the first major eruption of violence not directed against the Indian state since 1992. Rather, violence exploded between two of the states' largest ethnic groups, the Meiteis and the Kukis. At the time of writing, the crisis was still unfolding.

The root causes of the conflict in Manipur are complex and deep rooted. At the most fundamental level, the conflict originates from the very way the territory that forms the state of Manipur became part of Independent India. During the colonial era, Manipur was a princely state and was clearly divided into two areas: the Imphal Valley and the hills areas surrounding the Valley, over which the maharaja only had nominal supervision.

6. Most of what follows is taken from Mittaland and Jafri's long and detailed reportage, published in *The Caravan*.

Therefore, when the Maharaja acceded to India in 1949, the hills were also included, despite that they had been effectively autonomous till then.

The two areas differ significantly in their social composition. While the Valley is mostly inhabited by Meiteis, in the hills live several tribal groups, the most numerous of which are the Kukis and the Nagas. Both have strong ethnic ties with ethnic groups across the border, in Myanmar and Bangladesh, as well as other north-eastern Indian states. The Meiteis are largely Hindus, the Kukis largely Christians.

The two groups have been coexisting more or less peacefully, and with some intermingling. Overtime, Kukis came to work and live in the Valley, as well as Meitei in the hills. However, sources of conflict simmered. To simplify, Meiteis resented Kukis' Scheduled Tribes status – which gave them preferential access to government jobs – and prevented Meiteis to purchase land in the hills. (Kukis have no restrictions to buy land in the Valley). The Meiteis count for about 90% of the population, but occupy only about 10% of the land.

The Kukis, on the other hand, resented the severe underdevelopment of the hills area, which they see as a result of the Meitei's dominance over the state's politics. In fact, the state has 40 Meiteis MLAs, as against 20 between all other ethnic groups. The Kukis (and other ethnic groups living in the hills) have been demanding more autonomy and say over state politics, but the autonomous local bodies have no real power. In fact, the state of Manipur is the only one in the North-East of India where the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution – which grants legislative and taxation powers to local tribal councils – is not applied [*The North-East Affairs* 2023, 3 July].

In recent years, a series of events precipitated the situation. First, the civil war in Myanmar [Fumagalli 2023] caused the displacement of thousands of people, who share ethnic ties with the Kukis. While Myanmar's Kuki-Chins were welcomed in Mizoram (where Kukis form a majority of the population), they were met with hostility in Manipur, where they were dubbed as «illegal immigrants» or even «drug traffickers» [Sayeda 2023, 28 November].

Second, and partly fuelled by immigration from Myanmar, new forms of Meitei nationalism – more radical than its previous avatars – radicalised a section of the community. In particular, the RSS invested significant resources in the state, with the objective of mobilising Meiteis in opposition to religious minorities and «illegal immigrants». The BJP (in power since 2017) too promoted Meitei nationalism and collaborated with organisations such as the Meitei Nationalist Party, which explicitly had the objective of protecting the Meiteis and India [Singh Amom Malemnganba 2023]. Moreover, Kuki leaders (including some belonging to the BJP) claimed that the Chief Minister repeatedly used abusive language against their community [Thapar 2023, 9 May].

Third, over the past few years – and especially since Assam undertook the National Register of Citizens exercise [Torri 2020: 368-376] – Meitei

youths have been asking for a similar register in Manipur [Deka 2023, 6 May]. The crux of the matter was what Meitei saw as an abnormal growth of the population in the hills, which they attributed to illegal migration. When the state government formed a Cabinet sub-committee to look into the matter and identify foreigners, tension mounted further.

Fourth, the state government took some policy decisions which were seen as threatening by the Kukis. In November 2022, for instance, the government passed an order which declared 38 tribal villages as encroachers of forest land, a move supposedly aiming at curbing poppy cultivation (which the state government had repeatedly accused the Kukis of being responsible for). Evictions followed suits, which Kukis saw as an attempt to remove them from the land they had occupied for generations. Another decision by the government which contributed to rising tension was the state's withdrawal from the ongoing ceasefire against two Kuki militant groups and the arrest of Mark T. Haokip, a separatist leader. All of these instances were read by Kukis as unequivocal signs that the state government had decided to turn visibly against their community.

In this situation of rising social tension, a decision by the state's High Court in April 2023 was the last straw. The Court directed the state government to consider a request put forward by the Meitei community to be granted Scheduled Tribe status. Kukis immediately saw a plot to allow Meitei to buy land in the hills and to eat up their share of government and university jobs. At the beginning of May 2023, riots broke out.

Between May and December 2023, more than 200 people died, tens of thousands were displaced and thousands of churches, temples, shops and homes were destroyed [Yasir and Kumar 2023, 1 December]. Several police and army outposts were attacked and thousands of weapons went missing. Militants had in fact at their disposal army-grade weapons, including RPGs [Lama 2023, 31 December]. At the time of writing, there is no solution in sight to end the hostilities. In fact, it seems that the situation is radicalising and that the two communities now see each other as «irreconcilable enemies» [Guha 2023, 5 November].

In December 2023, Home Minister Amit Shah announced that the central government signed a peace agreement with one of Meiteis militant groups, the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) [*Scroll.in*, 29 November]. This is one of several Meiteis' separatist organisations, which had been banned by the government in November. Shah expressed hope that other organisations would follow suit and renounce violence. However, observers expressed scepticism, as several armed groups – which had been dormant or relegated to jungle areas across the border with Myanmar – had started recruiting again on Indian soil, explicitly targeting young men who had been victims of the recent wave of violence [Zaman 2023, 11 December]. On the Kuki side, a newly formed organisation, the Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF), issued an ultimatum to the government, asking for a

completely separate administration for the Kukis, a demand that the state government resisted [Zaman 2023, 1 December].

Not surprisingly, mainstream Indian media have virtually ignored the conflict, partly because the region tends to be covered very little in general, and partly because the crisis is a deep embarrassment for the central government. In fact, the growing authoritarian climate in India makes it very risky and un-rewarding for media to take a line against the government. To this subject we now turn.

3.4. *The continuing erosion of democracy*

During 2023 India's democracy continued to erode. The V-dem main indexes continued their downward trends, reaching 0.4 (Electoral Democracy Index, the same value it had in 1976, during the Emergency regime) and 0.31 (Liberal Democracy Index, it was 0.27 in 1976) [V-dem].

The topic has been abundantly covered in previous issues of *Asia Maior* [Torri 2020; Torri 2021; Maiorano 2022; Maiorano 2023] as well as elsewhere [Tudor 2023; Ganguly 2023]. While some scholars argued that the obituaries of India's democracy are exaggerated [Verma 2023] or have roots than go much further back in time than the current regime [Singh, Tripurda-man, 2023], most analysts do agree that there has been a significant erosion of democratic norms and practices in the last decade [Yadav 2023].

In 2023, this erosion was particularly evident in two domains: freedom of speech and independence of institutions. On freedom of speech, three episodes are worth mentioning. First, in February 2023, the BBC released a two-part documentary on Modi, which was very critical of the Prime Minister [Ellis-Petersen 2023, 14 February]. The government decided to ban it and, a few weeks later, BBC's India offices were raided by income tax officials and subsequently forced to restructure their India operations [Singh, Namita, 2023, 12 December].

Second, in October 2023, the police arrested Prabir Purkayastha and Amit Chakravarty of Newslick, a media outlet which had been the subject of a *New York Times* investigation which linked the website to an international network that funds Chinese propaganda [Travelli *et al.* 2023, 3 October]. Some of Newslick's journalists, which has an editorial line very critical of the current government, were also conducting investigations on the Adani group. The news outlet was raided, as were the homes of some of its journalists, some of whom were booked under the draconian anti-terrorism law Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA).

Third, there has been turmoil in academic circles too. In late 2022, the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), India's premier think tank, was investigated for alleged violations of Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) and its certificate, necessary to access foreign funds, suspended [*The Indian Express* 2023, 11 October]. This crippled CPR's finances and most of its staff was either fired or retained with no salary. While all these cases

may or may not result in convictions, they fit a pattern of using investigative agencies to stifle dissent and independent voices.

Finally, institutional erosion continued during 2023. In March 2023, Rahul Gandhi was sentenced to two years in prison by a court in Gujarat for an ostensibly offensive remark he made during the 2019 electoral campaign. Two years was the minimum requirement for the Lok Sabha to proceed to Gandhi's disqualification as a Member of Parliament, which was executed the following day. Eventually, the Supreme Court suspended his conviction, pending appeal, which cleared the way for him to be reinstated as an MP [Ellis-Petersen 2023, 4 August]. At the moment, it is still uncertain whether Gandhi will be able to contest the 2023 elections.

Another instance which showed the remarkable erosion of institutional proceeding occurred in late 2023. More than 100 MPs were suspended for asking a probe on the security breach happened on 13th December 2023, when, on the 22nd anniversary of the 2001 attack on the Parliament, two men entered the building and started shouting anti-government slogans [The Indian Express, 2023, 14 December]. The suspension of the MPs and the subsequent boycott by opposition parties of the on-going parliamentary session, led to the passing of some critical bills without debate or scrutiny [Mehta 2023, 22 December]. The most crucial one was a bill modifying the rules for appointing the Chief Election Commissioner. According to the new rules – passed by both chambers of Parliament in December 2023 – the selection committee will consist of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, and another Cabinet member (which replaces the Chief Justice of India). In other words, India's electoral watchdog will now be nominated exclusively with the votes of the sitting government [Election Commissioner Bill 2023].

4. *Conclusion*

India entered 2024 as a country that appeared to be going towards an inevitable third term for Prime Minister Modi and the BJP. The enduring popularity of the Prime Minister – reflected also in the state election results – was making the task of opposition parties almost unsurmountable. In 2023, some 20-odds parties started negotiations for presenting a unified front against the BJP, but their historical rivalries and the BJP's ability to set the narrative and attract opposition leaders into its ranks was a source of frustration and complication of what already was a very complicated political process.

While the Indian economy kept growing robustly during 2023, its inability to generate jobs continued to be a major reason why inequality appeared to be growing larger and larger. While this might represent the BJP's weakness, it also seems that many voters will keep economic considerations on the back burner when deciding who to vote for.

APPENDIX 1:

Brief description of India's welfare schemes, mentioned in table 1⁷

Ayushman Bharat - Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) is a health insurance scheme aimed at providing access to quality inpatient secondary and tertiary care to poor and vulnerable families, and reducing catastrophic out-of-pocket expenditures arising out of serious health episodes. The scheme expands the previous Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY).

Child Protection Services (CPS), earlier known as the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS), aims at providing preventive and protective care and rehabilitation services to any child in a vulnerable situation that may lead to abuse, neglect, exploitation, abandonment and separation from families. The scheme included both children in conflict with law, and those who come in contact with law either as a victim or as a witness, as defined under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act. The scheme was launched in 2009 and restructured into Mission Vatsalya as per Union Budget 2022-23.

Food Subsidy is provided by the Government of India (GoI) for the supply and distribution of foodgrains and other essential commodities. With the passing of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) in 2013, nutritional security became a right. Under the Act, adequate quantities of quality food at affordable prices are to be provided to two-thirds of India's population.

Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is GoI's flagship programme aimed at providing basic education, health, and nutrition services for early childhood development. The scheme was launched in 1975 and reconstituted into Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 in FY 2021-22.

Jal Jeevan Mission is GoI's rural drinking water programme to provide functional tap connections to every household for drinking, cooking, and other domestic needs on a sustainable basis by 2024. It subsumes the National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP).

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) is GoI's flagship rural employment programme which aims to provide at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment based on demand. The scheme was launched in 2006 and is the largest scheme of the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD).

Mission Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 was launched in FY 2021-22 after restructuring ICDS, POSHAN Abhiyaan, and the Scheme for Adolescent Girls. The scheme aims to redress some of the challenges identified with the existing schemes and converge nutrition-related initiatives of the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD).

7. These descriptions are reproduced with permission from Accountability Initiative 2023d.

National Health Mission (NHM) is GoI's flagship scheme to achieve universal access to quality healthcare by strengthening health systems, institutions, and capabilities. It consists of two sub-missions: a) the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), launched in 2005 to provide accessible, affordable, and quality healthcare in rural India; and b) the National Urban Health Mission (NUHM), a sub-mission launched in 2013 for urban health.

National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) was launched in 1995 with the objective of supporting minimum needs of specific social groups such as the elderly, widows and disabled persons living in Below Poverty Line (BPL) households.

Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana - Gramin (PMAY-G) is GoI's flagship 'Housing for All' scheme. The scheme aims to provide monetary assistance for the construction of a pucca house with basic amenities to all rural houseless families and those living in dilapidated and kutcha houses. It was constituted after restructuring of Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY) in 2016.

Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) was launched in 2000 with an aim to provide all-weather road connectivity in rural areas. The scheme is being run by MoRD and envisages connecting all habitations with more than 500 residents in the plains, and more than 250 residents in hilly, tribal, and desert areas. Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM KISAN) is GoI's income support scheme aimed at supplementing farmers' incomes to enable them to take care of expenses related to agriculture and allied activities as well as domestic needs. It provides an annual cash transfer of ₹6,000 to all landholding farmers through Direct Benefits Transfer (DBT) mode into their bank accounts.

Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMJY) is a maternity benefit scheme providing conditional cash transfers to pregnant women and lactating mothers for the first live birth. The scheme has evolved over a period of time with the launch of the Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana (IGMSY) in 2010.

Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN), previously known as the National Programme of Mid-Day Meals in School (MDM), aims to provide one hot cooked meal in government and government-aided schools from FY 2021-22 to FY 2025-26. The scheme has the dual objective of addressing hunger and improving the nutritional status of eligible children as well as encouraging poor children belonging to disadvantaged sections to attend school more regularly and help them concentrate on classroom activities.

Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) was GoI's flagship secondary education programme. The scheme was launched in March 2009 with the objective of augmenting access and quality of secondary education. It was integrated into Samagra Shiksha in FY 2018-19 along with Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Teacher Education.

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) was GoI's flagship elementary education programme. Launched in 2001, it aimed to provide universal educa-

tion to children between the ages of 6 to 14 years. It was integrated into Samagra Shiksha.

Swachh Bharat Mission – Gramin (SBM-G) is GoI's flagship rural sanitation programme run by the Ministry of Jal Shakti (MJS). It is a community-led programme whose first phase aimed at providing access to sanitation facilities and eradicating the practice of open defecation by 2 October 2019. SBM-G Phase II aims to achieve ODFPlus (Open Defecation Free - Plus) status for ODF villages.

APPENDIX 2

State elections results 2023

Table 2A – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Rajasthan 2023

Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2018)	Vote share (difference from 2018)
None	BJP	115 (+42)	41.69 (+2.92)
INDIA	INC (incumbent)	69 (-31)	39.53 (+0.23)
	RLD	1	-
	Total	70 (-31)	
BAP	BAP	3 (+3)	-
RLP+	RLP	1 (-2)	2.39 (-0.01)
	ASP (KR)	0	-
	Total	1	
BSP	BSP	2 (-4)	1.82 (-2.21)
None	IND	8 (-5)	-

Legend: BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; INDIA= Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance; INC = Indian National Congress; RLD = Rashtriya Lok Dal; BAP = Bharat Adivasi Party; RLP= Rashtriya Loktantrik Party; ASP(KR) = Azad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram); BSP= Bahujan Samaj Party; IND = Independents.

Table 2B – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Madhya Pradesh 2023

Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2018)	Vote share (difference from 2018)
None	BJP	163 (+54)	48.55 (+7.53)
	INC (incumbent)	66 (-23)	40.40 (-0.49)
	BAP	1	-
	IND	0 (-4)	-

Legend: BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; INC = Indian National Congress; BAP = Bharat Adivasi Party; IND = Independents.

Table 2C – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Chhattisgarh 2023

Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2018)	Vote share (difference from 2018)
None	BJP	54 (+39)	46.27 (+13.27)
	INC (incumbent)	35 (-33)	42.23 (-0.77)
BSP+	BSP	0 (-2)	2.05 (-1.85)
	GGP	1(+1)	-
	Total	1	
None	IND	0	-
	Others	0	-

Legend: BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; INC = Indian National Congress; BSP = Bahujan Samaj Party; GGP= Gondvana Gantantra Party; IND = Independents.

Table 2D – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Telangana 2023

Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2018)	Vote share (difference from 2018)
INDIA	INC	64 (+45)	39.40 (+11.00)
	CPI	1 (+1)	0.34 (-0.07)
	Total	65	39.74 (+10.93)
NDA	BJP	8 (+7)	13.90 (+6.92)
	JSP	0	0.25
	Total	8	-
None	BRS (incumbent)	39 (-49)	37.35 (-9.55)
	AIMIM	7	2.22 (-0.48)
	Others	0 (-3)	-
	IND	0 (-1)	-

Legend: INDIA= Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance; INC = Indian National Congress; CPI= Communist Party of India; NDA = National Democratic Alliance; BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; JSP= Jana Sena Party; BRS= Bharat Rashtra Samiti; AIMIM= All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen; IND= Independents.

Table 2E – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Mizoram 2023

Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2018)	Vote share (difference from 2018)
None	ZPM	27 (+19)	37.86 (+14.96)
	MNF (incumbent)	10 (-16)	35.10 (-2.60)
	INC	1 (-4)	20.82 (-19.16)
	BJP	2 (+1)	5.06 (-3.03)
	AAP	0	0.09 (+0.09)
	IND	0	-

Legend: ZPM= Zoram People's Movement; MNF= Mizo National Front; INC = Indian National Congress; BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; AAP= Aam Aadmi Party; IND = Independents.

Table 2F – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Karnataka 2023

Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2018)	Vote share (difference from 2018)
None	INC	135 (+55)	42.88 (+4.74)
	BJP (incumbent)	66 (-38)	36.00 (-0.35)
	JDS	19 (-18)	13.3 (-5.01)
	KRRP	1 (+1)	0.63 (+0.63)
	SKP	1 (+1)	0.25 (+0.2)
	IND	2 (+1)	4.07 (+0.17)
	Others	0 (-2)	2.18 (-0.32)

Legend: INC = Indian National Congress; BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; JDS= Janata Dal (Secular); KRRP= Kalyana Rajya Pragathi Paksh; SKP= Sarvodaya Karnataka Paksha; IND = Independents.

Table 2G – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Tripura 2023

Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2018)	Vote share (difference from 2018)
NDA (incumbent)	BJP	32 (-4)	38.97 (-4.62)
	IPFT	1 (-7)	1.26 (-6.12)
	Total	33 (-11)	40.23 (-10.78)
SDF	CPI-M	11 (-5)	24.62 (-17.6)
	INC	3 (+3)	8.56 (+6.77)
	AIFB	0	1.03 (+0.47)
	RSP	0	0.67 (-0.08)
	CPI	0	0.48 (-0.34)
	IND	0	0.65
	Total	14	36.01 (-10.08)
None	TMP	13 (new)	19.69 (+19.69)
	AITC	0	0.88 (+0.58)
	IND	0	1.6
	Others	0	0.23

Legend: National Democratic Alliance = NDA; BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; IPFT= Indigenous People's Front of Tripura; SDF= Secular Democratic Forces; CPI-M= Communist Party of India (Marxist); INC = Indian National Congress; AIFB= All India Forward Bloc; RSP= Revolutionary Socialist Party; CPI= Communist Party of India; TMP= Tipra Motha Party; AITC= All India Trinamool Congress; IND = Independents.

Table 2H – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Meghalaya 2023

Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2018)	Vote share (difference from 2018)
None	NPEP (incumbent)	26 (+6)	31.49 (+11.43)
	UDP	12 (+6)	16.21 (+4.61)
	AITC	5 (+5)	13.78 (+13.38)
	INC	5 (-16)	13.14 (-15.36)
	VPP	4 (new)	5.46 (+5.46)
	BJP	2	9.33 (-0.27)
	HSPDP	2	3.56 (-1.74)
	PDF	2 (-2)	1.88 (-6.32)
	GNC	0	00.53 (-0.9)
	Others	0 (-1)	0.23
	IND	2 (-1)	0.79

Legend: NPEP= National People's Party; UDP= United Democratic Party; AITC= All India Trinamool Congress; INC = Indian National Congress; VPP= Voice of the People Party; BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; HSPDP= Hill State People's Democratic Party; PDF= People's Democratic Front; GNC= Garo National Council; IND = Independents.

Table 2I – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Nagaland 2023

Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2018)	Vote share (difference from 2018)
NEDA	NDPP	25 (+7)	32.24 (+7.02)
	BJP	12	18.8 (3.51)
	Total	37 (+7)	51.04 (+10.53)
None	NCP	7 (+7)	9.56 (+8.50)
	NPEP	5 (+3)	5.76 (-1.14)
	LJP (RV)	2 (+2)	8.64 (+8.64)
	NPP	2 (-24)	7.09 (-31.71)
	RPI (A)	2 (+2)	3.69
	JD (U)	1	3.25 (-1.25)
	INC	0	3.56 (+1.45)
	IND	4 (+3)	6.27
Others	0	0.83	

Legend: NEDA= North East Democratic Alliance; NDPP= Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party; BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; NCP= Nationalist Congress Party; NPEP= National People's Party; LJP (RV)= Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas); NPP= Naga People's Front; RPI (A)= Republican Party of India (Athawale); JD (U)= Janata Dal (United); INC = Indian National Congress; IND = Independents.

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INDIA 2023: TACTICAL WINS AND STRATEGIC SETBACKS IN FOREIGN POLICY?

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India had a busy and increasingly tumultuous year in foreign policy. New Delhi played host to both the Group of 20 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, providing opportunities to shape agendas in multiple areas of global governance and international security. It used both presidencies to showcase the achievements of the Modi government, to demonstrate India's «convening power», and, at times, to frustrate others, especially China. But, during 2023, India also attracted global attention for other reasons. In the middle of year, the killing of a Sikh separatist in Canada led some to conclude that New Delhi was running a covert programme of targeted assassinations. That incident led to a major diplomatic dispute with Ottawa and was followed by evidence, uncovered by United States authorities, of an unsuccessful plot to assassinate another Sikh separatist. These events cast a shadow over India's strategic partnership with Washington. Towards the end of year, the outbreak of violence in Gaza brought the Modi government's Middle East policy – especially the strong relationship forged with Israel – under greater scrutiny. Both could prefigure strategic setbacks for India, this article argues.

KEYWORDS – India; Indian foreign policy; G20; China; targeted killings; Canada; Gaza

1. Introduction

Partly by design and partly by circumstance, the global spotlight shone brightly on India throughout 2023. With a national election looming in the first half of 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government was keen to display India's «convening power» in contemporary international affairs, as chair of both the Group of 20 (G20) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and as convener of two «Voice of the Global South» summits. These events allowed Modi to showcase *Naya Bharat* («New India») to tens of thousands of visiting politicians, officials, businesspeople, investors, and analysts, and to make the case to ordinary Indians that their country is now held in high esteem by the world, thanks to the astute diplomacy of the Prime Minister and the *Bharatiya Janata Party* («Indian People's Party» or BJP).

As the year wore on, however, India found itself the focus of international attention for other reasons. On 18 June 2023, a prominent Sikh separatist leader, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, was shot by unidentified gunmen

outside a *gurdwara* in Surrey, near Vancouver, in the Canadian state of British Columbia [Pawson 2023, 19 June]. In the following hours and days, it was widely speculated that India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) had played some part in the killing. It soon became clear that this suspicion was shared by the Canadian government and at least some of Canada's allies, including the United States (US). On 18 September 2023, just over a week after the G20 summit in New Delhi, this belief was finally aired in public. In a dramatic statement to parliament, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stated that Canada's security agencies were «actively pursuing credible allegations» concerning the involvement of Indian officials in Nijjar's murder [Tasker 2023, 18 September].

This allegation plunged the bilateral relationship between Canada and India into crisis. New Delhi reacted angrily, designating Canada unsafe for Indian citizens, suspending visa services, and forcing the withdrawal of forty-one Canadian diplomats working in India [Bhattacharyya 2023, 20 October]. The accusation also cast a wider shadow. As the dispute developed, the extent of American concern about India's alleged actions concerning Nijjar and the fate of other actual or putative targets became evident. We now know that in a series of private meetings in September, October, and November, the US repeatedly pressed India to engage constructively with Ottawa's investigation [MacDonald 2023, 10 November]. Then came a surprising development. On 29 November 2023, US authorities unsealed an indictment alleging that an Indian citizen named Nikhil Gupta had collaborated with an Indian official in New Delhi to plot another assassination, this time in the US [Department of Justice 2023]. The target was not named in the indictment but was widely reported as New York-based Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, the high-profile leader of the «Sikhs for Justice» separatist group [Herman 2023, 22 November].

The suggestion that members of the Modi government were engaged in a programme of targeted killings prompted renewed scrutiny of the strategic partnerships forged with India by the US and its Indo-Pacific allies, including Australia and Japan [Ganguly 2023, 29 November]. While few analysts advocated breaking off or even winding back these relationships, in Washington, Canberra, Tokyo, and indeed London and further afield, questions were asked about the wisdom of deepening security ties with a country willing and able to act in such an unrestrained manner within the borders of supposedly friendly states [e.g. Chatterjee Miller 2023].

In this way and in others, the year saw what might be seen as a series of short-term tactical wins for New Delhi, but whether these successes advanced or undermined India's longer-term strategic interests is less clear.¹ To be sure, some of the wins were significant. In the G20 and SCO, and

1. Here I follow what I take to be the standard distinction between tactics – actions taken to achieve discrete ends – and strategy – the overarching plan to fulfil a broader set of larger objectives over time.

in other groupings, for example, India deployed considerable diplomatic skill to frustrate Chinese agendas and to forge closer ties with significant players, including in the Middle East, and the Global South [Hall 2023, 13 July; Manzoor, 2023, 10 September]. Modi's State Visit to Washington in June reaffirmed the commitment of both countries to their burgeoning technology partnership, especially the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), agreed late in 2022, and a memorandum of understanding facilitating the future manufacturing of US-designed jet engines in India [Ministry of External Affairs, 2023b]. Some might also claim, perhaps, that India's undeclared targeting killing programme paid dividends, eliminating a series of long-standing national security threats. By the end of the year, at least ten accused terrorists had been killed by unnamed assailants, including several apparently high-ranking militant Islamists resident in Pakistan [*The Times of India* 2023, 10 November].²

Yet at the same time, the Nijjar and Pannun affairs arguably undermined trust between New Delhi and the Western strategic partners India needs to help manage security challenges posed by China and Pakistan and others in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. Throughout 2023, those challenges remained acute. By the end of the year, China remained in possession of the territory seized by stealth by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the first half of 2020. Military talks between India and China yielded only a few minor disengagements on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) [Pandit 2023, 12 October]. China continued to upgrade military infrastructure along the LAC and to step up its military and oceanographic presence in the Indian Ocean [Laskar 2023, 6 June]. Beijing did not wind back efforts to build influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region [Grossman 2023, 21 August]. And while China's leaders called on New Delhi to stabilise the relationship and work with Beijing in areas of mutual interest, they offered no concessions to India [*Xinhua* 2023, 25 July].

Nor did Pakistan, for that matter, despite that country's worsening economic malaise and increasingly fractious internal politics [Biswas 2023, 17 May]. While the India-Pakistan Line of Control remained relatively quiet, which could be seen as a success of sorts, no progress was made in improving relations between Islamabad and New Delhi [Chauhan 2023, 23 October]. To make matters worse for India, events elsewhere in the immediate region took problematic turns during 2023. In Afghanistan, the Taliban consolidated its control and pledged to work more closely with Beijing [Yunus Yarwar and Greenfield, 2023, 14 October]. In Myanmar, the military government with which India has remained engaged since the start of the civil war lost

2. Those killed in Pakistan include Mistry Zahoor Ibrahim of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) shot on 1 March; Paramjit Singh Panjwar of the Khalistan Commando Force, shot on 6 May; Riyaz Ahmad of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), shot on 8 September; Maulana Ziur Rahman, also of LeT, shot on 12 September; and Shahid Latif, a member of Jaish-e-Mohammad, shot on 12 October.

control of more territory [Myers 2023]. In the Maldives, a Presidential election was won by a candidate, Mohamed Muizzu, committed to upgrading the country's relationship with China and Muslim states and downgrading ties with India [Kapoor, 2023, 21 December]. In parallel, another election, this time in Bangladesh, exposed disagreements between New Delhi and strategic partners like the US [Shivamurthy 2023].

This paper explores this persistently difficult strategic predicament and other significant developments in 2023. The next section sets the scene, outlining India's position at the start of the year. The third examines one of New Delhi's biggest projects: its outreach to the Global South, using the G20 and other vehicles. The fourth returns to India's relations with the major powers; especially it examines the consequences of New Delhi's attempts to «soft balance» China, and the impact of the allegations of India-sponsored targeted killings on its partnerships with Western states. The fifth section then turns to India's balancing act in West Asia, which was made more precarious by Hamas' surprise attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and the war in Gaza that followed. The conclusion provides a brief assessment of India's standing at the close of the year.

2. Promise and Purpose

Despite facing a complex set of strategic challenges, New Delhi began 2023 with purpose. The Modi government's determination to make the most of the G20 presidency was clear as soon as it took over the G20 presidency from Indonesia. At the Bali G20 Leaders' Summit on 15-16 November 2022, Modi himself promised that India would deliver not just an «inclusive, ambitious, action-oriented, and decisive» agenda, but also that it would promote a «universal sense of one-ness» or harmony between all living things [Modi 2022, 30 November].

Whether or not that latter objective could be achieved, at the start of 2023, New Delhi had reasons to feel confident. Prior to the Bali Summit (15-16 November 2022), many observers doubted that a final statement could be agreed among the G20 members, given differences between China and Russia, on the one hand, and the West, on the other, over Ukraine. Deft Indonesian and Indian diplomacy, however, eventually forged an agreement which included language mildly critical of Russia's aggression and acceptable to all [Press Trust of India 2022, 19 November]. This was no small achievement, balancing both Western and Russian concerns, and Chinese disapproval [Lawler and Allen-Ebrahimian 2022, 16 November]. For a time, at least, the Bali language appeared to offer India a way out of a messy situation New Delhi was compelled to manage in 2022, thanks to Vladimir Putin's adventurism and Western anger at Russia's aggression. Some ire had been directed at New Delhi, which refused to condemn Pu-

tin's actions and maintained an open channel of communication to Moscow, fearful that Russia might be forced into China's arms [Tellis 2022] and conscious of India's ongoing dependence on Russian-supplied weapons [Lalwani and Sagerstrom 2021], as well as scarce and sensitive technologies [Gupta, Amit 2022].

Beyond the Bali compromise, India also had other grounds to be positive. Despite the disagreements about Russia, during 2022 New Delhi had managed to further strengthen ties with its Quad partners: Australia, Japan, and the United States. The Tokyo Quad Summit in late May unveiled a series of new initiatives useful to India, not least the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) and projects intended to enhance cooperation in basic science, advanced technologies, space, cyber-security, and the green energy transition [White House 2023]. The Quad foreign ministers reaffirmed their commitment to work together at a meeting on the sidelines of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in September 2022 and convened again in New Delhi in March 2023. At that New Delhi meeting, the bonhomie among the Quad foreign ministers was evident. At the Raisina Dialogue, hosted by the Observer Research Foundation, they compared themselves the «The Beatles» in cheery exchanges with each other and with the audience [Roy 2023, 4 March].

Finally, New Delhi had managed the economic disruptions caused by the Ukraine conflict reasonably well, partly by buying up cheap Russian oil with Indian rupees, satisfying some of the country's own needs, and refining and on-selling more [Gamio *et al.* 2023, 22 June]. These actions allowed India to cushion its economy from some of the inflationary pressures that arose from the war and the sanctions imposed on Russia. Partly as a result, India's gross domestic product grew by 7.2% in the financial year 2022-23 [Mishra 2023, 31 May] and strong growth was predicted to continue through into 2023-24 [Seth 2023, 31 January].

3. *Reengaging the Global South*

Eager to capitalise on these achievements and make the most of the G20 presidency, New Delhi moved quickly to demonstrate India's convening power and to extend its influence, especially in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In the final days of 2022 and the first of 2023, Modi and India's External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr Subrahmanyam (conventionally «S») Jaishankar embarked on a round of telephone diplomacy, making calls to the leader or foreign ministers of most than a hundred developing countries. On 12-13 January 2023, India held a virtual «Voice of the Global South Summit» with participants from 125 states, including 47 from Africa [Pradhan 2023, 19 January]. New Delhi promised to use the meeting to gather up ideas – especially concerning the reform of international institutions, common but

differentiated responsibilities on issues like climate change, and the challenge of inclusive development – to feed into the India's G20 agenda [Roy 2023, 14 January].

These moves reflected a growing concern in New Delhi that India had unduly neglected the Global South in recent years. For two decades, as C. Raja Mohan rightly observed in the aftermath of the summit, India had focused most of its attention on «restructuring its great power relations» while «promoting greater cooperation and connectivity in the near and extended neighbourhood» [Mohan 2023]. Throughout this period, India's ties with most of the developing world beyond South Asia were recognised as important, but were not prioritised. Indeed, successive governments, including Modi's, showed little interest in fora like the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77, favouring alternatives like the BRICS (which brings together Brazil, China, India, Russia, and South Africa) or the G20. These groupings allowed India to work more closely with the major powers [Ganguly 2016, 19 September] and offered New Delhi higher status in the international community.³

This approach was not without costs. Over the past two decades, New Delhi has lost ground to China in the battle for influence in the Global South, especially in Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific [Cooper 2021]. The January Summit was intended to respond to that challenge. It aimed to boost India's influence and thereby reshape institutions and processes of global governance to better fit India's interests [Akita 2023, 1 April]. So was New Delhi's ultimately successful push to give the African Union a seat at the table at the G20, alongside the European Union. A series of visits by the Foreign Minister to developing states in Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific had similar objectives. In 2022, Jaishankar ranged further afield than most recent Indian foreign ministers, heading to Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, as well as Botswana, Ethiopia, and Kenya [Gupta, Shishir 2022, 30 August]. During 2023, Jaishankar travelled further still, visiting Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Tanzania to signal India's renewed interest in African partners, to Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Guyana, and Panama in Central and South America [Seshasayee 2023, 5 May], and to Fiji in the Pacific.

In May, Modi also became the first Indian prime minister to visit Papua New Guinea (PNG). There he attended the summit meeting of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), a grouping launched in Fiji in 2014. FIPIC connects India with fourteen Pacific Island states to work on trade, investment, energy, physical and digital infrastructure, and people-to-people ties. Modi had earlier attended the Fiji meeting and the subsequent one in Jaipur in India in August 2015, but then FIPIC went into something of a hiatus. Its revival in May 2023 was India-driven and reflec-

3. On India's enduring concern with status, see Basrur and Sullivan de Estrada 2019.

tive of New Delhi's mounting anxiety about Chinese influence in the Pacific [Parashar 2023, 23 May]. For that reason, Modi brought a twelve-point action plan for closer ties and the promise that India wanted to be an active development partner for the region, helping to keep it «free and open», and providing an alternative to China [Modi 2023a].

Several other Global South-focused initiatives followed in the second half of 2023. Two were revealed on the sidelines of the G20 Summit. The first was a Global Biofuel Alliance (GBA) that aimed to develop and promote sustainable fuels, bringing together India with Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, Italy, Mauritius, Singapore, and the US. The second was more contentious: an agreement among the IBSA grouping, comprising India, Brazil, and South Africa, to work more closely together to reform multi-lateral development financing. This initiative came as a surprise to some observers, as IBSA had been dormant for several years, as the larger BRICS minilateral forged ahead. Few missed the fact, however, that both the new GBA and IBSA project excluded China. This was in keeping with New Delhi's broader effort – discussed in the next section – to frustrate and forestall Beijing's ambitions [Hall 2023, 11 September].

India completed this push for influence with a second Global South Summit held online on 17 November. Modi introduced the opening session and highlighted what he deemed were the achievements of India's G20 presidency: the admission of the African Union; promises to reform the development banks and provide funds for the green transition; commitments to realise the Sustainable Development Goals; and pledges concerning artificial intelligence, digital payments, and disaster resilient infrastructure [Modi 2023b].

This event was overshadowed by the war in Gaza, however – a conflict that divided the attendees, despite Modi's call for solidarity [*The Wire* 2023, 18 November]. That conflict also threatened New Delhi's efforts to forge partnerships across West Asia and pursue projects beneficial to India. These included initiatives like an India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), unveiled by Modi just two months earlier at the G20 Summit, and intended to connect India to Europe via Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) [*Al Jazeera* 2023, 9 September]. This scheme now has no clear timetable for completion. Other Indian projects, including the so-called «Middle East Quad», comprising India, Israel, the UAE, and the US, launched in late 2021, known as I2U2, were also sidelined [Alhasan and Solanki 2023, 16 November].

4. *Tactics and Strategy*

The demands imposed by the hundreds of meetings held across India under the auspices of the G20 stretched its notoriously over-worked diplo-

mats. Yet throughout 2023 New Delhi's foreign policy and national security establishment was also busy in other areas.⁴ In part, this was due to India's engagement with an ever-growing number of multilateral and minilateral groupings, including the BRICS, East Asia Summit (EAS), FIPIC, IBSA, I2U2, Quad, and SCO. Each of these required New Delhi's energy during the year, to advance or defend India's interests, or stymie others' agendas, or simply to ensure that a suitable representative and delegation could attend meetings. But in part too, India's officials were busy because the Modi government was keen for India to be assertive concerning perceived adversaries. Two received the most attention: China and foreign-based separatists, including militant Islamists focused on Kashmir and advocates of an independent Sikh state of «Khalistan».⁵

4.1. *Soft Balancing China*

New Delhi was more subtle in its approach to managing China.⁶ Unable and unwilling to attempt to dislodge the PLA from the positions Chinese troops had seized in 2020, India persisted with a diplomatic strategy with four elements developed during 2021 and 2022 [Gokhale 2021; Torri 2022]. The first part of this strategy was rhetorical: the public insistence that what occurred before, during, and after the Galwan clash cannot and will not be seen normal – as minor incidents or disputes like the others that have periodically occurred along the LAC since China seized control of Tibet in 1950. Throughout 2023, New Delhi maintained that what the PLA did in transgressing so aggressively and in grabbing territory was extraordinary and unacceptable, and that Beijing bears sole responsibility for remedying the situation. To emphasise this point, EAM Jaishankar repeatedly declared that New Delhi cannot abide by the tacit agreement struck in the 1990s between China and India to set aside their differences over the LAC and deepen cooperation in other areas of the bilateral relationship. Instead, Jaishankar argued, Beijing must return to the *status quo ante* 2020 before India will work with China again in those areas [*The Times of India* 2023, 27 September].

The second element consisted of military pressure along the LAC, exerted by the persistent deployment, all year round, of significant numbers of Indian troops into the border areas, and by the accelerated development of related infrastructure. Three army divisions have been stationed in Lada-

4. India's foreign service is tiny, with «A» officers numbering just over 1000. For a deeper look, see Bajpai and Chong 2019.

5. For a useful account of the history of the Khalistan movement, see Van Dyke 2009.

6. This subtlety is a function of necessity: the power imbalance between the two has widened significantly over the past forty years. For a critical analysis of the «evasive balancing» strategy New Delhi has adopted in response, see Rajagopalan 2020.

kh since the 2020 crisis – two more than usual – plus tanks, artillery, helicopters, and various fixed-wing aircraft and drones [Tarapore 2021]. In total, at the end of 2023, India was maintaining around 50-60,000 troops on the western sector of the LAC. Moreover, following clashes in the eastern sector late in 2022, additional forces have also been deployed into Arunachal Pradesh and new roads built to better manage Chinese incursions [Wallen 2023, 19 December].

The third part of this strategy involved strengthening India's ties with strategic partners, including the other members of the Quad [Tarapore 2023]. Since 2022, if not before, New Delhi has been energetic since 2021 in working more closely with Australia, Japan, and the US within the Quad in multiple areas: in artificial intelligence, biotechnology and pharmaceuticals, climate change, critical infrastructure, cybersecurity, infrastructure financing, maritime security, minerals, and supply chains [Madan 2022]. Beyond the Quad, it also continued throughout 2023 to develop closer bilateral defence and security relationships with all three countries [Mehta and George 2022; Siddiqui 2023, 20 March; Vergun 2023], and with others, including France [Balachandran 2023] and Singapore [TNN 2023, 2 November]. These moves were intended to bolster interoperability as well as building habits of cooperation, permit greater information sharing, foster defence industry partnerships and technology transfer, and facilitate arms sales.

The final element in India's evolving approach to managing China is what we might call «soft balancing» within multilateral institutions and minilateral groupings. Soft balancing can be defined as the «use of non-military tools to delay, frustrate and undermine» [Pape 2005: 10] often involving «limited, tacit, or indirect balancing strategies largely through coalition building and diplomatic bargaining within international institutions, short of formal bilateral and multilateral military alliances» [Paul 2005: 58]. Throughout 2023, there is much evidence that India engaged in soft balancing of China across several forums, seeking to stymie Beijing's agendas. This was clear at the G20, as we have already seen, and was widely commented upon inside and outside China [Reuters 2023, 9 September]. But it was also evident within the BRICS and even the China- and Russia-dominated SCO, which India joined in 2017.

This soft balancing took multiple forms. At the G20, it involved sidelining China, and forming other groupings, like the biofuel alliance, or using existing groupings, like the hitherto moribund IBSA, which India revitalised to provide a platform for a new campaign for the reform of multilateral development banks [Hall 2023, 11 September]. At the BRICS Summit, hosted by South Africa on 22 to 24 August, it involved more direct opposition, especially to Beijing's plan to open the forum to new members, including Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. New Delhi eventually dropped its objections, but the point was made – China cannot assume that India will support an effort to turn the BRICS into

a Beijing-led anti-Western alternative to the Group of 7 (G7) [du Plessis, Miridzhanian and Acharya 2023, 25 August]. At the SCO, which New Delhi chaired during 2023, India's approach was more circumspect, but still focused on frustrating Chinese objectives [Lo 2023, 6 July]. Citing scheduling issues, New Delhi held the set-piece SCO Summit online, refused to endorse the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and focused the agenda on light issues – innovation, traditional medicine, and digital inclusion – rather than the security challenges that are the organisation's usual preoccupations [Hall 2023, 13 July].

Beijing was clearly irritated by India's actions in these and other forums. Xi Jinping's refusal to attend the G20 Summit in New Delhi in September – also officially blamed on scheduling difficulties – was likely a rebuke, as well as an attempt to minimise embarrassment on China's part [Paramesha 2023, 8 September]. But whether India's tactics had strategic effect is not yet obvious.

4.2. *Targeted Killing*

India's approach to countering perceived non-state threats was less subtle. In late February 2023, the Indian media reported the death of Bashir Ahmad Pir (also known as Imtiyaz Alam) in the Pakistani city of Rawalpindi. Allegedly a top Hizbul Mujahideen commander, Ahmad was shot by unidentified gunmen [Basu 2023, 21 February]. A few days later, Syed Khalid Raza, said to be a former member of the militant group Al Badr, was killed in Karachi [*Hindustan Times* 2023, 27 February]. A few days after that Syed Noor Shalobar, an alleged Islamic State Khorasan commander, was shot in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on or around 4 March [ANI 2023, 6 March].

This spate of killings was not unprecedented – there were several in 2022, including the shooting of Zahoor Mistry Ibrahim, a long-time Jaish-e-Mohammed operative who participated in a notorious hijacking in 1999, in Karachi in March [Shekhar 2022, 9 March]. However, they did not attract much attention beyond South Asia. But then came a series of incidents involving Sikh separatists. On 6 May Paramjit Singh Panjwar, long-time head of the so-called Khalistan Commando Force, who had played a prominent role in the insurgency in Punjab in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was shot in Lahore [Press Trust of India 2023, 7 May]. A month later, in mid-June, Avtar Singh Khanda, a 35-year-old Sikh activist, died in a hospital in Birmingham in the United Kingdom (UK). Khanda had earlier led a protest outside the Indian High Commission in London, during which he helped to pull down India's flag from the building. Media reports cited blood cancer as Khanda's cause of death, but some followers soon suggested he was poisoned [The Tribune 2023, 15 June]. Finally, a few days after Khanda's death, the high-profile Sikh activist Nijjar was shot in Canada.

These cases, well publicised not just in the Indian media but also by Sikh separatist outlets, attracted global interest. And without good expla-

nations for what had occurred, international scrutiny of the killings intensified. Soon after Nijjar's death, the theory began to circulate that India had played some role in his murder [Macdonald *et al.* 2023, 19 June]. So, indeed, did the idea that New Delhi was running a bigger targeted killing programme [Southern 2023, 20 June]. These suspicions were not allayed by the response of leading Indian media outlets. Many adhered to the official line that New Delhi had not been involved in the murders. But at the same time some welcomed the killings and suggested that they sent strong signals to India's enemies and the countries that harboured them [e.g. Joshi 2023, 20 June].

It is now known that the Canadian government suspected Indian government involvement in Nijjar's death soon after the shooting. In August and September, in the run-up to the New Delhi G20 summit, Canadian National Security Advisor Jody Thomas travelled to India twice to convey Ottawa's concerns to her counterpart, Ajit Doval. They were raised once more by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau during a bilateral meeting with Modi on the sidelines of the summit [Sharma 2023, 4 October]. During this time, Canada appears also to have discussed the issue with allies and partners, including the so-called «Five Eyes» intelligence group, which includes Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and the US. Additional information about the killing may have been communicated to Ottawa by at least one Five Eyes partner [Akbarzai *et al.* 2023, 24 September].

Up to the G20 summit, India simply denied any suggestion that Indian officials had had a hand in Nijjar's murder. On 18 September, a frustrated Trudeau finally went public, outlining Canada's suspicions in a statement to parliament. At the same time, Canada took the serious step of naming and expelling Pavan Kumar Rai, the Ottawa station chief of India's foreign intelligence service, R&AW [Rajghatta 2023, 19 September]. New Delhi reacted with fury and expelled the top representative of Canada's external intelligence agency at its High Commission. Further measures followed, including the removal of two-thirds of the Canadian diplomats serving in India, all without any admission of culpability by New Delhi, nor a public promise to cooperate with the Canada's investigation of Nijjar's shooting. Instead, the official relationship between Canada and India entered a deep freeze, with neither side willing to break the ice [Nossal 2023, 15 October].

For about two months after Trudeau's speech to parliament, it appeared that this issue might remain bilateral. On 22 November this situation changed, however, with the claim that in June US authorities had foiled an alleged plot to murder the prominent Khalistani and joint Canadian and US citizen Gurbatwant Singh Pannun. A week later, the indictment concerning this case was unsealed by the Department of Justice, making clear the nature of the charges against one of the alleged co-conspirators, Nikhil Gupta, and an unnamed Indian official in New Delhi the investigating authorities claimed had directed the plot [Department of Justice 2023]. At

this point, it became clear that the US had been concerned about India's behaviour since at least June 2023, if not earlier.

4.3. *Tactical Assertion and Strategic Precarity*

New Delhi's reaction to the US indictment was markedly different to its visceral response to the earlier Canadian allegations [Ganguly 2023, 29 November]. Some Indian commentators fulminated about «Deep State» links to Sikh separatists, conspiracies to sabotage relations with the US, and Pakistani skulduggery [Talukdar 2023, 24 November]. But the official response was restrained. The MEA argued that assassinations on foreign soil were «contrary to government policy» and noted that the government had set up a «high-level enquiry committee» to scrutinise information provided by the US on the «nexus between organised criminals, gun runners and terrorists» [*Hindustan Times* 2023, 30 November]. No admission of involvement in a plot to kill Pannun was made, but equally, no angry statements were issued, no diplomats were expelled, and no visa processes suspended.

For good reason, authoritative analysts observed that this muted response likely reflected concern in New Delhi about the potential impact of the Pannun case on the US-India strategic partnership [Moriyasu and Sharma 2023, 28 November; cf. Ganguly 2023, 29 November]. Just a fortnight before the allegations of the murder plot were aired, the importance and the foundations of the relationship had been emphasised at the 2+2 foreign and defence ministers meeting. The meeting had brought Jaishankar and Rajnath Singh together with their American colleagues, Antony J. Blinken and Lloyd J. Austin III. Observing that both countries held the view that their partnership had been built on «trust and mutual understanding», the Joint Statement issued after the meeting outlined all the work underway to further cooperation in defence, counterterrorism, law enforcement, science and technology, health, trade, and infrastructure [US Department of Defense 2023].

New Delhi needs these initiatives to succeed, as well as those announced earlier in the year during Modi's State Visit, given their importance for India's economic and social development, as well as its national security. The iCET programme, American investment to build a semiconductor industry, defence and space collaboration, cooperation in advanced areas like artificial intelligence and quantum computing, joint work on energy transition and sustainable development, all have immense potential for India (Ministry of External Affairs 2023a). Regional diplomatic coordination and information sharing are arguably crucial to New Delhi helping to construct the multipolar Indo-Pacific the Modi administration declares that it seeks [see Jaishankar 2024]. And from Washington's point of view, India may still be «America's best bet in the Indo-Pacific», as Arzan Tarapore [2023, 29 May] has argued, to assist with managing a truculent China.

Yet the Pannun affair and the evidence of an apparent targeted killing programme appears to have undermined trust in the US and shaken

the case for deeper engagement [Galani 2023, 1 December]. It has likely further divided a foreign policy establishment split over the value of the strategic partnership. These divisions have been evident for some time and are unlikely to disappear soon, given the revelations concerning Nijjar and Pannun. They were exposed in 2022 due to New Delhi's refusal to criticise Russian aggression in Ukraine and India's purchases of huge quantities of Russian oil. They were obvious once more in the first half of 2023, well before Nijjar was gunned down in Canada, fed by anxiety about India's strategic intentions and relative weakness *vis-a-vis* China [Tellis 2023, 1 May] and the Modi's government's apparent «autocratic turn» [Markey 2023]. The Pannun case likely fed those doubts and widened existing divisions in the US, offering as it did «ammunition to those inside the US government and elsewhere who question the wisdom of trusting India», in Daniel Markey's words [Lakshman 2023, 5 December]. At the time of writing, the affair had not ended, despite the reported conclusion of an internal investigation by India and the transfer of one or more «rogue» R&AW officials to another part of the bureaucracy [*Hindustan Times*, 2024, 21 March].

5. *Maintaining Balance in West Asia*

The outbreak of hostilities in Gaza following Hamas' breakout from the territory on 7 October added a further complication – with uncertain implications – to India's international relations. Since the end of the Cold War, successive Indian governments have tried to forge close partnerships with most of the major military and economic powers of what India sees as «West Asia» regardless of the disputes they might have between them [Blarel 2022]. Since 2014, the Modi government has leant more heavily into the relationships with Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, but in general it has pursued a strategy of regional «multialignment», aiming for good relations with most of states in the Middle East [Quamar 2023].⁷ The Gaza war threatened and continues to threaten to undermine that approach, forcing harder choices on India than it has faced for at least thirty years.

During the Cold War, the issue was clearer cut. Early on, New Delhi positioned itself as a prominent champion of the Palestinian cause. In 1947 India voted against the partition of Palestine and in 1949 against the admission of Israel into the UN, though it begrudgingly recognised the new state a year later. In the early 1970s, New Delhi intensified its concern once more, forging close ties with the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organisation). But its motives for this move were more mixed: socialist and «anti-imperialist» solidarity played a part, but so did material and geostrategic concerns. After

7. On the concept and practice of «multialignment», see Hall 2016.

the 1971 war with Pakistan, in which most Arab states sided with Islamabad, New Delhi was keen to ensure oil and remittances continued to flow from the Gulf and eager to investigate whether a wedge might be driven between Pakistan and other parts of the Muslim world [Ginat 2004].

In the late 1980s, however, New Delhi began to develop closer ties with Israel, finally establishing full diplomatic relations in 1992 under P. V. Narasimha Rao's Congress-led government.⁸ Again, India's motives were mixed. Facing an upsurge of violence in Kashmir, New Delhi was disappointed at the lack of even tacit support from Arab states. At the same time, India was also increasingly interested in Israel as a supplier of much-needed advanced defence technology, and later information technology too [Blarel 2014]. By the end of the 1990s, moreover, some Hindu nationalists came to see Israel as a model manager of militant Islamism and sought to learn lessons learned by Tel Aviv to apply within and beyond India's borders [Karram 2022].⁹

For all these reasons, the current BJP-led government has persisted with the engagement of Israel and constructed a strategic partnership, formalised when Modi became the first Indian prime minister to visit the country in 2017 [Kumaraswamy 2023]. Simultaneously, however, it has also deepened and broadened ties with key Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia, which agreed in early 2019 to form another of India's strategic partnerships [Sabarin 2019, 20 February], and the other GCC states. Economic, human, and strategic interests have driven this process, as India looks to boost trade and investment, ensure oil supplies, improve the wellbeing of Indian citizens working in the Gulf, and weaken Arab state support for Pakistan [Quamar 2023].

This strategy of parallel engagement of Israel and the GCC states, while maintaining strong ties with Iran, depends on two conditions: a stable security situation across most (if not perhaps all) of the Middle East and progress towards normalising relations between Israel and the Gulf Arab states. India's persistence over the past decade or so have allowed it to engage with multiple partners at once, without being dragged into regional disputes and without having to make substantive trade-offs, with neither Israel nor the Gulf Arab states applying conditions to strong relations. The Gaza war has already upset that balance and could generate greater instability, to the detriment of India's interests. It has likely left projects like the IMEC corridor stranded and could well stymie initiatives like the nascent I2U2 Middle East Quad [Haidar 2023, 20 November].

More broadly, the Gaza war brought more scrutiny of India's strategic partnership with Israel and the ideological alignment of parts of the Hindu Right with hard-line Israelis, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [e.g. Blarel 2023, 17 November; Storey 2023, 16 November]. And with

8. Israel was earlier permitted to open a consulate in Bombay / Mumbai.

9. Some scholars (for example, Sen 2015) also observe similarities in Hindu nationalist and Zionist ideology.

this scrutiny came suggestions that India's ties with the Arab states might suffer if she was too supportive of Tel Aviv [*The Economic Times* 2023, 11 October]. To some degree, these changed circumstances help explain the shifts in New Delhi's approach to the Gaza war in the latter part of 2023.

Immediately after Hamas' assault, Modi telephoned to Netanyahu to tell him that «people of India stand in solidarity with Israel in this difficult hour» and to reiterate New Delhi's unequivocal condemnation of terrorism [Ministry of External Affairs, 2023b]. On 26 October, India then abstained in a UN General Assembly (UNGA) vote calling for a ceasefire, notwithstanding a verbal call for de-escalation [United Nations, 2023]. At the same time, an Indian foreign ministry spokesperson called for the «immediate and unconditional release» of the hostages taken by Hamas [Press Trust of India 2023, 9 November]. Then on 7 November, New Delhi banned pro-Palestinian public protests in Kashmir [Hussein and Saaliq 2023, 8 November]. Thereafter, however, India's stance changed, amid domestic debate about the government's initial strong backing of Israel and concern about its impact on ties with other states. At the second virtual Global South summit on 17 November, Modi called terrorism «unacceptable» but stated that New Delhi «strongly condemns the death of civilians» in the conflict [Associated Press 2023, 17 November]. Public attention was also drawn to India's provision of humanitarian aid to Gaza [Chitre 2023, 19 November]. Finally, in mid-December, India voted for a UNGA resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire [Roy 2023, 14 December].

6. Conclusion

These modifications to India's approach to the Gaza conflict aimed at reducing the risk that New Delhi's closeness to Tel Aviv might undo the progress it had made in building partnerships in the Gulf and rebuilding influence in the Global South – at avoiding, in other words, another strategic setback. They drew attention to the fundamentals of India's circumstances. India needs stability and predictability to ensure the sustained economic growth New Delhi requires to deliver social development and enhance national security. In the decade since the Modi government came to power, however, stability and predictability have been in short supply, thanks to China's assertiveness, the rise of Donald J. Trump, a global pandemic, Putin's adventurism, and latterly, a return to war in the Middle East. New Delhi is not so naïve as to think that international affairs will always be stable or predictable, of course, but it is fair to observe that recent events have not been kind to India.¹⁰

10. On the prominence of uncertainty in Indian official thinking, see Jaisankar 2020.

At the same time, it might be noted that the Modi government's *Realpolitik* may not always improve New Delhi's position. This may be one lesson of 2023. Whatever success India had in undermining Chinese agendas in multilateral and unilateral settings and in restoring influence in the developing world was arguably undercut by irritation in the West at India's targeting of enemies overseas, especially of Sikh separatists, and in the Muslim world at India's closeness to Israel. It is not yet clear how the first issue will play out, but trust and confidence in India appears to have been affected, with uncertain implications for strategic partnerships in which both New Delhi and Western states have invested much in recent years. Nor is the lasting impact of the Modi government's early backing of Netanyahu against Hamas obvious, but again, there is some evidence that some damage has been done to India's relations with the Arab states. For these reasons, it is hard to conclude that India ended 2023 in a stronger position than the one with which it started the year.

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NEPAL 2020-2023: FROM THE INSTITUTIONAL CRISIS
TO NEW POLITICAL PATHS

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The article analyses some of the main events in Nepal between 2020 and 2023 in order to outline the political and economic framework of the Himalayan country during the pandemic and the political-institutional crisis that led to the dissolution of the Communist Party of Nepal and the return of Sher Bahadur Deuba as prime minister of the country. In fact, the institutions of the republic had to deal with the chaos triggered by the internal struggles on the communist front and in particular between K.P. Sharma Oli and Pushpa Kamal Dahal. The House of Representatives was twice dissolved and twice the dissolution was overruled by the Supreme Court. In terms of foreign policy, the question of the territory of Kalapani remained a decisive point in the long crisis with India. Oli maintained a clear pro-Chinese orientation, while Deuba's position was more open to improve the relations with India and also with the United States. The appointment of Dahal as prime minister at the end of 2022, the subsequent new break with the Marxist-Leninists and the important visit to India of the Maoist leader all seem to confirm a rapprochement with New Delhi.

KEYWORDS – Nepal; India; China; Kalapani; Belt and Road Initiative; Ukraine.

1. Introduction

The article aims to describe the political and economic scenarios of Nepal between 2020 and 2023. During these years the country was the subject of a serious political and then institutional crisis. In the period of the pandemic which also hit the Himalayan country, the internal difficulties of the Communist Party of Nepal reverberated on the institutional level with the House of Representatives dissolved twice according to procedures later defined as illegitimate by the Supreme Court. The split – which seemed definitive – between old and ailing Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli and the Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal paved the way for a new government, headed by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba in the summer of 2021. Deuba then led the country to the 2022 elections within an alliance that also included Dahal. The alliance won the elections, and, surprisingly, contrary to the general expectation that the position of prime minister would remain with Deuba, Dahal returned to the government as prime minister in late 2022. He was supported by almost the entire House of Representatives, including

Oli's Marxist-Leninists. In February 2023, however, the Marxist-Leninists left the coalition due to disagreements over the election of the president of the Republic.

In terms of foreign policy, these years saw the aftermath of the crisis with India related to the territory of Kalapani which even led to an amendment of the Nepalese constitution. Oli's pro-Chinese positions were not openly denied by Deuba, especially at the United Nations. Deuba, however, certainly set himself up with a more balanced policy. On 27 February 2022, the Nepalese Parliament finally ratified the Millennium Challenge Corporation's Nepal Compact and, in April 2022, Deuba went on an official visit to India. Dahal's visit to New Delhi confirmed the rapprochement with India, which strengthened cooperation between the two countries in various fields. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, nonetheless, Nepal openly sided with Ukraine.

Writing this article, I have relied on official reports and press releases published by the Government of Nepal or by other Nepalese, foreign or international institutions. Furthermore, Nepalese and international newspapers were also consulted.

2. *Foreign policy*

2.1. *The Kalapani crisis: the constitutional amendment*

The ongoing border issue with India was one of the recurring themes in the difficult definition of the relationship between Kathmandu and New Delhi [Paudyal 2013:35-48]. A border dispute around Kalapani territory [*República*,¹ 2019, 7 November; *República* 2019, 9 November; *República* 2019, 12 November; *República* 2020a, 3 January], a small region of Km² 35 between the Nepalese state of Karnali and the Indian state of Uttarakhand, had flared up again in 2019. Indeed, following the revocation of the special constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir and the establishment of the union territory of Ladakh, the Survey of India had published a new official map of the area on 2 November 2019, which included the disputed territory as Indian [Gaha Magar 2019].² This led to a harsh condemnation by the Nepalese parliament between the end of December 2019 and the beginning of January 2020 [*República* 2020b, 3 January; *The Himalayan Times* 2019,

1. Writing this article, I have largely consulted the paper edition of *República*, therefore the dates of the articles may not coincide with those of the online edition. However, when the online edition has been consulted, it is indicated as *myRepública*.

2. To be precise, a few days after the first publication, the Survey of India published a second new map, i.e. the 9th edition [Government of India 2019]. Only, the first map indicated the Kali River. The new map traced the course of the river but did not indicate its name [Gaha Magar 2019].

24 December]. Also in January 2020, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs reaffirmed the correctness of the map [*Repubblica* 2020a, 3 January]. In June 2020, the two houses of the Nepalese parliament voted unanimously in favour of a constitutional amendment that changed the country's emblem, correcting the map it contained [Ghimire 2020, 9 June]. The new map clearly showed those areas that were disputed with India, i.e. Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura, as Nepali territories [*Al Jazeera Media Network* 2020, 18 June; Mohan 2020, 13 June].³

If the border issue with India reached the point of having to amend the Constitution, the reaction of Nepalese political leaders to the border problems with the People's Republic of China – as had already been the case in recent years – was decidedly more nuanced. In 1961 the Kingdom of Nepal and the People's Republic of China had signed an agreement which was to resolve border issues [GSCPRC 1961]. The agreement had come after the completion of the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the flight of the Dalai Lama to India in 1959. In recent years there have been Chinese encroachments, particularly in the district of Humla, but the Nepalese government has so far preferred to maintain a decidedly conciliatory attitude, without harsh proclamations or clear-cut positions, although this has affected the population and has been denounced by a local member of the parliament, Chakka Bahadur Lama [Giri 2020, 23 September; Giri 2021, 23 October].⁴

2.2. *Hong Kong and Xinjiang*

The pro-Chinese position of the Oli's government was also underlined in relation to Nepal's position regarding the Chinese government's crackdown on pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. In July 2020, Nepal sided with 52 other countries in support of the Hong Kong National Security Law during the 44th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council [Albert 2020, 6 July]. In the same international forum, two years later, in October 2022, despite the prime minister being Deuba, the Nepalese representative again expressed himself in favour of the People's Republic of China by voting against the initiation of a debate on the human rights violations of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang [*France 24/AFP* 2022, 6 October].

2.3. *Millennium Challenge Corporation's Nepal Compact*

A few months after Deuba's appointment as prime minister, on 27 February, 2022, the Nepalese parliament finally ratified the Millennium Challenge Corporation's Nepal Compact [Millennium Challenge Corporation 2022],

3. The copy of the updated constitution is available on the Nepal Law Commission website (<https://lawcommission.gov.np/>).

4. Within the framework of Sino-Nepalese relations during the Oli government, it is worth mentioning the agreement reached on the height of Everest at the end of 2020 [*Voice of America* 2020, 8 December].

i.e. a US aid of 500 million dollars to the country that had been signed in September 2017 [Millennium Challenge Corporation 2017]. Oli's Government had then postponed the issue for years. Indeed, several members of the Nepal Communist Party feared that money could be a tool to involve Nepal in the US-sponsored Indo-Pacific Strategy [Pradhan 2019, 23 December; Pradhan 2019, 22 December]. The return to government of the Nepali Congress and in particular of Deuba unblocked the situation [Millennium Challenge Corporation 2022]. The days leading up to the ratification of the compact had been characterized by violent protests in Kathmandu [Sharma 2022, 20 February].

2.4. *Deuba's visit to India*

Deuba travelled to India on 1 April 2022 for a three-day visit [Sharma Poudel 2022, 8 April]. It was his first visit abroad during his new tenure as prime minister [Sharma Poudel 2022, 8 April]. The India-Nepal Joint Vision Statement on Power Sector Cooperation was issued at the meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi [Government of Nepal, Ministry of Energy, Water Resources and Irrigation 2022]. The text declared the willingness of both governments to strengthen cooperation in the energy sector, after Nepal had begun exporting hydroelectric energy to India in 2021 [Sharma Poudel 2022, 8 April; Sharma Poudel 2021, 27 December].

2.5. *Dahal's visits abroad*

At the end of 2023, Dahal became the new prime minister. Initially, his government was supported by almost all political parties present in parliament, but just a couple of months later the Marxist-Leninists left the majority. We will have the opportunity to talk about this more carefully in the following pages. As regards the Nepalese foreign policy during the first year of the new government, the visit to India between 31 May and 3 June 2023 should certainly be noted [Embassy of India, Kathmandu, Nepal 2023]. The meeting with Modi coincided with a clear strengthening of relations with the southern neighbour, expanding cooperation in many areas, including the energy and infrastructure sectors [Embassy of India, Kathmandu, Nepal 2023; Pandey 2023, 5 May; *The Kathmandu Post* 2023, 1 June]. The Transit Treaty – which expired in 2019 – was renewed, opening access to Indian inland waterways for Nepal [Kathuria and Srinivasan 2023; *The Wire* 2023, 1 June] and an agreement was finalized for the export of 10,000 MW of electricity to India in 10 years [Embassy of India, Kathmandu, Nepal 2023]. Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar then signed the agreement in Kathmandu on 4 January 2024 [*The New Indian Express* 2024, 4 January]. Among the many projects announced in June, also the construction of two bridges between the two countries and an agreement on cross-border digital payments were included [Embassy of India, Kathmandu, Nepal 2023].

Dahal's visit to China, which only took place in September 2023, was interpreted by several analysts as less significant [Giri 2023, 27 September; *The Kathmandu Post* 2023, 1 October]. This visit took place within the framework of a relationship that was seen as decidedly less open and collaborative than it was in previous years with Oli [Tiwari 2023, 27 October]. In particular, Nepal decided not to join Xi Jinping's Global Security Initiative [Gupta 2023, 28 September].

2.6. *The Russian invasion to Ukraine*

The position of the Nepalese government to openly support Ukraine during the invasion unleashed by Russia in February 2022 should also be noted. This further underlines Deuba's caution in the international arena. Nepal voted in favour of different United Nations General Assembly resolutions on Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, i.e. ES-11/1 (2 March 2022), ES-11/2 (24 March 2022), ES-11/4 (12 October 2022). However, the government abstained from voting on the resolution ES-11/3 (7 April 2022). In South Asia, the Kingdom of Bhutan and the Maldives did the same, while India and Pakistan always abstained. Bangladesh only voted in favour of United Nations General Assembly resolutions ES-11/2 and ES-11/4 and abstained in the other two votes [United Nations, Digital Library]. On 12 October 2022, this is what the Permanent Representative of Nepal to the United Nations Amrit Bahadur Rai declared in the General Assembly: «My delegation is deeply distressed by the protracted violence and conflict in Ukraine. It has posed a serious threat to international peace and security. Nepal's position on Ukraine remains clear: The principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, political independence and non-aggression, as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, are inviolable and must be fully respected by all Member States at all times. There cannot be any ifs, ands or buts. [...] Based on Nepal's long-standing principled position on the inviolability of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of all States and its unwavering respect for international law, the rules-based international system, the United Nations Charter and the values of world peace, my delegation will vote in favour of draft resolution A/ES-11/L.5 before us today» [United Nations, General Assembly 2022].

3. *Domestic policy*

3.1. *The institutional and political crisis of 2020-2021*

The strong political tensions that had shaken the Nepal Communist Party in 2019 [Mehta 2019, 20 December], were resolved in March 2021 with the dissolution of the political party. The Nepal Communist Party was born not even three years earlier, in May 2018, from the unification of the two main

forces of the Nepalese extreme left, the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Center) [*República* 2018, 18 May]. Unification was the outcome of an electoral alliance [*The Rising Nepal* 2017, 4 October] which had enabled K.P. Sharma Oli to win the election and become prime minister in February 2018. The leadership of the party had been shared between Oli and Dahal (known as Prachanda), but not so the position of prime minister, although Maoists claimed the existence of an unofficial agreement which provided for a changeover of the two politicians at the helm of the government [*República* 2019, 21 November]. However, Oli denied the existence of this kind of agreement [*República* 2019, 21 November]. The conflicts then continued the following year until they culminated in the dissolution of the House of Representatives – and not of the National Assembly – in December 2020 by the President of the republic and at the request of Oli [Adhikari & Masih 2020, 20 December]. In November, Dahal had levelled harsh accusations against Oli up to that of not having duly supervised corruption related to the management of the pandemic [Pradhan 2020, 14 November]. The choice of the head of state to dissolve the House of Representatives was therefore contested by the faction of Dahal and his ally, the former Marxist-Leninist Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal [*The Kathmandu Post* 2020, 20 December]. The two thus sanctioned a de facto split, redefining the leadership and the basic dual structure (Marxist-Leninist and Maoist) of the Nepal Communist Party around themselves [*The Kathmandu Post* 2020, 22 December]. However, the dissolution of the House of Representatives was overturned by the Supreme Court on 24 February 2021 [Pradhan & Giri 2021, 24 February]. In fact, the judges disputed the reasons that Oli had provided to request the dissolution and decreed the unconstitutionality of the choice [Pradhan & Giri 2021, 24 February].

A few days later, on 7 March 2021, the Nepal Communist Party was formally dissolved following another decision of the Supreme Court which cancelled the registration of the party itself in 2018, since it had essentially the same name of a small political party previously founded and registered [Pradhan 2021, 7 March; Ghimire 2021, 8 March]. The political crisis that had accompanied the pandemic was finally to lead to Oli's defeat in parliament, in the vote of confidence in the House of Representatives on 10 May 2021 [*Nikkei Asia* 2021, 7 March]. Only 93 votes against 124 [*Nikkei Asia* 2021, 7 March]. In any case, on 13 May, Oli was reappointed prime minister, as no alternative majority had been found in parliament and with the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) being the leading party by number of seats [*France24* 2021, 14 May; *The Himalayan Times* 2021, 15 May].

The institutional situation in the young Himalayan republic became even more problematic when the week following the inauguration of the new government, the House of Representatives was again dissolved by the

President again at the request of Oli [Giri *et al.* 2021, 22 May]. In early June, Oli twice increased the number of ministers in his government [Giri 2021, 11 June]. At his side, there were also some exponents of the Janata Samajbadi Party, including in particular the faction of Mahanta Thakur. The Janata Samajbadi Party was born in April 2020 from the unification of the Samajbadi Party Nepal and Rastriya Janata Party Nepal [Pradhan 2020, 9 July; Pradhan 2020, 23 April]. The new political scenario, however, led to a new split, formalized in August with the formation of the Loktantrik Samajbadi Party Nepal by Thakur [*The Kathmandu Post* 2021, 20 August]. Against this backdrop, two new decisions of the Supreme Court put a definitive end to these last attempts by Oli to remain at the centre of the Nepalese political panorama. On 22 June 2021, not even two weeks after the second appointment of the new ministers, the Supreme Court in fact declared the new appointments of ministers illegitimate [*The Kathmandu Post* 2021, 22 June]. According to the judges, in fact, the appointments violated article 77, section 3, of the Nepalese Constitution [*The Kathmandu Post* 2021, 22 June].⁵ The following month, on July 12, the Supreme Court intervened again to annul the dissolution of the House of Representatives. This time the judges also ordered the appointment of Sher Bahadur Deuba as the new prime minister [*Nikkei Asia* 2021, 12 July]. The following day, the old leader of the Nepali Congress was sworn in as head of government for the fifth time [*The Times of India* 2021, 13 July].

The Congress thus returned to the guide of Nepal after more than three years of opposition which had seen it in serious political difficulty. The 2017 elections, despite an excellent result in the proportional share, had marked a tough defeat for the Nepali Congress in the single-member seats. The vote had relegated Deuba to the opposition of a government that had managed to control two-thirds of parliament in June 2018. This had meant for Oli the possibility of changing the constitution with his parliamentary majority alone [Koirala 2018, 2 June]. The ruinous management of the pandemic, the never-silent internal conflicts and finally the clumsy, if not wicked, management of the institutional crisis were all factors that favoured Deuba's return to power, with the support of Dahal and Madhav Kumar Nepal [Ghimire 2021, 18 July; *The Himalayan Times* 2021, 18 July].

3.2. *The 2022 elections*

The general election was finally held on 20 November 2022 [*The Times of India* 2021, 13 July; Sharma 2022, 20 November]. The Nepalese Parliament

5. According to Article 73(3) of the Constitution: «In case the office of Prime Minister falls vacant pursuant to clause (1), the same Council of Ministers shall continue to act until another Council of Ministers is constituted». For the text of the Constitution of Nepal, I have relied on the English translation available on the website of the Nepal Law Commission (<https://lawcommission.gov.np/>).

consists of a lower house (the House of Representatives) and an upper house (the National Assembly). 165 of the 275 members of the House of Representatives are elected under the first-past-the-post electoral system. The remaining 110 members are instead elected with a proportional system on a national basis (article 84 section 1 of the Constitution). For the proportional share, the electoral law provides for a threshold of 3% [Giri 2021, 26 August; *The Kathmandu Post* 2021, 29 August]. The upper house, on the other hand, is made up of 59 members elected by the federated states (56) or appointed by the President of the Republic on a proposal from the government (article 85 clause 1 of the Constitution). The members of the National Assembly have a term of six years, but they are renewed by a third every two years (article 86 section 3).

The governing coalition therefore decided in August 2022 to also form an electoral alliance [*The Kathmandu Post* 2022, 5 August]. Alongside the Nepali Congress there was therefore the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) of Dahal, the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Socialist) founded in August 2021 by Madhav Kumar Nepal [*Online Khabar* 2022, 7 December], the Janata Samajbadi Party and the Rastriya Janamorchha [*The Kathmandu Post* 2022, 5 August]. Later, the Loktantrik Samajwadi Party, Nepal also joined the coalition [*myRepubblica* 2022, 9 October].

The Nepali Congress won 57 seats in the majority share and got over 2.7 million votes in the proportional share [Election Commission, Nepal]. The main opponent of the governing coalition was obviously the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) which obtained the most votes (about 2.8 million), but only 44 seats in the majority share [Election Commission, Nepal]. The third party by number of votes and seats was the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre): 18 seats in the constituencies and about 1.8 million votes [Election Commission, Nepal]. The Rastriya Swatantra Party instead obtained 7 single-member seats and over 1.1 million votes, making it the fourth largest party in the country [Election Commission, Nepal]. More single-member seats (10) were instead obtained by the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Socialist), which however obtained only slightly less than 300,000 votes [Election Commission, Nepal], thus not exceeding the threshold of 3% [*Online Khabar* 2022, 7 December]. The monarchist Rastriya Prajatantra Party instead obtained around 589,000 votes and 7 single-member seats [Election Commission, Nepal]. With the distribution of proportional seats, the Nepali Congress won another 32 seats and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) won another 34 [*Online Khabar* 2022, 7 December]. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) won 14 seats in the proportional quota, only one more than the Rastriya Swatantra Party [*Online Khabar* 2022, 7 December]. Another 7 seats went to the Rastriya Prajatantra Party and five seats each to the Janata Samajbadi Party and the Janamat Party [*Online Khabar* 2022, 7 December], both with around 4 million votes [Election Commission, Nepal].

A twist, however, among the many that now characterize Nepalese political life, came during the negotiations for the formation of the new government. In fact, Dahal, instead of continuing to support Deuba, sided again with Oli the month following the elections, thus managing to regain the position of prime minister for the third time [Ghimire 2022, 27 December]. Dahal was sworn in as the new prime minister of Nepal on 26 December 2022 [Ghimire 2022, 27 December]. Then, on 10 January 2023, Dahal obtained the almost unanimous support in the House of Representatives (268 votes out of 275) [*myRepública* 2023, 10 January].

3.3. *The election of the president of Nepal*

The broad support obtained by Dahal in parliament, with an almost unanimous vote in the House of Representatives, rapidly decreased in the following weeks. The alliance with the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) broke down again in February, during discussions relating to the election of the president and vice-president of Nepal [*The Economic Times* 2023, 27 February]. The candidate of the Nepali Congress, Ram Chandra Poudel, was elected on 9 March 2023, obtaining almost 34,000 votes from a 52,628-member constituency, clearly defeating Subas Nembang of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), who did not even reach 16,000 votes [Khatiwada 2023, 9 March]. A few days later Ramsahaya Prasad Yadav of the Janata Samajbadi Party (JSP) was elected vice-president, with more than 30,000 votes [*myRepública* 2023, 17 March].

The rift between Oli and Dahal severely reduced the large majority in the House of Representatives and, on 20 March, in the vote of confidence the government obtained only 172 votes. In particular, in addition to the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), the Rastriya Prajatantra Party also abandoned the government coalition [*The Kathmandu Post* 2023, 20 March].

3.4. *Protests for the return to the monarchy*

Before presenting a general picture of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal, it is necessary to point out, on a domestic political level but with clear results in foreign policy, the important protests that took place at the end of 2023 with the request for a return to monarchy and the reestablishment of the Hindu state. The protests began in November 2023 and involved thousands of people [Das 2023, 27 November; Rijal 2023, 22 December]. The most significant political result was the opening of an internal debate within the Nepali Congress [Giri 2023, 28 November]. Deuba, although against the return of the king to the throne, opened up the possibility of re-discussing the issue of secularism [Giri 2023, 28 November].

3.5. *The pandemic crisis*

Nepal was hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. By October 2022, confirmed cases had now exceeded one million and over 12,000 deaths [World Health Organization]. There were three strongest waves. The first was in autumn 2020, in particular between the beginning of October and the end of November, when, in a single day (October 21), 5,743 cases were recorded [World Health Organization]. Even more serious was the second wave, in the spring of 2021, when for several days 8,000 to 9,000 cases were recorded in May [World Health Organization]. On 19 May, the recorded deaths were over 246, 50 more than the previous day [World Health Organization]. It was undoubtedly the most critical moment for the country which, as seen, in those days was going through one of the most confused and convulsive moments of the political crisis. Finally, the third and most critical wave occurred in January 2022, when over 10,000 cases were recorded on the 20 of that same month [World Health Organization]. The number of deaths, nonetheless, was decidedly lower, as, by that time the country was accelerating on vaccinations [Karki 2022]. On 30 January, the peak of deaths of the third wave was recorded (32) [World Health Organization]. Also in January 2021, Foreign Minister Gyawali visited New Delhi with the aim of obtaining vaccines produced in India [*The Hindustan Times* 2021, 14 January]. A new call for help came in April 2021, when Gyawali telephoned his counterpart Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. The press release of the Nepali Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated: «The Foreign Minister Gyawali expressed sincere thanks to the Government of India for supporting Nepal in its fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, including through the generous gift of one million doses of COVISHIELD. He requested the External Affairs Minister of India for necessary facilitation for the supply of vaccines for Nepal to continue administering the second dose of vaccination for people at highest risk» [Government of Nepal, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021]. In January 2022, the doses donated by European countries (in particular Germany, France and Italy) reached 5.4 million [Delegation of the European Union to Nepal 2022]. In June 2022, the United States donated 2.2 million doses of paediatric vaccines to Nepal, after already supplying the country with 2.26 million doses of Pfizer vaccine and 1.5 million doses of Johnson & Johnson vaccine [U.S. Embassy in Nepal 2022]. About four million doses of vaccines were donated, in several shipments, also by the People's Republic of China [*The Kathmandu Post* 2022, 29 March]. However, since these doses were officially considered to have a longer term than vaccines produced in India or in the West, they had not yet been used in December 2022 and their actual future use remains in doubt [*The Kathmandu Post* 2022, 4 December]. As of September 2022, the country had already received over 61 million doses of vaccines and vaccinated over 22 million inhabitants (76.5 of the total population) with at least two doses [Government of Nepal, Ministry of Health and Population]. About 9.5 million doses had arrived from India [*The Indian Express* 2022, 27 September].

4. *The economic scenario*

The pandemic crisis also represented a severe economic breakdown for Nepal: GDP growth, which in 2019 stood at 6.7%, collapsed to -2.4% in 2020, and then recovered to 4.8% in 2021 [The World Bank]. 2022 saw a further GDP growth of 5.6% [The World Bank]. The unemployment rate had risen from 10.6% (2019) to 13.1% (2020) [The World Bank], coinciding with the most difficult moment of the pandemic. The following year it dropped to 12.2% and then continued to drop in 2022 to 11.1% [The World Bank]. GDP per capita went from US\$ 1,185.7 (2019) to US\$ 1,139.2 (2020) and then went back up to US\$ 1,229.4 in 2021 and to US\$ 1,336.5 in 2022 [The World Bank]. The country's total reserves, which had risen again to US\$ 8.71 billion in 2019 and to US\$ 11.47 billion in 2020, fell considerably in 2021 to US\$ 9.64 billion and to US\$ 9.32 billion in 2022 [The World Bank]. On the currency front, 1 US dollar was traded at around 114 Nepalese rupees on 1 January 2020. A year earlier it was traded at around 111 Nepalese rupees [Nepal Rastra Bank-Central Bank of Nepal]. By the end of December 2023, 1 US dollar had instead risen to around 133 Nepalese rupees [Nepal Rastra Bank-Central Bank of Nepal]. According to data from the Nepal Rastra Bank, in the fiscal year 2022/2023, the average consumer price inflation reached 7.74%, against 6.32% of the previous year [Nepal Rastra Bank, Economic Research Department: 2]. Between 2015 and 2020, average inflation in Nepal was 6.1% [Government of Nepal, Ministry of Finance 2021: 5].

In terms of international trade, in the fiscal year 2022/2023, imports decreased by 16.1%, while exports decreased by 21.4% [Nepal Rastra Bank, Economic Research Department: 3]. On the contrary, the previous year imports had grown by 41.7% and exports by 24.7% [Nepal Rastra Bank, Economic Research Department: 3]. Specifically, in the fiscal year 2022/2023, the imports amounted to NPR 1611.73 billion and exports at NPR 157.14 billion [Nepal Rastra Bank, Economic Research Department: 3]. Exports to India fell by 31.3 percent [Nepal Rastra Bank, Economic Research Department: 3]. Exports to other countries, excluding China, also increased by 10.7% [Nepal Rastra Bank, Economic Research Department: 3]. Exports to the People's Republic of China increased by 118.3%. In contrast, Chinese imports to Nepal decreased by 15.9% [Nepal Rastra Bank, Economic Research Department: 3]. This figure is slightly higher than the decrease in Indian imports (14.4%) [Nepal Rastra Bank, Economic Research Department: 3].

5. *Conclusion*

As we have had the opportunity to point out in this article, the Nepalese political system, during the period under review, was still experiencing enor-

mous contradictions almost twenty years after the birth of the Republic. Nepalese domestic politics had been monopolized for years by Oli, Dahal and Deuba. The irresponsibility that characterized a large part of the Nepalese political class since the early years of the proclamation of the Republic had somehow congealed around the human and political events of these three leaders. The political class that essentially was the same that wrote the constitution found itself at the mercy of repeated constitutional crises that undermined the legitimacy of the institutions. The constitutional procedures were folded in order to resolve the internal struggle of the Nepal Communist Party. Fractures and old and new alliances marked these years until the incredible post-election agreement that allowed Dahal to return to occupy the seat of Prime Minister. Domestic political instability has in some ways been reflected in Nepali foreign policy. The country has been trying to define its new international role for many years. This reassessment has been carried out by the different prime ministers with different objectives and perspectives in the framework of relations with India and China. As seen, Deuba, distancing himself from the more blatant pro-Chinese position of his predecessor Oli, tried to rebalance the country towards India and the West, in particular the United States of America. Nepal's position in support of Ukraine at the United Nations was also underlined in this article. The government chaired by Dahal and supported by Deuba also showed itself to be particularly oriented towards cooperation with India. Dahal's visit to New Delhi led to important agreements and projects, which strengthened cooperation between the two countries.

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SRI LANKA 2023: WICKREMESINGHE'S FIRST SIX MONTHS
BETWEEN ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY

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The country's effort to emerge from the economic and political crisis characterized the year under review for Sri Lanka. After long negotiations, Colombo managed to reach an agreement with international partners on financial aid, accompanied by a program of profound economic, fiscal and government reforms. These have weighed heavily on the population, especially the less well-off classes who reacted with widespread protests and strikes. At the same time, Colombo managed to obtain a partial consent to the restructuring of its debt with Beijing. On the political level, the year was characterized by a harsh confrontation between President Wickremesinghe and the opposition, and by civil society protests against the government's apparent inaction in shedding light on responsibility for political violence in the country. There also remained considerable uncertainty about the government's willingness to respect the electoral agenda which called for presidential and parliamentary elections by 2024.

KEYWORDS – Sri Lanka; Ranil Wickremesinghe; financial crisis; popular protest; democracy in South Asia.

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka's economy has shown a recovery trend during 2023. After reaching the threshold of collapse in 2022, with crowds of protesters storming the residences of the prime minister and president, the government of Ranil Wickremesinghe apparently managed to weather the storm, bringing the country and its economic fundamentals towards a relative stability. This was achieved thanks to massive international economic support, and passing through the forks of financial default, which dealt a hard blow to the country's international reputation. Moreover, Sri Lanka's dependence on foreign investments and remittances was cruelly exposed, opening big question marks over Colombo's capacity for structural economic reforms. However, if the economy seemed to emerge from the storm, people's living conditions remained decidedly worse than pre-crisis, especially for the poorer social groups. Not unexpectedly, the economic situation strongly influenced political events during the year. Negotiations undertaken by Colombo with multilateral and bilateral lenders for financial recovery became the subject of bitter political debate between the government and the opposition. Issues such as economic, fiscal and government reforms,

relations with India, China, and the West, and the responsibility for the economic crisis were deeply divisive issues. In the meantime, political actors begun preparations for the next presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for 2024, which were perceived as a sort of showdown between the parties. To the disappointment of the main parliamentary opposition groups, the polls did not seem to reward them. Rather, the political scenario projected a clear advantage for the extreme left. The fact that this political area was very critical of the austerity measures cast a serious shadow on the future of the country. The Sri Lankan crisis highlighted the distance between the position of multilateral bodies such as the International Monetary Fund [IMF] and the World Bank [WB], on the one hand, and Beijing, on the other, on assistance for countries in financial difficulty. At the same time, the evolution of the Sri Lankan crisis intensified the trend already underway the previous year of a rapprochement between Colombo and Delhi.

2. *Wickremesinghe's first six months as president*

It is undeniable that the figures who took command of the country after the July 2022 disaster demonstrated considerable ability. It must especially be noted that current president Ranil Wickremesinghe, who first took over as interim prime minister and was then elected president by parliament, while managing to steer the Sri Lankan economy away from the financial storm, had initially been underestimated by public opinion. More important, Wickremesinghe had a troubled relationship with the Aragalaya movement. In the most intense days of the popular protest, the appointment of Wickremesinghe as prime minister to replace Mahinda Rajapaksa had not at all satisfied the demands of the demonstrators, who directed heavy criticism at him and even targeted his personal residence. The veteran politician appeared too compromised with the past, and with the Rajapaksa's power system to represent any real change. This criticism appeared to be well founded when Wickremesinghe, once elected president by parliament, appointed Dinesh Gunawardena of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna [SLPP] – the party to which former president Gotabaya Rajapaksa and prime minister Mahinda Rajapaksa belong – as prime minister. In order to understand this point, it should be remembered that the protest movement, although primarily the result of the disastrous management of the economy and the COVID-19 pandemic, at the beginning had a much broader ambition. The resignation of the Rajapaksas was seen by Aragalaya activists as the first step towards a more general transformation of Sri Lankan politics, which should have a generational and ethical character. From this point of view, it is undeniable that the results of the transition, while reassuring regarding the recovery of the Sri

Lankan economy, disappointed the expectations of the younger generation and civil society [Keenan 2022].

A fundamental reason that made the president disliked by most of the proponents of change was that his appointment was perceived as a co-optation by the Rajapaksas. The fact that Wickremesinghe had not been elected by popular vote but by parliament aggravated this perception, indicating that he lacked popular legitimacy. The belief that the president had been chosen by the powerful family to save their system of power and prepare their return to government was so widespread in the country that he himself felt the need to publicly deny it. Addressing parliament in March about the economic recovery efforts, Wickremesinghe thought of denying «allegations being levelled...that [my] objective was not to rescue the country from an economic crisis but to safeguard the Rajapaksa family» [PMD 2023]. Yet, despite his proud self-defence, Wickremesinghe could not deny that he relied on the support of the SLPP to be elected president, and that the SLPP's support was crucial to maintain his parliamentary majority throughout the year [Abenante 2023: 379].

Moreover, from the beginning there was a feeling of mutual hostility between Wickremesinghe and the Aragalaya movement. Over the course of the year, the President maintained the same distrustful attitude towards the protest that he expressed since its inception, portraying it as a violent phenomenon based on a subversive political plan. Particularly significant to this regard was the President's speech at the International Forum of the Democratic Union held in London in June 2023, which caused a particular stir. Here Wickremesinghe offered a lengthy examination of the Aragalaya, describing it as a movement that far from being spontaneous had a precise anti-democratic subversive plan. The president also cited episodes of great violence between protesters and security forces. According to many observers, this picture was decidedly exaggerated if not totally false, and ignored the predominantly peaceful character maintained by the protest [Keenan 2023: 4; *Daily FT* 2023, 29 June]. The president's statements contributed to the impression that the new government maintained the same intolerant attitude towards political dissent as the previous regime. As discussed in the next paragraphs, this impression was then supported by concrete evidence regarding the government's attitude towards dissent. This further disappointed those sections of civil society who were calling for a change of pace from the Rajapaksa system. In fact, one of the key points of the movement, beyond economic reform, was the end of the «muscular» approach that characterized Sri Lankan politics during the Rajapaksa era. The fact that Ranil Wickremesinghe combined with his presidential position a series of key ministerial portfolios – namely those of Finance, Defence, Technology, Women and Child Affairs and Social Empowerment – undoubtedly contributed to building the picture of an excessive concentration of power within the executive [*The Island Online* 2022, 27 July].

3. *Transparency on political violence and terrorism*

Another delicate issue on which the executive was criticized by the opposition was its insufficient commitment to stop acts of political violence. Apparently the Wickremesinghe government has not strayed from the line of impunity towards violence committed by security agencies against political opponents. Human rights activists and international observers had requested that the controversial *Prevention of Terrorists Act* of 1979 [PTA] be scrapped. However, the government continued to implement it. Furthermore, in March the government announced a new bill, the *Anti-Terrorism Act* [ATA], which would replace the PTA and which, according to analysts, would give the government even more repressive powers than the PTA [Keenan 2023: 4; *Daily FT* 2023, 28 March]. While the opposition protested vigorously against the bill, the government chose to defend it from criticism. During a parliamentary debate, Justice Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe argued that the ATA's public order measures were less stringent than anti-terrorism rules in force in many European countries including the United Kingdom [Indrajit 2024, 11 January].

Similar disappointment was expressed by the opposition and civil society regarding the developments of the investigations into the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks. Here the state's inactivity seemed obvious: four years after the terrorist attack, no perpetrator had been identified and no concrete results of the investigations were known. Furthermore, in August, some press reports, based on confidential testimonies from within the security forces, caused a stir. According to these reports, there was connivance on the part of the Rajapaksa's power circle with the Islamist organization held responsible for the attack. According to these testimonies, some state agencies had established contacts with terrorist groups in order to create a climate of tension in the country, favourable to the government. This complicity would explain the great difficulties encountered by the judiciary and the police in carrying out the investigations on the attack [Seale 2023, 6 September]. A further controversy that drew criticism of the president concerned the investigation into violence committed by security forces during Sri Lanka's civil war [1983-2009]. This issue was hotly debated during the year, as 2023 marked the 40th anniversary of Black July, the anti-Tamil pogrom that in 1983 left at least 4,000 people dead and forced hundreds of thousands to flee their homes [Srinivasan 2023, 28 July].

The scars of the war have continued to reopen in the public debate also thanks to the discovery of the mass graves of the victims of the massacres perpetrated against both the Sinhalese and the Tamils [*Tamil Guardian* 2023, 6 July]. For about ten years the UN Human Rights Council has pressured Colombo to shed light on the responsibility of the armed forces in these atrocities. After various promises to this effect, in May the government presented the proposal to establish a National Unity and Reconciliation Commission

[NURC]. According to the government, the NURC would be modelled on the experience of the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and was based on a study mission carried out by the Colombo authorities in South Africa [Keenan 2023: 3; *The Sunday Times* 2023, 9 April].

Associations representing the victims' families, NGOs and civil society actors were not enthusiastic about the government's initiative. They highlighted two issues: first, the commission was placed entirely under state control rather than under an independent authority; this made it unlikely that the commission would seriously shed light on the responsibilities of the state itself in the exercise of violence. Second, the government did not seem to want to take the victims' families and civil society organizations into confidence; in fact, the commission had only sporadic contacts with the families of the victims. This raised fears that the creation of the NURC was aimed solely at taking the country out of the international spotlight, and normalizing relations with foreign donors, rather than establishing accountability for past crimes.

Doubts about the seriousness of President Wickremesinghe's intentions were apparently legitimized by precedent. Between 2015 and 2017, the current president – who at the time held the office of prime minister under the presidency of Maithripala Sirisena – had repeatedly given signs of a lack of will to pursue the path of accountability. In 2015, he had promised to establish a truth commission, a commitment he never kept. Then, following international pressure, the government had created two transitional courts of justice, the Office on Missing Persons and the Office for Reparations; however, both courts were politically and financially too weak to play any effective role [Keenan 2023: 4].

Not surprisingly, the North East Coordination Committee, a collective of 16 Tamil civil society organisations, called on foreign observers to reject the NURC and form an independent international commission to investigate war crimes [*Tamil Guardian* 2023, 25 July]. Nonetheless, judging by international reactions, the government seemed to convince at least some of the foreign partners. The Japanese government expressed appreciation for Colombo's initiatives, while the South African authorities confirmed their support to Sri Lanka for the process of reconciliation. The achievement of the agreement between Colombo and the IMF on financial aid, which will be discussed in paragraph 5, seemed to be a further sign of the willingness of international partners to recognize Colombo's accountability efforts, at least for the present time.

4. The government and the Buddhist monks

While Wickremesinghe's presidency seemed to act politically in substantial continuity with the previous regime on various issues, there were also some

signs of change. One of these concerned the connection between the representatives of religious authority and state power. Sri Lanka has a long history of Buddhist clergy interventionism in politics, and party leaders have often used religious symbols in their public discourse. This connection has deep roots in the country's decolonization period. The first politician to seek the support of the monks was former prime minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike in the 1940s and 1950s. Although part of Sri Lanka's post-colonial westernized elite, Bandaranaike was instrumental in the rediscovery of Sinhala culture, language and religion as part of the process of building Sri Lankan nationalism. The result of this search for «authenticity» was the creation of a public discourse in which Buddhist symbols and concepts played an increasingly important role [Rambukwella 2017: 383-387].

This process inevitably attracted the clergy into the political sphere, granting them the authority to legitimize – or delegitimize – political actors. Since then, Buddhism was an integral part of Sri Lanka's political discourse, and the activism of monks was a constant feature of the island state [Rambukwella 2017: 383-387; Gunasekara 2023, 30 June]. For years, Buddhist clergy especially supported the SLPP; former president Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his brother Mahinda were helped by the monks in their election campaigns in 2019 and 2020. For their part, the Rajapaksas have often used religious symbols as part of their political message [Abenante 2023: 374].

There was, however, a significant development over the year in the relationship between the clergy and political parties. The economic crisis and the fall from power of the Rajapaksa brothers had consequences on the attitude of the monks towards the SLPP. The emergence of the Aragalaya and the unpopularity of the government left the clergy disoriented. While a section of the monks moved from active support for the Rajapaksas towards neutrality, another section began to openly criticize the former government for its management of the economy. Some of them even tried to establish relations with the Aragalaya, although unsuccessfully [Gunasekara 2023, 30 June]. The protest movement was strictly secular, and attempts by some monks to join the protests provoked polite but firm refusals. According to media reports, when a monk joined a protest in Colombo near parliament, he was sternly asked to leave [Gunasekara 2023, 30 June]. Nonetheless, over time, Aragalaya activists themselves gradually began to move away from their secular attitude to take on a more traditional political style. Several leaders of the movement publicly sought out members of the clergy, seeking their advice in the same way politicians did. At the same time, the SLPP struggled to save its special bond with the clergy. In April the party appointed a monk – professor Uthurawala Dhammarathana Thera – as party president to replace G. L. Peiris who moved to the opposition [*Colombo Gazette* 2023, 22 April].

This was a clear sign of the importance that nationalist politicians still attached to the legitimation of Buddhist monks. In this context, however,

the current government gave some surprising signals of change. During a parliamentary debate on financial bills, Wickremesinghe launched an unexpectedly harsh criticism of the interference of monks in politics: «It is not possible», the president stated, «to obtain special protection simply by wearing robes and acting against the Dharma» [*News.lk* 2022, 29 November]. This unprecedented criticism was followed by other episodes which confirmed the tension existing between the President and the influential monks. In January the government received an ultimatum of sorts from leading clergy to provide financial aid to Buddhist temples, under the threat of a new protest movement. The following month, the monks staged a dramatic protest before parliament against the government's intention to implement the 13th amendment of the constitution, which provides for the granting of autonomy measures to the northern Tamil regions. Finally, in May, the clergy organized a sit-in in front of the Canadian High Commission in Colombo, to protest against a statement made by the Canadian Prime Minister on the occasion of the Tamil Genocide Remembrance Day. The monks demanded that the government officially condemn the «insult» against the «heroes» of the civil war [Gunasekara 2023, 30 June]. In the past, on similar occasions, governments had tried to accommodate the monks' requests, but now the dissenting voices of the clergy were almost ignored.

While it would be excessive to conclude that the clergy lost all its political importance, these episodes seemed to indicate that Wickremesinghe put an end to the state's uncritical support of Buddhist religious hierarchies, rather proceeding on a case-by-case basis, depending on the circumstances.

5. *The economic recovery program*

Beyond the political scene, the economy was undoubtedly the field in which the government had to commit itself most. From this point of view, the executive's action seemed to be effective. The Sri Lankan economy started to grow again during the year, especially driven by the agricultural sector [Jayasinghe 2023, 15 December]. The improvement was tangible: the long queues outside basic grocery stores and petrol stations that were normal scenes the year before disappeared, and life in Sri Lanka's cities seemed to return almost to normal. Yet, despite appearances, the economy remained fragile and life was very difficult, especially for the poorer social strata. The country still had more than US\$ 80 billion in domestic and foreign debt, and the increase in prices on basic necessities, especially food, put families in serious difficulty. According to estimates, about half of families spent 70% of their income on food alone. At the same time, tax increases and the cancellation of state subsidies caused bills to rise. Electricity prices increased by around 65%. A particularly worrying aspect of the crisis was the dramatic increase in migratory flows. According to estimates, between 2022 and

2023, over 300,000 people left the country, especially skilled workers and graduates, which obviously casts shadows on the country's future prospects [Jayasinghe 2023, 6 July; Shukla 2023, 18 July]. In this sense it could be said that the class character of the crisis accentuated; while at the beginning the effects of the crisis distributed among almost all social classes, now it was the lower classes who bore the brunt of the country's impoverishment.

The government's first objective was to obtain confirmation of the economic aid program envisaged by the agreement reached in 2022 between Colombo and the IMF. Under the agreement, the IMF committed to providing Sri Lanka with a US\$ 2.9 billion Extended Fund Facility over a period of 4 years [Abenante 2023: 382]. The release of these funds, however, was conditional on two clauses; the first, that Colombo implement a series of economic, fiscal and legal reforms; the second, that the government of Sri Lanka reach agreements for the restructuring of external and domestic debt.

The most complex point concerned Sri Lanka's ties with China, which held the majority of the island external debt, approximately US\$ 7.4 billion [Jayasinghe 2023, 6 July]. First of all, the government had to engage in the first review of the IMF programme, the outcome of which was an essential condition for the disbursement of the first tranche of aid, being subjected to the IMF positive assessment of the progress of Colombo's economic and administrative reforms. The early results were negative: after a two-week visit to the island state, the IMF team announced that the negotiations had failed; despite the «commendable progress» made, the state of the reforms was still insufficient, especially regarding tax collection. The news obviously came as a cold shower for the Colombo authorities as it put the stability of the island state at risk [Parkin 2023, 27 September].

However, after further negotiations, on 19 October it was announced that a staff-level agreement had been reached with the IMF, which would provide a tranche of US\$ 333 million. This disbursement was accompanied by an additional US\$ 7 billion in rapid credit support from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and other donors [IMF Press Release 2023, 19 October].

Despite the complexity of the deal, which took into consideration the advancement of the reforms, the IMF board's statement positively underlined the work carried out by the government. It highlighted that Sri Lanka was the first Asian country to undergo the IMF Governance Diagnostic exercise and had released the scheduled Report on time. The IMF board also emphasized that «reform efforts have been commendable, including rapid disinflation and a significant fiscal adjustment expected by the end of this year» [IMF Press Release 2023, 19 October]. However, while almost all indicative targets had been achieved, the tax revenue situation was still unsatisfactory. Fiscal policy therefore remained a major weakness of the Sri Lankan economy. In the ten years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, Sri

Lanka was estimated to have collected on average tax revenues equal to around 12% of GDP. This was a rather low percentage considering, for comparison, that Zambia – another country benefiting from an IMF aid program – collected on average tax revenues equal to more than 18% of GDP in the same period [Setser 2023: 16].

Moreover, the recovery program was hit by many difficulties both in society and in parliament. Firstly, several sectors of the populations resisted the austerity and financial management reforms demanded by the IMF. The measures introduced by the government, in particular the tax increases, caused strong protests among an already exhausted population. These even made observers fear a return of the Aragalaya movement. The shift to market exchange rates led to a devaluation of the currency, driving up fuel and food prices and leading to a 165% increase in electricity tariffs by February [Ghosh and Ruwanpura 2023]. In March, unions declared a series of strikes in the hospital, school and railway sectors, to protest against high living costs and rising taxes [*Al Jazeera* 2023, 15 March].

Although the President made a special address in parliament in March to announce the IMF-Colombo agreement, describe the reforms, and call on opposition parties to support them, the latter's response was cold. The main opposition party, the Samaji Jana Balawegaya [SJB], rejected the agreement, arguing that its consequences would inevitably fall mainly on the poorer social classes. The debate on reforms inevitably cast shadows on the country's political future in view of the elections scheduled for 2024. In September, the SJB leader Sajith Premadasa met with IMF representatives and informed them of his intention to review the terms of the agreement should there be a change of government [*Colombo Gazette* 2023, 25 September]. Evidently the opposition was not willing to pay the political consequences of the economic reorganization, considering that these weighed much more heavily on the working class.

It is important to note that the economic recovery program agreed with the IMF depended on the restructuring not only of domestic debt, but above all on external debt. From this point of view, Colombo suffered from the well-known differences existing between Beijing and multilateral donors. According to the IMF-Colombo agreement, to obtain the release of the allocated funds, the Sri Lankan government would also have to obtain a debt restructuring from sovereign lenders, primarily China. However, Beijing's opposition to this request was known. Within the so-called Common Framework – namely the consortium created by the G20 during the 2020 pandemic to assist states in financial crisis – Beijing had responded negatively to this request. The Chinese authorities were of the opinion that not only bilateral and commercial creditors, but also multilateral ones such as the World Bank and the IMF would have to accept a debt cut [Setser 2023:3; Cash 2023, 22 June]. Rather unexpectedly, however, in mid-October Colombo announced that it had reached an agreement with China Exim Bank

for the restructuring of a US\$ 4.2 billion debt. While this represented only a portion of Sri Lanka's total exposure to China, the news was greeted with relief by international observers, as it allowed Colombo to move forward with its recovery plan [Shukla and Oi 2023, 13 October].

6. *The road to the 2024 elections*

The political scene was dominated by the prospect of elections scheduled for 2024. According to the Sri Lankan constitution, presidential and parliamentary elections were to be held by the end of the year. This was a further element of difficulty for the Wickremesinghe presidency, given that the complex institutional system forced the country into a continuous electoral campaign. The electoral schedule obviously influenced the debate on economic measures, pushing both Wickremesinghe and other political actors to articulate their political positions in increasingly harsher tones. The president opened the way in March when, during the special address in parliament to announce the reforms requested by the IMF agreement, he launched a severe attack against «certain political parties, trade unions and media» who, instead of supporting the government's recovery effort, «labored to cause disruption» in the country. Wickremesinghe went so far as to claim that there were «plans to create a continuous wave of strikes, to destroy the economy and create anarchy in the country» [PMD 2023].

The opposition's response was equally harsh. All the various political forces were busy positioning themselves in view of the electoral deadline. Wickremesinghe announced in parliament his intention to respect the constitutional deadline, which required elections within the year. The 74-year-old president also announced that he would run for office again. However, uncertainty dominated for three reasons. The first was that the President avoided making the election date official, thus leaving political forces and observers in considerable confusion. The second reason was that the main electoral polls showed the President far behind in voter approval ratings, while, at the same time, giving an advantage to one of the main opposition figures, Anura Kumara Disanayaka, leader of the Marxist-Leninist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). This led some observers to predict that the President would seek a pretext to postpone the elections. The third reason was Wickremesinghe's own decision to postpone for the umpteenth time the calling of elections for the provincial councils in the north and east of the country, appointing interim administrations instead. According to observers, the move was motivated by the government desire to avoid the opposition's victory. It is no surprise that opposition leader in parliament, Sajith Premadasa, accused the government of «conspiring to postpone all elections», and warned that «delaying or cancelling elections constitutes a serious assault on democracy» [*Daily FT* 2023, 10 October]. It is, nonethe-

less, interesting to note that, according to polls for the presidential election, Premadasa was not given an advantage. On the contrary, his personal approval rating – according to data collected in October – although as much as the double that of the President, was significantly behind JVP leader Disanayaka [IHP 2023].

Apparently, Sri Lankans held the main opposition leaders partly responsible for the state of the country and resented the poor living condition of the subaltern classes, giving their support to the far left. On the other hand, the SLPP did not announce whether it intended to present a candidate for the presidential elections. By all accounts, the Rajapaksas' ambition to attempt a return was intact, if arduous. In addition to their already low popularity, the image of the two Rajapaksa brothers was damaged by a Supreme Court ruling in November which indicated they were responsible for the financial crisis together with 13 other former leaders. Nonetheless, in December the SLPP appointed Mahinda Rajapaksa as party leader [Ng 2023, 15 November; *Newswire* 2024, 16 January]. Overall, the Sri Lankan political framework appeared extremely fragmented. The analyses of the possible electoral result envisaged a situation of great fluidity, with the risk of having no clear winner in 2024 [Devapriya 2023, 23 December].

7. Sri Lanka-India relations

From the point of view of foreign relations, the year saw the consolidation of a trend that had already emerged the previous year, namely the rapprochement between Colombo and New Delhi [Moorthy 2022]. A determining factor was certainly the willingness of the Indian government to provide economic assistance to Sri Lanka since the beginning of the financial crisis, as part of its competition with China. As mentioned, the difficulties encountered by Colombo in obtaining a partial restructuring of the debt it owed to Beijing influenced the general Sri Lankan attitude towards cooperation with China. This aspect added to the already existing debate on the hypothetical existence of a Chinese «debt trap». In fact, apart from the Communist Party of Sri Lanka [CPSL], that denounced an «anti-China environment created by Western vested interests», few voices defended the benefits of Chinese investments [*The Island Online* 2023, 31 December]. Secondly, in the transition of government from Rajapaksa's SLPP to Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP), a different emphasis was placed on the relationship between Sinhala culture and ethnic minorities. While the SLPP focused its political discourse on Sinhalese nationalism, the UNP favoured greater accommodation of Tamil culture. This did not stop Wickremesinghe from publicly supporting the need of highlighting the national peculiarities of Sinhalese identity, even as far as the island minorities were involved. Significantly, in the aforementioned parliamentary speech in which the Presi-

dent criticized the political activism of the monks, he also argued that «we should preserve and also show the distinct nature of Hinduism in Sri Lanka as compared to India» [*News.lk* 2022, 29 November]. Nonetheless, Wickremesinghe's openness towards the Tamil community certainly favoured relations with New Delhi. More concretely, the President demonstrated his attitude first by promoting together with the Indian authorities the reopening after 40 years of the ferry connection between Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu and Kankesanthurai in Sri Lanka's Jaffna [Devapriya 2023, 23 December]. The route was inaugurated in October in the presence of the Sri Lankan President and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The latter took the opportunity to underline that the ferry line «brings alive historical, cultural links» [Janardhanan 2023, 14 October]. A second significant example was given by the start of a dialogue between Colombo and New Delhi for the adoption of the Indian rupee to regulate cross-border transactions [Kolatewala 2023, 8 March].

8. *The economic setting*

The main indicators confirmed the progressive stabilization of the economy compared to the previous year, despite a still difficult context. Sri Lanka's economy grew by 1.6%; the expansion was the first since late 2021. The growth was notably driven by the agricultural sector, which grew by 3% compared to the previous year, with a 0.3% increase in industrial production, while services grew by 1.3% [Jayasinghe 2023, 15 December]. Large-scale retail trade growth, equal to -7.8% at the end of 2022, was estimated at -3% at the end of 2023. The inflation rate, which had reached 46% at the end of the previous year, fell more than expected in 2023, stabilizing at 18.7%, with prospects for a further sharp decline in 2024. The trade deficit worsened from US\$ 2.3 billion to 3.5 billion, due to the easing of import bans, in the face of a still low level of exports. However, the increase in foreign remittances by 78% and the recovery of the tourism sector by 67.4% pushed the current account from a deficit of US\$ 1.3 billion in 2022 to a surplus of 644 million a year later. Likewise, official reserves doubled during the year to US\$ 3.8 billion. This occurred largely thanks to international financial support and central bank dollar purchases [ADB 2023: 23].

9. *Conclusion*

The start of economic recovery and the return of international confidence in Sri Lanka were certainly an important achievement for the Wickremesinghe government. However, as widely expected, this has been accompanied by growing social and economic inequalities as a consequence of the austerity

measures. The widespread impression was that the measures applied by the government tended to place the sacrifices on the working class rather than on the banking sector. In any case, despite the undoubted effort made by the government to meet the demands for reform, the fundamental objective of restructuring the economy into one that was no longer export-dependent still remained distant. Furthermore, there was widespread dissatisfaction in civil society towards the new government's intolerant and often aggressive approach to dissent. It could not be completely ruled out that social and economic inequalities would lead to a new popular protest movement such as the Aragalaya. Moreover, great uncertainty surrounded the outcome of the next presidential and parliamentary elections. If, as the polls indicate, these were to lead to a victory for the far left, the maintenance of the economic recovery program would be in serious doubt. On the other hand, the possibility that the executive postponed the elections for a year, despite the President's reassurances, would place the country's democratic prospects at even greater risk.

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PAKISTAN 2023: MULTIPLE CRISES IN THE LEAD-UP
TO THE GENERAL ELECTIONS

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The salient events that characterized Pakistan in the period covered in this article (January – December 2023) were the political and economic crises that occurred in the lead-up to the general elections and the postponement of these elections to 2024. Former Prime Minister, Chairman of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), and top opposition leader Imran Khan was in a dire stand-off with the coalition government led by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). After being ousted by a no-confidence vote on 9 April 2022 – which Khan attributed to a military plot aimed at pleasing the United States – the former premier clamoured for snap elections. Khan faced multiple trials on charges of terrorism, sedition, contempt of court and corruption. His imprisonment in May 2023 triggered mass protests on the part of angry mobs, which were followed by mass arrests and resignations from PTI leaders and workers in an alleged military-led effort to dismantle the party – the same party which had helped bring to power Khan back in 2018. In August 2023, Imran Khan was arrested again and sentenced to three years in prison, disqualifying him from running for public office for five years. The verdict was later suspended. Khan's detention, the postponement of the provincial and general elections, and the promulgation of laws that weakened civilian institutions in favour of the military were viewed with concern by many observers of the Pakistani political scene. The political turbulence occurred against the backdrop of a severe economic crisis, aggravated by delays in disbursements from the stalled bailout plan reached with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2019. However, an agreement with the institution was eventually reached, allowing for the resumption of short-term financial assistance in exchange for the adoption of new austerity measures. At the same time, Sharif's government began pursuing a prudent foreign policy aimed at consolidating or maximising the economic benefits derived from its relations with the leading world powers.

KEYWORDS – Army; Economic Crisis; Election; Imran Khan; International Monetary Fund; Political Crisis.

1. Introduction

In April 2022, after losing the military establishment's support, the *Tehreek-e-Insaf* (PTI) government faced a no-confidence vote from the opposition and lost its parliamentary majority. Former professional cricketer Imran Khan was ousted from the prime minister's office in a motion that – he argued

– was orchestrated in a plot hatched by then-political opposition and the United States [Corsi 2023: 396–397]. The events coincided with increased political instability in Pakistan, which continued in 2023 through the harsh confrontation between Khan and the 13-party coalition government, the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), led by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) with Shehbaz Sharif as premier [*Ibid.*: 397-400]. The political dispute primarily pertained to elections, which were constitutionally required by the end of 2023. Following the ouster, Khan mobilised his die-hard supporters to call for early voting amid the weakening of Prime Minister Sharif’s administration following the PTI’s electoral victories in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Punjab, a traditional stronghold of the PML-N. In January 2023, the PTI dissolved the two provinces’ assemblies to force the federal government into early elections, while the Supreme Court of Pakistan ordered the Electoral Commission of Pakistan (ECP) – in vain – to comply with the constitutional provisions and hold elections within 90 days of the assemblies’ dissolution.

Many leaders and members of the PTI faced legal cases. Imran Khan was arrested while attending a hearing at an Islamabad Court on 9 May 2023 related to a controversial lawsuit filed by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB). His brief detention triggered nationwide protests, some of which involved violent mob attacks on military installations and clashes with police [Ali 2023, 21 June]. In turn, there were mass arrests of PTI officials who were allegedly involved in the unrest.

Since his deposal, Imran Khan has adopted a firm anti-establishment stance, and his growing popularity has become a thorn in the side of the Army. In particular, he repeatedly accused the high ranks of the military establishment and Prime Minister Sharif of being involved in the assassination attempt against him in November 2022 [Singh & Rawat 2023, 26 May]. Amid this political instability, much attention was paid to the Army’s involvement in political matters under the new Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir, who replaced General Qamar Javed Bajwa at the end of 2022 [Afzal 2023, 13 January].

Critically, the vicissitudes of the PTI leader did not impact his influence on the masses. In fact, if Khan had the opportunity to participate in the upcoming election, he would have had a strong chance of returning to power [Wallen 2023, 16 May]. However, this possibility seemed to vanish on 5 August 2023, when Khan was arrested again after a court sentenced him to three years in prison for corruption, disqualifying him from politics for five years. Although this verdict was later suspended, Khan wasn’t released from prison due to an indictment for another case – and the disqualification persisted.

When the legislative session ended on 9 August 2023, the assemblies were dissolved, and a caretaker government was nominated. Almost simultaneously, it was announced that the election – constitutionally due within

90 days of the assemblies' dissolution – would be deferred to 2024 due to the need for new constituency delimitations, made necessary by the completion of the updated census. The postponement of the election to 2024 opened a period of guaranteed power for the caretaker government. In November 2023, the voting date was set for 8 February 2024.

Analysts have argued that the government and the armed forces shared the goal of sidelining Khan and rendering his party politically ineffectual prior to the general election and that this goal was the main reason behind the legal prosecutions of PTI leaders and the postponement of the election [Afzal 2023, 26 May]. In line with this, two laws passed by Parliament prior to its dissolution provided for the further militarisation of Pakistan's politics and judicial system and countered Khan's popularity [Sheikh 2023, August 2023].

This political confrontation occurred against the backdrop of a dire economic crisis triggered by the country's structural weaknesses and exacerbated by both the negative externalities of Russia's war in Ukraine and the 2022 Pakistan floods, which caused more than US\$ 30 billion in damages [Soumya & Ghosh 2023, 31 May; IMF 2023, 18 July]. Despite attempts to decline further IMF aid packages, Islamabad ultimately reached a new agreement with the international institution, resulting in new austerity measures [Butt 2022, 13 December].

Islamabad went on to adopt a policy of prudence towards the leading world powers. It strengthened its economic relations with China, continued its energy cooperation with Russia, and maintained the interlocutory status quo in its bilateral ties with the United States and India.

2. *The economy*

Long-standing structural bottlenecks holding back Pakistan's socioeconomic development, growth-enhancing investment and job creation included inadequate social spending, corruption, a weak business climate and excessive regulation and licensing requirements [IMF 2023, 18 July]. Pakistan has long relied on an economic model grounded in foreign loans, leading to an inability to repay its foreign debt and a high risk of bankruptcy [Anees 2023, 2 May; Naqvi & Mushahid 2023, 7 June]. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC; the flagship project of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative launched in 2013 aimed at creating trade routes to China and addressing Pakistan's infrastructure gaps) has contributed to Pakistan's economic distress. In fact, it has made Islamabad heavily reliant on Chinese equity holdings and loans, widened Pakistan's unsustainable external debt and current account deficit and has further decreased foreign exchange reserves [Ahmad & Gul 2023, 21 November; Boni 2023, 23 May; Bhowmick 2023, 24 June]. As of December 2022, Pakistan – with a GDP of about US\$ 350

billion – had a total external debt and liabilities count of US\$ 126.3 billion, of which US\$ 97.5 billion belonged to the federal government. Approximately 30% of the central government's total debt stemmed from private and bilateral Chinese lending. Pakistan also had a US\$ 45 billion debt with multilateral institutions (the World Bank, the IMF, and the Asian Development Bank) and US\$ 8.5 billion with Paris Club countries [The World Bank 2023, April; Rana 2023, 6 April; Ahmad 2023, 14 April].

Islamabad has approached the IMF 23 times since 1980 [IMF 2020, 29 February]. Experts have repeatedly warned that IMF assistance would not solve Pakistan's economic challenges, as they require long-term structural reforms of the country's macroeconomic framework [PIDE 2022, September]. They have also stressed that the conditions attached to IMF loans have worsened Pakistan's fiscal position, resulting in tariff hikes, high inflation, and the devaluation of the Pakistani rupee [Asim 2022, 23 September]. In May 2019, the IMF and the government of then-Prime Minister Imran Khan agreed to a 39-month US\$ 6 billion bailout package for Pakistan under the Extended Fund Facility (EFF) programme, which was formally launched in July that same year [IMF 2019, 3 July]. The associated funding was later suspended, however, when Prime Minister Khan refused to adhere to some of the programme's conditionalities [Corsi 2023: 390]. After Khan's government was ousted in April 2022, the new Shehbaz Sharif government sought to unlock the funding and started a confidence-building process with the IMF. At the same time, a further spike in inflation hit the country, and the country's foreign reserves dwindled to less than US\$ 4 billion [State Bank of Pakistan 2023; Mangi 2023, 5 February; Somro 2023, 1 May; *Reuters* 2023, 30 June].

In August 2022, the IMF approved the seventh and eighth reviews of the EFF bailout programme, allowing for the release of over US\$ 1.1 billion and extending the programme by one year. The parties discussed raising fuel, electricity, and gas prices; however, with the election set for 2023, Sharif's administration resisted adopting austerity measures [*Outlook* 2023, 14 March; *The Nation* 2023, 10 May]. In November 2022, Pakistan and the IMF began engagement on the ninth review of the loan programme. However, the two delegations didn't meet until February 2023 due to differences in programme targets. The energy subsidies that the PTI government had granted amid the shock to global energy markets triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the new government's indecision regarding the turnaround of such assistance significantly hindered economic performance [Corsi 2023: 389–391]. In January 2023, inflation soared to 47%, and the value of the rupee plummeted by 54%, pointing to a potential default [*The Friday Times* 2023, 4 April]. The country's foreign exchange reserves fell, the fiscal deficit grew, the balance of payments deteriorated, and public debt rose by approximately 74% of the GDP, leading external debt to exceed about 45% of the GDP [Rasul 2023, 2 April]. The State Bank of Pakistan

announced that it would raise interest rates from 16% to 17% – the highest rate in 26 years – in order to address high inflation [*The Patriot* 2023, 4 July].

On 15 February 2023, the federal government presented the Finance (Supplementary) Act, 2023 («mini-budget») to the National Assembly [Hussain 2023, 16 February]. The tax-loaded mini-budget aimed to meet the global lender's conditions to allow for the release of the US\$ 1.1 billion loan tranche by holding down the country's deficit and generating about US\$ 643 million in four months.¹ In April 2023, Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves were boosted by the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China's disbursement of US\$ 300 million, the latest of three tranches of a credit line collectively worth US\$ 1.3 billion. Around the same time, the United Arab Emirates confirmed to the IMF a commitment of US\$ 1 billion in financing to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia committed US\$ 2 billion, China committed an additional US\$ 2 billion, and Qatar, the United States and Iran committed themselves to some additional financial support [*Daily Mail* 2023, 1 April; *Daily Pakistan* 2023, 6 April; *Business Recorder* 2023, 14 April; *The Current* 2023, 27 April]. The IMF mandated that to restart the bailout program assurances of financial support from primary creditors had to be secured, and austerity measures aimed at boosting government revenue had to be implemented [Rana 2023, 30 May]. However, the ninth review had yet to be concluded by May 2023. On 9 June 2023, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar presented the budget for the new fiscal year (July 2023 – June 2024) to the National Assembly. The budget, which featured a spending target of US\$ 50 billion and a tax revenue projection of US\$ 32 billion conflicted with EFF conditionalities and favoured spending over austerity measures [*Dawn* 2023, 9 June]. Even if the forthcoming elections could justify the government's choices, this rationale did not satisfy the IMF [Shahid 2023, 15 June; Brewster 2023, 22 June]. Soon after the presentation, Pakistan reviewed the budget and raised projected tax revenue by US\$ 752 million, putting forward a primary surplus of around 0.4% of GDP. Additionally, Islamabad curtailed non-essential expenditures and withdrew its guidance on import prioritisation, demonstrating its commitment to adhere to complete market determination. Pakistan's Central Bank raised interest rates further to 22% to reduce demand and ease strain on Pakistan's foreign reserves [Government of Pakistan Finance Division 2023; *The Economic Times* 2023, 24 June; *Leather* 2023, 26 June].

These steps taken by the government allowed Pakistan to reach an agreement with the IMF on 29 June 2023 to release US\$ 3 billion under a

1. Salient features of the taxation measures included raising the General Sales Tax (GST) from 17% to 18% on imported goods (and to 25% for luxurious items); increasing the prices of natural gas and oil, which was one of the preconditions of the IMF to release the tranche; and increasing federal excise duties on several goods, including tobacco, aerated water, sugary drinks and cement [*Times of India* 2023, 5 February; *First Post* 2023, 16 February; *Iqfa* 2023, 28 February; Jain 2023, 26 March].

nine-month-long Stand-By Arrangement (SBA).² This SBA was agreed to a day before the EFF expiration, while Islamabad was awaiting the release of the remaining US\$ 2.5 billion from the bailout package agreed to in 2019. The approval allowed for an immediate disbursement of US\$ 1.2 billion, with the remaining instalments subject to quarterly reviews. This deal gave Pakistan temporary economic relief and the government a pre-election political boost [IMF 2023, 29 June]. Notably, the new loan made Pakistan the fourth-largest borrower from the IMF globally, behind Argentina, Egypt and Ukraine [Imdad 2023, 3 July; Janjua 2023, 3 July; Shahnawaz 2023, 4 July].

3. *Khan's arrests and the weakening of the PTI*

After completing investigations triggered by a report filed by PDM members in August 2022 (the «Toshakhana» case pertaining to Imran Khan's declarations of annual assets), the ECP disqualified the opposition leader, on 21 October 2022, from holding public office for five years on corruption and terrorism charges [Corsi 2023: 400]. Since then, the government has launched over 100 cases and investigations against him, ranging from corruption to terrorism, blasphemy and sedition [Gul 2023, 25 March].

Following accusations of violating a ban on public gatherings by organising a rally, a first information report was registered against Imran Khan in October 2022 for allegedly receiving suspicious foreign funding through a PTI account [*The News* 2023, 14 March; Gul 2023, 19 March]. Another arrest warrant delivered to Khan pertained to his alleged threatening of a judge, Zeba Chaudhry, after she had approved the remand of Kahn's aide, Shahbaz Gill [Corsi 2023: 400]. Again, in October 2022, Khan was charged under Pakistani anti-terrorism law for his remarks about filing cases against political opponents and top police officials. Khan encountered additional legal trouble for failing to attend required court hearings. In January 2023, the ECP issued a fresh bailable arrest warrant against the former premier and other PTI leaders in a contempt case based on statements against the poll body and the Chief Election Commissioner.

After postponing it twice because of a ban on public gatherings in the provincial capital, on 13 March 2023, Khan organised a rally in Lahore to kick off his election campaign despite security and arrest threats [*The News* 2023, 12 March; *Ibid.*, 13 March]. On the day of the rally, Islamabad police reached Lahore to arrest him on charges stemming from the judge-threatening case. Khan's supporters clashed with police, who ultimately walked off without making an arrest. Nonetheless, the attempt to arrest Khan ap-

2. Details of the IMF's Stand-By Arrangements can be found in the IMF's fact-sheet, available at: <https://www.imf.org/en/About/Factsheets/Sheets/2023/Stand-By-Arrangement-SBA>.

peared to be a show of force, aimed at intimidating the PTI Chairman, as it came just before the suspension of his arrest warrant by an Islamabad court the following day and the conversion of several other non-bailable warrants to bailable ones [*The Express Tribune* 2023, 31 March; *The Daily Patriot*, 4 April].

However, on 9 May 2023, Imran Khan was arrested on a warrant issued by the NAB, pertaining to the Al-Qadir Trust case, dating back to 2019. The arrest was made during Khan's court appearance in Islamabad for unrelated corruption charges. In 2019, real estate tycoon Malik Riaz was investigated in the United Kingdom for money laundering. A few months earlier, the Supreme Court of Pakistan had fined Riaz's company, Bahria Town, US\$ 3 billion for illegally acquiring and disproportionately profiting from land in Karachi. A settlement was reached whereby Riaz's assets would be transferred from the UK to Pakistan instead of a fine being levied. Khan and his wife were accused of obtaining land from Riaz to facilitate the US\$ 240 million repatriation [Mallik 2023, 12 May]. The land was then allocated to the Al-Qadir Trust, a charitable organisation founded by philanthropist Abdul Sattar Edhi, which was established in Islamabad a few weeks after the Imran-led government approved the agreement with Riaz [*Daily Patriot* 2023, 9 May; *Dawn* 2023, 9 May; Niazi 2023, 9 May; *The Friday Times* 2023, 10 May; *The Express Tribune* 2023, 10 May; *Reuters* 2023, 10 May; *The News* 2023, 10 May].

Khan's popularity has only risen since his ouster in 2022, as demonstrated by the PTI's successes in provincial elections in Punjab and KP [Mangi 2023, 7 March; *The News* 2023, 4 April]. For this reason, according to the former Premier, all the charges and allegations against him were politically motivated and aimed at keeping him from leading PTI's election campaign [*The News* 2023, 7 March; *The Express Tribune* 2023, 31 March]. After his arrest, protests erupted across Pakistan, and military installations were raided by angry mobs.

Similarly, the Supreme Court ruled the arrest of the PTI chairman unlawful and unconstitutional because it violated the petitioner's right of access to justice and «the sanctity and safety of the court as he had already surrendered to the court for seeking judicial relief against the action taken by NAB» [Fraser & Davies 2023, 10 May; Bhatti 2023, 11 May]. Imran Khan was then granted protected bail, which prevented him from being re-arrested on the same charges. Despite the rulings, the corruption charges against Mr. Khan persisted [Shafiq 2023, 12 May].

Police also arrested close aides of Imran Khan. PTI Vice President Fawad Chaudhry was jailed and later released on charges of threatening the chief of the ECP and other government officials after he criticised the appointment of the caretaker chief minister in Punjab. Awami Muslim League Chief Sheikh Rashid, a close aide of Imran Khan, faced charges for his allegation that Pakistan People's Party (PPP) Co-Chairman Asif Ali Zardari

plotted to assassinate Khan in 2023 [Zake 2023, 4 February]. In April 2023, Punjab police and anti-corruption officials conducted an arrest operation at the residence of PTI President Parvez Elahi as part of a case being handled by the Lahore High Court. The police operation was unsuccessful, as Elahi was absent, but he was arrested in a corruption case later in June 2023 [*The Express Tribune* 2023, 28 April; *The Nation* 2023, 3 June].

On 5 August 2023, an Islamabad trial court declared Khan guilty of corrupt practices in the Toshakhana case and sentenced him to three years in prison. The case was named after the treasury («Toshakhana») where gifts handed to government officials from foreign officials are kept [Joles 2023, 5 April]. Allegedly, in his asset declarations, Khan concealed details of money that he earned – about US\$ 635,000 – from selling gifts that he had received while in office [*NDTV* 2023, 14 March]. Again, Khan defended himself and denied the charges, arguing that he used the proceeds from selling the gifts for public purposes. He was arrested by Punjab police from his residence in Lahore and transferred to Attock Jail [Gul 2023, 6 August]. This time, Mr. Khan urged his supporters to stage peaceful protests, and he was taken into custody without any significant resistance [Masood & Goldbaum 2023, 4 August]. At the end of September, Khan was transferred to Adiala Jail in Rawalpindi, which offered better facilities.

Again, the judiciary – the Supreme Court Bar Association – expressed reservations about the legality of the judgment leading to Khan's arrest due to its alleged blatant violation of the Islamabad High Court's order, in which the trial court judge was asked to re-examine the jurisdiction of the ECP's complaint. According to Khan's lawyer, the trial had been conducted without allowing the accused to defend himself [Davies & Walsh 2023, 6 August]. In response to his appeal, on 29 August 2023, a federal court suspended Imran Khan's corruption conviction and three-year jail sentence, ordering his release on bail. The federal court motivated the decision, arguing that the sentence was unlawful and breached Khan's fundamental right to due process and a fair trial.

Despite the suspension, the verdict disqualified Khan from holding public office for five years under Article 63(1)(h) of the Constitution [Yusuf 2023, 8 August; Radford 2023, 9 August].³ Additionally, Khan was not released due to a separate case registered by the Federal Investigation Agency against him for allegedly violating the Official Secrets Act and sharing information on a «cypher» cable, for which he was indicted on 23 October 2023.

3. An amendment passed by the National Assembly in June 2023 limited the disqualification of a parliamentarian to a maximum of five years, enabling those who had been barred for life from public office to pursue a potential return [Satti 2023, 25 June]. Among those who could benefit from the amendment, it is worth mentioning not only Imran Khan himself but also the PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif, who was disqualified in 2017 and who returned to Pakistan in October 2023 after four years of self-exile in London [Corsi 2018: 353–356].

The case referred to a cable, leaked in early August 2023, that documented an alleged conversation between US State Department officials and the then-ambassador of Pakistan to the US about ousting Khan from power over his neutrality on Russia's war in Ukraine in exchange for better relations between Islamabad and Washington [Grim and Hussain 2023, 9 August; Gul 2023, 29 August; *The News* 2023, 29 August; *DW* 2023, 23 October].

4. *The alleged interference by the military establishment in the political space*

Khan blamed the Pakistani Army and its chief – General Asim Munir – for ordering his arrest and repeated allegations that Major General Faisal Naseer, a senior military figure, and Prime Minister Sharif were behind the November 2022 assassination attempt against him [Baloch & Ellis-Petersen 2023, 14 May]. Following Khan's release on the Al-Qadir Trust case, the military announced that it would prosecute protesters who attacked military facilities following Khan's arrest [Shirazi 2023, 15 May]. Many PTI leaders left the party – or even politics altogether – under the pressure related to their alleged role in the turmoil, while others were taken into custody [*The Current*, 11 May; Hussain 2023, 24 May; Samaa 2023, 24 May]. Formally, PTI leadership confirmed the party's non-involvement in the protests and claimed that Pakistani intelligence agents were among the protesters, suggesting a plot between the military and the government aimed at dismantling the PTI, arresting Khan and having him tried by a military court to prevent him from contesting Pakistan's general election. Analysts have largely concurred with the PTI's assessment, tracing the reason for the arrests and consequential *en masse* resignations among PTI leaders to Khan's attacks on the military leadership. Friction between Imran Khan and General Munir dates to the latter's removal from his post as Director-General of the ISI in 2019, during Khan's government [Siddiq 2023, June; Ellis-Petersen & Baloch 2023, 3 June].

The concerns regarding the rise in military influence in the country's political life were corroborated in August 2023, when the National Assembly – with a coalition majority including the PML-N and the PPP – passed two bills granting additional power to the armed forces.⁴ The Pakistan Army (Amendment) Bill 2023 criminalised criticism of the military establishment and enabled the military to act against such criticism [National Assembly of Pakistan 2023, 18 August]. The Official Secrets (Amendment) Bill 2023 gave security agencies unlimited discretionary powers to arrest those deemed a threat to national security and try them before military courts [Senate of

4. Both parties are signatories of the 2006 Charter of Democracy, through which they pledged to refuse military support for political ends by reaffirming the supremacy of civilian government [*Dawn* 2006, 16 May].

Pakistan 2023, 18 August]. In the context of the forthcoming election, the two laws ensured the continued political weakening of the PTI and provided the military with the tools to counter Khan's attacks. Compounding allegations of military interference in the political space, the military reportedly requested media silence on Imran Khan – including just the utterance of his name – and his campaign against the Army [Grim *et al.*, 2023, 2 June; Davies 2023, 8 June; Mir 2023, 21 June]. As a by-product of the events of 9 May 2023, General Munir consolidated his position in the Army by ridding the top ranks of pro-Khan elements [Haqqani 2023, 9 August]. Sympathetic senior officers were removed, and disciplinary measures were taken against lower-ranking officers accused of not acting effectively to stop the Khan-induced turmoil [*The Dawn*, 26 June; Katju 2023, 29 June].

5. *The postponement of the election*

In January 2023, after the assemblies of both provinces under PTI control – Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – were dissolved and caretaker governments were appointed, the PTI called on the ECP to schedule fresh elections [*Ani News* 2023, 18 January; *The News* 2023, 26 January; Ahmed 2023, 26 January; Hussain 2023, 13 March]. In March 2023, the ECP announced the delay of the elections in the two provinces until 8 October in Punjab and a to-be-determined date in KP on account of economic stress and the rising threat of terrorism. The Supreme Court of Pakistan rejected this ECP decision as a violation of the Constitution, which stipulates that elections must be held within 90 days of an assembly's dissolution. Still, the PML-N government rejected the ruling of the Supreme Court, as only three judges reached the verdict after the other six recused themselves [*The Washington Post* 2023, 4 April]. Soon after, the National Assembly passed a resolution urging the Prime Minister not to accept the Supreme Court's decision [*Dawn* 2023, 6 April]. In April 2023, talks began between Pakistan's coalition government and former Prime Minister Imran Khan's PTI, ultimately leading to an agreement to hold provincial and general elections on the same day [*The Tribune* 2023, 6 May].

On 9 August 2023, the national assemblies were dissolved [*Daily Pakistan* 2023, 18 July; Abrar 2023, 19 July]. After the results of the first-ever digital census were approved by the Council of Common Interests (the constitutional body that coordinates the relationship between the federal and provincial governments) in August 2023, the ECP announced that the general election would be delayed to 2024 due to the new constituency delimitations [Amilbhatti 2023, 6 August]. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif confirmed this shortly before the dissolution of the assemblies [Shahzad 2023, 5 August; Khan 2023, 18 August; Nawaz 2023, 30 August]. On 12 August 2023, Prime Minister Sharif and opposition leader Raja Riaz announced

that Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, a senator from Baluchistan, had been chosen as caretaker premier to steer the country until a new government was elected. Kakar, a former PML-N member, left that party and formed the Baluchistan Awami Party in 2017, becoming its spokesperson. He has been a member of the Senate Standing Committee on Defence, Foreign Affairs and Parliamentary Affairs and the Chairman of the Senate Standing Committee on Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resources. His close relationship with the military establishment led political analysts to allege that his nomination had come from the Army [*The Guardian* 2023, 12 August].

On 2 November 2023, Chief Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja and the President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Arif Alvi, agreed that the general elections would take place on 8 February 2024 [Yusuf 2023, 2 November]. Two days after the announcement, Fawad Chaudhry, once allied with Imran Khan, was arrested with no public explanation despite having distanced himself from the PTI [*Dunya News* 2023, 4 November]. Soon after, another top leader of the PTI party, Asad Umar, announced that he was quitting politics [*The Express Tribune* 2023, 11 November].

Analysts of the Pakistani political scene pointed out that both the accusatory fury against Imran Khan and the postponement of the elections in violation of the Constitution promoted the political objective of the PML-N – and of the PDM in general – of weakening the PTI in preparation for the voting process. Some analysts also stressed that the reduction of the PTI's electoral reach could not have happened without the consent of the military establishment [Bokhari & Parkin 2023, 8 August]. In this regard, the alleged presence of a common political objective shared by the government forces and the military establishment was considered alarming as further militarising Pakistan's political and judicial system [Sheikh 2023, August 2023; Khawar 2023, 24 August].

6. *Foreign affairs amid internal instability*

6.1. *The relations with China*

Beijing and Islamabad maintain a strong relationship despite the slow progress of the CPEC, the surge in extremism – which often targets Chinese nationals residing in Pakistan, triggering concern about the future of Chinese investment – and political instability [Shoab & Basim 2023, 7 July]. Chinese authorities have repeatedly called for national political stability as a prerequisite to protect their investments under the Belt and Road Initiative. However, security and investment interests do not impact China's broader strategic geopolitical interests in Pakistan, which serve to counter Indian power and facilitate Chinese economic prospects in Afghanistan. Thus, Pakistan's instability does not pose a particularly serious threat to the China-Pakistan relationship. Since the CPEC was launched in 2013, Pakistan has had four

prime ministers – Nawaz Sharif, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, Imran Khan, and Shehbaz Sharif – from two different political parties. However, none of these political transitions led to a recalibration of the country's partnership with Beijing; in fact, political cooperation with China has only grown over time, especially under the CPEC [Shannon 2023, 16 May]. The China-Pakistan partnership has proven to be resilient, as demonstrated by Beijing's decision to grant a US\$ 2 billion loan to Pakistan in August 2018, just days after Imran Khan's election to the prime ministership, whose repayment, due on March 2023, was delayed by China in that date [SCMP 2018; Shahzad and Shahid 2023, 31 March]. Also, cooperation in energy, military, security and counterterrorism matters between the two countries has been ongoing and was only reinforced by Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang's visit to Pakistan in May 2023 [Hussain 2023, 27 April; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2023, 7 May; Shahzad 2023, 20 June]. On 31 July 2023, He Lifeng, the vice premier of China and member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, visited Pakistan to participate in events commemorating the 10th anniversary of the CPEC. During these events, representatives from Pakistan and China signed several agreements to enhance bilateral cooperation and economic relations [*Independent News Pakistan* 2023, 31 July; Jamal 2023, November].

6.2. *The relations with Russia*

Sharif's government has also pursued energy deals with Russia, following up on energy cooperation that was already on the bilateral agenda when former Prime Minister Imran Khan visited Moscow in 2022 [Corsi 2023: 391–392; Krishnankutty 2023, 13 June]. In April 2023, Sharif's government finalised an agreement with Moscow on 100,000 metric tons of discounted crude oil imports – predominantly supplied by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – to provide its citizens with some relief in the lead-up to elections.⁵ Energy cooperation between Moscow and Islamabad has been economically challenging. Pakistan's economic crisis reduces Islamabad's long-term financial capacities and, therefore, the sustainability of the energy deal. Although not objected to by Washington, the arrangement and its modality – Pakistan used the Chinese Renminbi to pay Russia – raised concerns among US officials about the deal's geopolitical implications. Pakistan continued to balance relations with Russia and the West, maintained a position of neutrality on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, and avoided antagonising the US, which strongly

5. Reportedly, Pakistan planned to import two-thirds of its oil requirements from Russia [Jamal 2023, June]. However, after receiving the first Russian oil tanker, Islamabad suspended crude oil imports from Moscow, as local refineries failed to extract as much petrol and diesel out of imported crude as they extract from Gulf crudes [*Daily Pakistan* 2023, 13 August]. At the end of September 2023, the first shipment of liquified petroleum gas from Russia reached Pakistan [*The Frontier Post* 2023, 27 September].

influences global financial institutions. At the same time, Pakistan's purchase added a buyer to Moscow's sales of redirected oil from Western markets to India and China because of its invasion of Ukraine [Shahzad 2023, April 20; *Business Recorder* 2023, 26 April; Syed 2023, 28 April]. The April 2023 energy deal with Russia sealed the solid strategic partnership between the two countries, as confirmed by the statement of Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs commemorating the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic bilateral relations with Pakistan [Government of Pakistan 2023, 1 May; Krishnakutty 2023, 13 June; Ali 2023, 21 June].

6.3. *The relations with the US*

Pakistan-US bilateral relations have resumed and slowly improved since the tensions following Imran Khan's accusation that the US contributed to his ouster in April 2022. As before, they have primarily focussed on transactional and security-related cooperation [Corsi 2023: 396–397; Jamal 2023, March]. Shifting US foreign policy priorities towards the Indo-Pacific and the war in Ukraine have reduced Islamabad's ability to obtain economic or strategic advantages from Washington in exchange for security cooperation [Kapur 2023, 3 March; Ijaz *et al.* 2023]. However, Pakistan remained a valuable US ally. A series of communications and meetings between representatives of the two governments reiterated the mutual commitment to deepening bilateral ties, particularly after the humanitarian crisis that followed the 2022 floods [Yousaf 2022, 7 July; Hussain 2022, 8 July; U.S. Department of State 2022, 26 September; *The News* 2022, 27 September; *Pakistan Observer* 2023, 26 June]. Washington worked with the Pakistani military on counter-terrorism efforts and other defence-related matters, including in Afghanistan, as demonstrated by the US State Department's approval of a US\$ 450 million sale of F-16 aircraft and related equipment to Pakistan in September 2023 [*Reuters* 2022, 8 September; Jamal 2022, October]. In February 2023, Pakistan and the US held high-level talks in Washington to coordinate security-related issues and explore potential new areas of cooperation. Nonetheless, in the year under review, the White House did not engage yet in a substantive «reset» of its bilateral ties with Islamabad, made necessary by its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. The Biden Administration continued to support Pakistan's democratic institutions while taking no position on the country's domestic political disputes [Congressional Research Service 2023, 22 May]. The centrality of democratic principles and respect for the rule of law in US-Pakistan relations was reaffirmed by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a telephone conversation with Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari in July 2023 [U.S. Department of State 2023, 24 July]. Still, the US remains mindful of the deepening political instability in Pakistan, public support for Khan and Islamabad's efforts to strengthen its bilateral relations with China [Mishra & Sharma 2023, 23 June; Syed 2023, 9 August; *The Frontier Post* 2023, 9 August].

6.4. *The engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*

On 4 and 5 May 2023, Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Zardari Bhutto attended a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) hosted by India in Goa ahead of the SCO leaders' summit scheduled for July 2023 in New Delhi. Bhutto's visit was the first to India by a Pakistani Foreign Minister in 12 years [*The Patriot* 2023, 4 May; *Business Recorder* 2023, 5 May]. For Islamabad, the visit marked an opportunity to strengthen engagement with the SCO – led by China and Russia – and advance its foreign policy interests with the Central Asian member states, with which Pakistan had started intensifying relations under Khan's government to expand trade and connectivity [Pandita 2023, 7 May]. From the perspective of India-Pakistan bilateral relations, Pakistan's participation in the meeting was unsuccessful, as Bhutto Zardari only briefly met his counterpart, Minister of External Affairs of India Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, and did not have any substantial discussions with him. In fact, after their encounter, Jaishankar criticised Zardari's statement on the weaponization of terrorism for «diplomatic point scoring» [Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023, 5 May; Adil 2023, 8 May; Tiezzi 2023, 9 May].

The recent political and, allegedly, military-related crises in Pakistan have diminished the legitimacy of Pakistan's government as a credible interlocutor of New Delhi. At the same time, it can't be said that Pakistan's crises significantly impacted ties with India, given that there was already a lack of ongoing dialogue and political will to repair the difficult relation with Islamabad on the part of New Delhi [Sobhan & Sham 2023, 16 May]. Addressing a presser to highlight the achievement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during his tenure, Bilawal Zardari Bhutto reiterated that Pakistan's stance on bilateral relations with India was unequivocal and consistent; unless New Delhi revoked its illegal and unilateral acts of 2019 over Jammu and Kashmir, there was no space for meaningful engagement [*The News* 2023, 10 August].

7. *Conclusions*

The most prominent developments in Pakistan in 2023 revolved around the intersection of political and economic crises, particularly in the lead-up to the general elections.

In April 2022, Pakistan's PTI government lost the support of the military and faced a vote of no confidence, leading to the ouster of Prime Minister Imran Khan. This political turmoil continued in 2023 with a dispute over the timing of constitutionally required elections. Khan found himself embroiled in a dire standoff with the coalition government led by the PML-N and marred by multiple legal battles. Many PTI leaders faced legal cases, and Khan himself was arrested in May 2023, leading to nationwide

protests, clashes, and the resignation of PTI leaders and members. Khan remained popular despite the attack on him, but his political future dimmed when he was arrested again in August 2023 and sentenced to three years in prison, which disqualified him from holding public office for five years.

The detention of Khan, the postponement of provincial and general elections to 2024 and the strengthening of the military over civilian institutions raised suspicions of a military-led effort to side-line Khan and triggered concerns over the militarisation of Pakistan's political and judicial systems.

Amid this political turmoil, Pakistan grappled with a severe economic crisis that was exacerbated by delays in receiving funds from the stalled bailout agreement reached with the IMF in 2019. A solution was eventually reached, facilitating the resumption of short-term financial assistance in exchange for the adoption of new austerity measures. Sharif's government pursued a cautious foreign policy aimed at enhancing economic cooperation with various major powers.

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The year under examination was characterised by the Taliban attempts at consolidating control over Afghanistan, following a tumultuous first 18 months in power. Security has overall improved across the country but the equilibrium remains fragile. From a political standpoint, the Taliban have expanded their reach across all provinces in Afghanistan by consolidating the emirate's institutions and governance practices, although internal divisions among the Taliban ranks still persist. To document these dynamics, the paper draws on novel data from the decrees and edicts by the Taliban supreme leader published in May 2023. The international relations of the Taliban regime were characterised on the one hand by the need to establish economic and investment linkages with the outside world to sustain the economy and, on the other, by the desire of the international community to ensure that the Afghan territory does not become a launchpad for other militant groups to operate, both regionally and globally.

KEYWORDS – Taliban government; China-Afghanistan relations; Pakistan-Afghanistan relations; humanitarian crisis.

1. Introduction

In 2023, the Taliban have attempted at consolidating their power across Afghanistan through a series of administrative moves, including the establishment of provincial councils across the country and the improvement of revenue generation. While divisions still persist with the Taliban ranks, particularly between the Haqqani network, which controls Kabul and is strong in the capital and the east, and the Kandahar leadership in the south [Loyn 2023], the hope that many observers, especially in the West, had of a more inclusive Taliban regime did not materialise. In fact, in 2023 there was further evidence of no improvement as far as granting basic rights to women and to the country's non-Pashtun ethnic groups was concerned. From a security standpoint, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) – a branch of the Islamic State active in Central and South Asia - was weakened in strength and numbers but it was still present in the country alongside other groups (e.g. *Al-Qā'ida*). Domestic opposition was weakened internally but it has tried to gain momentum and international support through the so-called Vienna Process for a Democratic Afghanistan. During the 2 meetings held in 2023 (in April and December) activists from many different

backgrounds, ethnic groups and religious affiliations, took part in the event aimed at convening the forces opposing the Taliban [Coffey 2023]. While the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF) was identified as the leading force behind the opposition, the December meeting saw the participations of senior figures from the National Resistance Council for the Salvation of Afghanistan, also known as the Ankara Coalition (including former MP Mohammadi Muhaqeq and former vice president of Afghanistan Yunus Qanuni). Abdul Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek Afghan commander and long-time Afghan powerbroker, also sent a personal representative to deliver his message to the attendees. There were also international observers from the US, and European and regional countries [Coffey 2023].

Beyond the domestic realm and the attempts just described at coalescing political opposition to the Taliban rule, the latter's denial of basic rights to Afghan women and girls and their imposition of draconian social rules since returning to power in August 2021 has sabotaged, at least for now, the chances that the United Nations (UN) and other international bodies might recognise their regime. But behind the surface and official pronouncements, there is a growing realisation, especially among regional capitals, that the best way to secure their countries' interests and moderate the Taliban's behaviour in the long term is patient engagement with Kabul, rather than ostracism [International Crisis Group 2024]. There are also geopolitical reasons behind engaging with the Taliban. On the one hand, the region is trying to insulate itself from Western sanctions on Russia, Iran and Afghanistan, as well as the prospect of further economic restrictions on China. In particular, Moscow and Beijing are keen to promote the regional economy as a buffer against pressure from the West [International Crisis Group 2024]. On the other hand, regional countries are eager to develop some form of economic engagement with Kabul as a way to try and incentivise the Taliban into behaving less erratically.

To unpack the domestic and international dynamics of Afghanistan in 2023, the article proceeds as follows. The ensuing section (section 2) looks at the domestic politics of the Taliban regime, with a focus on the edicts and decrees issued by the Taliban supreme leader. These offer significant insights and, to the best of the author's knowledge, it is the first time that they are analysed in an academic publication. Section 3 dives into the socio-economic dynamics that characterised Afghanistan in 2023. In section 4 the foreign policy of Afghanistan is analysed. In particular, the article details the approach of China, Pakistan, India and Russia to the Islamic Emirate. Some final conclusions are laid out in section 5.

2. Domestic Politics: how do the Taliban rule?

In May 2023, the Taliban decided to published a number of decrees, edicts and instructions of supreme leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada. The

documents were originally produced from 2016, when Akhundzada became leader, to the spring of 2023. Published and translated into English by the Afghanistan Analysts Network, the collection represents a particularly useful tool to shed light on the governance of Afghanistan under the Taliban, an area often neglected in scholarly and policy analyses on the country. What is the Taliban's vision about the Emirate's functioning? How has this materialised in 2023?

Before diving into analysing some of the decrees and answering these questions, it is important to briefly outline the key concepts discussed in the documents and which reflect the Taliban's approach to governance, namely: 1) sovereignty is established through the implementation of Sharia; 2) the country's leadership is chosen by a select Islamic shura, or council; 3) all branches of government are subject to the authority of the emir; and 4) basic rights are defined/limited by Sharia as interpreted by the emir/leadership [Thier 2020: 2].

Such an approach to governance and state organisation is clearly opposite to that outlined in the currently suspended 2004 Constitution. The latter is primarily modelled around Western notions of sovereignty belonging to the people and the division of legislative, executive and judicial powers. In addition, while the 2004 constitution codified the ground rules and norms that would regulate political and social life in Afghanistan, the Taliban have primarily ruled by issuing decrees, without providing an overarching constitutional framework. With these distinctions in mind, it is worth highlighting some general themes that run through the 65 decrees published, as they provide some relevant insights into the organisational and administrative guidelines and priorities, and how they played out in the year under examination.¹

First, administrative corruption was high on the agenda of the Taliban leadership. According to data from Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI), between 2005 and 2021 Afghanistan averaged around the 168th place out of 180 countries in terms of perceived corruption. It is therefore not surprising that the Taliban leader issued a number of decrees specifically addressing this point. They included a ban on double salaries (2022); a provision that revenues must be collected transparently and then «to avoid irregularities and chaos» must be handed over to the Ministry of Finance, with no independent spending of them (2022); the establishment of a National Procurement Commission (October 2022); a ban on state officials and employees to participate in bids to gain contracts for building materials or mines (2023) [Clark 2023]. In early 2023, the Taliban leader issued three further decrees on anti-corruption and nepotism; they prohibited the de facto officials from participating in government contracts (on 12 March),

1. The full list of decrees, including their English translation, is available at: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2023, 'Decrees, orders and Instructions of Taleban supreme leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada', 15 July.

employing their sons and relatives in institutions under their responsibility (on 18 March), and regulating government land distribution, lease and sale (on 20 March) [UNAMA 2023b: 4]. These anti-corruption efforts seem to be effective, given that between 2022 and 2023 Afghanistan moved from 168th to 152nd place in the abovementioned Corruption Perception Index, 16 places down from the position recorded for the years 2005 and 2021.

A second key theme in the edicts and decrees revolved around the organisation of security services. Ensuring loyalty from within their ranks and the security of the new regime were two key priorities for the Taliban, especially considering the threats coming from other militant organisations in the first few months of the new regime. To this end, a number of orders were issued aimed at clearing the ranks from corrupt or disloyal elements, and ensuring those who failed vetting could not join other services. In 2021, a new body, the Military Commission, was set up with the task of purging the Emirate's security forces of «undesirable and corrupt people» [Clark 2023]. This was followed in 2022 by an order to the security services to register «mujahedin» with biometrics taken and positions and salaries specified. Later that year, a very long and detailed decree set out the duties of another new body, the Security and Screening Commission, also with a mandate to purge [Clark 2023].

A third strand of edicts and decrees focused on the administration of the state and on ensuring a proper functioning, alongside a recalibration, of the structures that the Taliban inherited from previous administrations. Rules were imposed on which ministries were to report to which deputies to the acting prime minister; departments and courts were relocated; the duties of various government bodies were defined; the stages legislative documents were to go through were indicated; finally, the Supreme Court was ordered to send its decisions to the leadership. Regarding local governance, the establishment of provincial ulama shuras (councils) was completed by the end of 2023 in all 34 provinces, thereby increasing the local conflict resolution capacity. None, including those in the predominantly Shia-populated provinces of Bamyan and Daykundi, included Shia or female members [UNAMA 2023a: 3].

An overall assessment of these edicts reveals that the emir's micro-management of governance appears the result of perceptions of rampant disobedience, to which he is responding by issuing ever-harsher edicts [Watkins 2023]. Such a view is corroborated particularly by what was noted above regarding the establishment of ulema councils in every province, as they seem to function as the emir's eyes and ears across the country. But while dissent against the emir's agenda is real, dissenters are not a cohesive force working towards the same objectives, which will make it difficult for them to organise [Watkins 2023].

Some of the harshest edicts during the period under examination were directed against women, whose conditions dramatically deteriorated

following the return of the Taliban. The latest manifestation of this came in September 2023, when the national examination authority announced the results of the country's annual university entrance exam. None of the participating 84,234 high school graduates were female. Before the Islamic Emirate took power, girls had won first place in the entrance exam for two years [Abdal 2023, 4 September]. While there were signs of women-led resistance to the Taliban rule,² it should not come as a surprise that from a Gallup poll in July 2023 emerged that only 11% of Afghan women were satisfied with the freedom they have to choose what to do with their lives. This is the lowest result that Gallup has ever recorded in any country and population [Nusratty and Ray 2023, 10 November]. From an economic standpoint, the interim Taliban administration's restrictive policies on women's education and work will further lower Afghanistan's growth prospects, to which the analysis turns in the next section.

3. *Socio-economic dynamics: limited growth and lack of social inclusion*

The Afghan economy is likely to display no or very modest growth in 2023, after contracting by 26% since August 2021 [World Bank 2023]. However, the Taliban's overall management of the economy has been more successful than what many predicted it would be following their takeover [Byrd 2023]. Revenue collection was very effective and it accounts for nearly 60% of state revenues. Part of this success was due to the fight against corruption which, as we have seen in the previous sections, was one of the key aims of the Taliban leadership. From a socio-economic standpoint, according to the World Bank's *Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey* (AWMS) there are signs of a small improvement in the welfare of Afghan households compared to the months immediately following the Taliban takeover. While in the period October to December 2021, 70% of households reported lacking enough income to satisfy basic needs, this percentage reached 62% in the latest available measurement April to June 2023. Along similar lines, the share of households reporting acute food insecurity declined from 50% in the fall of 2021 to 40% in the spring of 2023 [World Bank 2023: 22]. Despite these limited improvements, poverty projections show that 48.3% of the population was to be considered poor as of April-June 2023. This means that half of the Afghan population, or 20 million people, is currently poor. Despite its international isolation, Afghanistan receives approximately \$3 billion annually in foreign humanitarian aid. Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis saw a rapid deterioration in the second half of 2023, owing to two main developments: 1) four 6.3-magnitude earthquakes which struck Herat province in a

2. See for instance: Fetrat, Sahar, 2023, 'Bread, Work, Freedom—Afghan Women's Two Years of Resistance', *Human Rights Watch*, 16 August.

span of eight days and directly impacted 275,000 people; and 2) Pakistan's decision to repatriate undocumented Afghan refugees in the country, which according to the latest estimates totalled around 1.3 million people [Security Council Report, December 2023]. According to a report published by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 350,000 people have returned to Afghanistan since the announcement, with the number of people arriving at border crossings «exhausted and in need of emergency assistance» continuing to grow.

4. *Foreign policy*

Afghanistan's foreign policy under the Taliban regime was largely in the wake of previous years. The Taliban regime, which still lacks any form of international recognition, has primarily been looking to boost its trade relationship as well as to attract investments. Evidence of this came in early 2023, when the Taliban announced the establishment of an investment consortium including Russian, Iranian and Pakistani companies, and also stated that China had expressed readiness to invest in mining and other economic projects, including lithium mining and economic infrastructure [UNAMA 2023b]. On their part, regional countries have continued looking at Afghanistan through a security prism, in order to ensure that the emirate's territory does not become a launching pad for militant groups willing to attack outside of Afghanistan's borders. The outside world's view of Afghanistan is best epitomised by the remarks of then Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, who advocated for international cooperation in building professional security forces that would enable the Afghan Taliban, as he put it, to counter the «alphabet soup» of terrorist groups still in the country [Dawn 2023, 18 February]. The sections that follow provide an overview of the Taliban ties with key regional countries, including China, Pakistan, India and Russia.

4.1. *China and Afghanistan: cautiously deepening ties*

China has moved cautiously on Afghanistan, being careful not fill the vacuum left by the US, while simultaneously making an important political move by being the first country to nominate a new ambassador to Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover [Pantucci 2023, 15 September]. To decode Beijing's approach to Afghanistan, the framework provided by the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI) – perhaps the two most recent and important articulations of China's foreign policy vision since the BRI [Sciorati 2023] – may be a useful starting point.

With regards to the GSI, the concept paper highlights the importance of promoting dialogue through multilateral forums and organisations

(e.g. the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), as well as of using mini-laterals in promoting cooperation and stability. On this point in particular, the concept paper highlights «the role of coordinating and cooperative mechanisms such as the Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan [...] to promote regional and global peace and stability» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022]. As evidence of this approach, in May Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Motaqi alongside Minister of Commerce and Industry Nooruddin Azizi, participated in the fifth trilateral meeting with the foreign ministers of Pakistan and China, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari and Qin Gang respectively. The concluding joint statement noted how all parties wanted to advance political engagement, counter-terrorism cooperation and trade, investments and connectivity under the trilateral framework [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2023].

As for the GDI, the framework identifies «digital security» and «connectivity» among its priority areas [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021]. Evidence of both is clearly discernible in China's engagement with Afghanistan in 2023. As far as digital security is concerned, there were reports about the Taliban's plan to improve the camera surveillance system in Kabul in a partnership, yet to be confirmed, with the Chinese tech giant Huawei [Yawar and Greenfield 2023, 25 September]. The plan, similar to one the US mooted before its withdrawal in 2021, consists of upgrading and increasing camera surveillance across the capital in order to improve security. China's involvement, even if not yet confirmed at the time of writing, is in line with Beijing's development of «smart cities», both in mainland China and abroad [Hillman 2021; Boni 2019].

With regards to connectivity, the Taliban leadership has been keen since returning to power, and in 2023 in particular, to signal its desire to boost the country's connectivity with both China and the wider region. In October, the Afghan Minister for Foreign Affairs attended the third Trans-Himalaya Forum in China. During the event, he reiterated the potential of Afghanistan to become a node of economic connectivity. On the side lines of the Forum, the Chinese minister for Foreign Affairs of China, Wang Yi, stated that China was willing to help Afghanistan to develop its relations with neighbouring countries and to join regional economic cooperation, simultaneously soliciting counter-terrorism measures from the Taliban [Zhen 2023, 6 October]. Later that month, Afghan Minister for Commerce and Industry Nooruddin Azizi joined the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing and requested the formal integration of Afghanistan into the BRI. Afghanistan's most direct way in would be by joining the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the US\$ 26 billion infrastructure investment focussed on Pakistan. Although Pakistan Railway and state-owned China Railway Eryuan Engineering Group have signed a Memorandum of Understanding and issued construction tenders for the

construction of a rail line between Karachi and Mazar-e-Sharif (northern Afghanistan) [Business Recorder 2023, 1 May], the prospects of Afghanistan's inclusion have been mooted for years [Boni 2022; Boni 2023b] and they remain slim. The challenging relationship between Islamabad and Kabul, to which the analysis turns in the next section, represents the main hurdle in the prospects of extending the CPEC to Afghanistan.

4.2. *Pakistan: dealing with the TTP*

Islamabad's relationship with Kabul continued to be a complicated one. The euphoria which accompanied the return of the Taliban in 2021 soon left space to a series of issues that came to characterise the bilateral relationship. Amongst, the one that has become particularly thorny was the role of the Tehreek Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an anti-Pakistan Taliban faction, whose attacks intensified significantly in 2023. In January 2023, for instance, the TTP conducted an attack against the police headquarters in Peshawar, capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It was the deadliest attack ever on police in the country [Ahmed 2023]. The tense relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban is perhaps best epitomised by the unusual remarks from the Pakistani PM, during a press conference in early November. On that occasion, then PM Anwar ul-Haq Kakar voiced his country's unprecedentedly open criticism of the Taliban regime. He noted the support that the Taliban leadership was providing to the TTP, a decision that, according to the then Pakistani PM, had contributed to a significant increase in violence in Pakistan, with 2,867 Pakistani fatalities since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 [Raza 2023, 9 November]. Lamenting that, despite Pakistan's requests, «no actions were taken against the anti-Pakistan groups», he lashed out at the Afghan leadership claiming that «in a few instances, clear evidence of enabling terrorism also came forward» [Raza 2023, 9 November]. Both the statement and its timing are significant, as they came following Pakistan's decision to repatriate undocumented Afghan refugees [Mir 2023]. More generally, the decision over the Afghan refugees in Pakistan as well as Kakar's criticism should be contextualised within a wider set of measures that Islamabad has implemented to pressure the Taliban leadership to reconsider and eventually end its support for the TTP. These measures included reducing trade ties by either banning or imposing tariffs on the import of Afghan goods prone to smuggling [Rana 2023, 4 October], as well as not advocating the Afghan Taliban's case at the international level [Yousaf 2023, 9 November].

On its part, the Taliban leadership appeared unlikely to bow to these pressures and take any major steps against the TTP. The Taliban main concern since returning to power has been to keep the internal cohesion, even at the cost of angering foreign powers. As such, they are concerned about how their ranks would react to efforts to crack down on the TTP. In addition, there is ideological proximity between the Taliban stance vis-à-vis the Pakistani state and that of the TTP. Hibatullah Akhundzada – the Taliban

supreme leader – has deemed Pakistan’s constitution to be un-Islamic, just like TTP chief Noor Wali Mehsud [Ahmed 2023].

Despite potential prospects of growing cooperation between the two sides given their closeness between 2001 and 2021, the relationship between Islamabad and Kabul in 2023 was dominated by lack of trust and security predicaments. Both would benefit politically and economically from a more functional interaction, but 2023 was the year in which neither of these materialised.

4.3 *India’s growing ties with the Taliban*

India’s relations with the Islamic Emirate’s leadership have witnessed a modest, yet constant and sustained, engagement throughout 2023. Considering the virtually non-existent ties between the two parties when the Taliban returned to power in 2021, developments in 2023 pointed to the growing realisation on both sides that some form of engagement will be necessary and potentially beneficial. Aid and humanitarian relief efforts were one of the areas in which India sought to make its presence more visible in Afghanistan. In March 2023, for instance, New Delhi delivered 20,000 metric tonnes of wheat in partnership with the World Food Programme [Kaura 2023]. Importantly, they used for the first time the Iranian port of Chahbahar, in which India has invested since 2016 and that could represent an important resource for India to bypass Pakistan in its relations with Kabul [Boni 2023a]. Along similar lines, India’s union budget for 2023-24 also made a special provision for a US\$ 25 million development aid package for Afghanistan. On the political front, India’s Ministry of External Affairs, under the aegis of the India Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC), invited Afghan government officials to attend a four-day virtual course on Indian legislation and business climate. In addition, in May 2023, Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), meeting in Goa, India, agreed to resume convening the SCO’s Afghanistan Contact Group, which had been suspended following the Taliban takeover. Finally, on 24 November, the embassy of Afghanistan in New Delhi, which had been led by diplomats loyal to the pre-Taliban government, was permanently closed. The Taliban announced that they were going to reopen the Embassy with their own diplomats.

Despite the growing engagements just documented, there were a number of limitations in the prospects for a more comprehensive partnership between Kabul and New Delhi. From a value-based perspective, not only India has always opposed the Taliban regime, but it has been one of the countries that has more vocally expressed its hope for a more inclusive governance in Afghanistan. On 7 March, for instance, special envoys of the India-Central Asia Joint Working Group on Afghanistan announced support for an inclusive government in Afghanistan, human rights and women’s rights, counterterrorism and humanitarian assistance. While this line of

argument is repeated at virtually every meeting between the Taliban and a foreign delegation, it is something that is seen in Kabul as emanating from the West, and India's embrace of this narrative alongside its increasingly close ties with the US [Torri 2022] places it in a difficult position vis-à-vis the Taliban regime. In addition, the fault lines between the two sides are also religious, with the Taliban leadership considering India the land of Hindus. According to former Afghan Minister of Education Mirwais Balkhi, the majority of the Taliban sees India as a Hindu majority land that has always suppressed Muslims and that, as such, should be fought against [Balkhi 2023].

Overall, the leaderships of both India and the Islamic Emirate have made some incremental steps to collaborate, but the prospects for a more comprehensive partnership remain slim.

4.4. *Russia's engagement with the Islamic Emirate*

Moscow was one of the countries that has more proactively engaged with the Taliban leadership since their return to power. More generally, Russia, alongside China and Pakistan, was among the countries that had never really stopped engaging with the Taliban even during the years of the Afghan Republic. Russia is now reaping the benefits of this years-long engagement. The drivers behind Moscow's approach to the Taliban during 2023 were primarily two-fold: first, Moscow sought to use the Afghan market and the leverage offered by economic cooperation with the Taliban regime as a way to mitigate the effects of Western sanctions; second, Russia's decision to boost the Afghan economy following Western sanctions and the freezing of assets, represented an important symbolic point for Russia, as part of its self-narrative of a rising power, allied with the Global South [Suleymanov 2023]. Russia's economic engagement with Afghanistan was mostly visible in the oil sector. According to Taliban officials, Afghanistan has increased Russian oil imports from 246,000 tons in 2022 to more than 710,000 tons between January and November 2023, with an overall oil trade over US\$ 300 million. [Dawi 2023, 21 December] This was a win-win for both, as Russia found a market for its oil supplies and it managed to avoid Western sanctions, and Afghanistan found a vital lifeline for its energy supplies. From a diplomatic standpoint, in September 2023 Russia hosted in Kazan the annual meeting of the Moscow format on Afghanistan. The forum, established in 2017 as a way to bring together Afghan representatives and those from key regional countries, included China, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as members and Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye³ and the United Arab Emirates as guests. The Taliban were represented

3. In December 2021, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan ordered the use of the term Türkiye instead of Turkey to better represent Turkish culture and values. The change of name was accepted by the UN in June 2022.

by a delegation led by the Minister for Foreign Affairs. The ensuing «Kazan Declaration» acknowledged the Afghan de facto authorities' efforts to combat drug-related crimes and terrorism and the overall security improvement in Afghanistan, while expressing concerns about restrictions on female employment and education and calling for efforts to forge a broad-based, inclusive government [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2023].

5. Conclusions

In 2023, the Taliban's agenda revolved around establishing their own governance structures at the local level, while simultaneously regulating the functioning of the institutions that they have inherited from the Afghan Republic. The denial of basic rights to women and ethnic minorities, while receiving the condemnation of the international community, including the Taliban's closest international partners, has remained a defining feature of Afghanistan's social setup. The Afghan economy overall stabilised but the poverty figure placing nearly half of the Afghan population at poverty level provides a snapshot of the living conditions and of the Taliban's uphill battle in managing a country always on the verge of economic and humanitarian collapse. It is therefore not surprising that while the organisation of domestic governance was the priority, internationally the Islamic Emirate's leadership sought to attract investment and obtain economic cooperation with countries in the region. Almost invariably, regional powers have moved very cautiously on their relations with the regime in Kabul, falling short of recognising the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, but also exploring potential avenues of cooperation to keep the country afloat. The last thing that these countries want is an Afghanistan out of control, which becomes a fertile ground for terrorist organisations, ranging from Al-Qā'ida to ISKP, to launch attacks abroad. Security guarantees in exchange for some form of economic cooperation was the dominant pattern of 2023 and it is likely to remain one of the key drivers to understand the international relations of Afghanistan under the Taliban.

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IRAN 2023: INTENSIFIED FOCUS ON THE EASTWARD STRATEGY
AND ONGOING FRACTURES IN STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS

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The Islamic Republic of Iran persists in its ambition to counterbalance the adverse effects of Western sanctions by strengthening ties with «the East» and participating in regional organizations with influential Asian countries as guiding members. A significant shift in Iran's regional policy occurred with the agreement to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia, marking the end of years of diplomatic and military animosity. This normalization process with Riyadh aims not only to de-escalate tensions in the region but also to curb Saudi interest in joining the Abraham Accords architecture and normalizing relations with Israel. Meanwhile, the Iranian economy is grappling with challenges, hindering its revival. In this situation, low-income households, youth and workers suffer because of delayed salaries and are unable to cope with the prevailing very high costs of living.

KEYWORDS – Iran-Saudi normalization; workers protests; women's rights; Axis of Resistance; Look to the East Policy.

1. Introduction

Throughout 2023, the domestic and foreign outlook of the Islamic Republic of Iran did not display significant changes. On the domestic front, social discontent persisted and found expression through protests and strikes. The persistent high levels of inflation and the soaring cost of living, encompassing housing and asset prices, have not been alleviated through government measures. In the face of violent suppression that resulted in a decline in both the duration and scale of women-led protests, female resistance and instances of civil disobedience against government directives on women's dress code persisted. Furthermore, sporadic demonstrations, led by workers, nurses, and teachers, continued as a response to economic apprehensions, delayed wage payments, and precarious working environments.

From a political perspective, the Raisi government witnessed internal tensions. This phenomenon is not new but represents an ongoing clash between the centres of power and multiple ambitions coexisting within the *nezām*, the Iranian political system. The upcoming parliamentary election scheduled for February 2024 will serve as a key indicator of two crucial aspects. First, it will reveal the level of popular participation, providing essential data to assess whether the state maintains a certain degree of popular le-

gitimacy. Second, the election will determine whether there will be a change in the composition of the parliament.

Iran's foreign policy during the year has been characterized by three major developments. In March, Iran and Saudi Arabia made a historic announcement regarding the normalization of their diplomatic relations, facilitated by China's mediation. This milestone not only represents a significant achievement for regional stability but also greatly reduces the risk of military escalations between the two nations. Although certain issues have not been explicitly defined and remain somewhat vague, the ambition to normalize bilateral ties marks a notable improvement in Iran's efforts toward de-securitization.

In the second part of the year, the Hamas military raid known as «Al-Aqsa flood» on Israeli territory triggered a substantial military response from Tel Aviv, leading to massive bombing and prolonged raids on Gaza, which caused a significant humanitarian crisis. Iran opted not to directly engage, signalling a willingness to avoid a broader regional conflict. However, given Hamas's association with the so-called «Axis of Resistance», Tehran could leverage the conflict to advance its regional strategy and potentially hinder the normalization process between Arab states and Israel. Lastly, a third event that influenced Iran's foreign policy in 2023, aligning with President Raisi's «Look to the East» agenda, was the process to become a member of BRICS, scheduled for January 2024. In addition to strengthening bilateral relations with China and Russia, Iran's participation in regional organizations reflected its effort to signal a realignment with «the East», not just as a geographical space, but as a «geopolitical sphere». This strategic move is aimed at fortifying military, diplomatic, and commercial ties with various countries in the region, bolstering Iran's resilience against Western sanctions.

2. Domestic Policy

Although the international community's attention to Iran's internal affairs declined throughout the year under analysis, popular protests persisted. The intensity and frequency of these demonstrations were noticeably lower than the ones that erupted in September 2022 and that were articulated behind the slogan «women, life, freedom» (*Zan, zendeghi, azadi*). This decrease was partially attributed to the government's severe crackdown, but it was also influenced by the movement's lack of clear leadership. Consequently, Iran experienced a reduced flow of protests. Nonetheless, diverse segments of the population, encompassing workers, youth, and ethnic minorities, persisted in demonstrating for various reasons, underscoring the enduring dissatisfaction with the government's economic and political measures. In the midst of these developments, the parliament enacted new regulations

aimed at curbing individual liberties and imposing stricter punishments for violations of the Islamic code. This indicates that the female-led protests that commenced in September 2022 have not softened the system, inducing it to meet popular demands. Instead, these protests have resulted in intensified political control over public spaces and individual freedom. This development is considered a significant element in understanding the state-society relation.

2.1. *Protests and Social issues*

Widespread protests against compulsory hijab persisted across the country. In certain parts of Tehran, women, in an act of civil disobedience, defied mandated hijab regulations, boldly walking without veils to challenge security forces. Instead of tempering the unrest, the government responded by intensifying control and imposing stricter restrictions on women opting not to wear the Islamic veil. This issue became a matter of political debate within the parliament, where some advocated extreme measures against non-compliant women. The Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, stated that «removing the hijab is forbidden in Sharia and politics» [Supreme Leader 2023], hereby highlighting the dual significance of the prohibition in both the realms of politics and religion. This underscores why the matter of the Islamic dress code holds immense significance for the political elite, serving as a symbolic cornerstone of political legitimacy for the Islamic Republic [Shirazi-Mahajan 1993].

In September, the parliament approved a new «hijab and chastity» regulation aimed at introducing new punishment for people violating Islamic dress code [Al Jazeera 2023b, 20 September]. Authorities sought to exert additional pressure on women not wearing headscarves in public spaces, employing security cameras and online monitoring. Both public and online spheres fell under the watchful gaze of the authorities, intensifying the scrutiny on women who defied the mandatory head covering [Reuters 2023, 3 May]. Acts of civil disobedience over hijab regulations continued throughout the 2023, with women removing their headscarf while walking on the street or in public places. Within the same framework of social contestation, teachers marched and gathered in many Iranian cities in protest of the poisonings of female students. The protests were organized by the Coordination Council of Teachers' Unions of Iran. According to Amnesty International since November 2022, thousands of schoolgirls have been poisoned and hospitalized [Iran: Millions' 2023]. It was never revealed who was behind these multiple attacks to teenagers in schools.

Beside protests for women's rights, teachers across various cities staged protests against delayed payments of their salaries and asked for better working conditions. In response to these demonstrations, Education Minister Yousef Nouri resigned, and Reza Moradsahraei was appointed by President Raisi to succeed him. Meanwhile, authorities continued to crack

down on demonstrators by arresting, detaining and jailing protesters and activists. Despite these measures, not only teachers took to the streets demanding their salary in early 2023, but also workers. In February, twenty Iranian trade unions jointly issued a call for a social, modern, and humane revolution aimed at combating oppression, discrimination, exploitation, tyranny, and dictatorship. These twenty independent trade unions and civil organizations in Iran collaborated to compile and release a «charter of minimum demands» [Charter of Minimum 2023] drawing inspiration from the ongoing protests of the Iranian people. This was not a novel phenomenon, as workers in Iran have a rich history of activism and protest. However, it signalled profound dissatisfaction within the working class and underscored the government's persistent failure to offer effective solutions. Labour protests intensified since 2018 due to inflation, drop in standard of living, delayed payments and widespread poverty [Kozhanov 2022].

According to Workers Rights Watch, from January to June 2023, 70 cities across Iran have witnessed more than 406 labour protests [‘Workers Rights Watch’ 2023]. Insufficient wages in the face of escalating prices for essential goods, delayed payment of wages, unsafe working conditions, especially for specific job categories, and job insecurity arising from temporary contracts all contribute to a complex set of challenges in the labour landscape. The prevalence of temporary contracts can be attributed to crony capitalism and the transfer of ownership from state-owned enterprises to ostensibly «private» entities. In practice, many of these private corporations have strong ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards or political groups, rendering the process of liberalization indistinguishable from a strategy that primarily benefits government loyalists [Dadvar 2007]. Given the substantial financial investment required for acquisition, many of these industries resort to employing temporary contracts for workers, thereby diminishing their access to social protection.

At Haft Tappe factory, labourers have carried on their enduring tradition of recurrent strikes, persistently demanding fair wage equality. Also, in March strikes occurred at Esfahan Steel Industry, where security forces were deployed, arresting dozens of demonstrators [Strike in Isfahan 2023]. Strikes also encompassed workers across multiple sectors within crucial industries for the republic, including but not limited to oil, gas, petrochemicals, refineries, power plants, and steel industries. Owing to the rise in prices caused by inflation, workers contested their inadequate wages and subsequently walked out of their workplaces. Anti-government demonstrations on social media were encapsulated under the banner of the «nation-wide strike» (*E'tesabat Sarasari*) [Iran's Numerous Industrial 2023].

The response of the Iranian government to popular demonstrations have been tough. Activists and protesters have been arrested, as well as several journalists covering the protests. Amongst them, Niloufar Hamedei and Elahe Mohammadi have been jailed, as they had reported the death

of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 and covered her funeral in Saqqez. They were sentenced to six years in prison on charges of acting against national security. Simultaneously, Iranian women advocating for individual freedom and the respect of human rights continued to attract international attention. A case in point is that of activist Narges Mohammadi, who has a substantial history of championing human rights, actively opposing the death penalty and corruption. For these reasons she has been detained in Evin prison, facing charges of anti-regime propaganda and crimes against national security. And, for the same reasons, she was awarded the Nobel peace prize for 2023 [*Al Jazeera* 2023, 6 October].

Another pressing social concern is the ongoing water scarcity and pollution, which continues to provoke protests in various provinces. The provinces consistently impacted by the phenomena of drought and reduced water flow – notably in Khuzestan, Sistan Baluchistan, and the central provinces like Esfahan – witnessed periodic protests demanding the right to access water. The water crisis is not solely caused by ongoing climate change but also by the mismanagement of resources and the construction of infrastructures, such as dams and canals, redirecting the flow of rivers [Madani 2014]. Protesters assert that authorities make use of politicize water resources to the detriment of minority ethnic communities.

The impact of the water crisis extends to the agricultural sector, giving rise to migration flows and displacements, significantly affecting impoverished households and those dependent on fishing and agriculture for their livelihoods. In Sistan Baluchistan, residents rallied, calling for compensation for the agricultural sector, seeking tax forgiveness, and accusing the government of a weak water policy ['Protests In Southeastern' 2023]. These demonstrations unfolded in an already tumultuous province, where ethnic minorities have been grappling with the central government for decades, primarily due to ethnic discrimination. In the city of Zahedan, security forces violently cracked down on peaceful Baluchi protests, arresting hundreds of protesters, as reported by Amnesty International ['Iran: New Wave' 2023]. Protests related to water scarcity frequently intersected with challenges of economic stagnation, financial deprivation, and ethnic discrimination. A similar scenario unfolded in the oil-rich province of Khuzestan, where, since 2018, people have consistently gathered in the streets of Ahwaz, Abadan, Dezful, and Masjed Soleiman to protest working conditions, water scarcity, water pollution, and environmental degradation ['Iran's Khuzestan' 2023].

2.2. *Elections and intra-factions disputes*

Domestic tensions signified a profound erosion of the social contract. The relationship between state and society has been weakening, as made evident not only by the prolonged series of popular protests occurring at a frequent pace since 2017 but also by the low turnout during electoral rounds. The electoral process holds significant importance in the Iranian Republic.

Through elections, the Supreme Leader aims to showcase the system's legitimacy, while society often responds in large numbers, signalling its stance on political matters. This was notably observed in the substantial turnouts during the 1997 and 2013 elections. In both cases, the election resulted in the defeat of conservative and hardline candidates; and this is why reformists and pragmatists also encourage people to vote. Nonetheless, the electoral process lacks complete freedom, given that candidates must navigate through the veto power wielded by the Guardian Council, an unelected body with the authority to arbitrarily approve or reject candidates.

In February 2024, when the formation of the new parliament is scheduled, it will be crucial to examine popular participation in the election as an index of the situation of state-society relations. The previous election, held in 2020, saw the lowest turnout since the 1979 revolution, standing at only 42.6 %. The political result of the elections will be essential to assess how and if the national assembly will shift its political centre and which faction will hold the majority of seats. This will have a profound impact on domestic and foreign policies. Hardly less important will be the assessment of the turnout, which, if below that of the 2020 election, will be an indication as clear as any of the widening gap between state and society and the increasing delegitimization of the former. The low turnout also signals the population's apolitical inclination, indicating a lack of interest and hope in political change.

At the end of 2023, the Guardian Council has already started the vetting process on the thousands of candidates, mainly pro-reformists, as well as members of the parliament willing to run again.

Although conservatives hold sway over all three branches of power, signs of internal frictions and polarization persist. There have been notable changes in key ministries, including the Minister of Education, the head of the Planning and Budget Organization, and the Minister of Agriculture, indicating the existence of internal animosities and disagreements. Indeed, this indicates that domestic factionalism affects even the same faction, leading to rivalries also within what is often referred to as the conservative group.

3. Economy and the financial situation

Iran persisted in grappling with economic challenges. Economic growth was significantly impacted not only by sanctions but also by domestic mismanagement and a lack of transparency. The Raisi administration made minimal efforts to alleviate the consequences of inadequate government management, fluctuations in oil prices, and currency depreciation. As delved into in the preceding paragraph, economic problems contributed to social discontent and socio-political instability. Despite economic relief being the focal point of Raisi's presidential campaign in 2021, the administration has

been unable to address internal malfunctions and mitigate the adverse effects of sanctions.

3.1. *Economic issues: domestic and external factors*

By the start of 2023, indications of a challenging economic situation were already apparent. Inflation had surged to 50%, marking the highest level in decades, escalating further to 63.9% by March 2023, when it reached the highest point in 50 years [Inflation Reached The 2023]. The rising inflation rate contributed to currency devaluation, since early 2018 [Amway 2023, 8 February]. This decline worsened when President Trump unilaterally withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Owing to economic sanctions, financial isolation, lack of transparency, poor government management, and domestic anti-government demonstrations, the Iranian Rial was persistently losing its value in the open market.

According to the Central Bank of Iran, in October 2023 the cost of food in Iran rose by 36.10 % compared to the same month in the previous year [‘Iran Food Inflation’ 2023]. The surge in prices primarily affects red meat, eggs, bread, dairy products, and cooking oil. In addition to food, inflation significantly surged in the case of housing prices. The escalation in rent or purchase housing prices was attributed by government agencies to mismanagement in construction processes, worsened by a decline in construction activities [Rising Housing Cost 2023] and a reduction in demand in the essential commodities market. The increased housing costs forced Iranian households to cut back on many of their daily necessities to allocate funds to other sectors.

These data highlight some significant issues. First, the government’s lack of accurate record-keeping on economic data leads to information that may differ and possibly be more severe than reported. The second aspect is that vendors frequently alter prices throughout the year, contributing to their fluctuation, and the government has limited control over this dynamic [Ziabari 2023]. A third aspect is that salaries are not adjusted to the rising costs of living, leading to frequent protests and widespread social mistrust in the government’s performance. In late October, the Statistical Center of Iran disclosed that house prices in Tehran had risen by 75 % in September of the current year compared to the same month the previous year [Stone 2023]. Restricted economic growth and pervasive inflation contributed to an escalation in the poverty level. According to domestic sources, the Majlis Research Center stated in a report that the poverty rate in Iran surged from 19 % to over 30 % within a decade [What Is The 2023]. Approximately 10 million people currently find themselves living below the poverty line [Donnan 2023].

The poverty level in the country has the potential to influence state-society relations and fuel social unrest. Equally, it could be wielded by certain segments of the elite to externalize faults and shirk responsi-

bility. The stagnant economy is frequently framed as a consequence of the perceived actions of «arrogant» powers against the Islamic Republic. This narrative may be leveraged in populist campaigns, shaping public perceptions of economic challenges and attributing them to external influences rather than domestic factors [‘Khamenei: Iran’ 2023]. Moreover, the youth unemployment rate saw a decline in the initial half of the year, dropping from 24.2% to 20.1%. However, this figure aligns with the annual average of the preceding two years, indicating that youth unemployment remains a significant concern in the domestic economy [‘Iran Youth Unemployment Rate’ 2023].

Regarding annual economic growth, this article can only rely on estimations. There was a decrease in GDP growth observed between 2021 and 2022. As of early 2023, the annual GDP growth is approximately 2.7% [World Bank 2022]. This data gains significance when contrasted with other countries in the region. In the corresponding period of 2022, the United Arab Emirates exhibited an annual GDP growth of 7.4% [‘United Arab Emirates’ 2022], while Saudi Arabia emerged as the fastest-growing G20 economy in 2022, with a notable annual GDP growth rate of 8.7% [International Monetary Fund 2023].

To elucidate the disparity in economic growth between Iran and its regional neighbours, it is crucial to recognize a combination of external pressures on the Iranian economy and internal malfunctions. Externally, Iran has faced various economic challenges since 2018, including international sanctions that have placed significant constraints on its trade and financial transactions. In 2023, Iran achieved record-high levels of crude oil production and exports, defying the challenges posed by U.S. sanctions. Despite them, Iran managed to significantly increase its crude oil output. Notably, China stands out as the primary destination for Iranian oil, having purchased an average of 1.05 million barrels per day (bpd) in the first 10 months of the year [Xu 2023, 10 November]. A key strategy employed by Iran to boost its oil exports involved selling oil at discounted price [Reuters 2023, 16 November].

One factor contributing to Iran’s limited economic growth was the absence of sufficient foreign investments. The Islamic Republic faced challenges in terms of resources, attractiveness, and a transparent banking system that would appeal to foreign investors. Additionally, the impact of US sanctions further constrained Iran’s ability to attract international investments. In an effort to overcome these limitations, Iran has pursued strategic measures, including entering into long-term cooperation agreements with China and Russia.

Russia, in particular, has become a significant investor in various sectors of the Iranian economy, spanning energy, mining, industrial and transport sectors. By the conclusion of the financial year in 2022, Russia accounted for a substantial portion, comprising two-thirds of the total foreign direct

investment, which amounted to approximately US\$ 4.2 billion [England & Bozorgmehr 2023]. It is expected that this pattern might continue through 2023, indicating the significance of Russian investment in bolstering Iran's economy despite prevailing challenges. A primary catalyst for economic cooperation between Iran and Russia lies in the development and utilization of the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The INSTC is a project initiated in 2002 with the objective of establishing an extensive network of infrastructures, including roads, railways, and sea connections. The overarching goal is to foster integrated commercial ties among India, Russia, Iran, and potentially Central Asian countries. The corridor aims to streamline and enhance transportation links, facilitating the movement of goods and promoting economic cooperation across the participating nations.

On 17 May 2023, a significant milestone in the development of the INSTC was achieved as President Putin of Russia and President Raisi of Iran signed an agreement to finance the Rasht-Astara railway ['Moscow, Tehran' 2023]. This crucial railway, spanning 100 miles, serves as a previously missing key link in the corridor, facilitating the connection between Iran and Azerbaijan. The agreement highlighted the shared commitment of the two countries, both under international sanctions, to fortify regional infrastructure and promote advanced economic cooperation within the framework of the INSTC. On this occasion, Russia declared its commitment to invest 1.6 billion euros in this railway infrastructure project ['Iran, Russia' 2023].

4. *Foreign Policy*

Two significant events influenced Iranian foreign policy in 2023. First, the year commenced with a diplomatic rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, aimed at reducing regional tension and fostering collaboration. The second major development was the Israel-Hamas conflict, where Hamas, a member of the Iran-led «Axis of Resistance» was involved. Although the Islamic Republic did not directly participate in the conflict, this war provided Iran with a necessity to reassess and reshape its regional positioning.

4.1. *Iran-Saudi Arabia diplomatic rapprochement*

On March 10, the Islamic Republic and Saudi Arabia chose to mend diplomatic ties, reopening embassies after six years. The objective of this agreement was to acknowledge mutual sovereignty and commit to non-interference in internal affairs [Hafezi *et al.* 2023]. Diplomatic relations between the two nations had ceased in 2016 due to a series of events, including the death of an Iranian citizen during the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, the execution of the Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, and the public unrest against the Saudi embassy in Iran. Subsequently, mutual animosity escalated amid

deteriorating stability and security in the whole region. This agreement was signed following two years of closed-door talks between Iran's and Saudi Arabia's delegations in Iraq and Oman, and thanks to China's active mediation. This encapsulates significant implications and projects across various scenarios.

For years, Iran and Saudi Arabia engaged in clashes for regional influence, making use of armed proxies in areas of crisis such as Yemen, Syria, and Iraq [Hiro, 2019]. The escalating regional tensions became detrimental to both Saudi and Iranian national security as well as economic growth. Considering this aspect, it is crucial to emphasize the role of China in mediating the Saudi-Iran rapprochement, as its intervention played a pivotal role in addressing the longstanding geopolitical rivalry between the two countries. China is not inclined to assume the role that the United States played in the region, through decades of military interventions. Indeed, there is a strong likelihood that China will intervene using diplomatic channels to safeguard its economic interests and enhance its diplomatic influence in the region [Jash 2023, 23 June].

After March, the two countries exchanged official visits, although the terms of the agreement remained ambiguous [*Al Jazeera* 2023, 17 August]. While there was a shared commitment to regional cooperation, tension reduction, and de-securitization, the agreement did not specify the terms and conditions of mutual actions. Resuming diplomatic relations was undoubtedly a positive beginning, but it did not establish a clear timeline or juridical conditions to ensure maritime security in the Gulf or to address the Iranian indirect involvement in the Yemeni conflict – in particular the prevention of Houthi incursions into Saudi territory – or avoid mutual security threats.

This agreement does not outline specific fixed objectives; instead, it serves as an assessment on how to address hostility and move towards normalizing bilateral relations. Therefore, it should not be perceived as a re-definition of respective regional policies and military strategies. Instead, it should play a crucial role in mitigating risks, fostering mutual understanding, and preventing miscalculations that could potentially lead to military conflicts [Divsallar 2023]. Therefore, it can be a significant step in building mutual trust and promoting information exchanges related to the two countries' respective actions in sensitive locations, like the Persian Gulf. However, several crucial security issues still remain unresolved. Primary among these concerns is nuclear development. Saudi Arabia perceives the advancement of Iranian uranium enrichment as a security risk. In September, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated that if Iran obtains a nuclear weapon, «we have to acquire one» [Fazeli & Serrich 2023]. Both nations are signatories to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, allowing them to legally pursue nuclear programmes for civilian purposes. However, the major hurdle lies in the distrust of Iran's intentions, related to its employment of dual use nuclear technology, that is, a technology that can be simultaneously used

for power generation and nuclear device construction. The impact of the nuclear issue on the normalization process between Iran and Saudi Arabia remains unclear [Davenport 2023].

The significance of the Saudi-Iran agreement not only lay in the effort for normalization, potentially paving the way for commercial exchange and economic cooperation, but also in the improvement of the security environment of the region. By mitigating tensions between the two nations, there was an expectation that the Middle East would be less susceptible to military or security escalation. On March 15, Iran's Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani, visited the United Arab Emirates, signalling the effort to reconcile Iran with other Gulf states. This visit was envisioned as a starting point for discussions on bilateral, regional, and international issues [Reuters 2023, 15 March].

The regional power that viewed the Iran-Saudi rapprochement with suspicion was Israel. The Abraham Accords, signed in 2020, not only aimed to normalize relations between Israel and Arab states, namely the UAE, Morocco and Bahrain [US Department of State 2020], but also to establish an anti-Iran axis, aimed at diminishing Iranian regional influence [‘The Impact Of’ 2023]. While this agreement could potentially pave the way for a shifting in the regional equilibrium, and start a de-securitization process, there are regional players who regard it with suspicion.

4.2. *Iran's Perspective in Israel-Hamas Conflict*

On 7 October, there were reports of a military incursion by armed members of Hamas into Israeli territory. The operation, known as «Al-Aqsa Flood» was launched in the early morning, taking Israeli security and intelligence forces by surprise. During the operation, members of Hamas targeted civilians killing approximately 1,200 people, and reportedly took more than 200 as hostages. This marks the first instance of Hamas carrying out such an extended military incursion within Israeli territory. Of course, the task of this article is not that of analyzing the 7 October attack, but this does not dispense us from highlighting its significance in various aspects of Iran's regional policy.

First, given that Hamas is part of the so-called «Axis of Resistance» – an Iran-led network involving state and non-state actors such as Syria, the Yemeni Houthis, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shia militias [Wastnidge 2017] – questions arose shortly after the attack about Iran's role in the military operation. Despite Iran's longstanding provision of military training and financial support to Hamas, and regular meetings between the group's leaders and Iranian Revolutionary Guards officers, both Israeli intelligence and Iranian official sources concurred on the fact that Iran was not directly involved in the October attack. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, while praising the attack as an action of resistance, declared that «Hamas gave us no warning of your Oct. 7 attack on Israel and we will not enter the war on

your behalf» [*Iran International* 2023, 12 November]. However, the Islamic Republic could potentially benefit from the current situation.

A summit took place in Riyadh on 11 November, hosting the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, a 57-member bloc that includes Iran. The primary focus of the summit was to discuss a cease-fire in the Israeli-Hamas war. This marked President Raisi's inaugural visit to Saudi Arabia. During this occasion, Raisi urged all countries to «cut off political and trade ties with Israel» and boycott relations; also to designate its military apparatus as a terrorist organization [Mehdi 2023, 11 November]. This positioning revealed Iran's ambition to not only isolate Israel but, more importantly, to impede the normalization process between Israel and Arab states.

Following the Abraham Accords, Riyadh outlined prerequisites for establishing normalization with Israel, encompassing security assurances from Washington and assistance in developing a civilian nuclear program [*Al Jazeera* 2023a, 20 September]. This marked a pivotal moment in the Middle East's balance of power, affecting not only the normalization between Israel and key Arab states but also the anti-Iran axis. The potential advancement of a nuclear program in Saudi Arabia might indeed prompt an escalation of enrichment activities in Iran as a deterrent measure. However, this could lead to heightened tension and increased instability in the region.

In response to Israel's military escalation in Gaza, Saudi Arabia promptly announced a suspension of discussions on potential normalization. This development might already be perceived as a triumph for the Islamic Republic, as it has the potential to curtail the normalization process between Israel and Arab states. Moreover, Saudi's standing provides an opportunity for the Islamic Republic to reinvigorate diplomatic exchanges with Arab countries, starting from addressing the Palestinian issue.

A second significant achievement for Iran, arising from the first two months of the Israel-Hamas conflict, pertains to Iran's military strategy. While revolutionary Iran used the Palestinian issue and the anti-Israel narrative as a component of its regional and foreign politics, it refrains from risking a direct military confrontation with Tel Aviv. Throughout the first months of the war, Iran assumed the role of passive observer and did not intervene in the war theatre. This was in line with Iran's long-standing policy to keep Israel occupied in military efforts while leveraging Hezbollah as a major element of deterrence.

A third Iranian achievement was the demonstration of the power wielded by Iran's proxies in the region. Despite their autonomous and localized agendas, the existence and actions of these proxies contribute to Iran's to strengthen its regional role as they continue to provide Iran strategic depth.

Predicting the consequences of the war on the broader Middle East equilibrium is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, as the conflict

started, it is safe to point out that Iran appeared to be gaining at the political level from it.

4.3. *Eastward Strategy: multilateral and bilateral relations*

Building on Ebrahim Raisi's foreign policy approach, Iran sustained its eastward strategy throughout the year 2023. As argued in this and in a previous article [Perletta 2022], Iran is pursuing the strengthening of ties with Russia, China, Central Asian nations, and neighbouring countries. The two-decade long «Look to the East» policy is driven by pragmatic needs such as enhancing investment and trade, as well as aligning with an anti-Western axis. Also in order to react to the practical demise of the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (JCPOA), Iran has actively been cultivating relationships with Eastern partners. Following its inclusion as a permanent member in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a security framework led by China, Iran is set to join BRICS in January 2024. The expansion of BRICS memberships carries a distinct significance in terms of augmenting China and Russia's diplomatic and commercial influence, particularly in juxtaposition with the West.

Joining this regional organizations marks a notable achievement for the Islamic Republic and its eastward strategy, particularly in terms of enhancing bilateral relations with fellow members. Some BRICS members are contemplating the establishment of a dollar-alternative exchange among its member states. As an alternative, Iran can potentially utilize the Chinese yuan, local currencies, and barter arrangements, even if this solution may require time. This strategic move aims at enhancing both its oil and non-oil exports to fellow BRICS members, potentially alleviating pressure arising from US sanctions [Shahidsaless 2023, 31 August]. Nevertheless, while this plan may be welcomed by Russia and China, other BRICS member, such as India and South Africa, will not risk alienating their good relations with the United States. Moreover, the stabilization and relief of the Iranian economy remain contingent on the removal of secondary sanctions, and improvement of national management.

Beyond these multilateral relations, Iran continued to improve bilateral relations with Russia, China, countries of Latin America and Asia. The conflict in Ukraine has strengthened the alliance between Iran and Russia, particularly in terms of military collaboration. Iran is supplying Russia with drones, and there could be additional forms of military exchange. On 9 May 2023, the United States disclosed that Iran was assisting Russian endeavours to establish a drone manufacturing facility, located hundreds of miles east of Moscow [Barnes and Koettl 2023]. The factory is expected to commence drone production in 2024.

As observed in the previous section of this article, China is Iran's main commercial partner; its relations with Tehran, however, extend beyond mere commercial exchange. In October, the Chinese government expressed its

willingness to bolster communication and coordination with Iran within the United Nations, the SCO, BRICS, and other multilateral mechanisms [Xinhua 2023, 27 October]. Also, China has been a key player in the Iran-Saudi normalization process.

Since August 2022, formal discussions regarding the revival of the JCPOA have come to a standstill. In 2023, the United Nations' nuclear watchdog reported that Iran has decelerated its enrichment process [*Associated Press*, 2023, 4 September]. The proliferation risk persists due to the unresolved issue of AIEA officials' limited access to Iranian nuclear facilities and their inability to access surveillance camera footage. Meanwhile, Oman and Qatar have facilitated indirect negotiations between Iran and the US, resulting in the arrangement of a planned prisoner swap and the release of assets. The prisoners swap involved the exchange of five Iranians for five US citizens, accompanied by the unfreezing of US\$ 6 billion in Iranian assets in South Korea. Nonetheless, by the end of December 2023, given the war in Ukraine, the uncertain developments in the Israel-Hamas conflict, and the approaching US presidential elections in 2024, it is unlikely that any significant improvements on how to relaunch the JCPOA will be finalized in the medium term.

5. Conclusion

During 2023, Iran did not exhibit major changes in its domestic and foreign policy. President Raisi continued to pursue an eastward strategy to alleviate the adverse effects of sanctions and enhanced both multilateral and bilateral relations with Eastern countries. Gaining entry into the SCO and BRICS marked a significant achievement in the pursuit of the «Look to the East» policy. Nevertheless, domestically, significant challenges persisted in the economic sector and state-society relations. The economic challenges continued, causing strain on both daily life for consumers and salaries. This sparked workers-led protests and demonstrations throughout 2023, with a determination to go on with them, unless solutions are found to alleviate the high costs of living, inflation, and unemployment.

Despite the conservatives' control over the three branches of power (executive, legislative and judicial), tensions escalated between members of the parliament and the cabinet. The removal of several ministers and the emergence of animosity between the legislative and executive branches were particularly notable, especially concerning the new dress code regulation. Some adopted more hardline positions and criticized others for their perceived «soft» approach. This demonstrates the ongoing struggle within the so-called «second generation» of conservatives, including technocrats, Islamists, heads of religious foundations, and military figures. President Raisi, along with the conservative-led parliament, has intensified control over

individual life and public spaces. While protests are more limited to ethnic minorities and working categories, and reduced in volume in comparison to 2022, indeed, they signify a nation grappling with the need for renewal, a process that is often compromised by the power struggle at the elite level.

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SPECIAL ARTICLE

WHEN HISTORY RHYMES: CHINA'S RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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In a recent publication, the renowned expert on Sino-Russian relations, Inge Bekkevold, wrote that in the last century «China has seen Russia as imperialist, a comrade in arms, an enemy and a partner, and is now debating whether it should be an ally». This paper attempts to connect these views with the most recent evolution of Sino-Russian relations at the time of Putin's invasion of Ukraine. It first describes Russia's role as China's territorial threat and as a political antagonist from the end of the Qing dynasty to the fall of the Soviet Union. It then looks at the rise of Russia as China's main anti-hegemonic partner after the Cold War, with a special focus on the evolution of the Sino-Russian «unlimited partnership» during Xi Jinping's second mandate and its sudden revision after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The analysis will then address the evolution of China's most recent «pro-Russian neutrality» as Beijing's attempt to detach itself from Moscow's military adventurism while maintaining its strategic anti-hegemonic alignment with Moscow. In the conclusion, the paper will try to assess the rationale of China's revision of its «unlimited partnership» on the basis of Beijing's historical experience with Russia and will then point out China's interests and divergences with Moscow in order to provide a useful conceptual toolkit to foresee the future evolution of Sino-Russian relations.

KEYWORDS – China; Russia; foreign relations; unlimited partnership.

1. Introduction¹

In a recent publication, the renowned expert on Sino-Russian relations, Inge Bekkevold, wrote that in the last century «China has seen Russia as imperialist, a comrade in arms, an enemy and a partner, and is now debating whether it should be an ally». This paper attempts to connect these views with the most recent evolution of Sino-Russian relations at the time

1. The author is deeply grateful to Sergey Radchenko, Mohammed Al Sudairi and the anonymous peer-reviewers for their valuable comments to this paper.

of Putin's invasion of Ukraine. It first describes Russia's role as China's territorial threat and as a political antagonist from the end of the Qing dynasty to the fall of the Soviet Union. It then looks at the rise of Russia as China's main anti-hegemonic partner after the Cold War, with a special focus on the evolution of the Sino-Russian «unlimited partnership» during Xi Jinping's second mandate and its sudden revision after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The analysis will then address the evolution of China's most recent «pro-Russian neutrality» as Beijing's attempt to detach itself from Moscow's military adventurism while maintaining its strategic anti-hegemonic alignment with Moscow. In the conclusion, the paper will try to assess the rationale of China's revision of its «unlimited partnership» on the basis of Beijing's historical experience with Russia and will then point out China's interests and divergences with Moscow in order to provide a useful conceptual toolkit to foresee the future evolution of Sino-Russian relations.

2. A defining relationship: historical sediments of Sino-Russian relations

According to some renowned Chinese scholars, in the last two centuries, Russia has profoundly shaped the evolution of Chinese domestic and foreign policy. The leading Chinese expert on Russia, Prof. Feng Yujun, Professor at the History Department of Peking University, recently published an influential essay that looks at the matrix of Sino-Russian relations through a historical perspective. In history, he writes, all the three alliances between China and Russia ended with China paying a heavy price.

The first time was in 1896, after the First Sino-Japanese War, when China and Russia signed the Li-Lobanov Treaty (中俄密約) named after its negotiators Li Hongzhang, a leading Chinese diplomat and statesman, and Alexei Lobanov-Rostovsky, the Russian Foreign Minister. The treaty was primarily a defensive military alliance. Russia agreed to assist China in the event of a Japanese attack, a concern for China following its defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). The treaty granted Russia the right to build the Chinese Eastern Railway, which was a crucial part of the Trans-Siberian Railway. This railway was to pass through Manchuria, significantly enhancing Russia's influence and presence in the region.

The second alliance, known as the Sino-Soviet Treaty (中苏友好同盟条约), was signed between the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek and Stalin after the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1945. The treaty stipulated Sino-Soviet cooperation against Japanese forces in Manchuria and the facilitation of Soviet aid to the Chinese Nationalist government. As a result, China was forced to recognise the 1945 Mongolian independence referendum in Outer Mongolia that was orchestrated by the Soviet Union, leading to the «loss» of nearly 1.6 million square kilometres of territory

immediately after China had just spent eight years fighting against the Japanese invaders.² The treaty granted the Soviet Union concessions in Port Arthur (旅順口) and Dalian (大连) and control over the Chinese Eastern Railway and the South Manchuria Railway, which were key strategic and economic assets.

The third alliance was after 1949, when Mao chose to «lean to one side» (一边倒) and signed a formal treaty with Stalin in Moscow right after the foundation of the People's Republic of China. Prof. Feng claims that this alliance brought two critical impacts on China; it favoured Beijing's isolation from the international community and pushed China into the Korean War. The latter decision led to the loss of countless Chinese lives and also severely strained China-US relations, making it difficult for China to prosper for the next several decades [Feng 2023, 7 January].

The cost of «leaning to one side» and the Korean War was certainly huge and, eventually, influenced a profound process of revision of Chinese domestic and foreign policies aimed at shedding Soviet influence and re-launching Mao's original vision of the Chinese revolution.³ A vision that surpassed the primacy of the proletarian revolution preached by the USSR and reposed Mao's identification of anti-imperialist liberation as the «main contradiction» of the international system [Niu 2012: 66].

In the year before the «leaning to one side», in fact, Mao had reinterpreted the Chinese revolution outside the binary Cold War context. In 1946, Mao argued that the primary global conflict was not the rivalry between the US and USSR, as many of his comrades argued. Instead, he saw it as stemming from the American reactionaries' efforts to broaden their influence over an extensive «intermediate zone» (中间地带) that included former European colonial powers and semi-colonial and colonial regions in the Southern Hemisphere, the Middle East, and China. According to the Chinese leader, this area was the first target that the reactionaries were meant to subjugate in order to encircle and weaken the Soviet Union, the major obstacle in their path to global dominance. Mao therefore identified the central conflict – i.e. the «main contradiction» – as between the American reactionaries' hegemonic ambitions and the independence movements within the «intermediate zones». In Mao's view, revolutionary China had a

2. China however had not controlled this territory since 1921 so it was more a «perceived» loss than a factual one.

3. According to Major General Xu Yan (徐焰), a professor at the Chinese People's Liberation Army's National Defense University, China paid a heavy price for its decision to enter the conflict. According to his estimates, the total number of Chinese casualties in the war amounts to 180,000, the war costs were as much as 6.2 billion yuan and China's military debt to the Soviet Union reached 3 billion yuan [*Global Times*, 2010, 27 October]. Furthermore, US President Harry Truman's decision to come to rescue of Syngman Rhee's South Korean regime and to dispatch the Seventh Fleet to «neutralize» the Taiwan Strait added Taiwan to the US security perimeter, forcing Mao to indefinitely postpone the invasion of the island.

crucial, transformative role in this context, as the first defender of Socialism and leader of the anti-hegemonic front in what Mao assessed as the «third pole», namely «the intermediate zones» [Mao 1946: 1184-1185; Talk with A. L. Strong 1946; Lu 1946, 4 January].

When the Cominform in 1947 emphasized the division of the world into two opposing camps – the imperialist and anti-democratic camp led by the United States, and the anti-imperialist and democratic camp led by the Soviet Union – Mao adjusted his strategy to elevate China's position within the post-Yalta international framework. Initially, Mao deemphasized his «intermediate zones» theory, which highlighted the unique nature of the Chinese revolution, and aligned more closely with the Soviet Union's «two camps» concept [Tang 2008: 53].

After his trip to Moscow, however, Mao complained about Stalin's behaviour. As clearly explained by historian Odd Arne Westad, Mao was frustrated by Stalin as the latter aimed at securing a treaty that was conducive to Soviet security, rather than an alliance between two Communist-led states [Westad 2005: 65]. Mao's frustration with the Soviet Union deepened during the Korean War: Stalin's decision to avoid a direct confrontation with the US clashed with Mao's expectation for stronger Soviet support during the conflict. Moreover, the outbreak of the Korean War, and the consequential inclusion of Taiwan into the US security perimeter, cost Mao the indefinite postponement of his original intention to complete national unification by invading Taiwan. As clearly shown by renowned Chinese historian Shen Zihua, these events sowed the seeds for the future Sino-Soviet split and activated a long process of correction of Chinese foreign policy aimed at shedding Soviet influence [Shen 2020: 130].

From the mid-1950s to the end of the Cold War, China's domestic and foreign policies were deeply influenced by the growing antagonism with Moscow. Mao eventually perceived Soviet ideological influence as an obstacle for the independent realization of China's revolution and started challenging the Soviet leadership of the international communist movement. This shift progressively detached China from the «two camps» structure and revitalised Mao's original anti-hegemonic and anti-imperialist policy, derived from the Chinese revolution [Radchenko 2024].

The radicalization of China's policies in the 1960s was intended to expel Soviet malevolent influence (i.e. «revisionism») – a process that resulted in the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution – and transform China into the leader of the anti-imperialist struggle in the «intermediate zones».

In 1969, the intensification of anti-Soviet sentiments within China and the repeated military confrontations at the border between the two socialist giants turned Soviet «social-imperialism» – as it was labelled by Mao – into Beijing's main foreign threat. This, in turn, prompted China into a rapprochement with the United States – epitomized by Mao's handshake with Nixon in 1972 – that marked a profound alteration in the bipolar bal-

ance of forces and provided an enormous plus to the American global strategy against Moscow.

At the end of the 1970s, Deng Xiaoping's added a domestic element – the economic reform – to Mao's diplomatic «opening» to the West. Deng's economic reforms combined China's abundant workforce with Western capital and know-how, and Western economies with much-coveted access to the enormous Chinese market. China's relationship with the West was thereby «internalized» as a crucial factor to relaunch China's economy and lead it to regain its central position in Asia. This set the ground for China's «de-facto» alliance with the US and their allies against Moscow and, at the same time, favoured a progressive liberalisation of Chinese political, economic and social dynamics on the domestic front [Fardella, 2009].

As had already happened with China's alliance with the Soviet Union in the 1950s, the Chinese leadership began to perceive the influence of US dominant role in the relationship as a challenge for the independent course of Chinese politics. In the 1980s, China's entente and engagement with the West started to be perceived as a menace by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and reinforced Beijing's strategy towards a more independent stance in international affairs.

In a report delivered at the 12th National Congress of the CCP in 1982, Deng Xiaoping formally announced China's independent foreign policy grounded on the three principles – not seeking hegemony, not aligning with any major power, not engaging in military expansion – better known as the «Three No's» policy. These principles were meant to guide China's foreign relations and position the country as an independent actor, avoiding the ideological rivalries of the Cold War superpowers. This represented a further correction of China's foreign policy – which had been heavily influenced by its alliances with the Soviet Union and later the United States during the Cold War – and a return to Mao's original attempt to carve an autonomous and influential role for China as a counterweight to global powers and a champion of the developing world (i.e. «the intermediate zones»). Deng's «Three No's» policy provided a framework for China to gradually normalize and improve its relations with the USSR, as the two countries moved away from the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s.

The rise of Mikhail Gorbachev as the new leader of the Soviet Union and its proactive openings towards a normalization of the relations with Beijing, contributed to Beijing's attempt to enhance its independent stance in international affairs and balance its reliance over Western support with a reduction of the tensions with Moscow. In a speech delivered on the 28th of July 1986 in Vladivostok on Soviet's policy in the Asia-Pacific the Soviet leader expressed its intention to normalize relations with China and overcome past tensions by reducing the troops deployed along the border and transform the common border in a «line of peace and friendship». [*The New York Times*, 1986, 29 July]

This led to a series of high-level meetings to normalize ties and resolve longstanding border issues. In May 1989, Gorbachev visited Beijing, marking the first Sino-Soviet summit in 30 years.

This visit occurred amidst the Tiananmen Square protests, as student-led demonstrations were taking place in the Chinese capital, an event that, to the eyes of the Chinese leadership, proved the destabilizing effect that Western influence could pose to Party leadership.

Despite the domestic unrest, Gorbachev and Deng were able to reach an important agreement during the summit aimed at reducing military tensions, setting up a joint mechanism for troops reductions along the border and normalize diplomatic and economic relations between the two countries.

By the end of the year, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe were perceived by the Chinese leadership as Western attempts to implement a «peaceful» evolution that would lead to the overthrow of all socialist regimes [USSR Collapse 2023].

The collapse of the Soviet Union, which followed in 1991, therefore generated two fundamental effects over Chinese domestic and foreign policies.

Internally, the dynamics that led to the crisis of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) have been carefully analyzed by the CCP and have inspired Chinese domestic policies to this day. In a speech delivered in December 2012, shortly after he became the General Secretary of the CCP, Xi Jinping described the collapse of the Soviet Union as a «tragedy» and a cautionary tale for the Party. Xi's description of the Soviet Union's fall focused on the loss of ideological conviction and political corruption as key factors leading to its disintegration. The message was clear; the Communist Party of China must learn from the Soviet Union's mistakes and remain vigilant against internal and external threats to its governance and ideological purity [Xi 2023; Gao 2013; Historical Lessons USSR 2021].

Externally, the fall of the Soviet Union coupled with the rise of a new US hegemonic push at the beginning of the 1990s - vividly represented by American military interventions in the Middle East and in the Balkans - to reinforce the emphasis of China's foreign policy on achieving a more independent and antihegemonic horizon. As brilliantly described by Rushi Doshi, Biden's National Security Council director for China, since the 1990s China smoothly implemented a series of tactics aimed at blunting US power projection at regional and global level [Doshi 2021]. Within this framework, Beijing rediscovered Russia as a useful partner for the creation of a less-hegemonic international system whose power distribution could be less «unipolar» – i.e. centred around the values and interests of Washington – and thus more distributed among various «poles» of the system itself.

3. *The rise of the «unlimited» partnership: Sino-Russian relations and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine*

In 2001, shortly after Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency of Russia, Moscow and Beijing ratified the «Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation», signifying a pivotal moment in their bilateral ties. This agreement highlighted mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, a pledge towards non-aggression – which was crucial given the history of border disputes and conflicts between the two nations – and articulated a mutual aspiration for a multipolar world, starkly critical of the existing international unipolar system, dominated by the United States. It also heralded the start of economic collaboration, particularly in energy, propelling Russia to become a major oil and natural gas provider to China.

The 2007-8 financial crisis in the United States and China's resilient economic momentum were perceived by Beijing as signalling the wane of American unipolarity and the opening of a strategic window that would establish China as a pivotal international player. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, what was characterized as a new era in international relations saw a fortified partnership with Moscow. In Xi's intentions, this fortified relationship was aimed at reinforcing an anti-hegemonic stance, challenging American influence and paving the way for a new global governance model, centred around the CCP's values and interests. In March 2013, marking his first state visit as president, Xi Jinping travelled to Moscow, where he unveiled his vision for a «community with a shared future for mankind», laying the groundwork for China's ambition to reshape global governance [*China Daily* 2023, 23 March].

The year 2018 was another landmark in Sino-Russian relations. March witnessed the re-election of Vladimir Putin as Russia's President and the re-election of Xi Jinping as President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) during the 13th National People's Congress (NPC). The same Congress also saw the removal of the presidential term limit, granting Xi an indefinite tenure. Concurrently, Le Yucheng, an expert on Russian affairs within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was appointed deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, signalling Beijing's intention to emphasize Sino-Russian relations.

In June 2018, Xi Jinping conferred upon Putin the first «Friendship Medal of the People's Republic of China», while underscoring a deep personal bond with the Russian leader by referring to him as his «closest friend» (最好的知心朋友) [*Xinhua* 2018, 8 June].

These developments significantly enhanced the potential for bilateral relations, especially in anticipation of their 70th anniversary in 2019. In a relevant policy article published in the CCP's theoretical journal, Vice-Foreign Minister Le outlined the evolution of bilateral ties from 1949 to 1989, highlighting the adherence to principles of nonalignment, non-confron-

tation, and not targeting third parties. Le remarked that these principles paved the way for a positive trajectory in relations, leading to their current stable and healthy state. He emphasised that these foundational principles were not mere outcomes but crucial starting points for future progress in bilateral relations, implying their further elevation «beyond» the existing foundational principles [Le 2019a].

In November 2019, following discussions with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Le declared that there were «no restriction on the growth of Sino-Russian ties» showing the intention to effectively removing barriers to their growth, although without formally altering its fundamental non-alignment principle [Le 2019b; Le 2019, 26 November].

This wording set the tone of Chinese official discourse that began emphasising the absence of limitation on Sino-Russian cooperation. The same position was reiterated by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov in February 2021 and by Le Yucheng's statement in December 2021 [MOFAPRC 2021; *Xinhua* 2021, 4 February].

This led to the often-quoted formula adopted in the official statement that followed Putin's official visit to China on 4 February 2022 for the inaugural ceremony of the Winter Olympic Games. In the document, the two sides reaffirmed in fact «that the new interstate relations between Russia and China are superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era. Friendship between the two states has no limits [and] there are no forbidden areas of cooperation» [Government of Russia 2022]. As anticipated by Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng in 2019 and restated in his interviews following the leaders' meetings, these words officially indicated that the bilateral relations had entered a new qualitatively higher level from that of the era of «nonalignment, non-confrontation, and not targeting third parties» [MOFAPRC 2022a].

When, on 24 February 2022, Putin's troops started the invasion of Ukraine (the «Special Military Operation», SMO, in the official formula used by Moscow's propaganda) the international community began guessing whether China was previously informed by the Russians. Some Western media even claimed that Xi Jinping had asked Putin to postpone the attack until after the Olympic Games [*The New York Times* 2022, 2 March]. Although the tension between Russia and Ukraine was mounting in the days of Xi and Putin meeting, there is no clear indication that China was informed about the incoming Russian military operations. According to Alexander Gabuev, Carnegie expert on Sino-Russian relations, China was not informed about the Russian imminent attack as Sino-Russian relations were built on an informal anti-Western coalition, but were lacking the trust and mutual interest to be considered an alliance. This intrinsic distrust between the two sides, affirmed Gabuev, had historically prevented the two nations from discussing sensitive issues as in the case of the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 [Radchenko & Gabuev 2022]. This assessment may be further confirmed by

China's repeated position, preceding the beginning of the invasion, which emphasized the respect of the Minsk-2 agreement as the only solution to the Russian-Ukraine tensions. ⁴An option, nonetheless, which was blatantly neglected by Putin's actions in the following days [*Reuters* 2022, 19 February].

Opposite conclusions, however, were drawn from other actions taken by Chinese authorities in the weeks before the beginning of the invasion.

Some doubts were raised in this respect by the contradictory messages sent by the Chinese embassy in Kyiv to Chinese nationals in Ukraine on the eve of the Russian invasion. Two days before the beginning of Russian invasion, the Chinese Embassy warned Chinese nationals in Ukraine against venturing into «unstable» areas, but it did not advise them, as many other nations did, to leave the country [*Reuters* 2022, 22 February; MOFAPRC 2022b]. A few hours after the beginning of Putin's attack against Ukraine, the Chinese Embassy in Kyiv advised its nationals there to «stay at home» or to display the Chinese flag when they went outside [*China Daily* 2022, 24 February]. The day after, the Embassy reversed its instructions and warned Chinese nationals in Ukraine that it was better «not to» display any Chinese national symbol [PRC Embassy Ukraine 2022].

Other doubts emerged from Chinese state energy companies' unusual behaviour in the months preceding the invasion. As shown by Collins and Miles, «Chinese LNG buyers stood out from every other group of global purchasers in the six months leading up to Russia's invasion [as] they bought more than 91 percent of all global LNG purchased worldwide under term deals». This amount was more than twice the quantity ever bought by Chinese purchasers in one full year. «Had European firms had access to this LNG after the invasion», highlighted the authors, «perceptions of gas scarcity and price spikes may have been much reduced» [Miles & Collins 2023, 12 June].

China's official statements after the invasion called for restraint and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, without explicitly naming Russia as the aggressor or condemning its actions but also without supporting Moscow's move. This is shown by China's abstention at both the 25 February Security Council vote – which denounced the Russian invasion – and the 2 March General Assembly resolution – which demanded the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine [UN General

4. The Minsk II agreement was signed on 12 February 2015 by Ukraine, the Russian Federation, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic. It was the second attempt - after the failed Minsk I agreement signed on September 2014 - to resolve the conflict in Eastern Ukraine by establishing a ceasefire, withdrawing heavy weapons, and facilitating the exchange of prisoners. It sought to restore Ukrainian control over state borders, provide for decentralization and special status for Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and ensure the withdrawal of all foreign troops.

Assembly 2022]. The Chinese Ambassador at the UN, Zhang Jun, however, stated that the crisis was the direct result of five successive rounds of NATO's eastward expansion, which affected Russia's legitimate security aspirations. Therefore, by blaming the US and NATO for the escalation, the Ambassador emphasised China's call for common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security. This was an anticipation of the official Global Security Initiative (GSI) to be presented by Xi Jinping in April 2022 as an attempt to provide a new alternative framework for international security cooperation, with the intention of addressing global challenges through dialogue and collaboration, rather than confrontation and alliance-based security mechanisms such as NATO [Sciorati 2023]. The same line was repeated by Vice Foreign Minister Le on 19th March 2022, speaking at the Fourth International Forum on Security and Strategy. Le criticised NATO's bloc politics, search for absolute security, and «weaponisation» of globalisation through unilateral sanctions towards Russia [MOFAPRC 2022c; MOFAPRC 2022d].

In the meantime, the Chinese government, facing Russia's military failure in Ukraine and Western compact reaction in support of Ukraine, quickly backtracked on the by then popular «no limit» formula to define the course of bilateral relations with Russia and restated the three principles of «nonalignment, non-confrontation, and not targeting third parties» as unambiguously formulated in the joint statement issued after Xi Jinping's official visit to Russia on 20-22 March 2022 [MOFAPRC 2023a].

Between June and September 2022, China therefore tried to signal an ongoing rebalance of its position vis-à-vis Moscow and strengthened its contacts with Washington in an attempt to soften the US «great siege» (大围剿) against China. This was the term – as defined by Chinese scholars in memory of the nationalist campaign that forced the CCP to the Long March in the 1930s – by which the Chinese policy implemented by the Biden administration was defined [*Sina* 2022, 1 June]. On 9 June Chinese State Councillor and Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe, during his talks with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin at the 19th IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, stated that China expected to establish sound and stable major-country relations with the US [Embassy of the PRC in the United States, 2022]. On 13 June CCP Politburo Member and Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi had a four hour meeting with US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in Luxembourg. According to the official American readout, the two officials had already talked over the phone on 16 May but this time the meeting «included candid, substantive, and productive discussion of a number of regional and global security issues», Ukraine included. According to the official Chinese readout, the two sides, agreed to strengthen contact and dialogue, reduce misunderstanding and miscalculation, and properly manage differences [US Embassy and Consulates in China, 2022; MOFAPRC, 2022e]

One day later, Beijing announced that Le Yucheng no longer served as vice-foreign minister and was appointed as deputy head of the National Radio and Television Administration. This move was interpreted by several analysts as a demotion intended to signal a correction in China's diplomatic course towards Russia [Nakazawa 2022, 23 June]. It was, however, a correction in words but not in deeds.

On 9 September, Vyacheslav Volodin, the chairman of the State Duma held a meeting with the chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, Li Zhanshu, in Moscow to prepare the meeting between Xi and Putin to be held a few days later at the margin of the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in Uzbekistan. Li stated that the US and NATO were endangering Russia's national security, that China understood and supported Russia on Ukraine and was therefore willing to provide assistance. According to Wu Guoguang, Senior Fellow on Chinese Politics at the Center for China Analysis, the verb chosen by the Chinese official (策应) conveyed the idea of providing support in subtle, strategic and well-coordinated ways behind the scenes [Wu Guoguang, 2023]. Such an unprecedented public endorsement blatantly clashed with Beijing's previous effort to rebalance its «pro-Russian» stance and restate the «three principles» after the outbreak of the war. Sergey N. Goncharov from the Russian Academy of Science, claimed that Li, who was about to step down from the CCP Politburo during the 20th Party Congress to be held in October, probably did not follow given instructions, which showed a certain division among Chinese leaders over the course of Sino-Russian relations on the eve of the Party Congress [Goncharov 2023]. Although Russian official media highlighted this passage, which was presented as the demonstration of China's support for Russian invasion, Chinese media omitted Li's supportive statements. The incident apparently reverberated on the «cold» climate of Xi and Putin meetings in Samarkand one week later in which Putin stressed China's «balanced» position and showed «understanding» for Beijing's concern about the situation [State Duma 2022; *Xinhua*, 2022, 10 September; Tiezzi 2022, 17 September].

These events consolidated China's position over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine as based on a formal redefinition of the «unlimited partnership» and a reaffirmation of the principles of «nonalignment, non-confrontation, and not targeting third parties». This correction allowed China to formally detach from Russian military adventurism while maintaining a *de-facto* alignment towards Moscow, a position that was functional to confront the US and NATO. At the same time it created a broad and flexible neutralist stance with the goal of maximising China's appeal as a rational and peaceful actor among the vast majority of countries that were unwilling to take sides in the Russian-Ukraine conflict. In the light of the growing antagonism between China and the US, along with rising tensions over the Taiwan issue, a careful balance of these two components was enabling China to extract maximum gains for its national security from the Ukraine conflict.

4. *Fighting by «peace»: the evolution of China's «pro-Russian neutrality» in 2023*

On 18 October 2022, in his extensive report at the 20th Congress of the CCP, Xi Jinping did not mention either Ukraine or Russia, but he repeatedly emphasized the concept of security (mentioned 91 times), giving the impression that China was a country under siege by hostile forces. «China must remain on high alert against systemic security risks» claimed Xi [MOFAPRC 2022f].

Russian experts gave a positive assessment of the outcome of the CCP Congress. Alexander Lukin, Acting Head of the Institute of China and Modern Asia, said that the deterioration of China's relations with the West might indicate a wider scope for progress in bilateral Russia-China relations. Aleksey Maslov, Director of the Institute of Asian and African Studies at Lomonosov Moscow State University, added that China might react to Western «siege» with a more assertive foreign policy that would be suitable for the successful development of relations with Russia. Maslov also noticed that China's position on Russia had evolved since the outbreak of the invasion and that, therefore, Russia «should not demand from China what it has never promised» [RIAC 2022].

The same discrepancy between Russia and China's official positions manifested itself once more in the 30 December 2022 virtual meeting between Xi and Putin. In the Russian leader's words, the two countries seemed to be working together against «unprecedented Western pressure and provocation», signalling a sort of synchrony between the «defensive» logic of Russian invasion of Ukraine and Beijing's ongoing manoeuvres in the Taiwan Strait. Putin clearly expressed the intention to strengthen military cooperation with Beijing. In the Chinese account of the meeting, nonetheless, there was no mention whatsoever of this element; it only reported Putin's search for improved cooperation «in various fields», and Xi's position as primarily based on strengthening economic cooperation with Moscow [President of Russia 2022a; MOFAPRC 2022g].

At the end of 2022, the consolidation of Xi's power within the CCP as a result of the 20th Party Congress allowed the Chinese leader to revert back to foreign policy and translate the shift of China's formal position over Russia, matured over the summer, into play. Chinese authorities tried to recalibrate the «pro-Russian» nuances of their previous position by giving more emphasis to a more «neutralist» tone, primarily aimed at driving a wedge between the US and its partners in Europe, weakening Washington's anti-China containment strategy. In October 2022, the Biden administration had intensified its economic offensive against Beijing, focusing on expanding export control and trade sanctions on Chinese companies [Bureau of Industry and Security 2022]. This was part of the Biden administration's broader National Security Strategy, which identified China and Russia as strategic adversaries [White House 2022].

A first signal of China's new formally neutralist stance became apparent in a piece published in both Chinese and Western media on 1 November by Zhou Bo (周波), a former senior colonel in the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Zhou criticised Putin's nuclear threat against the West – raised by the Russian leader at the end of September [Faulconbridge 2022, 21 September] – and warned that Putin's threat could negatively influence China's «balanced» position towards Russia: «The last thing Beijing wants now is the deterioration of relations with European countries. When the United States intensifies its competition with China, it is important that Europe is not always on the side of the United States. Putin has admitted that Beijing has “questions and concerns” about the Russian-Ukrainian war. If he uses nuclear weapons, Beijing's response will go far beyond doubts and worries. Can China remain neutral when the whole world protests against Moscow?». The Colonel agreed with Putin in his analysis of the war as a conflict between Russia and the West, not between Russia and Ukraine. Zhou, therefore, suggested that China could mediate to persuade Putin not to use nuclear weapons. This would involve an exchange where NATO formally committed not to further expand, addressing the concerns that led to the nuclear threat, which Zhou saw as a response to NATO's expansion [Zhou 2022, 27 October; 2022, 1 November].

China's initiative fully developed in February 2023, on the eve of the first anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On 18 February, Wang Yi, a member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs, delivered a keynote speech at the 59th Munich Security Conference, calling for China and Europe to partner up to prevent the outbreak of a «new Cold War». Wang also announced that the Chinese side would put forward «China's position on the political settlement of the Ukraine crisis» and a Global Security Initiative Concept Paper to «lay out more practical measures to address current security challenges» [PRCEU 2023; MOFAPRC 2023b].

Three days later, the Chinese government published the GSI paper, which served as a sequel to Xi's first introduction of the GSI in April 2022. The paper restated the principles of «sovereign equality and non-interference in internal affairs», condemned nuclear war, military pressure, and sanctions, and promoted political dialogue as a means of resolving international crises, including the situation in Ukraine [MOFAPRC 2023c; Sciorati 2023].

On February 24, 2023, marking one year since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs unveiled a «peace plan» for the political resolution of the Ukraine crisis, outlining China's «objective and just position» [MOFAPRC 2023d; 2023e].

While the plan, according to Chinese propaganda, was meant to provide a framework for peace, it appeared more as a «position plan» merely aimed at promoting China's diplomatic principles and its stance on global governance. As such its direct contribution to a solution of the specific com-

plexities of the Ukraine conflict – consistently referred to as a mere «crisis» – would be minimal.⁵

Most of the points raised in the plan lacked specific mechanisms for implementation and enforcement. This was the case with the call for an immediate ceasefire (point 3), the resumption of peace talks (point 4), the resolution of the humanitarian crisis (point 5), the protection of civilians and POWs (point 6), the safety of nuclear power plants (point 7), and the promotion of a European security architecture (point 12).

The first and most important point, «Respecting the sovereignty of all countries», asserted that the «sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of all countries must be effectively upheld» in line with the «purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter». While this primarily reflected Beijing's stance on Taiwan, considered by Beijing as an integral part of the People's Republic of China, this point was open to contrasting interpretations by Russia and Ukraine. Russia could view it as an acknowledgment of the legitimacy of its 2022 annexations in eastern Ukraine, while Kiev was likely to see it as an affirmation of the intangibility of its internationally recognized borders as they existed before Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Other points, such as the abandonment of bloc politics (point 1) and unilateral sanctions (point 10), indirectly supported Russia by attributing the current instability to NATO and subtly promoting China's GSI as an efficient alternative. These points also appealed to European constituencies inclined to avoid escalation, seek conflict resolution, and alleviate economic impacts. More specifically, European fears were addressed through the emphasis given to avoiding the use of nuclear weapons (point 8), maintaining the stability of industrial and supply chains (point 11), and addressing China's role in post-conflict reconstruction (point 12).

China's «peace plan» therefore appeared to consolidate its «pro-Russian neutrality», reflecting the original inspiration of China's anti-hegemonic foreign policy strategy. It employed «peace» as a means to isolate the US and NATO, protect Putin's Russia, drive a wedge between Washington and its European allies, and promote China's proposals for an alternative global governance in the Global South.

In an insightful analysis of China's peace plan, Vasily Kashin, Director of the Centre for Integrated European and International Studies at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, emphasised that Beijing would use the document to consolidate efforts with countries not involved in the conflict and countries that had not joined the sanctions

5. China seemed however much more active in its condemnation of Putin's use of nuclear threat towards Ukraine. In a meeting held in early November with German Chancellor Olaf Scholtz, the Chinese leader made an indirect but clear criticism of his Russian partner by stating that the international community should jointly oppose the use of, or threats to use, nuclear weapons. [*Politico*, 2022, 4 November]

against Moscow. Kashin asserted that the 12 points included in the Chinese Plan could serve as an alternative to permanent anti-Russian resolutions at the UN General Assembly, as draft resolutions based on these points could be «neutral, restrained, and have a real chance of gaining a majority of votes» [Zakvasin 2023, 24 February].

Deng Yuwen, a prominent Chinese public intellectual and visiting scholar at the Institute of China Policy at the University of Nottingham, wrote at the time that Beijing aimed at «flying the banner of maintaining world peace» and gaining the support of states opposing to or suspicious of the US. The goal was to weaken US influence, as Beijing believed that after defeating Russia, the US would turn against China. Beijing's main objectives, therefore, were to keep the war ongoing to distract the US from containing China, weaken Russia's national power to make it more dependent on Beijing, and, at the same time, preserve Putin's regime through fruitful economic support. Deng described this strategy as Beijing's yin/yang duality; while the international community saw only the yang side – China's stance on peace – the yin side – weakening US influence – remained hidden behind beautiful diplomatic words [Deng 2023, 27 February].

Deng's «yin and yang» metaphor well applies to Xi Jinping's state visit to Russia on 20 March 2023. The visit followed China's «diplomatic coup» on 10 March, which led to the pompous inauguration – staged in Beijing, but de facto brokered by Iraq and Oman – of the agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia to resume diplomatic relations; a move that was meant to show the world a first successful practical outcome of China's GSI and China's capacity to use «peace» as a functional tool to gain diplomatic and strategic depth at the expenses of US traditional influence in the region [Xinhua 2023, 11 March].

The visit in Moscow was meant to further expand China's manoeuvre. Putin welcomed Xi, praising China's «objective and impartial» position shown in its «peace plan» and reaffirming his commitment to the resumption of peace talks [MOFAPRC 2023f]. The two leaders signed the «Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development». This comprehensive document aimed at promoting bilateral cooperation on the basis of the three basic principles of non-alignment, non-confrontation, and non-targeting of third countries [President of Russia 2022b]. Behind the scenes, as revealed by Alexander Gabuev, both sides appeared to be making efforts to further strengthen their defence partnership. According to the Russian expert, «over half of Putin's team engaged in discussions with Xi Jinping were involved in Russia's weapons and space programmes with the primary objective of deepening defence cooperation with China» [Gabuev 2023, 12 April]. Professor Tian Feilong, a prominent hard-line intellectual affiliated with Beihang University's Law School in Beijing, went so far to draw comparisons

between this document and the «Atlantic Charter» of 1941 in which U.S. President F.D. Roosevelt - not yet being a participant in the second world war – outlined a shared vision with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill that laid the foundation of the post-war international order [Tian 2023, 23 March].

When, at the end of June 2023, Russia was suddenly shaken by the uprising caused by the leader of the Wagner group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, Beijing's reaction was cautious and subdued. Officially, China followed its typical approach to avoid direct involvement in the internal affairs of other nations, describing the event as Russia's internal affair and supporting Russia in maintaining national stability [*Xinhua* 2023, 26 June; Hu 2023, 27 June]. However, the incident reportedly caused some concern in China, given the CCP's historical sensitivity to warlords, and it was used by the government to restate its own narrative on China's model of political control over the army [Chen 2023, 25 June; Przychodniak 2023, 12 October]. Prigozhin's words about corruption in the Russian army were not censored in Chinese media and seemingly served as a boost to the CCP to launch a new wave of the anticorruption campaign, which hit the PLA over the summer, causing the removal of eleven generals and the detention of Defence Minister Li Shangfu [Allen-Ebrahimian 2023, 31 December].

Although the last part of 2023 saw a partial détente in the relations between the US and China, symbolised by the Xi-Biden meeting in San Francisco in November, Sino-Russian relations progressed quite steadily. This was shown by Putin's official visit at the Third Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing and Russia-China coordination over the crisis in Gaza [President of Russia 2023]. Both countries publicly expressed support for the Palestinians, never condemned Hamas' attacks, and jointly challenged US support for Israel [United Nations 2023]. Russia played the role of the «bad cop», comparing Israeli actions to Nazism and hosting the Hamas leadership in Moscow [*Reuters* 2023, 13 October; Roth 2023, 26 October]. China, on the other hand, reiterated the same formula applied over the war in Ukraine and positioned itself into a «pro-Palestinian neutrality». It presented another vague «peace plan», mainly aimed to expand China's influence in the pro-Palestinian front, and, at the same time, decried US support for Israel as a threat to regional stability [MOFAPRC 2023g].

In a call between Xi and Putin on 31 December 2023, the two leaders expressed profound satisfaction with the development of bilateral relations. Particular emphasis was given to the robust growth of their economic relations despite the weight of Western sanctions on Russia [Embassy of the PRC in the UAE 2023]. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, China, as one of the world's top oil consumers, became, in fact, a significant economic lifeline for Russia. Half of Russia's oil and petroleum exports were directed to China in 2023 (19% of PRC total imports), with a rise of 23% that allowed Moscow to overtake Saudi Arabia as China's largest crude oil supplier for

the year [US Energy Information Administration 2023; Soldatkin & Astakhova 2023, 27 December].

This evolution boosted the use of yuan in bilateral trade helping the yuan overtake the Japanese yen as the fourth-most used currency by value in global payments [Zhang 2023, 22 December]. As stated by Russia's Central Bank Governor Elvira Nabiullina in January 2024, the use of the Chinese yuan to pay for Russian exports has increased 86 times to 34.5% of total payments since 2022 [Yahoo 2024, 30 January]. At the same time, in 2023, Chinese shipments to Russia skyrocketed, indicating a growing dependence of Russia on Chinese goods, a factor that has generated a debate in the West on Russia's «vassalage» towards Beijing [Reuters 2024, 12 January; Gabuev 2022, 9 August; Beytout 2023, 22 May; Burns 2024, 30 January].

5. Conclusion: when history rhymes: China's Russian policy in perspective

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, its leaders, from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping, have sought to reshape the global political landscape. Their objective has been to rectify the «humiliation» inflicted by Western imperialism and to secure a «legitimate» space and status for China, thereby restoring its lost prestige and re-establishing Beijing's lost regional and global authority. This ambition to reclaim «centrality» in the international arena has manifested itself in the persistent effort to undermine the dominance of superpowers such as the United States and the Soviet Union. Hence China has persistently aimed to create an alternative, China-led pole that could gradually influence global governance, ensuring the nation's security and prosperity.

Consequently, the People's Republic of China has never fully aligned itself with the prevailing global orders – whether the bipolar structure of the Cold War or the subsequent US-led «liberal» order. Instead, China has navigated within these systems to maximize its benefits while simultaneously attempting to transform them from within. This dual approach has aimed both to mitigate these orders' impact on China's political stability and to foster the emergence of a new system that could elevate China's global standing.

A consistent element of this strategy has been the anti-hegemonic orientation of Beijing's foreign policy. Since its inception, China has framed its policies around a global effort to counteract the hegemony of alien powers, which was perceived by Chinese leaders as a significant threat to the legitimate space they sought to create. This approach has involved the implementation of two primary initiatives. First, China has endeavored to build a broad anti-hegemonic coalition, leveraging its alignment with the developing world to confront and weaken those powers which it perceives as most antagonistic. Second, China has tried to promote the establishment of

a new order; free from adversarial forms of hegemony and therefore prone to favor Beijing's ascent to the center stage of the international system [Fardella & She, 2024]

In the years that followed China's entry in the WTO in 2001 and the Lehman Brothers crisis of 2007, the strengthening of China's economic and political sway on a global scale appeared to the Chinese leadership to parallel the waning of US hegemony. Subsequently, Beijing embarked upon a proactive foreign policy agenda, designed to mitigate American influence and to cultivate fresh markets and alternative frameworks of global governance, with the objective to bolster China's global power and revise the US led international order. The logic of the deepening of Beijing's alignment with Russia and China's position over the Ukraine war fits within this strategic rationale.

The Sino-Russian Joint Statement issued on June 2021 at the eve of the twentieth anniversary of the historical Treaty signed by the two partners in 2001 summarised the logic of bilateral relations with a specific formula: «Russia needs a prosperous and stable China, and China needs a strong and successful Russia» (俄罗斯需要繁荣稳定的中国, 中国需要强大成功的俄罗斯) [Joint Statement 2021]. In this context, such a formula suggested that China believed its geopolitical interests were better served by a Russia that was both powerful and successful. The statement emerged during the consolidation of the Sino-Russian «unlimited partnership», a delicate moment indeed as the massing of Russian troops at the border with Ukraine started rising fears of a new Russian aggression towards its neighbour. The same «strong and successful» formula, however, appeared also in the Joint Statement issued in March 2023 after Xi and Putin's meeting in Moscow. This meeting de facto sanctioned the «new» formal framework of bilateral relations under the traditional «three basic principles» – non-alignment, non-confrontation, and not targeting third parties – and China's «pro-Russian neutrality» as its corollary. If the disappearance of the «unlimited» formula suggested a formal discontinuity, the perseverance of the «strong and successful» logic guaranteed conceptual continuity [MOFAPRC 2023a].

As highlighted by Goncharov, the three principles stemmed primarily from China's tragic experience as USSR's junior ally that led to the Korean War, the internationalisation of the Taiwan issue and a thirty-year isolation from the West [Goncharov 2023]. This historical inheritance influenced the following trajectory of China's independent stance in the international system, preventing it from formally translating any potential alignment into formal alliances.

The risk that a badly planned Russian military adventure dragged China's new «alliance» with Moscow into a global confrontation with a galvanised West forcing Beijing into a premature confrontation over Taiwan certainly played a pivotal role in the sudden correction of China's official position. A

relevant role was also played in this respect by the steady political, military and economic response of the West to Putin's actions in Ukraine but, quite probably, also by Xi's domestic urge, in sight of the 20th CCP Congress, to smoothen the antagonistic factions within the Party that challenged its assertive foreign and domestic policies. In short, the historical experience of non-alignment well served the interest of the present and influenced China's political tuning of its formal position away from the «unlimited partnership» formula and towards the traditional «three basic principles».

It was an efficient adaptation that combined a formal discontinuity, inspired by the historical experience of non-alignment, with a logical continuity required by the current reality; a stratagem that made China's diplomatic action more efficient thanks to the association of its strategic entente with Moscow to a more flexible anti-hegemonic manoeuvre in the «neutralist» camp (the new version of Mao's «intermediate zones»).

At the time of the formation of the Sino-Soviet alliance, China acted as a junior partner in the relationship, and it was this very same nature that generated Mao's frustrations and the subsequent decoupling of China's national interest from the «two camps» framework. The nature of Sino-Russian relations today, however, is diametrically different, with China playing the role of the senior partner, and Russia being progressively perceived as a «vassal». As a consequence, Beijing is now in a much more favourable position to manage its relations with Russia in a direction that favours its national interest and its global ambitions.

Professor Zhao Huasheng, of the Center for Russian and Central Asian Studies at Fudan University, recently wrote that the role of Russia is crucial for China to maintain security and stability at its continental periphery, particularly at a time of intensifying Western pressures in the Indo-Pacific. In case of an escalation over Taiwan, Russia's support would be crucial for China's energy security and resistance against Western sanctions. Furthermore, as a major nuclear power and a member of the UN Security Council, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the BRICS, Russia plays a strategic role in China's attempt to shape a new international order [Zhao 2022, 24 January].

China and Russia's horizons, however, as Professor Feng Yujun noted, do not always align. «The imperial logic underlying both the rejection of Ukraine as a national entity and the overt claim to restore [Russia's] traditional territories is alarming [...] It is clear that this conception of "cultural boundaries instead of actual sovereign boundaries" [...] is in essence no different from the West's [belief in] "the primacy of human rights over sovereignty"» [Feng 2023, 17 January].

China has always tried to «formally» detach itself from this logic, which recalls Russian imperialist voracity of Chinese territory in the first part of the 20th century. As a consequence, Beijing has advocated – more in words than in deeds in fact – the preservation of Ukraine's sovereignty and

territorial integrity and it has not «formally» supported Russia's military actions nor recognized the independence of Crimea, Luhansk, and Donetsk.

In the eyes of some among the most renowned Chinese analysts, Russia's military adventurism, in fact, accelerated the emergence of a new «bloc confrontation», reinforcing the US hegemonic outreach over its allies – through the expansion of NATO at the expense of EU strategic autonomy – and provoked an escalation of its pressure over the South China Sea and, most importantly, Taiwan [CICIR 2023; Wang 2023, 24 February].

The adaptation of China's formal position reflected this reality and, based on China's historical experience, called for a more flexible and independent anti-hegemonic course that better preserved China's national interests. As a result, China corrected Russia's formal positioning in Beijing's official horizon, without, nonetheless, altering its strategic value. Beijing needed a «strong and successful» Russia to enhance its continental security and keep Western antagonism away from Chinese shores. At the same time, it played «peace» to drive a wedge between the US and Europe and lead the neutral «intermediate zones» (i.e. Middle East). The aim was to shield Russia from the diplomatic manoeuvre of the West and promote China's reform of global governance, officially presented in September 2023 [MOFAPRC 2023h]. All this, as Deng Yuwen explained, is supposed to increase China's political leverage over Russia and strengthen Beijing's economic security [Deng 2023, 27 February].

A formalized «unlimited» partnership with Russia therefore risked to jeopardize Beijing's strategic horizons by limiting China's diplomatic flexibility towards the West and the appeal of its «neutralist» stance on the developing world. The substantial alignment with a «strong and successful» Russia, the latter being demoted to the status of junior partner, has nonetheless become a fundamental component of Beijing attempt to achieve its regional and global ambitions. This explains the rationale behind Beijing's ambiguity over Russia's invasion of Ukraine and better indicates the scope of Beijing's interests in its potential outcomes.

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SPECIAL ARTICLE

THE RETURN OF THE 'INDO-PACIFIC'

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This article studies the Indo-Pacific, the warm waters surrounding Asia as a concept in geography in the later part of the 19th century. It shows how the concept was re-fashioned in geopolitical and geocultural commentary in the earlier part of the 20th century, and then rediscovered in explicit geopolitical and geoeconomics terms in the 21st century. The economic weight of the Indo-Pacific makes trade routes and, with it, sea-lane maritime security and control an issue of prominence. As such, this sense of the Indo-Pacific is increasingly shaping strategies and policies for the region. The impact of China has generated much of the current Indo-Pacific discourse, strategies and policies; as has the rise of India.

KEYWORDS – Indo-Pacific; geopolitics; geo-economics; geo-culture; maritime Asia

1. Introduction

India's External Affairs Minister, addressing the newly set-up Indo-Pacific Business Summit in 2021, invoked history, «the Indo-Pacific represents a return of history. A seamless and integrated space was disconnected decades ago by the strategy of the day» [Jaishankar 2021]. The seamless and integrated space was the Indian and (Western) Pacific Oceans, the warm waters around Asia, the Indo-Pacific.

During the last decade, there has been an accelerating and widespread focus on the Indo-Pacific by states and regional actors inside and outside the region. The «Indo-Pacific» arose as a geographical term in the 19th century, was pushed as geopolitical term in the early 20th century, and was then rediscovered in the 21st century as a formal geo-strategic term shaping policies.

2. 1850-onwards: geographic usage

James Logan seems the earliest to have used the «Indo-Pacific» label in 1850 as an ethnological term in connection with «the continental relations of the

Indo-Pacific islanders» the various Malayo-Polynesian (i.e. Austronesian) languages to be found from Polynesia through Southeast Asia to Madagascar around «the shores and islands of the Indo-Pacific Ocean» [Logan 1850: 252, 273].

The Indo-Pacific term moved from ethnology to marine biology by the late 19th century, as in the *Report on the Zoological Collections made in the «Indo-Pacific Ocean» Carried out by HMS Alert in 1881-1882* [British Museum 1884]. Such zoological expeditions were for scientific as well as national purposes. They came complete with finding and labelling local species like the Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin, in the waters spreading from the West Pacific to East Africa.

This Indo-Pacific tagging crossed into climatology, exemplified with the Indo-Pacific Monsoon Climate Zone, otherwise known as the Indo-Pacific Tropical Rain Belt, encompassing the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The Indo-Pacific Warm Pool is further uncontroversial labelling. Oceanology has adopted Indo-Pacific frames of reference, for example the Indo-Pacific Convergence Region with regard to plate tectonics on the floors of the Indian and Pacific oceans.

3. 1900-1945: *Classic Geopolitics and Geo-culture*

The US push across the Pacific in 1899, from Hawaii to Guam and the Philippines, was heavily influenced by the maritime geopolitics advocated by Alfred Mahan. His advocacy of US expansion westwards across the Pacific was in part responding to a perceived threat of China «bursting her barriers eastward toward the Pacific» [Mahan 1898: 32]. Mahan's 1900 publication *The Problem of Asia: Its Effect upon International Politics* focussed on the land-power challenge of Russia; but also the advantages of seapower deployments from British India around the Indian Ocean, through South-East Asia to China [Mahan 1900: 27-29].

Eurasian land power considerations were picked up by Halford Mackinder in his 1904 paper 'The Geographical Pivot of History', where he argued that the Eurasian «Heartland», essentially Central Asia, was as a pivot of history from which power had been deployed. Mackinder concluded by going from a Russian threat in his 1904 present to a potential Chinese threat in the future, where «they might constitute the yellow peril to the world's freedom just because they [China] would add an oceanic frontage to the resources of the great continent» [Mackinder 1904: 437].

Geopolitics was to the fore in Germany with the *Indopazifischen Raum* («Indo-Pacific realm») propounded by Karl Haushofer during the 1920s and 1930s [Li 2022]. In the «Great Indo-Pacific Ocean», it was the maritime interplay of India, China and Japan, «this unity of the monsoon countries», which caught his attention [Haushofer 1938: 17, 355]. He reckoned «those

spacious, population-hungry regions of the future have their spatial point of gravity on the Indo-Pacific sea space» [Haushofer 1938: 110]. In the opposite direction, he noted that the US «stands across the Pacific with an armoured foot on the Americas and East Asia corresponding to the wide, and then again, narrow, sea-strategic concept which was conceived by Mahan» [Haushofer 1938: 184].

Haushofer's geopolitics found a sympathetic audience in Japan during the 1930s, with his call for a Germany-Japan alliance echoed in the Anti-Comintern Pact signed in 1936 [Spang 2006]. In turn, Japan's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere – which covered Oceania, the Pacific Rim littorals of Korea and East China, and Southeast East Asia – would have become a Japanese Indo-Pacific if Japan's advance on British India had been successful in 1940.

In contrast, the Indian historian Kalidas Nag outlined the Indo-Pacific in geocultural rather than geopolitical terms. During the 1920s Nag accompanied Rabindranath Tagore on tours of the Western Pacific and South East Asia, both figures espousing Pan-Asianism. On his return, Nag founded the Greater India Society in 1926, its first *Bulletin* containing his piece 'Greater India', which drew out cultural links running from India to the Pacific [Zabarskaitė 2023]. By the time of Nag's stay at the University of Hawaii in 1937, he was characterising the «vast expanse of water extending from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific» as «the Indo-Pacific domain» [Nag 1937: 37]. Even as Japan was coming westwards to the doors of India, trying to bring it within its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, Nag, in his *India and the Pacific World* Nag extolled the «Indo-Pacific domain which is the true historical setting and geographical background of Greater India» [Nag 1941: 282].

4. 1945-1990s. *De Facto Indo-Pacific Frameworks*

The Second World War may have brought an eclipse of Haushofer's Indo-Pacific geopolitics centred around a Japanese-led order; but allied victory, mainly due to US might, saw an extension of Mahanian seapower geopolitics. US occupation of Japan and its West Pacific island possessions (Ryukyus, Bonins, Marianas and Carolines), alongside US possessions of Hawaii, West Samoa, Guam and the Philippines left the Pacific as very much an «American Lake» [Lattimore 1945], right up to the Asian mainland.

Nicholas Spykman had already argued that the US «will have to establish island bases for their power [...] such bases will probably be sufficient to counterbalance any future attempt of China to dominate the Far East» [Spykman 1944: 53]. China's shadow loomed ever larger when the Chinese mainland (but not Taiwan) fell to Mao Zedong's Communist Party, the People's Republic of China being proclaimed in October 1949. In March 1949, as the mainland was slipping away, Douglas MacArthur judged that «now

the Pacific has become an Anglo-Saxon lake and our line of defense runs through the chain of islands fringing the coast of Asia» [MacArthur 1949]. It was a chain considered as running from the Philippines (through Taiwan) and the Ryukyu Islands to Japan and over to Alaska's Aleutian Islands. In January 1950, Dean Acheson's speech to the National Press Club dubbed the offshore island chains as the US forward «defense perimeter» [Acheson 1969: 357] enclosing an essentially American Pacific.

In contrast, the Indian Ocean which had been something of a «British Lake» during the 19th century, based on UK control of routes to and from India, was transformed by the end of the UK rule in the Indian Sub-continent in 1949, and the subsequent UK announcement in 1966 of its withdrawal from an East of Suez posture in terms of bases, most significantly at Singapore. UK Defence Secretary Denis Healey was blunt, admitting that this withdrawal would be «leading to the diminution or disappearance of our role in the Indo-Pacific thereafter» [Government of the UK 1966]. The US filled the gap to some extent by setting up a large base at Diego Garcia in 1971, with the agreement of the sovereign host the UK, in the newly formed British Indian Ocean Territory.

Cold War rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union was evident in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. One *de facto* Indo-Pacific framework was the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), set up in September 1954. This can be viewed through two lenses. Firstly, the United States was setting up NATO, CENTO, and SEATO for similar purposes of containment of the Soviet Union, which reflected Spykman's geopolitical logic of mobilizing the Eurasian «Rimland» against power projection from the Eurasian landmass. This Rimland «conflict area» [Spykman 1944: 54] stretched from Japan to the Mediterranean, and was an Indo-Pacific zone that post-1945 was seen as under threat from a Soviet Eurasian bloc. Secondly, SEATO can be seen through a narrower lens of China containment. The collapse of French power in Vietnam, as well as Beijing's intervention in the Korean War, was already bringing to the fore the spectre of Chinese control, in effect foreshadowing the formulation of the Domino Theory that led to US (and Australian) intervention in Vietnam during the 1960s. Here, Spykman's Rimland alliances, manifested in SEATO, was complemented by US alliance in East Asia with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (where Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China had survived).

SEATO's membership was curiously sparse for South-East Asia, but stretched across the Indian and Pacific Oceans and included Pakistan, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, Philippines, France, the UK and the US. Members had little common aims, with Pakistan seeking to gather support against India rather than to contain the Soviet Union or China. By 1968 the question was being asked: «Is SEATO obsolete?» [Miller 1968]. In 1977 a moribund SEATO was formally wound up, with Pakistan already establishing an ever-closer security partnership with China.

The US attempt to fight a land war in Vietnam ultimately failed. Consequently, the Nixon Doctrine announced in July 1969 indicated a US pullback from mainland involvement, a doctrine announced appropriately enough at Guam, the US «forward spear» then and now for projecting US power across the Pacific onto the Asian littoral. This «Guam Doctrine» represented a return to the «forward defence perimeter» advocated two decades earlier by MacArthur and Acheson and running along the offshore island chains [Girling 1970].

With a maritime focus, the US Pacific Command (PACOM), established in 1947, expanded its field of operations. In 1971, PACOM assumed responsibility for the Indian Ocean and the countries of southern Asia extending westward to the eastern border of Iran. PACOM's operational boundaries were changed yet again in 1976, as the US Pacific Command was given responsibility for the entire Indian Ocean to the east coast of Africa, including the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, and all the Indian Ocean Islands excepting Madagascar. This represented a *de facto* Indo-Pacific maritime command in the broadest geographic sense.

Talk of the «Pacific Century» [McCord 1991], an impending «Pacific Era» [Nagai 1987], the «Pacific Impulse» [Mahbubani 1995] became widespread by the 1990s. Around the Pacific, the post-war economic rise of Japan, followed by those of the «Tigers» of Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea, coupled with the rise of California, brought about a new phase of economic vitality. A so-called *Rimspeak* [Cumings 1994], focussed on the Pacific Rim rather than the Pacific Basin, was institutionalised through the formation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1989. This brought together North America (the US, Canada) with East Asia (Japan and South Korea), Southeast Asia (ASEAN, but not Myanmar) and Australasia (Australia and New Zealand). Further expansion took place in the 1990s, a rapidly modernising China as well as Taiwan in 1991, Mexico and Papua New Guinea in 1993, Chile in 1994, and Russia in 1998. The new regional coinage of «Asia Pacific» [Dirlik 1992] represented both littorals of the Pacific, i.e. «Pacific Asia» [Borthwick 1992] plus the Americas. Although India expressed some interest in 1991 in APEC membership, a moratorium on new members imposed from 1998-2012 and continuing concerns over India's protectionism kept India out of APEC.

Mikhail Gorbachev's speech at Vladivostok in July 1986 on 'Peace and Security for the Asia-Pacific Ocean Region' represented an attempt for the Soviet Union to take advantage of the economic vitality opening up in the region [Gorbachev 1986]. The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 left instead a diminished Russia, with the Russian Far East impoverished and the former Soviet Pacific Fleet, at times literally, rusting away.

In contrast, the very strength of the China surge, evident in the late 1990s, ironically meant that, as the 21st century approached, there was less talk of it being shaped by the Pacific [Foot and Walter 1999]. Instead, there

was increasing talk of the coming 21st century being shaped by China's economic rise. This was typified by books like *China's Century: The Awakening of the Next Economic Powerhouse* [Brahm 2001].

5. 2000s: Unofficial «Indo-Pacific» rediscovery

China's evident economic and military rise, evident from the 1980s, coupled with India's later economic take off in the 1990s saw the «Indo-Pacific» re-emerge in prominent usage, initially among commentators and think tanks.

This was first indicated in 2002 by a member of Canada's defence establishment James Boutillier, based at Vancouver on the Pacific shoreline, who drew out the geopolitics of the situation with his prescient piece on «some truly historic changes in the Indo-Pacific naval environment» being posed by «Japan's first long-range naval deployment since World War II» into the Indian Ocean, together with «the emergence of a new and more powerful Chinese navy and the re-emergence of an Indian navy with blue water ambitions» [Boutillier 2002-2003: 198]. His call was for Canadian «naval intervention and engagement in the Indo-Pacific Region» [Boutillier 2003: 209]. The related geo-economics of the situation were to the fore in his 'Reflections on the New Indo-Pacific Maritime and Naval Environment', where he argued that «the centre of world economic gravity has shifted from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific region», in which energy security and maritime security were entwined as «the Indian and Pacific Oceans are linked by vital energy flows and the overlapping geo-strategic interests of the Indian and Chinese navies» [Boutillier 2004: 1, 9].

Such Indo-Pacific language was re-echoed in 2005 by New Zealand's former naval commander Peter Cozens, who wrote in the inaugural edition of *Maritime Affairs*, published in India by the National Maritime Foundation, about the «Indo-Pacific» as a maritime-strategic continuum encompassing the Northern Indian Ocean, South-east Asia and Western/Central Pacific [Cozens 2005]. Also, in 2005, the Australian journalist Michael Richardson discussed the newly set up East Asia Summit (EAS) as a core for an «Indo-Pacific community» [Richardson 2005]. Like APEC, the EAS involved the East Asian powers of Japan, South Korea and China, alongside the ASEAN states, as well as Australia and New Zealand. Unlike APEC, the EAS also involved India from the onset. Russia and the USA joined in 2011, giving the EAS a Hollywood to Bollywood span. Nonetheless, the EAS had little institutional powers, and was unable to bridge China-US or China-India divisions.

A Track-II event, the Indo-Japan Dialogue on Ocean Security in 2006, between India's Society for Indian Ocean Studies (SIOS) and Japan's Ocean Policy Research Foundation, brought further Indo-Pacific input from Indian commentators. At the Dialogue, Premvir Das, the former Commander-in-Chief of India's Eastern Naval Command, used the term «Indo-Pacif-

ic» [Das 2006: 111, 115]. The following year, another naval figure, Gurpreet Khurana employed the term «Indo-Pacific» with regard to trade flows and sea lines of communication and the prospects for India-Japan cooperation [Khurana 2007: 139, 141, 144]. Raja Mohan proved a sustained Indo-Pacific advocate in India from 2011 onwards with his talk of the «new era of the Indo-Pacific» [Mohan 2011, 25 January].

An important contribution was made in 2007 in Australia where, in an open letter to the incoming Prime Minister Kevin Rudd about Australia-India relations, Rory Medcalf, based at the Lowy Institute, quoted «the Asia-Pacific (or some might say Indo-Pacific)» [Medcalf 2007]. This was the start of Medcalf's sustained and influential role as an advocate of the Indo-Pacific in Australia and beyond.

2007 was an important year in the dissemination of Indo-Pacific frames of reference, as it witnessed Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's address to the Indian Parliament in August 2007 on «Confluence of the Two Seas» about a maritime «broader Asia» [Abe 2007]. His call for closer India-Japan cooperation represented implicit strategic balancing, with China in mind; and was implemented in the wider setting up of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or QUAD, launching the co-operation between Australia, India, Japan and the United States. Officials first met in May 2007, with naval exercises held in the Bay of Bengal in September 2007. However, Chinese complaints brought this particular quadrilateral format to a halt in 2008.

6. 2010s-2023: Official Indo-Pacific rediscovery

Although China dismissed talk of the Indo-Pacific as insubstantial «foam» [Wang 2015], the 2010s witnessed increasing adoption of Indo-Pacific rhetoric by states, often concerned about China, which was translated into formal strategies, policies and outlook statements. By 2019, Japan's ambassador to India noted «the Indo-Pacific has become a buzzword now» [Kiramatsu 2019]. In 2021 India's ambassador to Japan similarly considered «the Indo-Pacific has become the new currency» for regional discourse, strategic narrative and policy implementation [Verma 2021].

The US started using Indo-Pacific rhetoric with Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State during the first Obama administration of 2009-2013. Clinton used the term «Indo-Pacific» in 2010 to reflect closer naval cooperation with India. In her words, «we are expanding our work with the Indian navy in the Pacific, because we understand how important the Indo-Pacific basin is» [Clinton 2010]. Strategic rethinking around Indo-Pacific regional conceptualization generated practical imperatives in Clinton's mind, finalized to «translate the growing connection between the Indian and Pacific oceans into an operational concept» [Clinton 2011]. Alliance dynamics

were apparent. Whereas US relations with Australia had previously been described and conducted within an «Asia-Pacific» framework, Clinton extended this with Indo-Pacific references. As she noted, «we are also expanding our alliance with Australia from a Pacific partnership to an Indo-Pacific one» [Clinton 2011]. Finally, the following year, in a speech on economic statecraft, Clinton summarised that «the Indo-Pacific region is crucial to our future» [Clinton 2012].

Generally, the US policy pursued by Obama involved a «pivot» or «rebalance» westwards to Pacific Asia [Obama 2011]. However, while the mooted rebalance of military forces to Guam [Toroad 2012], Singapore, and Australia was put in train, and bilateral links with India deepened, the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor (IPEC), mooted in 2014 to knit South Asia and South-East Asia, remained little funded or implemented by the US during the second Obama administration of 2013-2017.

Stephen Smith shows the exact moment when Australia started using Indo-Pacific frames of reference. As Minister for Foreign Affairs from 2007 to 2010, Smith generally used «Asia-Pacific» frames of reference, with a traditional focus on the Pacific and South-east Asia. However, as Defence Minister from 2010 to 2013, Smith started to apply specific and explicitly wider «Indo-Pacific» terminology to bring India and the Indian Ocean into defence discussions in general and maritime-naval aspects in particular. He first indicated in December 2011 that «the notion of the Indo-Pacific as a substantial strategic concept is starting to gain traction» [Smith 2011]. Medcalf argued from the sidelines that the Indo-Pacific was «a term whose time has come» [Medcalf, 2012]. Whereas Australia's 2009 Defence White Paper mentioned the Asia-Pacific 47 times and the Indo-Pacific zero times, the 2013 Defense White Paper contained a meagre three mentions of the Asia-Pacific swamped by 67 mentions of the Indo-Pacific, where «a new Indo-Pacific strategic arc is beginning to emerge, connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans» [Government of Australia 2013: 2]. This maritime «strategic arc» bent around but did not include China, running from Japan to India, significant balancing partners for Australia alongside the US.

India's first official references to the Indo-Pacific were also made in 2011. Shyam Saran penned an influential piece 'Mapping the Indo-Pacific' in October 2011 [Saran 2011, 29 October]. India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh deployed the term «Indo-Pacific» for the first time in December 2012 at the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit. These references knitted together India's «Look East» policy of economic outreach to South East Asia – announced in the mid-1990s, and expanded to Australasia and the Far East in a Look East-2 economic and security policy announced in 2003 – to India's long-established Look South drive for pre-eminence in the Indian Ocean.

The advent of Narendra Modi in 2014 brought a new urgency, with «Look East» re-badged as «Act East». An «Act Further East» policy was announced in September 2019, involving the Russian Far East and a Vladiv-

ostok-Chennai Maritime Corridor. On the economic front, India launched an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) with Japan in May 2017. The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) announced by Modi at the 14th East Asia Summit in November 2019 emphasised economic and environmental co-operation, but avoided any security issues. Neither the AAGC nor the IPOI involved China.

On the security front, India moved to stronger security ties with Japan and the United States, the India-Japan-US (IJUS) trilateral operating since 2011; though shading their terminology by calling for a «Free Open and Inclusive Indo-Pacific» (FOIP) at the East Asia Summit in 2018. The marked downturn in China-India relations in the wake of border clashes at Doklam in 2017 and Galwan in 2020 accelerated Indian security participation alongside the US, Japan and Australia in the QUAD, reformed in 2017. India also pursued closer security partnerships with Indonesia, Vietnam and France – all conducted under specific Indo-Pacific rhetoric on norms. Growing Indian concerns about China rendered the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral, running since the late 1990s, increasingly irrelevant under Modi's tenure. India's *Milan* naval exercises attracted an increasing range of actors across the Indo-Pacific, but with China not invited.

Although China avoided using the term Indo-Pacific, its own policies, to which other countries were responding, were very much Indo-Pacific in nature. On the military front, the 2000s saw the arrival of China's «Two Oceans» naval doctrine [Kaplan 2009], covering the Indian and Pacific Oceans [Lee 2002], reflecting a progression from «near-seas active defense» (*jinhai jujū fangyu*) in the 1980s to «far-seas operations» (*yuanghai zuo-zhan*) strategy. This quickly generated rising concerns over Chinese bases and facilities being established by China across the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, encapsulated in the «string of pearls» doctrine advanced in 2004, and subsequently reflected through Chinese presence at Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Gwadar (Pakistan) and Djibouti (north-east coast of the Horn of Africa)). China's leader, Xi Jinping, outlined the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) infrastructure initiative in September 2013. In Xi's vision, the MSR extended from South China eastwards to the Pacific Basin and westwards around South-East Asia and across the Indian Ocean, over to the Mediterranean.

Shinzo Abe's return to power in Japan in 2012 renewed the Indo-Pacific pushback against China. Abe immediately made the call for a «security diamond» uniting Australia, India, Japan and the US [Abe 2012]. He went on to formulate the need for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) in 2016 as a central and enduring plank for Japanese foreign policy. This FOIP emphasis was pursued with further vigour by Fumio Kishida, Abe's Foreign Secretary from 2012-2017, who took over as Prime Minister in 2021.

Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific formulation was picked up by the Trump administration in 2017, and elaborated in the *US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* (security-focussed on combating China) in February 2018

and the State Department's *Advancing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific* (more diplomatically-nuanced) in July 2018. PACOM was renamed INDOPACOM in May 2018, reflecting its operational domain stretching from Hawaii to India and Diego Garcia. The subsequent Biden administration strongly reiterated this Free and Open Indo-Pacific usage, perhaps with more finesse on soothing partners. While Trump's decision to immediately withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (negotiated by Obama) was not reversed by the Biden administration, they did launch Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) negotiations in 2022, not inviting China, and leading to the Supply Chain Agreement signed in November 2023.

France moved towards an Indo-Pacific posture after 2018. Its interest for the area was based on the perception that France already was a «resident power» because of its possessions of Reunion in the Indian Ocean, and New Caledonia and Polynesia in the Pacific. The French Ministry of Defence issued an authoritative profile *France and Security in the Indo-Pacific* in June 2018 and *France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific* in May 2019. During President Macron's trip to Australia and New Caledonia in 2018, he advanced the notion of an «Indo-Pacific axis» (*l'axe Indo-Pacifique*) with Australia and India – a format reflected in the Australia-France-India trilateral set up in September 2020. French diplomats argued that «France will operate in concert with India to ensure a free open and secure Indo-Pacific» [Lenain 2019, 8 December]. Closer strategic partnerships were also established with Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines. Annual deployment involving French aircraft carrier (*Operation Clemenceau*) and helicopter carrier (*Operation Perouse*) groups were initiated across the Indian Ocean and Pacific from 2018 onwards. These involved various military exercises with US, Indian, Australian and Japanese units in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific. They also included Freedom of Navigation exercises in the South China Sea and transit of the Taiwan Strait.

Other local middle-power actors moved to use Indo-Pacific openings. Vietnam's President argued that increased strategic cooperation between Vietnam and India would help «transform the Asia Century into the Indo-Asia-Pacific Century» [Quang 2018]. His state visit to India witnessed the signing of a formal Joint Statement emphasising the importance of the «Indo-Pacific», as well as the importance of maintaining freedom of navigation and over-flight in the South China Sea. Vietnam's 2019 White Paper on Defence announced that Vietnam was ready to participate in «security and defence mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region» [Government of Vietnam 2019: 29]. This was in line with Hanoi's interests, which were immediately identified as maintaining Vietnam's position and claims in the South China Sea – identified by Hanoi as Vietnam's «East Sea» – against China. Long-running security ties with India were consequently strengthened, including Vietnam's participation from 2018 onwards in India's biannual *Milan* naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal. Likewise delicately and carefully

calibrated strategic cooperation was established with the Philippines, Japan, Australia, France, the UK and the US.

Indonesia, like Australia, looks onto the Indian and Pacific Oceans, a setting reflected in President Jokowi's concept of Indonesia being a «maritime nexus» between the two oceans. The previous Indonesian administration had already floated an Indo-Pacific Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation [Natalegawa 2013, 20 May], which, however, had been ignored by the various Powers. Jokowi's administration then worked on an Indo-Pacific Cooperation Programme during 2018 [Marsudi 2019, 20 March]. This was eventually adopted by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in their *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, released in June 2019.

The *ASEAN Outlook* called for «ASEAN-Centrality» in Indo-Pacific cooperation and that the East Asia Summit should be «ASEAN-led» [ASEAN 2019]. However, it had little to say on security matters, and avoided grappling with China and South China Sea issues. It stressed economic cooperation, but without reference to rival economic schemes. In a similar fashion, the Indian Ocean Regional Association (IORA) released its own *Indo-Pacific Outlook* in November 2022. Like the *ASEAN Outlook*, the IORA counterpart advanced the need for local economic and environmental cooperation but had nothing to say on security issues. IORA also has even less convening power than ASEAN.

Bangladesh's *Indo-Pacific Outlook*, released in April 2023, welcomed both the ASEAN and IORA economic cooperation proposals and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), but avoided committing to either China's MSR or US-Japan FOIP proposals.

An accelerating European adoption of Indo-Pacific frames of reference was noticeable in the 2020s. Post-BREXIT, the UK announced a «Tilt to the Indo-Pacific» in its *Integrated Strategic Review* of 2021 [Government of the UK 2021]. A return to an «East of Suez» posture of deployment of forces and upgrading of basing access had already been announced in 2016 [Johnson 2016]. Naval chiefs adopted explicit Indo-Pacific language [Jones 2019]. Overlapping deployments from the UK were initiated from 2018 onwards, including the presence of an Aircraft Carrier Group in 2021, and ongoing long-term stationing in the region of HMS Tamar and HMS Spey was initiated in 2021. On the diplomatic front, in 2021 the UK became an ASEAN Dialogue Partner, as well as joining with Australia and the US in setting up AUKUS as a trilateral mechanism for defence cooperation. In 2022, the UK joined the maritime pillar of India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, and signed a strong Defence Cooperation Agreement with Japan. Finally, in July 2023 the UK joined the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and boycotted China's Belt and Road Forum in October 2023.

Elsewhere in Europe, Germany announced its *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific* in September 2020, stressing the economic importance of the

region, and the necessity of a rules-based order, freedom of navigation and naval deployments [Government of Germany 2020]. Consequently, in 2021, the German frigate Bayern was sent exercising with India and Japan and was temporarily deployed across the South China Sea. In 2022, in a first-time event and largest peace time deployment, Germany sent 13 airforce fighters to participate in *Pitch Black* exercises in Australia.

A month after Germany, in October 2020, the Dutch government released *Indo-Pacific een leidraad voor versterking van de Nederlandse en EU samenwerking met-partners in Azië* («Indo-Pacific: A Guideline for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia»). Like the UK and German strategy, the Dutch *Guideline* emphasised the economic allure of the Indo-Pacific, as well as the need to protect the rule of law and freedom of navigation, allocating a role for Dutch naval presence. This was manifested in the dispatch of the Dutch frigate, HNLMS Evertsen, embedded in the UK Carrier Strike Group, deployed in 2021.

At the European level, the formal *EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* was released in 2021 and stressed economic engagement, and cooperation with like-minded partners to safeguard an international rules-based order. It specifically called for a greater presence of EU navies in Indo-Pacific waters. A further sign was the setting up of the annual Ministerial Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific mechanism in 2022, which brought together not only the EU and its member states, but also actors from around the Asian rimland (India and Japan) and from across the Pacific, (the US and Canada), together with the new CPTPP member, namely the UK, and the micro-island states in the Indian and Pacific Oceans (the Seychelles and Fiji). China was notably absent and notably uninvited. High Level Consultations on the Indo-Pacific, bringing together the EU with the US, were also initiated in 2022.

EU member-states with little, if any, historical links to the region also issued Indo-Pacific strategies. Czechia released Strategy for Cooperation with the Indo-Pacific in October 2022, and Lithuania released *For a Secure, Resilient and Prosperous Future. Lithuania's Indo-Pacific Strategy* in July 2023 [Government of Czechia 2022; Government of Lithuania 2023]. Both countries withdrew from the China-East Central European (CECE) mechanism, Lithuania in 2021 and Czechia in 2022, and established closer links with Taiwan, anathema to China.

Italy also pushed a more active Indo-Pacific outreach under the Meloni government, elected in October 2022. Italian interest in the Indo-Pacific was evident throughout 2023 [De Luca 2023, 2 January]. It was signalled during the year with Meloni's high profile appearance at the Raisina Dialogue [Meloni 2023], followed by the establishment of closer economic and security cooperation with India and Japan, and, to some degree, also with Vietnam and Indonesia. This was accompanied by the dispatch of the frigate Morosini on a six-month deployment across the Indo-Pacific. Converse-

ly, Italy moved away from China, boycotting China's Belt and Road Forum, held in September 2023 and formally withdrawing from China's Maritime Silk Road initiative at the end of the year.

The growth of Indo-Pacific formulations by Australia, India, Japan and the US, alongside their strengthening bilateral and trilateral relations, and mutual concerns about China, made the revival of the QUAD a particularly significant development in the late 2010s. First run at Senior Officials level in 2017, the re-established QUAD was upgraded to Ministerial Level in 2019 and Heads of Government summits in 2021. Annual four-way naval *Malabar* exercises commenced in 2020, which alternated between the Bay of Bengal and the Western Pacific. A QUAD Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Awareness was launched in 2022, as was a QUAD Infrastructure Coordination Group. 2023 witnessed the QUAD Supply Chain Agreement. QUAD-Plus formats co-opting South Korea and Canada made their appearance during the Covid pandemic in 2022. This was no surprise, given South Korea's and Canada's adoption of Indo-Pacific formulations in late 2022.

Canada's *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, released in November 2022, announced deeper involvement in the Indo-Pacific; including greater deployment of Canadian naval vessels (*Operation Projection*) in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and greater collaboration with other China-concerned actors. In such a vein, the *Sea Dragon* exercise in March 2023 involved the Canadian airforce exercising with India, Japan and the United States at Guam. Also, Canada joined India, South Korea and the United States in anti-submarine warfare exercises in April 2023. Very pointedly, HMCS Ottawa transited the Taiwan Strait in September 2023, along with USS Ralph Johnson, before conducting joint exercises with the Philippines and the US in the South China Sea in October 2023. This was followed by low-level military confrontation with China in November. However, Canadian relations with India took a dramatic downturn in late 2023, following Canadian accusations of Indian Intelligence Services assassinating Sikh «Khalistan» advocates in Canada [Hall 2024].

A final development in 2023 was South Korea's pursuit of Indo-Pacific security. An economic focus towards Southeast Asia and India through the New Southern Policy (NSP) was initiated by the Moon administration in November 2017. However, South Korea's *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific*, released on 28 December 2022, represented a much firmer security stand by President Yoon Suk Yeol, elected in May 2022. South Korea had already been reaching further out to India, but, under Yoon also struck a new minilateral pact with Japan and the US, self-defined as a «Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Partnership [...] in pursuit of a free and open Indo-Pacific» [White House 2022]. Following their trilateral summit in Washington in August 2023, a ministerial-level Indo-Pacific Dialogue jointly inaugurated by Japan, South Korea and the US, with their first meeting arranged for January 2024.

7. Conclusion

This article started by invoking India's Minister for External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, talking in 2021 of the Indo-Pacific as a welcome «return of history». In contrast, his Chinese counterpart Wang Ji invoked history in a very different fashion in 2021. He argued that «the so-called 'Indo-Pacific strategy', which is aimed at provoking bloc confrontation, is an attempt to form a small clique for geopolitical rivalry. It is the revival of the Cold-War mentality and regression of history. It should be swept into the dustbin» [Wang Yi 2021]. However, a dustbin does not await the Indo-Pacific. It remains a fact of life that China's own growing presence and assertiveness through the region, has been increasingly evident in the last decade. This, in itself, means that, in the near future, various Indo-Pacific responsive strategies will be generated by concerned actors inside and outside the region.

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REVIEWS

MODERN ERASURES: REVOLUTION, THE CIVILIZING MISSION, AND THE SHAPING OF CHINA'S PAST

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Pierre Fuller, *Modern Erasures: Revolution, the Civilizing Mission, and the Shaping of China's Past*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2022, 362 pp. (ISBN9781009026512)

Modern Erasures represents the culmination of the extensive research of Pierre Fuller, a prominent scholar whose primary focus has concerned Chinese political cultures, crucially during periods of rural crises in the 19th and 20th centuries. The book is dedicated to the examination of silences and erasures, specifically those that have facilitated the development of universal and modernist narratives related to humanitarian action and solidarity. Feeding on the dialectic between knowledge destruction and physical violence during the Maoist period, *Modern Erasures* aims to explore the intertwined relation between the Western civilizing missions in China and the revolutionary program of Mao Zedong, as both of them were directed to Chinese rural communities.

Prior to Fuller, scholars like Deleuze, Guattari and Hevia focused on colonialism as part of the growth of the capitalist structure. Fuller, however, demonstrates how these capitalist processes relate to the reinterpretation of humanitarian positions and to the perception of communities seen as “backwards” (p. 23).¹ The Cultural Revolution is commonly understood as a repudiation of all things associated with or representing the West. Contrastingly, Fuller utilizes the prism of revolutionary and communal memory to scrutinize the trajectory of the Cultural Revolution, and this analysis leads to the thought-provoking thesis that the Cultural Revolution is fundamentally an “outgrowth of colonial modernity” (p. 292).

1. Deleuze G., Guattari F. (1977) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, New York: Viking Press, 222–40. 63; Hevia J. (2003) *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth Century China*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 21–27, 128–42.



Modern Erasures proceeds by analyzing different media, crucially pièces of writing, Western and Chinese novels, theatrical works, local gazettes and woodcuts, in the fifty years between the May Fourth Movement (1919) and the peak of the Cultural Revolution in 1969.

The research is organized into four parts.

Part I, titled 'Seeing and Not Seeing,' focuses on the perception of writers and activists regarding certain phenomena in rural China during the 1920s, specifically environmental crises such as famine and earthquakes, and social and cultural uprisings, such as the May Fourth Movement. The name of the first part stems from the media's decision to represent or not represent such events. The first chapter investigates how crisis events were addressed and, more importantly, remembered; the second chapter deals with the reception of the May Fourth Movement in university circles, which aimed at the reformist and revolutionary transformation of China. The third chapter focuses on the interpretation of those same crisis events and the support by the West. Crucially, it demonstrates how the ideas of Chinese intellectuals of that period owed a debt to Western exegesis on the value attributed to human life and solidarity in 1920s China.

The second part, 'Revolutionary Memory in Republican China,' analyzes the evolution of revolutionary memory through cultural production during the 1920s and 1930s, demonstrating how accounts of the impact of famine and earthquakes were excluded from liberal narratives. The fourth chapter considers children's magazines and textbooks on civic education and history, while the fifth chapter focuses on Shanghai newspapers and party reports, critically examining the development of the term 'lieshen' (evil peasants) in the context of the Guomindang and Communist codification of rural life. The sixth chapter analyzes the reduction of complex rural communities to peasantries, both in artistic and academic works. Examining the impact of Pearl Buck's 'The Good Earth' and Mao Qijun's 'Sociology and Social Issues', Fuller shows how such communities were stigmatized as "essentially lacking the social chemistry to organize" (p. 154): not knowing "how to work together; there is nothing to arouse social awareness" (p. 156).² The development of visceral 'muke' (woodcuts) by communist artists is illustrated in the seventh chapter, shedding light on the transformation of depicted subjects: from urban characters, to the proletariat, to those termed 'forsaken subjects' from 1945 to 1949, namely individuals outside social and civic networks in rural areas.

Part III, 'Maoist Narratives in the 40s,' illustrates the inculcation of Maoist morality first in Yan'an and later in cities and rural areas. According to the author, this occurred through the production of theatrical works

2. Buck P. (1939) *Introduction to My Country and My People*, by Lin Yutang. London: W. Heinemann; Mao Q. (1933) 毛起鵞. *Shehui xue ji shehui wenti* 社會學及社會問題. Shanghai: Minzhi shuju.

like ‘Chi Ye He’ and through youth association newspapers such as ‘Minzhu Gingnian’, as depicted in Chapters eight and nine.

The fourth and final part explores the dialectic between the two types of memory—revolutionary and communal—that has evolved in the People’s Republic. In the tenth and eleventh chapters, ‘Wenshi Ziliao’ (cultural and historical materials) are compared with local records from the 1920s to explore how perceptions of rural life in the past were instrumentalized during the agrarian reforms of 1949. The twelfth chapter delves into the reinforcement of revolutionary memory following the economic and social debacle of the Great Leap Forward, while the last chapter demonstrates the extent to which the tension between communal and revolutionary memory elucidates the potency of the political narrative of the People’s Republic of China.



Modern Erasures sets out from the intriguing premise of addressing a question overlooked by historians, that is, what aspects of ‘peasants’ culture were erased during the collapse of pre-revolutionary rural China, giving rise to the very title of the work. The book aims to focus on a category not widely considered, namely, rural China in villages and small towns of the 20th century (p. 10). Drawing inspiration from the tradition of Lucien Bianco’s research, the book redirects attention to local gazettes ‘difangzhi’ and first-hand accounts showcasing the richness of rural China.³

Examining the phenomena of silence and erasure might seem like a theoretical stretch. Nonetheless, Fuller’s insightful strategy involves tackling the scarcity of testimonies by concentrating on catastrophic events and their communal responses; this choice is justified by the assumption that such events would likely have garnered attention from journalists and documentarians. Focusing on episodes of crisis allows the historian to observe the interplay between emphasis and erasure of solidarity policies in rural areas, a terrain otherwise epistemologically inaccessible and obscure. Additionally, the book employs a creative approach by scrutinizing realistic literature, civic education manuals, and artistic production to explore the formulation of distinctly Chinese public morality and its potential omission from the accounts of 20th-century intellectuals. Its objective is not to provide an exact representation of historical realities, but rather to document what both Chinese and Western individuals have written or omitted concerning Chinese communal life. The goal is to identify variations and contextualize the writings within a broader experience of modernity.

The book succeeds in demonstrating how the nationalism and campaigning of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) owe a debt to the erasure of certain aspects of rural Chinese cultural life. On a point of observation,

3. Bianco L. (1971), *Origins of the Chinese Revolution, 1915–1949*, trans. Muriel Bell, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 87, 90.

the insightful aim to generalize the universal drive towards modernity amid contingent crises is tempered by a potential limitation. Overlooking power transition elements not directly tied to crises may compromise the intended universality. This calls for further exploration in subsequent research, adding complexity and prompting readers to critically engage with the author's perspective.

The author's brilliant insight lies in his astute analysis of crisis events to unveil what was erased by the epistemic violence of Maoist ideologies within rural Chinese culture. This innovative approach not only sheds light on overlooked facets but also encourages readers to reconsider the intricate layers of a cultural heritage marred by Maoist influences. *Modern Erasures* is an important and timely read for scholars and graduate students who are interested in the history and sociology of 20th century China.

A COUNTY IN MANCHUKUO

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Filippo Dornetti, *Integrazione politica e società nella Manciuuria coloniale: L'Associazione della Concordia nella Contea del Fushun*, Milano: Franco Angeli, 2021, 130 pp. (ISBN 978-8-83-514620-9).

Manchukuo was the puppet state created in the early 1930s by the Japanese in Manchuria. The head of the state was Puyi, the last emperor of the Manchu dynasty who had been forced to abdicate the Celestial Empire while still a child in February 1912. The state of Manchukuo is known among scholars beyond the compass of Asian history because the conquest of Manchuria marked, together with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia a few years later, the breakdown of the balance and rules defined by the League of Nations after the First World War. Despite its importance in the history of international relations, the internal political history of Manchukuo remains largely on the margins of Western historiography. Filippo Dornetti's book *Integrazione politica e società nella Manciuuria coloniale: L'Associazione della Concordia nella contea del Fushun* fills this lacuna. The text is a rare study on the Concordia Association of Manchukuo. The Association owes its name to its primary objective, namely the realization of the principle of 'concord among peoples' (*minzoku kyōwa*) of the state, a concept exalted in the Declaration of Independence, but born in Japanese circles in Manchuria at the end of the 1920s (pp. 13-14). The harmony between peoples has been interpreted by historiography as the legitimization of the Japanese occupation and the protection of the Japanese minority in the territory. Writing that «L'armonizzazione di interessi contrapposti, però, fu un problema politico reale che l'Associazione consegnò alle sue sezioni locali» (p. 14) Dornetti presents, on the basis of primary sources, a more careful and complex reading of the political and ideological space outlined by the Association. The state-building program that historiography has been able to grasp in the fundamental motivations of the Association is not denied. However, it is presented by the author as part of the task of mediation and resolution of problems at a local level – undertaken by the Association through the village elites – between the different groups. On an organizational level, the Concordia Association mirrored the territorial organization of Manchukuo, but despite its top-down structure the territorial branches had been able in the first years of independence to maintain a certain autonomy until 1937. The Association, its structure, membership and working methods are analysed in detail through the study of the specific case of Fushun County, in the Fengtian region.

The first chapter of the book presents the birth of the Manchu Youth League in the city of Fushun in 1928. The author starts from the pre-eminent role of the South Manchuria Railway Company in Manchuria, and in particular in Fushun, analysing the growth of the city driven by coal mining. Dornetti presents its successes, related in particular to mining – and its difficulties especially in the chemical and food sectors, with the exception of rice cultivation, reconstructing attentively the economic and demographic framework that characterized Fushun. The last part of the chapter is dedicated to the birth of the Manchu Youth League (*Manshū seimen renmei*) in 1928, the year of the assassination of Zhang Zuolin, the warlord of Manchuria. The League was founded by Japanese colonists, and, after the Japanese occupation, it was called the Concordia Association of Manchukuo (*Man-shūkoku Kyōwakai*). The League had its roots in another Japanese organization, the Manetsu Employees' Association, but was open to a more varied composition.

The second chapter highlights the reasons for the strength, evidenced by the widespread membership, of the Association in Fushun County, i.e. the relationship between the Japanese settlers and the Chinese village elites. The time span goes from the beginning of the occupation until 1943. The socio-economic picture of the rural areas of Fushun County is first presented on the basis of a 1934 investigation within a report by the Kyōwakai of Fushun. The author goes on to analyse the role of the elites of the villages and their relationship with the Association. Over the years, these elites became mediators between the Association and the rest of the population. They were essentially the pivot of the Association in the villages. Agriculture was modernized, while the traditional social structure was maintained. Part of the chapter then focuses on membership and changes on an organizational level. Despite the economic difficulties due to the military conflict - in particular from 1937 when taxation increased and actions aimed at social welfare ceased - many farmers did not leave the Association with a view to personal gain.

The third chapter is dedicated to the project of the Concordia Irrigation Society, as part of a broad analysis of rice growing in Fushun County from the birth of the Chinese Republic to the Japanese occupation - which marked the true development of the rice growing sector that lasted until the beginning of the 1940s. The author has the merit of emphasizing the centrality of the Society understood as «un tentativo di tradurre in termini concreti la dottrina corporativista di mediazione degli interessi tra le diverse nazioni che componevano il Manchukuo» (p. 92), while underlining its substantial failure.

Finally, the fourth and final chapter outlines a comparison between the branch of Majun, carefully studied in the second chapter, with three other branches of the Association. The Majun branch is in fact compared to the Tuqian branch, in the county of Yushu (Jilin) to the Xinkang branch

in Shuangcheng County (Binjiang) and finally to the Yulin branch in Jian County (Tonghua). From the comparison the link emerges between the individual interests of the farmers and membership of the Association, somehow debasing the ideal character. Dornetti writes: «Il fatto che fu proprio la sezione di Fushun, più facoltosa, a raggiungere un numero maggiore di iscritti, ci permette di riflettere sulla natura della partecipazione alla Kyōwakai da parte della popolazione mancese» (p. 114). The author sees the causes not in the «forza persuasiva dell'ideale panasiatico», but in the «potere di attrazione esercitato dagli incentivi materiali offerti dalle sezioni, sia nelle politiche assistenziali, che nella risoluzione di controversie» (p. 114). It is an important comparison which suggests a strong limit to the contours of the ideal and ideological space of most of the members of the Association, beyond the objectives of the Kyōwakai. It thus provides an essential element in understanding the history of Manchukuo.

Dornetti's text is evidently an interesting book for historians of both Manchukuo and of colonialism in China. As mentioned, the work is based on primary sources that have been studied by the author. Starting from a specific and limited case, the author provides us with a careful and precise analysis which can be a harbinger of further studies and reflections. The invitation that can be addressed to Dornetti is to broaden his research with further studies, perhaps starting from a translation into English of his book in order to make it accessible to a wider audience.

THE POLITICS OF FAMINE AND RELIEF IN INDIA, CA. 1880-1950:
AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

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Joanna Simonow, *Ending Famine in India: A Transnational History of Food Aid and Development, ca. 1890-1950*, Leiden: Leiden University Press 2023, 286 pp. (ISBN 9789087284046).

According to the World Food Programme (WFP), nearly up to 783 million people do not have enough to eat and 47 million people suffer from hunger. Natural and manmade disasters, warfare, political unrest, and socio-economical iniquities, further exacerbated by the consequences of Covid 19, concur to create food insecurities which dramatically impact vulnerable communities.¹ One fourth of the undernourished world population lives in India only, despite the country's growing economy and steady food production.² The WFP has implemented food and nutrition programs in India since 1963, when food aid became a vector of development, modernization, and political stability, alongside similar programs put in place in the Middle East.³ More specifically, since 2015 the WFP has worked towards “improving access to food, reducing malnutrition, increasing incomes and livelihoods and building resilient food systems” in order to meet the 2030 sustainable development goals to end hunger.⁴

The WFP's policies on food distribution, on fortified meals for vulnerable categories, or on the scientific indicators by which the Indian territory is closely monitored, not only open a window into current trends of humanitarian and development policies, but they can also illuminate the past. Joanna Simonow's book – *Ending famine in India. A Transnational history of food aid and development, ca. 1980-1950* – offers a deeply researched, highly original, carefully situated in the literature(s), and engaging analysis of the web of institutions and actors including “medical practitioners, nutritional scientists, social reformers, agricultural experts, missionaries, politicians, and colonial administrators” who designed and implemented solutions to

1. “Ending hunger”, <https://www.wfp.org/ending-hunger> (accessed 8 February 2024).

2. “India”, <https://www.wfp.org/countries/india> (accessed 8 February 2024).

3. Lola Wilhelm, “Local Histories of International Food Aid Policies from the Interwar Period to the 1960s: The World Food Programme in the Middle East”, in Kirill Dmitriev, Julia Hauser and Bilal Orfali (eds.) *Insatiable Appetite. Food as Cultural Signifier in the Middle East and Beyond*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill 2019, pp. 340–58.

4. “India country strategic plan (2023-2027)”, <https://www.wfp.org/operations/in03-india-country-strategic-plan-2023-2027> (accessed 8 February 2024).

end famine (13). The main contribution of the book is to go beyond the familiar equation of British institutions and Indian nationalists in the fight against famine from the late colonial period to the first years of independence. Simonow not only adds a third actor, American missionaries who got involved in famine relief in late 19th century Bombay, but she also expands the geopolitics of hunger to North America where missionary and philanthropist groups showed interest for India and where Indian social and political movements created anti-British networks. In doing so, Simonow joins a group of scholars of South-Asia – including Michael Philipp Brunner, Maria Framke, Harald Fischer-Tiné, Eleonor Marcussen, Corinna Unger, and Elena Valdameri – who have complicated Western narratives of care and modernization in India's colonial and independent period.

Through the juxtaposition of famines which had only been studied singly, from the late 19th century to the Bengal famine in the 1940s, the book's main argument lies in the continuities of ideas and policies regarding famine aid and development across the large, diversified spectrum of the actors studied. By means of intertwined scales, Simonow bridges provincial, national, regional, and global perspectives, thanks to which one can follow where ideas emerged, how they circulated and how they were (re)appropriated in different contexts. The book has the merit to introduce a large number of actors and interrogates the peculiar meanings each gave to famine relief: colonial authorities, who based the famine codes on the "average working man" (p. 46), addressed special programs to children as the future productive colonial subjects; American missionaries engaged in social services as an alternative way towards projects of gradual conversion (p. 73); Indian nationalists who targeted groups excluded from the relief politics of British rule, while those who were in North America increasingly "capitalized on famine to draw attention to the exploitative nature of colonial governance" (p. 131).

As feminist critique claims, knowledge is plural and situated.⁵ I approach *Ending famine in India* from within and beyond my comfort zone. My interests in the history of American Protestant missionaries and Western humanitarian organizations find echoes in the transnational connections, circulations, and exchanges at the book's core. Post-imperial Central and Eastern Europe and the mandated Middle East, where the actors that I examine operated, offer the opportunity to think comparatively about how colonialism, imperialism, and the geopolitics of care are connected. Nevertheless, I am not a specialist of South Asia, which explains why I might have benefitted from an expanded historical background in support of a complex narrative where a huge array of actors is presented. It would have been also productive for the author to reflect on methodology and to dwell on the rich number of primary sources on which the book builds.

5. Donna Haraway "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99.

The book is organized in three parts: the first one deals with the role of the British administrators in setting the contour of the politics of famine as an economic problem and of malnutrition as a scientific one; the second one tackles the expansion of American Protestant missionaries in India, arguing that immediate responses to famine turned out to be a pathway to engaging in long-term rural reforms; the third one claims that Indian anti-colonial nationalists rallied around famine relief to meet their political goals, creating transnational allegiances with American groups, including missionaries, civil rights advocates, and labor groups. The choice of a synchronic actor-based structure allows scholars to concentrate on their specific interests, yet, at times, it also leaves the reader to make connections between parallel, interweaved stories. “Writing the history of the global” is indeed an open endeavor, on which historians are still much debating.⁶

The author critically tackles the definition of famine, which comes across as plural, highly debated, and politically contested. Rather than imposing a mold from outside-in, she neatly asks how the actors at the core of the book understood famine and argues that definitions, far from being neutral, contributed to shape “policies, relief measures, and scientific solutions”. For instance, the British colonial authorities conveniently looked at famine as “exceptional periods”, as they lacked the means and the political willingness to address the root causes. Such conceptualization had immediate consequences on relief measures, which ambiguously distinguished between deserving and undeserving recipients, while the emergence of the Indian famine codes in late 19th century failed to scientifically measure when famine relief should be put in place (pp. 14-15). At the same time, discourses around the dangers of famine were catalysts of humanitarian responses, where practices and policies of relief, rehabilitation, and development aimed not only to the stability of India but also of the broader region.

Applying a similar empirical approach to the ideas and politics of humanitarian aid and development could have been useful to understand what institutions and their agents meant by them and how definitions shaped the implementation of programs, or the other way around, as well as the lives of the persons involved.⁷ What does a focus on famine relief in India tell us about continuity and change in the history of humanitarianism where, so far, analyses have generalized out of case-studies in Europe and in the

6. Maxine Berg (ed.), *Writing the History of the Global Challenges for the Twenty-First Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013.

7. Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2012.

Middle East?⁸ Does a focus on famine relief in India confirm or revise what we know of Christian internationalism from the late colonial to the early independent era? Last, do the “voices” of recipients of aid emerge from the archival sources which the author mobilizes⁹ and, if so, how? Rather than shortcomings, these questions are a window into the book’s methodological and analytical innovations.

In addition to the histories of humanitarianism, development, science, and anti-colonialism, to which this book contributes, Simonow engages with global labor history and with women’s and gender history, among others. She also shows how “an integrated view” further challenges assumptions of “origin stories”. The scientific knowledge that was gained in responding to starvation circulated from India to post-WWII Europe, carrying mixed results. Experiments in fortified foods in the US after the Great Depression were precedents for the multi-purpose foods that many American organizations distributed in India in the early 1950s. Far from being passive recipient of colonial, missionary, and international projects, in the following decades India became a place for knowledge production in the fields of fortified foods and nutrition. These examples prove that, as any great book, *Ending famine in India* offers answers and open new questions. I do look forward to seeing on which topics Simonow will apply her rigor, creativity, and brave vision.

8. Bruno Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–1924*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2014; Keith David Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones. The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2015; Davide Rodogno, *Night on Earth. A History of International Humanitarianism in the Near East, 1918–1930*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2022.

9. Peter Gatrell, Anindita Ghoshal, Katarzyna Nowak, and Alex Dowdall. “Reckoning with Refugeeedom: Refugee Voices in Modern History.” *Social History* 46, no. 1 (2021): 70–95

ON BALANCING HISTORIES LARGE AND SMALL:
MODERN INDIA AND K.M. PANIKKAR

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Mauro Elli and Rita Paolini, *Indian National Identity and Foreign Policy: Re-Evaluating the Career of K.M. Panikkar (1894-1963)*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 270pp. (ISBN 978-3-031-36242-2).

Can an individual life speak to larger historical developments? A cursory glance at the bookcase in my office that is devoted to modern Indian history would answer this question in the affirmative: some of the most insightful works the bookcase contains, use individuals as prisms to shed light on India's larger story. Readers would seem to agree, too: such books draw large academic and non-academic audiences. This is as true for biographies as it is for books that do not centre an individual life, but rather use that life as an organizing principle for a broader narrative.

There appears to be much less consensus, however, when it comes to how the authors of these books view themselves, and this cannot be seen as separate from the awkward status of biography within the discipline of history. As popular as the genre of biography is with the general public, the profession has long considered biography as a “lesser” form of history. In a 2009 roundtable entitled “Historians and Biography” in the *American Historical Review*, Judith Brown opened by saying that she does not agree with the labelling of her books on Gandhi and Nehru as biographies: “I do not see myself as a biographer, or these works as biographies, in the accepted sense of tracking and interpreting a life from the cradle to the grave, and, more problematically, of taking the individual as the only intellectual and analytical center of the argument.”¹ Rather, she argues, following the course of a life can add depth and complexity to the analysis of larger developments.

I believe that the authors of *Indian National Identity and Foreign Policy*, who approach this topic through Indian historian-diplomat K.M. Panikkar, would largely agree with this statement. In the book's introduction, they state that “the purpose of this research is the study of a significant character because it is believed that, in this way, it might be possible to contribute to a better understanding of certain dynamics of great importance for the history of India ... this means that this will be a biography of Panikkar only

1. Judith Brown, “‘Life Histories’ and the History of Modern South Asia”, *The American Historical Review* 114:3 (2009), 587-595: 587.

to a certain extent, namely the intellectual and professional one.”² In other words, the book’s intent is not to illuminate Panikkar as a three-dimensional historical figure with a private life and the affective ties that come with it, but rather to centre his extraordinary career and prolific writings to view Indian national identity and foreign policy – as the main title tells us – from an underexplored angle.

This is a difficult balance to strike. After all, what is an affective tie and what is a professional one, and might they not sometimes overlap? How public is the private, and vice versa, for a diplomat – let alone one who actively published on not just the history and politics, but also the literature and poetry of the countries to which he was posted? Panikkar’s career trajectory, especially in the interwar years, took some sudden twists and turns, and some of the underlying reasons, by Panikkar’s own admission, were very much prompted by his private circumstances. It is impossible to make such separations neatly, which means that, over the course of this book, the reader must accept that some questions remain unanswered.

By contrast, the story of modern India that is offered by Elli and Paolini in this book is exceptionally clear, which is arguably a much harder feat to accomplish. The history of India’s late-colonial and early post-independence trajectory which they offer in this book is not just well-constructed, but the product of a clear set of thematic choices and an underlying primary source base that is both broad and deep. For readers that seek a history that has the thoroughness of a handbook but the readability that comes with life writing, I cannot recommend this highly enough.

Given the range of Panikkar’s writings, the authors have resisted the temptation of being encyclopaedic, while maintaining a chronological approach. The choices they made give the book direction. To highlight a few: they focus primarily on Panikkar’s Anglophone writings – some of which was originally published in Malayalam and later translated – and on his historical and political writings on India, rather than on his regional histories of Malabar or his literary work. I present this as a choice because there is certainly some bleed between these categories. Panikkar’s 1951 introduction to his *Modern Chinese Stories*, for example, is as telling of his views on modern China and modern Asia as his diplomatic missives, if less explicit.

Likewise, the authors have elected to focus on the national rather than the international for the 1920s and 1930s, touching only briefly on Panikkar’s second European sojourn in 1925-1927. Given that this sojourn gave rise to some of Panikkar’s writings specifically on Malabar, this is entirely consistent, even if it removes the possibility of tying his international activities in the interwar period to his international work as diplomat in the postwar years. Interestingly, given the large number of studies that have come out in recent years on Indian internationalism in the interwar years,

it has the added benefit of appearing as a refreshing corrective to recent trends. The international turn in the historiography of India has broken new ground and continues to produce exciting work. That the authors remain in conversation with this literature while electing to focus on the national story, adds credibility to their choice of narrative. Finally, it enables them to tell the history of the integration of the Princely States in a thoroughly contextualized way. Given the instrumental role Panikkar played in this regard, this too is a fitting choice.

It deserves highlighting at this point, that *Indian National Identity and Foreign Policy* is a co-authored book that is nevertheless very consistent in tone, style, and structure. It is also balanced in terms of its treatment of the pre- and post-independence decades. The subtitle, *Re-Evaluating the Career of K.M. Panikkar*, does leave the reader with questions about the “re” in the re-evaluation. Critics of Panikkar do emerge in the book, especially of the role he played in China, which is covered in the fifth chapter. But some of the criticism will appear surprising to readers who come to this book without prior knowledge of Panikkar’s life and work. Accusations of toeing the PRC party line appear counterintuitive to all the cautious and moderate politics covered in the preceding chapter, just as labels like “Mestophelian” or “without moral compass” will appear extreme.³ It is here, as with Panikkar’s role in China more generally, that one wishes for the authors to position themselves more clearly. How do they weigh these events? In short, if this is a “re-evaluation”, what is it, exactly, and whose prior evaluation should readers discard?

This is not to detract from the conclusion to the book, in which the authors do indeed attempt to evaluate Panikkar’s body of historical and political writing as a whole. They arrive at a set of “antinomies”, past/modernity and unity/diversity in particular, that are constants in his work. These elements change in relative weight along with India’s, and indeed Panikkar’s own, circumstances, but they remain present throughout his life.⁴ Given Panikkar’s range of subject matter, this is a wonderful note on which to end the book, given that these antinomies prominently appear in some of Panikkar’s literary work as well, such as *Parankippalayāṭi* (Portuguese Soldier, 1934) or *Keṛālasimham* (Lion of Kerala, 1941), lending strength to the conclusion beyond the works discussed in the book.

In the end, *Indian National Identity and Foreign Policy* is an apt demonstration of the benefits of life-writing in telling larger histories in new ways. As Judith Brown notes: “acknowledging the collapse of many grand narratives of history, and the historical hollowness of some recent theoretical approaches, working in part with life histories enables a more nuanced methodology that allows the historian to shift gaze from the general theme and

3. 151.

4. 227.

theory to the particular and precise experience of people and groups, moving from one to the other as each type of focus checks and illuminates the other.”⁵ By telling the story of India’s pre- and post-independence decades through Panikkar’s involvement in them, whether central or peripheral, the authors have done just that.

5. Brown, “Life Histories,” 587.

“RIVALRY AND RECONCILIATION: CHARTING THE MIDDLE EAST’S POWER
DYNAMICS BETWEEN IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA”

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Ibrahim Fraihat, *Iran and Saudi Arabia: Taming a Chaotic Conflict*, Edinburgh University Press, 2020, 248 pp. (ISBN 978-1474466189).

Simon Mabon, *The Struggle for Supremacy in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and Iran*, Cambridge University Press, 2023, 268 pp. (ISBN 978-1108473361).

In 2023, an intriguing development occurred in the diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as they reestablished formal ties following seven years of estrangement. This reconciliation was facilitated through a mediation process brokered by China and appeared to stem from a series of track two diplomatic dialogues. In this latest backdrop of interesting events of conflict and conciliation unfolding between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the scholarly works of Simon Mabon and Ibrahim Fraihat are not only timely but essential to understand the dynamics of rival relationship between the two countries.

While the main focus of Mabon’s “The Struggle for Supremacy in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and Iran” is to understand the multifaceted impact of the rivalry spanning decades between Saudi Arabia and Iran on both local and regional politics throughout the Middle East, Fraihat’s “Iran and Saudi Arabia: Taming a Chaotic Conflict” attempts to fill the gap in the majority of available literature on Saudi Arabia and Iran which usually focuses on conflicts, by exploring conflict resolution approaches to the existing cold war.

Mabon’s book offers a comprehensive exploration of the Saudi Arabia-Iran rivalry’s impact on regional and local politics in the Middle East. Mabon’s scholarship in its seven chapters provides exhaustive detail on various aspects, including regional security, identity politics, and sectarianism across five case study countries: Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Rather than simplifying the narrative of sectarian proxy relationships, the research delves into the complex ways in which regional actors shape local politics and vice versa. Utilizing interviews with officials, activists, scholars, and journalists, alongside other sources, the book offers evidence-based insights into the impact of the rivalry on regional politics. Analyzing historical trajectories and contemporary developments, Mabon argues that while the Saudi-Iranian rivalry significantly shapes regional politics, its parameters are not solely determined by Riyadh and Tehran

but are also influenced by local contestations across political, social, economic, and religious domains.

In the chapter, 'States, Sects, and Order', the author provides insights through a multifaceted approach, incorporating geopolitical strategies, religious considerations, ideological differences, socioeconomic factors, and societal dynamics to understand the evolving nature of the rivalry across temporal and spatial dimensions. The fluidity of capital movement across domestic and transnational spheres underscores the complexity of Iran-Saudi regional dynamics.

The subsequent chapter traces the historical trajectory of the Saudi-Iran rivalry, delineating key periods marked by shifting dynamics, from engagement to heightened tensions. It challenges the notion of 'ancient hatreds' by contextualizing the rivalry within contemporary political crises and global power dynamics. The chapter highlights the complex interplay of global forces and domestic politics in shaping the rivalry, reflecting its evolution as a product of evolving contingencies.

The following chapter delves into the complex dynamics of Iraqi politics within the broader context of regional power struggles. It explores the significant event of the US drone strike in January 2020, targeting Iranian General Qassim Suleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, further escalating tensions in the region. Despite internal divisions and external pressures, Iraq has emerged as a mediator between regional powers, signaling a shift in transnational power dynamics. The analysis also examines strategies employed by Saudi Arabia and Iran to assert influence in Iraq, with Iran relying on religious and cultural capital, while Saudi Arabia increasingly utilizes economic and cultural influence. This reflects the evolving dynamics of power within the region and highlights the ongoing struggle for dominance between regional powers. Overall, the chapter provides valuable insights into the intricate web of political, social, and economic factors shaping Iraqi politics.

Similarly, the book offers a comprehensive analysis of Bahrain's political landscape within the context of regional power struggles, exploring its evolution from a shared political community to a contested territory controlled by Sunni rulers. It examines how Bahrain's geographical location and demographic composition have made it a battleground for competing interests, resulting in a complex interplay of economic, political, and religious capital. Furthermore, the chapter critically investigates narratives propagated by the ruling Al-Khalifa family regarding Iranian involvement in domestic unrest, encouraging a more nuanced understanding of Bahrain's socio-political dynamics.

The subsequent chapters discuss Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, each providing valuable insights into the complexities of regional dynamics and the Saudi-Iran rivalry's impact on these countries. The conclusion discusses the challenges of improving relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, influ-

enced by economic factors and shifting international dynamics. It emphasizes the importance of understanding the rivalry in the broader context of regional politics and stresses the urgent need for diplomatic solutions to mitigate further harm inflicted by conflicts involving Saudi Arabia and Iran.

As a specialist consulted by international organizations about conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction in the Arab world, Fraihat in his book deals with the recommendations made in Mabon's book on diplomatic solutions to attain regional stability. Across four chapters, Fraihat attempts to fill a gap in the literature by doing three things: first, unlike the majority of the available literature that focuses on an understanding of the conflict, he takes a conflict resolution approach to assess how the conflict can be managed and effectively resolved. Second, while discussion generally revolves around what each government can do to resolve the conflict – also known as track one – this book takes an integrated approach to the resolution, arguing that effective peacebuilding in this conflict needs to be applied on three levels: government, track two, and grassroots. Third, while the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is generally treated in the literature as a subject for area studies, this book takes an interdisciplinary approach by bringing area studies into dialogue with conflict resolution and peace studies to present a coherent understanding of the drivers of the conflict and how it could be effectively resolved.

Fraihat's book offers a critical examination of the entrenched conflict between the two regional powers, reframing it within the context of contemporary geopolitical dynamics. The author's analysis is sharp and dissects the complex web of motivations and historical narratives that have fueled the rivalry for over four decades. Rather than succumbing to the prevailing pessimism surrounding the conflict, Fraihat boldly explores avenues for potential resolution. The book aptly critiques the futile diplomatic efforts and scholarly discourse that have failed to stem the tide of violence and instability unleashed by the Iran-Saudi Arabia conflict. It emphasizes the staggering human cost of proxy wars in Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and Iraq, where countless lives have been sacrificed amidst a backdrop of geopolitical maneuvering and opportunistic arms deals.

Fraihat challenges the conventional wisdom that views reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia as an unattainable goal. Drawing on historical precedents such as the Franco-German reconciliation post-World War II, he highlights instances of tentative cooperation between the two adversaries, suggesting that such gestures could pave the way for broader rapprochement.

Central to Fraihat's thesis is the recognition of security as the primary driver of conflict. He argues persuasively that addressing the immediate security concerns of both parties is essential for laying the groundwork for constructive dialogue. By reframing the conflict narrative away from sectarianism and geopolitical power plays, Fraihat advocates for a prag-

matic approach that prioritizes confidence-building measures and crisis management.

The author's proposed conflict resolution framework is ambitious yet pragmatic. He advocates for the establishment of a crisis management system that includes direct communication channels, technical coordination committees, and confidence-building measures. Through incremental steps aimed at de-escalation and trust-building, Fraihat envisions a pathway toward eventual reconciliation.

Critically, Fraihat challenges the entrenched narratives perpetuated by both sides, debunking the simplistic sectarian interpretations of the conflict. He exposes how leaders in Tehran and Riyadh have instrumentalized sectarian tensions to bolster their domestic and regional legitimacy, perpetuating a dangerous cycle of escalation. Fraihat's analysis also sheds light on the broader geopolitical dimensions of the conflict, particularly the role of external factors such as the United States and Israel. He argues provocatively that these powers have exploited tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia to advance their interests, further complicating efforts at resolution.

While acknowledging the controversial nature of his proposals, Fraihat remains steadfast in his belief that a forward-looking dialogue is essential for breaking the deadlock in the conflict resolution process. His book serves as a rallying cry for diplomats, policymakers, and scholars to rethink entrenched assumptions and explore new pathways toward peace in the Middle East.

Overall, the two books complement each other, offering insights into conflicts and exploring various approaches to resolve them. Both authors express hope for inevitable political change, yet they also harbor apprehensions about its scope and direction. This sentiment is evident from the thorough analysis presented in the books, drawing from a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including well-known scholarly works by both Iranian and non-Iranian authors, published both within and outside Iran. With its timely relevance, these books offer valuable insights for students, researchers, academics, policymakers, diplomats, and anyone interested in understanding the cycles of rivalry and reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

SEEKING SECURITY AND TRADE IN ASIA?
OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR AUSTRALIA

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Sam Roggeveen, *The Echidna Strategy, Australia's Search for Power and Peace*, Collingwood: La Trobe University Press in conjunction with Black Inc., 2023, 1+233pages (ISBN: 978174823279 ebook).

Andrew Charlton, *Australia's Pivot to India*, Collingwood: Black Inc., 2023, 1+311pages (ISBN: 9781743823316 ebook).

Roggeveen's *The Echidna Strategy* and Charlton's *Pivot to India* are both about opportunities for Australia to build closer diplomatic and strategic relationships with Asian powers. They argue that changes in Australia's domestic and international environments provide compelling reasons to overcome past obstacles.

In their accounts, two factors stand out. First, while Australia has long clung to its European foundations and alliance with the US, it trades with Asia. It trades especially with China—a source of both profit and fear. Second, Australia's population of 26.3 million is no longer predominantly Anglo Celtic. Following the 1939-1945 war an assertive immigration program brought migrants first from Britain, then from northern Europe and then from southern Europe. Immigrants account for 30 per cent of the population. Migration from Asia, recently from China and more recently still from India, has confirmed it as multicultural, with notable Asian components. At the 2021 census 17.4 per cent of the population identified as having Asian ancestry. That current migration policy emphasises graduate qualifications and skills in high demand makes it attractive to the many potential immigrants from Asia who meet these criteria. Multiculturalism is likely to continue to deepen. However, it is likely also to remain contested.

Both authors are more than aware of continuing inhibitions, not to mention outright fears, that obstruct explicit changes in direction. Since the 1980s, changes in economic and social policy combined with rapid technological change have widened gaps between social groups. The egalitarianism on which many Australians have prided themselves has frayed. Aspiration has collided with stunted access to economic success. Professional and well-educated Australians do well. Less well-educated ones struggle for well-paying jobs and for the comfortable lifestyles they see others enjoying. Further, for many in Australia, trade on a transactional basis with Asian powers, even an assertively rising China, is one thing; diplomatic closeness and strategic links to culturally different countries are quite another. In these

circumstances, fiercely contested domestic politics means that opportunities advocated can easily become choices avoided.

In *The Echidna Strategy* Roggeveen advocates, against the grain of the security community of which he is a member, that Australia rethink its dependence on ‘great and powerful friends’, principally the US. In particular, he argues against bipartisan support for the recently promulgated AUK-US Partnership (Australia, UK, US). This aims to provide Australia with access to conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines and to joint advanced military capabilities deployed in the Asia Pacific region. Under AUKUS Australian power would be technologically advanced and projected beyond its shores. And with familiar allies.

Roggeveen takes a very different tack. He proposes a defence strategy based close to home. He argues that Australia should make a strength of its geographical position adjacent to Asia and of its sprawling but often unwelcoming island continent. He names his strategy for an Australian animal, the echidna. It has porcupine like quills, is solitary, and is uncomfortable to get close to. It is also generally inoffensive unless attacked. He is director of the International Security Program at the Lowy Institute (a prominent privately funded think tank) and worked previously as an intelligence analyst in government. His standpoint is explicitly centre right.

In *Pivot to India* Charlton argues that the time is right to make closer ties with India. He explores opportunities for increased security links and trade. He celebrates the substantial Indian origin diaspora in Australia—about 1 million people or nearly 4 percent of the population—and sees Indian origin Australians as vital enablers of closer ties. However, he is very aware of the failures of past attempts at closer relations.

Charlton represents the Australian Labor Party in the national parliament in a marginal metropolitan seat in Sydney. The seat has a substantial Hindu population, approximately 31,000 or 17 percent. Charlton also has a distinguished academic record as an economist, was an adviser to a former Labor Prime Minister, and founded a data driven strategy consultancy acquired quickly by a major consulting group. His interest in India is long standing and began with participation in a program of India Australia youth dialogues.

The Echidna Strategy aims to persuade by analysis and reason. It sets out a carefully argued case. *Pivot to India* aims to persuade by outlining opportunities, including, but going further than, security and trade. It invites Australians to think about the benefits of the cultural change closer relations with India might bring. Taken together the books invite readers to think about the ways such approaches could help build improved relations with Asian powers.



Roggeveen's advocacy of an Echidna Strategy is based on three elements: distance from potential threats, alliances with neighbouring powers, and capability to inflict unacceptable pain on an invader. He gives two main reasons: first, that the US is unlikely to remain the leading strategic power in Asia; and second, that Australia can defend itself without calling upon the US. In Australia neither point is uncontroversial. However, both have been welcomed in influential quarters as usefully provocative. Similar views have been expressed by former prime minister Paul Keating (Australian Labor Party 1991-96) and former foreign minister Gareth Evans (Australian Labor Party 1988-96).

Roggeveen argues that in its approach to Asia, the US is rich, powerful and unmotivated. While China and other states are building up military capability in Asia and the Pacific the US is not. He sees a gap between the disposition of US forces and US strategic interests. Inertia, rather than strategic responses to vital threats, is keeping the US in Asia. By not building up its forces it can be seen as having begun a gradual withdrawal. He foreshadows a gradual separation that is beyond Australia's ability to prevent. In his view, a continued US presence is likely to be based on sharing influence with Asian powers, especially China.

That Australia can defend itself runs contrary to settled policy by both major political parties since the 1940s. The US alliance, embraced by wartime Labor prime minister John Curtin, and further formalised by the ANZUS Treaty (Australia, New Zealand, US) in 1951, is regarded as critical. US requests for military assistance are rarely denied. AUKUS, the eight nuclear powered submarines to be provided under it, and access to US and UK advanced military technology are presented as a necessary strengthening of an indispensable alliance.

However, delivery of both submarines and technology is contested. Objections by US politicians have had to be negotiated. Possible delivery dates for the first submarines are well in the future; not before 2030. The first craft built in Australia is due only in 2040. In the meantime, the Australian government works to maintain support from the US, embed treaty arrangements, fund a large financial commitment to US and UK suppliers, and implement interim measures. Risks remain. So do perceptions of a gap in defence capability.

The Echidna Strategy proposes not interim measures but a switch. In a non-offensive defence strategy, enhanced foreign policy development aimed at improving relations with Asian powers would help keep potential security risks at a distance. Instead of paying large sums to the US and UK for submarines and technology that can project power, and hosting US bases that may invite retaliation, Australia could look to its own resources.

Above all, Roggeveen argues, it should be clear about actual threats. In his view a rising China does pose threats to be countered. Its control of and militarisation in the South China Sea, maritime disputes with Southeast

Asian countries, grey zone coercive tactics and pushing forward slice by slice all demand effective pushback. So do coercive trade restrictions, as applied to Australia in 2020 and only recently in part relieved.

But he poses also questions that do not, in his view, require AUKUS answers. He asks: how far might China want to push; would it want to invade; and does Australia need the capability that AUKUS could potentially provide to strike the Chinese homeland? In response, he argues that China has shown no interest in invasion and would suffer unacceptable losses if it did. He supports his argument with an analysis of China's interests, the logistics of mounting an invasion force, and the ability of conventional arms to disrupt an invasion force well before it landed. He argues further that conventional weapons can be used to respond to grey zone tactics.

Roggeveen mounts a challenging case. Improved relationships with Indonesia and the Pacific can be supported as strong priorities. So can taking foreign policy initiatives that secure closer ties with other Southeast Asian countries. Strategic ties with Indonesia and the Pacific would guard against a potential invader getting close enough to threaten the mainland. Australian defence forces could be adjusted accordingly.

Roggeveen's argument can be read as a case for not pursuing AUKUS. It can be read also as a primer for how to respond to shortfalls in what AUKUS can eventually deliver. If AUKUS falters it may turn out to be the alternative proposal whose time has come.

However, significant challenges to his argument can be expected. Four may prove difficult. First, military technology does not stand still. The pace of development of new weapons using missile, electronic, space, drone and other emerging technologies will demand continuing vigilance. Further, strategic experts can be expected to challenge the author's assessment of what can be achieved with conventional military technology.

Second, the major enhancement of diplomatic endeavours envisaged by Roggeveen will challenge the political will of government leaders and the capabilities of a foreign service often under-resourced and bypassed. As he recognises, relationships with Indonesia have often at best been prickly. In the Pacific smallness of scale, combined with distance, diversity, past Australian tendencies to paternalism, and dilatoriness in responding to the impacts on Pacific states of climate change will call for significantly enhanced strategies.

Third, Roggeveen limits his regional vision. He does not give priority to improved relations with India. Its commitment to strategic autonomy is seen as a limit to its involvement in bilateral and multilateral arrangements. However, as Charlton suggests this underplays India's potential importance. India is a big country looking for friends. It is concerned at the prospects of an Asia in which China is dominant. Like Australia it is active in Southeast Asia and interested in a 'regional balance' where no country dominates.

Fourth, whatever the wishes and skills of Australian ministers and officials, the constraints of domestic politics are likely to be critical. For the

most part bipartisan enhancement of the US alliance with AUKUS has been met if, not by popular enthusiasm, with resigned forbearance. Should AUK-US falter adjustment will be difficult. In its restrained and careful way, The Echidna Strategy is a demand for a major change that will call for political courage and skill of a kind rarely recently seen.



Charlton's advocacy of closer ties with India is urgent and enthusiastic. He sees India as a friend Australia needs. He presents a 'pivot to India' as a transformative 'national imperative'. As well as enhancing diplomatic ties, closer relations with India can help recast Australia's perception of itself. He bases his advocacy on three main reasons: the emergence of a substantial Indian diaspora that can change Australia 'inside out'; the strategic advantages of becoming closer to an 'inexorable superpower' that can change the world; and opportunities for trade with a rapidly growing economy.

However, he recognises that past efforts at closer relationships foundered on a lack of common interests. Current opportunities followed a slow change in the circumstances of both countries. As he puts it, they 'only recently drifted within reach'. He draws on the existing literature on Australia-India relations to explain the persistence of fitful exchanges. First, for much of the time post-independence, Canberra made most of the running. However, for India, such Australian initiatives held little attraction. A combination of a lack of substance in initiatives and diplomatic muck ups over, for example, Indian nuclear tests and attacks on Indian students in Australia in 2008-10, kept relationships distant.

Second, differing colonial experiences and world views reinforced lack of interest. In India the colonial destruction of the country's wealth and global economic influence, which Charlton emphasises, still rankles. In contrast Australia developed a wealthy economy as a settler colony within the British Empire. Indeed, Australian trade with India was greater when it was still a colony. Further, differing colonial experiences led to different geopolitical outlooks. Independent India favoured self-reliance in economic management and non-alignment, then strategic autonomy, in international affairs. However, Australia developed a mixed, more open economy and favoured alliances with culturally similar countries. As the author puts it, in international affairs, India feared subjugation; Australia feared abandonment.

The emergence of a sense of interests in common took place slowly. To describe the process by which opportunities opened-up as 'drift' is apt. It was planned by neither country. For India the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of an increasingly assertive China encouraged, however incrementally, a geopolitical rethink. Internally, a gradual liberalisation in economic management, however partial, provided opportunities for faster economic growth (described in some detail in the book) and a moderated enthusiasm for public ownership and self-reliance. For Australia a more

liberal approach to immigration from Asia, ironically under a conservative government, provided the country with a growing number of Indian immigrants. It coincided with increasing concerns about maintaining a stable regional order and a sense that India might be interested in the same thing. Further, as India improved relationships with the US, Australia's reliance on the US alliance became less of a hindrance. In sum, economies managed differently became less different and differences in geopolitical outlooks narrowed.

For Australia current opportunities comprise two main elements, trade and education on the one hand, and security and defence on the other. While a comprehensive economic cooperation agreement has proved elusive (a sticking point has been access by Australian agricultural products to Indian markets) a more limited agreement secured in 2022 encourages increased two way trade. In education the author's optimism has been rewarded in 2023 by enrolment of 122,00 Indian students in Australian universities. Further, in 2024, after India implemented legislation to allow foreign university campuses, Deakin University opened in Gujarat the first overseas university campus in India. This followed a thirty year history of involvement in India. The first offerings at the new campus will include masters programs in the currently popular topics of business analytics and cybersecurity.

In security and defence, conceptualisation of the Indo Pacific region as one in which both countries have vital interests has provided a language in common. It has been accompanied by joint exercises, for example, Exercise Malabar, 'that seeks to deepen interoperability between participating regional partners' (Australian Government 2023).¹ It has been accompanied also by more regular Indian participation in strategic discussions, for example the Quad, a diplomatic forum on Indo Pacific issues including the US, India, Japan and Australia.

However, as the author is fully aware, opportunities are not self-fulfilling. Essential mutual understanding is hard won. And in India mutual understanding needs to extend beyond transactional approaches. For this reason, he sees Australia's Indian diaspora as a vital resource. Knowing about and participating in the diaspora communities is a way of learning about India. However, the book does not provide a detailed analysis of the diaspora. It notes the diversity of immigrants and provides snapshots of cultural activities and media. It encourages interaction. It also provides practical advice.

In this spirit, the book endorses a suggestion from the CEO of the Centre for Australia India Relations, one of several officially supported bodies, that members of the diaspora can help Australian businesses find their way into the 'nooks and crannies' of Indian society and business life. How-

1. Australian Government, 2023, 'Australia to host Exercise Malabar for the first time', <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/media-releases/2023-08-11/australia-host-exercise-malabar-first-time>, 11 August.

ever, it does not discuss in detail how such bodies, ambitious in goals and often short on funds, including the Australia India Institute founded with support by the Australian government and several universities in 2008 only after the violence against Indian students in Melbourne, can best promote mutual understanding.

It does, nevertheless, argue that the diaspora needs recognition and inclusion. There is a paucity of diaspora members in state and national politics and on the boards of leading companies. Underemployment among professionals is still too frequent. Restrictions on qualified professionals practising in Australia need to be eased. More promisingly it notes the increasing prominence of diaspora members in business generally. While it does not set out an equal opportunity plan for the diaspora, one can sense that the author may have it on an agenda for the future.

Charlton's book is timely and accessible. It encourages people previously not closely involved with India to discover more. However, India has yet to achieve the decisive status he claims for it. What it has done is to take a more engaged role in global affairs and a prominent role in promoting domestic economic growth. It has also taken leading initiatives in the use of digital applications in the public and private sectors, including notably in citizen identification and access to welfare benefits. In doing so it has staked effective claims for its voice to be heard in global forums.

While Roggeveen has made a persuasive case that India is unlikely to take a front-line role in Australian defence, its preparedness to engage with issues in the Indo Pacific is a change that Australia can explore to advantage. Similarly, while improvements in trade relations are moving slowly, opportunities for Australia to contribute to Indian development by the complementary investments and initiatives valued in India are becoming more tangible.

For Australia, Indian immigration has brought a significant domestic change. Yet more dimensions have been added to a multicultural society. While Indian immigrants may not alone change Australia 'inside out' they may add force to the impacts of Chinese and other Asian immigrants on how Australia sees itself. As a country's population changes so does its culture and how it presents itself to the world. However, quiet acceptance of changes that many regard as overdue is contested by loud voices demanding continuing endorsement of an Anglo Celtic settler culture with a shrinking base. Further, that many Indian immigrants are well educated professionals may strike some as adding to concerns about asymmetry in access to well paid jobs. In a future edition it would be useful to examine more explicitly the challenges of managing the changes Charlton so clearly welcomes.

On India's internal governance, social relations and policy directions the book touches lightly. Indeed, on governance and economics it searches too much for similarities. In a future edition it would be useful also to include a more extensive account. People and institutions in Australia need to

appreciate the multilayered nature of Indian society, business and politics. They need to appreciate also that since 2014, the BJP, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has initiated a drive towards a 'New India'.

Prime Minister Modi's enthusiasm for extending India's participation in international affairs makes him a welcome host and guest. However, for those wishing to build enduring relationships, a sketch of the country as it is under the BJP, rather than as Australians might hope it to be, is desirable. As John McCarthy, a former Australian High Commissioner to India has noted, the image of an India of 'economic growth, technological capacity and increased competence' can easily be welcomed.² Less easily accommodated are accompanying currents of strong nationalism and Hindu supremacy. But this does not mean Australia should draw back. McCarthy is clear that a 'strong relationship with India' is in Australia's interest. However, he concludes with a firm recommendation: 'let us be clear in our own mind about with whom we are dealing'.



While Roggeveen's topic is national security and Charlton's is closer relations with India, their arguments are complementary. In security, economics and national identity they identify directions still unpursued. In doing so they recognise that the changes to Australian priorities they advocate face continuing inhibitions and obstacles. They mount arguments to help overcome them that will be useful when opportunities arise.

Roggeveen's *Echidna Strategy* is based on a hard eyed, conservative analysis. Australia cannot rely on the US alliance. There is a viable home grown alternative. But the political costs of making such a large shift in strategy are large and immediate. Such costs inhibit political leaders from attempting to persuade a conflicted Australian public to endorse it. Nevertheless, his analysis provides an available fall-back position. Despite the current full throated political support for AUKUS Australia may yet need it.

Charlton's *Pivot to India* argues that looking to India is more important than Roggeveen allows. Closer relations with India can provide Australians not only with opportunities in trade and security but help them become more comfortable with the country's deepening multicultural identity. Engagement with India and an updated self-perception can lead to benefits for both countries. Charlton does not say so explicitly, but effective engagement with India may provide hints on how to engage more effectively with other Asian countries too.

In sum these books provide new ideas for what to think about next in Australia's long standing but still contested debates about its self-perception and priority relationships.

2. McCarthy, John, 2023, 'This isn't the India we once knew', *Australian Financial Review*, 9 December.

APPENDIX
LIST OF THE ASIA MAIOR'S ISSUES

With, in brackets, the recommended citation style

Vol. I Giorgio Borsa e Paolo Beonio-Brocchieri (a cura di), *Asia Major. Un mondo che cambia*, Ispi/il Mulino, Bologna 1990 (*Asia Major*, Vol. I/1990);

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Asia Maior think tank owes a debt of gratitude both to the Centro Studi Vietnamiti of Turin, which hosts the think tank official seat, and, in particular, to its Director, Ms. Sandra Scagliotti, for her continuous and generous support. This debt is here gratefully acknowledged.

Finito di stampare.
nel mese di giugno 2024
da The Factory s.r.l.
Roma