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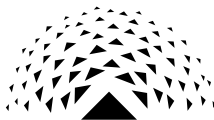
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EXAMINING SMALL AND MIDDLE STATES' BEHAVIOUR VIS-À-VIS RIVAL GREAT POWERS THROUGH A CASE STUDY OF AUSTRALIA

Ádám Csenger

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Abstract: One of the most significant questions in international relations today is whether the world is heading towards a new Cold War. It is important to examine this issue from the viewpoint of small and middle states, whose behaviour vis-à-vis the great powers during the Cold War basically consisted of siding with one or the other. Are we seeing the same behaviour today, or are small and middle states employing different strategies due to the different circumstances? This paper seeks to answer this question through a case study of Australia, a middle power, whose security is guaranteed by the US but whose main trading partner is China. While during the Cold War Australia clearly belonged to the US-led Western bloc, its situation in the current power struggle between the US and China is more complicated. The paper examines Australia's relationship with both superpowers and concludes that it follows a hedging strategy, whereby it maximises rewards from both sides while also preparing a fallback position in case circumstances change. This strategy is necessitated by the global economic interdependence that has resulted from globalisation. The study finds that Australia's strategy vis-à-vis the two rival great powers of today is different from its strategy during the Cold War. Many other small and middle states are hedging in a similar way, and this fundamental difference in their behaviour compared to the Cold War leads to the conclusion that there will be no return to a Cold War with clearly separate blocks.

Keywords: Australia, China, United States, hedging strategy, economic interdependence

Introduction

The past decade or so of international relations has undoubtedly been characterised by the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China, and it seems inevitable that the relationship between these two superpowers will continue to worsen. Many therefore believe that the world has entered a new Cold War (Dupont, 2020; Kusai, 2021). Others, on the other hand, dispute this, arguing that while we are heading towards a world with two main power centres, there are fundamental differences between the current era and the Cold War due to globalisation (Karabell, 2020; Christensen, 2021). In this view, one of the main differences is that the economic interdependence among countries brought about by globalisation makes the formation of competing blocks like the ones that existed during the Cold War impossible. Since the existence of two rival blocks was a fundamental characteristic of the Cold War, a world order without similar blocks could not be considered a new Cold War.

This paper seeks to contribute to the discourse about whether we are seeing a new Cold War by examining the behaviour of small and middle states vis-à-vis rival great powers under the current conditions. It does so through examining Australia's relationship with its security guarantor, the US, and its main trading partner, China. The question the study seeks to answer is whether small and middle states such as Australia employ the same basic strategies in relation to great powers as they did during the Cold War, or whether they adopt more complex strategies that are better suited to the current global economic interdependence resulting from globalisation. If they pursue the same strategies, then we might indeed be returning to a Cold War that is, from the viewpoint of small and middle states at least, essentially not different from the first one. If, however, the strategies of such states are different this time, this would be an indication that the current rivalry between China and the US is not a repetition of the Cold War, since an important (although underresearched) element of it, the behaviour of small and middle states, is different than it was back then.

The study first provides an overview of the alignment strategies employed by small and middle states that have emerged since the end of the Cold War. It then looks at how Australia's security relations with America have evolved,

followed by an overview of Australia-China trade relations. The next section examines the post-Cold War period, when Canberra believed it did not have to choose between the US and China. By maximising benefits from both partners, Australia pursued a hedging strategy. Next, the paper analyses the current tensions between Canberra and Beijing, which have marked the end of the era of not having to choose between its two main partners for Australia. Nevertheless, in spite of diplomatic relations hitting rock bottom, China remains Australia's main trading partner, and thus Canberra continues to hedge. The study concludes that Australia's hedging strategy is different from its strategy during the Cold War, and that economic interdependence implies that small and middle states' strategies vis-à-vis China and the US will not be the same as the ones during the Cold War.

Post-Cold War Alignment Choices and the Hypothesis

During the Cold War, the strategies employed by small and middle states in international relations basically consisted of allying with either the Western or the socialist bloc. In the 1980s and 1990s, the strategies of balancing (when a state forms alliances with other states in order to offset the power of an increasingly powerful state) and bandwagoning (whereby a state associates or allies itself with an increasingly powerful state) became the focus of the discourse of alignment. During the post-Cold War era, however, other alignment choices have emerged, and these alternative strategies (such as engagement, buckpassing, binding, soft balancing, limited-alignment, and hedging) challenge the dichotomy of the classic Cold War assumptions that a state will either balance or bandwagon (Kuik, 2016; Collins, 2013). The international relations literature has demonstrated that the main drivers behind these strategies are security-maximising and reward-maximising. The micro aspects of alignment behaviour, however, remain relatively understudied, despite the significance of the constituent components of states' alignment strategies and the interplay between them. They are important because any alignment choice always comprises several components, some of which are mutually complementary, while others are competing or even contradictory. Furthermore, the literature mostly focuses on the military aspects of alignment, even though the above-mentioned mixed strategies may place as much or even more emphasis on other

dimensions, such as economic or diplomatic ties (Kuik, 2016). The economic dimension is especially important in the age of globalisation and economic interdependence.

On the basis of these theoretical considerations, this paper assumes that the strategies of small and middle states vis-à-vis rival great powers have become more complex in the wake of globalisation and the resulting economic interdependence. To test this hypothesis, the study examines Australia's relations with the US and China since the beginning of the Cold War. It assumes that rather than simply balancing or bandwagoning, Australia, generally considered a middle power, has followed a strategy in the post-Cold War era that has allowed it to maximise rewards from both China and America.

Australia and the United States

Throughout its modern history, Australia has considered itself vulnerable to outside powers, and its solution to this problem has been to maintain close relations with powerful countries. Owing to its modern history as a colony of the United Kingdom, Australia naturally relied on the UK for protection until almost the middle of the twentieth century. This started to change in 1939, when prospects of war and the threat posed by Japan seemed increasingly real, and the turning point came in late 1941 (Bell, 2016), when the Australian Prime Minister declared that, in light of the dire straits the United Kingdom was in, "Australia looked to America" to counter the Japanese threat in the Pacific (Curtin, 1941). The fall of Singapore in early 1942 came as a shock and irreparably damaged confidence in the British Empire's ability to defend Australia (Baranyi, 2020). Once the Cold War set in, fear of a resurgent Japan and the spread of communism were the main drivers of the understanding that preserving Australia's security was of foremost importance (Frydenberg, 2015). It was now clear to the Australian political elite that the United States would be the best partner to guarantee Australia's security.

However, the US was initially not interested in a security agreement with Australia. Since communism had not yet spread to Australia's wider region, the US saw no reason for a security treaty with Australia. This changed with the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, which transformed the US strategic approach to the region (Bell, 2016). This led to the ANZUS

(Australia, New Zealand, and United States) Security Treaty, signed in 1951 and in force since 1952 (The Avalon Project, 2020). The treaty meant that the world's most powerful country became Australia's security guarantor, greatly alleviating Australian anxiety about the restoration of Japan's sovereignty and the spread of communism following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Frydenberg, 2015).

The alliance with the US has never been questioned by Australia, although during the Cold War there were occasions when it was unpopular, most notably during the Vietnam War (Bell, 2016). Since the end of the Cold War the treaty has generally been considered indispensable in Canberra, which has been further reinforced by the Australian public's support of the treaty and the unrivalled superpower status of the US during the first two decades of the post-Cold War era. Australia has supported American military operations such as the first Gulf War and the war in Afghanistan, in which it did not have a direct stake because it is convinced it needs its 'great and powerful friend' to ensure its own safety. In Canberra's view, being a loyal ally of the US is the best way to guarantee Australia's security, since this way it can reasonably expect that America will come to its defence if necessary (Henry, 2020).

Australia and China

Australia did not recognise the newly established People's Republic of China in 1949, and relations between the two countries were hostile until the early 1970s. China was perceived as a sponsor of communist movements in Southeast Asia and a threat to Australia's security. This changed in 1972, when Canberra recognised the People's Republic of China as the sole government of China, which was followed by the quick development of diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations between the two countries (Sherlock, 1997). Even so, in terms of trade, during the Cold War China never accounted for more than 5 per cent of Australia's total merchandise trade, and its share was usually well below that figure (Australian Government, *The Treasury*, 2012).

Australia's trade relations during the Cold War reflected the country's historical ties with the United Kingdom as well as the fact that it was part of the Western bloc. After World War II, Australia's largest merchandise export market was the United Kingdom until 1965-66, when it was

overtaken by Japan, which retained its top position until the late 2000s, when China became the most important export market. The biggest source of merchandise imports between World War II and the late 1960s was the United Kingdom, when it was replaced by the United States. Excluding a brief period in the mid-1980s, when Japan became the largest source of imports, the US remained at the top until the mid-2000s, when it was overtaken by China (*Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*, 2016).

China became Australia's main trading partner in 2007 (*Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*, 2008). Its economic importance for Australia has been steadily increasing ever since, and it is largely thanks to China's robust demand for Australian raw materials and minerals that prior to the current Covid-19-induced crisis, Australia had not experienced a recession since 1991 (Feeney, 2018). China is Australia's most important trading partner both in terms of exports and imports: in 2020, 41 per cent of Australia's goods exports went to and 27 per cent of its goods imports came from China. Between 2015, when the China–Australia Free Trade Agreement entered into force, and 2020, the value of exports to China rose by 61 per cent, while the value of imports from China increased by 75.8 per cent. The importance of China for Australian trade is further highlighted by the fact that the value of both exports to and imports from China exceeds that of the next four most important partner countries put together (Csenger & Eszterhai, 2021).

“Australia Doesn't Have to Choose”: Hedging

However, in parallel with the growing importance of China, an uncomfortable contrast emerged between Australia's security and its prosperity due to the growing contest between its security guarantor and the country its economy was increasingly reliant on. For a long time, the Australian political elite pretended there was no contest underway between the US and China, an approach summed up by the foreign policy mantra “Australia doesn't have to choose between America and China” (White, 2017, p. 44). This notion had its roots in the 1990s: Prime Minister John Howard came to an agreement with China in 1996 that Australia, as an ally of America, would refrain from doing anything directed against China. It was easy to stick to this principle for a long time, since the US did not think of China as a strategic threat at the time. This changed

with Pivot to Asia, announced by US President Barack Obama in 2011, which involved the American expectation that Australia play a role in Washington's response to a rising China (White, 2017).

Australia found itself in a difficult situation: for the first time since 1972, when the US and China normalised their relations, Washington considered Beijing a rival and was asking Canberra for support in countering China. As opposed to the Cold War, however, Australia's position was more complicated now, since the great power competition this time was unfolding between its strategic partner and its main trading partner. In response, Australia fully supported Pivot to Asia in words, but when it came to actual involvement in it, Canberra was reluctant to contribute: for example, while it condemned China's unilateral actions in the South China Sea, it refused to join the American freedom of navigation operations aimed at countering them; despite Washington's objections, Australia eventually joined China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank; and in spite of American disapproval of the Australian economy's openness to Chinese investments due to the vulnerability to Chinese pressure it entailed, Canberra did not take steps to stop or slow down the expansion of Australian-Chinese economic relations (White, 2017).

Australia continued its policy of "we don't have to choose between the US and China": it continued to rely on the US for its security and on China for its economic wellbeing, thereby maximising benefits from both sides. Security-maximising and reward-maximising were thus key considerations for Canberra. Australia's behaviour can be classified as hedging, which is defined as "an insurance-seeking behaviour under high-stakes and high-uncertainty situations, where a sovereign actor pursues a bundle of opposite and deliberately ambiguous policies vis-à-vis competing powers to prepare a fallback position should circumstances change" (Kuik, 2016, p. 504). Hedging can be seen as a strategy between the two end positions of balancing and bandwagoning. It is characterised by mixed, ambiguous, and at times even contradictory components, exhibiting elements of both balancing and bandwagoning (Kuik, 2016). Since China's emergence as a rival to the US, the Asia-Pacific region has experienced increasing uncertainty due in large part to China's actions in the South China Sea aimed at changing the status quo in China's favour (e.g. creating and militarising artificial islands). Beijing's increasingly bold and assertive behaviour has created unease in Australia as well, as it is heavily reliant on the maritime

trade passing through the South China Sea and adjacent waters. China's unilateral steps in the region that disregard international law, freedom of navigation, and the rules-based international order in general have been a source of deep concern in Canberra. Therefore, they welcomed America's Pivot to Asia, although at the same time they tried not to get too involved in it due to their hedging strategy: while Australia continued being a loyal US ally (to ensure a fallback position in case China became outright hostile), it nevertheless attempted to avoid doing anything that might enrage Beijing and thus endanger trade with China.

Despite the growing tensions between China and the US, Australia's hedging strategy worked, and the country was indeed able to ride two horses at once. The Australian economy became highly reliant on China, and Australia was profiting handsomely from the two-way trade. Importantly, this had no effect on its alliance with America; Canberra overall had a good relationship with both Washington and Beijing.

Tensions in the Australia-China Relationship

The situation started to change in 2017, however, when it was revealed that the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) had warned the three main Australian political parties in 2015 that foreigners with close links to the Communist Party of China may be attempting to influence Australian politics (Kennedy, 2017). The ensuing scandal led to new legislation in 2018, aimed to make foreign influence in Australian politics and the government more visible to the public (BBC, 2018). Although the government denied it, the new laws were clearly aimed at China. In the same year Canberra banned Huawei from participating in the 5G rollout in Australia, citing national security concerns (Slezak & Bogle, 2018). As a result of these developments, the relationship between Australia and China became strained, with Chinese ministers refusing to communicate with their Australian counterparts.

The tense relationship between Australia and China sank to new lows after April 2020, when Australia called for an independent inquiry into the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic (Scott, 2020). This infuriated China, and from May 2020 onwards it implemented restrictive trade measures (excessively high tariffs as well as import restrictions and bans) in relation to a range of Australian exports, such as barley, wine, beef, and coal (Rajah, 2021). Beijing

also discouraged Chinese students from studying in Australia, a popular destination for overseas studies (Hare, 2021). In late 2020, China made it clear that it blamed Australia for the deterioration in their relations; in Beijing's view, Canberra had in recent years interfered in China's internal affairs by making statements about Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Taiwan, and they had unfairly rejected certain Chinese investments under the pretext of national security. Shortly afterwards a Chinese diplomat in Canberra handed a document to representatives of the Australian media that listed Beijing's grievances in 14 points (Scott, 2020). The implication was clear: China expected Australia to rectify its mistakes, otherwise bilateral relations would not improve.

Diplomatic relations between Australia and China have drastically deteriorated over the past four years, and especially since 2020. As China rises, it is becoming more assertive, and Australia is experiencing this more than most countries. In response to Chinese pressure, it has decided not to bow to the pressure but to strengthen its ties with the US and like-minded states. Australia is a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), along with the US, Japan, and India (incidentally, Australia withdrew from the Quad's first incarnation in 2008 after China had protested over the grouping, deeming its economic ties with China too important to risk) (Wyeth, 2017). Last year Australia abandoned its long-held neutrality on the South China Sea maritime disputes and joined the US in rejecting Chinese territorial claims regarding the sea (Thayer, 2020). There are plans for enhanced American air force and navy presence in northern Australia (Jennings, 2021), and Australian-Japanese military cooperation was given a major boost in 2020 by a new defence pact (Takenaka & Park, 2020). Furthermore, in an extraordinary recent development, the AUKUS security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US will involve Australia building nuclear-powered submarines using American technology (BBC, 2021).

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has defiantly declared that he will never trade Australian values in response to coercion (Needham, 2020). It is true that Canberra has not made concessions to Beijing, but trade with China continues, even if not on the same level as before the Chinese trade measures. The value of Australian trade with China for nearly all industries decreased by 40 per cent in the second half of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019, but the overall value of trade

decreased by only 2 per cent thanks to iron ore, which China can only buy from Australia. Australian trade with the rest of the world decreased by 22 per cent during the same period, and therefore it seems it is not only the Covid-19-induced economic downturn that is at play in the case of Australian-Chinese trade (Doran, 2021). In the first half of 2021, exports to China increased each month (except for a small decrease in February), while imports from China remained more or less the same (*Australian Bureau of Statistics*, 2021). Despite the sharp downturn in Chinese trade for a lot of Australian industries, China is still by far Australia's most important trade partner in terms of both exports and imports.

In spite of the frosty Australia-China relations, the Australian government emphasizes that it wants to maintain Australia's trade relationship with China, hoping for dialogue with Beijing to resolve bilateral issues, even though Australian ministers' efforts to discuss the issues have been snubbed by their Chinese counterparts for some time (Sugiura & Takahashi, 2021). Australia's stance demonstrates that despite the political standoff with Beijing, it cannot afford a drastic reduction in trade with China without jeopardising Australia's prosperity. It simply cannot replace China as a trade partner. Of course, Australia is trying to diversify its trade – and a number of industries have more or less successfully managed to do so – in the sectors affected by Chinese trade sanctions, and other industries are also likely considering other markets as a contingency plan, but the country is nevertheless still reliant on China.

Conclusion

Australia's foreign policy during the Cold War was straightforward: it became an integral part of the US-led Western bloc after World War II and has been a staunch American ally ever since. Canberra's post-Cold War position, especially since the turn of the century, has been more complicated, however. While Australia continues to rely on the US for its security, it has reaped massive economic benefits from China. This is the outcome of the hedging strategy it has pursued. Australia has successfully maximised benefits from both sides, and Canberra is not changing its strategy even despite the intensifying contest between China and the US. The rivalry has not led to Canberra reducing relations with the former in order to further secure its position in the 'camp' of the latter. While Canberra is increasingly wary of Beijing's assertive behaviour,

it continues to be reliant on trade with China. Granted, the extent of this reliance has been reduced by China's punitive trade actions, but the country remains Australia's largest trade partner by far, and Canberra remains intent on improving bilateral ties. At the same time, Australia is preparing a fallback position, should its relationship with China drastically change: it is intensifying its relations with the US and building closer ties with other countries in the Indo-Pacific that are feeling increasingly threatened by China's conduct.

Australia's strategy vis-à-vis the two great powers is therefore more complex than the strategy it followed during the Cold War was. The hedging strategy it pursues demonstrates that security-maximising and reward-maximising are fundamental drivers of its foreign policy. In fact, globalisation makes hedging not only the most advantageous strategy for Australia, but perhaps also basically the only viable one, since the global economic interdependence that has evolved in the last three decades makes significant decoupling from China impossible. As we have seen, even the steady worsening of Australia-China relations over the last four years has not led to a serious break in the trade relations between the two countries. These results confirm the hypothesis of the paper that the strategies of small and middle states in relation to rival great powers have become more complex in the wake of globalisation and economic interdependence.

As we have seen through Australia's case study, economic interdependence implies that siding with one great power while minimising relations with the other is no longer a realistic option for most small and middle states, and therefore, like Australia, they are bound to hedge in some manner and to some extent. Indeed, many other small and middle states are also hedging, albeit in different ways and to a different extent: New Zealand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and South Korea, to name a few, are also wary of China and are thus strengthening ties with other states in case their relationship with Beijing seriously deteriorates. At the same time, they also have extensive economic links with China that they can hardly give up.

To conclude, the Cold War as we know it from history will not be repeated, since economic interdependence – with China being one of the economic centres of the world – will prevent the formation of the clearly

separate rival blocks seen during the Cold War. At the same time, more research is required into the alignment choices of small and middle states to better understand their behaviour in the era of growing competition between the US and China. Further studies on hedging behaviour like Australia's and other alignment strategies could contribute to a deeper understanding of how such states navigate the current tensions arising from intensifying great power rivalry.

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE SINO-AMERICAN NEXUS, WITH A VIEW FROM WASHINGTON: FROM HOSTILITY TO SMART APPEASEMENT AND BACK

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Abstract: Considering the recent series of events and intensified diplomatic and economic relations, many experts envisage a new Cold War between the two superpowers of the twenty-first century. Although the Chinese-American relationship over the last half-century has experienced some great moments, it has mostly been characterised by less amicable or even hostile attitudes, as well as economically volatile competition. The pragmatic realist approach and diplomatic appeasement of the 1970s and 1980s served mutual interests for the two countries against their common foe, the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, concerning their political values and visions, the democratic US and the Marxist-Maoist People's Republic of China have proven to be two irreconcilable political and social experiments, worlds apart from each other's spheres and paradigms. Within the context of the drastically altered global political milieu of the new millennium, the two great powers have manoeuvred themselves into heated confrontational positions over the last decade, not even excluding the possibility of a severe clash of interests in the future.

Keywords: China, USA, competition, new Cold War, appeasement, hegemony

Introduction

History teaches us that great powers usually cannot stand alone for a long time on the stage of international theatre, especially superpowers like ancient Rome, the medieval Mongol empire, or the vast British Empire. For the last hundred years, the United States has been performing as the agenda-setting actor of global affairs, possessing historically unprecedented economic and political influence as well as power projection abilities in the world.

Great powers tend to ascend to their zenith and gradually reach the maximum of their power projection capacities within a few decades or over a century. In the next phase, they inevitably eagerly try to hold their positions against the newly emerging challengers, attempting to hinder and mitigate their foreseeable decline by all means (Kennedy, 1988). If they neglect any aspect of their power resources, e.g. their economic, cultural, or military capacities, they will certainly be doomed to fail and be ousted from the top of the world. Within the nexus of the superpower United States and the emerging new rival power China, we could recently witness a phase of great power muscle testing, which primarily manifested in economic and political competition for determining the global agenda and the trade routes of the world during the second half of the twenty-first century.

This paper provides a concise retrospective insight into the most important features and evolution of the controversial bilateral relations between the US and the People's Republic of China, starting from the 1970s Cold War-era great diplomacy of *Asia First* policies, as the American foreign political strategy focus aligned with the changing priorities. The second part of the study provides a brief analysis of the nature of the contemporary bilateral relations between the old-new adversaries on the world stage. This is also labelled by some analysts and policy-makers (Weinstein, 2019) as a revisited, twenty-first century new Cold War competition between the rising, expansionist, communist China, and the established power of the West, evidently personified by its leading power, the United States. The great doyen of American diplomacy Henry Kissinger, also assessed the tense relationship between the two great powers as “being in the foothill of a new Cold War” (Bloomberg, 2021).

Many experts of international relations claim that the explicit criteria of a new Cold War scenario are mostly missing from this great power rivalry. However, the concerning relationship controversial as it may be, the eligible component factors validating the often-quoted Cold War condition tend to alter rather promptly and unpredictably. One of the most vocal critical views of the frequently revisited Cold War theory has been expressed by Columbia University professor Thomas Christensen (2021), who argues that there are no prevailing conditions for applying this belligerent terminology in bilateral relations defined predominantly by economic rivalry.

Nevertheless, the option of disengagement and evolving into a hot conflict or the outburst of an *impromptu* military escalation cannot be completely excluded from this scenario. Obviously, the tasks of military and political strategists involve the analysis and elaboration of all-case scenarios, while policy and decision-makers assume the responsibility of taking these factors into consideration before making a decision.

This study focuses on how the American elite perceives China, employing a predominantly American or Western vantage point and intellectual stance. The study, therefore, does not analyse the stages of bilateral relations equally and systematically, instead it highlights the motives that may be crucial for understanding the current Sino-US relationship.

History teaches us that win-win situations or benign conflict resolutions are quite rare in the context of fierce great power competition, although the frequently cited ancient Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu wittily suggests that “the supreme excellence and greatest victory is the one fought and won without a battle” (Sun Tzu, 2007, p.22). Transferred into a twentieth and twenty-first-century global political context, many experts argue that the mutual interest of the two great adversaries would in practice manifest in the recognition of *smart appeasement* in their relations (Harris, 2021, pp.129-135). From this standpoint, the tactical calculations and risk assessments of loss and win in case of a potential military confrontation between the two great powers tend to render a more prudent, cautious approach in coping with their clash of interests.

Nevertheless, taking their capacities into consideration, both countries have the ability and eagerness for a milder as well as a more volatile stand-off. The outcome relies both on economic and political factors as well as

less rational factors, such as hurt feelings, especially when considering the growing Chinese nationalistic pride, supplemented with the idealistic zeal for global hegemony.

The Beginning of Appeasement

The 1970s, with its anti-Soviet containment, deterrence, détente strategies, MAD-doctrine¹, and Domino-theory², undoubtedly proved to share different global scenarios and political conditions. The shocking political and military trauma and domestic social drama of the Vietnam war truly overshadowed the legitimacy and *raison d'être* of the American grand strategy aiming to contain and roll back Soviet-style communism in Southeast Asia, fearing its covert penetration into Indonesia or even reaching its key strategic ally, Australia. As Robert McNamara, the influential Secretary of Defense of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, asserts in his memoir, the American strategy was basically correct in Indochina, although the tactics, methods, and communications were completely wrong and counterproductive.

Furthermore, American strategists and policymakers like McNamara came to the disillusioning recognition that they cannot win a war or conflict without the support of the people they were supposed to be championing, i.e. the great majority of the Vietnamese people. The US also lost the psychological and communication war on the home front, in the living rooms of the American homes, and most significantly, on university campuses and in newsrooms. The tide of events turned even more gloomy when millions of Americans had to witness the dramatic pictures of the fall of Saigon on 5 April, 1975, followed by the fall of Laos and Cambodia less than two weeks later. Although it may seem of secondary importance in terms of political history, it is worth mentioning that the communist Chinese regime also supported the communist red armies of North Vietnam with a significant amount of military and financial aid in their desperate fight against the United States and the South Vietnamese forces (Bush, 2021). However, as a strange twist in history, soon after the end of the Vietnam War, the formerly reliable ideological allies turned against each other on geostrategic terms. This occurred when communist Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh started to overstretch his political and military dominance, neglecting and breaching Chinese interests in the region, as well as overtly favouring the Soviet Union.

The quite short, less than two-month military conflict in February 1979 along the Chinese-North Vietnamese border aimed to teach the dissenting Vietnamese a lesson, although it had a surprisingly twisted and sour end for the Chinese (Eszterhai 2014, p.26). The blitz-war was initiated by freshly rehabilitated Chinese Communist Party leader and supreme leader Deng Xiaoping, right after he had returned from his first visit to the White House in January 1979. Deng also broadly shared the anti-Soviet and anti-Vietnamese feelings of Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's influential national security advisor and *de facto* foreign policymaker. Carter, on the other hand, opposed the Chinese-Vietnamese military confrontation. Both Deng and Brzezinski had in mind the same medium-term goal: to push back Soviet influence from Indochina and come to terms with each other for the sake of tighter economic and political cooperation. Nonetheless, the underperformance of the Chinese troops in the last real war of modern China in the last half century proved to be a great lesson and experience for Deng Xiaoping's new reform-communist Chinese government, who realized the fragility and serious handicaps of their military, economic, as well as political power projection capacities. Although many American military analysts recognize the stunning pace of development of the Chinese military, especially accomplished during the last two decades (Burns 2021), it is important to note, particularly when discussing (and often unintentionally overestimating) the military might and combat experiences of the PRC, that it has not been involved in any real large-scale military conflict since the Vietnamese fiasco of 1979 (Stacks, 2021).

The various national development projects heralding the new socialist market-driven economy of China or the new way of Reform and Opening Up stemmed from the bitter experience of Premier Deng and his reformist comrades, who defined and paved the way for a new, efficient, and prosperous China into the twenty-first century. However, on the global chessboard (Brzezinski, 1998, p. 229) the new anti-Soviet Chinese geopolitical and economic strategy harmonized with the anti-Soviet American national interests and enjoyed considerable bipartisan support from the American grand strategists in Washington, including influential personalities such as Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Brent Scowcroft, and George H.W. Bush. The latter, serving as the successful and popular chief of the US liaison office in Beijing between September 1974 and December 1975, gained a significant understanding

and experience of the Chinese world, which benefitted him greatly in his future position as CIA Director, Vice President, and President of the United States (Bush, 1987, pp. 140- 145).

Shaping the secretive great power diplomacy of the US towards communist China had been initiated in the turbulent years of the late 1960s and 1970s, during the Nixon and Ford administrations, primarily characterised by Kissinger and General Brent Scowcroft's activity and series of secret visits to China (Kissinger, 1994, p. 722). Acting on classic realistic pragmatic terms in foreign relations, Kissinger and Scowcroft successfully managed to find their way to Chinese Prime Minister Zhou-Enlai and Deputy Foreign Minister Qiao Guanghua to develop an amicable relationship with the Chinese, further undermining the gloomy Chinese-Soviet relationship.

This new special bilateral approach resulted in the signing of the famous *Shanghai Communiqué* in 1972, a diplomatic breakthrough and overture in the Sino-American relations. It partly reshaped the petrified bipolar world order, and more importantly, it legitimized the Maoist People's Republic of China on the world stage, which the Communist Party leader had really wished to achieve. Some influential left-wing American intellectuals, such as Yale professor R. Lippmann, also alarmed Kissinger as well as many conservative realists when they claimed that two similar totalitarian ideologies (namely Soviet Marxist-Stalinist universalism and the American concept of exceptionalism and mission in the world) had been clashing over Indochina, aligning with the strategic dimension of the famous 'triangular diplomacy' heralded by Henry Kissinger and President Nixon (Hanhimaki, 2003). Furthermore, along with this pretext and idea-driven theory, the war, as well as the prevailing Domino-theory, could be considered utterly unjustified and illegitimate as the sheer manifestation of oppressive imperial overstretching from all parties involved.

The foreign policy of the American administrations in the 1970s was characterised by realistic pragmatic features and followed the geopolitical guidelines formulated by Kissinger and Brzezinski, which primarily aimed to strengthen American political dominance in the Far East with the help of a reformist China against the Soviets. This

diplomacy of overture and smart appeasement with China served both domestic and foreign political aims. This diplomacy could as well have been derived from Kissinger's Westphalian historic conceptuality and strategy: to cordialize prudently with the foe of your most ardent enemy and promote the balance of power equilibrium for the sake of preserving lasting peace (Kissinger, 2014, p. 313).

The thaw, gradually improving relations with China, also enabled the United States to fully counterbalance the Soviet expansionism proclaimed through the Brezhnev doctrine, which dated back to the spring of 1968, the historic moment of Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia. The Chinese reaffirmed Chairman Mao's policy on non-violent and non-expansionist China from 1969, which openly declared a protective sphere of interest over North Korea and the Taiwan, a sensitive spot for China, which regards it as a domestic political issue, also became a possible clashing point in the trilateral relations between China, Taiwan, and the US, which we can still witness decades later, today.

Nevertheless, from an American perspective, this rather isolationist Chinese attitude and the idea of a benevolent and benign regional great power only proved to be valid for the given moment and did not turn into a long-term trajectory for the future. This was reflected in Mao's famous note to a bewildered President Nixon during his first visit to China in February 1972, "the smaller issue is the question of Taiwan, the big one is about the whole world!" (Kissinger, p. 725).

As a true ideological test, Deng's opening and market reforms were spectacularly challenged and put on trial during the great student demonstrations of Beijing in June 1989.

China and the US After the Cold War

President George H.W. Bush, the victor of the Cold War and the beneficiary of the unfolding 'New World Order' driven by American hegemony, regarded communist China more or less the same way as the pragmatic realist Kissinger. Following the events of Tiananmen Square, the American conservative administration preferred having an amicable but predictable communist China as a foreign partner to a vast, chaotic country with an unpredictable course and intentions. Kissinger considered universal

human rights practically incomprehensible and alien in the context of third-world countries like China, non-viable in great power diplomatic relations. An attitude and realization that seems to be valid even today after so many failed projects of democratizing and Westernizing second and third-world countries or exporting liberal democratic ideas abroad during the last half-century.³

China, following the Deng path of controlled market capitalism led by the Communist Party, chose to gain influence through economic power and intended to avoid ideological clashes and competition with the West, particularly with the United States. Taken from a Western attitude, China, along the guidelines of Deng Xiaoping's strategy and under the leadership of his successor reformist leaders, such as Jian Zemin and Hu Jintao (1991-2012) during the decades around the turn of the millennium, aimed to construct a prosperous and harmonious society. Moreover, in terms of foreign relations, China eagerly shifted towards a more participatory and global attitude, joining all the major international bodies, organizations, and treaties it had denounced for decades, such as the UN and its specialized agencies, IMF, the World Bank, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Asian Pacific Cooperation Forum (APEC), and the ASEAN Regional Forum.

During the American administrations of Presidents Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton, the American foreign policy towards the 'new China' envisaged by Deng and his successors preserved the pragmatic, realist, and generally amicable attitude that alternated between the 'China First' or 'China First' and/or 'Asia First' strategic approaches towards the region (Shambaugh, 2019, p.86).

Beside the dramatic Tiananmen Square drama of 1991, some dubious incidents significantly overshadowed the bilateral relations, like the Taiwan Strait military incidents in 1995-96, the notorious Belgrade Chinese embassy bombing in 1999, or the US Air Force EP-3 surveillance-jet crisis over Hainan Island in May 2000. In this period Joseph Nye, Deputy Secretary for International Security Affairs and William Perry, Secretary of Defense in the Clinton administration suggested implementing a US strategy shift towards Asia First from the China-centric policy shared by former President G.H.W. Bush, a great proponent of Chinese appeasement.

In any case, China under Jiang Zemin played a role in the reestablishment of full-scale diplomatic ties between the US and communist Vietnam two decades after the dramatic fall of Saigon. A few years later, China also joined the American 'global war on terrorism' program and President George W. Bush's rather Manichean 'with us or against us' foreign policy doctrine following the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the US. This resulted in probably the most fruitful and constructive cooperation between the two countries in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Within the context of amicable bilateral relations with the US, the issue of cultural, religious, and civilizational appropriation has not really been part of any official Chinese political strategy or agenda, although the CCP's Central Committee has had some rather interesting confidential initiatives for its members.⁴

The Xi Era: the 'Revisionist' China of New Capabilities and Old-new Ambitions

Starting from the Obama administrations, China has become a scapegoat for the escalating tensions in the Far East (regarding North Korea and the South China Sea), as well as for the enormous American trade deficit and staggering unemployment figures (Xuetong, 2010, p. 278).

The rather volatile, even hostile American political attitude towards China started in November 2010, following the global financial crises of 2008-2009, which had affected the US badly and highlighted the significance of trade and global interdependency. During the 2010 Seoul summit, President Obama demanded clear actions from President Hu Jintao concerning North Korea and more importantly regarding the unbalanced bilateral trade relations and sovereign Chinese economic policies (Landler, 2012). With President Donald J. Trump's rise onto the zenith of the political arena in Washington, this deliberately non-amicable stance by a previously seemingly friendly United States escalated into an open and harsh technological and trade war with China. This short study does not have the space to examine whether the American viewpoint and economic assessment was realistic and authentic concerning the unfavourable trade and political relations with China, but the economic figures have overshadowed all other factors in bilateral relations.

In 2012 the new era and the new century elevated Xi Jinping to the top of the Chinese Communist Party, which also heralded a new phase in an assertive and defiant Chinese national strategy. China under President Xi has become the biggest and most dire challenger of American economic and political dominance in the world in recent years. By sharing newly developed military capabilities, skills, and economic power according to a Chinese version of the Monroe-doctrine (Holmes, 2012), China is asserting revisionist ambitions within its safety perimeter, which includes a vast region bordered by Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. The exclusive protection zone or territorial waters of the South China Sea is similar to the United States' claim for the Caribbean against its rival European great powers in the early nineteenth century. In the Western and primarily American interpretation, Xi Jinping's deliberately assertive and prudently expansionist idea considers China the new-old centre of the world, as it used to be before the West had risen to world dominance between the eighteenth century and the dawn of the twenty-first century (Ferguson, 2012, pp. 344 - 346).

Based on its enormous national financial reserves, which has risen to a soaring USD 4 trillion, as well as its export powerhouse economy, President Xi Jinping's China is not rejecting the notion of revisionism any more, as his predecessors' China had cautiously tended to do. Nevertheless, contradicting the liberal optimism and idealistic expectations emphasized by scholars like Francis Fukuyama at the end of the Cold War, more market capitalism, population welfare, and impressive technologic developments have not resulted in more democracy and freedom in China. These developments have instead resulted in more political assertiveness and room for manoeuvring on the part of the Communist Party elite, who exercise efficient comprehensive control over society by applying the latest technology solutions in artificial intelligence, through the social credit system, and cyber security tools.

Based on its much-appreciated and envied economic parameters and budgetary conditions, China has become a truly global player in the twenty-first century, which cannot be neglected any more at the large table of global affairs. The extremely ambitious and financially unparalleled international trade project called One Belt One Road, or lately The Belt and Road Initiative, was launched in 2013, with the aim of expressing and projecting Chinese trade interests and infrastructural

development projects around the world, involving more than 90 partner states (CFR, 2021). Many Americans agree with the blunt assessment of French political philosopher Bernard-Henry Lévy (Lévy, 2021), who claims that the more the vast Chinese economic projects gain room in the world, especially in underdeveloped Africa, South East Asia, and Central Eastern Europe, the more the West (and primarily the US) and its civilizational impact and sphere of interest may be forced into retreat from these regions, which might result in dire consequences and a radical paradigm shift in the world (Garrett, 2017).

Along with the unprecedented economic boom and global trade expansion, the People's Liberation Army, the dedicated security guardian of Chinese trade routes and economic interests, has carried out the largest navy development program in the world since World War II, to become the largest navy in the Indo-Pacific region, with its more than 350 modern military vessels symbolically outnumbering the deployable battle force of the US Navy (ChinaPower, 2021). Hence, China's deterrence factor and power projection ambition both in trade and military terms has become crystal clear for everyone in the region.

Significantly, this concept theoretically denounces colonization or the forced global penetration of the Chinese model, as unlike that which the British Empire, the American neoconservatives, Wilsonian idealists, or the expansionist Marxist ideologues had pursued with missionary zeal in previous centuries. After the return of Hong Kong and Macao to China by the end of the twentieth century, the only missing mosaic to completing the much-desired national reunification process is evidently Taiwan. Many strategists claim that reunification with Taiwan, either coerced politically or forced explicitly by an invasion, might take place within the next five years (Oswald, 2021). This could also be triggered by the soaring Chinese national pride and emotional engagement against the Taiwanese 'renegade' Chinese republic. The only possible concern, particularly for a large-scale military escalation, comes from the famous Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, a tight security agreement between Taiwan and the US against a possible external threat.

Since the turn of the millennium, a significant change in perception has taken shape among both Democratic and Republican decision-makers, sharing the assumption that China has grown far too big, thus

threatening global trade and even the political hegemony of the United States. As a result, it is much advised to roll it back or hinder its further strengthening for the sake of the America. Several political and security analysts have extensively examined the very tense Chinese-American relations and open trade war, which took on new dimensions during the Trump administration, including intensified punitive American actions against China.

According to the timeline of diplomatic actions initiated from Washington D.C., the American State Department, following the guidelines of President Trump and especially Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, shifted from a seemingly amicable pro-trade attitude towards a more confrontational and anti-Chinese (as well as pro-Taiwanese) stance starting in 2017 and culminating in 2019-2020, the year of the Covid-19 pandemic, which also emerged from China (Ebrahimian, 2021). President Trump's phone conversation with Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen in December 2016 presumably also contributed to the significant anti-Chinese strategic approach undertaken both by President Trump and key members of his administration, which was reflected in the national security and defence strategy documents the United States issued during the following year. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo became the most ardent and vocal critic of China and the Chinese Communist Party leader's alleged eagerness for world dominance against the West (Westcott, 2019).

Moreover, the ensuing new Democratic administration led by President Joe Biden does not seem to be shifting away from the rather hostile attitude and volatile strategic approach towards China, either, judging by the latest rather heated, mutually reproachful, and strikingly non-amicable clash of public arguments at the Chinese-American summit in Anchorage, Alaska in March 2021 (Taiwan RA, 2021). The topics that defined the acrimonious discussions among the high-ranking delegation leaders of the two great powers revolved around the recurring issues of unfair trade tariffs, the bilateral trade imbalance disproportionately favouring China, the intense anti-American cybercriminal activities mostly originating from Chinese sources, and the extensive industrial and even cultural espionage activities related to Chinese big tech companies, college students, academic researchers, and even some staff members of the large network of Confucius Institutes located in the US. Not surprisingly, the most heated

spat between the delegations burst out around the controversial issue of large-scale human rights abuses and the persecution of religious groups (Chinese Christians) and ethnic minority groups (Muslim Uyghurs) in China. A few weeks before the tense Chinese-American Alaska summit, former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, when stepping down from his office in January 2021, also quite harshly condemned the ill-treatment of the Uyghurs by the oppressive Chinese authorities as modern era genocide (Borger, 2021).

It has become obvious that China defiantly rejects the Western (American) universalist idea of human rights, as well as the value-based paradigm and policy-making. According to the Chinese view defined by Xi Jinping, the People's Republic of China has its own well-defined values and core national interests, which may seem antithetic or incongruent, but from this vantage point are nonetheless inferior to the ones shared by the United States or any other country in the world. From this stance, the rivalry of great powers seems to be inevitable, which also supports the validity of neorealism in international relations, as highlighted by John Mearsheimer (2021) in his latest Foreign Affairs article.

Conclusions

As it has been shown above, ever since the 1970s, the US pragmatic realistic Chinese appeasement policy has contributed significantly to the success and implementation of Deng Xiaoping's reform policies, relying on mutual anti-Soviet sentiments and geostrategic interests. Moreover, soon after the decade-long unipolar moment of the US after the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet bloc, the steadily developing reform communist China gradually turned from a formerly neglected, secondary regional power into a real great power with ambitious goals. The PRC, led by the outstandingly assertive Xi Jinping since 2012, has become a world-class economic, financial, and political power, as well as a security threat for anyone daring to breach Chinese national interests, including their formerly covert political pseudo-ally and trade partner, the United States. As President Xi quite clearly asserted at the latest ASEAN summit in November, China does not seek hegemony over the South China Sea, nor does it coerce and exclude its smaller neighbours from its waters, it merely claims exclusive sovereign territorial status as a sort of 'first among equals' (Reuters, 2021). China also wants to avoid a volatile superpower

competition or the undesired scenario of a new Cold War with the United States. However, accomplishing its national strategies does not lack the possibility for confrontation.

During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, we could witness the clash of various near-future scenarios and perspectives regarding the Chinese-American rivalry and fight for global dominance. According to a common pessimistic-realistic Western outlook, China will soon take over leadership from the US as the biggest and bulkiest economy in the world, following more than a century of American hegemony. This trajectory and highly revered status does not imply political or military hegemony, or even an agenda-setting capacity in global affairs, although it does assume being unavoidable in most international issues. The new American administrations, particularly heralded by the rather volatile anti-Chinese sentiments of President Trump (although also with the similarly affirmative and less amicable President Biden), have shared different strategic approaches and political and economic mindsets regarding the undisputable American primacy in the twenty-first century as well.

On the other hand, beside its steadily growing economic output, the People's Republic of China seems to be lacking the necessary soft power skills to dominate and set the agenda of global affairs, having neither the extensive network of reliable allies nor, more importantly, the cultural and linguistic power tools to share its visions, ideas, and interests with the world. The Chinese cultural soft power, represented by the global network of thousands of Confucius Institutes around the world as part of the Chinese national strategy of 'going global' since 2004 (Brookings, 2021), cannot compare to the extensive web of allies, organizations, and scholarships woven by the US, not to mention the absolute world dominance of the English language and American popular culture.

In hindsight, it is clear that Deng Xiaoping's initiative and strategy of turning a mostly agrarian and rather poor, underdeveloped China into a technological and economic giant, without the ideological implications and political inheritance of the West, has proven to be a successful and productive strategy for China. The failures and disillusionment in the Central and East European countries of the former Soviet bloc that occurred from reluctantly imitating the West have not haunted China at all (Hrasztev & Holmes, 2019).

China seems to be following a similar pattern to Japan's forced national modernization project at the beginning of the twentieth century (Veblen, 1915, pp.23-38), efficiently pursuing a kind of 'state-controlled imitation method' without intellectual inclusion. This kind of national approach implies a strategy of utilizing cutting-edge Western industrial manufacturing skills and scientific and technological innovations, but it strictly avoids adopting any core element of the Western ideologies or ethics that might challenge the dominance of the ruling Communist Party. This issue of political philosophy tends to be of utmost importance within the nexus between China and the world and will likely be scrutinized further in the future.

Many disillusioned liberal as well as conservative analysts and politicians seem to share the popular theorem of American decline theory, reaffirming the mostly unjustified speculative assumption that even though the United States managed to win the Cold War against the Soviet Union, it will inevitably lose the competition against the rising Far Eastern giant power in the twenty-first century (Doshi 2021). This may result in reshaped new power structures and alliances in the second half of the century. In light of the above-mentioned conclusions, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's recent recognition of the incongruent value rift between an 'authoritarian communist China' and Western allies (2021) seems to be particularly belated, although the focus of NATO is not in the Far East.

The new Chinese paradigms and strategies reveal a broadly shared view of the ambitious Chinese national goal that just like the twentieth century belonged to America, the next one will certainly be heralded by the re-emerging superpower of China. This is seen as a historical redemption for the humiliations and minority status brought on by the Western great powers ever since the nineteenth century (Bader, 2016, p. 28).

However, many liberal (institutionalist) American political strategists, most notably Ryan Hass, Director of Chinese Affairs at President Obama's National Security Council, claim that China is not as seriously challenging and powerful as its growing economic and navy power would suggest. The United States should not seek to destroy or humiliate China, as they did with the Soviet Union in the Cold War, instead it should integrate it and advocate its diplomatic goals and trade ambitions within the

institutionalized global structures dominated by the West. Ultimately both parties must avoid any cause for the escalation of a high-level economic and political conflict into a direct military confrontation.

Nevertheless, as the classic wisdom of *realpolitik* and power perception implies, one important, if not the most important, power factor in interstate relations is trade and financial resources, both in the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries. Thus, many Washington foreign trade pundits admit rather bitterly that Americans have simply wished to build good business positions and cherished profitable relations within the vast Chinese economy ever since the 1980s without doing anything else. The American intentions and strategic plans had not included contributing to a rapidly booming Chinese economy for the sake of American interests, involving the unwanted and unpleasant outcome of facilitating the emergence of their own volatile competitor not only in economy but in world politics and even military dimensions. The covert American strategy of turning China, a tertiary regional power into a booming economy as well as a reliable but meek partner, as it had happened in the case of a defeated Japan, has neither met the American expectations, nor did it follow the roadmap outlined by the US State Department. (Kissinger, 2014, p. 381).

In contrast with the American assumptions and failed strategic objectives, China is pursuing its own national strategic pragmatic guidelines, defined by the omnipresent political power centre of the Chinese Communist Party, embodied at present by President Xi Jinping. The era of the smile diplomacy of a superficial friendship with the United States (Xuetong, 2010, p. 282) has been evidently over for several years, and the Sino-American relationship seems to be more about overt opposition than cooperation. In the new, rather multi-polar post-postmodern world order, the United States seems to be preserving its primacy and perceptible dominance, although China is clearly not following the terms and conditions of the Western world order, pursuing its own strategic objectives as a non-secondary global sovereign power.

All in all, the current nexus of the two great powers seems to be defined by controversial volatile trade actions and hostile political rhetoric, from where various scenarios (constructive as well as rather gloomy ones) may unfold, depending on the political will and the mid-term strategic objectives of the opposing parties.

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Endnotes

- 1 Mutually Assured Destruction, the idea that the ‘first striker dies second’ in the unlikely case of a total thermonuclear war. The term was coined by Donald Brennan, a strategist scholar of the Hudson Institute in 1962.
- 2 Declared by President Eisenhower in April 1954, following a decisive battle lost by the French troops against the Vietnamese revolutionary army at Diem Bien Phu. It claims that the loss of the Indochina states like ‘dominos’ against the spread of communism would have unfathomable consequences for the free world.
- 3 George Kennan’s view is worth mentioning here, who was a famous American diplomat to Moscow and an expert on the Soviet world and expansionist Marxist ideology, who considered China a less aggressive successor great power to the Soviet Union, being much more potent, goal-oriented, diligent, and shrewd than the Stalinist empire (Kennan, 1947). Following the Sino-Soviet rift of 1967, Kennan invalidated his anti-Soviet containment strategy in Asia, although he asserted that an American ‘defensive perimeter’ must be guaranteed around a fragile South Korea, Japan, and Philippines. It was not aimed against the ‘non-expansionist’ China but against the Soviet Union and the rather unpredictable North Korea (Bader, 2017, p. 17) .
- 4 CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin’s intellectual sympathy towards Protestant Christian denominations and work ethics is quite interesting. After his retirement in November 2002, he quite surprisingly mentioned that

if he had had the power, he would have adopted Protestantism as a state religion in China, it being the most beneficial spiritual product of the West beside Marxism. In the spirit of this rather curious and open intellectual proposition, the next party leader and Chinese President, Hu Jintao even organized academic briefings for the Politburo members of the Central Committee in 2007 on the importance and influence of Christianity on social equilibrium and economic productivity. However, as the level of state persecutions of various religious groups in China has been intensifying, these revolutionary and reactionary ideas have most likely remained mere intellectual experiments on the part of some members of the party elite, and the rather anti-religious national policy defined by the atheistic Marxist-Maoist doctrine has not changed much in recent decades.

INDONESIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract. This paper examines Indonesia's foreign policy regarding the handling of the global COVID-19 pandemic. As the third most populous country in Asia after China and India, Indonesia has taken strategic steps to handle COVID-19, looking after its citizens both within the country and abroad. The study shows that Indonesia's foreign policy is carried out through the Alliance for Multilateralism. First, Indonesian citizens abroad are protected by the Indonesian government with the help of large-scale repatriation, especially in countries that have been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the Indonesian government encourages the strengthening of governance within the global health framework by supporting the policies of the World Health Organization (WHO). In addition, Indonesia cooperates with various countries, both regionally and multilaterally, in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The factors that influence Indonesia's foreign policy regarding the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic include Indonesia's national interests and the international political situation. These have characterized foreign policy implementation under President Joko Widodo during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, Indonesia, COVID-19, Pandemic, Mitigation

Introduction

The world is currently facing the Corona Virus Disease-19 pandemic, often referred to as COVID-19. A pandemic constitutes a global health crisis, which has an impact on the social and economic conditions of the affected countries. Under these conditions, countries around the world must adapt to new dynamics. The global pandemic caused

by the spread of COVID-19 has threatened international peace and internal security. COVID-19, rather than force every state to work together, has strengthened international competition. The two strongest superpowers, the United States and China, have used propaganda against each other regarding the origin of the virus. The United States' withdrawal from WHO membership also fits into this approach because Washington has accused the World Health Organization of being under Chinese control (Akhli, 2020). Geopolitical competition has also manifested in the aid policies of the two great powers. Through the U.S. Department of State and USAID, the US has disbursed more than USD 490 million in emergency medical assistance from the USAID Global Health Emergency Reserve Fund for the Infectious Disease Outbreak and Global Health Program funding post (U.S. Embassy Jakarta, 2020).

Meanwhile, China has assisted WHO with USD 30 million (Financial Times, 2020). Although this great power competition has remained in the spotlight, international cooperation has also been characterized by international solidarity. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted internal social, economic, political, and national security conditions, requiring comprehensive action. Internally, there is a need for cooperation from civil society groups and the government accompanied by responsive leadership at all levels and maintaining public trust with a transparent attitude, strengthening communication functions that are more humane and empathetic.

These external and internal challenges impact every country during the pandemic, and Indonesia has also made various efforts to resolve the impact of the pandemic. Indonesia is actively involved in international cooperation in handling COVID-19. This effort is inseparable from Indonesia's foreign policy in defending its national interests in a changing global context, which has impacted Indonesia's social, political, and national security conditions.

This study analyses Indonesia's foreign policy in handling the various problems the COVID-19 pandemic has caused, as well as explain the factors that influence Indonesia's foreign policy in mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact on Indonesia

Indonesia announced its first positive case on 2 March, 2020. Following that, on 13 April, 2020, the Indonesian government declared COVID-19 a national non-natural disaster and has since implemented Large-Scale Social Restrictions (Pembatasan Sosial Skala Besar or PSBB) in various major cities in Indonesia, thus affecting the social and economic activities of the community.

The Large-Scale Social Restrictions policy implemented by the Indonesian government proved ineffective in reducing the number of people infected with COVID-19, and the number of COVID-19 victims kept increasing. Starting in January 2021, the Indonesian government introduced a new policy, the Enforcement of Restrictions on Community Activities (Pemberlakuan Pembatasan Kegiatan Masyarakat or PPKM). The first phase began between 11-25 January, 2021. Phase two took place between 9-22 February, 2021. From March to June, the implementation of Community Activity Restrictions was halted. However, in early July 2021, an emergency Community Activity Restriction was re-implemented between 3-20 July, 2021 because the number of people infected with COVID-19 was increasing (Tim Detik.com, 2021). The emergency PPKM was continued with PPKM level 4 between 21 July and September 2021. At the time of writing (September 2021), the Indonesian government was still implementing the PPKM (Farisa, 2021).

The total number of COVID-19 cases in Indonesia at the time of submission (27 September, 2021) reached 4,209,403 cases since President Joko Widodo's first announcement on 2 March, 2020. By 27 September, 2021, the death toll from COVID-19 was 141,585. In addition, the government noted 388,341 people with a suspected COVID-19 status (Guritno, 2021).

The spread of COVID-19 has had a major impact on Indonesia, especially regarding the issuance of the COVID-19 health protocol policy, which is an effort by the Indonesian government to break the spread of COVID-19 and reduce the number of people who test positive.

Indonesia has experienced a decline in the pace of the economy since the beginning of the pandemic and the implementation of large-scale social restrictions in various regions in Indonesia. Based on a report by Bank Indonesia (BI), Indonesia's economic growth in 2020 was -2,1%, although Indonesia's GDP expanded by 3.1% in the first half of 2021, as restrictions eased and demand picked up. Fixed investment and government spending showed healthy growth, while private consumption grew modestly, held back by continued uncertainty. Imports grew in step with domestic demand, but exports grew faster (Zhang, 2021).

In addition to Indonesia's economic conditions, social conditions in Indonesia have also been affected by the spread of COVID-19 and need serious attention from the Indonesian government:

COVID-19 has had an impact on the health system in Indonesia. The rapid spread of COVID-19 to various provinces in Indonesia has resulted in inadequate infection prevention and control measures, reduced availability and supply of essential medicines, reduced availability of beds and skilled health workers in hospitals, especially in disadvantaged areas, disrupting services in essential health care, such as antenatal care, safe delivery, and care of new-borns and toddlers. The impact is also felt by people with chronic diseases or diseases requiring routine care and follow-up (UNSDG, 2020).

COVID-19 impacts the functioning of public health centres. More than 6 percent of sub-districts in Indonesia do not have a public health centre, and many have limitations in terms of electricity, clean water, and adequate equipment. Around 21 percent of public health centres have limited referral transportation, and 35 percent have limited access to clean water and electricity (UNSDG, 2020).

COVID-19 has also had an impact on the education system in Indonesia. The policy issued by the Ministry of Education in Indonesia regarding online learning ordered the closing of schools, which has caused new problems for students and teachers. These include a lack of mastery of information technology, inadequate facilities and infrastructure, lack of preparation, and limited internet access. These have resulted in widening the gap between more and less capable students (Martoredjo, 2020).

Principles and Traditions in Indonesian Foreign Policy

Based on the Law on Foreign Relations No. 37 of 1999, Article 1, Paragraph 2, Indonesia's foreign policy is defined as the policies, attitudes, and steps taken by the Government of the Republic of Indonesia in dealing with other countries, international organizations, and other subjects of international law in the context of dealing with global problems to achieve national goals. Foreign policy can also be defined as a series of government policies concerning the international community to achieve national goals. The government projects national interests into the society between nations (Sabir, 1987).

Perwinta and Yani argue that a country's foreign policy is essentially a mechanism for the nation-state to adapt to various changes in its environment (Perwinta & Yani, 2005). Indonesia's foreign policy is a 'Free-Active' policy, a foreign policy that is not neutral in essence but free to determine attitudes and policies towards international problems, not binding itself a priori to one world power. It actively contributes, both in the form of thoughts and active participation, to resolving conflicts, disputes, and other problems, for the sake of accomplishing world order. Indonesia's foreign policy instruments change in line with internal and external developments. A change will also influence the change in the government regime, which is marked by a new national leadership as a product of the existing democracy. Indonesia is confident in implementing diplomacy and foreign policy and plays an active role at the regional and global levels (Perwinta, 2007).

State protection for citizens is one of the rights of citizens. As stated in the Constitution, everyone has the right to recognition, guarantee, protection, fair legal certainty, and equal treatment before the law. Thus, through protection diplomacy, the state seeks to ensure the human rights of its citizens. One form of protection for Indonesian citizens is through consular assistance and protection provided by official representatives of the state within the framework of citizen services, as regulated in Regulation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia No. 4 of 2008 concerning Citizen Services at Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia abroad.

Indonesia's foreign policy in mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic is put into practice through the Alliance for Multilateralism, which focuses on the protection of Indonesian citizens abroad as well as encouraging the strengthening of governance within the global health framework through a framework of regional and multilateral cooperation. Its primary focus is the protection and rescuing of Indonesian citizens, which is one of the priorities of Indonesia's Foreign Policy 4+1. These priorities consist of strengthening economic diplomacy; protection diplomacy; sovereignty and national diplomacy; increasing Indonesia's contribution and leadership in the region and the world; and strengthening the diplomatic infrastructure (Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

The Alliance for Multilateralism is an informal network of countries united in the belief that only a rules-based multilateral order can guarantee international peace and stability, and that international challenges can only be solved through cooperation. The Alliance aims to renew the commitment of countries in the world to maintaining the stability of the rules-based international order, upholding international principles. If necessary, countries can adapt to existing conditions. It also aims to protect and preserve international norms, international treaties, and institutions under pressure or in danger, generate a more proactive plan in policies that lack effective governance. This requires collective action and reform without neglecting core principles and values, so that multilateral institutions and the global economic and political order are more inclusive and effective for the entire international community. Through the Alliance for Multilateralism, countries will choose policy alternatives with the most beneficial consequences in meeting goals and objectives, without ignoring international norms (Alliance for Multilateralism, 2021).

Mitigating COVID-19 in the International Arena

Countries have taken various steps in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, and the pandemic has united the interests of countries around the world, affecting the foreign policy of every country, including Indonesia. The Indonesian government continues to prioritize people's interests in the implementation of its foreign policy. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused several countries to accuse each other and suspect each other of using propaganda regarding the origin of the virus and made them

doubt the performance of the WHO as an international organization that regulates global health. Instead of being involved in the conflict, the Indonesian government has protected Indonesian citizens both at home and abroad.

On 23 January, 2020, the city of Wuhan was quarantined by the Chinese government; the safety of several Indonesian citizens who were there was indirectly threatened, and they were not allowed to leave Wuhan. In response to this, on 31 January, 2020, President Jokowi ordered the cabinet to immediately repatriate Indonesian citizens residing in Wuhan, China, with several procedures considering that COVID-19 is easy to spread through physical contact. The plan to repatriate Indonesian citizens from Hubei Province is supported by several aircraft alerted by the TNI (Setiawan, 2020). This repatriation effort shows the Indonesian government's exceptional attention to the safety of Indonesian citizens. In the repatriation scheme, the main priority of the Indonesian government is to protect Indonesian citizens so that the Indonesian state is present abroad as a form of policy from the Indonesian government in responding to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, from April to July 2020, several Indonesian citizens returned to Indonesia via air, sea, and land routes. The Indonesian citizens who were repatriated came from various countries. Furthermore, Indonesian citizens affected by lockdown policies have received assistance from the Indonesian government. The Indonesian government is aware of the increasingly complex problems that have arisen due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as increasing migration and the possibility of cross-border organized crime such as trafficking in persons. Given this impact, the Indonesian government seeks to create a corridor for safe and fair migration for Indonesian citizens and Indonesian Migrant Workers through a multilateral process in the United Nations, by agreeing to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM). GCM has four objectives, the first of which is the need for accurate data. To obtain accurate and up-to-date data on Indonesian Citizens/Migrant Workers, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has used a public service 4.0 approach through two digital platforms, namely Portal Peduli WNI and Safe Travel. The second objective is to provide accurate and timely information at every stage of migration,

the third is to facilitate fair and ethical recruitment patterns, while the fourth objective aims to prevent, eradicate, and eliminate human trafficking (Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020).

Government policies for mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic focus on efforts to repatriate Indonesian citizens so that it runs smoothly and pays special attention to Indonesian citizens who test positive for COVID-19. Based on data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, until the end of August 2020, the number of Indonesian citizens exposed to COVID-19 was 24,000. From them, 1,370 Indonesian citizens were declared dead in the country. The government is trying to monitor the safety of Indonesian citizens by providing treatment and compensation, especially to Indonesian citizens who are affected by lockdown policies and are experiencing difficulties due to a reduced income. The Indonesian government has provided aid packages to Indonesian citizens affected by lockdown, with a total of 522,086 aid packages distributed worldwide. Of this figure, 451,098 aid packages have been given to Indonesian citizens in Malaysia (Setiawan, 2020).

The implementation of Indonesia's foreign policy in mitigating the risk of the COVID-19 pandemic by prioritizing the safety of Indonesian citizens is inseparable from bilateral cooperations with various countries and the private sector, as well as the United Nations. With the Safe Travel digital application, the Indonesian government can monitor the data regarding Indonesian citizens abroad, even though the data obtained are not all Indonesian citizens because some are not legally registered. Repatriating Indonesian citizens is also not a simple process because the government and Indonesian citizens must follow the applicable health protocols. This procedure requires collaboration between stakeholders, at every stage of migration.

The second focus of the Indonesian government's state policy in mitigating COVID-19 is strengthening governance within the Global Health framework. Global Health is a concept that emerged from a process of political and historical change. Global Health can be defined based on five categories: geographic reach, level of cooperation, target individual or population, access to health, and range of disciplines. Global Health focuses on issues that directly or indirectly affect health, which can transcend national boundaries based on geographic reach.

Cooperation within the global health framework includes developing and implementing solutions that require international cooperation. Individual or population targets include prevention programs within the population and individual clinical care. The main goal is access to health that all countries and communities can reach. Research related to global health is related to health sciences and includes multidisciplinary sciences (Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that global health governance is still weak. Many countries are creating their own policies rather than coordinate with the World Health Organization (WHO) in responding to the current global health crisis because WHO is not considered to be quick enough to resolve the pandemic. However, many countries continue to support the WHO policies, including Indonesia, seeking to build multilateral cooperation to support global health governance in mitigating the risk of COVID-19.

Indonesia is one of the countries that initiated the resolution “Global solidarity to fight the coronavirus disease 2019” on 27 March, 2020. This resolution is an effort to build global coordination when superpower countries do not participate. It focuses on intensive cooperation efforts in preventing and mitigating pandemics through sharing information, disseminating knowledge on best practices, and encouraging WHO to prepare an informative guide (Rum, 2020).

Indonesia’s efforts to mitigate the risk of the COVID-19 pandemic were also seen at the 25th Meeting of the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) via video conference on 9 April, 2020. The foreign ministers who attended this meeting agreed to increase efforts to handle COVID-19. The Indonesian foreign minister underlined four main elements. First, Indonesia emphasized the importance of implementing the results of the ASEAN Health Ministers and ASEAN Plus Three meetings and proposed at the ASEAN Summit related to the COVID-19 pandemic that the leaders of ASEAN member countries could instruct the mechanism for drafting a protocol for cross-border public health responses. Second, Indonesia proposed that the Supply chain and flow of goods policy during the outbreak be discussed at the ASEAN Plus Three Summit. Third, Indonesia emphasized the importance of ASEAN’s role in protecting vulnerable groups and migrant workers by applying health protocols.

Indonesia even proposed post-pandemic recovery steps through the protocol of the movement of people within the ASEAN Member States. Fourth, Indonesia proposed that ASEAN member countries ensure the availability of medical equipment by establishing the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund through the ASEAN Development Fund and the APT Cooperation Fund (Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020).

On 14-16 April, 2020, the IMF and World Bank Spring Meetings were held virtually, attended by Central Bank governors and finance ministers from various countries. In this meeting, Indonesia encouraged implementing a coordinated policy mix response to mitigate the economic impact of COVID-19. All countries present, including Indonesia, supported the G20 Action Plan to deal with the crisis as a reference for policy responses to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak (Bank Indonesia, 2020).

Indonesia is also part of the Foreign Policy and Global Health (FPGH) forum with six other countries (Brazil, France, Norway, Senegal, South Africa, and Thailand). In March 2007, the Oslo Ministerial Declaration was agreed upon at the FPGH Foreign Ministers meeting in Oslo, Norway. The declaration emphasizes the purpose of FPGH to build synergy between foreign policy and global health in various bilateral, regional, and multilateral forums (Widyawati, 2021).

On 18 May, 2020, the Ministers of Health of the FPGH held a Virtual Meeting led by the Minister of Health of the Republic of Indonesia and produced a Joint Statement on two topics, cooperation in handling COVID-19 and affordable health care for all, which contained the commitments of FPGH countries to increase international solidarity and cooperation in the preparedness and mitigation of the COVID-19 pandemic and strengthen health systems focusing on primary health care. The Virtual Meeting also emphasized the need for similar activities to ensure the availability of health services to everyone, achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC) as well as the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 (Widyawati, 2021).

Indonesia is also participating in the Solidarity Trial, which aims to find a suitable vaccine for COVID-19. On 19-21 August, 2020, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia and the Minister of

State-Owned Enterprises (BUMN) visited China and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in cooperation in developing a COVID-19 vaccine. In the context of cooperation in developing COVID-19 vaccines by several companies such as G-42, UAE with Sinopharm, China, and Kimia Farma, the UAE is committed to providing 10 million vaccines for Indonesia (BPOM RI, 2020).

On 24-26 August, 2020, the Head of BPOM of the Republic of Indonesia made a working visit to the United Arab Emirates. A meeting was held with Amin Hussain Al Amiri from the UAE Ministry of Health, Jamal Alkaabi from the Abu Dhabi Ministry of Health, and Peng Xiao, the CEO of Group-42, Sinopharm, visiting the Vaccine Testing Center located at the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre. This collaboration provides an opportunity for Indonesia to obtain vaccines according to Indonesia's needs and develop the pharmaceutical industry by exporting medicines and vaccines from Indonesia to the Middle Eastern countries as well as encouraging the implementation of the OIC Action Plan to support drug and vaccine independence in OIC member countries (BPOM RI, 2020).

Overall, the series of international collaborations established by the Indonesian government is a form of support strengthening governance within global health. Countries worldwide, including Indonesia, no longer expect WHO to resolve the pandemic because the current pandemic is different from what has happened before. Therefore, cooperation from various countries worldwide is needed to prevent its spread and find a suitable vaccine for the international community to use.

Indonesia also emphasizes the importance of bilateral cooperation to reduce the number of Indonesian citizens who are positive for COVID-19. Indonesia cooperates with South Korea because it is one of the countries in Asia that has succeeded in suppressing the number of positive people for COVID-19. The effort made by the South Korean government is to conduct large-scale rapid tests so that the government can easily track and quickly respond to the spread of COVID-19. In addition, there is also support from South Korean biotechnology companies Kogene Biotech and Seegene in providing COVID-19 test kits. Through this bilateral cooperation, the South Korean government has provided assistance worth USD 500,000 to the Indonesian government to support efforts

to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in Indonesia. The assistance has consisted of COVID-19 test kits and rechargeable power sprayers. Private parties from South Korea, such as the LG Group, have also assisted the Indonesian government with as many as 50,000 COVID-19 diagnostic kits (RT-PCR type), while Hyundai Motor has assisted with 40,000 PPE (Berita Indonesia, 2020).

Indonesia's foreign policy in mitigating COVID-19 has also been influenced by the polemics of international politics. When COVID-19 began to spread rapidly, the United States government began to issue a suspension policy to persons with a history of travel from China planning to enter the United States (Akhli, 2020). The United States government first referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as the Chinese Virus or the Wuhan Virus based on the place where the virus was first found. This was later opposed by the WHO because the name encouraged racial stigmatization. The United States government ignored the WHO and claimed that WHO Secretary-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus was a Chinese accomplice. WHO was considered slow in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic (Akhli, 2020).

The United States government received a response from the Chinese government, but the accusations levelled against the Chinese government have not affected China's ambitions in carrying out its foreign policy. When the European Union and the United States showed unpreparedness in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, China carried out diplomacy in several countries through medical assistance. China even claims that the United States wants to start a Cold War through COVID-19, which the United States military may have brought to Wuhan (Akhli, 2020).

The international political environment became increasingly heated when the United States government stopped its WHO funding, worth around USD 500 million a year, and planned to leave the WHO (Sushanti, 2020). On the other hand, China has been taking advantage of this moment by further demonstrating its role within the WHO. The Chinese government has provided a budget of USD 30 million to the WHO to mitigate the risk of the COVID-19 pandemic (Akhli, 2020). This happened because of the competition in the vaccine trade in the health industry, between the United States and China.

The state of international politics is one of the considerations of the Indonesian government in its efforts to mitigate the risk of the COVID-19 pandemic. With its Free-Active foreign policy principle, Indonesia is not involved in the feud between the two superpowers and focuses on its domestic politics rather than fight for the interests of other countries. As part of the international community, the Indonesian government shows its solidarity in mitigating the risk of COVID-19 by establishing cooperation both bilaterally and multilaterally. As for choosing a vaccine, Indonesia meets its domestic needs from various countries, be it China, America, or another country. The Indonesian government seeks to make Indonesia's foreign policy adaptive to the conditions of the pandemic with the help of protective diplomacy. It tries to present the state in society rather than being involved in the propaganda actions of countries that take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic in international politics.

Conclusion

Indonesia's foreign policy is an embodiment as mandated in the preamble of the 1945 Constitution, namely participating in implementing world peace. This means that through a multilateral framework, the Indonesian government recognizes that the COVID-19 pandemic is no longer related to the national security issues of one country, but it is a threat to human security around the world. Through the Alliance of Multilateralism, the Indonesian government seeks to invite countries to cooperate in the handling of the pandemic, providing essential medical equipment, personal protective equipment, medicines, and vaccines for countries in need, as well as making efforts to facilitate the movement and flow of goods to continue to support global trade and supply chains during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is a global health crisis that requires joint action on the part of the international community. The deteriorating world economic conditions and the high death rate caused by the pandemic show that mitigation is the appropriate step to be taken by the international community instead of using political propaganda to accuse each other of the origins of the virus. The international community has no other option but to adjust the series of policies prepared by the WHO, to be implemented in their respective countries, and use the WHO as a forum for cooperation for all UN member countries.

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SOCIAL DISTANCING? THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS

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Abstract: Owing to changes in Taiwan's domestic politics, the PRC's turn to a more assertive foreign policy, and the rapid deterioration in Sino-US affairs, cross-Strait relations were already at their lowest point in recent history when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out. This article analyses how the interplay between these already existing factors and the pandemic have impacted relations between Beijing and Taipei. The analysis is conducted on three levels: Taiwan's domestic politics; cross-Strait perceptions and interactions; and changes in the international space available for Taiwan. It is argued that the pandemic has primarily accelerated and amplified trends already in place rather than introduce fundamentally new factors. Taiwan's successful management of the pandemic has stabilized DPP rule and given the government enlarged policy space. It has further entrenched negative views of the other on both sides of the Strait and decreased cross-Strait social contact. The country's success has also provided a boost to Taiwan's manoeuvring in the increasingly fragmented international economic and political space that has resulted from intensifying great power competition.

Keywords: China, Taiwan, pandemic, Covid-19, cross-Strait relations

Introduction

On 15 January, 2020, representatives of the US and the People's Republic of China (PRC, China) signed the Phase One trade deal, trying to put a break on the rapidly deteriorating relations between Washington and Beijing. Four days earlier, on 11 January, the Democratic Progressive Party

(DPP), helped by its firm stance vis-à-vis Beijing, had won the general elections in Taiwan, retaining its majority in the Legislative Yuan and ensuring a second term for President Tsai Ing-wen. On the same day, the PRC reported the first death attributed to a disease later named Covid-19. On 23 January, the city of Wuhan in China's Hubei province was locked down by the authorities in Beijing in an attempt to control the fast-spreading epidemic, and a week later the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global health emergency. In the context of rapidly deteriorating US-China relations and a predictably frosty post-election atmosphere across the Taiwan Strait, the pandemic emerged as a new force impacting the relations between Beijing and Taipei at a time when "cross-Strait relations are at their most precarious point since the 1995–1996 third Taiwan Strait crisis; and the US-Taiwan relationship is stronger now than it has been since 1979" (Hsiao & Hsiao, 2021, p. 155).

This article analyses the extent and direction of the influence the Covid-19 pandemic has had on cross-Strait relations. There are sound reasons to expect a considerable impact. The pandemic has caused a massive disruption in economic activity, trade relations, political dynamics, as well as everyday life around the world. It has pitted countries against each other in a nationalistic competition for scarce medical resources, triggered unprecedented border closures, highlighted the weaknesses of domestic and global governance and the pitfalls of international cooperation, and provided particularly fertile ground for the spread of disinformation (Brands & Gavin, 2020). The pandemic has also directed plenty of attention to both sides of the Strait – to the PRC as the locus of the first large outbreak, and to the governments representing alternative methods in managing the pandemic at home (Alon et al., 2020). Moreover, seventeen years earlier, the SARS epidemic of 2003 had demonstrated the destabilizing potential of a cross-border epidemic. It disrupted cross-Strait travel and led to a sharper differentiation of Taiwanese identity and more negative views regarding the PRC. President Chen Shui-bian (DPP) also used the opportunity to improve his popularity before the 2004 elections by calling for a national referendum on whether Taiwan should join the WHO, and by adding the word "Taiwan" on the cover of Taiwanese passports (Brown, 2003; Shen, 2004).

Isolating the impact of the pandemic on cross-Strait relations from other trends is, of course, close to impossible, and this article aims less to identify an independent influence than place various pandemic-related

effects in the broader context of other simultaneous developments, to see how Covid-19 has shaped, restrained, or amplified other co-existing trends and dynamics. Three of these broader trends are worth mentioning at the outset.

First, the identity of Taiwan's population has long been shifting away from a sense of unity with the mainland, a process that accelerated after the 2014 Sunflower Movement against closer economic ties with the PRC (Dreyer & deLisle, 2021). The DPP's success in 2016 in simultaneously taking control of the presidency and the legislature signalled the rise to political dominance of this new identity, ending the lingering illusion that the two sides of the Strait agree that they belong to a single community (Cole, 2020).

Second, for the last several decades, the cross-Strait military and economic balance of power has been shifting toward the PRC, fundamentally altering the dynamics between Beijing and Taipei and making peaceful reunification based on a compromise agreement acceptable to both sides even less likely (Dittmer, 2017). Whereas earlier Beijing had shown strategic patience, shelving the question of reunification while waiting for a more advantageous power position and international context, under Xi Jinping Beijing has shown increasing impatience, stating that reunification with Taiwan is a necessary part of the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (Hsiao & Hsiao, 2021; Xi, 2019).

Third, since the 2017 US National Security Strategy identified China, alongside Russia, as powers that "want to shape a world antithetical to US values and interests," a bipartisan consensus has emerged in Washington in favour of a more confrontational policy towards the PRC (*National Security Strategy*, 2017, p. 25). Although the Biden administration has moderated the rhetoric of its predecessor's broad unilateral effort to contain China, in practice, it has expanded it into an attempt at multilateral coordination with US allies and other willing states. Since the United States looms large over cross-Strait relations, the rapidly deteriorating US-China relations have placed Taiwan in a particularly sensitive spot, especially as the Biden administration has continued, and in some ways has pushed further the Trump administration's pursuit of closer relations with it (Grothusen, 2021).

The analysis situates the impact of the pandemic in the context of these other major factors and proceeds in three stages. First, it looks at how Taiwan's domestic politics, which is both a major determinant and a primary battlefield of cross-Strait relations, has been impacted by Covid-19. Second, the effects on cross-Strait economic, social, and political interactions and mutual perceptions are analysed, including the role of (dis)information. Finally, the article investigates how the pandemic has influenced the global position of Taiwan and Mainland China, including their relative position in the global economic system, their global image, and their contestation over international political space through the use of traditional and public diplomacy.

Domestic Politics in Taiwan

Taiwan is a highly central issue for the PRC, with direct implications for the survival prospects of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and there is very little domestic contestation over government policy in this area (Weiss & Wallace, 2021). Therefore, the impact of Covid-19 on Chinese domestic politics has had little bearing on cross-Strait dynamics. In contrast, Taiwan's dynamic domestic political scene plays a major role in China-Taiwan relations due to the different positions the two major parties, the independence-leaning DPP and the more pro-unification KMT, take on Taiwan's relations with the PRC. Both the governing party and the stability of the government strongly influence the dynamics of cross-Strait relations and Taiwan's standing in the international community. Although it was expected to pose a major challenge to the Taiwanese government, the successful management of the pandemic has in fact ended up strengthening and stabilizing the government's position and expanding its space for political manoeuvring.

DPP controls both the Legislative Yuan and the Presidency since 2016, having retained both in the January 2020 elections. Under President Tsai, the issue of cross-Strait relations began to clearly benefit DPP domestically, since her moderate policies allayed fears that Taiwan's otherwise increasingly pro-interdependence population had about the party's earlier destabilizing actions towards the PRC (V. W.-C. Wang & deLisle, 2021). As a result, KMT's political strength now rests mostly on exploiting dissatisfaction with the state of the economy or various social issues, the political potential of which was clearly demonstrated by KMT's

considerable success at the 2018 local elections. However, by the 2020 elections the focus on Taiwanese politics had shifted back to cross-Strait relations due to the large-scale protests in Hong Kong against Beijing's moves to curtail the city's autonomy, which greatly improved the results of DPP and made KMT's position on improving relations with China increasingly untenable (Rigger, 2020; Singh, 2021).

The coronavirus outbreak had the potential to generate an economic and social crisis in Taiwan that KMT could exploit to improve its electoral chances. At the beginning of the pandemic, Taiwan was identified as having the second highest risk of importing the disease due to the density of its travel links with the PRC (Gardner, 2020). In fact, Taiwan managed to avoid any major domestic outbreak until May 2021, before which time it had only registered 1,129 cases (many of them imported) and 12 deaths. Even the first wave that ultimately reached Taiwan in May 2021, with the number of daily cases peaking at around 500 per day in that month, was quickly brought under control, and by 15 September Taiwan had the relatively modest total of 16,103 cases and 839 deaths, both among the world's best track records according to the Worldometer coronavirus page (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>).

There are many reasons behind Taiwan's remarkable success in managing the pandemic. Its linguistic and social proximity allowed the government in Taipei to gather early and high-quality information about the nature of the disease that appeared in China at the end of 2019. With the experience of the 2003 SARS epidemic and the 2009 H1N1 outbreak, as well as other health and food security challenges originating from China, Taipei acted with distrust and caution towards the PRC and immediately set in motion the policies and practices designed after the SARS epidemic (Yasuhiro, 2020). The government quickly securitised the outbreak, launching a response as early as 2 January, and it activated the Central Epidemic Command Center on 20 January (Kennedy, 2020; Su & Han, 2020). Within a week, Taiwan heavily restricted entry from the PRC, and later from most of the rest of the world, making good use of being an island. Taiwan also mobilised its digital capabilities and world-class healthcare systems to execute highly effective contact-tracing and quarantining affected individuals (C. J. Wang et al., 2020). As a result, the government only had to impose relatively strict restrictions – including universal mask-wearing, closure of leisure and entertainment

venues and on-site restaurant services, a ban on larger gatherings, an entry ban for all non-residents, etc. – for about three months between 20 May and 26 July.

The successful prevention of any major outbreak until May 2021 boosted satisfaction with Tsai's leadership and the performance of the government. Between January and May 2020, Tsai's approval rate increased by 14.5 percentage points, reaching an all-time high of 71.2% (Yasuhiro, 2020). Rich and Einhorn (2021) found that the population's satisfaction with the government's coronavirus management had a strong positive impact on President Tsai's approval rating. The government's popularity was helped by the fact that Taiwan was among the few advanced economies that managed to have a positive economic growth rate in 2020 (around 3%). Taiwan's economy benefited from avoiding any lockdown that year, which meant undisrupted manufacturing production, and also from increasing demand for electronics and digital tools resulting from lockdowns elsewhere (Cheng et al., 2021). This strong economic performance was also partially due to the ongoing China-US trade and technology war, which had incentivised the return to the island of Taiwanese capital (C. Yu, 2021)

In the year following Tsai's peak approval rate, controversial decisions by the government, including the lifting of the ban on importing pork from the US, public concerns over food security, press freedom, and DPP's links with organised crime, as well as power outages and water scarcity problems, saw the president's approval slide gradually down to 54.4% by April 2021, before taking a more drastic drop as a result of the May outbreak (Chou, 2021; L. Chung, 2021a). Although the outbreak was quickly brought under control, it exposed the weakness of the Taiwanese government's vaccination policy. By early May, only around 0.2% of Taiwan's population had received at least one dose of the vaccine, lagging well behind the average of high-income economies (27.3%), as well as the world average (7.6%) at the time (Ritchie et al., 2021). Although the government faced many external obstacles in purchasing vaccines, some of which are discussed in the next section, it also acted complacently and somewhat recklessly by relying on its plans of a zero Covid policy until locally-made vaccines became available in the second half of 2021 (L. Kuo & Chen, 2021; Tan, 2021). In June, disapproval of Tsai briefly surpassed her approval before the latter recovered to 45.3% in August, partly due

the successful control of the outbreak and the remarkably rapid rollout of a belated vaccination campaign. By the beginning of August, the share of people who had received at least one dose reached 33%, surpassing the world average of 28.4% (Ritchie et al., 2021). Although the disruption caused by Taiwan's first coronavirus wave clearly cost popularity, it still left President Tsai with a higher approval rate than for most of her own first presidency or for almost the whole of the two terms of her KMT predecessor, Ma Ying-jeou (T. Y. Wang & Cheng, 2015; You, 2021).

Cross-Strait Perceptions and Interactions

The pandemic broke out at a point when cross-Strait relations were at a low point. The PRC severed official political relations with Taiwan in 2016 after President Tsai had refused to explicitly acknowledge the “1992 consensus” that Beijing identified as the foundation for any continuing cross-Strait political interaction. Since then, Beijing's diplomatic assaults have lured away eight of Taiwan's former diplomatic allies, leaving the latter with only fifteen states with which it has official diplomatic relations. Taiwanese society has also turned increasingly cold on the PRC. By the second half of 2019, only 36% of Taiwanese supported closer political ties, and 52% supported closer economic ties, with considerably lower numbers, 16% and 39%, respectively, among the under 30s (Devlin & Huang, 2020).

The government in Beijing seems to have concluded that the Taiwanese will not realistically choose reunification even under future KMT rule (Bush, 2021). In his report to the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, President Xi omitted from among the list of principles pertaining to “resolving the Taiwan question” that of “placing hope on the Taiwan people” (Xi, 2017, p. 50). Instead of working through political relations, the Chinese government has opted for a combination of ramping up military threats and engaging more directly with the Taiwanese population through a broad set of measures to attract Taiwanese investments and individuals to the mainland, and stepping up its information and influence campaigns (Hsiao & Hsiao, 2021).

By 2019, Beijing's offer to Taiwan was clearly defined as a version of the “one country, two systems” model that had been implemented in Hong Kong in 1997. Therefore, the rapid and relentless *de facto* dismantlement of Hong

Kong's special status during the course of 2019 and 2020 ensured that this offer would have little traction in the Taiwanese population (Hsiao & Hsiao, 2021). Tsai's re-election in 2020 promised a deadlock for the next four years, with no hope for improving relations, but with at least relative stability, which the pandemic has put under pressure (Rigger, 2020).

Difficulties related to the political relationship between Taiwan and the PRC emerged early during the pandemic. As Wuhan entered lockdown, the evacuation of Taiwanese citizens became an urgent concern. In the absence of formal government-to-government relations, most of the negotiations and practical arrangements had to be conducted through unofficial actors, including businesspersons and KMT politicians (Rowen, 2020). Moreover, the evacuation was a sensitive question for Beijing, as it wanted to avoid giving the impression that Taiwanese citizens were "foreigners" similar to other nationalities being repatriated at that time. In the end, evacuation began using a PRC airline, but disagreements between the two sides over its execution quickly halted the operation until after the lockdown in Wuhan had been lifted (Brown & Churchman, 2020).

Access to medical resources became another point of contention. As the outbreak started to spread in the PRC in January, Chinese citizens began to buy up medical-grade face masks, sanitizers, and other protective equipment from all around the world, including Taiwan. To prevent drastic shortages, Taiwan first put in place export controls on 24 January and then allocated government funds for increasing medical manufacturing at the beginning of February. The decision was criticised both at home and in the PRC for holding back crucial resources from where it was arguably most needed (Wei, 2020; Yasuhiro, 2020). By late March, Taiwan itself became a major exporter of medical equipment and began to donate masks to other countries. After the government in Taipei announced on 18 March that it had agreed to donate 100,000 masks per week to the United States, the PRC's Taiwan Affairs Office called the move "despicable behaviour" and a "confrontation with the motherland" that privileges foreigners over compatriots (Everington, 2020).

By 2021 the focus had shifted to vaccine access, especially after the May outbreak. China's offer in May to send vaccines and pandemic specialists was rejected by Taiwanese authorities as an attempt to divide

the population of Taiwan (K. Huang, 2021). The Taiwanese government also rebuffed Chinese suggestions to provide Covid-19 jabs to Taiwanese citizens at mainland airports (L. Chung, 2021b). KMT politicians and the PRC, in turn, criticised the government for rejecting Chinese vaccines on political grounds in an emergency situation (Hioe, 2021; Yang & Wang, 2021). In any case, according to a poll conducted in February 2021, only 1% of Taiwan's population were willing to accept a Chinese vaccine, due to the lack of trust in medical products from the PRC (I. Lee, 2021).

Political relations with Beijing also complicated Taiwan's access to BioNTech vaccines. The Chinese pharmaceutical company Fosun Pharma enjoyed exclusive rights to sell BioNTech's mRNA vaccines in the Greater China region, which also includes Taiwan. Negotiations with BioNTech and Fosun Pharma dragged on until they finally collapsed in February 2021. The Taiwanese health minister blamed the failure on Chinese interference over the wording of the agreement with BioNTech, which would have identified Taiwan as a "country". Although the Taiwanese authorities agreed to change the language, negotiations stalled. Former president Ma Ying-jeou blamed the DPP, suggesting that KMT would have been better positioned to negotiate an agreement with the Chinese company. Beijing denied any interference (Chik, 2021; Zhong & Schuetze, 2021). In the end, the deadlock was only solved in mid-July through complex and unofficial channels to distance the PRC and Taiwan. Taiwanese companies Foxconn and TSMC, and the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation purchased 15 million doses of BioNTech vaccines manufactured in Germany and distributed by Fosun Pharma through the intermediary of a Swiss-owned pharmaceutical firm, Zuellig Pharma, and donated them to the Taiwanese government (McGregor, 2021).

Social and economic interactions across the Strait suffered under the border restrictions implemented from February 2020, with trips from the PRC to Taiwan down by 95.7% by February 2021 and cross-Strait higher education mobility grinding to a halt (L. Chung, 2020; Yearender, 2020). Nevertheless, 2020 still gave China the highest share of Taiwan's exports in the last decade, although investments had dropped by both value and number (Keegan & Churchman, 2020, 2021). The post-pandemic resumption of regular exchanges across the Strait, however, has remained a priority for Taipei (Foreign and Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee, 2021).

In the information space, cross-border flows remained as active as ever during the pandemic, contributing to Taiwan's own infodemic, i.e. "too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak" (World Health Organization, n.d.). Disinformation complicated the government's pandemic management efforts and threatened Taiwan's political security. In a very early example, on the day before election day in January 2020, a poster was published on LINE, Taiwan's popular social media platform, warning that the possibility that some Taiwanese might have been infected with the virus from Wuhan could make voting unsafe (Doublethink Lab, 2020). This did not seem to have had a major effect on turnout, which remained exceptionally high. Later disinformation included the government's alleged cover-up of large numbers of unreported infections and deaths, hospitals having to burn or dump dead bodies into rivers, overflowing morgues, major infection clusters affecting the factories of important tech companies, people dying after receiving vaccination, and the government donating large amounts of vaccines to allies while Taiwan's population suffered from vaccine shortage (Hille, 2021; T. Huang, 2021; Yu M. & Lim, 2021).

Such disinformation does not necessarily originate in China, since local political or profit-oriented actors might also be behind some of the phenomenon (Aspinwall, 2020). Sharing the same language, however, makes Taiwan particularly vulnerable to disinformation campaigns originating from the PRC, which the latter undoubtedly exploits, making Taiwan the primary target of Chinese information operations (Yasuhiro, 2020). Fake news and other forms of disinformation might be generated by PRC propaganda organs, nationalistic Chinese citizens, or troll collectives and spread through Taiwanese social media, such as LINE, PTT, Facebook, or Youtube, in a decentralised manner by local individuals and groups, before being picked up by mainstream media (Hille, 2021). The source of disinformation is often given away by the use of simplified characters or phrases and terms used in the PRC, which also limits their credibility, and hence impact, on Taiwanese society (Blanchette et al., 2021; Monaco et al., 2020). The Taiwanese Ministry of Justice has attributed 70% of coronavirus-related disinformation to sources in the PRC (Bradshaw et al., 2020, pp. 388–393).

The pandemic has embittered views across the Strait, with polls in Taiwan showing a significant increase in the share of respondents who did not see the Chinese government as Taiwan's friend (Brown & Churchman, 2020; Yasuhiro, 2020). It is, however, unclear to what extent this has been influenced by the pandemic rather than earlier developments. Chen and Zheng (2021) argue that the breaking point in attitudes towards China in Taiwan took place around 2019, with the anti-China extradition bill protests, increasing US-China tensions, and more aggressive PRC policies towards Taiwan. The recent shift towards an increasing share of Taiwanese population claiming exclusively Taiwanese identity as well as favouring a move towards independence had already begun in 2018 (Election Study Center, 2021a, 2021b; Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation, 2021).

International Space and Recognition

Taiwan and the PRC have long been in competition for international space and recognition, a contest that has increasingly favoured a rapidly rising China (deLisle, 2021). In the last few years, however, the international pushback against Beijing's turn to a more assertive foreign policy and diplomatic style, coupled with the impact of US-China tensions on the global political and economic system, has introduced a degree of instability, with potential opportunities and pitfalls. The pandemic has further upset the international order. Moreover, it has placed the PRC and Taiwan in the global spotlight, not only because the outbreak started in the PRC, but because the different ways the two government managed the pandemic became a symbol of the competition between authoritarian and liberal democratic systems. Increased concerns about global supply chains, shifts in the global image of the PRC and Taiwan, and active pandemic diplomacy have shaped their struggle for international space, although the impact of the pandemic has remained secondary compared to the more fundamental international realignments driven by the rise of China.

By demonstrating the dangers of depending on other countries for crucial products (e.g. medical supplies), as well as the vulnerability of global supply chains to disruptions in a few core countries, the pandemic has accelerated already growing trends in the global economic system towards deglobalization and production reallocation.

It has heavily impacted the global value chains in which both the PRC and Taiwan occupy core, although different, positions (H.-H. Lee & Park, 2020). Whereas the PRC has an interest in deepening economic interdependence with Taiwan, Taiwan's government and companies have shown increasing preference for reallocating their supply chains away from China. Most of the drivers of the latter trend predate the pandemic and will therefore most likely outlast it. Rising labour costs in China and the emergence of robotics and other digital technologies that constitute the Fourth Industrial Revolution have changed the economic incentives Taiwanese companies face when organising their production, making it more rational to move production back home or to lower-cost regions.

Diversification away from the PRC has also been a major political goal of Tsai's administration, which launched the New Southbound Policy to improve economic links with South and Southeast Asia, Australia, and New Zealand in 2016, and the "Action Plan for Welcoming Overseas Taiwanese Businesses to Return to Invest in Taiwan" to encourage reshoring from the PRC in 2019 (C.-C. Kuo, 2021). Even more significant a political factor was the beginning of the US-China trade and technology conflict in 2018, which made it both more costly and risky for many Taiwanese companies to have investments in and commercial relations with the PRC (Duchâtel, 2021). TSMC, for instance, discontinued taking orders from Huawei in response to US sanctions on the company (Keegan & Churchman, 2020). The chip shortage that developed during the pandemic, due to a combination of increased demand for electronics and disrupted production in some countries, underlined the dependence of the world on Taiwan's semiconductor-production, and hence Taiwan's successful avoidance of a large outbreak became crucial for the global economy as well. It also, however, led to calls in the US and the EU to move crucial choke points in global value chains away from a location threatened by one of the world's largest economic and military powers, which can undermine Taiwan's position in global value chains in the long run (Crawford et al., 2021).

How the PRC and Taiwan are perceived globally is a significant factor and battleground in their struggle for international recognition and status. China's image suffered heavily early on in the pandemic due to Beijing's initial cover-up of the outbreak and other signs pointing

to China's responsibility for the crisis. Negative associations with the Covid-19 pandemic certainly accelerated the deterioration of China's image among advanced economies, which reached a low in 2020. However, the increase in unfavourable views of China preceded the coronavirus outbreak, having already started around 2018-2019, influenced by a broader set of factors that the pandemic amplified (Silver et al., 2020; Turcsányi et al., 2021). Moreover, by 2021 China's image improved significantly as a result of its successful management of the pandemic at home, the spectacular mismanagement of the pandemic in the United States and other advanced economies, as well as in reaction to its provision of international assistance (Seah et al., 2021; Silver et al., 2021).

Taiwan's successful management of the pandemic, even with the weaknesses made visible by the May 2021 outbreak, offered a unique opportunity to improve Taiwan's global status. This was even more so because Taiwan's achievement was perceived to offer a rebuttal to the idea that authoritarian countries such as China enjoy an advantage over liberal democracies when handling such emergency situations (Y.-J. Chen & Cohen, 2020). As an implication, liberal democracies had come to have a stake in making sure that Taiwan would continue to succeed in its anti-pandemic efforts.

Capitalizing on its positive image, Taiwan's government moved fast to expand Taiwan's international space through pandemic and health diplomacy constructed around the terms "Taiwan model" and "Taiwan Can Help" (www.taiwancanhelp.us). This strategy was implemented through channels of traditional as well as public diplomacy, including an active use of social media platforms, organizing video conferences and media interviews, and participation in international events such as the Copenhagen Democracy Summit (Rowen, 2020). By the end of 2020, Taiwan had sent anti-pandemic experts to its diplomatic ally Eswatini, donated more than 50 million masks and other anti-pandemic supplies to over 80 countries, including an automated surgical mask production line to Czechia, and offered projects to train healthcare workers in other countries and share Taiwan's know-how in the use of digital technologies for pandemic control through its International Cooperation and Development Fund (Bisping, 2021; Wu, 2020, 2021).

Taiwan also sought to mobilise the sympathy it had gathered through its pandemic diplomacy to support its bid for membership in international organizations, a further step towards securing full international legal sovereignty. The disadvantages of the lack of full membership in major organizations, and thus being listed as part of the PRC, were demonstrated early on in the pandemic by Taiwan's constrained access to meetings of, and information from, the WHO and by the collateral banning of Taiwan's China Airlines by Italy based on documents of the UN's International Civil Aviation Organization (Blanchard, 2020). The main aspiration for Taiwan was achieving observer status in the World Health Assembly (WHA), the governing body of the WHO. The pandemic created an ideal situation for such a bid, since Taiwan's exclusion from the organization, coupled with its successful handling of the pandemic, created problems of legitimacy as well as efficacy for the WHO, and the bid could be launched on a purportedly non-political, functional ground (deLisle, 2009).

The pressure that the negative consequences of Taiwan's exclusion from the organization during the SARS epidemic placed on China and the WHO had played a role in Taiwan gaining observer status in the WHA in 2009 (deLisle, 2021; Lindemann, 2014). However, Taiwan's participation remained subject to the "one China principle" and to annual approval by Beijing, which the latter ultimately withdrew in 2017, after Tsai's election to the Presidency. Taiwan has thus not been invited to the WHA since 2016. Although Taiwan's bid to get an invitation failed both in 2020 and 2021 due to China's opposition, the international attention generated by the attempts has further underlined Taiwan's presence on the international stage. Taipei has received particularly strong support from the United States, which encouraged its allies to stand by Taiwan's bid in line with the 2020 TAIPEI Act instructing the US government to assist Taiwan in improving its relationships in the world and its standing in international organizations (Hinshaw & Alpert, 2020; Keegan & Churchman, 2020).

The PRC has also tried to use its substantial resources for pandemic and vaccine diplomacy to curtail Taiwan's political space, although ultimately with little success. After the name of the representative office of the Netherlands in Taiwan received a diplomatic upgrade, the *Global Times* published a thinly veiled threat to withhold medical supplies (*Netizens Call for Dutch Products Boycott*, 2020). China's vaccine diplomacy has also targeted Taiwan's remaining diplomatic allies, who occasionally struggled

with vaccine shortage (Tiezzi, 2021). Honduras considered opening a trade office with the PRC in exchange for access to vaccines, but it did not follow through on it (Harrison, 2021). Beijing allegedly approached the government of Paraguay with an offer of help with vaccine access in exchange for switching sides. Taiwan secured vaccines for Paraguay with the support of India, redirecting money from the Taiwan–Pakistan cooperation programme, while Washington applied diplomatic pressure on the South American country (Foreign and Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee, 2021; *Taiwan Says India Helped Paraguay*, 2021). In 2021, the Taiwanese foreign ministry indicated that it would help allies with funds to secure Covid vaccines as long as the money is not used to buy Chinese vaccines, and that it was considering providing locally-made Taiwanese vaccines to diplomatic allies (Chung Y. & Lim, 2021; Reuters, 2021).

The fact that Taiwan's anti-pandemic efforts have acquired symbolic political significance due to its competition with China have also benefited Taiwan in unexpected ways. After the May 2021 outbreak, beside its own purchases of Astra Zeneca and Moderna vaccines and its access to some supplies from the Covax initiative, Taiwan also received donations of 3.4 million doses from Japan and a further 2.5 million from the United States (Strong, 2021c). Both donors had a stake in preserving Taiwan's stability and anti-pandemic success. As a result, Taiwan could implement one of the most rapid vaccination campaigns in the world while having a relatively small outbreak, while countries with much larger epidemics continued to face serious vaccine shortages. Vaccine donations to Taiwan have also become diplomatic signals of goodwill as attitudes shifted in Europe against the PRC and in favour of Taiwan. Lithuania donated 20,000 doses in July 2021, before deciding to exchange representative offices with Taiwan and allowing the use of Taiwan's name in the office in Lithuania – a first in a European country. It followed on with donating a further 235,900 doses in September. Czechia, whose Senate leader visited Taiwan in September 2020, donated 30,000 doses in August 2021. In September, Slovakia donated 160,000, Poland 400,000 doses (K. Chen, 2021a, 2021b; Everington, 2021; Strong, 2021a, 2021b). Vaccine donations thus confirmed both Taiwan's improved international status and the fact that, although on the surface this improvement was linked to its success in managing the pandemic, it in fact rested on the foundation of intensifying geopolitical competition between China, the United States, and other major powers, including Japan and India.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has primarily acted as an accelerator and amplifier of trends and processes that had predated it, but nevertheless had an independent effect on various factors affecting cross-Strait relations. In Taiwan's domestic politics the largely successful management of the pandemic has increased the popularity of the DPP government, enabling it to pursue policies that otherwise might have generated unacceptable political costs. This includes, most prominently, the lifting of the ban on US pork imports, which opened the door to a potential trade deal with the United States and thus trade diversification and improved relations with Washington. It remains to be seen, however, for how long this effect on popularity will last. In cross-Strait relations access to vaccines and other medical supplies, as well as disinformation originating in the PRC have become major points of tension, but they have not radically altered the pre-existing trends dominated by the ongoing shift towards a non-Chinese identity in Taiwan and a hardening and more unilateral position taken by Beijing. Perhaps the longest-lasting impact can be identified in terms of Taiwan's skilled use of pandemic diplomacy to position itself as offering a liberal democratic alternative to the PRC's mode of pandemic management, and hence carving out a crucial symbolic place in the intensifying strategic and ideological struggle between China on the one hand and the US and its allies on the other. It was this latter underlying trend, however, that has made Taiwan's successful expansion of its political space possible. This reminds us that, in the long run, cross-Strait relations will continue to be shaped primarily by trends more fundamental than a pandemic, including the shift in the identity of Taiwan's population, the growing asymmetry of power between the two sides of the Strait, and the reordering of the world around the emerging US-China confrontation.

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TURKEY AND ITS NORTHWEST BORDERLAND REGION: INTERDEPENDENCE WITHIN SOUTHEASTERN EUROPEAN RELATIONS

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Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between Turkey and the countries in Southeastern Europe in terms of complex interdependencies. The study uses Buzan and Waever's Regional Security Complex Theory as a theoretical framework, in which Southeastern Europe is viewed as a regional security sub-complex. Sectors of interdependence are reviewed and examined in relation to the region, including the military, political, economic, societal, and environmental segments. The study focuses on the economy in more depth and sees it as a sector the development of which can promote and increase not only social welfare but also the stability of the region. In this sector, EU Member States are considered key players with respect to the region, although Turkey may also step up its efforts in the post-Covid period. The EU and Turkey represent two different poles in Southeastern Europe, geographically and economically. Ankara has strong positions mainly in the Balkan countries that are more dependent on Turkey and have significant Muslim minorities.

Keywords: Turkey, Southeastern Europe, Balkans, EU, interdependence, geopolitics, regional security

Introduction

This paper examines the relationship between Turkey and the countries of Southeastern Europe, including the varying degrees of complex interdependence in their respective relations. For a comprehensive approach, the author extends the examination to the sectors of interdependence based on the Regional Security Complex Theory (Buzan & Waever 2003).

Since the stability of Southeastern Europe also affects the security of the EU and Turkey, the internal processes of the region that make a Regional Security Sub-Complex are important to examine. In addition, external factors such as the current migration crisis or other regional security and economic challenges have weighed on the region and may have a negative impact on the wider environment, including Europe, by further increasing the vulnerability of the region. The key argument of the paper is that there is a strong interdependence between the two regions, i.e. Europe (the EU) and Southeastern Europe, including Turkey. The EU can further strengthen the stability of the region through additional economic incentives and soft power capabilities. This paper shows that Turkey has not developed economically significant dependence of several states in the Balkans, despite its active and expansive foreign policy.

The paper first provides an overview of the Regional Security Complex Theory, applying it to Southeastern European relations, and then it presents the military, political, economic, societal, and environmental sectors of interdependence. From among these, the economic sector is detailed further, with an insight into the existing economic dependence of EU-Southeastern Europe on trade and economic relations between Turkey as a key regional player and other countries of Southeastern Europe. In this context, the main policy recommendation of the study is that further increased activity and interdependence in the sector can help the stability of the region (Oneal & Russett, 1999; Schneider & Barbieri, 1999). The most effective way to achieve this could be deeper integration between the EU and the Southeastern European region, as a result of which the creation of economic opportunities would reduce the risk of security-related issues in the region and thus the negative impact of these on Europe.

The studied area is of strategic importance due to its 'borderland' nature, as its geostrategic location may have an impact on the security of the surrounding Regional Security Complexes (primarily in Europe). Many historical examples demonstrate that conflicts in or arising from the region spread to other regions and thus generate a larger, more complex conflict process. Countries in Southeastern Europe have also followed different paths of development and can be described as fragmented not only within the region but also in terms of external players, since some countries are members of political or military organizations (the EU, NATO), while others are not.

Theoretical Background

The international security structure is analysed by the international relations literature from several different theoretical aspects. The three principal theoretical perspectives on the post-Cold War security order are the neorealist, globalist, and regionalist perspectives. The neorealist perspective is state-centric (Waltz, 1979; Walt, 1987; Jervis, 1982; Mearsheimer, 1990). According to this perspective, the global political and security structure is determined by the distribution of material power in the international system. In contrast, the globalist perspective opposes the statist, power-political understanding of the international system structure. Globalization thrives mainly on cultural, transnational, and international political economy approaches (Held et al., 1999; Woods, 2000; Scholte, 2000). The regionalist perspective, which encompasses neorealist and globalist elements, stems from territoriality and security (Buzan, 2003). This paper uses the regionalist perspective as its theoretical background.

The paper analyses the relations of the Southeastern Europe sub-region (the Balkans) from the perspective of complex interdependences. The best way to achieve this is to apply the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), hallmarked by the Copenhagen School of International Relations (Buzan, 2003), which uses a comprehensive framework based on sectors and levels, including the idea of sub-complexes and insulator states. The study focuses on Turkey and presents the dependence of the sub-complex countries of Southeastern Europe on Turkey from Turkey's point of view.

The author hypothesizes that although Turkey plays a significant role within the Balkan sub-complex, it is still characterized by the insulator position used by Buzan and Waever (2003) (1). The research shows that the Balkans cannot be considered a separate Regional Security Complex (2), but it is part of the European RSC as a sub-complex, thus the EU has the greatest influence over Southeastern Europe in terms of regional security and economic interdependence, as well as economic development (3).

The concept of insulator is “specific to Regional Security Complex Theory and defines a location occupied by one or more units where larger regional security dynamics stand back to back. This is not to be confused with the traditional idea of a buffer state, whose function is defined by standing at the centre of a strong pattern of securitization, not at its edge (Buzan, 2003, p. 63).

Turkey as a middle power has a strategic role in current international relations. In RSCCT terms, Turkey is an insulator state, as it is situated at the intersection of three different regional security complexes (RSCs): Europe (including the sub-complex of the Balkans); the Middle East (including the sub-complexes of the Levant, the Gulf, and Maghreb); and the former Soviet Union (including the Baltic; Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova; the Caucasus; and Central Asia) (Kazan, 2003, p. 90–91). Even though Turkey is a part of all three RSCs as an active participant, according to the Copenhagen School, it is from the position of an ‘outsider’ (Barrinha, 2014, p. 166). The Regional Security Complex Theory also states that Turkey can only be promoted to a great or superpower status if it first becomes a regional power, and to this end, it needs to belong to an RSC. This means that the country would have to intensify its security relations with one of the RSCs around its borders, shifting its position from a peripheral security role to a central one (Barrinha, 2014). This paper examines to what extent Turkey can be considered a dominant player in terms of economic interdependence and to what extent it seeks to play such a role in the Balkan sub-complex.¹

The security approaches developed by Buzan and the Copenhagen School have appeared in a number of studies, the most important of which is *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Buzan et al. 1998). Based on an analysis of the new security challenges, it proposes to

broaden the concept of security and distinguish five sectors (sector theory). In addition to the military, this new concept of security includes the political, economic, societal, and environmental sectors. A significant advance in the theory is the recognition that, according to the authors, the security sectors can only be separated in theory, but in practice, they are closely interconnected, and the processes taking place in them interact with each other. In the theory, however, in addition to sectoral relationships, it is also necessary to examine the levels of each sector (level theory). Security issues in each sector can be attached to four levels: global, inter-regional (interaction between a region and its neighbouring regions), intra-regional (state-to-state relations), and sub-state levels (domestically within the states of the region). Security problems in the economic and environmental sectors tend to occur primarily on a global scale. However, the most effective tools to address these are available at the state or local level within the states, so the examination of the intra-regional level is important. At the same time, security problems in the military, political, and societal sectors typically occur at the regional level. Based on these experiences, Buzan has developed the concept of security complexes, defining a Regional Security Complex (RSC) as

a set of units (group of states) whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another” (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 201).

In security complexes, interdependence develops between states that can be characterized by friendly co-operation and hostility.

According to the next development, International Systems in World History (Buzan and Little 2000), the interactive capabilities of states play a decisive role in the formation of the international system. It no longer makes sense to separate political, military, and economic international systems from one another because these create a single system. The presence of foreign direct investment (FDI) as a source of economic development has become important for many countries (Buzan & Little, 2000). At the same time, weak states, like most Balkan countries, are forced to absorb more and more external influences. Interdependence has increased as a result of the dense network of

international relations and interactions, and economic, political, military, and social structures are closely linked with one another. The above-mentioned findings on interactions provided an additional basis for understanding and further developing the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT).

One of the most important books for the paper is *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, in which Buzan and Waever (2003) present the Regional Security Complex Theory, which is applicable to all regions of the world. The work shows that the security of each actor in a region interacts with the security of the other actors. There is often intense security interdependence within a region, which makes intra-regional security an interesting area of study. Buzan emphasizes that security regions form subsystems in which most of the security interaction is internal. Within these subsystems, states respect their neighbours and ally with other regional actors. The regional level includes a so-called 'Half-level', which can be called sub-complexes. A sub-complex has the same definition as an RSC, with the difference that a sub-complex is part of a larger RSC. The Southeastern Europe region (the Balkans) is a good example for a sub-complex that represents distinctive patterns of security interdependence. Within the Balkans sub-complex, Turkey takes up an insulating position (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 392), which is of great importance for the region. The insulator state is located at the geographical boundary of two or more RSCs, but it is not strong enough to 'merge' different RSCs and form a coherent strategic arena. The Regional Security Complex Theory, the idea of sub-complexes and insulator states, is used as the main theoretical basis of this paper. Also relevant to the study is Daniel Gagan's *Europe and its Southern Neighbors: Interdependence, Security and Economic Development in Contemporary EU-MENA Relations*, which applies the RSCT to Euro-Mediterranean relations.

Analysing concepts that examine the relationship between economic interdependence and conflict in *Globalization and Peace: Assessing New Directions in the Study of Trade and Conflict*, Gerald Schneider and Katherine Barbieri (1999) point out that asymmetric relations cause economically underdeveloped countries to become unilaterally dependent on the economically developed world. One-sided dependence gives rise to tensions and conflicts, influencing democratic

peace. In particular, democratic systems do not initiate war against each other partly because of their economic interests and their trade relations. In Schneider and Barbieri's view, foreign direct investment can contribute to peace between states under certain circumstances. Finally, in *Assessing the Liberal Peace with Alternative Specifications: Trade Still Reduces Conflict*, John R. ONeal and Bruce Russett (1999) examine bilateral trade in relation to states that are either neighbours or one of them is a major power. The study focuses on the impact of trade on conflict situations. Bilateral interstate disputes are analysed using mathematical methods, with the conclusion that economic interdependence significantly reduces the likelihood of violent conflicts.

Broader Interpretation of Security – Applying Sectoral and Level Theories of Interdependence to the Balkans

Interdependence has historically been a phenomenon that accompanies international economic relations, and its interpretation has expanded gradually. In Buzan's theory, interdependence is best described and examined by sectors and levels (Buzan et al., 1998; Buzan & Waever, 2003). Based on the sectoral approach, countries have different capabilities, which can be examined according to military, political, societal, economic, and environmental competencies. The levels denote the different geographical arenas where states operate, which can be global, inter-regional, intra-regional (regional), and sub-state (domestic) levels. The main analytical background of Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory is the interaction of these sectors and levels.

This paper focuses on the Southeastern Europe Regional Security Sub-Complex, which covers EU Member State countries (Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, and Croatia), EU candidate countries (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey), and potential candidates (Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina). The study accepts Buzan's theory that the Balkans is a sub-complex within the European RSC, introducing the concept of the Regional Security Sub-Complex of the Balkans (RSSCB), accepting complex interdependence within the region. The paper does not justify the existence of the RSSCB,

but by accepting its existence, it examines Turkey's regional role within the sub-complex. The author agrees with Buzan's finding that Turkey is located between different RSCs, and consequently it has become important as an insulator state. Traditionally, an insulator state is expected to be relatively passive in international relations. This passivity appears in the Kemalist Turkish foreign policy doctrine 'Peace at home, peace in the world'. Earlier doctrine stated that Turkey did not seek territorial expansion at all (Mustafa Kemal quoted in Váli, 1971, p. 25, 27). However, at present, Turkey seems to be challenging the concept of insulator by playing an increasingly active role, which contradicts its insulator position.

When using Buzan and Waeber's RSCT and applying it to the Regional Security Sub-Complex of the Balkans, the core structure of the theory, i.e. the notion of sectors and levels should be considered first. Considering levels, the Southeastern Europe region has global, inter-regional, intra-regional, and sub-state levels of importance. Without discussing all security-related issues at all the levels, a few examples are worth mentioning. Global importance can be assumed for several cases related to this geographical area, like the Balkan Wars or the international (great power) competition for influence in the region. The many inter-regional issues include European integration, migration, and the inter-regional impact of cross-border security issues, such as serious and organized crime. At the sub-state level, security issues of societal stability and ethnic conflicts can be emphasized. Religion and ethnic constellations have had a strong impact on state identity as well as Turkey's relation to the Balkans. Since this paper focuses on the interactions between states within a sub-complex (sub-region), the intra-regional level will be analysed in more depth, with the assistance of the other sectors of the RSC theory.

Buzan and Waeber developed five important sectors of security: the (1) military, (2) political, (3) societal, (4) environmental, and (5) economic sectors, all of which have intra-regional significance in the state relations of the Balkans.

The military sector at the intra-regional level is of some significance in Southeastern Europe. Due to the recent war, low-intensity conflicts, as well as the weaknesses of states, the region poses a

constant threat to the countries of the region and the stability of the wider region, which can threaten European security as well. This perceived threat has led to several EU and NATO missions being sent to the Balkans with the purpose of maintaining stability in the region. Destabilization in Southeastern Europe can lead to security threats for the neighbourhood of the region, especially for the EU, and it can bring about migration, arms proliferation and smuggling, the spread of organized crime and terrorist organizations, and regional instability. The peak of NATO military involvement in the Balkans affairs came in 1999, with the Kosovo war, which triggered direct military action. All of this has led to the permanent NATO and EU military involvement in the Balkans, strengthening military sector reform and modernization as well as enhancing the cooperation between the Balkan countries and NATO. As for Turkey, since 1995 Ankara has taken part in all NATO operations in the Balkans and has deployed its military troops to cooperate with international security forces in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The political sector of the Balkan countries is even more relevant at present. The Balkans is becoming attractive for a wide spectrum of foreign players. The role of the United States, the Western Alliance led by it, and the EU can be considered dominant in the region. For the US, security considerations are paramount, and it judges its partnerships in the region on the basis of attachment to and distance from the Atlantic Alliance. In relation to the EU, three categories can be distinguished: as mentioned earlier, there are EU member states (Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece), candidate countries (Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Turkey), and potential candidate countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo). As a political space, the Balkans is today as much a field of power gain and rivalry as it used to be, and the fact that the region is evidently rather fragmented politically contributes to this greatly. The security of the region and the prosperity of economic relations are crucial for Germany. Italy approaches the Balkans mainly from an economic point of view, but security issues are almost as important to the country. Russia is trying to counterbalance Western influence through its old partners, but its aspirations are only more pronounced on energy issues. Another influential actor in the region is Turkey, being part of the region and a member of NATO, as well as

a candidate for membership in the EU; however, its foreign policy in recent years has focused on developing a separate sphere of interest in the Balkans beside the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. This paper also interprets and analyses Ankara's practice of expanding its sphere of interest, drawing conclusions from it about the future geopolitical development of the region.

The societal sector is also important regarding regional security. Several individual projects are funded by the European Union (EC), other governments (e.g. Turkey) and intergovernmental regional organizations and agencies with the aim of developing the societal sector. These projects cover several areas of intra-regional societal cooperation with the involvement of local civilian organizations, charity organizations, and NGOs. In response to the migration challenges of recent years, a number of programs have been set up to help refugees. As ethnic and religious differences have often emerged in the conflicts of recent years, some of these projects may be appropriate tools for improving cultural understanding. The role of societal actors in Turkish foreign policy can be considered soft power. The appearance of various Turkish state agencies, such as the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency, the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities, the Yunus Emre Cultural Centers, Diyanet, or the TIKA's increasing involvement in the region clearly shows Turkey's activity in this sector. The Turkish minority constitutes an increasingly important element of the social fabric of the Balkans. They constitute a measurable minority in four Balkan states: Bulgaria, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Romania (Egeresi, 2018, p. 161).

The environmental sector also needs to be understood in the context of the security of Southeastern Europe. Beyond the environmental problems of the countries (air pollution, water quality, drinking water supply, wastewater treatment, etc.) there are also common environmental problems like climate change. Cities in the Balkans rank among the worst in Europe in terms of air pollution. While safe drinking water is secured for most of the population, only a small share of urban waste water is treated before being discharged into the rivers and seas of the region. The Adriatic Sea, the Aegean Sea, the Sea of Marmara, and their coastlines are polluted by plastic

waste and other pollutants coming from the rivers and coastal cities. Multiple hotspots of pollution (contaminated soil, chemicals) are still a concern in the region. Addressing these problems requires dedicating sufficient institutional capacity at the regional, national government, and local levels. The recognition of these problems led to setting up the South Eastern European Regional Environmental Reconstruction Program in 1999.

Finally, the economic sector of Southeastern Europe relations can be considered the most important sector. The region has faced a number of economic difficulties over the past thirty years, which have significantly affected the economic performance of individual states. In the 1990s, as a result of the local and regional conflicts, the Balkan countries also suffered significant losses in terms of economic capacity and productivity (Gabrisch, 2015, p. 309). After the turbulent periods, the economic environment has become increasingly favourable as a result of consolidation due to the prospect of EU accession and the launch of Stability Agreements that aimed to establish economic stability in the Balkans. The Eastern part of the region, Romania, Bulgaria (2007), and the more developed Western state of former Yugoslavia, Croatia (2013) have become members of the European Union. These changes have contributed to the massive inflow of investments and economic growth in these countries. The remaining part of the Balkans (the Western Balkans) has also benefited from an improved economic environment. The financial crisis of 2009 weakened Greece's position in the region, with Turkey strengthening in the region (Fisher-Onar & Watson, 2013, p. 413). In this period, Ankara's image of sustainable economic growth, its successful handling of the financial crises created the right circumstances for economic power projection. Kirişçi (2009) argues that Turkey is a trading state that aims to expand economic relations in order to 'occupy' and dominate new markets for trade and investment. According to Pintér (2013) and Szigetvári (2018), the driving force of Turkish engagement in the Balkans is the country's economic considerations, although it also seeks interdependence in this area.

Table 1.
Analytical sectors of Southeastern Europe interdependence

Levels	Sectors of Southeastern Europe interdependence				
Global					
Inter-Regional					
Intra-Regional	Political: » Actors » Objects » Agenda » Threats » Dynamics » External influence	Military: » Actors » Objects » Agenda » Threats » Dynamics » External influence	Economic: » Trade » FDI » Development assistance (Aid)	Societal: » Actors » Objects » Agenda » Threats » Dynamics » External influence	Environmental: » Actors » Objects » Agenda » Threats » Dynamics » External influence
Sub-State					

Source: Gugan (2017, p. 536) and author

In conclusion, the paper relies on Buzan and Waever’s Regional Security Complex Theory to deal with a complex set of intra-regional interdependencies. Buzan and Waever’s original research framework is applied at the intra-regional level and examines the economic sector more in depth. Due to the importance of the economic sector, the paper focuses on the interdependence in the economic sector and the implications of this asymmetric relationship.

Economic Interdependence in Southeastern Europe – Turkey’s Perspective

This section examines the economic interdependence of the states of Southeastern Europe and Turkey, using three indicators: trade, foreign direct investment (FDI), and development assistance (aid). The five Buzanian

sectors (military, political, economic, societal, and environmental) can be explored according to Buzan's original issue areas (actors, objects, agenda, threats, dynamics, and external influence), but the economic sector can be examined through terms of economic interactions (trade, foreign direct investment, and development assistance) (Gugan, 2013, p. 19). According to Gugan (2017), economic interdependence can be measured most effectively by these three indicators. As Turkey's economic dependence on the other Balkan countries is not significant compared to the EU, Turkey's foreign policy and economic efforts to increase interdependence, as well as its efforts to increase economic influence, are also worth analysing.

According to Gugan (2017), the best tool for measuring economic interdependence is to examine the trade relations between regions and within countries. This will be applied to Turkey and other Southeastern European countries, creating an indicator of Turkey's share of trade with the Balkan countries. Since the imports of a country have an impact on the supply of goods available to its population, and the exports affect its income, the more engaged two countries are in these transactions, the more they depend on each other. It also follows that economic interdependence can be partially translated by examining the relative export-import ratio. The export-import ratio refers to the ratio of the value of exported goods and services to imported goods and services of the countries involved in international trade in the examined region. The paper uses Gugan's formula $[(\text{export}+\text{import ratio})/2]$ to determine the economic dependency of trade. Trade relations between Turkey and the other Southeastern European countries are asymmetrical, as shown by trade data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity and Trade Map. The countries of Southeastern Europe conduct most of their trade with the states of the European Union. Between 40-70% of imports and exports come from and go to the EU (Trade Map, 2019). From a different perspective, a relatively small portion of the trade of these countries is directed to partners other than EU Member States. Compared to the EU, trading with Turkey is relatively low in significance. This means that most of the Southeastern European economies do not depend on Turkey's exports or imports. This is true even though, for most countries, Turkey is among the top ten most important trading partners. Of the Southeastern European countries, Bulgaria (7.2%) is considered to be the most Turkey-dependent, while Croatia (1.2%) is the least dependent in the region, with

an average trade dependency of 3.8%. Conversely, the dependence is even lower for Turkey and the other Balkan countries, which are of little importance to Turkey in terms of both imports and exports. This means that the European Union is the most significant trading partner of Southeastern Europe. EU states tend to make between 40 and 68 percent of the Southeastern European countries' imports and exports, which shows that the EU plays a very important role in the economy of the Balkan sub-region. This sub-region is therefore EU-dependent, since it trades a significant amount with Europe, while other regional players such as Turkey, China, Russia, and the US play a less significant role in terms of economic dependency.

Table 2.
Economic dependency of trade in Southeastern Europe

Country	Turkey	EU	Russia	USA	China
Albania	4.3%	68%	1.5%	1.7%	5.7%
North Macedonia	2.9%	57%	0.8%	3.1%	2.6%
Montenegro	3.4%	40%	3.2%	1.2%	5.8%
Serbia	3.0%	54%	6.3%	1.4%	2.8%
Greece	4.8%	40%	3.7%	2.9%	4.9%
Bulgaria	7.2%	55%	4.9%	1.6%	3.6%
BiH	3.5%	58%	2.7%	1.7%	3.0%
Romania	3.6%	68%	2.7%	1.8%	3.3%
Croatia	1.2%	68%	5.1%	2.0%	2.5%
Mean	3.8%	56%	3.4%	1.9%	3.8%

Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity and Trade Map (2019)

Another good indicator of the economic interdependence between Southeastern Europe and Turkey is the role of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows from Turkey to the Balkan economies. FDI can be considered the main external financial contribution by economic players to the economic development of a country. According to Gugan (2017), FDI

not only brings the necessary capital for development to less developed countries, it also plays a significant role in technological and managerial transfers, and therefore facilitates economic progress. During the last decade, FDI inflows to the Southeastern European region have grown steadily. On the other hand, FDI inflows to the Balkans have still been lower than in other regions, such as Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Weak and fragile economies have kept FDI flows away from the region, and global and regional powers have preferred to invest in more stable developing regions with better economic growth potential. The EU is the most engaged player in the Southeastern European economies, investing a significant portion of its FDI flows in the economies of the Balkans. In general, 50%-90% of the region's incoming FDI comes from the EU countries. In particular, Bosnia (88%), Croatia (84%), and Romania (83%) show the dominance of EU FDI.

Development assistance (aid) figures also show significant asymmetries in the Southeastern European region. One of the most important indicators of international development assistance is Official Development Assistance (ODA), which the author uses to examine Turkish advocacy and economic interdependence in Southeastern Europe. According to the OECD, the region received some 5 to 10 percent of Turkish ODA, and some Balkan countries were among the top 10 largest ODA recipient countries, such as Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2015 (4th and 7th, respectively), and North Macedonia and Kosovo in 2010 (4th and 10th, respectively). However, taking into account the fact that the Turkish ODA is usually concentrated in Asia (the Turkic Republics, Afghanistan, and increasingly in the Middle East), the Balkans usually receive the second largest amount of aid in a regional comparison. Turkey's development assistance in the Southeastern Europe region can be interpreted in relation to the countries of the Western Balkans. According to data from the OECD Development Assistance Committee, in 2018, five countries in the region received development assistance from Turkey: North Macedonia (USD 8 million), Albania (USD 5 million), Montenegro (USD 2 million), Serbia (USD 4 million) and Bosnia-Herzegovina (USD 18 million) through bilateral ODA funds. Although the financial flow of development assistance has never reached the levels of trade and FDI interactions, their impact on political relations is undeniable. In contrast, the same countries have received significantly more aid from the institutions of the European Union. In 2018, the recipients were North Macedonia (USD 145

million), Albania (USD 219 million), Montenegro (USD 166 million), Serbia (USD 687 million), and Bosnia (USD 140 million). The same trend can be observed for the two largest regional donors (the EU and Turkey) in the previous years, i.e. a considerably higher share of EU aid in the field of development assistance.

Summarizing the findings, Turkey's economic interests in the Balkans are obvious; however, the importance of the sub-region to Turkey is rather limited despite some minor growth in recent years. Turkish trade rather goes to bigger and geographically closer EU countries, whose share is around 70-80% in the total Southeastern European trade. The picture is more complex when we analyse the case of FDI. Turkish investment focuses on the EU countries in the region. However, as a whole, Turkey cannot compete with other EU players and challenge the economic position and importance of the EU in these countries. Thus, despite Turkey's strong commitment to expanding its economic influence over the region, this goal has not been achieved yet, even if tangible gains and increasing economic relations with the Balkans can be detected. The Balkans benefits from Turkey's presence economically, but the scope of trade relations and direct investment inflow is rather insignificant compared to the involvement of other countries in the region, for example, EU countries such as Germany, Italy, Austria, and Greece. This supports Egeresi's findings that Turkish capital prefers bigger markets compared to the small economies of countries with a few million inhabitants (2018, p. 83). The share of Balkan states' trade in the Turkish total trade has remained low. At the same time, Bechev (2012a, 2012b) argues that Turkish investments are growing in the Balkans. He points out that even if the Balkan countries are relatively unimportant for Turkey, Southeastern European countries trade relatively heavily with this middle power. Nevertheless, on the whole, Turkey cannot compete with other, predominantly EU players and cannot become a major trading partner of the region despite its strong commitment to enhancing Ankara's economic influence over the Southeastern European region. Based on this trend, it is primarily Kosovo and Albania that have the prospect to become dependent on Turkey in the near future. Based on the available datasets, we can come to the conclusion that the EU is the biggest aid supporter of the Balkans (i.e. the Western Balkan countries), giving around USD 1.1 billion to USD 1.3 billion on average during the last two statistical years (2017 and 2018), which is 20 times as

much as Turkey has provided (around USD 40 million). All this does not confirm the economic dependence of the Western Balkan countries on Turkey. Meanwhile, Turkish development assistance continues to play a significant role in creating a perception of Turkey as a great ally of these countries. Finally, we must not forget the fact that Turkey is not only one of the largest donors in the region, but it also receives significant development assistance, mainly from the EU, exceeding the total EU funding provided to the Balkan countries in one year.

The Future of Southeastern Europe Relations: Turkish Economic Interests and Policies in the Region Regarding Interdependence

When examining the future development of relations between the countries of the region and their interdependence, it is essential to take into account the geopolitical strategy of Turkey, which may determine the intensity of future relations between Ankara and other countries. In recent years, Turkey has reconsidered its foreign policy doctrine, indicating that the country defines itself as a regional power. One of the peculiarities of the new type of Turkish foreign policy activism is focusing on neighbouring regions that were formerly part of the Ottoman Empire, one priority area of which is the Balkans. The legitimacy of the aspirations can be traced back to the historical role the Ottoman Empire played in the region (Anastasakis, 2012, p. 186). From the point of view of the countries concerned, the Ottoman historical past still affects the Balkan countries today. While some of the Balkan countries (Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro) and some regions (e.g. the Sanjaks) have a more positive attitude towards the Ottoman times, among the population of other countries (e.g. Serbs, Bulgarians, Greeks) Turkish dominance in the region has negative associations (Gangloff, 2005, p. 1-2). This system of relations also influences the development of better ties between Turkey and the countries of the region.

During his 2009 Balkan tour, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu made the direction of Turkish foreign policy clear. His speech in Sarajevo gave momentum to understanding and evaluating Ankara's ambition towards the region.

“We desire a new Balkans, based on political values, economic interdependence and cultural harmony. We will restore this Balkans. I emphasize the Ottoman heritage. The Ottoman era in the Balkans is a success story. Now it needs to come back... (Davutoğlu, 2009).”

According to Tanasković (2010), the Balkans is a key element in Turkey’s so-called Neo-Ottomanist policy. The main focus of the Turkish geopolitical doctrine is that Turkey should strengthen its economic positions in the surrounding regions, i.e. the Balkan countries, and thus promote business activity in the region. Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans is based on three main pillars. The first is that Ankara seeks to strengthen good relations with the so-called “traditional Balkan countries,” such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo. The second is the policy of new opening towards Bulgaria, Serbia, and Montenegro to improve relations, while the third element is to strengthen security and stability in the region, where Turkey can play an important role as a mediator, supporting and encouraging multilateral initiatives. By gaining ground in the Balkans, Turkey aims to increase the intensity of economic relations and expand its sphere of interest. To this end, Ankara has concluded free trade agreements and visa-free agreements with all the Balkan countries, thus supporting the development of economic relations (Szigetvári, 2018).

According to Djurica (2015, p. 46), from a Turkish investment perspective, the region of Southeastern Europe could play an increasingly important role in the future. Many Turkish companies have serious regional aspirations with their investments. The Turkish investment strategy in the region has numerous features, including the importance and priority of financial investment. The emergence of Turkish banks in the region has in many cases been preparation for the strengthening of subsequent economic ties and supporting further expansion. For Turkish investors, brownfield investments are more popular than greenfield investments due to fewer administrative barriers. However, due to positive changes in the investment climate and the possible progress of EU accession negotiations in some Balkan countries, both types of investment could lead to growth. Investing in the countries of Southeastern Europe offers Turkish companies

a relatively low-cost, low-risk, and high-return opportunity, a good starting point for further economic expansion, especially in the EU-27 markets.

Turkish investors in the Balkan region mainly invest in infrastructure, communications, finance, retail trade, tourism, and road construction. In addition, manufacturing is becoming more and more important for the Turkish partners, and in the future this may be one of the priority areas for investments (Szigetvári, 2018, p. 18). It should be noted that Turkish investors appeared in the region significantly later than investors from EU countries, which still puts them at a serious competitive disadvantage. In the case of strategic sectors such as the energy industry, Russia is in a better position than Turkey. Greece, as mentioned earlier, is a key economic competitor in the region, even though this role has declined significantly as a result of the 2009 financial crisis.

Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia joined the EU in 2007 and 2013, respectively, creating special opportunities for foreign investors. Turkey is the third most important country in Romania in terms of investments, most of which have taken the form of small and medium-sized companies, and the number of these investors may increase in the future. Turkish investment activity in Romania has the primary goal of making better use of their own resources and capacities locally or acquiring new resources and capacities to gain a competitive advantage (Szigetvári, 2018, p. 19). The role of Turkish investors in the Bulgarian economy has grown significantly in recent years, and this trend is expected to continue in the near future. The total value of Turkish investments in the country exceeds USD 2 billion, with two Turkish banks and more than 1,500 small, medium-sized, and large companies operating in Bulgaria (Szigetvári, 2018). Based on the development of bilateral relations, interdependence between the two countries may increase. In contrast, Croatia is still less attractive for Turkish investment, although the country's accession to the EU could provide many opportunities for Turkish capital.

Turkey is among the largest investors in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Kosovo. While similar activity can be observed from the perspective of Turkish investors in North Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro are not considered a major target of Turkish capital. However, the economies of the latter may become valuable in the future for Turkish investment

purposes due to the progress of the ongoing EU accession negotiations. In 2019, the total value of Turkish direct investments in Serbia already exceeded USD 195 million, which was realized mainly in the textile and food industry, as well as the retail and entertainment industries. Serbia welcomes Turkish investors who, in contrast with their Western counterparts, invest even in the underdeveloped regions of the country, as they do in the Sanjaks. Evidently, Turkey's investments in the Balkans are driven by economic factors rather than political or cultural preferences. This means that for example, in addition to the traditionally good Bosnian relations, they will rather support and implement investment in Serbia. This is because Turkish companies are striving to get closer and thus have easier access to the European market.

Although the EU is the gravity point of the Balkan countries, the apparent slowdown of the accession process has reduced the integration enthusiasm of the Western Balkan countries. Since Turkey appears as a strategic competitor of the EU, Turkey's activity can gain greater importance in the future. Vračić (2016) and Dursun-Özkanca (2016) argue that the decline of EU commitment may also lead to the strengthening of Ankara in the Balkans. A growing interdependence between Turkey and certain Southeastern European countries (especially some Western Balkan countries) is seen in the increase in trade volume, trade agreements, and the presence of Turkish companies in the region.

Another approach is related to the cultural dimension of the relations between Turkey and the Balkan countries, which shows Turkey's special relation to the Muslim communities living in the Balkans. Anastasakis (2012, p. 186) and Egeresi (2013) argue that Ankara behaves as a protector of Muslim people because as a Muslim country it has a better understanding of these communities. Thus, Turkish involvement in the cultural and societal sector contributes to the stabilization of the region and can prevent further conflicts as well. Gangloff (2001) has highlighted Ankara's efforts to support religious education in the Southeastern European region as well as supporting Muslim communities. Öktem (2011) focuses on the growing Turkish influence over the region and concludes that Turkey will increase its efforts to exert control over Muslims in the Balkans in the near future.

Conclusion

In recent years Turkey has become more active on the international stage by diversifying its relations and taking a more definite position regarding international security and geopolitical issues, including international economy. This development in Ankara's foreign and security policy is related to the country's ambition to transform itself from an ambitious, emerging middle power into an influential global actor. According to Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory, this is not yet the case - although there has been an intensification in Turkey's regional presence in the RSCs surrounding the country, this has not been limited to a specific RSC. Therefore, Turkey is still more of an insulator state.

Although Turkey is a special kind of insulator, the country is a very active and important political, economic, and military actor in all RSCs around it (see the Turkish activity in Syria, Lybia, Nagorno-Karabakh, or the Eastern Mediterranean region). Even though Turkey acts like a global power, Ankara's dominance in its Northwest Borderland Region (i.e. the Balkans) can be questioned. This paper confirms Buzan's findings that although the country plays an important role in the region, Ankara cannot compete with the EU or the US in shaping the future of the region, which is why it will remain an insulator state despite its leaders' drive to break out from this status (Buzan & Waeber, 2003, p. 394-395). However, Turkey's bilateral and multilateral policies indicate a clear preference for a further intensification and diversification of its international relations. Therefore, it is predictable that the scope and depth of Turkey's multi-regional engagement will increase in the coming post-Covid years.

Another finding is that Southeastern Europe cannot be considered a separate RSC in Buzanian theoretical terms, it is part of the European RSC instead. This is illustrated well by the fact that the internal dynamics of the region is not only affected but is practically determined by an external power, the European Union. The author agrees with Buzan's statement that this external power has imposed peace upon the region, otherwise the sub-complex would return to war and inner conflicts (Buzan, 2003, p. 378). Integration processes also show the convergence of the EU-European RSC and the Balkans sub-complex with one another,

which may even merge in the long run. In other words, the two regions do not act as separate security complexes in practice. As presented in the paper, this ambition is reflected well in EU initiatives and strategy papers. In agreement with other experts, the paper suggests that this vision should be translated into practice more effectively in order to deepen political and economic integration between the two parts of the European RSC.

After examining the five sectors of Turkey-Southeastern Europe interdependence (the military, political, societal, environmental, and economic sectors) within the Regional Security Sub-Complex of the Balkans, a different level of intra-regional interdependence is apparent in all of them. The detailed examination of the economic sector highlights that the interdependence is asymmetrical to a lesser extent between Turkey-Southeastern Europe and to a greater extent between EU-Southeastern Europe. Therefore, the EU has clear dominance in the economic sector. It is also shown that the EU is using this leverage with some efficiency to influence the economic development of the Southeastern European region. At the same time, the Southeastern European region has recently been considered one of the most attractive regions for Turkish investments as well. Although the largest share of Turkish FDI is directed towards more developed markets, Southeastern Europe has many advantages that make investments profitable for Turkish investors. Southeastern Europe serves as an intermediate market for Turkish firms, a means to internationalise their operation as they move towards more developed EU markets.

Based on these findings, this paper suggests that in the context of the discovered interdependence patterns, the best way forward in Turkey-Southeastern Europe and EU-Southeastern Europe relations is the enhancement of economic cooperation in the post-Covid period. Southeastern Europe's economic dependence on the EU shows that the economic problems of the region can only be managed and solved in the long run by an external force, and recently only the European Union is capable of making such an economic impact.

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Endnotes

- 1 This work uses the term Southeastern Europe, which includes Albania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Romania, Greece, and Turkey, but it excludes Slovenia, Hungary, and Cyprus and will be used as a synonym of the term “the Balkans”.
- 2 The author uses Cox’s (1983, p. 60) notion for dominance, which refers to a state’s leverage over another state or group of states but not over a system.
- 3 Based on the geographic boundaries, the Middle East is also known as the Near East or Southwest Asia. In academia, the Middle East refers to the Arab states of Asia, the Arab states of North Africa, Israel, and the non-Arab states of Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey (see Figure 1) (Surratt, 2000).

FRANCE AS A MIDDLE POWER IN THE SHADOW OF GREAT POWERS AFTER THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract: This study examines France's strategy in the Indo-Pacific region to explore how a European middle power tries to maintain its status in the emerging focal point of global politics. Based on the concept of middle global power, the paper explores the limits of France's autonomous regional foreign policy. The paper argues that the best strategic option for France is to seek cooperation with other regional partners, notably Australia, beside the two superpowers, China and the United States. However, the dramatically increased tensions between the United States and China since the second part of the Trump administration have resulted in important changes in the Indo-Pacific region, such as the strengthening of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which makes it increasingly difficult for France to maintain its independence as a regional great power image. This changing reality for France is illustrated through a case study of the AUKUS Treaty.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, middle power, France, Quad, Australia, AUKUS, China, Covid-19

Introduction

France has been a dominant power over the centuries due to its colonies globally, and it is still striving for a great power status today, although in the last few decades this ambition has become really challenging. It is true that France is the only country from the European Union that has colonial territories overseas and keeps a nuclear arsenal, but its capacities are overshadowed by the two biggest global actors, the United States and China (Fisher, 2013). Although France's focus has always been on the

Atlantic region, the French elite has had to recognize that the gravity of the world order in the twenty-first century has shifted toward the Indo-Pacific (Haruko, 2020). The aim of this paper is thus to explore the strategy of France in the Indo-Pacific and how it fits into the traditional global middle power concept, characterized by France's foreign policy ambitions after World War II. The study identifies the main goals France has regarding its role in the Indo-Pacific region and what kind of tools it uses to keep its power, as well as examining the challenges it faces to keep its importance and significance.

The paper first discusses the concept of the global middle power. The second section identifies France's interests and goals in the Pacific region. The following section explores France's regional strategies, with special emphasis on its alliance with Australia. The paper then shows how the escalation of the US-China rivalry affects the application of the French concept of middle global power in the Indo-Pacific region and the strategic response of the region. Then, through a case study of AUKUS, it is argued that France can hardly be seen as a potent global actor in the Indo-Pacific. The conclusion points out that an autonomous and independent French Indo-Pacific policy is essentially an illusion, an important conclusion for the French government to draw.

The Middle Global Power Concept and Charles De Gaulle's Strategy

Middle powers are states with mid-range levels of power, between small states and great powers (Shin, 2015). However, it is difficult to measure who could be considered a middle power, as it depends on many factors (for example, territory, and the size of the economy or the military). Middle powers are defined as states that do not have enough hard and soft power to make an impact on the international order, but they can be major actors at the regional level, like Canada, Australia, France, India, or Indonesia. 'Middle' is often categorized based on the size of the country, the size of the military, and other characteristics.

According to former Minister of Foreign Affairs Hubert Védrine, there are differences between middle powers (Bonifacio, 2000). In the case of France, the concept of middle power could be examined based on their

diplomatic impact. France plays a global role, hence Védérine considers France a global middle power because of its overseas territories and historical background. Since France still has an impact on the world, Védérine states that France could be more precisely described as a global middle power. Furthermore, the middle power concept is also determined by the diplomatic approach of the states.

It was Charles De Gaulle's "grandeur" strategy that made France a global middle power (Oi-Siang, 2019). First, it was very important to maintain the global prestige of France, which also has a strong legitimacy element in French domestic politics. Second, it was important to maintain the sovereignty of the country, despite the fact that the unchallenged superpower of the Western bloc during the Cold War was the US. Third, it was considered important for France to seek partners outside the two superpowers, to balance them out. Lastly, they needed to promote the integration of Europe, which would have given France the opportunity to strengthen its international role as the most powerful country (Briancon, 2016). This global ambition can be illustrated by the fact that in one of his speeches in 1967, Charles De Gaulle declared that the nuclear strategy could be a defence in all directions (Hamill, 1989).

By the twenty-first century, the situation has changed because the focus of the global stage has been directed to the Pacific, prompting many to think that the twenty-first century can be labelled the "Pacific century" (Rieren, 2002). Even Zbigniew Brzezinski has acknowledged that the main geopolitical actors of the world order have started to direct their focus towards the Pacific. The reason why the Indo-Pacific has become more important is that more than USD 5 trillion in trade passes through these strategic waters annually, connecting key players in the global economy such as the US, China, Japan, and India.

Moreover, the Indo-Pacific region is a geopolitical buffer zone between the established power of the US and its military alliance system, and a rising China. The aim of the US alliance system is the Free and Opened Indo-Pacific (FOIP), which is trying to block China from rising further on the grounds of protecting the rules. In the age of the Pacific century, France's status as a global middle power is facing countless challenges. The growing gap in capacity between France and the other powers can only be remedied if France pursues a very effective foreign policy and thus

emerges as an influential player in the Indo-Pacific region. The following section describes how France intends to defend its position as a global actor on the stage of world politics (Pascal, 2021).

France's Key Steps to Keep its Middle Power in the Pacific and the Indo-Pacific

This section studies the key steps in French foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific. Cui Hongjuin, Director of the Department of European Studies at the China Institute of International Studies, portrays France's role in the Indo-Pacific region with the following words: "France was the first European country to formally adopt an Indo-Pacific Strategy. France may believe that the Indo-Pacific region will be the main battlefield of great power competition, and it is now interfering in the region to try to show its major power status" (Onishi, 2021). Since Emmanuel Macron became President of France in 2017, he has put a lot of effort into building a strong foreign policy both in the Asia-Pacific and the Indo-Pacific (Salloum, 2021).

France indeed takes keeping its power and prestige in the area seriously. This means for them more than just having a nostalgia for the "la gloire" era. The presence of France in the Indo-Pacific is of importance from a sovereignty point of view. Still more than a million of French citizens live in France's overseas territories, which also includes 93% of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), approximately 9 million km². President Macron has emphasized that the defence of this area is essential for France both in economic and in security terms, hence the military presence in the region is a basic element of French foreign policy (Lowy Institute, 2019). Beside defending France's regional interests, its major goals listed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are the following:

- strong involvement from France in settling regional crises, the safety of the main shipping routes, as well as fighting terrorism, radicalization, and organized crime;
- strengthening and increasing France's strategic and global partnerships in the region;
- a greater role in regional organizations to contribute to the development of multilateralism;
- a commitment to promoting common goods.

France has chosen two instruments to achieve its Indo-Pacific objectives. First, it has increased its military presence. French naval exercises have become increasingly intense, and around 8,000 soldiers and dozens of ships are positioned on several bases. Second, France, in keeping with its global middle power tradition, has sought regional partners who also seek to balance the US and China in order to maintain their strategic space. Since France does not want to unconditionally support the US in line with the concept of middle global power, Paris has decided to search for other regional partners. Of the regional players, Australia was France's choice, a country that was also keen to cooperate with an external power in the shadow of the two great powers. Finally, France is the only country in the Indo-Pacific region that has a territory there. This gives France the opportunity to represent the interests of the EU, making France a more influential player in the Indo-Pacific game.

French-Australian Bilateral Dialogue as a Hope for France to Keep its Middle Power Status

In the Indo-Pacific region, the ideal candidate was Australia, which is both a regional power and is culturally closer to France than other Asian players. Another important consideration was that although Australia had been a US military ally since World War II, by the 2010s its foreign trade had become absolutely dependent on China, which prompted Canberra to pursue a more cautious foreign policy, lest it create tensions with Beijing. The French-Australian relationship has a long history that goes back centuries due to the colonization of the European great maritime powers. Their bilateral partnership has strengthened since the 1980s (Bhatty & Ahmad, 1996), and the cooperation between the two states has focused on the security sector. A challenge was posed by emerging powers, above all China, but there are also important threats such as piracy, terrorism, or nuclearism in the Pacific. Regarding the nuclear question in the Pacific, there has long been a kind of confrontation between Australia and France because Australia has always been against nuclear weapons, which the Rarotonga Treaty (also called the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty) has only strengthened. The Treaty of Rarotonga was signed in August 1985 by eight members of the South Pacific Forum. The Treaty is now in force for 12 of the 15 Forum members: Australia, the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Western

Samoa. Tonga signed the Treaty on 2 August, 1996, but it has not ratified it yet. France signed the Treaty with the United Kingdom and the United States, and they signed all three Protocols on 25 March, 1996 (Protocol, 2011). The Treaty aimed to prohibit the testing of any nuclear explosive devices. It also prohibits poisoning the sea with hazardous waste such as radioactive materials. Three Protocols extend the provisions of the Treaty to states outside the zone: Protocol I declares that states with territories in the region need to prohibit the testing of nuclear explosive devices to their territories; Protocol II commits the five declared nuclear weapon states not to use or threaten to use any nuclear explosive device against the Parties to the Treaty or on territories of Protocol Parties within the zone; while Protocol III commits the five nuclear weapon states to not testing any nuclear explosive devices within the zone (Protocol, 2011).

In the shadow of a more assertive China, the French-Australian partnership has further strengthened in the 2010s, especially after Macron had been elected President of France in 2017. (Soyez, 2018). France wanted to deepen its relationship with the Pacific and protect French interests in the Indo-Pacific. In 2016, the French Naval Group agreed with Canberra to build ocean-going submarines for Australia. The two countries first decided to organize joint military exercises, and the partnership was deepened when France and Australia signed the Joint Declaration of Strategic Partnership in Paris on 19 January, 2012. The importance of the agreement for the parties is shown by the fact that Australia's Defence White Paper mentioned the program as one of the most important events in the strategic development of the region (Payne, 2016). The main purpose of the program was to establish supportive cooperation between Paris and Canberra in order to build strong security, which was a basic element of the long-term partnership between the two countries. Under the contract, the parties agreed to deepen industrial cooperation, which includes information on the technology and building capability of the submarines (Atnia, 2017). Article 14 emphasizes the importance of the research and the technological development focusing on mainly technological breakthroughs in the naval domain (Atnia, 2017). One of the most significant parts of this contract was Article 15, which refers to navy-to-navy cooperation, jointly organized exercises, crew training, and active participation and strong cooperation in military exercises (Atnia, 2017).

In the Shadow of the US-China Rivalry: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the Role of France

France's ambitions to become a major power in its own right in the Indo-Pacific region have been challenged by the dramatic changes in the international system and the growing tensions between China and the US. The conflict between the two countries became open during the Trump administration. However, the tensions had started earlier. The US Pivot towards Asia, launched by the Obama administration in 2012, already identified China as a challenge to American interests in the Indo-Pacific region. The American ambition to contain China, however, has created a situation resembling a "Thucydides trap," characterized by militarization on both sides and making war a reality (Arezin, 2019). The situation is fast developing something like a new Cold War, and it is turning multipolarity into bipolarity (Arezin, 2019). These changing circumstances obviously narrow the strategic autonomy of other actors and force them to choose a side. The Indo-Pacific region, which has become the clashing zone of the two superpowers, was quickly affected by the open competition between China and the US. One such defining process in the region is the strengthening of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) between the United States, India, Japan, and Australia. The Quad considers France its Francophone Western ally, and it invites France to naval drills in the Indo-Pacific to challenge China (Huger & Raj, 2021). The first exercise of the naval drill was called exercise La Perouse, named after a French naval officer and explorer who lived and served at sea in the eighteenth century, and it was held in 2019, without India. This was a three-day naval drill. The drill "will provide an opportunity for these five like-minded, high-end naval forces to develop closer links, sharpen their skills, and promote maritime cooperation throughout a free and open Indo-Pacific," the French embassy in New Delhi said in a statement. The drill was followed by the maiden summit of the Quad leaders, held virtually on 12 March, 2019, and it was considered a determined and important moment in Asian geopolitics (Sharma, Lassus, 2021). This virtual event was followed by US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's visit to India, whose tour also included Japan and South Korea. The four Quad nations cooperated in a maritime exercise after the November 2020 Malabar drill in the Indo-Pacific. With France, the four nations are expected to take this cooperation to a new

level. In April 2021, the Quad partners (Australia, Japan, and the US) gathered in a French-led naval drill in the Bay of Bengal, as the nations aim to strengthen Indo-Pacific maritime security (Sharma, Lassus, 2021).

The maritime spaces connecting the entire Indo-Pacific also constitute a major security issue for France. The original aim of Quad is the maintenance of the international law and the freedom of navigation, which France shares. Moreover, by cooperating with Quad, France is taking the opportunity to strengthen diplomatic ties with India through this diplomatic step to play a larger role in the region (Huger & Raj, 2021). Paris and Delhi have agreed to work together to maintain security and the freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean (Rohan, 2018). As a consequence, President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Narendra Modi have made closer ties through a military logistics and support agreement, so this new military coalition intends to work at the operational level (Pajon, 2021). This shows that Paris has not completely abandoned its strategy of cooperation with the Central Powers, despite the changed context (Pascal, 2021). From France's point of view, India is a great partner because, in addition to its willingness to take action against China's growing number of embassies, it is a major player in the region in terms of strategic importance, and it is also a nuclear power. France's moves have also been supported by Australia, for similar strategic considerations. The established trilateral dialogue aims to conduct political consultations, coordinate diplomatically, exchange intelligence, conduct military exercises, transfer and share technology, and build capacity (Grare, 2020).

In the great power rivalry between the US and China, the Covid-19 pandemic marked a new stage, as a result of which the war of narratives has further increased tensions. This has also had an impact on the Quad cooperation. In March 2020, the Quad members held a meeting with representatives from New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam to discuss their respective approaches to the Covid-19 pandemic. This grouping of key Indo-Pacific states is called "Quad Plus" (Pajon, 2020).

Quad and Quad Plus have increasingly become the framework within which France could realistically represent its regional goals. The changing French role is illustrated well by the Jeanne d'Arc naval mission (Mahadzir, 2021). According to the mission, the French Amphibious Ready

Group (ARG) has participated in various large-scale exercises with the navies of partner countries present in the Indo-Pacific zone (India, Australia, Japan, and the United States) (Pascal, 2021).

The fading of France's global middle-power tradition also reflects the changing image of Europe in the Indo-Pacific region. In the past few years there has been a dramatic change in attitudes in European countries toward China. The Netherlands and Germany, following the path of France, are positioning themselves as actors in the Indo-Pacific region (Duclos, 2020). In the autumn of 2020, France, Germany, and the Netherlands wrote together a 'non-paper', later joined by other countries from the European Union, e.g. Poland, Italy, Portugal, and Sweden because they also found the importance of the EU position in the Indo-Pacific useful. These countries were on the same page about the importance of the four areas of trade, connectivity, maritime security, and global issues (Duclos, 2020). They emphasize peace and security in the region, and they have also worked out a Guideline for their long-term strategy. However, European countries with an effective independent military force have no choice but cooperate with the US and the member states within Quad.

These processes mean that in the growing bipolar international system France will not be able to act like a global middle power in the Indo-Pacific region. The ideal to create independent foreign policy based on the cooperation of middle powers like Australia has declined due to the growing bipolarity. France cannot follow De Gaulle's strategy anymore to act alone without the United States because France's middle power is limited in spite of its military presence in the Indo-Pacific (Hamill, 1989).

The next section describes this new status of France, arguing that France's middle power has become more symbolic. This will be illustrated through a case study of the AUKUS Agreement.

The AUKUS Agreement as a Reflection for France About Its Vulnerability

AUKUS is a trilateral security pact for the Indo-Pacific region between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, announced on 15 September, 2021. The pact includes cooperation on cyber capabilities,

artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and additional undersea capabilities. Under the pact, Australia will acquire new long-range strike capabilities for its air force, army, and navy, including nuclear-powered submarines. The pact will focus on the military. Michael Shoebridge, Director of Defence, Strategy and National Security at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, highlights the importance of the pact. “A nuclear submarine has enormous defence capabilities and therefore ramifications for the region. Only six countries in the world have nuclear submarines. They are a really powerful deterrent capability without giving them nuclear weapons” (Tewari, 2021). The Australian decision is partially a result of the aim of the US geopolitical strategy to make their allies participate in containing China. In addition, the dramatic deterioration in relations between Australia and China in recent years and Beijing’s desire to change Australia’s behaviour through economic pressure may have been decisive factors. The growing sense of threat may also have suggested to Australia that it was entrusting its security to the US, the only country that could actually protect it. Therefore, the Australian government was willing to make a gesture to Washington by denouncing the previous submarine treaty with France, thus plunging diplomatic relations between Australia and France to a low point. Australia has argued that it is cancelling the submarine project because the French submarines were diesel-electric submarines, while the US and UK are providing nuclear ones. From Australia’s point of view, this was a necessary step to defend themselves against the assertiveness of China. According to the French, Australia’s decision was a ‘stab in the back’ (McGurik, 2021).

The Agreement has created a crisis for France, leading to stronger Anglosphere relations in the region; hence, AUKUS also shows that the power of France is not enough to balance the growing influence of China in the Indo-Pacific, and other actors do not see France as a capable actor (Bowen, 2021). This evaluation is in line with the view of the French ambassador to the United States, Philippe Étienne, who stated after the incident that France is no longer a great power (Onishi, 2021). Others also agree. According to Arnaud Danjean, member of the European Parliament and a former defence official and diplomat, “We need a French policy in the Pacific because we have commercial, economic and territorial interests there, but the means we have now don’t allow us

to be a credible alternative to the United States in facing China,” (...) “The Pacific is the playground of the great powers, the preserve of the United States and China” (Onishi, 2021).

Conclusion

This study investigated whether France is capable of keeping its global middle power status in the new geopolitical centre of the twenty-first century, the Indo-Pacific. The paper argues that despite a coherent and cost-effective strategy, France can hardly act as an independent actor in the region. In an increasingly bipolar world, France can only represent its regional interests primarily as a junior partner of the US, particularly the defence of its overseas territory and exclusive economic zones. The case study of AUKUS underlines the fact that France’s lack of capacity is not only obvious in Paris but also for the regional actors, shattering the illusion of previous grandeur.

The AUKUS agreement is the best proof and reflection of how the rivalry between the great global powers has become more serious in the Indo-Pacific, and middle powers have no other choice but choose a side between the US and China. Australia’s investment in nuclear-powered submarines and the new agreement with its Anglo-Saxon alliances could well be the start of a new trend in the Indo-Pacific region and an important step in counterbalancing efforts against China. France and other middle powers must recognize that the world order has started to move toward the beginnings of a bipolar structure.

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PEOPLE'S PERCEPTION OF THE ROLE OF FOREIGN POWER IN MYANMAR: A CASE STUDY OF THE 2021 MILITARY COUP

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Abstract: The study explores people's perception of foreign external actors in Myanmar's domestic conflict through a case study of the recent military coup in Myanmar on 1 February 2021. Both Myanmar and China firmly hold a non-interference policy in other's internal affairs stemming from the 'Five Principles of Co-existence. However, the traditionally strong relationship between China and the Myanmar army, the Chinese response to the military coup, and its attitude to the army leaders have become controversial among people in Myanmar, leading to a growing anti-Chinese sentiment. By conducting a survey with the Myanmar diaspora, the paper analyses how people in Myanmar perceive China's role in Myanmar's internal affairs. The study concludes that, given China's growing international role, Beijing should pay particular attention to how its foreign policy actions are perceived by the populations of other states.

Keywords: China, military coup, Myanmar, people's perception, public opinion

Introduction

In recent times, China has been evolving as a regional and global power on the international stage. Small countries in the Southeast Asia (SEA) region view China as a regional great power. From the perspective of these countries, China is a capable and responsible actor in the region and a possible regional hegemon in the post-Covid world. In terms of economy, China's role is unquestionable. It is also undeniable that China's military power has been growing together with its economic development. In post-Covid Asia, this will be a very important indication of the regional order.

Whether small countries in the region dislike China's behaviour or not, there is no possibility to alienate China, and China remains an influential actor in regional stability. Despite China's growing strength, a key issue for Beijing is how the other SEA players see China. Although China has traditionally focused on state-level politics, it cannot ignore the fact that China's image in the eyes of the domestic audience of other states will sooner or later have an impact on government policies in those countries. Therefore, it is essential to know how regional countries perceive China's role for future cooperation between Beijing and these countries.

From China's point of view, the most important characteristic of China's foreign policy is its non-interference policy. China always stands on the non-interference policy of other countries' affairs, not only in the region but also at the international level. China preserves and defends the 'non-interference' or 'non-intervention' principle, not only in terms of its relations with other countries but also resisting Western involvement in its own domestic politics. Furthermore, China has repeatedly insisted on its non-interference principle in both bilateral relations and multilateral relations, especially in its relations with neighbouring countries (Pang, 2009). However, due to China's growing international footprint, it is an interesting question whether China is really avoiding interfering with other countries' domestic affairs at the expense of its own interests. On the other hand, do small actors consider China's non-interference policy as just a narrative or a real political guideline of China?

Listening to how other countries perceive China could help Beijing recalibrate its long-term policy and think about adjusting it. Moreover, the small actors would be more willing to cooperate with China if it played a responsible role. By doing so, other countries would see China as a predictable power, which would help them see China as a trusted power in the international arena. Thus, China should consider the perception of other actors to preserve its unique role.

The present research will examine how other countries in the region see the changing role of China in the post-Covid era. To investigate this, the 1 February 2021 military coup in Myanmar was chosen as a case study to explore people's perception of China in Myanmar.

Myanmar and China's relationship as neighbours goes back centuries. The relationship has been typically asymmetrical, with China playing the leading role. This was the case before the arrival of the Western powers, during the era of the China-centred tributary systems, as well as since the late 1970s, when Myanmar and China re-established closer ties. A major point in the deepening of bilateral relations was the international community's sanctioning of the military government for its suppression of the 1988 uprising in Myanmar (Holliday, 2005), which led to the country's increasing dependence on the Chinese economy (Clapp, 2010). A quasi-civilian government took office in April 2011, formally ending five decades of military rule in Myanmar. Although China has remained Myanmar's dominant partner, its ability to influence the country's development has diminished significantly. Although the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar is seen by many experts as an opportunity for China to restore its former influence, Myanmar and China cannot simply return to the pre-2011 period. Due to democratic reform, the society of Myanmar is used to having a more open voice in public affairs, and the information revolution that has taken place provides new channels of communication. All this has led to a strengthening of the role of public opinion in Myanmar, which has become an important factor in the military coup and has the potential to influence bilateral relations.

The article first briefly explains the role of perception in international relations. The second section presents the hypothesis and the methodological description of the research. The third section describes the military coup that took place on 1 February 2021, and the relationship between Beijing and the coup regime in Myanmar. The results and discussion sections are followed by a conclusion.

The Role of Perception in International Relations

People's perception is of crucial importance in democratic countries because it can greatly influence political decision-making. In an authoritarian state, the role of people's perception is insignificant, and there is no room for debate in domestic politics. Perception plays a significant role in a country because it will have consequences in domestic politics, as well as influence international relations. Herrmann (2013) underlines the fact that people's perception is

important because “the decision making in a political process is shaped by both the perceptions people have of the situation they face and the understanding people have regarding what sort of action produce what sorts of outcome” (Herrmann, 2013, p.334). As decisions in domestic politics reflect a country’s external relations, people’s perception of a country is worth considering for other countries.

Moreover, people’s perception influences the image of actors, which can be defined as a product of perception (Ametbek, 2017). From the perspective of small countries, it is very important to identify great powers’ behaviour based on their perception. People’s perception can also result in a huge outcome and losses in bilateral relations. In the Myanmar-China economic relations, the two countries have seen the failure of the important Myitsone hydropower dam project as a result of its unilateral suspension by the Myanmar government, which was prompted by people’s strong opposition. This shows how people’s perception can influence bilateral relations even if there are asymmetrical relations between small and great powers. As a result of this type of incident, China not only lost economic power, but its image was also damaged in the international community, as the root cause was a lack of confidence in Beijing’s political and economic behaviour.

In the case of the recent military coup in Myanmar, it is fair to assume that the people of Myanmar considered it impossible for China, as an emerging power and supporter of former military regimes, not to play a role despite Beijing’s firmly stance on its non-interference policy in Myanmar’s internal affairs. According to Gareth Price, Beijing’s “laissez-faire” approach toward Myanmar’s military coup could damage its own strategic and economic interests in the countries of Southeast Asia (Lee, 2021).

Based on the domestic perception in other countries, the question is whether China’s non-intervention policy is relevant in a post-Covid world in order to maintain its status as a global actor. However, other actors, particularly small actors, see that China’s involvement in domestic conflicts differs from China’s foreign policy. Other countries’ perception of China may push China towards more engagement and involvement in international affairs, thus it is important to know how people’s perception influences China’s behaviour in the post-Covid era.

Hypothesis and Methodology

In Myanmar, it is impossible to ignore China's role in its domestic politics. Most people believe that China is an important factor behind the military coup and that China was involved in Myanmar's domestic conflict to protect its interests in the country and to preserve its strong ties with the military junta. This research will test the hypothesis that people think China is an active and relevant actor in the region and is responsible for regional order. The case study focuses on the recent military coup that occurred on 1 February 2021. A survey was conducted among people from Myanmar who live abroad, as interviews could not be conducted with people inside Myanmar due to the military coup and the Covid-19 pandemic. Over 100 participants have answered the questions, who live in different countries – Australia, China, the Czech Republic, Dubai, Germany, Hungary, Japan, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Norway, the Philippines, Poland, Serbia, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. Five questions were designed to find out how people from Myanmar perceive the role of foreign powers (especially that of China) in the military coup.

Military Coup on 1 February, 2021

On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar army took power through a coup d'état, claiming that election fraud had been committed during the elections held in November 2020. During the elections, the National League for Democracy Party (NLD) won a landslide victory. The NLD won 83 percent of the available seats in the parliament, while the Union Solidarity and Development Party, backed by the military, won only 33 out of 476 seats (Tham, 2021). The army detained State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and several dozen other senior officials in early morning raids in Naypyidaw, the capital of Myanmar, when the elected members for the Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House of Parliament) were in the capital to convene after the November 2020 national elections. The military accused Aung San Suu Kyi of illegally accepting USD 600,000 and 11 kg of gold, as well as other charges including “fear and alarm”, illegal possession of radio equipment, and breaking Covid-19 restrictions (BBC News, 2021b). The military declared a one-year state of emergency, justified by the electoral fraud and the need to protect democracy in

the country. Vice-President Myint Swe, member of the military-backed opposition party (Union Solidarity and Development Party-USDP), replaced President Win Myint. He also signed the authorization for the declaration of a state of emergency, in which national power was handed over to Commander-in-Chief Sr. Gen Min Aung Hlaing, and pledged to hold new elections in a year's time.

Without any reliable evidence, the military has repeatedly alleged election fraud and voter irregularities during the elections, claiming that the Union Elections Commission (UEC) and the NLD failed to address the concerns of the opposition, ethnic groups, and the military (Human Right Watch, 2021). Moreover, it also claimed that both UEC and NLD failed to "properly perform their duties but also ignored to conduct a free, fair and transparent election" (Global New Light of Myanmar, 2021a). Despite the accusations put forward by the military, independent international observers have disputed the allegations of a fraudulent election, stating that no irregularities were observed (BBC News, 2021b).

The military junta organized a new election commission. The junta continuously committed unlawful acts by declaring that the results of the November elections were invalid as well as coercing election officials into signing affidavits to confirm electoral fraud was happening. These actions taken by the military were completely contrary to international standards for the resolution of election disputes (ANFREL, 2021). Regarding the election result, independent observers have rejected the military's accusation of voter fraud during the 2020 general election (BBC, 2021c). In its report, the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) states that "it is ANFREL's informed opinion that the results of the 2020 general elections were, by and large, representative of the will of the people of Myanmar" (BBC, 2021c). Before the coup, a dozen domestic election observer groups released a joint statement calling on the military and all political parties to recognize the results of the election (Myanmar Now, 2021).

When the coup was staged by the army, the people of Myanmar first showed signs of popular opposition by banging on pots and pans, as well as honking car horns in protest. To show their willingness to reject and not support the military, the Civil Disobedience Movement was begun as an online campaign by Myanmar professionals, for example, medical and health care workers (Walker, 2021). Not too soon, the CDM could

attract other people across the country. Many joined the CDM and refused to return to work. They unanimously demanded that the military relinquish power and give power back to the democratically elected NLD government, respecting their votes. Government employees from various ministries and company staff joined the Civil Disobedience Movement. Tens of thousands of government employees, including doctors, nurses, teachers from primary education and higher education departments, and staff from other ministries were fired from their job, and some were arrested by the military council. Beside government employees and company staff, ordinary people have also cooperated with CDM in terms of boycotting products and services from military-owned businesses, avoiding the state lottery, stopping placing advertisements in state-run newspapers, as well as not buying the state-owned newspapers in which the military advertises their policies and prints fake news for people in Myanmar and the international community. These actions are intended to cut off the military regime's flow of income (The Irrawaddy, 2021a).

China as a New Important Actor in Myanmar's Domestic Affairs?

During the State Administration Council (SAC) meeting in February, coup maker Min Aung Hlaing announced that the stalled hydropower projects would be resumed (Currie, 2021). At the meeting, he also mentioned that renewable energy production and hydropower projects should be prioritized in the country (Tun, 2021). This announcement prompted great concern among the people of Myanmar, who are worried about the Myitsonne dam project, which had been suspended in 2011 under the USDP government. The Ayeyarwady Myitsonne Hydropower dam project was a joint venture project between the Myanmar Ministry of Electric Power (1) (MOEP-1) and the China Power Investment Corporation. Due to public protest against the project for social and environmental concerns, President Thein Sein announced the unilateral suspension of the project on 30 September, 2011 (New light of Myanmar, 2011). Amidst the political turmoil, the military junta is stealthily continuing China's strategic infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. Under the NLD government, these projects were under review for their social and environmental impact as well as their commercial viability, although China was pushing to move them forward. One month after the seizure of power, the junta reorganized

the leading committees responsible for implementing BRI projects. Just five months into the military takeover, the junta's moves reveal that they have put China-backed projects at the top of their economic agenda, regardless of people's resentment towards China (The Irrawaddy, 2021b). While most international companies, for example, Telenor is gradually withdrawing its investments, China's economic leverage is still improving, in contrast with other international investors. Behind Beijing's non-interference policy, China is continuing its cooperation with the military council. Although China had good relations with the democratic NLD government, it is undeniable that it was solely focusing on its economic opportunities.

Results and Discussion

Five questions were formulated to answer the research question: Do you think that the military accepted any foreign support to carry out the coup?; Which country is the politically closest foreign power to the military junta during the military coup?; Do you think China is following its non-interference principle in Sino-Myanmar relations?; Which is the most influential country in Myanmar's domestic politics?; and What should China do to establish strong relations with Myanmar and become a good neighbouring country?

Regarding the military takeover, 91% of respondents answered that they suspected the Myanmar military had received secret support from a foreign power. Thus, people imagine that foreign powers were involved in Myanmar's domestic issue. 86% of respondents assume that China has had the closest ties with Myanmar during the coup. People had already perceived a close relationship between the Chinese government and the successive military junta in previous decades. Moreover, the Chinese government often protects the Myanmar government in the international arena through its diplomatic shield, and the military government has also relied on China's diplomatic assistance as well as political and military assistance for the survival of its regime.

Since 1988, the relations between Myanmar and China have improved dramatically, and because of the sanctions imposed by the Western countries, the military junta has been largely dependent on China both politically and economically. When the semi-civilian government led

by President Thein took power in 2011, the Myanmar government could counterbalance China to some extent by its new foreign policy goal of reintegration into the international community, and the Myanmar-US relations improved as a result of the government's reforms. The Myanmar government even announced the unilateral suspension of the controversial Myitsone hydropower dam project, which was signed by Myanmar and China in 2009. The Myitsone dam project is China's largest hydropower project abroad, and it will be the 15th largest dam in the world when it is constructed. In 2015, the NLD government, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, could extend its relations with the West, after which the government was able to renegotiate some important economic projects with China to ensure a fair stake for Myanmar. Despite these facts, people strongly believe that China still has a great influence on Myanmar's domestic conflicts.

Furthermore, 87% of respondents think that China is interfering in the internal affairs of Myanmar, particularly in the military coup, although China says that it firmly keeps to its non-interference principle. However, China's involvement does not meet with Myanmar people's perceptions. Compared to the Western countries, China has avoided using the term 'military coup', and its stance on the military coup differs from that of the international community. In addition, China's response has been moderate to both the coup and the violent crackdown of the military on the civilians, which has made people in Myanmar suspicious of China's involvement in the military coup.

Standing on its firm perspective, that the coup and the civil war belongs to Myanmar's internal affairs, it seems Beijing is ready to deal with anyone who wields power in Naypyidaw, but China should be aware that this demeanour can also threaten its interests in Myanmar. In contrast, within hours of the coup, the United States and its allies issued a condemnation and expressed concern (Smith, 2021). The leaders of the United Nations also called for the release of all persons who were arrested by the military and for the restoration of democracy in Myanmar (ALJAZEERA, 2021). European leaders condemned the military's illegal seizure of power and demanded the immediate release of all detainees arrested in the raids (REUTERS, 2021a). The Secretary-General of the United Nations also urged the military to respect the will of the Myanmar people and adhere to democratic norms (ALJAZEERA,

2021), and UN special rapporteur Thomas Andrews on Myanmar said that it is important for the international community to condemn the military coup in “the strongest terms” (ALJAZEERA, 2021). The G7 leaders also released a statement calling upon the military to immediately stop the state of emergency, restore power to a democratically elected government, release all unjustly detained persons, and respect human rights and the rule of law (BBC News, 2021a).

While other international communities denounced the military coup, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said that China noted the military coup in Myanmar and called on all sides to properly handle their differences under the constitution and legal framework and to safeguard political and social stability (REUTERS, 2021b). China’s state-run news agency Xinhua described the coup as a “major cabinet reshuffle” (XINHUANET, 2021). China’s refusal to denounce the military leaders might be assumed to have been Beijing’s protection for the junta, deflecting some of the international condemnation and shoring up the junta’s grip of power. In addition, the ambassador affirmed that the change of the political situation in Myanmar is undoubtedly an internal affair that will have spillover effects on Myanmar’s relations with its neighbouring countries (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China, 2021). China’s top diplomat, State Councillor Wang Yi said in March 2021 that “no matter how the situation in Myanmar changes, China’s determination to promote China-Myanmar relations will not waver, and China’s direction of promoting China-Myanmar friendly cooperation will not change” (REUTERS, 2021c).

Majority in Myanmar expect China to take positive engagement in the country’s domestic affairs by recognizing the National Unity Government (NUG), which has opposed the coup, and return power to the democratically elected NLD party. People also hope that China takes action or condemns the junta, as they believe that China has a great influence on the military leaders. Due to Beijing’s failure as a great power, people show their lack of trust in Beijing by arguing that Beijing should act as a good neighbour of Myanmar, displaying growing discontent towards Beijing. People’s lack of approval could be a huge challenge for Chinese businesses in Myanmar, which Beijing has experienced before, when the Myitsone hydropower dam project was put on hold in 2011. The results of the questionnaire showed Myanmar

people are dissatisfied with China because they thought that the Chinese non-interference policy was not reasonable. China uses this policy in Myanmar to achieve its own interest. At the same time, people want China to play a major role in helping Myanmar in a positive way, since 93% of the respondents answered that China is the most influential country in Myanmar's domestic politics. In this case, people might be assuming that Beijing's non-interference policy is a cover for its 'sitting on the fence' status.

The last and most critical result was that 98% of respondents want China to play an important role in the current domestic crisis in Myanmar. People want to see China reduce its close ties with the military junta and engage with the National Unity Government (NUG), the people's government fighting against the coup leaders and the junta. Instead of using the non-intervention principle, the people in Myanmar wish China was actively involved in Myanmar. Even if Beijing chose the military junta as its ally, people might welcome it, as Beijing is seen as a predictable actor. Consequently, this behaviour could improve Beijing's image as a trusted actor in the international arena. Whether Beijing admits it or not, its behaviours indicate that it indirectly supports the junta.

Conclusion

As to the question how other countries see the changing role of China, it has been found that China's non-interference policy makes it controversial among people in Myanmar, whether or not China really stands for this policy. Nevertheless, it is clear that people in Myanmar want China to play a key role in dealing with the military coup and they think that Beijing should be responsible for its great actor role for regional order. In Myanmar, the protest against the military coup has been led by the new generation (Generation Z). For the people who oppose the military rule, their ultimate goal is to eradicate the authoritarian regime in Myanmar. They are fighting against the military rule and strongly condemn any country that supports the military leaders or accepts or ignores the coup. People demand that the international community and organizations condemn the military coup and help people in Myanmar in resisting the junta. In practice, this young generation will be the future leaders of the country, and Beijing's ignorance of the will of these young people might seriously impact the future of Sino-Myanmar relations. According to

the results of the research, the hypothesis is confirmed that China is an active and relevant actor in the region in the post-Covid world, and it is expected to take responsibility for regional order. The research highlights that people demand more active engagement from China as a great power in Myanmar's affairs because they assume Beijing is a great power in the region. Moreover, political stability in Myanmar is also essential for Beijing to secure important economic projects such as the Kyaukphyu deep seaport, and the oil and gas pipeline projects that are crucial parts of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Not only to maintain its great power position but also to protect its interests in Myanmar, Beijing should consider recognizing and regarding others' perception of it, especially that of its strategic neighbour.

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RUSSIAN-SINO RELATIONS IN POST-COVID ASIA – MOSCOW’S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: From the Kremlin’s perspective, the global great power rivalry has intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, which will result in a US-Chinese bipolarity. Moscow would like to avoid being in a situation where it needs to choose a side because Russia would either become a junior partner or become marginalized. Therefore, the Kremlin will develop its bilateral relations with Beijing and other countries on the Eurasian continent, and it will try to find multilateral cooperations and international organizations (SCO, EEU, UN) to preserve its room to manoeuvre and protect its own strategic autonomy in global politics. The pandemic has shown the deficiency of the cooperation between Russia and China, although no strategic-level disagreement has occurred. A military alliance still seems impossible between the two countries, with Russia’s economic ties overly focused on the export of raw materials, although there are promising projects, for example, in the Arctic region. In the long term, a flexible strategic partnership could be the most suitable way of cooperation for the parties, but their bilateral relations will be greatly influenced by their respective relations with the West.

Keywords: Russia, China, asymmetry, dependence, post-COVID Asia

The Significance of Sino-Russian Relations for Moscow Before the Pandemic

Many sources can be used to provide a brief summary of how Russia looks at its territorially largest neighbour, the People’s Republic of China, which is simultaneously the most populous country in the world and the strongest country in terms of its economic potential. These sources include speeches

of members of the political elite, results of surveys about regular citizens' opinion, or diplomatic declarations. The most straightforward way, however, is to read the description on Russian – Chinese strategic relations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (MFA) (2020). The MFA considers the relations between Russia and China “strategic and comprehensive”, which is based on the Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation, signed in 2001. However, more than 300 other mutual agreements also exist between the parties. The MFA highlights the fact that deepening relations with China is a priority for Russian foreign policy. Since BRICS and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are mentioned, these multilateral initiatives must be considered more important than others (for example, the United Nations [UN], the Shanghai Cooperation Organisations [SCO], etc.). China is currently Moscow's most important partner on the global scale, since they want to see the same type of international system, their goals are aligned, they share challenges at the international level, and they strive to reach resolutions in a similar fashion. In other words, both support the multipolarity in which they are to be regarded as sovereign great powers, and they firmly believe in the principle that global stability and security can only be achieved through multinational, democratic institutions like the UN and through international law. The pragmatism of this approach is immediately clear: no emotions, no ideologies, only common interests, without even referring to the word “alliance.”

Since the signing of the above-mentioned treaty in 2001, the two countries have sorted out their border disputes in an exemplary way, they have developed their economic cooperation, and often provided political support to each other. From a Western point of view, these years can best be described as an “axis of convenience” (Lo 2008). Moscow and Beijing, however, consider this period their return to global politics as great powers and demanding more influence in the world order – without changing its fundamental institutions, but turning into a multipolar one.

The increased need to transform the world order has been clear since President Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007. However, the most tangible turning point, with the most long reaching effects, was without doubt the year 2014, with the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, the shooting down of the MH17 passenger flight, and the beginning of the Western sanctions. This period is usually called “Pivot to Asia”, and it was announced by President Putin in

late 2013 (Interfax, 2013), deepening political, economic, and military ties with Asian countries, primarily with China. Top leaders of the political and military elite have frequently visited each other, and these meetings have often resulted in key agreements. Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the 70th anniversary of the Victory Day celebrations in Moscow in 2015, where the top Western leaders were absent due to the Russian role in the Ukrainian conflict. Furthermore, in 2015 President Putin and President Xi outlined that their main geopolitical projects, the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) are considered to be complementary initiatives. Russia was more than satisfied with the possibility to expand its economic ties (especially in the energy sector) towards China, whose flagship project was the Power of Siberia pipeline, which started to operate in 2019. The Kremlin even acknowledged Beijing as a “near-Arctic state.” Between 2019-2020, personal and online meetings were scheduled between heads of states and foreign and defence ministers at both the multilateral and the bilateral level. Regular joint strategic-level military exercises have taken place, for example, Vostok 2018, Tsentr 2019, Joint Sea 2019, and Kavkaz 2020, just to mention a few.

The increasing pressure from the West did not simply result in Russia's turning towards Asia, but the US-China trade war also deepened the above-mentioned “axis of convenience.” However, as tempting as it would be to declare the strengthened Chinese-Russian cooperation as a result of the pressure from the West, it might not be completely accurate. While it is probably true to some degree, as it is difficult to question the effects of the sanctions and the trade war, at the same time, this might also be an approach that focuses on the West too much, not taking the developments during the 2000s into account, or the existing complementary potential stemming from their geographical closeness, the characteristics of their intertwined economies, as well as their shared view of sovereignty, global security, and the criticism of the current world order.

Signs of Cooperation and Glitches During the Pandemic

Even though the leaders of both Russia and China often praise their high-level cooperation, the COVID-19 pandemic has had an unexpected effect on it. They have not only faced challenges in domestic issues, but their bilateral ties have also shown their vulnerability and limitations.

To begin with some of the positive developments, the first cases of the new virus were officially confirmed in Russia on 31 January, 2020, about one month after its discovery in Wuhan. During the first weeks of February, the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation sent 23 tonnes of medical supplies to the affected Chinese regions, while the Rospotrebnadzor and other institutions sent experts to Beijing to share their expertise about disease control (RIAC, 2020). From April, when the number of cases in Russia started to grow quickly, China also helped by sending medical supplies and experts. On the last days of 2019, President Putin announced the “Year of Russian–Chinese Scientific, Technical and Innovation Cooperation in 2020–2021” (Tass, 2019), which officially opened on 28 August, 2020. Under the circumstances, this mostly meant online meetings, which still became a useful tool in fighting the pandemic and sharing experiences. Even though Beijing was later able to successfully control the pandemic, China’s failure to stop the spread of the virus in the early weeks was critical. Overall, the epidemic has had more devastating effects on Russia than on China. Nonetheless, on 16 April 2020, President Putin reassured President Xi during a phone call that it was “counterproductive” to blame China for not being able to stop the virus from crossing the border (Kremlin, 2020a). The two leaders have repeatedly shown respect and support for each other, and the state media in both countries has also communicated this message. The Sino-Russian cooperation has also been remarkable in terms of digital propaganda. During the pandemic the officials of both sides spread the theory that “US biology warfare” was the source of the virus (Tass, 2021) and even tried to sow mistrust in Western vaccines (Emmott, 2021). The high point of their relation in the last period was obviously 19 May, 2021, when after a video conference between the two Presidents, President Putin told the media that “We can say that Russian–Chinese relations have reached the highest level in history” (The Moscow Times, 2021a).

The new situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, has caused some seemingly serious disruption in the trust between China and Russia. Both sides lacked sophisticated norms and mechanisms for disease prevention, particularly in border-crossing. Despite the good relations, Russia was among the first countries in the world to unilaterally close its border with China on 30 January, stopping all commercial flights on 1 February. It is important to note that Moscow was much slower to do the same with its European partners, making the same decisions only

in the second half of March. In April, the Chinese propaganda criticized Russia for the insufficient measures (Izvestia, 2020), but neither this nor the fact that Beijing also closed its border crossings could stop the Kremlin from continuing to praise the Chinese success combating the pandemic. In fact, a kind of amplification of the Chinese propaganda was visible in the Russian media outlets, blaming the Western countries for being unsuccessful in prevention (Frolova, 2020). There was an outcry when Chinese nationals were deported for violating sanitary and epidemiological regulations, saying that they had experienced racial discrimination (RIAC, 2020), and the same was reported by Russians in China (RIAC, 2020). The most visible glitch between the two countries, however, was China's reluctance to give a live coronavirus strain to Russia, which could have resulted in developing a vaccine earlier (RIAC, 2020). Learning from the pandemic, one of the main future fields of cooperation could be taking full advantage of the Years of Russian-Chinese Scientific, Technical and Innovation Cooperation, founding joint companies to deal with virus testing, diagnosing, manufacturing medications, etc. It is also possible that new intergovernmental bodies will be created to deal with information sharing, developing processes to avoid the difficulties caused by closing borders or the discrimination against each other's citizens.

However, at a strategic level, these glitches have had no serious consequences for the relationship between the two countries, since they were short-term in nature, and no broad anti-Chinese or anti-Russian sentiments have emerged. The regular contact between the two leaders, who have shown support for each other, has also served to reassure that despite some disruptions, the strategic partnership has not suffered any damage. Looking at the number of deaths and the number of cases (Worldometer, 2021), China has been much more successful in combating the virus, while the pandemic has hit Russia very hard. This clearly highlights the differences between their ability to monitor their respective societies and enforce strict measures (Shevchenko, 2020).

What Can Russia Expect in the Post-COVID Era?

From the Russian perspective, the most important development is that the global COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the US-Chinese rivalry (Trenin, 2020a). In this narrative, global politics is heading towards bipolarity,

which is not as welcome in the Kremlin as it might seem. At the moment, the deepening cooperation with Beijing since 2014 seems to have been quite helpful because it has made it possible for Russia to consolidate its economy and avoid a collapse. Moscow has even been able to pursue its geopolitical aims, or at least show its teeth in conflicts like Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and other African countries. This might not have happened without indirect support from China. This trend does not seem to be different in the short term, and Russia is still likely to benefit from this cooperation. However, in the long term, there are clearly visible concerns regarding this process of bipolarity. There is a real danger that Russia will find itself in a situation where the Kremlin has to choose a side, which should be avoided. Moscow is aware of its limited capabilities, and in a situation like this its strategic autonomy would dramatically suffer, and it would inevitably become a junior partner on either side and/or become marginalized. This is why it is a top priority for the Kremlin to avoid this and find an equilibrium between China and the US. There are of course ways to do so, such as strengthening Russia's involvement in multilateral cooperations and international institutions; using their existing ties with China more effectively; and the Kremlin can also find new strategic partners on the Eurasian continent, for example, in India, Japan, or some member states of the European Union. Since managing the possible power transfer in 2024 is another top priority in the Russian political elite, we cannot expect any 180-degree turn in US-Russian relations, but in dealing with the West, there are visible opportunities for Russia in manoeuvring regarding its relations with the EU as well as Asian countries.

Moscow's Geopolitics vs. the Chinese Influence – Interests and Counter-Interests

Examining the potential vectors of the Sino-Russian relations, we have to take a look at some regions that are of crucial geopolitical importance for Russia. For a clearer picture, it is necessary to list some of the possible cooperations within regional organizations such as SCO, and outline the expected reactions after the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Sino-Russian relations will probably not suffer any damage on the issues that are most important for Russia, such as Ukraine, Belarus, or the Baltic states. China is mostly present in the region through its economic influence and multilateral platforms, such as the BRI or Cooperation

with Central and Eastern Europe (16+1). However, these countries export raw materials or easily replaceable goods to China (Samorukov, Umarov, 2020). No real Chinese advance can be expected in the military arena, even if there is limited cooperation in security-related issues. Ukraine, however, has benefited from these ties after losing the Russian market and its sources for military equipment, although Kiev's hands are tied by the West. Although Minsk and Beijing have worked together on the Plonez multiple rocket launcher system, this project must be considered symbolic, as are their military personnel exchanges or participation in multilateral joint exercises. The Baltic region is different due to its NATO membership and the pro-Western attitudes of its countries. But because the region is as sensitive for Moscow as Ukraine or Belarus, it is expected that in the future China would support the Russian world view in its rhetoric (Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2020) while not giving up its own economic goals. Beijing has no geopolitical goal in the region, and it just is not worth getting involved in Russia's local adventures; therefore, non-alignment can be expected.

The pandemic has also had some direct geopolitical side-effects. Regarding Central Asia, the unwritten but solid rule that Russia shapes the region through its security ties while China does so through its economic influence, is showing some cracks. Concerns have been articulated by experts about China possibly gaining further ground in the Central Asian states, which region the Kremlin considers an area of Russian influence (Izvestia, 2020b). These claims are based on the fact that Russia is the main destination of local migrant labour, but since the deteriorating pandemic the borders are closed, many people are left without a proper income. However, this economic power has not had any spillover effect, especially at the strategic political level, so the balance between Beijing and Moscow has been assured. Until 2020, China had almost exclusively supported local presidents and of course tried to convince them about the benefits of turning to China. This policy also involved corrupting the elites. Last year, however, protests and political events resulted in a change of leadership in Kyrgyzstan, and the new President, Sady Japarov seems to long have had ties to China. Experts say that, if this is not a coincidence, it could mean that Beijing is slowly moving away from its early policies and not only working with incumbent leaders, but also helping new ones to power (Umarov, 2021). It is difficult to measure how the pandemic has affected this process, but in the long term, Moscow can

expect some new challenges in this geopolitically sensitive area, losing some influence in favour of Beijing despite the widespread anti-China sentiment in these countries.

Another aspect of the China-Central Asia relations that is causing more headache for Russia is Beijing's attempts to build surveillance systems. Before the pandemic, in 2019 Kyrgyzstan was the first country in the region to sign an agreement with the China National Electronic Import and Export Corporation to install a facial recognition system, and the company claims that it has provided the system for free (Markotkin, 2021). Later that year, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan also held a meeting with Chinese companies, but to date only Tashkent has signed agreements. Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, during a visit in China, following a meeting with high-tech company Hikvision, called upon the Kazakh government to follow the Chinese way in digitalizing the country (Markotkin, 2021).

This highlights another asymmetry between China and Russia: the latter does not have either the capabilities or the technology to compete in digital surveillance, the tech sector, or digitalization. Moscow's failure to control the pandemic has partly been due to its inconsistent and barely sophisticated surveillance system and digitalization (Shevchenko, 2020). This incompetence has drawn attention to serious disparities. Since from the Russian perspective the global great power rivalry is intensifying, there is a serious risk of decoupling from China and the West in the information technology sector, one of the most important emerging areas. The Western sanctions, which are also affecting the Russian IT sector, further aggravate this process. Although Russia and China have been cooperating in the high-tech area for almost two decades, the main hindering factor for deeper ties is that Russia has been integrated into the global internet, and the Western standards and platforms are widespread (Sinkkonen and Lassila, 2020). The current situation is a real Gordian knot: while Russia needs more digitalization to modernize its economy, this is not possible for security reasons while the Western sanctions are on, but the Chinese option is simply not attractive for the Russian users, and for state security this dependency would also be undesirable. If the Russian-Western relations do not improve, the dependence on Beijing will further grow in the tech sector, and with it Russia's vulnerability, too. However, being dedicated to mutual, but partly symbolic, projects like the Sino-Russian Big Data Headquarters Base, the Sino-Russian Joint

Innovation Investment Fund, and the 2020-2021 Russian-Chinese science cooperation, from Moscow's point of view in the long-term this question could easily turn into resistance or even confrontation. Furthermore, it is impossible to predict whether Moscow will ever be able to come up with alternative IT systems abroad like Washington or Beijing already can.

Despite the Sino-Russian relations being substantially realized on the Eurasian continent (SCO, EEU, BRI, the Greater Eurasian Partnership), and the fact that Russian geopolitical thinking is also almost exclusively focused on land (with the exception of the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea), this might easily change in the near future. Two factors should be taken into account: the growing importance of the Arctic and the Pacific Ocean, both of which have much to offer for Moscow if it wants to avoid becoming a junior partner.

Russia has been developing its abilities to protect its maritime interests and return as a great sea power since 2001 (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2018). China has also been expanding its capabilities to support its foreign policy priorities, for example, securing sea trade routes and protecting Chinese interests in the East China Sea. Despite having no formulated strategic maritime partnership, the two countries have conducted several cooperations in this sphere. This includes the Arctic, joint military exercises, the Pacific, the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, but also the Mediterranean and the Baltic Sea. The Sino-Russian strategic partnership could be complemented by mutual recognition of each other's maritime interests, especially in internationally disputed waters, besides the expansion of the ongoing "land" projects at the same time. This would fit in with the changes in global politics, in which both regular and alternative sea routes will become more important. This could make it possible for Russia to be more visible on global issues, it could serve its economic interests, strengthen its military security, and even create highly visible ways of cooperation, for example, mutual Russian-Chinese patrolling could happen near the straits, and Chinese ships can visit exercises in the Baltics, like during the Zapad-2021. Moscow could easily return mutual patrolling, and by doing so also join China's fight against semi-encirclement. Being able to become a new actor in distant waters and cooperating on oceans from Iran to Japan could increase Moscow's regional influence, balancing its ties with China. Of course, the Russian-Chinese mutual activities could involve other countries

and could further strengthen the ongoing “land” projects, as well as ultimately increase Moscow’s global influence. This would inevitably cause disapproval from the US and its allies, but staying away would not have any positive consequences, such as easing sanctions.

From the Russian perspective, the Arctic has the greatest potential, and building a Silk Road on ice would serve Moscow’s economic interests and give it more room for manoeuvre. Acknowledging China as a near-Arctic country does not pose any threat to Russia, since Beijing has no territorial claim there. There is simply no alternative than cooperate with Russia in the region, especially when the China-US relations are where they are right now. Moscow wants to protect its strategic autonomy in the Arctic as well, although it is aware of its dependency on foreign capital and technology to exploit the local resources and execute crucial developments. Beijing can participate in this process, but Moscow can find alternative non-Western partners as well. However, the Russian concept of a Greater Eurasia is still land-focused and urgently needs a maritime strategy (Trenin, 2020b). As Dmitri Trenin suggests (Trenin, 2020b), a Murmansk-Mumbai trade route, which connects the Arctic with the Indo-Pacific region, would closely link Russia and its Asian partners. This would offer alternatives and avoid further dependency on China, but of course this project can only be achieved by allowing Beijing to play an active role.

On the other hand, Russia may defuse its growing dependence on China via its new ties with India. New Delhi is a negligible economic partner for Russia at the moment, their cooperation covers the fields of energetics (nuclear energy) and selling military equipment. Moscow tries to carefully balance its relations with India, trying to avoid them becoming too deep and sensitive for China, but not withdrawing completely. Building stronger ties would cause disapproval from China, thanks to its own rivalry with India, which has resulted in a deadly border clash in June 2020. A real Russia-India-China triangle would be more than welcome in the Kremlin, and it could be formulated within the SCO, BRICS, and in other international forums

Their different evaluations of the coup in Myanmar in February 2021 may show a hidden disagreement between Russia and China. While the former looks at the development as a purely domestic affair of a sovereign state,

the latter expressed its concerns early (The Moscow Times, 2021b). The Kremlin seems to have secured its ties in the country going forward, since they have already signed an agreement on shipping high-tech Russian military equipment, and even the Sputnik V vaccine was approved after the coup (The Moscow Times, 2021b).

Although the recent developments in Afghanistan make the future unpredictable, for Russia and China it will probably help to find new ways of cooperation along their interest-based relations, as well as their shared view of the world. The US withdrawal, as has been emphasized by the Russian media and leaders, is a sign of the failure of the unipolar world led by the US and the West, and along their Chinese counterparts, they refer to this by promoting a multilateral, more democratized global order. In other words, Moscow and Beijing stand for their increased role in global politics, using their positions in international organisations such as their permanent seat in the UN Security Council. In post-NATO Afghanistan, however, Russia is facing several challenges. Moscow has no resources to get involved in the country, nor has it any direct interest to do so (Trenin, 2021). For both Russia and China, the number one priority is to fight the extremists, to stop the inflow of illicit drugs and arms, and to secure the stability of the region while promoting non-interference in the domestic politics of Kabul. For Moscow the current situation means possible future inconveniences, given the fact that the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) shares a border with Afghanistan, but it also serves as an opportunity to increase its influence using diplomatic ties in the region and beyond. It is possible that an evolving situation will easily reshape the unwritten roles of Moscow and Beijing in the broader Central Asian region. Surely the Sino-Russian security cooperation will strengthen to some extent. This will not only concern bilateral relations, but the CSTO-China, SCO cooperation may also be expanded. Moreover, tackling the problem with local actors is an excellent opportunity for the Kremlin to widen its relations with Pakistan and India, and it also confirms Russia's criticism of the Western world view. At the moment, it is difficult to predict the outcome of the Taliban's takeover in Kabul, but it certainly has the potential for Russia to re-energize its diplomatic arsenal with China and other countries in Asia.

Using its traditionally extensive diplomatic toolset, the Kremlin can increase its weight in global politics, secure its geopolitical interests, deepen its ties with Beijing, and avoid unhealthy dependency at the same time. As the *Russia-China Dialogue: The 2020 Model* presents (RIAC, 2020), the Kremlin has countless opportunities in the post-COVID era. The SCO will stay the cornerstone of multilateral relations in the development of economic cooperation, transportation, logistics, infrastructure, healthcare, science and technology, as well as education, sport, and tourism (RIAC, 2020). In the new security reality created by the Taliban takeover in Kabul, the SCO platform can be used to resolve crisis situations, fight against extremists and drug trafficking, and even peaceful settlement and economic restoration in war-torn countries such as Syria (RIAC, 2020). Using the opportunities provided by the BRICS membership, it is possible to focus more on global issues such as cooperation in trade, economy, and finance. This platform can solve security-related issues in Asia and beyond, but it can also be a tool to promote world views that differ from those of the West in institutions like the UN. Russia's EEU project, which has not been especially successful, can probably be re-energized to some extent. However, Moscow's security-focused CSTO has a window of opportunity to boost military-security ties due to the current situation in Kabul.

Economic Partnership: Perfect Match or Temporary Solution?

It is a well-known fact that Russia's economy heavily depends on the export of raw materials, especially hydrocarbons such as oil and gas, and there has not been any serious development in the last few decades that would decrease this exposure. This generates three problems. First, the Kremlin's annual budget is exposed to the volatile fluctuation of global energy prices. Second, since 2014 it has increasingly relied upon the non-European market, including China, which has a better position in negotiating in the current circumstances. Third, in the long term, Russia is facing a more serious threat, since more and more countries make announcements about achieving zero net CO₂ emission in the upcoming decades. While Russia officially still shows little worry about this, this trend could be a game changer, since even Beijing has made announcements in this regard (Bloomberg, 2021). At the moment, exporting raw materials is still a fruitful cooperation because China will still be a resource-dependent economy in the upcoming decades.

In the last few decades, we could witness dynamic growth in terms of economic relations. As a result, China had become Russia's largest foreign trade partner by 2020. This still means that only 13.8% of total export is heading to China (considering the EU members as separate entities) (Russia: Foreign Trade Statistics, 2020a). However, for mineral products, which account for 43.7% of total exported goods (Russia: Foreign Trade Statistics, 2020b), there is a much bigger dependency on the Chinese buyers: more than a fifth of these products are exchanged in this direction, surpassing all other countries (Russia: Foreign Trade Statistics, 2020c). In 2019, the last pre-COVID year, the bilateral trade exceeded USD 110.9 billion, with a tiny surplus in favour of Russia (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020). 62.2% of this bilateral trade was realized in exchanging minerals such as oil and gas (Russia: Foreign Trade Statistics, 2020d). Right after the Western sanctions in 2014, the two sides agreed on building the 2,159-km "Power of Siberia" pipeline, which was completed in 2019 and will probably reach its working capacity in 2024.

The current underdeveloped Russian economic structure is clearly visible in these numbers, showing dependency on mineral export and growing dependency on China at the same time. This makes Russia vulnerable not just to the fluctuation of the global price of minerals, but increasingly also to Beijing. Since last year's commitments by Western and Asian leaders, among them by President Xi Jinping, Moscow has to face the changing reality of a possible degradation of its oil and gas products on the global market. The withdrawal of the US from the region and the future Chinese investments in Iran and Iraq will make it easier to change its Russian energy sources. For the Kremlin, continuing exposure to this quasi-monocultural trade structure could cause further lagging behind the world economy, but it also represents some opportunities for increasing room for manoeuvre. New trade partners can be found in this field, such as Vietnam or India, which could be surprisingly lucrative if Russia was able to ship LNG through the Arctic region.

Finding alternative energy-related projects to prepare for the post-oil era could offer new fields of influence for Russia, mainly through its nuclear know-how. This year at an online conference the two Presidents agreed to Russia building new nuclear power plants in Tianwan and Xudabao (The Moscow Times, 2021a). According to the plan, these facilities will be functional by 2026-2028. The decision further deepens their strategic

partnership and can further increase Moscow's influence in the global energy sector. President Putin has praised this meeting as the best in the history of Sino-Russian relations.

China's influence in the financial sector has also increased, as Western sanctions allow Beijing to replace former Western countries in Moscow's capital needs. Despite this assumption, we see a decline in foreign direct investment from Beijing. Despite the growing numbers in trade in general, since the beginning of "Pivot to Asia" in 2014, there has been a massive outflow of Chinese investment from Russia, with investments decreasing by 250% (Sukhanin, 2021). Many factors may have caused this. Presumably there are companies that do not want to be subject to Western sanctions because they contract with Russian parties. Of course, the global pandemic has also had a negative impact. In addition, the Chinese investors are also looking for profits, and the Russian economy, which has been growing more slowly than the world economy for years, is not the most attractive destination in this respect. Only in the first three quarters of 2020, these amounts were halved (Sukhanin, 2021). This is particularly sensitive for Russia's infrastructural projects. Although Chinese companies are the only foreign actors receiving permission to participate in developing the infrastructure, a sector which is strongly controlled by President Putin's circle, to date their cooperation has mostly resulted in symbolic projects (e.g. developing infrastructure in the Crimea). Generally speaking, Beijing's state-owned companies are not willing to invest in its neighbour, simply because the previously arranged, land-focused plans seem to be unattractive, and there are fears of further Western sanctions (Sukhanin, 2021). This question will be crucial in the near future, since Russia's plan to develop its Arctic regions needs more capital, more actors, and high-tech capabilities, which are not available at the moment. Of course, considering the sea-focused nature of some plans, China's behaviour could be different in the future.

China's reluctance to cooperate with Russia is illustrated by the fact that Beijing is showing no interest in any plans setting up alternatives to the SWIFT system – in case there is a disconnection from the West (Sukhanin, 2021). It is probable that Chinese financial experts are thoroughly examining every aspect of the Western sanctions toward Moscow and are trying to prepare for suffering the same steps in the near future.

The fourteenth five-year plan has many opportunities for the next fifteen years, and it may have some opportunities to offer for Russia in the short and medium term. This plan has two strategic goals, to double China's GDP by 2035 compared to 2020, and to become a high-income economy (Spivak, 2021). More gas and oil will surely be needed to achieve these, and Russia is in a good position in this regard. Even though Moscow will need to compete with other countries in Central Asia, Middle East, and Africa, its annual budget probably will not suffer losses as the global trends are turning to green technologies. The five-year plan also has prospects for the agricultural sector, and most importantly, ones for the high-tech sector as well. Experts predict that the latter will cause growing standardization in the sector globally, which makes it possible for Russia to connect to various producing lines and avoid choosing a side or becoming decoupled (Spivak, 2021).

Media and Disinformation

Cooperation on the information sphere had started long before the pandemic. The two sides agree that the Western media outlets are influencing domestic politics both in Russia and China and support the opposition, for example, Navalnij or the Hong Kong protesters. The main state-run companies Sputnik and the China Media Group (CMG) have signed agreements to mainly target the domestic audiences (Markotkin, 2021). At the official level, many personal meetings have been scheduled: since 2015 there has been an annual forum organised by the CCP Propaganda Department and the Russian Presidential administration; Maria Zakharova met her Chinese counterpart in 2019 to discuss the current issues regarding the global media and to clarify common interests and cooperation between the foreign ministries (Markotkin, 2021). In 2017, Sputnik and the Global Times signed a cooperation agreement with the purpose of showing the international community their shared positions and concerns on various international issues (Eu vs Disinfo, 2020). The coordination had clearly been visible long before 2020, and the two countries already supported each other's disinformation projects. The period of the pandemic has also offered a lot of opportunities to work together in the informational sphere. The most important among these include the source of the virus, vaccination, human right violations in Xinjiang, and narrating the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The

main goals were the same as before, to keep opposition voices as quiet as possible while amplifying pro-government messages and challenging the Western narratives.

According to an EU report (Emmot, 2021), finding themselves on the same side of “vaccine diplomacy”, Russia and China state media outlets started to spread disinformation. Both countries attempted to amplify the side-effects of the Western vaccines while offering their products as alternatives. These allegations have been denied by both countries, but the EU report shows clear signs of well-organized and coordinated information campaigns on social media sites and online platforms. These actions are particularly conspicuous in the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and partly in the Caucasus countries, where the Western-Russian geopolitical struggle is mostly concentrated (EU vs Disinfo, 2021a). As mentioned earlier, even the origin of the virus is questioned in the Russian media. Parallels are drawn between the Western allegations of poisoning Sergei Skripal in Salisbury and the theory of leaking the virus from a laboratory in Wuhan, suggesting that Moscow and Beijing are victims of the unjust accusations of the West (EU vs Disinfo, 2020).

Remarkable coordination could be observed on other issues as well. China has been defended by the Russian state media on the human right records in Xinjiang (EU vs Disinfo 2021b). The pro-Kremlin news outlets simply reproduced the Chinese narrative and accused the West of unjust allegations. This fits in the long articulated Russian narrative claiming that human rights are a tool of the West to interfere in domestic politics and violate sovereignty. China and Russia have released a common statement condemning such steps (MID 2021).

After the withdrawal of the NATO troops from Afghanistan, similar narratives seem to have appeared in the state media of both countries. This new approach says that the West in the future may “betray” Ukraine and Taiwan in the same way, whose existence is strongly based on its support (EU vs Disinfo, 2021c). This not only undermines Kiev’s and Taipei’s legitimacy but also mocks the global world order led by the West. Again no clear proof can be detected, but the similarity of the approaches and how they were disseminated is telling.

Cooperation in informational warfare has been highly active during the pandemic. Since it is not expected that the stance of Moscow or Beijing on the question of sovereignty will change, or that one of them will give up their policy on Ukraine or Taiwan, the developments of the last two years in terms of disinformation are important and forward-looking.

Military Alliance: “Maybe” is Better Than “Surely”

Just weeks before the US election in 2020, one of the most remarkable moments of the Sino-Russian relation during the pandemic was when at the Valdai Discussion Club President Putin, answering a question on a possible military alliance, said that “It is possible to imagine everything... We have not set that goal for ourselves. But, in principle, we are not going to rule it out, either.” (Kremlin, 2020). Not saying no unequivocally is part of the toolset the Russian President is working with, since in the West the realization of a military alliance between Moscow and Beijing would be a nightmare and could easily be a game changer in global politics. There are calculations which say that even the combined defence budget of Russia and China is less than half of that of the US, but if everything is taken into account and all costs are normalized, the budget of the former two in reality exceeds that of the latter (Champion and Krasnolutska, 2021). Although the Kremlin in reality indeed cannot rule out this happening, there is probably only one case in which Moscow and Beijing would form a military alliance: in the unthinkable situation where the West would attack them both at once. Despite all the events of the pandemic, this possibility remains theoretical.

There are several reasons why we should not expect any military rapprochement after a certain point. National sovereignty being one of their main values, the symbol of their independence for both China and Russia, they are reluctant to give it up. An alliance would obligate the parties to get drawn into conflicts over the interests of the other. To date, Beijing has not even recognized, for example, the annexation of the Crimea, or Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and similarly Moscow has no real interest in defending Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea. Not to mention the fact that Beijing still has no intention of abandoning its non-alignment policy, one of the basic principles of its foreign policy. Signing such a pact would further deteriorate

their relations with the West to an unpredictable extent, which is utterly undesirable. Signing a pact but not supporting the other side in an armed conflict would also dramatically throw back Sino-Russian relations.

The Russian leaders and the Russian documents all use the expression “strategic partnership” to describe their relationship. Although this is not as high-standard a cooperation as an alliance, it has huge flexibility. Being allied not only has a strategic security concept, it also has a spillover effect in the economic, political, and diplomatic ties as well. A strategic partnership model needs no sacrifice endangering the parties’ ties with the West, it needs no political commitments which are not in harmony with the domestic political environment, and it definitely needs no isolation in diplomatic terms in favour of the other; therefore, it is the best way for Moscow and Beijing to work together (Huasheng, 2021). From this perspective, speaking about a possible alliance has three meanings. The first is to dispel all doubts caused by minor disagreements in Sino-Russian relations during the pandemic, the second is to send the message to the West that Russia has the right to choose even to sign a treaty that is of main concern for the West, and third, it is likely that the Kremlin, following the US presidential campaign, wanted to send the message that a pro-Russia president would be a wise choice. In this regard, the Sino-Russia military alliance is more about the West than about the two parties. The joint military exercises of recent years, strategic bomber patrolling, and even Russia’s selling Su-35 fighter aircrafts and the S-400 missile system (which was rather symbolic) might all be alarming for the West and must be interpreted in this sense.

Conclusion

In summary, another, less-discussed factor regarding the future of Sino-Russian relations concerns the limits of the cooperation resulting from economic and strategic political differences. We cannot overestimate the pragmatic approach of the two sides, but there is also a real possibility of ideologic opposition. The close Sino-Russian relationship is mostly explained by the West and its world view: challengers of the free, liberal world will inevitably unite. However, this is again a very Western-centred opinion, in which the fault lines are drawn by ideologies formulated according to the twentieth-century dichotomies of democracy-fascism and democracy-communism. However, the Chinese historical perspective

focuses on the grievances that occurred during its century of humiliation by the West. As Maxim Trudolyubov notes (Trudolyubov, 2021) in this regard, Russia is also part of the West – at least historically. While the Kremlin's point of view encompasses the last decades, Beijing's goes back to the last two centuries. At the moment, it is difficult to imagine their relation to deteriorate so quickly that China would start to classify Russia as part of the oppressing, "imperial" West, but the ideological foundations are clearly there.

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US FOREIGN POLICY GOALS IN THE MIDDLE EAST BETWEEN 2011 AND 2021

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Abstract: Since the end of World War II, the United States' interests in the Middle East have intensified rapidly, and this presence continues today in response to a variety of economic and security concerns. Following the 2011 Arab uprisings and the Iraqi regime change, US foreign policy has pursued several transformative agendas against some of its traditional allies, apparently contradicting Washington's long-standing defence of the regional status quo. This has caused levels of uncertainty among regional players about what to expect from the United States. The present study highlights the US foreign policy goals in the Middle East between 2011 and 2021, which includes upholding US military bases in the Gulf countries, supporting client-states and other friendly states, providing support and protection to Israel's sovereignty, maintaining strategic access to oil in the Gulf countries, and battling Islamic movements and terrorist groups (such as Hamas, Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)). In addition, the study also focuses on other crucial aspects that might affect the United States and their regional allies' interests in the regime. To explore US foreign policy decisions and actions between the years 2011 and 2021, data was collected through structured interviews and online secondary data sources. The data was reviewed and analysed to look at the socio-political, historical, and economic factors at work in the Middle East. The theoretical analysis uses a descriptive approach as to how the changes in the period after 2011 have influenced American foreign policy in the Middle East. The findings illustrate that terrorism, civil wars, and instability in the Middle East have had significant influence on the United States' economic, national security, and diplomatic interests in the region. Maintaining strong ties with allies and comprehending the nature of conflicts is critical to attaining the US foreign policy objectives

in the Middle East. This research study serves as a reference guide for scholars, policy analysts, and practitioners by examining to what extent the relationship between the US and the Middle East has changed.

Keywords: US foreign policy; Middle East; policy goals; Israel's sovereignty

Introduction

The Middle East has been a focal point of US foreign policy since World War II, increasing in importance due to global, geographical, and political influences in the region. Many cultural relations exist between the region and the West, stretching back to the Middle Ages and extending into modern history through the efforts of Western missionaries and their educational activities. The Middle East is made up of parts of three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa. Natural resources, such as oil and water, abound in the region. The term 'Middle East' is relatively new. The name first appeared in a series of articles in *The Times* in 1902. After WWII, the word 'Middle East' gained widespread acceptance, especially among academic institutions and government agencies (Al Sarhan, 2017).

The continuing disputes and turmoil in the Middle East do not diminish its geostrategic importance. According to former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the importance of the Middle East depends on four key factors. First, despite the United States' efforts to modernize its energy industry, world and global market equilibrium will remain reliant on Middle Eastern oil. Many analysts and commentators have also claimed that the turmoil in the Middle East threatens oil supply as well as the economic system of the countries that depend on it, including many European nations (Chomsky, 2005; Harvey, 2010). Second, due to its proximity to Europe, the unrest in the Middle East presents a direct and present danger to most European countries, jeopardizing global peace and prosperity. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Syrian crisis, which have resulted in massive refugee waves to Europe, are only two recent examples of such challenges. Third, the importance of the area stems from the strategic relationship between Israel and the United States, as well as the need to sustain the sole Franco-American/Western ally of the region. Finally, Blair claims that the historical evolution of the Middle East will most likely determine the global fate

of radical Islam, which is expansionist in nature and opposes all forms of political and religious systems. The regional defeat of radical Islamic groups could lead to their global defeat and the preservation of the existing international political structure (Prifti, 2017).

Since the end of World War II, the United States' interests in the Middle East have intensified rapidly, and this presence continues today in response to a variety of economic and security concerns. US foreign policy goals include upholding US military bases in the Gulf countries, supporting client-states and other friendly states, providing support and protection to Israel's sovereignty, maintaining strategic access to oil in the Gulf countries, and battling Islamic movements and terrorist groups (such as Hamas, Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)), and many other aspects that might affect the United States and their regional allies' interests (Al- Sarhan, 2017).

The present study highlights the US foreign policy goals in the Middle East between 2011 and 2021. The Middle East goals of the US are grouped into four categories: combating terrorism, maintaining regional stability, preventing Iranian expansion, and maintaining the balance of power. Iran, the Islamic State, and al-Qaida all pose real threats to these interests at times, but it is believed that these are overestimated, and that many US interests in the region are unlikely to be challenged. The problems of the allies, on the other hand, are more pressing, and the Arab Spring and continuing civil wars have brought all of these to the fore. The US solution to these issues has yielded a number of advantages, including deterring and weakening enemies, as well as reassuring allies efficiently. It has, however, exacerbated internal problems and fuelled anti-Americanism at times (Byman and Moller, 2016).

Methodology

The present study is descriptive in nature and investigates the phenomenon of US foreign policy decisions and actions between the years 2011 and 2021. The data was collected through structured interviews, published research articles, review journals and other available online resources like Wall Street Journal & Al Jazeera news. The data was analysed to look at the socio-political, historical, and economic factors at work in the Middle East. The data was theoretically analyzed on the

basis of socio-political, historical, and economic factors at work in the Middle East. A descriptive approach, focusing on answering questions relating to “what changes after the year 2011 influenced the US foreign policy in the Middle East up until the present day” was employed for the study. The year 2011 was a turning point and is considered important for comparative study for two reasons. The Arab Spring, a series of pro-democracy uprisings that enveloped several largely Muslim countries, including Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Bahrain began in the spring of 2011. In addition, the brutality of the Assad administration in reaction to protests in 2011 triggered a civil war that lasted more than seven years and was further worsened by the advent of ISIS in 2014. The study then examines changes in US policy along by categorizing US foreign policy goals in the Middle East. Based on the literature (Shukri, 2017), the analysis focuses on the following strategic goals: combating terrorism, regional stability, preventing Iranian expansion, and maintaining the balance of power. The study provides a comprehensive picture of the changing role of the US in the Middle East and the trends expected in the near future.

Categorizing US Foreign Policy Goals in the Middle East

In the following paragraphs, changes in the US Middle East policy are examined in the light of the strategic goals of the US.

Combating Terrorism

The United States declared counterterrorism a top priority in its Middle East policy after the 9/11 attacks. Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen have gained international acclaim for their anti-terrorism cooperation, and the US has bolstered ties with historically ignored countries, such as Algeria. The administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama have had a strong effect on Saudi Arabia and other stable Gulf countries. Both the Bush and the Obama administrations pushed for a ban on financing terrorism and supporting jihadist movements (Rudner, 2004).

To combat terrorism around the world, the Bush administration adopted a National Strategy for Combating Terrorism in February 2003. The far-reaching plan included methodologies to crush fear-based oppressors

and their gatherings, decline terrorists sponsorship, help, and safe house, diminish the social and financial conditions that terrorists misuse, and ensure US individuals' and public safety at home and abroad (National strategy for combating terrorism, 2003). The US invaded Iraq on 19 March, 2003, and overthrew Saddam Hussein's regime. The Iraqi government was accused by the Bush administration of violating human rights, possessing weapons of mass destruction, and harbouring terrorist leaders. Furthermore, US officials said that the Iraqi regime posed a threat to the security and stability of the entire Middle East region (Desoli, 2015).

The United States formed a global alliance to battle ISIS and terrorism in August-September 2014. The United States and various countries, including a few Arab nations (Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), directed air strikes against ISIS focuses in Syria on 23 September, 2014, determined to undercut "the assailant gathering's capacity to request, train, and resupply its warriors" (Fantz & Pearson, 2015).

The US gains access to vital information through joint efforts, local services use their agents and resources to track and destroy terrorists at home, and it gains physical access to executing drone strikes in some situations, such as Yemen. The Saudis were instrumental in foiling an AQAP plot to bomb a US airliner in 2010, and a joint US-Saudi operation against the group in 2011 foiled similar plots (Dreazen, 2012).

Hamas and Hezbollah are two well-known militant groups that also play an important political role in Middle East. Both are hostile to the United States, although unlike Al-Qa'ida, neither is planning operations against Americans. While the fight against terrorism frequently contributes to the development of democracy. In reality, as the case of the Hamas and Hezbollah shows, by cooperating with partners to combat terrorism, the US is bolstering its intelligence agencies, which is frequently the least democratic aspect of an autocratic administration (Mueller and Stewart, 2012).

The lack of major recent assaults by Al-Qa'ida also demonstrates the vulnerability of the group. The question in this debate is whether the vulnerability of al-Qa'ida is due in part to a persistent US counterterrorism

program or it is largely unaffected by US intervention. It also depends on whether al-Qa'ida affiliate groups are considered part of the central movement and therefore a danger to US interests, or merely local organizations only posing a tangential threat (Byman, 2012).

ISIL, a new jihadist organization that regards the Kurds as ideological opponents as well as enemies for control of territory and resources, attacked Syrian Kurds heavily in the first six months of 2014. The YPG, the military wing of the PYD, began forcefully defending Kurdish towns and villages for the first time, and it appeared to be a more effective actor on the ground than their Iraqi Kurdish counterparts, the Peshmergas (Gunes et al., 2015). The militarization of the Syrian Kurdish struggle has undoubtedly shaped a new dynamic in the region as a result of the Syrian war. The city of Kobani was attacked for the second time by ISIL on 13 September, 2014; this onslaught signalled the end of the Kurdish presence in the region for the jihadists. The YPG was put in a difficult situation after losing a dozen villages in the early days of the battle (Desoli, 2015).

The development of ISIL was one of the key forces altering the Middle East political map, but the Kurds swiftly benefited from the Siege of Kobani owing to an international coalition. Indeed, the US launched air strikes against the jihadists for the first time, resulting in widespread media coverage of the Kobani battle and the Kurdish cause in general. Furthermore, it demonstrated to the rest of the world the fruitful cooperation between the US and the PYD/YPG, which continued despite Turkey's opposition. The Kurds were able to not only defeat ISIL but also take control of the majority of Syria's border with Turkey, thanks to US assistance. The US, the PYD/YPG, the Peshmergas, and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) worked together in Kobani to show worldwide support for the Kurdish cause. The PYD's standing as an official US partner has been elevated as a result of its achievements over ISIL on the battlefield, enhancing the legitimacy of the YPG (Plakoudas, 2017).

To summarize this element of US policy in the Middle East, following the September 11 attacks, the United States has become increasingly involved in the fight against terrorism. The US has strengthened its counterterrorism strategies with long-time allies like Egypt and Jordan and has pushed for stronger connections with previously overlooked

or unfriendly regimes such as Yemen and Libya. Of course, the most dramatic example is the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which sparked an insurgency and led to a US presence in the country until the end of 2011. Then, just as US forces were leaving Iraq, the Arab Spring shocked the region, overthrowing long-time US allies in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen, and sparking civil wars in a number of nations, including Syria. Despite the Obama administration's opposition to a large-scale US military engagement in the region, it initiated air attacks against Islamic State militants in Iraq in 2014 and increased its attempts to collaborate with regional allies and local partners to combat the group (Byman and Moller, 2016).

The United States' post-9/11 democracy development policy, which was predicated on the ideal that it can curb terrorism, was likewise faulty for a variety of reasons. It associated Western interests with Middle East democratization, and as a result, it instrumentalized democracy in a way that eroded faith in both the notion and the practice of democracy. As a result, once it became evident that democratization was no longer benefiting Western interests, democratic support dwindled. The first and most significant lesson of the post-9/11 period is that we must promote democracy for its own sake as well as on the basis of international standards and universal values. The United States policy during Obama's presidential term showed strong conflicts between the commitment to help existing US allies and popular forces that jeopardize to sweep them away – as evident during the Arab spring revolutions of 2011, in particular – the shift away from explicitly linking democracy with US security has been positive. In conclusion, President Obama made efforts to put the United States' house in order before advocating for democracy in other regions, although this admittedly came with mixed results (Dalacoura, 2012).

Regional stability

The United States has a long history in the Middle East, and from the end of the Cold War, its influence has only increased. The oil fields of the Middle East, as well as other communist-leaning governments, acted as a chessboard between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In the 1990s, the US expanded its military presence in the region in order to keep Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Iran's clerical rule in check.

Washington, on the other hand, was involved and sustained in its efforts to achieve peace between Israel and its Arab neighbours, although this was largely unsuccessful (Byman and Moller, 2016).

With the end of the Cold War and the crumbling of the Soviet Union, another American period started in the Middle East. Shockingly, it started with a fight. After Iraq attacked oil-rich Kuwait toward the beginning of August 1990, the US fought back rapidly by entering an American-driven military union and applying tension on Iraq to pull out. Over seven years after the fact, in December 1998, the US dispatched a four-day besieging effort to debilitate Iraq's capacity to create and utilize weapons of mass destruction and empower it to maintain UN Security Council Resolutions. After the 9/11 terrorist assault in the US and charges that Afghanistan had reinforced the fear-based oppressors who committed the assault, the United States' next huge presence in the district was an attack on Afghanistan. After two years, the United States participated in the most troublesome conflict of the twenty-first century up until now: the attack of Iraq in 2003. The Iraq War did not end US impact or contribution in the Middle East. Instead, the war ushered in a new era of US Middle East foreign policy, with direct military action against ISIL in Iraq and Syria, as well as diplomatic cooperation with Iran and other regional powers (Brands, 2016).

While many blamed the Iraq War on President Bush's neoconservative policies, others hoped that his replacement, Barack Obama, would take an alternative approach to the region. As a presidential candidate Obama announced that the Obama Doctrine would be "as doctrinaire" as the Bush Doctrine, resulting in the controversial principles of unilateralism and prosecutorial immunity. He ran on a platform of "mutual peace" and "shared prosperity" with other countries. He also vowed to put an end to fear-based politics and change the mindset that has swept the United States into countless conflicts and wars around the world (Ackerman, 2008).

Obama started to emphasize the need for a new period of foreign policy against the Middle East and the Muslim world during his early days as President. As part of this goal, the President travelled to Turkey for the first time, one of the most powerful states in the region and a long-time US ally. In a speech to Egyptian representatives and women shortly

after leaving Turkey, President Obama vowed a “New Beginning” in US foreign policy toward the region (Holzman, 2009). Given this divide, it is reasonable to ask if President Obama’s foreign policy is a continuation or a deviation from that of President Bush. Indeed, the more one studies US foreign policy, the more precise and detailed one’s understanding of foreign policy trends and behaviours as they affect change and consistency in the field over time becomes, as the result of the ever changing foreign policy. (Collinson, 2014).

In May 2018 President Donald Trump announced withdrawal from JCPOA, while a few weeks earlier, he had authorized airstrikes against Syrian regime positions in response to a suspected chemical weapons attack on civilians in the Ghouta region near Damascus. Although this might just have been the latest in a long line of chemical weapons attacks (US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley estimated at least 50 previous incidents), it was the first time the US government took such action during the eight-year Syrian conflict. While President Obama proclaimed the use of chemical weapons to be a “red line” that would prompt immediate US intervention in 2012, the US had previously refused to act on this threat, only to do so this time. This strategy hampered any sense of predictability in US foreign policy, as it did in the case of the Iranian nuclear deal, where the US reacted differently to similar incidents over the span of a few months (Quero & Dessì, 2019).

Preventing Iranian Expansion

Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of Islamic republics in Central Asia, the events of September 11, 2001, and the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq have all had a significant impact on the Middle East. These events occurred in the area surrounding Iran, leading to a tightening of the US blockade of the country, which included the establishment of US military bases in Central Asia and the deployment of American fleets in the Gulf region, where Iran is largely isolated from the rest of the world (Habashneh, 2008).

The Iranian nuclear program has been the source of a dispute between Iran and the United States (Farhani and Qamadi, 2016). According to Zoueiri and Suleiman (2018), President Obama took a new approach to

Iran, without giving up the American interests. Furthermore, Castiglioni (2013) proposed that political rather than military means should be used to convince Iran to drop its nuclear program. During Obama's presidency, Nunlist (2016) advocated for keeping open channels of contact and dialogue between the US and its antagonists, such as Iran; this could be achieved by leaving space for negotiation regarding the Iranian nuclear problem.

According to Katzman (2019), the Obama administration's Iran nuclear deal resulted in a convergence between the US and Iran, since it served both the US and Iran's national interest by decreasing the nuclear threat and enhancing economic relationships respectively. According to Abdul Fattah (2014), this agreement would put an end to the ideological war between the two countries, allowing Iran to integrate into the global system. According to Zoueiri and Suleiman (2018), these agreements serve the American interest by removing the Iranian nuclear threat, as it also serves Iran's interests by enhancing its economic relationship with the United States and allowing it to spend previously frozen funds.

Trump grew hostile to Iran during his administration (Badawi 2018) and accused it of being a corrupt dictatorship. Trump realized that confronting Iran and siding with the Gulf States would be beneficial to the United States. Similarly, Katzman (2019) argues that Trump started to challenge Iran by pulling out of the nuclear agreement and placing economic sanctions on the country because of Iran seemed unstoppable in becoming the biggest terrorist supporter in the world, as shown by its funding for the Houthis in Yemen, which it provides with money and weaponry, and its emphasis on expanding the Iranian long-range missile system.

Some remedies, such as tariffs, are prioritized in US foreign policy, while others are addressed to differing degrees. Various governments have debated the degree to which they should pursue cooperation with Iran, whether for limited reasons or to accomplish a significant change in US-Iran relations. President Trump openly encouraged dialogue with Iran's officials, as Secretary of State Pompeo said in his 21 May, 2018 speech, and the administration set detailed conditions for a significant change in US-Iran relations. Many of the requests would have ramifications for Iran's revolution and national security policies, and Iran is unlikely to

comply. A number of potential direct talks between the two countries have fallen apart. President Rouhani reported in December 2018 that the US had demanded negotiations with Iran on eight occasions in 2017 and three times in 2018, and that the US “indirectly” ordered negotiations on three occasions in 2018. Iran, he added, had declined these overtures (Mousavian, 2018).

Rouhani and other Iranian officials have stated that they would not negotiate with the Trump administration until sanctions imposed after Trump’s withdrawal from the JCPOA were lifted. To support US strategy, many governments have threatened to use military action against Iran, either indirectly or directly. Prior to the JCPOA, advocates of unilateral action against Iran said that doing so would set back Iran’s nuclear program (Rogers, 2006).

While the United States remains a significant player in the Middle East due to its alliances and military presence, a discussion of what lies ahead in terms of power transfers should not be unduly centred on the US. This is due to a number of factors. First, with Russia’s intervention in Syria in 2015, the country cemented its position as the most important external actor in the region. Secondly, under President Trump’s leadership, the US withdrew backing from the Syrian opposition and abdicated leadership in May 2017 by violating the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA). These acts bolstered the perception that the US is an untrustworthy, capricious, and rash player in the region (Harrison, 2018).

Maintaining balance of power

The primary objective of the United States as a regional superpower in the Western Hemisphere is to prevent any regional hegemon or hemispheric influence from rising in other areas. The United States has been able to achieve this diplomatic objective by using the offshore balancing grand plan (Mearsheimer, 2001). Preserving international hegemony, retaining peace, helping alliances, maintaining energy supplies, preventing the proliferation of WMD, combating terrorist groups, and, more recently, democracy promotion are some of the aspects that are still essential to the US. The United States has intensified its attempts to gain or sustain world influence since the conclusion of the Cold War. The United States’ main interventions in the Middle East have focused on

bolstering regional dominance as part of a broader effort to rule the globe. The Middle East is viewed as one of the world's most insecure regions for a number of reasons, and the United States considers maintaining stability and prosperity in the Middle East to be one of its highest priorities (Shukri, 2017). The involvement of a large number of players with varying preferences aids the buck-passing strategy (i.e. no direct offensive action against the aggressor). With more players in the game, regional states are less likely to cooperate, making it easier for the US to find a regional power to counter any aggressive state. The United States has favoured buck-passing on two occasions, protecting the US military capability while weakening the military capabilities of adversarial countries, for example. The buck-passing technique can be dangerous at times because the aggressor would be able to interrupt the buck-catcher and gain enough leverage to break the power balance (Mearsheimer, 2001).

According to Michael Beckley (2018), power is conceptualized as a combination of military, economic, and political variables. If no power-politics event, for instance, civil war happens, the hegemon would use a dual-containment strategy to prolong the conflict and prevent the emergence of a victor. One of the best examples for avoiding the drawbacks of buck-passing is the dual-containment strategy used in the Iran-Iraq War. The geographic location of the US is the biggest reason why it has relied on the strategy of buck-passing. Generally, the larger the distance between rival great powers is and the greatest the natural barriers are that divide them, the more likely they will rely on buck-passing to control the rival. Because if the other chooses to attack first, the hegemon would in the front line control the aggressor (Toft, 2005).

Since 2003, both Saudi Arabia and Iran, the major powers of the Gulf region, have been involved in a hegemonic war over power and influence. This rivalry was exacerbated following the 2011 Arab spring and the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia's Western partners, culminating in the July 2015 JCPOA. This process of rapprochement has exacerbated Riyadh's strategic angst stemming from the US abandoning its long-time ally Hosni Mubarak of Egypt amid a parallel process of the international rehabilitation of Iran. Consequently, the US has ended the demonization of Iran under the presidency of Ahmadinejad (Fathollah-Nejad, 2017)

If the buck passing strategy fails, the US has a policy of direct juggling through diplomatic warnings, forming an alliance that opposes the aggressor, or deploying its own economic and armed forces. In specific circumstances, it will consolidate direct shuffling with the buck-passing procedure to keep away from a clear clash with the attacker (Prifti, 2017).

A shift in America's Middle East policy has been long overdue. While massive military participation in the region may have looked like the correct response in the aftermath of the horrific events of September 11, later years have demonstrated that America cannot transform the region by force. Neither the US operations nor significant military deployments have improved the stability of the region or the security of the United States. Instead, American intervention in the Middle East has far too often resulted in the exact opposite. Continued hegemony in the region is unlikely to provide better results in the future. Instead, a more hands-off approach to managing US strategic interests could be more effective. It is past time for the US military to leave the Middle East stage in substantial numbers (Ashford, 2018).

Conclusion

For most of the twentieth century, even well into the twenty-first, the United States has had multinational aspirations and a global footprint. By using diplomatic, economic, and military power to further its national interests, the United States has become a key player in the Middle East. The Middle East has been a focal point of US foreign policy since World War II, after which it has increased in importance due to global, geographical, and political influences. The year 2011 was a turning point in history, influencing US foreign policy in the Middle East. The Arab Spring is a phenomena that has spread across the Middle East. It has challenged the political power of present regimes in many Middle Eastern states in one way or another; it has also dominated internal political debate in countries where the Arab Spring has not gained pace. A quick glance at the changes in the Arab world's political map reveals that the region's political variety has grown dramatically. Until the Arab Spring, the majority of the distinctions between Middle Eastern political systems could be found in the degree to which they were autocratic. However, there are two significant types of states now: authoritarian systems and transitional systems, as well as stable

versus unstable systems (Beck & Huser, 2012). The Iraqi-Syrian border remains one of the most geopolitically volatile places in the Middle East, notwithstanding the fall of the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Various Kurdish entities and parties have progressively affected the dynamics across the northern section of this border in recent years. During the Syrian crisis, the Kurds appeared to be a crucial partner for the US and, even more importantly, a secular bulwark in the fight against the Islamist factions of the anti-Assad opposition. The United States, as is well known, does not officially favour the establishment of a Kurdish state. In reality, however, the US strategy is uncertain and ambiguous. Due to its previous participation in Iraq, where the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) was viewed as a threat to Iraq's unity, Washington was initially hesitant to engage the Syrian Kurds, particularly the PYD/YPG forces. The Obama administration's reluctance to engage on the Kurdish problem largely stemmed from its desire to end the Syrian crisis. As the civil conflict erupted, the US was forced to adopt a firmer stance on the Syrian Kurdish aspirations. As a result, the US has never stated a foreign policy toward the Kurds, who live in four different countries.

The United States' foreign policy toward the Middle East has been ambiguous toward the dominant international powers for the past four decades. Rather than stabilize the region, the US foreign policy has created a mechanism that allows the US to remain an intrusive external force. As a result, the US military and diplomatic activity in the area has worked against both its own national interests and a stable international power balance. The United States' constructive interaction with Iran has shown that a pragmatic approach to dispute resolution without partisan attachment is not only possible, although it may also signal a shift in US foreign policy in the region. A break from permanent attachment to or estrangement from respective countries in the region, according to Paul Pillar, may allow an offshore balancing strategy (Prifti, 2005). Using US leverage to stifle ethnic ambitions and progress is akin to pitting one side against the other in a competition. A more realistic US foreign policy, one that manages to change the balance from afar rather than defend its own interests in regional crises, could well drive the country toward a power-balanced arrangement (Kaussler & Hastedt, 2017).

Preserving international hegemony, retaining peace, helping alliances, maintaining energy supplies, combating terrorist groups, and, more recently, democracy promotion are some of the aspects that are still essential to the US. This research concludes that three out of four investigated factor – combating terrorism, regional stability, preventing Iranian expansion and maintaining balance of power – have changed post-2011. While the United States remains a significant player in the Middle East due to its alliances and military presence, a discussion of what lies ahead in terms of power transfers should not be unduly centred on the US. This is due to a number of factors. First, with Russia's intervention in Syria in 2015, the country has cemented its position as a relevant external actor in the region. Secondly, under President Donald Trump's leadership, the US withdrew backing from the Syrian opposition and abdicated leadership in May 2017 by violating the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA). These acts bolstered the perception that the US is an untrustworthy actor in the region (Harrison, 2018).

It's only fair to acknowledge that the invasions and subsequent occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq occupied most of the United States' attention and resources in the decade following 9/11. These battles were more about counterinsurgency than counterterrorism, and there was little appetite or funding for a strong global soft power campaign to combat extremism. The Arab Spring of 2011 presented another window of opportunity for the US to capitalize on public movements in a more meaningful way. But, once again, a political-military view on the stability and danger concerns arising from individual nations, particularly Libya and Syria, affected us. Extremist groups, on the other hand, took advantage of chances created by the movement in formerly autocratic regimes. They sparked divides and made inroads into the consequent sects (London,2020).

The United States has intensified its attempts to gain or sustain world influence since the conclusion of the Cold War. The United States' main interventions in the Middle East have focused on bolstering regional dominance as part of a broader effort to rule the globe. The Middle East is viewed as one of the world's most insecure regions for a number of reasons. The United States considers maintaining stability and prosperity in the Middle East to be one of their highest priorities. Combating terrorist groups in the Middle East has been one of the

most critical foundations of US strategy in the twenty-first century, especially since September 11, when as a result of the terrorist attack, the Bush administration announced a “global war on terror” (Shukri, 2017).

Hence, the findings of the study illustrate that terrorism, civil wars, and instability in the Middle East have had a significant influence on the United States’ economic, national security, and diplomatic interests in the region. Maintaining strong ties with allies and comprehending the nature of conflicts are critical to attaining US foreign policy objectives in the Middle East.

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Endnotes

- 1 Based on the geographic boundaries, the Middle East is also known as the Near East or Southwest Asia. In academia, the Middle East refers to the Arab states of Asia, the Arab states of North Africa, Israel, and the non-Arab states of Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey (see Figure 1) (Surratt, 2000).

