

PULASKI REPORT

"The Dragon's Shadow - China's rising assertiveness on the global stage"

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of China is one of the most significant phenomena in the international politics. China during 30 years was able to develop economically and politically to such an extent that can be capable to challenge the hegemony of the United States in the foreseeable future. Currently, the world is observing a competition between these two countries, which is becoming more and more tense.

China has been growing its potential in influencing foreign and security policy with Beijing becoming more and more assertive in the region and beyond leaving the famous Deng Xiaoping dictum that "hide ambitions and disguise your claws". For many years China has also been increasing its presence in Europe and the CEE region through infrastructure investments and other projects aimed at achieving strategic aims of China.

The following report intends to trace the rising assertiveness of China on the global stage and present the main drivers behind it as well as the potential repercussion for the region and the world.

The reports aims to:

1. Identify the main area of China's rising assertiveness
2. Describe the drivers behind it
3. Analyse the potential outcome of such policy
4. Draft recommendations of this policy for Poland and the EU

The reports consist of five chapters:

1. China's rising position on the global stage and in the international organisations

2. The United States-China relations. Cold war 2.0?
3. A new global technological hegemon? China's quest for technological dominance
4. The rising Chinese assertiveness in relations with neighbours on the South China Sea
5. Chinese activity and propaganda in the CEE

The first chapters presents how the Chinese rising position is used to increase Beijing position in the international organisations. The role of China in the United Nations is analysed with the watershed moment of COVID-19. In addition the American actions to counter its influence are considered. The chapter also examines China's use of multilateral formats such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS and other led multilateral formats.

In the second chapter, the author tries to answer the question if the relations between the United States and China could be presented as the second Cold War by analysing and comparing the policy of Donald Trump's and Joe Biden's administration. Furthermore, the area of strategic competition are indicated and analysed. Finally, the author tries to present the consequences of this rivalry for the CEE region.

The third part of the report attempts to answer if China is the new technological hegemon of the world. The author describes and analyses the main strategies of China in the technological dimension, and presents the strong and weak points of Chinese technological development. Furthermore, the main area of technological competition with the United States are presented as well as the Washington activities aimed at

stopping China from achieving domination in the technological sphere.

One of the aspects of China's rising assertiveness is its growing position in the region and rising tensions with the neighbours in the South China Sea. In the fourth chapter, the authors presents the main disputes in this region, the Chinese approach to the neighbours with the main aims of Beijing policy, the historic roots of Chinese expansion and legal and coercive actions of Beijing. In the last part of the chapter authors presents the United States and its allies reaction on the Chinese actions.

The domination in the infosphere has become crucial in the current networked world and has also been pursued by China. Therefore the last chapter is devoted to Chinese propaganda in Central Eastern Europe with the description, main aims and historic roots of building Chinese influence in the region. Furthermore, the main tools of Chinese propaganda are numerated with particular case studies such as Huawei spy scandal and COVID-19. The last part of this chapter raises the issue of the tools, which should be employed to fight the Chinese propaganda in the region.

China's rising assertiveness on the global stage is clear and encompasses many fields such as increasing regional disputes around South China Sea, international organisations and the technological dimension. It is also covered with a robust propaganda machine, which helps in realising Chinese interests. Therefore the claims about the second cold war between China and the United States are not exaggerated and Europe and the CEE region need to be aware of this situation and stop treating China as a neutral, friendly country but rather as a competitor, which

tends to destabilise the democratic system. It is also a challenge for Polish authorities, which need to be more aware of the Chinese influence in the region and also have a cohesive policy toward this country.

1



China's rising position on the global stage and in international organisations

Dominik Mierzejewski & Przemysław Ciborek

1.1. Introduction

As China continues to grow as a global power, the need to better understand China's policies and practices on bilateral and multilateral levels is becoming increasingly important. Currently, in light of growing tensions between China and the United States as well as the West, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the centralisation of power in China, and the Russian war in Ukraine, it is essential to identify China's approaches in the United Nations concerning the country's promotion of its own initiatives. The paper argues that since the end of the Cold War, the Chinese government has participated and formed new multilateral bodies to reshape the existing world order with the ultimate goal of reshaping the United Nations – understood as a symbol of the West-led order based on legal provisions. In mid-1990s. together with Russia and five Central Asian states, China formed the

Shanghai Cooperation Organization, then in 2009, during the world financial crisis, the format of BRICS was formed in Saint Petersburg. Apart from participating in co-sponsored organisations, Beijing formed asymmetrical bodies with Africa, Southeast Asia, Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America. Cooperation with authoritarian regimes via multilateral platforms initially allowed China to promote its informal principles. In order to discuss the evolution of China's place in the international system, the paper is structured as follows: the first part discusses Beijing's policies in the United Nations before the COVID-19 pandemic, then it touches on the importance of China's co-sponsored multilateral organisations and China-led multilateralism, and the third part introduces the Chinese global initiatives during the pandemic with particular regard to Sino-US confrontations in the United Nations.

1.2 China's position in the United Nations before the COVID-19 pandemic

Ever since the People's Republic of China was identified as a United Nations member in 1971, the government in Beijing consequently built its position as part of global governance. In the very beginning, Chinese diplomacy took passive policies in international organisations. However, along with its economic might, especially under Xi Jinping, China has become more assertive and promoted its roles and principles. The promotion of China's values and alternatives to the current world order is mainly transmitted through two channels: first, with the existing international organisations like the United Nations, and second by promoting cooperation within different organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS or China-led multilateral formats like Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, or China–the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States formats.

What should not be surprising is that, as the second largest economy, China uses growing influence in the UN to create an external international environment to secure and advance its core economic and security interests. The primary concern of the Chinese government is its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The concept of sovereignty is deeply embedded in China's strategic thinking. As the Chinese narrative illustrates, the years of humiliation by the Western powers in the 19th century remain a vital memory in China's external actions. Since 1953, China has consequently repeated the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's political internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. As the principles of sovereignty contradict self-

determination and humanitarian intervention promoted by the Western countries, China uses the international organisation to secure its own territorial integrity by promoting its own principles.ⁱ China contributes to development programmes to gain more support and uses it „as a relatively low-cost opportunity to blunt criticisms of its policies and build support for its initiatives“.ⁱⁱ

Along with the growing financial contribution from a total of USD 12 million to the UN regular budget in 2000 (1 per cent of the total) to USD 367.9 million in 2019 (12 per cent of the total), China presented a willingness to approve sanctions against countries with which China has strategic or economic interests. Apart from this, in 2016, on the pledge by the Chinese government, the United Nations established the United Nations Peace and Development Trust Fund with a Chinese contribution of \$200 million to the United Nations over ten years.ⁱⁱⁱ Moreover, China has dispatched more than 40,000 peacekeepers to over 30 missions, contributing more peacekeepers than any other permanent member of the Security Council.^{iv} Apart from contributing to UN peacekeeping, China ranks number one in funding for operational activities for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). It shows China's preferences for promoting China's solutions based on the developmental rights of the second and third generations and gaining more influence and control in the UN agencies in charge of technological development (see Table no 1).

The contributions of China to the United Nations were illustrated by a self-pricing document issued

Table No. 1. UN entities in receipt of funding for operational activities where China ranks among the top ten contributors (2020)

	Total contribution (US\$ million)	Voluntary contributions (US\$ million)	Share of total entity income (%)	Share of voluntary contributions (government donors only) (%)	China's rank
UNESCO	34.8	5.5	9.9	3.4	1
UNIDO	26.7	9.3	16.6	12.2	1
WMO	2.0	0.3	11.2	8.4	2
ILO	41.9	0.5	8.2	0.3	3
ESCAP	1.7	1.7	7.5	7.5	3
FAO	57.1	9.6	3.9	1.7	4
WHO	55.2	19.0	3.5	1.5	6
ITC	0.8	0.8	2.4	2.4	6
IFAD	25.7	25.7	6.9	6.9	6
UN DESA	4.0	4.0	5.1	5.1	8
UNCTAD	1.0	1.0	3.3	3.3	9

Source: Max Otto Baumann, Sebastian Haug, Silke Weinlich, China's Expanding engagement with the United Nations Development Pillar, November 2022, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/19692.pdf>

by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Position Paper on China's Cooperation with the United Nations," released in October 2021. Beijing highlights its pursuit of win-win cooperation, the utilisation of dialogue and consultation, and its commitment to non-interference and opposition to the arbitrary use of force in international matters. Moreover, the document positions China as a peace broker, including the Korean Peninsula nuclear problem, the Iranian nuclear issue, and conflicts in Afghanistan, Myanmar, Palestine, Israel, Syria, Libya, Sudan, and South Sudan. Apart from this, Chinese diplomacy praised China's role in global arms control, disarmament, and contributions to various conventions and strategies, such as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. Apart from security dimensions, the Chinese side promoted the country's active role in „genuine multilateralism“, poverty alleviation,

developmental strategies, affordable health care and human rights agenda.^v

Chinese diplomats actively forge informal networks within the United Nations to promote the above-introduced principles and solutions. As argued by Courtney Fung, Chinese influences are mainly delivered through funding for UN departments, programmes, and initiatives; staffing of executive-level personnel positions; voting in the UN General Assembly and UN Security Council; and the use of PRC-specific discourse and language in UN-generated documents.^{vi} Apart from the abovementioned forms for building China's position, its relational approach was crucial. In China's conflict-averse political culture, consensus predominates, but meanwhile, the search for personal security generates ceaseless counter-mobilisation of informal networks. This need for hierarchy is an informal norm cemented

by patron-client relationships within the leadership and activated by a fear outside it: hierarchy means order.^{vii} While such a system, known as *guanxi*, is practised to promote harmony and cohesion in elite politics, it often becomes a liability during conflict and crisis.^{viii} The Chinese approach is based on the concept of *guanxi* (informal relations), which is, according to Kavalski and Cho, “non-ideological, pragmatic, and experimental.” *Guanxi* is an informal norm of social ties that regulates and facilitates privileged access to personalised exchange at both dyadic and network levels. Instead of adhering to a linear cause-and-effect process, the operational dynamics of normative power within China are determined by its social logic. This viewpoint emphasises the absence of fixed principles and highlights the importance of negotiability in all policies. The emphasis on interactions implies that the definitions of “normal” are subject to negotiation among the actors involved. In essence, these interactions suggest that normative powers must possess the ability to coexist with and navigate ambiguity, as the emergence of normative agency occurs within a community rather than in isolation.^{ix}

This informal approach is embodied in two concepts of China's diplomacy: head-of-state diplomacy (*yuanshou waijiao*) and people-to-people relations (*renjian guanxi*) – as discussed previously. The first approach was introduced when Xi Jinping took power in 2012. It means a top-down foreign policy's design with the critical role of the relationship between the head-of-states. This approach was executed through personal relations of Xi Jinping with global leaders, e.g. with Vladimir Putin, Cyril Ramaphosa from South Africa or Hun Sun from Cambodia.^x Under the current leader, China has been actively reinvigorating the CCP's United Front Work Department. The department supervises the 'people-to-people'

diplomacy – *guanxi* system, which runs activities through 'friendship' associations and whose various exchanges are aimed at exerting political influence overseas under the auspices of the CCP.^{xi} The UN General Assembly, World Health Organization and Human Rights Council (HRC) are no exception. We must acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly contributed to China's global activities. First, China was supported by dozens of developing countries and positioned itself as the leader of the Global South community. At the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, Cuba made a joint statement to support China for developing its pattern of human rights that fits its conditions and oppose other countries' interference in China's internal affairs under the “banner of human rights”.^{xii}

What should be noted is that the informal networks contradict the legal structures of the international order but, on the other hand, secure China's position among the developing countries. Building the coalition with developing countries that are less familiar with the role of law in the United Nations allows China to secure its domestic political structure and influence the Global South's leaders' mindset. In this regard, Chinese diplomats use the G77 group within the United Nations and promote the parallel world order by participating in non-West-led groups like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or BRICS. Building its position in the United Nations, China has mobilised support for its priorities within the UN by strategically positioning itself as a champion of developing states and building substantial influence within the G77, which constitutes 70 per cent of UN member states.^{xiii} This forum allows China to transmit its current position and promote its principles and values. In December 2022, during the meeting with G77, Wang Yi – the State Councillor and Minister of Foreign Affairs, introduced the principles

for cooperation among developing countries: keep development as a priority in international cooperation, promote more inclusive, balanced and sustainable economic recovery, promote just and equitable global economic governance, and forge global synergy for achieving modernisation at a faster pace.^{xiv}

1.3. Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS and China-led multilateral formats

In order to escape and manage the possible rising tensions among rising powers and extend its influence, Chinese diplomacy actively promoted the multilateral formats among the rising powers with the leading examples of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS as well as China-led multilateralism.

The discussion over China's multilateral practices has been concentrated predominantly on China-led multilateralism. According to Sun Xuefeng of Qinghua University, China's multilateralism is mainly driven by four factors: integration, co-governance, guidance, and dominance, while Ian Johnston observed that China established its multilateral position as a result of social learning.^{xv} As Li Minjiang argues, Beijing believes its participation in multilateralism could help diminish the "China threat" theory and build a "responsible power" image. For many scholars, including John Ikenberry and Daren Lim, Chinese multilateral initiatives aim to counter the United States. Another feature of China's multilateral endeavours is the country's factual focus on bilateral policy-making.^{xvi} Marina Rudyak recognised China's policies as 'multi-bilateralism' with embedded connotations of relationality and reciprocity, including summit diplomacy, as a tool to build relational power.^{xvii} Accordingly, Jakub Jakóbowski emphasised that the agenda-setting

process of the Chinese multilateral platforms was very China-centric, making it nominally multilateral but effectively bilateral and, as such, could be considered a form of 'qualitative bilateralism.'^{xviii} Recently, Mierzejewski, Kowalski and Jura concluded that China-led multilateral practices are mainly taken from the domestic governance model to maintain Beijing's central position. In this context, the informal networks, as argued in the paper, lead to the conclusion that the relational nature of China-led multilateralism is the core of navigating China's international politics.^{xix}

1.3.1. Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The first multilateral format co-initiated by the People's Republic of China was the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Chinese



Shanghai Cooperation Organization 2018 Summit in Qingdao, Shandong
Source: China By Press Secretary of the President of the Russian Federation. CC BY 3.0

diplomacy, under the pretext of combating the "three evil forces" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism identified in Central Asia, posing a threat to the Xinjiang autonomous region in the western part, initiated the formation of the SCO.^{xx} The PRC's initiation of the SCO through the "Shanghai Five" marked a breakthrough in China's approach to multilateralism, as it was the first and only multilateral institution entirely financially supported by China. China took the initiative in proposing the gradual institutionalisation of

the organisation and providing vital financial support for developing a new type of international cooperation orientation aimed at organising economic and security cooperation. Despite the growing risk of supporting unstable authoritarian regimes in the region, the initiation of this organisation can be considered a successful example of the development of Chinese soft power in Central Asia.^{xxi}

The process of forming what would become the future SCO began shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. China recognised the potential for cooperation with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to maintain security along its western border and promote the development of China's western provinces, particularly diversifying Chinese renewable resource imports. The SCO emerged as a further development of cooperation within the "Shanghai Five" initiated in 1996 (China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan). With the addition of the sixth permanent member, Uzbekistan, the SCO was officially established on June 15, 2001. Afghanistan, India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan became observers of the organisation, and since 2017, India and Pakistan have become full members. Despite Russia's dominant regional power in Central Asia, China, the USA, and the EU offer a tangible alternative for economic development to selected members of the Commonwealth of Independent States. For the People's Republic of China, the SCO balances the influence of powers in its neighbourhood. The development of cooperation within the SCO also provides China with access to resources and, in the context of domestic policy, acts as a security element stabilising the tense situation in its western provinces, primarily Xinjiang.^{xxii} The establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was a response to the need to ensure stability and security along China's

northwest border, as terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism were characterised as new threats to national security. Effective combat against these challenges became possible only with international cooperation. These factors were identified as a threat to China's national security and also posed a threat to other countries in Central Asia and Russia.

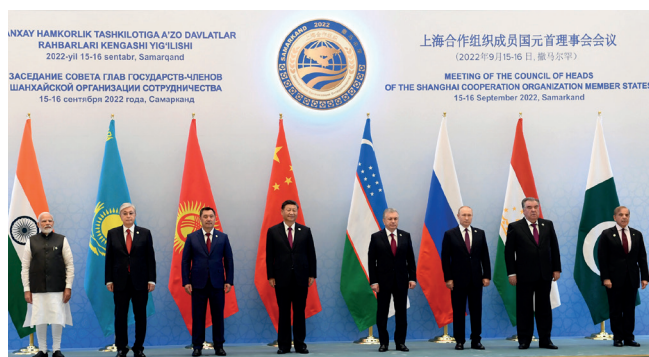
Faced with a common challenge, a real need for international cooperation arose. In response to the threats above, on June 15, 2001, the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism was signed, creating a global definition of terrorism, separatism, and extremism and proposing cooperation to combat these "three threats."^{xxiii} In June 2002, during the SCO summit in St. Petersburg, an agreement was signed among the member states on regional anti-terrorism agencies, while in October 2002, China and Kyrgyzstan conducted their first bilateral joint military anti-terrorism exercises under the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.^{xxiv} Within the SCO framework, China aimed to diversify its energy import sources, which held strategic importance as China continued to rely more on oil imports. Moreover, the economic structure of the four Central Asian countries did not differ significantly from that of Western China, a priority of China's domestic policy. In this context, the SCO provides China with a mechanism to achieve the aforementioned national security and economic benefits and offers Beijing a platform to implement a new security concept and present China as a responsible power – at least in the Central Asia region.

China also promised to expand its economic and trade ties through the 2013 Belt and Road Initiative to back up new initiatives. In theory, this would bring connectivity, infrastructure, and investment cooperation. It is important to note

that all of the above eventually happens in the pipeline. China is already the most significant trade partner for most Central Asia countries, and China's natural gas needs are boosting significant projects such as pipelines, highways and railways.^{xxv} With this regard, new, exclusive engagements with Central Asian countries, outside other multilateral formats such as SCO, are to secure Beijing's national interests at the expense of Beijing's ally – Moscow. Regarding cooperation within SCO, the China-Central Asia Summit held on May 2023 was a significant event regarding the direction of China's international strategy on the eve of growing tensions with the U.S. and diminishing Russian influence in the region. The Summit showcased China's growing interests in Central Asia, once Russia's exclusive influence zone. Beijing's ambitions were supported by promoting its vision of a "China-Central Asian community with a shared future", carrying mutual respect, benefit, security and friendship.^{xxvi}

Nevertheless, in the context of the future of the United Nations, the discussion with the SCO has been a longstanding part of the organisation's activities. On the Declaration on Establishment of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, adopted on 15th of June 2001, member states "reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening the central role of the UN in maintaining international peace and security, developing cooperation among states

and coordinating global governance. However, the issue of reforming the UN was not mentioned in the official document until 2005. It was first presented in the Declaration by the Heads of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, concluded in Astana on July 5, 2005. In the declaration, "The heads of state argue in support of rational and necessary reforms of the United Nations aimed at increased efficiency and credibility of the organisation. It has been confirmed that, importantly, such reforms should be based on seeking the broadest possible consensus, and no deadline should be set for them, nor should a vote be forced on any project over which there are major differences."^{xxvii} Similar rhetoric has been used up until 2017's Astana Summit of SCO. The member states reaffirmed their commitment to the goals and principles enshrined in the UN Charter. They supported efforts to improve the UN's authority and efficiency by reforming its main bodies – especially the Security Council – following its Charter.^{xxviii} Member states emphasised that any reform should be carried out through extensive consultations among all Member States to reach a broad consensus. This was a significant shift to promote the voice of the developing countries within the UN.^{xxix} It was at a time when the growing tensions between Beijing and Washington started to harm China's economic and diplomatic efforts due to Trump's policy towards China. Beijing extensively started to look for a partnership with like-minded countries within the Global South. In the Moscow Declaration in 2020, member states noted that "The politicisation of world economic ties and a lack of significant progress in reforming the existing international financial institutions, as well as the global political and socioeconomic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic involve serious risks for the sustained development of the world economy."^{xxx} The following statement in the document's introduction expressed the growing



22nd Meeting of the Council of the Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Source: By India Press Information Bureau. Government Open Data License - India

SCO member states' disappointment in the current status of world affairs, indicating further efforts to reform the world's most important international policy bodies, including the UN. In 2021, on the 20th anniversary of SCO, UN representatives and SCO's Heads of State signed the document "Cooperation between the United Nations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization". The document admitted that SCO is committed to acting consistently with the goals and principles of the United Nations and is ready to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Policy alignment between SCO and the UN could indicate that China is somewhat satisfied with international affairs. However, like in every other case, understanding the "basic terms", such as human rights, differs from West to East, leaving China able to attract different countries with its understanding, rhetoric and narratives.^{xxxix}

1.3.2. BRICS

BRICS is the second significant body influencing the international arena with a more global orientation. The formation of the BRICS group, comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, marked a significant multilateral initiative led by the People's Republic of China. Within the context of global economic dynamics and the desire for increased representation of emerging economies on the international stage, the BRICS partnership was established as a platform for these countries to collaborate on economic, political, and developmental matters.^{xxxix} China's role within the BRICS framework has been pivotal, driven by its growing economic influence and diplomatic capabilities. The establishment of BRICS in 2009 demonstrated China's commitment to fostering cooperation among emerging economies and reshaping the international order more inclusively. China's willingness to lead in BRICS was evident in its substantial financial commitments and

efforts to promote shared objectives.^{xxxix} China's diplomatic strategy within BRICS has focused on enhancing economic ties and facilitating mutual growth on a so-called "win-win basis". It leveraged its economic readiness to encourage intra-BRICS trade, investments, and infrastructure development. This approach aligned with China's broader economic strategy, including its Belt and Road Initiative, which sought to enhance connectivity and cooperation along historical trade routes.^{xxxix} The BRICS New Development Bank (NDB), established with China's active involvement, exemplified China's determination to create alternative financial institutions that better represented the interests of emerging economies. By contributing substantial capital to the NDB, China aimed to counterbalance established global financial institutions and promote infrastructure and sustainable development projects among BRICS nations.^{xxxix} Furthermore, China's engagement in BRICS strengthened its diplomatic influence and built coalitions on global issues, incorporating China's diplomatic rhetoric on the global stage. BRICS group collective voice on topics such as reforming international financial institutions, addressing climate change, and advocating for a multipolar world order demonstrated China's adherence to its understanding of multilateralism and its aspirations to shape global governance.^{xxxix} The BRICS platform serves Chinese diplomacy as an incubator for its soft power capabilities and promotion of an informal-led international regime. Through cultural exchanges, educational initiatives, and people-to-people connections, China is trying to attract a broader audience, showcasing its commitment to a "harmonious and mutually beneficial relationship".^{xxxix} It also serves as a platform for expanding China's Global Initiatives (GSI, GDI, GCI). Such an approach attracts other countries' interest, as Afghanistan, Algeria, Argentina, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan,

Nicaragua, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates expressed their willingness to join the bloc.^{xxxviii} The list of interested countries is close to 40, showcasing China's growing coalition-building capabilities aligned with the Global South's dissatisfaction with existing global governance.

The growing number of participants allows the Chinese government to stimulate more global debate on the United Nations system. As revealed from the documents, this subject has been a crucial part of BRICS discussions for many years. Member states adopted The Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership during the 7th BRICS Summit on July 9, 2015. The strategy emphasises the importance of cooperation of the member states within the United Nations. Areas of cooperation mentioned in the document encompass peace, security and development, considering the particular member states' national interests, priorities,



New Development Bank (BRICS Bank) headquarters in Shanghai, China
Source: By Donnie28. CC BY-SA 4.0



2023 BRICS Summit - with Sergei Lavrov in place of Vladimir Putin
Source: By Government of India. Government Open Data License - India

growth and development strategies.^{xxxix} Within the Johannesburg Declaration adopted at the 10th BRICS Summit on July 27, 2018, member-state countries expressed their determination to strengthen multilateralism and the rule of law in international relations. Additionally, BRICS countries stated they would be committed to "promote fair, just, equitable, democratic and representative international order". Therefore,

the declaration urged a complex reform of the UN Security Council and other multilateral institutions to make them more responsive to the current global situation.^{xl} Finally, in the BRICS Joint Statement on Strengthening and Reforming the Multilateral System issued on 1 June 2021, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa reaffirmed the central role of the United Nations and adherence to the UN Charter. However, member states called for comprehensive reform of the UN, including the Security Council, to increase the representation of developing countries and to reflect the contemporary geopolitical realities.^{xli} The gradual increase in claims against the UN in the BRICS forum towards reforms increased parallelly with the economic growth of member states, and in particular with the growth of China, as Beijing became visibly more assertive in the international

arena. Additionally, we could observe the growing number of attempts for reforms while the relations between China and the U.S. were deteriorating under Trump's administration.

1.3.3. China-led multilateralism with Africa and South America

Besides being involved in SCO and BRICS, China executed its dominant position through China-led multilateralism with less developed countries: Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, China-ASEAN, China-Central and Eastern Europe and China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States Forum. As revealed from the quantitative analysis of China's narratives introduced in the forums mentioned above (both the Chinese leaders' speeches and joint documents), the political direction gained priority in the relations with Southeast Asian and South American countries. At the same time, the economy became the primary subject within the relations with Africa and Central Europe. China's solutions, e.g., poverty alleviation, were highly promoted in the relations with Africa. However, regarding the United Nations and China's building influence in the current international system, African and South American governments were selected as the most influential in gaining support for China's

interests in the United Nations and global affairs. Contrary to FOCAC and China-CELAC Forums, the regional direction was prescribed for ASEAN, while Central and Eastern Europe remained mainly at the bilateral level (see Table No. 2).

The first approach to purely China-led multilateralism was made with Africa as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). A multilateral cooperation mechanism was established in 2000 between the People's Republic of China and all the states from the African continent apart from the Kingdom of Eswatini.^{xliii} According to official sources, FOCAC was established as a "platform for collective dialogue and an effective mechanism for enhancing practical cooperation between China and African countries."^{xliii} To a certain degree, the Chinese authorities used the past and the revolutionary years and China's assistance, e.g. building the TAZARA railway, as "important base components of this official lineage African elites, in turn, appreciate the respect and lavish treatment granted by their Chinese counterparts".^{xliv} During and after the Cold War, the relations with Africa and other developing countries served China to promote the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and other domestic informal principles that are informal by nature and not legally

Table No. 2. The central themes of China's narratives in China-led multilateral platforms

	CEE	FOCAC	ASEAN	CELAC
HISTORY	3,2	9,8	4,1	2,9
ECONOMY	137,5	109,9	47,3	60,5
POLITICS	108,5	79,0	88,6	79,0
CHINA MODEL	32,7	80,6	33,4	40,0

Source: own estimation based on quantitative analysis of 87 documents (the Chinese leaders' speeches and the joint statement issued after the summits of FOCAC, China-ASEAN, China-Central and Eastern Europe and China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States Forum with the application of Provalis Research CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software) Wordstat software: tabulate: total frequency, with data, display rate keywords per document, sort by case occurrences. Abbreviation: CEE- Central and Eastern Europe, FOCAC – Forum of China-Africa Cooperation, ASEAN the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and CELAC Community of Latin American and Caribbean States.



FOCAC 2018 Summit Source: By Présidence de la République du Bénin. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

binding. The Chinese government has taken the same approach since Xi Jinping took power but created more towards the future goals and victor narrative rather than being part of the victimised Global South.

The asymmetrical relations with Africa allow China to promote Xi's vision and principles, for example, the community of shared future and cooperation into a new era.^{xlv} As argued by Julia Straus, the Chinese leaders recognised the limits of the old rhetoric and, in FOCAC official speeches and documents, incorporated new concepts of "complementarity, the international division of labour between China and Africa, and the positive effects of globalisation for both".^{xlvi} From the second critical angle, establishing FOCAC provided a platform for showing mutual respect by Chinese and African leaders and "Beijing's way of "giving face" to African governments".^{xlvii} This informal nature of the relationship allows Beijing to secure markets for China's products, secure its energy needs, and

translate its norms into the global arena. Since FOCAC was created, the Chinese government has tried to convince the member states of its positive intentions and urged all parties to participate in China's ambitious plans to reshape the global order. The relations became less ideological and more commercial before 2012. Since 2017, the 19th Party Congress, along with China's foreign policy participation, China recognised that the relations between political parties are more effective, so party-to-party dialogue became more critical than government-to-government relations. The party channel allows China to promote its solutions and deepen experience sharing and mutual learning on state governance through the China-Africa Political Parties Theoretical Seminar.^{xlviii} As the Chinese side recognised the African agency embodied in Agenda 2063¹ and the continent's ambitions for industrialisation, it has frequently been referenced in Chinese official discourse since its inception in 2015.^{xlix}

1 According to the Africa Union Agenda 2063 is Africa's blueprint and plan for transforming Africa into the global powerhouse of the future. The continent's strategic framework aims to deliver on its goal for inclusive and sustainable development and is a concrete manifestation of the pan-African drive for unity, self-determination, freedom, progress and collective prosperity pursued under Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance. For more about the Agenda, see Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, January 2015, <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview>

The question of cooperation within the United Nations SDG was also expressed in the context of poverty alleviation and COVID-19 assistance. In 2018, Africa expressed gratitude for China's help: "The African side applauds China's efforts in helping African countries reduce poverty" (FOCAC Action Plan 2018).ⁱ Followed by this the African side also acknowledged this, which "applauds China's great victory in completing the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects and eradicating extreme poverty in rural areas by 2020, ten years before the UN SDGs" and obviously, the Chinese efforts met a positive reception from African countries: "The African side commends China for taking the lead to provide Africa with anti-COVID-19 supplies and vaccines, starting ahead of schedule the construction of the Africa CDC headquarters, and sending medical expert teams to share experience in fighting the disease."ⁱⁱ

Since the 1990s, the economic and political relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) and the Latin American and Caribbean countries have intensified. China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States Forum was established in 2014 and covers China's cooperation with the Latin American and Caribbean regions. It focuses on various fields such as politics, economy, trade, culture, education, science and technology and social development. The mechanism has three levels of institutional arrangements: the ministerial meeting, the senior officials meeting and the coordination meeting. The ministerial meeting is the highest decision-making body of the mechanism and is held every three years. The senior officials meeting is

responsible for implementing the decisions of the ministerial meeting and is held annually.ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly to FOCAC, the Chinese authorities have promoted successful experiences. This cooperation is based on promoting China's successful experience and looking to limit the American presence in the region. For example, the exchange of experiences and cooperation in poverty eradication is supposed to be facilitated by the agreement to hold an annual Poverty Reduction and Development Forum.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Apart from promoting China's model and economic cooperation, Beijing created a 'sphere of influence' in the traditional 'backyard' of the United States. As the United States pivoted to Asia, the Chinese government tried to balance American influences.^{lv} Sophie Wintgens analyses that Beijing relies on strengthening political dialogue to promote its interests at the regional level and on deploying extensive public diplomacy to reassure its partners at the bilateral level.^{lv}

In the context of reforming the United Nations, Latin America's prescribed role differs from Africa. From the very beginning of 2015, the question of the United Nations was absent in the Beijing Declaration, while the Cooperation Plan was mentioned twice.^{lvi} The situation has changed during the pandemic. Apart from developmental issues embodied in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. China and the leaders of Latin America agreed to promote and implement the Security Council's Resolution 1373² and cooperate to facilitate the implementation of the United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1540³ (2004).^{lvii} In 2021, both sides agreed to implement the United

2 Adopted September 28, 2001. This resolution placed barriers on the movement, organisation and fund-raising activities of terrorist groups and imposed legislative, policy and reporting requirements on member states to assist the global struggle against terrorism. It also established a Counter-Terrorism Committee to monitor state compliance with these provisions. "S/RES/1373. Resolution 1373 (2001)", United Nations, September 28, 2001, https://www.unodc.org/pdf/crime/terrorism/res_1373_english.pdf

3 Adopted April 28, 2004. This resolution affirmed that proliferation of nuclear weapons as well as the means of delivery constitutes a threat to international peace and security. "S/RES/1540. Resolution 1540 (2004)", United Nations, April 28, 2004, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/520326/files/S_RES_1540%282004%29-EN.pdf?ln=en

Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Kyoto Protocol, and the Paris Agreement. But this implementation was conditional: upon differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities according to different national circumstances and the institutional arrangements for nationally determined contributions (NDC).^{lviii} The most vocal government regarding China's initiatives is Cuba. As dictated by the strategic partnership with China, Cuba is committed to working with China to safeguard the international system within the United Nations and to support China's initiatives within the G77 and other mechanisms such as the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as the China-CELAC Forum to promote development, and jointly achieve the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Moreover, in November 2022, Cuba supported China's Global Development Initiative and is ready to further enhance "strategic docking" with China by being prepared to promote the implementation of this initiative.^{lix}

It is essential to acknowledge that both SCO and BRICS and China-led multilateral platforms, in a broad sense, have most of the common goals and narratives nearly identical to those included in the UN Charter. Both multilateral groupings with strong China influence are to maintain international peace and security, respect sovereignty and territorial integrity, promote multilateralism and dialogue, enhance economic and social development, and address global challenges such as terrorism, climate change, and pandemics.^{lx} However, there are some essential differences, although for now, BRICS and SCO are aligned to supplement the UN's activities. Both BRICS and SCO are focused on regional issues and interests, making them more exclusive, unlike the UN Charter; decision-making is more informal and flexible within SCO and BRICS.^{lxi} Informal and personal ties play a significant role

in Chinese-led multilateral groupings, contrary to the UN's formality and institutionalised structures and procedures.



CELAC 2016 Summit Source: By Casa Rosada (Argentina Presidency of the Nation). CC BY 2.5 AR

1.4. Gaining Influence in the UN: China's Global Initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic

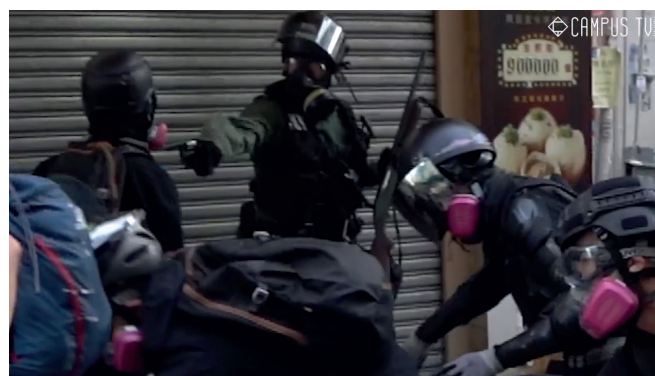
As China established its position within newly formed multilateral structures of SCO, BRICS, FOCAC, and China-CELAC formats, the next step was strengthening its position in the United Nations. As revealed from the Chinese diplomatic activities in the United Nations, China utilised the pandemic to promote its achievements in curbing the virus and looking for support in its global initiatives. Based on the resolutions co-sponsored and sponsored by China, it can be observed that the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced China's perception as a superior model compared to that of the West. Nevertheless, it can be seen that China carefully crafted the content of these resolutions. For example, the Human Rights Universal Group database analysis shows that the major themes of Chinese resolutions shifted during the first two years of the pandemic. In 2020, the focus was on health, medicines, research and development, and developing countries, while in 2021, sustainable development and capacity building took an essential part of China's narratives. In 2022, the focus shifted to social and cultural

rights, addressing inequalities, and mitigating the negative consequences of the pandemic. In this context, China used the turbulences created by the global virus to introduce its concepts to international organisations. The decision to discuss COVID-19 in the Human Rights Council resolutions during the first year of the pandemic was avoided as opponents may have raised questions regarding the virus's origin.^{lxii} Moreover, in October 2021, 100 countries voiced their support to China for developing its pattern for human rights development. They opposed politicising human rights issues to suppress other countries at the 76th session of the UN General Assembly to counter the Western critics over the situation in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet.

China uses a dual-track strategy in the HRC to block international criticism of its repressive human rights record. It also promotes orthodox interpretations of national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs that weaken international human rights norms, transparency, and accountability. But recently, China became more assertive in promoting its developmental rights and internationalised its domestic slogans. China's narrative is based on changing existing norms' meanings and creating new concepts. For instance, the resolution adopted in March 2020, "Promoting mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of human rights", was an attempt to reconstruct the understanding of human rights as a right of individuals into collective rights, according to the Chinese model.^{lxiii}

In collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), China published a special report on the pandemic's origins, released on March 30, 2021.^{lxiv} It should be noted, however, that WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus did not rule out further research and stated that "all

hypotheses are on the table and warrant complete and further studies". On the day the WHO-China report was released, a statement from



Hong Kong protester shot by police during the Hong Kong protests
Source: By Campus TV, HKUSU. CC BY-SA 3.0

the "US+13" group, signed by the governments of the US, Australia, Canada, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Israel, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, the Republic of Korea, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom was published. They stated that the WHO report did not meet expectations. It emphasised how important it was to know the natural causes



Protester in the Tiananmen Square - May 10, 1989 "The writing says: We want the freedom of newspapers, freedom of associations, also to support the ,World Economic Herald'; and support those just journalists."
Source: By Cai Shufang. CC BY 2.5

of the pandemic to fight effectively against its consequences. Thus, the group of countries led by the United States questioned the process of research conducted by experts: its effectiveness, scientific basis, transparency, and independence. The action taken by American diplomacy illustrated the United States' ability to form a coalition to accuse China of being a "virus spreader", as appeared in the Joint Statement of the United States and 13 countries.^{lxv}

Moreover, one of the main COVID-related controversies has been the question of Taiwan's participation in the World Health Assembly (WHA), the decision-making body of the World Health Organization (WHO). Taiwan, which is not a member of the United Nations for political reasons, has been excluded from the WHA since 2016.^{lxvi} During the early stages of COVID-19, it has received widespread praise for handling the pandemic. In 2020 and 2021, Taiwan was again excluded from the WHA, with some accusing China of pressuring the WHO to exclude Taiwan.^{lxvii}

1.4.1. China's Four Global Initiatives

By being active in international organisations, Beijing signals its readiness to reshape the global political landscape. Since September 2020, over the pandemic situation, the Chinese authorities have introduced four global initiatives: the Global Data Security Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative. The Global Data Security Initiative was introduced by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (September 2020).^{lxviii} This framework deals with security in data storage and digital commerce. The initiative involves eight tenets, which include China's concerns over being

cut off from access to Western markets and technology. China also outlined three principles that should be followed in international cooperation as part of its proposal. These include multilateralism, safe development, and fairness and justice. As the conflict with the United States intensified, the People's Republic of China became more assertive in promoting its alternative initiatives. The first global initiative announced by the PRC under the label of the Global Digital Security Initiative (GDSI) touched on the future of digital governance. In this regard, as perceived by many, the GDSI was a response to the Trump administration's Clean Network⁴ program.^{lxix} Furthermore, the GDSI is an attempt to address concerns regarding China's technology solutions, which, according to the United States, create a direct threat to the cybersecurity of other countries. This initiative aimed to depict Chinese technology as malicious and untrustworthy, excluding it from global internet infrastructure. The GDSI's core objective is to promote the development of a secure and reliable digital economy, which necessitates multilateral cooperation, inclusive development, and adherence to international norms and regulations.^{lxx}

The abovementioned principles emphasise the importance of open and stable supply chains, the absence of restrictions on the use of information technologies in critical infrastructure, the intention to use information technologies that protect privacy and personal data, and the lack of so-called "backdoors" for illegally obtaining information. These principles indirectly address allegations made by the American administration against Chinese technology corporations and the Chinese government. Beijing aims to diminish negative perceptions of its implementation of information

4 The Clean Network was a project launched by the Donald Trump administration in 2020. Its main objectives covered the protection of data privacy, security and human rights of the United States and its allies from the digital threats posed mainly by the actions of the Chinese Communist Party as well as other authoritarian actors. The project formed a coalition of countries to exclude untrusted vendors and applications from their telecommunications networks and services.

technologies in third countries, such as Serbia or Ethiopia, to name a few. Tenets are underpinned by three overarching principles that define the GDSI's ethos: multilateralism, secure development, and fairness and justice. These principles are aligned with international norms and regulations and reflect the initiative's commitment to promoting a secure and reliable digital economy that benefits all countries and people. The GDSI, like many other Chinese initiatives, contains very little information, mainly to facilitate gaining international support for the framework itself. To gain support for the GDSI, China initiated diplomatic outreach efforts to secure support from countries in Central Asia, Africa, and Europe. Russia, Tanzania, Pakistan, Ecuador, the Arab League, and ASEAN countries have supported the initiative. More than this, China organised the GDSI's first regional implementation platform, the China-Arab Data Security Cooperation, signed by Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu and the Arab League in March 2021.^{lxxi}

The second initiative touches on security questions and the Global Security Initiative, which was introduced in April 2021.^{lxxii} This framework comprises basic concepts, principles, cooperation priorities, platforms, and mechanisms. China maintains that the UN should occupy the central coordinating position regarding international cooperation. However, Beijing is actively promoting China-led platforms such as the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum, the Middle East Security Forum, the Xiangshan Forum in Beijing, and the World Security Cooperation Forum public in Lianyungang as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS. The GSI aims to expand China's global influence and ensure long-term security and prosperity. The following initiative includes various aspects, such as military modernisation, maritime security, and economic investments in multiple regions

worldwide.^{lxxiii} The GSI aims to promote China's cultural and ideological influence by expanding its media presence. On top of that, introducing China's GSI concept has been followed by setting up an International Mediation Institute in Hong Kong.^{lxxiv} China is likely trying to position itself as a mediator for international crises, as demonstrated by its involvement in brokering the Iran and Saudi Arabia agreement. The effectiveness of China's role as a mediator will depend on its neutrality, impartiality, and track record of resolving disputes, as well as its interest in settling the conflict. However, this might be supported by the fact that China is the major trade partner with the countries in the Global South.^{lxxv}

The publication of "China's position on the political settlement of the Ukrainian crisis" showed the Chinese intention to take as little risk as possible.^{lxxvi} Therefore, China will continue to avoid direct mediation between Moscow and Kyiv, in line with its position presented during the UN Security Council gatherings, where Beijing has called for the creation of appropriate conditions for a negotiation process between the parties of the conflict, thereby negating any attempts by third parties to join direct talks.

However, considering the case of the Iran-Saudi Arabia agreement, China's economic and political ties with both countries likely facilitated its involvement.^{lxxvii} Recently, Chinese diplomats have also been active in the Israeli-Palestinian issue, promoting a "two-state solution."^{lxxviii} China's leaders have pointed out their country's "peaceful" and non-confrontational rise for years, suggesting they could act as honest brokers in talks between Israelis and Palestinians.^{lxxix} While some developing countries have welcomed China's mediation role as a contribution to regional stability, the US views it as a challenge to its interests and influence.

Nevertheless, China sees this as an opportunity to expand its reach in various domains, such as economy, diplomacy, and culture, particularly as the US shifts its focus to the Indo-Pacific and moves away from the Middle East.

Then, the Chinese government promoted its developmental solutions, and Xi Jinping unveiled the Global Development Initiative in September 2021 during a speech at the UN General Assembly. This initiative aims to support accomplishing all seventeen Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by reviving global development partnerships and fostering stronger, greener, and healthier global development. GDI aims to address "unbalanced and inadequate development among and within countries" by moving away from the model of unchecked growth linked to socio-economic inequality and environmental deterioration. The above characterised the Chinese economy and much of the developing world in the past decades.



Chinese peace envoy Li Hui meets with Ukrainian foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba in Kyiv (17 May 2023) Source; By Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. CC BY 4.0

China's development plan is allegedly "people-centred," "high-quality," "green," and "innovation-driven". In this regard, China positioned itself as the leader of "like-minded" countries that share concerns over the future of development rather than political freedom rights. Placing the development agenda within the United Nations

framework allows the Beijing-based government to bypass controversies over the intentions of being the dominant power in the Global South community. Moreover, it prepared the ground for China to form the coalition based on the "alignment of belief" of particular importance in the context of growing tensions with the United States. The second important feature of positioning the Global Development Initiative within the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development allows China to promote its vision of human rights. According to the Chinese narratives and experiences, the priority should be given to the second and third generations of human rights: social and economic development rather than the political rights of the first generation of human rights.^{lxxx} In this regard, China can promote its China-style modernisation through a more nuanced approach that allows Beijing to bypass controversies.^{lxxxi}

The abovementioned promotion of China's solutions goes through, e.g., the Group of Friends of the GDI at the UN, with over 60 countries joining the group. It is worth mentioning that the Group has a close relationship with Secretary-General António Guterres, who praised the GDI during the inaugural conference in October 2022. In the long term, Chinese authorities will gain more influence to reshape standards for the industrial sector through informal "circles of friends" in the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO).^{lxxxii}

Apart from shaping a positive image of China as the vanguard for development, an essential part of China's agenda is to blame the United States for "all wrongdoings". The Chinese usually referred to racial discrimination, the situation in Afghanistan with the United States "double standards" and its "selective blindness", and utilising the human rights concept as a tool for interference. In the context of developmental rights, the American approach

is seen as the precise way for politicisation and interference, illustrated by its policy towards Syria and South Sudan.^{lxxxiii}

The last initiative presented the ancient Chinese civilisation's benevolent nature and was introduced by Xi Jinping as the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) during the political parties' conference in March 2023.^{lxxxiv} It proposes four initiatives: respecting the diversity of civilisations, advocating common human values, valuing the inheritance and innovation of civilisations, and promoting international people-to-people exchanges and cooperation. The initiative emphasises the need for different civilisations to coexist and tolerate each other, promoting true equality and inclusion among civilisations to achieve global peace and development. The initiative complements the Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative and forms the critical components of a human community with a shared future.

As Xi Jinping introduced the GCI during the Communist Party of China High-Level Dialogue with the Political Parties, the Chinese authorities signalled that GCI would be an umbrella organisation for party-to-party relations. The essential features of the GCI are outlined as follows: respecting the diversity of civilisations, advocating the shared values of humanity, valuing the inheritance and innovation of civilisations, and strengthening international people-to-people exchanges and cooperation. Along with the centralisation of power in China and the "participation" of the governmental apparatus, the CPC has become more critical in China's external relations.^{lxxxv}

The Chinese leader called "for leveraging the strength of a new type of party-to-party relations for building a new type of international relations



Secretary General António Guterres with Vladimir Putin and Sergei Lavrov Source: By Press Secretary for the President of the Russian Federation. CC BY 4.0

and expanding global partnerships by fostering stronger partners with world political parties". On the one hand, solid party-to-party relations guarantee support for China's global initiative, e.g., at the United Nations forums, and on the other, cemented authoritarian tendencies in the selected countries. Apart from the institutionalisation of inter-party relations under the framework of civilisation, emphasis was placed on the timing of an event in anticipation of Joe Biden's proposal for a second Summit for Democracy, which involved the governments of Costa Rica, the Netherlands, South Korea, and Zambia.^{lxxxvi} This step was previously taken by China before the First Summit for Democracy in December 2021, organising the CPC and World Political Parties Summit. The third prominent feature of GCI is to introduce China's position on the global stage from the civilisation's long-term perspective. This approach rhymes with the high criticism of the United States and its "less developed and exclusive model for development".^{lxxxvii}

1.5. The U.S. and China's Strategic Competition in the United Nations

As China became the second-largest economy with a more centralised government, the United States attempted to maintain the status quo after the Soviet Union collapsed. It led to a strategic competition visible in various domains, such as

trade, technology, security, and human rights within the United Nations forum. As Washington was in the process of rebuilding its credibility and leadership after four years of isolationism and unilateralism under the Trump administration, resulting from the withdrawal of the U.S. from several UN agencies and agreements, such as the WHO, the Human Rights Council, the Paris Agreement, and the Iran nuclear deal.^{lxxxviii} The growing Chinese influence within organisations has been described as challenging the rules-based international order and threatening security and human rights.^{lxxxix} Beijing, as well as Washington, are vying for influence and legitimacy in the multilateral system. The U.S. is attempting to counterbalance China's growing role and agenda in the UN, especially in the Security Council, where China frequently wields its veto power to prevent resolutions unfavourable to its allies or its interests.^{xc} Most of the United States diplomats' allegations concern human rights. The U.S. has been very vocal about condemning China's human rights violations, especially in Xinjiang, where the UN Human Rights Office has assessed grave concerns about Uyghurs and other minorities.^{xcii} The U.S. has also co-sponsored resolutions and statements urging independent investigations and accountability for China's actions in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Tibet.^{xciii} On the other hand, China has dismissed these criticisms as interference in its internal affairs and has mobilised its allies to defend its policies and counter the U.S.-led pressure.^{xciii} Beijing has portrayed its policies in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Tibet as necessary measures to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism and to promote stability, development, and national unity. China has also claimed that it respects human rights and has made remarkable achievements in improving its people's living standards and well-being. China has launched a counter-campaign to defend its image and

reputation in the UN and beyond by organising visits to Xinjiang for foreign diplomats and journalists, producing documentaries and reports to showcase its achievements, and sponsoring resolutions and statements to promote its concept of human rights.^{xciv} Different understanding of human rights has also been visible in cases outside China. The discussions between Washington and Beijing around the situation in Afghanistan sparked a fierce dispute between the two when, on August 29, 2022, Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield delivered remarks at a UN Security Council meeting about women and girls in Afghanistan. While the U.S. was the most significant financial contributor in this case, the American ambassador described China's contribution to financial assistance as "underwhelming", comparing its contribution to the Kremlin's lack of support for the Afghan people.^{xcv} Linda Thomas-Greenfield suggested China and Russia "put their money where their mouth is", exerting pressure on the tangible contributions from China. Previously, the U.S. representatives condemned China's vetoes of a Security Council resolution on the human rights situation in Myanmar and Ethiopia.^{xcvi}

Security is another source of friction between the U.S. and China in the UN. The U.S. has been alarmed by China's growing military and technological capabilities and its assertive behaviour in the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and other regions.^{xcvii} Lately, The U.S. side has also briefed countries on the potential security risks of Chinese surveillance balloons that have crossed dozens of continents. The U.S. has warned that these balloons could be used for espionage, propaganda, or cyberattacks.^{xcviii} On the other hand, China has accused the U.S. of interfering in its internal affairs and undermining its sovereignty and territorial integrity in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait.^{xcix} China has asserted its right

to defend its interests and maintain peace and stability in the region. The U.S. is also trying to counterbalance China's influence in other UN agencies, such as the World Health Organization (WHO). China has gained more clout and leverage due to its role in the COVID-19 pandemic. The U.S. has accused China of withholding information and covering up the virus's origins and has called for a transparent and independent investigation.^c China has rejected these accusations and has claimed that it has acted responsibly and transparently in responding to the pandemic and sharing information with the WHO and other countries.^{ci} China has also highlighted its contributions to global health governance and cooperation, such as providing vaccines and medical supplies to developing countries, hosting the World Health Assembly, and supporting the COVAX facility.^{cii} Despite China's opposition the U.S. has supported Taiwan's participation in the WHO and other UN agencies. As Taiwan was one of the few places that has successfully contained the pandemic, the U.S. has argued that Taiwan's exclusion from the WHO and other UN agencies undermines global



Hong Kong Protests Source: By Studio Incendo. CC BY 2.0

health security and cooperation.^{ciii} Even though Taiwan had firm support from Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield on joining the WHO assembly, China opposed Taiwan's participation in the WHO and other UN agencies.^{civ} China argued that Taiwan

is not a sovereign state and has no right to join the UN system, eventually making Taipei fail to join the WHO assembly.^{cv}

Conclusions

1. As China is recognised as the second largest economy, the need for shaping political influences arises. But this process is divided into three main periods. Since 1971, China joined the United Nations at the end of the Cold War; China has taken the „low profile“ position and concentrated on its domestic modernisation. Then, when the Soviet Union collapsed, and the United States became the dominant power in international relations, the Chinese government attempted to learn how to organise political activities through bilateral relations and multilateral platforms. The process of learning by doing started with the „Shanghai Five“, evolving into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS and China-led multilateralism with FOCAC and China-CELAC Forums as the leading examples. To reshape the current international system, the Chinese government used the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and, through its global initiatives, portrayed China as a stable and reliable partner.
2. As the global scene remained turbulent and uncertain, the Chinese government presented China as a solid, long-term thinker with a vision of an international actor. Most efforts are focused on reforming the United Nations, which is seen as a symbol of the American-led international order. All presented digital data protection, security, development, and civilisation initiatives should be seen as such. In this context, Beijing sees a chance to adapt to a more multipolar and diverse world, where many countries are reluctant to choose sides between the U.S. and China or prefer a more nuanced and pragmatic approach that

considers their interests and perspectives. Conversely, Washington is strengthening its alliances and partnerships with like-minded countries that share its concerns and objectives on China-related issues, such as Japan, Australia, India, the European Union, and Canada. Outside the United Nations, the competition for influence is visible in regional and sub-regional organisations and mechanisms that promote cooperation and dialogue on common challenges, such as ASEAN, the African Union, the Organization of American States, and the Arctic Council. Interestingly, China sees its partners reshaping the UN system, mainly in Africa and Latin America. In this context, the U.S. is leveraging its soft power and public diplomacy to showcase its achievements and contributions to global public goods, such as democracy, human rights, innovation, education, and culture. At the same time, China targets Global South countries with a different and more loose understanding of universal values, especially in the domain of human rights and the rule of law, making it more suitable for developing economies. This, however, should not be overestimated. As China is a rising power among other rising powers like India, South Africa, Brazil or Indonesia, the mutual interest in challenging the current international order can change, altering their affinity with each other and providing the platform for rivalry among the rising powers.^{cvi}

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2



The United States-China relations. Cold war 2.0?

Tomasz Smura

2. U.S.-China Relations – The Battle for Global Leadership?

The increasing economic and military power of China, along with their growing activity and assertiveness on the international stage, are shaping U.S.-China relations, which in turn currently impact the stability of the global order. The United States, after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, became the sole global superpower, guaranteeing security in various regions, including East Asia. Meanwhile, the rapid growth of power and increasing aspirations of the People's Republic of China to expand its role in global politics are altering the global balance of power and challenging the dominant position of the USA, both in the Indo-Pacific region and in the global order. Because the United States does not seem willing to relinquish its role as a guarantor of the

world order, relations between Washington and Beijing have become increasingly confrontational in recent years, and there is no doubt that they will dominate the current era. Although the two superpowers are trying to avoid open conflict at this stage, their rivalry is gradually expanding into new areas and affecting various actors, including European countries.

2.1. The evolution of U.S.-China relations

US-China relations have undergone a significant transformation over the past three decades. As recently as the end of the Cold War, the informal U.S.-China alliance aimed at the USSR was one of the main pillars of U.S. policy in Asia. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the brutal suppression of popular protests in the Tiananmen Square forced a revision of

US policy towards the People's Republic of China. This process was accelerated by the rapid growth of China's economic and military power (in the face of Russia's weakness and Japan's economic downturn, China could become the only prospective challenge to American dominance), whose policy was also becoming increasingly assertive and, in the face of weaker neighbours, even aggressive. What's more, with the growing economic importance of Asia, US trade and economic activity was moving there, so a disturbance of stability in the region due to Chinese actions could significantly affect the economy and prosperity of the United States. Hence, Washington, as early as the 1990s, began to pursue a policy of "engagement and containment" towards China, on the one hand including China in international cooperation, and on the other maintaining a strong political and military presence in the region (including by supporting the independent status of Taiwan – recognised by the PRC as its province – and maintaining allied relations with Japan and South Korea, among others, supported by a military presence). Gradually, China was becoming a top foreign and security policy priority for the US (George W. Bush described China as a "strategic competitor" even during the election campaign), only temporarily pushed back by US involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. Symbolic of this process was the "pivot" towards Asia during the Democratic administration of Barack Obama. It included e.g. the transfer of most of the US navy's capabilities to the Pacific, the deployment of US forces in Australia and the start of work – ultimately unsuccessful – on the creation of a new free trade area with US participation that excludes China, called the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

2.1.1. Towards a cold war - the policies of the Trump administration

U.S.-China relations have become even more strained during Donald Trump's presidency, as reflected in U.S. strategic documents. As indicated by the unveiled in December 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States of America, "China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity."ⁱ The document was also critical of the previous administration's policies directed at making China a "responsible stakeholder." The January 2018 National Defense Strategy, meanwhile, proclaimed the return of great-power competition, calling China a "revisionist power" and a "strategic competitor."

U.S. assessments of PRC policy expressed in the strategies quickly translated into real action. The Trump administration, in addition to continuing its support for Taiwan, began to make stronger demands on China to reduce its roughly \$350 billion trade deficit and to better protect intellectual property (forced technology transfers and intellectual property theft were expected to cost US companies \$300 billion a year),ⁱⁱ leading to a trade war. In April 2018 the US announced a list of 1,333 high-tech products worth \$46 billion to be subjected to 25 percent tariffs, which – as the list expanded – were introduced in successive tranches worth \$34 billion, \$16 billion and finally in July 2018 as much as \$200 billion, which was met with analogous actions from the Chinese side against the US. After months of mutual imposition of tariffs on subsequent products and difficult talks, in mid-January 2020 the two sides concluded a so-called "first phase" trade agreement, meeting some of the US demands (China pledged, among other things, to purchase an additional \$200

billion worth of goods and services over two years).



President Donald J. Trump, joined by Chinese Vice Premier Liu He, sign the U.S. China Phase One Trade Agreement Wednesday, Jan. 15, 2020, in the East Room of the White House. Source: Trump White House Archived/Flickr/CC 0

After a temporary “ceasefire” on trade issues, however, tensions in U.S.-China relations escalated against the backdrop of China’s responsibility for the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic, as in the spring of 2020 the Donald Trump administration accused China of causing the pandemic by acting too slowly and failing to disclose information about the detection of the virus in the city of Wuhan beforehand. Trump himself has started calling COVID “China’s virus”,ⁱⁱⁱ which, of course, was met with strong reactions from the Chinese side, and U.S.-China relations remained strained until the end of the Republican administration.

2.1.2. Biden towards China - change or continuation?

The nature of U.S.-China relations has not been significantly altered by the victory of the Democratic Joe Biden’s administration, although it has made some attempts to open up to Beijing. Indeed, as early as March 2021, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in Anchorage, Alaska. However, the climate of the meeting turned out to be bad, and the sides began the

meeting with a mutual exchange of accusations (the US side expressed “deep concern” over Chinese actions in Xinjiang, against Hong Kong, Taiwan, cyberattacks on the US and economic intimidation of Washington’s allies, while the Chinese representative criticised the state of American democracy and the US foreign and economic policy). Nor has the war in Ukraine caused by Russia’s unprovoked aggression against the country contributed to improvement of relations. For China, for which Russia remains a strategic partner (“comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for the new era”), unlike most countries in the world, has not condemned Russian aggression. What’s more, Beijing replaces the word “war” with the euphemism “crisis” in its official communications, indicating that its causes are complex and include, among other things, the issue of NATO enlargement and the West’s broader policy towards Russia. Washington is also concerned that China could more directly support Moscow in the war, such as through arms supplies, warning that this would be met with “serious consequences” from the US.^{iv} More serious tensions also arose against the backdrop of the House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in August 2022, which the authorities in Beijing interpreted as a violation of the “one China” principle and the unofficial nature of US-Taiwan relations (the US government, under the agreement with the PRC since 1979, has been recognising the government in Beijing as the only legitimate Chinese government, maintaining only unofficial relations with Taiwan), responding with a series of threats and military manoeuvres, which Washington considered as an “overreaction.” Nor was there a breakthrough in mutual relations when Joe Biden and Xi Jinping met at the G20 summit in Bali, although the two leaders had

the opportunity to talk in person about bilateral relations for the first time since the US election. Furthermore, against the backdrop of the identification and subsequent shooting down in early February 2023 of a Chinese balloon, which the U.S. administration referred to as surveillance one, the first visit of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken was cancelled.



Chinese leader Xi Jinping with U.S. President Joe Biden at the 17th G20 in Bali, November 2022. Source: The White House/Flickr/CC 0

The continuity in U.S. policy towards China, however, can be seen most clearly in U.S. policy documents. Released in October 2022, the new National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy identify China as a major challenge to US national security. China, in the strategy's assessment, is the only rival possessing both the will to change the rules-based international order and the appropriate capabilities to achieve this goal.^v

In this context, only a few months after the incident with the Chinese balloon, on May 10-11, 2023, the U.S. national security advisor Jack Sullivan met in Vienna with the Director of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission Office Wang Yi. The two sides exchanged views on bilateral relations, the Russian-Ukrainian war and the Taiwan issue, but the main goal of the meeting appears to be the restoration of disrupted (among other things,

by the downing of a Chinese spy balloon over the US territory) lines of communication. The importance of keeping the lines of communication open to avoid dangerous misunderstandings was also stressed in talks with the Chinese side by the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who visited China on June 18-19, 2023. Blinken also declared intensive efforts to prevent US-China rivalry from turning into a conflict.

Despite attempts to improve U.S.-China relations, they appear to be becoming increasingly confrontational, with President Joe Biden's administration – apart from only a partial change in rhetorical dimensions – largely continuing the hard line adopted by Donald Trump towards China. The U.S.-China rivalry is also entering ever new areas, which will also have implications for other countries.

2.2. U.S.-China Competition in the strategic dimension

After the end of the Cold War, the dominant position of the United States globally and in the Indo-Pacific region appeared unshakable. The U.S. maintained a network of alliances in the region, supported by the world's most powerful armed forces and a defence budget exceeding the combined defence expenditures of several consecutive countries with the highest defence spending. Over the years, the relative advantage of the USA began to diminish due to China's dynamic economic growth and its increasing military spending. According to the World Bank data, in 1990, China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) measured in US dollars at 2015 exchange rates was around \$1 trillion. Within 10 years, by 2000, it had nearly tripled to \$2.7 trillion, reaching \$7.5 trillion in 2010 and \$14.6 trillion in 2020 (for comparison, the GDP of the USA in the same year was about \$21 trillion).^{vi} This rapidly

growing economic potential allowed China to finance a comprehensive expansion of its military capabilities. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China's military expenditures in current US dollars reached \$293.3 billion in 2021, ranking second in the world after the approximately \$800.6 billion spent by the United States in the same category. Importantly, Chinese defence spending had increased more than threefold since 2006, while US spending, measured in constant dollars, had essentially remained unchanged during that time.^{vii}

2.2.1. China's military build-up

A large defence budget allows China to maintain armed forces with significant quantitative and qualitative potential. Currently, they consist of over 2.2 million soldiers, making them the largest in the world. In the land forces, approximately 975,000 soldiers serve in combat units organised into 13 army groups, comprising a total of around 80 combined arms brigades. Chinese land forces have in stocks approximately 5,600 tanks, 6,700 infantry fighting vehicles, 4,000 armoured personnel carriers, as well as over 9,000 artillery pieces and 270 attack helicopters. China's navy, consisting of around 260,000 sailors, maintains the world's largest fleet of surface and submarine vessels, totalling 340 units, including 125 large vessels such as aircraft carriers, destroyers, and frigates, and over 60 submarines. Furthermore, according to the Department of Defense estimates, the number of Chinese warships is expected to increase to approximately 400 by 2025 and 440 by 2030. The Chinese air force, comprising approximately 490,000 airmen, is equipped with about 2,400 combat aircraft, including 500 fighter jets, over 800 multirole fighters, and approximately 180 bombers. The Rocket

Forces, which are an independent branch of the Chinese armed forces, include Chinese cruise and ballistic missiles with ranges from short to intercontinental, equipped with conventional and nuclear warheads. According to the estimates of the U.S. Department of Defense, China already possesses around 300 intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of striking U.S. territory and continues to steadily increase this number.^{viii}



Aircraft Carrier Liaoning (16) at Hong Kong Waters. By Baycrest - Own work. Source: Baycrest/Wikipedia Commons/CC 0

China not only maintains large armed forces but also actively modernises them, particularly in the field of anti-access and area denial capabilities and power projection. In terms of anti-access capabilities, China has introduced anti-ship ballistic missiles (DF-21, DF-26, and potentially hypersonic DF-17) – capable of targeting large vessels – and long-range air defence systems. In the area of power projection, China is consistently adding new aircraft carriers to its fleet (currently 3 units) and large amphibious vessels of the Yushen (6) and Yuzhao (8) classes. China is also developing its fleet of bombers and strengthening its air force capabilities in areas such as aerial refuelling, electronic warfare, and early warning.

2.2.2. China's strategic goals

The rapid growth of China's military capabilities is perceived by the USA as a serious challenge.

The central goal of China's modernisation efforts, as stated by the Chinese leadership, is to "fully transform the people's armed forces into world-class forces by the mid-21st century,"^{ix} which, according to the Pentagon's assessment, means military forces equal to, and in some areas surpassing, the capabilities of the United States and other countries perceived by Beijing as threats.^x Before achieving this long-term goal, Chinese military forces aim to achieve two intermediate objectives:

1. "to generally achieve mechanisation by the year 2020 with significantly enhanced informationisation and greatly improved strategic capabilities;
2. to comprehensively advance the modernization of military theory, organizational structure, military personnel, and weaponry and equipment in step with the modernization of the country and basically complete the modernization of national defense and the military by 2035."^{xi}

Furthermore, the final communiqué of the 5th Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China suggests that efforts to modernise the military will be intensified to achieve the goal of building modern armed forces by the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army in 2027, potentially accelerating the original plan by 8 years. To achieve this, Chinese armed forces are intensifying integrated development efforts in mechanisation, informatisation, and networking, while also enhancing training systems and readiness.^{xii}

The goal of military development aligns with broader political objectives. The Chinese leadership's vision of the "Chinese dream" and

the associated "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" entails political, social, and military modernisation to expand China's national power, strengthen its authority, and revise the international order to support its governance system and national interests.^{xiii} The Chinese strategy also aims for deliberate and consistent efforts to amass and strengthen national power, ensuring China's leading position in the international system.^{xiv} To achieve this, some analysts suggest that China's "great rejuvenation" must include the unification of all Chinese territories, including the annexation of Taiwan.^{xv}

Chinese authorities have also set strategic "two centenary goals." The first, officially achieved in 2021 on the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party, involves building a "moderately prosperous society," emphasising economic and civilisational reforms to create a new model of the Chinese economy based on a strong middle class, a robust domestic market, innovation, and environmental protection. The second goal, to be realised by the 100th anniversary of the People's Republic of China in 2049, envisions China becoming a "great, modern socialist country in every respect" that is "prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful." This likely means achieving or regaining the status of the world's most powerful nation in economic, political, and possibly military terms.^{xvi}

2.2.3. The U.S. response

In these circumstances, successive U.S. administrations seem to be continuing the foreign and security policy reorientation initiated by the Obama's administration towards the Indo-Pacific region. This has also been positively received by countries in the region, which



USS Ronald Reagan in the South China Sea. Source: By U.S. Navy. CCO

are also concerned about the rise of China's power. Therefore, in addition to prioritising the development of their own military capabilities necessary for a potential confrontation with China (including a focus on the US Navy and Air Force – at the expense of the Army – and capabilities aimed at penetrating integrated air defence), the U.S. is also strengthening cooperation with allies and partners in the region.

This especially applies to Japan, which is in a territorial dispute with China over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands that escalated in 2012 (both countries also have historical issues related among others to Japan's aggression against China during World War II). According to a joint assessment expressed by both countries during their regularly held 2+2 dialogues (involving defence and foreign affairs ministers), "The United States and Japan acknowledged that China's behaviour, where inconsistent with the existing international order, presents political, economic, military, and technological challenges to the Alliance and to the international community. The Ministers committed to opposing coercion and destabilising behaviour toward others in the region, which undermines the rules-based international system."^{xvii}

As a result, the USA and Japan conducted a review of their strategic document – *The*

Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation, which was concluded in 2015. The document allows for cooperation between both countries in the defence of a third party, likely referring to South Korea or Taiwan. Washington also supports Tokyo in relaxing its post-war pacifist defence policy and increasing its defence budget (from around 1% of GDP to the planned 2% of GDP) as well as the capabilities of the Japan Self-Defense Forces, including the desire to acquire long-range precision strike capabilities.^{xviii}



Japan Self Defence Forces and U.S. Army Pacific during Orient Shield exercises. Source: By U.S. Navy. CCO

The United States is also working to expand its strategic cooperation with Japan's second most important ally in the region, South Korea. However, over the years, the state of Korean-Japanese relations has been hindered by historical issues and territorial dispute over the Dokdo/Takeshima islands, as well as South Korea's ambivalent stance towards China. Korean-Japanese relations deteriorated further after the conservative Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) came to power in Japan. During his first term (2006–2007), Abe's controversial statements on historical issues strained relations with neighbouring countries. Recognising the broader strategic interest in resolving Japanese-Korean disputes, the U.S. administration became involved. In 2014, the U.S. succeeded in convening the first summit



Joint U.S., Japanese, and Republic of Korea Navy exercises. Source: US Navy Photo/CC 0

between leaders of the U.S., South Korea, and Japan since Japan's elections. This helped strengthen Japanese-Korean governmental contacts and trilateral cooperation between Tokyo, Seoul, and Washington in the following years. South Korea, while considering China as a key economic partner, appears to be cautious not to make Beijing interpret its cooperation with Japan and the USA as anti-China. Therefore, this format primarily focuses on addressing the North Korean issue.^{xix} Furthermore, after Moon Jae-in of the Democratic Party's victory in South Korea in 2017, relations with Tokyo deteriorated again. It was only after Yoon Suk-yeol's – who represents major opposition party in South Korea or People Power Party – victory in subsequent elections that a new opening in relations with Japan occurred. The new South Korean government also seems to be more open and aligned with the expectations of Washington and Tokyo regarding the issue of China's growing assertiveness. As highlighted in the joint statement from the summit of leaders of Japan, South Korea, and the USA: "The Leaders strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo in waters of the IndoPacific, including

through unlawful maritime claims, militarization of reclaimed features, and coercive activities." This clearly pertains to China's policies in the region. The heads of state and government also emphasized the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the international community," which reaffirms Seoul's commitment to the critical Taiwan issue in its relations with Beijing, aligning with the interests of Washington and Tokyo.^{xx}

Considering the previous difficulties in the Tokyo-Seoul relationship, the United States and Japan are also seeking for strategic cooperation with other regional countries wary of China's intentions, especially India and Australia. This has led to a revival of cooperation within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, known as the QUAD, which is a format for strategic dialogue between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. The QUAD was initially launched by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe with the support of U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney, Australian Prime Minister John Howard, and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. It

operated in 2007-2008 but was frozen for about a decade due to pressure from China, which viewed it as an anti-China coalition, and changes in Australian politics. During this time, there were trilateral talks between Australia-Japan-USA and India-Japan-USA. It was only in November 2017 that representatives from the four countries met in Manila to "discussed measures to ensure a free and open international order based on the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific."^{xxi} In the following year, two rounds of meetings took place in this format. In 2019, the QUAD format was elevated to the level of foreign ministers (a meeting at this level also took place in 2020). Key topics on the QUAD's agenda include intensifying cooperation



Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, U.S. President Joe Biden and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison held the first in-person Quad meeting in Washington, D.C., 2021. Source: The White House/Flickr/ CC 0

in high-quality infrastructure, maritime security, counterterrorism, cybersecurity, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, education, and human resource development, all with the aim of promoting a "free and open Indo-Pacific." Much of this cooperation is focused on areas where China is most active and its policies are most controversial, such as maritime security, infrastructure, and cybersecurity. In March 2021, the first virtual meeting of QUAD leaders took place, during which they committed to "promoting a free, open rules-based order, rooted in international law to advance security

and prosperity and counter threats to both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond." Leaders also expressed support for the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and territorial integrity.^{xxii} It is clear that these statements are primarily directed at Beijing, which has been accused of resolving territorial disputes through coercion and violating the principle of freedom of the seas.

In September 2021, the leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the USA met in person for the first time at a summit in Washington, D.C. In the final statement, they announced a series of concrete actions in areas including pandemic control, climate change, secure 5G networks, and infrastructure development.^{xxiii} Subsequent QUAD summits were held in 2022 and 2023.

Simultaneously with Australia's programme to acquire new submarines, in September 2021, a new format of cooperation between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States was announced, known as AUKUS. Its first concrete initiative is to provide Australia with the possibility to acquire nuclear-powered submarines armed with conventional weapons (they will not be equipped with nuclear-armed ballistic missiles). The programme is divided into phases and includes training Australian personnel in the United States and the United Kingdom, increasing the frequency of visits by American and British nuclear submarines, and then rotating their deployment in Australia. Subsequently, in the early next decade, Australia aims to acquire three American nuclear-powered submarines (with an option for two more) of the Virginia class, and finally, in the early 2040s, the first domestically built SSN-AUKUS submarine will be acquired (the first unit will be delivered

to the Royal Navy of the United Kingdom).^{xxiv} The cooperation within the AUKUS format has, of course, faced criticism from China, which argued that it would lead to an arms race in the region and erode the non-proliferation regime of nuclear weapons. The challenge associated with this cooperation seems to be primarily motivated by the United States. Washington's strategy towards the People's Republic of China (PRC) currently appears to be based on the assumption of the need to militarily strengthen its closest allies in the Indo-Pacific region (especially Japan and Australia) so that they can effectively collaborate with the USA in deterring further Chinese expansion and assertive policies in the region.

2.3. Cold war enters new fronts

Regardless of momentary fluctuations in relations, there is no doubt that the U.S.-China rivalry is structural and, like the U.S.-Soviet rivalry in the 20th century, although it does not take the form of a military confrontation it is spilling over into new areas both geographically and thematically. In the latter dimension – In addition to the described above strategic competition, it manifests itself in areas such as technology, diplomacy or infrastructure, among others.

2.3.1. Technologies

The U.S.-China rivalry can now be seen to its fullest extent in the technological dimension. It intensified significantly during Donald Trump's presidency, when the United States began to look more closely at the Chinese company Huawei and Chinese 5G technologies. In December 2018, Meng Wanzhou, Huawei's executive vice president and chief financial officer, was detained in Canada at the request of the U.S. government, accused by Washington

of circumventing US sanctions on Iran. At the same time, the U.S. had sought to discourage allies from using solutions provided by the Chinese giant as potentially threatening to ICT security, due to the company's close ties to the PRC government and the associated intelligence threat. Washington thus, threatened allies wishing to continue 5G technology cooperation with Huawei in this context with the possibility of limiting intelligence and military cooperation with the U.S. The U.S. administration also accused the company of embezzlement, money laundering and intellectual property theft. Although China argued that the charges were politically motivated and intended to eliminate Chinese companies from the lucrative 5G market in mid-May 2019, the U.S. decided to put Huawei and its affiliated companies on a "blacklist" of entities that must seek special approval from the U.S. government to acquire U.S. components and technologies (this represented an impediment to the company being denied access to components and software updates provided by U.S. companies). In May 2020 the Department of Commerce imposed further restrictions on Huawei, which required, among other things, manufacturers of semiconductors (which are used, for example, in the production of smartphones) – including foreign ones – to obtain special licenses to sell them to Huawei if they were created using U.S. technology (this mainly affected Taiwan's TSMC, which supplies 90 percent of semiconductors to Huawei). The restrictions were further strengthened in August 2020, also expanding the catalogue of Huawei subsidiaries in other countries that are also subject to restrictions (to 152).

Not only did the Biden administration not back down from Trump's restrictions on the Chinese tech giants, it actually expanded them

in March 2021. In November of the same year, President Biden signed a bill prohibiting the U.S. administration from granting new licenses to trade with companies that pose a threat to U.S. national security – such as Huawei and ZTE. At the same time, Washington pressured allies, mainly the Netherlands and Japan, to prohibit their companies from selling technology (deep ultraviolet lithography, DUV) to manufacture chips. Finally, in January 2023, the Biden administration was to stop issuing licenses to sell components to Huawei altogether.^{xxv} The U.S. administration, however, is not only trying to deny Chinese companies access to semiconductors but has also made efforts to strengthen its own industry in this dimension. In June 2021, President Biden signed into law the CHIPS Act (Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors Act), passed by Congress, which provides government investment in scientific research, as well as grants and financial incentives for companies seeking to increase semiconductor production on US soil.

2.3.2. International organisations

The U.S.-China rivalry is also entering the realm of global diplomacy. China, with the growth of its own power, is becoming increasingly active on the international stage and is undertaking new diplomatic activities. This is especially true of the United Nations and its agencies particularly in areas where China's policies are most heavily criticised.

The activity of the government of Communist China since it replaced the government of the Republic of China on Taiwan in 1971 as the representative of "all China" in the UN Security Council has been relatively limited (China, for example, has abstained from voting on controversial issues that do not directly

concern it – most recently, for example, on draft resolutions condemning Russia for its aggression against Ukraine). This was due to its focus on its own problems and internal development, and its traditionally stated policy of not interfering in the internal affairs of other countries. Recently, however, there has been a marked change in China's approach to engaging in international problems. Among other things, China is increasingly participating in United Nations peacekeeping missions (China now contributes the most to United Nations peacekeeping operations among the permanent members of the UNSC – as of May 2022, some 2,000 Chinese soldiers and police officers had participated in 9 UN missions) and vying for influence within the organisation itself.

2.3.2.1 WHO

A significant arena of U.S.-China rivalry in recent times has been the World Health Organization (WHO), which is a part of the United Nations' system. This has been particularly evident in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Established in 1948 and comprising 194 member states, the international organisation establishes norms and standards (including those related to drug composition and food quality), formulates health policies, manages health crises, and tracks and assesses global health trends. Its main bodies include the Secretariat led by the Director-General, the World Health Assembly, the Executive Board, and Regional Committees. The organisation's activities are supported by six regional offices and 147 country and liaison offices.

Among its flagship initiatives is the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which is the first international treaty on public health. Signed by 176 countries and enacted in 2005, it sets

goals and legal principles for protecting against the consequences of smoking tobacco and inhaling tobacco smoke, which must be adhered to by member states. Additionally, there is the Codex Alimentarius Commission, tasked with developing international standards, guidelines, codes of practice, and other texts collectively referred to as the Codex Alimentarius, pertaining to food.



World Health Organisation headquarters, Geneva, north and west sides. Source: I. Yann/Wikipedia Common/CC BY-SA 3.0

Given WHO's competence in managing health crises, there were expectations that the organisation would play a special role in combating pandemics, including the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it was somewhat surprising to the international community when the Trump administration announced in late May 2020 that the United States would withdraw from the WHO. The administration accused the organisation of "poor management of the pandemic" and a pro-China bias in assessing China's actions at the onset of the pandemic and the origins of the virus. According to arguments presented by the Trump administration, WHO was said to have echoed the Chinese government's claim that the virus does not transmit from human to human, despite contradicting information provided by Taiwan. Additionally, WHO did not recommend travel restrictions to China, even

though travel restrictions were already imposed within China itself. At the same time, the U.S. urged the organisation to introduce reforms for, inter alia, transparency, holding member countries accountable for non-compliance with international health regulations, and countering China's undue influence on the organisation,^{xxvi} and the very process of the US exit from WHO was halted only by the US elections. It seems that the US accusations are not completely unfounded because China has indeed strongly increased its activity and presence in the WHO. This may be due to several reasons, such as demographic issues, the demand for Taiwan's inclusion in the organisation's work and the issue of responsibility for the COVID pandemic outbreak.

Demographic issues have traditionally been one of the main areas of concern for the communist PRC leadership. Earlier fears of overpopulation and resulting development problems (the risk of which was supposed to be mitigated by the one-child policy introduced in 1979), have been replaced in recent years by problems of excessive population aging and fertility. According to official Chinese government data, in 2020 the number of people over 60 years of age was 264 million, equivalent to 18.7 percent of the country's total population, an increase of 5.5 percent from 2010.^{xxvii} Moreover, the PRC government's estimates indicate that China's population of people over 60 will grow to 487 million by 2050,^{xxviii} which will account for 35 percent of China's total population. This will be a major challenge for Chinese authorities, who will have to provide medical and social care for the growing elderly population. A more serious demographic problem for China, however, will be a parallel population shrinkage. According to official data from National Bureau of Statistics

of China, the PRC's population shrank in 2022 for the first time since the early 1960s, when the country was suffering the consequences of its "Great Leap Forward" policy, including famine. China could lose its position as the world's most populous country to India later this year, and the disparity between the two countries will widen over time.^{xxxix} According to long-term estimates by the United Nations at current trends, China's population will shrink by about 400 million over a 50-year horizon and by about 700 million by the end of this century (to 767 million from today's more than 1.4 billion).^{xxx} This, combined with an aging population, will represent a huge loss of working-age population, with even hard-to-quantify consequences for the Chinese economy. It seems that this may pose the most serious challenge to China's strategic goals for the Communist Party of China's centennial in 2049, expressed in slogans about "a flourishing socialist superpower" and "the great renaissance of the Chinese nation," which, as it was mentioned, the U.S. administration believes effectively mean Chinese domination of the international system. All the more so since, according to the same UN estimates, the US population will not shrink, but will actually grow by nearly 60 million (to about 400 million). As Michael E. O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution points out, "it is far from obvious that, hegemonically speaking, time is on China's side."^{xxxi} The Biden administration also acknowledges this. President Joe Biden, during a meeting with donors in Utah, referred to the Chinese economy as a "ticking bomb," pointing to China's steadily decreasing economic growth. The slowdown in the pace of China's economic development is evident in macroeconomic data. According to the World Bank, China's economic growth rate has been steadily decreasing since 2007, except for a post-crisis rebound in 2021. While in 2007, China's economic growth reached



Pearl River Tower - New office of the China National Tobacco Corporation.
By Brad Wilkins. Source: CC BY-SA 3.0"

a record 14.2% of GDP, it was only 6.9% of GDP a decade later, and in 2022, it was just under 3% of GDP. There is no doubt that these trends will exacerbate the demographic issues outlined above.^{xxxii} Thus, from the Chinese perspective, it is of considerable importance to increase

influence over the organisation that coordinates policies at the global level that directly affect demographics in other countries of the world including the West. This would enable a change in the WHO's priorities – for example, less emphasis on the issue of combating diseases of civilisation or addiction in developed countries, what translates into life expectancy statistics and, consequently, the overall population size.

In this context, China's interest in the WHO may also be linked to protecting its own food and tobacco industries from international regulations. According to public health experts, the current Framework Convention on Tobacco Control of the World Health Organization (WHO) has not significantly contributed to reducing the number of smokers. In recent years, under pressure from the WHO, there has been an increase in efforts to combat alternative products to cigarettes, indirectly protecting China's strong tobacco industry.^{xxxiii}

The second factor prompting China to become more involved in the UN and its agendas is the issue of Taiwan. The Republic of China in Taiwan, which is recognised by only 13 countries in the world,¹ has long expressed interest in greater participation in the work of some international organisations, especially the WHO. For Taiwan, this has as much a symbolic dimension (breaking the country's isolation) as a practical one (its 23 million population and the world's 20th-largest economy are effectively excluded from international cooperation, which was to hinder, among other things, the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic). However, the PRC government in Beijing has consistently sought to isolate the island, depriving it of allies and

excluding from multilateral cooperation, which is expected to prompt the government in Taiwan to initiate "reunification" talks with the PRC.

Despite its efforts and the arguments related to the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as support from countries like the USA and the EU member states (including the unanimous adoption of a joint resolution supporting Taiwan's participation as an observer in the World Health Assembly during a joint meeting of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs and the European Union and the Senate Health Committee in Poland), Taiwan was not invited as an observer to the WHA session held in late May in Geneva in 2023.

As pointed out by Bob L.J. Chen, the head of the Taipei Representative Office in Poland, in an article for "Gazeta Wyborcza," the WHO's constitution clearly states that the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being, regardless of race, religion, political beliefs, economic or social condition. Therefore, if any member state (implicitly referring to China) uses the WHO as a tool to pursue individual political gains, it contradicts the mission of the WHO.^{xxxiv} Taiwan's position seems justified, as representatives from the island were invited to participate in the World Health Assembly by the WHO Director-General for eight consecutive years, from 2009 to 2016. However, invitations ceased to be extended after President Tsai Ing-wen, from the Democratic Progressive Party, was elected in Taiwan. She refuses to recognise the 1992 Consensus, which indicates that there is only one China, although defined differently by authorities in Beijing and Taipei. The coincidence

¹ According to established practice, countries recognise as legitimate Chinese authorities either the government in Beijing or in Taipei, which does not prevent Taiwan from maintaining rich unofficial relations with the US, among others.

between the election results and the suspension of invitations to the WHA for representatives of the new Taiwanese government is clear.

Another motivating factor driving China's increased external activity is the lessons drawn from the COVID-19 pandemic. China is meticulous in shaping the narrative about itself on the international stage, presenting itself as a responsible global power and an advocate for the interests of developing countries in the global South. Therefore, from the beginning, China has sought to deflect any responsibility for the international spread of the COVID-19 pandemic from its borders. As early as the beginning of the pandemic in late 2019 and early 2020, Chinese authorities prohibited doctors in Wuhan from reporting the scale of the threat, which delayed the implementation of measures that could have slowed the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus beyond China. Subsequently, Chinese propaganda attempted to shift the blame for the virus's origin and its spread to the U.S. while portraying China as a global leader in pandemic response. China distributed masks, tests, and its own vaccines to countries that were favourable to its interests ("Chinese aid" largely had a commercial character, and where it took the form of non-repayable assistance, it was aimed at achieving political and propaganda goals). The goal was to demonstrate that the Chinese authorities had effectively managed the pandemic and that any subsequent infections were the result of negligence by other countries. Chinese-controlled media, diplomatic missions, collaborative online platforms in other countries, as well as fake accounts and bots on social media, were used to propagate the Chinese narrative.^{xxxv}

In this context China, after the U.S. froze its contributions to the WHO, pledged an additional

\$50 million to the organisation in March and April 2020, while praising the organisation for its objectivity and impartiality of assessment, in apparent contradiction to the position of the U.S. and some its allies. Japanese Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso suggested e.g. the WHO change its name to "China Health Organization". However, the additional measures were not just a goodwill gesture. As experts quoted by Business Insider pointed out, China used the issue of Washington's dues freeze to increase its influence over the organisation, and its leadership "was captured by [countries like] China".^{xxxvi} This judgment may be justified insofar as, even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the position of Director General of the organisation from 2006 to 2017 was held by Hong Kong-born and strongly promoted by the PRC Chinese woman Margaret Chan, whose tenure was not without controversy.

These criticisms of the World Health Organization (WHO) emerged in the context of how it managed the H1N1 influenza pandemic in 2009 and its response to the Ebola epidemic in West Africa in 2014.^{xxxvii} Regarding the H1N1 influenza pandemic, concerns were raised about the connections some experts working for the WHO had with medical companies. A report by the Council of Europe highlighted that due to WHO's mistakes, European agencies and governments lost significant amounts of money by fuelling unfounded public health concerns.^{xxxviii} In the case of the Ebola epidemic, despite the discovery of the first virus cases in December 2013 and the intensification of the epidemic in March 2014, it was only in August 2014 that Margaret Chan declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. What is interesting, a post-epidemic report by the Harvard Global Health Institute and the London School of

Hygiene and Tropical Medicine recommended reforms to the WHO, including the ability to declare pandemic threats independently of political pressure.^{xxxix} In the Chinese context, although she denied that there was pressure on her from the PRC, in 2016 she decided not to invite Taiwan to the World Health Assembly, even though the island's representatives had previously been invited as observers, pointing to the "One China" policy.^{xl} What's more, in the organisation's internal documents she was said to have demanded that the Republic of China be referred to as "Taiwan – a province of China".

Also, the current authorities of the organisation, which, according to press reports, would be elected thanks to strong support and lobbying from China, are controversial in the opinion of critics. Indeed, the new Director General, Ethiopian Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, does not have a medical degree, as first in the organisation's history. His management of Ethiopia's Ministry of Health was said to be questionable (including strong corruption within the organisation), and as Foreign Minister he was said to in turn favour strengthening the Chinese presence in the country. Also, his leftist views (politically he hails from the Marxist Tigrayan People's Liberation Front) may translate into the WHO's overall policies. Indeed, in recent years there has been a tightening of the organisation's stance on worldview and moral issues, which, regardless of individual views, may be considered beyond its basic tasks under the WHO Constitution. These include access to abortion and contraception and support for the LGBT community (e.g., in March 2022 WHO published new guidelines on abortion, calling for, among other things, the complete removal of restrictions on access to abortion, what also may have implications for demographic issues).



Houlin Zhao then Secretary General of ITU with Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. By M. Jacobson – Gonzalez. Source: CC BY 2.0

It is worth adding that China, building its influence in international organisations, seems to cooperate in this respect with Russia, which is also strengthening its position in the UN system. One of the first decisions of WHO Director General Ghebreyesus was the appointment of Russian woman Tereza Kasaeva as the Director of the WHO Global Tuberculosis Programme (at that time Russia had the worst tuberculosis record in the world). Kasaeva was selected under a fast-track procedure, a month after Ghebreyesus met with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the World Health Assembly in Moscow. Despite the war in Ukraine and Western sanctions against Russia, Kasaeva still holds a senior position at the WHO European Office for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases which is still located in Moscow, whose global director for years was a Russian, Svetlana Akselrod, who also served as WHO Deputy Director-General. Only on May 15, 2023, more than a year after the Russian aggression against Ukraine, WHO decided to move the office from Moscow to Copenhagen, which is to take place by January 1, 2024, at the latest.

Accusations of pro-China bias within WHO have also been raised, along with criticism of

relying too heavily on information from the Chinese government and a delayed response, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Chinese authorities reported cases of pneumonia of unknown origin on December 31, 2019, but WHO did not relay this information until January 5, 2020. WHO maintained a false position for an extended period regarding the unequivocal confirmation of human-to-human transmission of the coronavirus, which could have been influenced by limited cooperation with Taiwan due to pressure from China. Critical information about the virus and the course of the disease was already collected in Taiwan in early January. Until January 30, WHO also delayed declaring a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, which allows the Director-General of WHO to issue recommendations to member states to restrict international movement. This declaration was made only after a WHO delegation visited China and held discussions with Chinese President Xi Jinping. WHO's leadership also repeatedly called on member states not to impose logistical restrictions on the flow of people and goods from China even after declaring a public health emergency. However, the organisation's actions later in the pandemic, such as the Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan funded with \$1.7 billion, as well as its information and training activities, have been evaluated much more positively, demonstrating the potential of the organisation when its capabilities are effectively utilised.^{xii}

2.3.2.2 ITU

Another visible "battle" in the US-China rivalry within the United Nations system took place within the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the world's oldest international

organisation established to standardise and regulate the telecommunications and radiocommunications market. Currently, ITU has 194 member countries and, in addition to its headquarters in Geneva, has twelve regional offices. The organisation is responsible for the field of communication and information technologies and establishes international standards in various areas, from mobile telephony to communication satellites, including standards for 5G and 6G networks. Two approaches to the future of the Internet are currently colliding within the organisation: Western, based on the paradigm of freedom, and "sovereignty" promoted by countries such as China and Russia, which involve greater state control over online content and users. In the latter approach, standards should be created in such a way as to give governments the ultimate authority to decide whether something can be published on the Internet. ITU has become the main forum where both countries have lobbied for their agenda.^{xlii}

As quoted by POLITICO, Tom Wheeler, former Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, pointed out that "China has clearly been able to use the internet for the effect of social scoring." So, as Wheeler asks, "Do you want to restructure the internet so as to cause that?" I think that's the change that's happening here."^{xliii}

The promotion of the "sovereignty" vision within ITU was facilitated by the fact that Houlin Zhao, a Chinese national, served as the organisation's Secretary-General for 8 years. During this time, the Chinese leadership within the organisation pushed for an expansion of ITU's mandate to include internet-related standards, increased the

employment of Chinese nationals within the organisation, and introduced initiatives to transform Chinese standards into global ones. POLITICO also noted that China “launched a well-funded and wide-ranging campaign to secure lower-tier, but crucial, positions in global digital standards bodies to carry out its own program.” The portal also pointed out that Chinese representatives are present in every working group shaping the organisation’s agenda.^{xliv}

After Houlin Zhao’s term ended, the Chinese supported the candidacy of Rashid Ismailov, a former Russian Minister of Telecommunications and an employee of European telecommunications companies. His election would have meant the continuation of previous activities. However, at the conference in Bucharest, the United States managed to push through the candidacy of Doreen Bogdan-Martin, to some extent symbolising the West’s regaining control of the organisation.



Secretary General of the ITU Bogdan-Martin with Deputy Secretary of State Sherman. Source: By U.S. Department of State. CCO

The greater support for its own candidates, along with the decision to stay in the WHO, shows a certain shift in policy

toward international organisations by the Biden administration, which rather than withdrawing from particular organisations due to China’s growing influence in them, among other things, points to the need for greater US activity. China’s greater influence in the organisations of the UN system can be so much more problematic for the US and the broader West that China’s agenda often stands in obvious contradiction to the purposes for which these bodies were established. For example, the “Chinese vision of human rights” promoted by China in the Human Rights Council – and especially many of the practical measures implemented by the Chinese government – does not correspond to that expressed in even the most basic United Nations conventions. In the area of health, on the other hand, China’s priority – due to demographic trends – is not at all necessarily the good health and longevity in the West, which may reflect, for example, on the WHO’s agenda. The same may be true of high-tech organisations and agencies like the aforementioned ITU.

2.3.3. Infrastructure and connectivity

A major field of US-Chinese rivalry is also the area of infrastructure and major infrastructure projects. This is reflected in China’s powerful economic initiatives, such as the idea of “One Belt One Road” (OBOR) which, was put forward by Xi Jinping in the fall of 2013. It consists of a land and a maritime part. The first one – the Silk Road Economic Belt – includes more than a dozen corridors from China to the EU, which involves the expansion or construction of new roads, rail routes, including high-speed rail, and transmission – oil and gas pipelines. The second part – the 21st -century Maritime Silk Road is to consist of the development of an

infrastructure network linking China, through Central Asian and Middle Eastern countries, to Europe. Over the following months, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) became the flagship project of China's foreign policy. By the end of 2014, Chinese authorities announced the establishment of the Silk Road Fund with capital for investments totalling \$40 billion.

According to Beijing's narrative, investments under the BRI are intended to promote the economic development of the countries involved in the project based on the principle of "win-win cooperation." Chinese officials also present the project as a "Chinese Marshall Plan," emphasising its inclusive character. It is meant to encompass more than 60 countries across Asia, Europe, Africa, and even Latin America. The first Belt and Road Forum in May 2017, an international conference dedicated to the initiative, saw the participation of 29 heads of state or government, including the presidents of Russia and Turkey, as well as the prime ministers of Italy, Spain, and Poland.



Xi Jinping and Italian President Sergio Mattarella during a visit regarding the Belt and Road Initiative Source: Presidenza della Repubblica/Wikipedia Commons/CC0

Among the most well-known projects carried out under the BRI are the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the expansion

of the Piraeus Port in Greece. In the case of CPEC, plans include the construction of approximately 1,000 kilometres of new roads, 1,800 kilometres of railway lines, a series of power plants and new power blocks, an airport in Gwadar, and a massive expansion of the port in that city. The project is valued at \$46 billion. In Piraeus, the Chinese acquired a 67 percent stake in the port from debt-ridden Greece for €385 million and committed to investing an additional €350 million in the facility's infrastructure.



Gwadar Port. Source: By Saadsuddozai/Wikipedia Commons/CC BY-SA 4.0

China is also investing in infrastructure in Africa, South America and Central Europe. In Africa, China is now the largest investor in infrastructure projects (Chinese investment is seven times that of the next investor) and Chinese companies have completed, among others, the \$1.2 billion Tanzania Gas Field Development Project in 2015; the \$3.4 billion 750-kilometer Ethiopia-Djibouti railroad in 2016; and the \$3.8 billion 750-kilometer railroad in Kenya in 2017.^{xlv} South America is a relatively new area of Chinese activity, but already in 2014 the cumulative value of Chinese direct investment exceeded \$100 billion, and China's EXIM Bank and China Development Bank are also lending for infrastructure investments made under the OBOR banner.^{xlvi} In the central part of the Old Continent, China is implementing the Budapest-Belgrade rail

link project, a \$1.3 billion highway from the port of Bar in Montenegro to Belgrade – for which a loan was provided to the government in Montenegro – and a Chinese company has won and executed a tender to build a bridge to the Pelješac peninsula in Croatia.

From a U.S. perspective, the Belt and Road initiative goes beyond infrastructure. On the one hand, it serves to extend Chinese economic and political influence over the countries through which the new transportation corridors, along with related investments, will run. On the other hand – as one might assume – OBOR is intended to serve the purpose of securing supply lines and transport routes from Europe and the Middle East to China. Until now, Chinese trade has been based on maritime transport, and could therefore be easily interrupted in the event of a possible conflict or crisis with the United States by the US Navy. In the case of a parallel land route, it would be much more challenging. Therefore, the Chinese project will reduce China's dependence on maritime trade routes that pass through the easily blockable Malacca Strait, which has strategic implications for the United States. As highlighted in the December 2018 document *Assessment on U.S. Defense Implications of China's Expanding Global Access* published by the U.S. Department of Defense: "While some OBOR projects appear to be motivated by economic considerations, OBOR also serves a greater strategic purpose."^{xlvii}

For these reasons, the United States, on the one hand, actively discourages other countries from cooperating with China in the area of infrastructure, pointing out, for example, the risk of the so-called "debt trap," and, on the

other hand, proposing its own alternative initiatives. An example of this is the BUILD Act (Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development Act), signed by the US President in October 2018, which brought a number of changes to the dimension of US development assistance. Under it, a new agency, the United States International Development Finance Corporation (USIDFC) was established to promote private capital investment in developing countries to stimulate economic development, create jobs and reduce poverty. The USIDFC is to provide financing and insurance for investment projects, including for critical infrastructure, that will contribute to sustainable development and economic growth in these countries. The initiative is intended to create a private capital alternative to politically motivated PRC infrastructure investments. The US has also made efforts internationally to create an alternative to OBOR. Indeed, in 2022, the G7 countries established the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), an outgrowth of the B3W (Build Back Better World) initiative announced a year earlier. According to the project, G7 countries, with the support of private capital, are expected to mobilise a total of about \$600 billion in infrastructure investments in the areas of energy, transport, digital communications, health and the environment over the next five years. These investments are to be based on high standards in the areas of transparency, anti-corruption procedures, respect for the environment or labour rights - areas where most criticism is levelled against Chinese investments. One of the first significant projects under the initiative is the Lobito corridor connecting the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia via Angola to the Atlantic

and, in the future, the Indian Ocean. Also on the list of initiatives to be supported are renewable energy and nuclear power projects (small modular reactors) in Angola, Indonesia, Romania or Brazil, among others.^{xlviii} On the other hand, in 2019, the US, together with Japan and Australia (subsequently joined by the UK and Spain), established the Blue Dot Network (BDN) initiative to certify the quality and soundness of infrastructure projects thus, encouraging investors. In Central Europe, the U.S. has taken a keen interest in the Trilateral Initiative as a potential alternative to cooperation between countries in the region and China in the area of infrastructure.

Conclusions

1. The US-China relationship appears to be becoming increasingly confrontational, with the Biden administration largely continuing the line adopted by Donald Trump.
2. Regardless of temporary fluctuations in Washington-Beijing relations, there is no doubt that the U.S.-China rivalry is structural, and while it is not taking the form of military confrontation it is spilling over into ever new areas both geographically and thematically. In the latter dimension, it manifests itself in such areas as technology, diplomacy and infrastructure, among others.
3. In the area of technology, the United States, in addition to strengthening its own capabilities (e.g., through the CHIPS Act), is increasingly requiring allies to limit their cooperation with China (currently, in addition to issues of 5G technology development, this mainly concerns countries with developed semiconductor production capabilities – Taiwan, the Netherlands and Japan).
4. U.S.-China rivalry is also intensifying in the forums of international organisations, as was recently seen against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic at the WHO or the election of a new ICT leadership. China is trying to increase its influence in individual organisations like the WHO – e.g. by filling leadership positions with its candidates and “buying votes” of developing countries – because of its own vested interests (blocking Taiwan, demographic and worldview issues, promoting its vision of human rights), which may influence its agenda.
5. The Polish government should increase its vigilance on documents, regulations or standards coming out of international organisations heavily influenced by China and Russia, such as the World Health Organisation, or Information and Communication Technologies. New regulatory proposals coming out of such organisations should be analysed holistically and interdepartmentally (current forms of interdepartmental consultations are often fictitious), and take into account not only the opinions of the relevant ministry, but also the perspective of ministries responsible for foreign affairs, defence and internal affairs or think tanks. It is also worth examining in this regard the existing norms and agreements from international organisations that are particularly vulnerable to authoritarian states.
6. The intensifying U.S.-Chinese rivalry may bring the Central European region, in addition to the threat (further prioritisation of the Chinese threat at the expense of the Russian threat to NATO's eastern flank), also certain opportunities, especially in the area of infrastructure (including further U.S. support for the Three Seas Initiative) or modern technologies (moving production chains to allied countries – the

new Intel's facility planned to be built near Wroclaw may be an example). Poland and other countries should monitor such initiatives as the PGII, looking for additional financing opportunities for infrastructure projects, especially those implemented in cooperation with other CEE countries, or supporting the acquisition of investments by countries that are particularly important from the perspective of Polish interests (e.g. Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia).

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3



A new global technological hegemon? China's quest for technological dominance

Andrzej Kozłowski

3.1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the mankind, countries have tended to be the most innovative and have possessed the most advanced technology to get an advantage over the other competitors. Innovation is a drive of economic and civilisation growth and the revolutionary technologies often guarantee domination on the global arena. The very good illustration of this thesis is the time of the Cold War and technological competition between the USSR and the United States and the latter country innovations that contributed to the collapse of the USSR and the victory of Western world. Currently, we live in a world where China tries to replace the United States as the top superpower and both countries engage in a hegemonic competition and one of the main areas of rivalry is technological superiority. Has China been determined to become a new technological hegemon and succeed the United

States or are the claims of Chinese technological hegemony exaggerated?

3.2. Chinese technological strategy

When in 2007 the American company Apple started to produce iPhones in China, local companies were unable to produce most of the components of the highly sophisticated smartphones and were forced to import them from more technologically advanced countries either from region or all the way from Europe. Eleven years later Chinese companies were not only able to produce almost all the necessary components of iPhones but also create smartphones, which are better and more advanced than Apple products. It is just one example illustrating the change in China's ambition in the technological field and how Chinese companies transformed from

assembling foreign components to creating a cutting-edge technologies.ⁱ The others include fully automated factories, mines, port and warehouse already in operationⁱⁱ or the first commercial autonomous taxi service starting up in Beijing.ⁱⁱⁱ



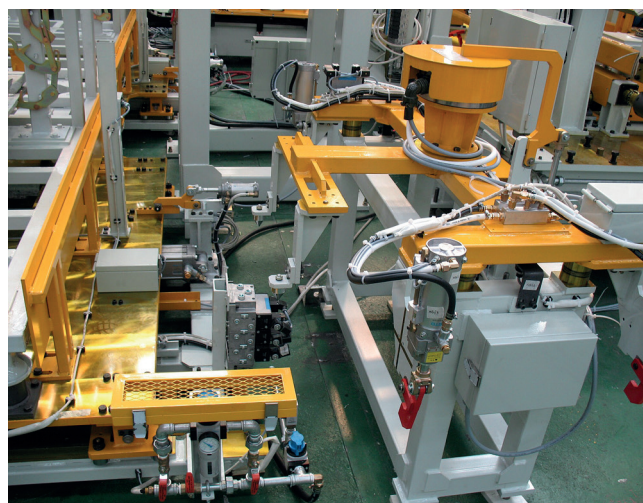
First iPhone on display under glass at Macworld 2007. Source: Arnold Reinhold/ Wikipedia Commons/4.0

Chinese rapid economic expansion was built largely on attractive, cheap labour forces. But China always wanted to be a prominent player in the technological field. In 2006 China adopted Medium and Long-Term Plan for the Development of Science and Technology, where the key term was “indigenous innovation” and the document focused mainly on advanced technologies and promotion of the concept of “indigenous innovation”. The plan focused on developing leading-edge advanced technologies by investing in R&D from state and industry sources, accumulation of intellectual property, setting of distinct technical standards and leveraging access to the Chinese market in exchange for foreign technologies.^{iv} These main pillars would be later developed in more detailed strategic plans.

3.2.1. Made in China 2025

In 2015 China demonstrated the next strategic document regarding the Chinese technological development – the national strategic plan

and industrial policy called Made in China 2025. According to this document, the modern technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, Internet of things, autonomous vehicles and latest generation of telecommunication network will play a crucial role in the great civilisation leap, which should help them replace the United States as the strongest superpower on the Earth by 2049, on the one hundred year anniversary of the creation of the People's Republic of China. Technology plays a key role here.^v



Manufacturing equipment Source: Mixabest/Wikipedia Commons/CC 3.0

The heart of this strategy, which copies German plan, is intelligent manufacturing, which focuses on applying the tools of information technology to increase productivity e.g. to use Internet of Things to connect small and medium sized companies to increase their efficiency in global production and innovation networks. China has broader and more ambitious goals and the Made in China 2025 enumerates 10 main priority sectors:

New advanced information technology;

1. Automated machine tools &robotics;
2. Aerospace and aeronautical equipment;
3. Maritime equipment and high-tech shipping;
4. Modern rail transport equipment;
5. New-energy vehicles and equipment;

6. Power equipment;
7. Agricultural equipment;
8. New materials;
9. Biopharma and advanced medical products.^{vi}

The Made in China 2025 aims to increase competitiveness of Chinese companies, bring production of components and final products to China, move Chinese firms up to the value-added chain in production and innovations networks and to achieve a much greater international brand recognition. The plan also called for Chinese companies to increase their investment abroad.^{vii}

The Made in China 2025 differs in many ways from Medium and Long-Term Plan for the Development of Science and Technology. Instead of focusing only on innovation the Made in China 2025 plan involves the entire manufacturing process and promotes not only advanced industries but also traditional industries and modern services. The source of financing is also a little bit different with a more significant role of market mechanisms and a lesser role of state involvement. There are also clear and specific measures for innovation, quality, intelligent manufacturing and green production. The language itself also differs with the term "indigenous innovation" used only twice.^{viii} The aim of Made in China 2025 strategy was clear to shape "China's manufacturing base from labour-intensive industries to high-technology sectors".^{ix}

3.2.2. Digital Silk Road

Digital Silk road (DSR) is a technological dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) supported by the government in 2015 and

promoted during the Belt and Road Forum in 2019.¹ DSR includes three main pillars:

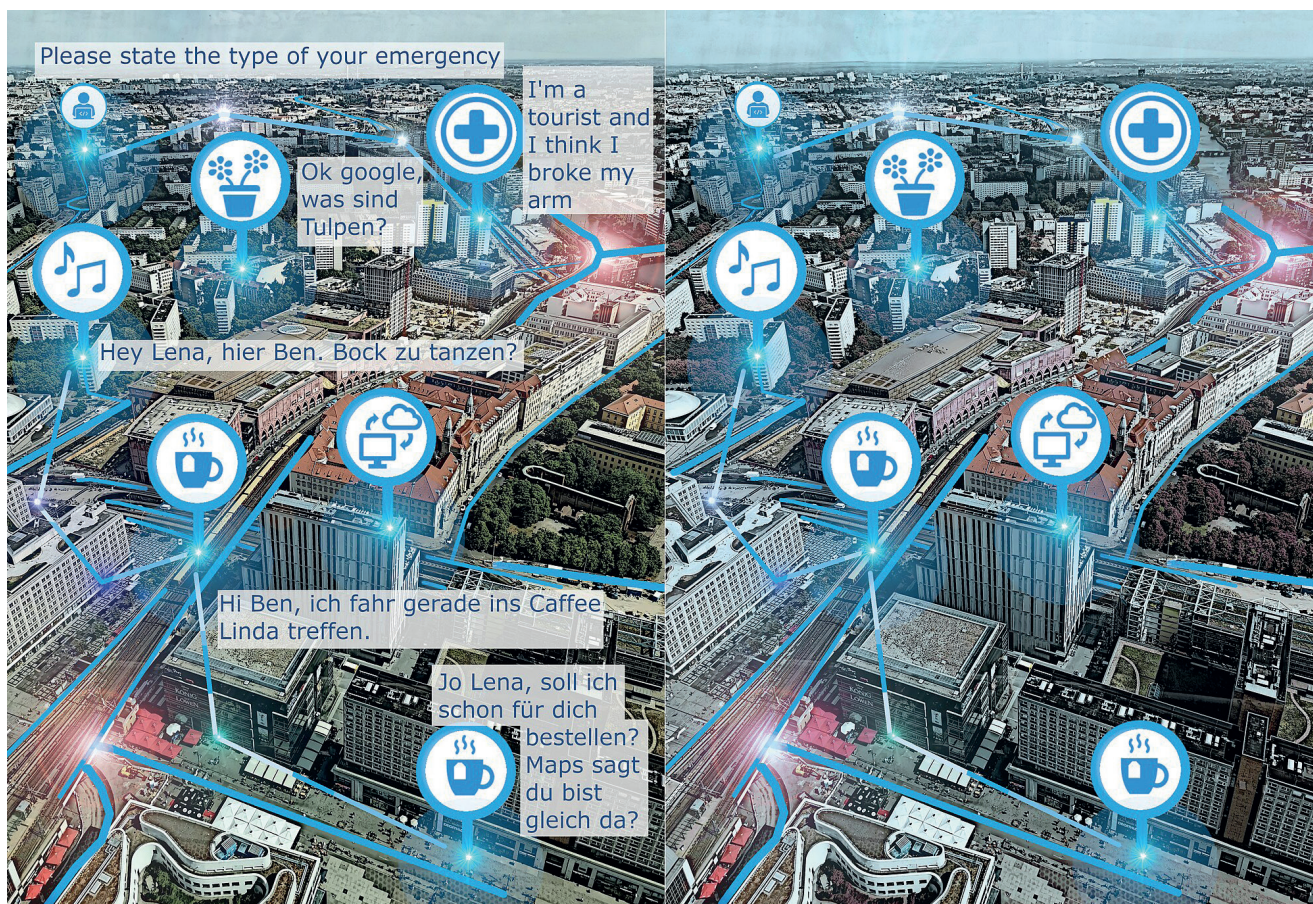
- Digital infrastructure;
- Smart City;
- Cross-border e-commerce.

One of the major elements of the DSR is the establishment of fast broadband Internet connections in the Belt and Road countries. The project covers the increase of China's participation in the undersea cables, which in 2019 was around 12% but should increase to 20% between 2025 and 2030. China also launched the BeiDou Navigation Systems, which serve as an alternative to American GPS, Russian GLONASS and European Galileo. More than 130 countries decided to sign cooperation agreements to use it.^x

Two other main principles were building smart cities both domestically and internationally using Chinese smart-city technologies and information and communication technology. The last main element is establishing a cross-border e-commerce and here China signed a Memorandum of Understanding with 20 countries, which led to the significant rise of e-commerce export in first quarter of 2022 by 92.7% in comparison to the last year.^{xi}

DSR is one of the strategies aimed at technological primacy and a greater autonomy in global digital order. DSR also allows China to build digital ecosystems in the Belt and Road countries. Many of them have underdeveloped telecommunication infrastructure with low Internet penetration. Chinese technology, which is cheaper than the Western equivalents seemed very attractive for rather poor countries. The

¹ The Belt and Road Initiative was adopted by Chinese government in 2013 as a global infrastructure development strategy to invest in more than 150 countries and international organizations. In August 2023, 155 countries signed up to the BRI.



Big-city-connect-data-protection Source: Eschenzweig/ Wikipedia Commons/CC 4.0

second important thing is also the reduction of China's dependence on other global technology leaders. By the end of 2018 98% of international Internet data and telephone traffic transferred through the telephone traffic owned by US tech giants. In the same time, the Chinese companies might become global champions through the easier access to local markets in BRIs countries and its reliance on Chinese infrastructure.^{xii}

By 2023 17 countries have signed Digital Silk Road-specific MoUs with China. 2001 Chinese companies implemented more than 1300 overseas investments and cooperation projects in the past two years and almost 60% of them were associated with DSR. China is effectively using the growing demand for digital technologies in the developing world and therefore they are creating an interdependence with the Chinese technological base. Chinese technology, which is relatively cheaper than Western equivalents is

also attractive for the developing countries and the debatable quality and allegations of using them to spy have not yet decreased the interest in the technology.^{xiii}

3.2.3. China's New Standards Strategy

One of the latest strategies of China, which influences the technological domain is China's "Standards 2035", which was published in October 2021. In this document, China shows its ambitions to shape the standards and technical specifications of products and services that influence the products, services and processes used by consumers worldwide. In order to become a technological hegemon, Chinese government wants to set global standards for emerging technologies, such as 5G, Internet of Things and artificial intelligence. China perceives technical standards as a driving force behind innovation and as a tool to strengthen research and development in technologies such

as artificial intelligence, quantum computing or biotechnology. The strategy aims also to improve technical standards by raising their level level in the respective sectors. The growing influence on worldwide technical standards by China, will also allow to dictate the terms of technological innovation in certain critical technologies.^{xiv}

This document is also an extension of the Made in China 2025 plan, which aimed to strengthen manufacturing industry. Technological standards are also perceived by China as a tool for the promotion of industry optimisations and upgrades, which is key in case of high-end equipment, integration of big data and industrial digitisation processes in the country. As China perceives a very important role of technology in the raising importance of industry, it believes that technical standards might also increase this competitiveness. The strategy should also help to fashion Chinese standards into international ones which is linked with the growing international position of Chinese companies. It should be possible by the increasing participation of Chinese delegations in international bodies, which will facilitate the process of shaping international standards.^{xv}



Xi Jinping. Source: The Presidential Press and Information Office/Kremlin. ru/CC 4.0

Chinese President Xi Jinping plans to use state tools to build economic and political advantage

over the United States and technology is a crucial component of this process. Through the years China has developed various strategies, which are connected with each other and are complementary. However, all of them want to make China a technological hegemon and set goals both for domestic and international policy. China especially plans to use new technologies to boost its own industry to be more competitive worldwide. Furthermore, Chinese authorities want to promote their technology abroad especially in developing countries but also influence the world technological standards to help Chinese companies growing worldwide.

3.3. Main areas of technological dominance

The main areas of the Chinese-American rivalry in the technological domains include semiconductors, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, 5G and other key technologies, which will be decisive for economic development.

3.3.1. 5G

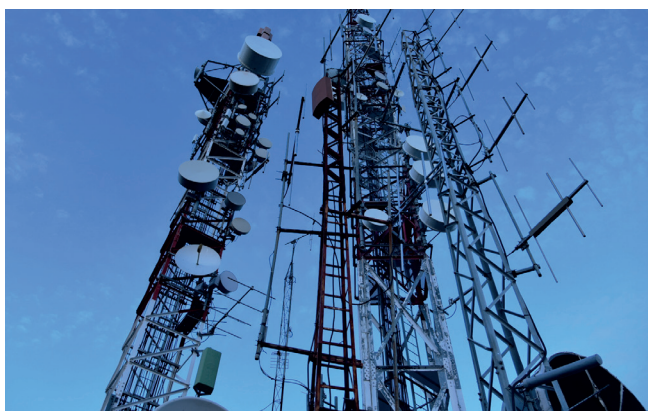
China is a dominant player in 5G technology, which will be a foundation of the new industrial revolution. The main competitors of Beijing-controlled companies in this field are Swedish Ericsson and Finish Nokia with the United States companies lagging behind. Despite the fact that more American cities have been connected to 5G than Chinese ones, Washington is behind Beijing in this domain. The context of this data is important, as American cities are in most case smaller than Chinese and less populated. It is obviously only one aspect of the success of 5G rollouts but the Chinese are still ahead in terms of speed, number of Chinese 5G users and deployed base stations.^{xvi} Their number rose only in China from 1.43 million in 2021 to 2.31 million

in 2022 – out of the world total of 3 million – despite American sanctions. Huawei built these stations with older version of chips, which were not banned.²



5G Source: DENAN Production/Flickr/CC 2.0

The American 5G is also slower, in some cases even by half in comparison to the Chinese equivalent and has a higher latency that even the previous generation of the telecommunication network – 4G, which makes it more difficult to effectively and safely use autonomous machines. "US also promotes a consumer-oriented Big Tech over industry application and their spectrum allocation favours Wi-Fi over mobile broadband" – claims David P. Goldman.^{xvii} Furthermore, China as the first country allocated spectrum in the 6GHZ band to 5G and 6G services to "promote global or regional division of 5G/6G spectrum resources and provide groundwork to promote mobile communications and industrial developments at home".^{xviii}



Telecommunication infrastructure. Source: Wallpaperflare/CC 4.0

Beijing telecommunication infrastructure has also been an important part of the Chinese exports to the Global South countries such as Brazil, Turkey, and members of ASEAN.³ It helps to conduct the digital transformation, modernise payment systems and in that way gives new opportunities to the marginalised people. It also reduces the costs of services such as education or healthcare.^{xix} To sum up, in case of 5G technology China is leading the global race and it is happening even with the sanctions against its main telecommunication giant Huawei and the Western countries deciding to withdraw and replace Huawei equipment. China has a distinct advantage in 5G broadband, a critical element in business automation. Transmitting thousands of data without delays and on high speed is crucial for technologies such as Internet of Things and artificial intelligence.



TSMC factory in Taichung's Central Taiwan Science Park. Source: Briáxis F. Mendes/ Wikipedia Commons/CC 4.0

3.3.2. Semiconductors

Today semiconductors are the key element of every modern technology from artificial intelligence, space technology to defence systems and therefore they are the critical components in Chinese-American competition. Considering the fact that the demand for chips will only increase as the more and more technologies need them, this element will

² Trump administration imposed sanctions to stop Huawei expansion. More on this topic you will find in the further part of the article

³ ASEAN - Association of Southeast Asian Nations

be gaining significance in Chinese-American technological rivalry.^{xx} In the semiconductor field, the Chinese government has invested significant funds to create its own industry but it still lags behind the United States, Taiwan and South Korea in its ability to produce the most sophisticated and advanced products. It was before the American sanctions and now the situation is even worse. China could not import the fastest and most efficient chips with gateways of 7 nanometres or less because of the American sanctions.^{xxi} It is clear that the sanctions imposed by the US and its allies will hamper the Chinese development in this field for a moment.⁴ It could also have another effect and Chinese domestic companies might eventually start to create advanced chips especially as the Chinese government adopted the package worth 143 billion dollars to galvanise the domestic chip industry. It is also a move meant to counter the US imposed sanctions.^{xxii} The key question remains if and when China will be able to produce domestically the most advanced semiconductors and where technologically the West will be when it happens but it is obvious that current sanctions will only increase the cost for Chinese and make it more difficult.

3.3.3. Artificial intelligence

The rivalry between China and the United States is tense as far as the artificial intelligence is concerned. Lately, Huawei has managed to roll out a business-centred AI system to train AI systems for customer in manufacturing, pharmaceutical R&D, mining, railways, finance and other industries. It was designed and dedicated to industry and in contrast to the ChatGPT is not able to compose poetry or respond to the Internet users' odd questions.

But also, the industrial systems do not require the complexity and computing power such as ChatGPT.^{xxiii} The Huawei platform is powered by Chinese accelerator chips.

This situation reflects the different approaches to AI. The American technology companies closely worked with the universities believing that the freedom of research and use is critical. It raised the voices that American AI companies dedicated a lot of time to approach consumer entertainment but it is not always true. Some American companies such as Nvidia try to apply AI to Reinforcement Learning,⁵ while Microsoft is examining the possibility to control drones.^{xxiv} However, China based on the model of national programmes set out in Made in China 2025 strategy mobilises business, universities and the local units of Chinese Communist Party to focus on development of the AI in the strategic areas.^{xxv} It focuses mainly on the automation of the work, improvement of the working environment and where and how AI might replace human employees. Generally, China tries to win the Fourth Industrial Revolution race with the application of AI to productions, logistics and services.^{xxvi}

The Chinese companies struggle with large language models (LLMs) and in this field they are at least two, three years or even more behind their U.S. counterparts and are still depended on American research and technology. Chinese AI developers face a far more limiting political, regulatory and economic environment than the American companies. They are also less original and innovative in research, and they are mostly reproducing research published abroad. China also sometimes uses plagiarism, which could

4 More about sanctions and American policy to win chip war you will find in subchapter The reaction of the United States and its allies

5 It is a machine learning training method based on rewarding desired behaviours and punishing undesired ones.



Artificial Intelligence. Source: Thomas Nordwest/Wikipedia Commons/CC 4.0

be seen in August 2021 when more than 100 scientists at Stanford collaborated to create a paper on foundation models – a category of the AI systems. Seven months later Chinese groups of researchers also drafted a paper on this topic, but it was highly plagiarised. Such an approach could be an obstacle for Chinese companies in assuming the leading role. It caused the Chinese response to ChatGPT such as Baidu's Ernie Bot or WuDao 2.0 be less advanced in comparison to the American counterparts.^{xxvii}

The limits on the semiconductors import will only deepen the problems of AI sector in China as these components are crucial for artificial intelligence development and China currently does not possess the capabilities to produce the most advanced ones.^{xxviii} In one of the analyses of Chinese LLMs, 17 models used chips produced by American Nvidia and only 3 were based on Chinese-made chips. Not

only the chips production might negatively affect the AI development in China but also cause economic slowdowns and growing regulatory scrutiny. It may drive Chinese start-ups to operate overseas and being offered to Western companies. Another characteristic of the Chinese system is the lack of freedom of speech and existing censorship, which might also hamper the development of LLMs. Even their Chinese creators poorly understood these models and boundaries of what might and might not be said. It is difficult to find the balance between the usefulness of the AI and avoiding issues from troublemaking topics.^{xxix}

3.3.4. Manufacturing industry

Despite the struggles on the AI field, in 2023 China has become the world leader in the largest manufacturing industry, i.e. automobiles, with 3 billion USD in global sales. According to David P. Goldman the high-tech manufacturing and



New drives for notebooks roll off of factory lines Source: Robert Scoble/ Wikipedia Commons/CC 2.0

economies of scale only increase China's edge. Especially on the market of electric cars, China might offer a cheap fully-featured electric cars and dominate world markets. The 5G network and the advancement in the industrial use of artificial intelligence might also lead to Chinese domination of other branches of industry with cheaper and more effective products.^{xxx}



Thermal energy storage. Source: Kallerna/ Wikipedia Commons/ CC 4.0

The United States is lagging behind in the manufacturing industry, and has shown little commitment to the Fourth Industrial Revolution technology. U.S. installed 5G networks in factory automation in General Motors, Ford and John Deere however, these facilities produce most of their products in China. Furthermore, these firms have joint ventures with Chinese manufacturers so they might be considered to be supportive of Chinese industry. The problem here is that

American industry, after the decline in the first decade of 21st century does not have the scale to beneficially utilise the application of AI technologies.^{xxxii}

3.3.5. Solar energy

China is also perceived as a solar superpower, and is one of its biggest technological triumphs in recent years. Chinese companies today have dominated almost every element of the value chain offering not only the highest quality but also attractive prices. It is a result of the well-planned strategic goals, which started in 2010 when China's State Council prioritised solar power generation as a strategic emerging industry. China also has a very strong position in the production of batteries that power electric vehicles. Considering the current trend of moving away from combustion engines the Chinese position will only grow stronger.

3.3.6. The Chinese-American competition in other technological fields

China has also been making significant progress and slowly winning against the Europeans and the Japanese in production of advanced machine tools such as robotics arms, hydraulic pumps and other equipment, ultrahigh-voltage transmission lines, high-speed rail and other. Chinese scientists achieved quantum-encrypted communication by satellite and are taking steps towards unbreathable quantum communication. Furthermore, China has been also the first country, which landed a rover on the far side of the moon.^{xxxii}

On the other hand, China has its own problems with the development of commercial jets. Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China



Googleplex Headquarters Source: The Pancake of Heaven!/ Wikipedia Commons/ CC 4.0

(COMAS), which is an answer to the market dominated by Airbus and Boeing is still at a nascent stage despite fifteen years of development. Not to mention that a lot of the equipment is imported from the West.^{xxxiii} The United States beats China also in computer power, particularly in the domain of most powerful supercomputers. In the top ten the US boasts 5 supercomputers with 150 in the top 500, while China possesses only two in the top ten and 134 in the top 500.^{xxxiv} Possessing a supercomputer significantly helps in many technological domains and it is an important component to becoming the technological leader.

China's technological companies are also far behind the American ones, which shows that Beijing has a lot to do if it wants to replace the United States as the technological number one. By market cap in the top 10 there is only one Chinese company – Tencent and 8 American ones, clearly showing which companies dominate worldwide.^{xxxv} It is one of the arguments of those who sceptically approach China's tech leadership. China also was not able to innovate a new category of consumer electronic such as digital cameras or game consoles and compete with Europe and the United States in automobiles.^{xxxvi} However, China controls a significant part of the market of smartphones with brands such

as Xiaomi, OPPO, VIVO producing a high quality and popular equipment, though they are still behind Korean Samsung and American Apple worldwide but achieved a dominant position on certain markets.^{xxxvii}

The combination of AI and high-speed broadband will create a data highway crucial for industry 4.0, Internet of things and the comprehensive transformation of the business. However, China still lags behind the West in several technologies. China's chip industry is at least five years behind the leader - the Taiwanese TSMC company and was heavily dependent on all the equipment needed to produce chips on import from Japan, the United States and Europe.^{xxxviii}



Microsoft Corporation headquarters in Redmond Source: Coolcaesar/ Wikipedia Commons/ CC 4.0

3. 4. Tools to achieve a global technological hegemony

China uses traditional ways of achieving global technological hegemony by increasing investments in research and development, supporting companies from technological domain, giving impetus to start-up development, extreme protectionism of Chinese manufacturing system.^{xxxix} However, it is not enough and Chinese used also other less clear tools. One of the most important tools is cyberespionage on massive, strategic scale and attempts to gain influence

in international technological bodies to promote own technological standards.

3.4.1 Manufacturing ecosystem

Manufacturing ecosystem is one of the most important factors in China's tech industry rapid development. China has prioritised technology sector not in research and advancement of science but in improving manufacturing capabilities. In 2021 China clearly stated in the latest five-year plan that they intend to become a manufacturing superpower.^{xi} Beijing needed two decades to create an unrivalled production capacity because of deep labour pool, dense cluster of supplies and government support. Also, cheap credit and energy played a vital role for tech companies in building their strong position. The great example is a solar energy sector, where a lot of companies supported by the government entered to the market and the competition became very high, forcing the companies to risky investments to gain an edge over others. It created a strong Chinese position in this sector. It is an opposite approach to the Western one, which invests a lot in R&D and product branding, while moving physical production abroad to the places, which offer a cheap labour force.^{xii} The rise of China's industrial capabilities is also the result of the country's large and advanced manufacturing workforce. It is vast and highly experience skilled workforce that can solve problems quickly.

Chinese success in industries such as solar components or energy batteries is the example of the strengthening of the country's manufacturing and quality control, which was generated by mass production. The striking example is that China used foreign firms such a General Electric, Telsa or Apple to learn from

and boost their own industrial capabilities. Chinese employees might learn from foreign companies and later transfer this knowledge to the local companies. This manufacturing-driven approach might prove critical in challenging Western technological domination.^{xiii}

3.4.2. Cyberespionage

Since the beginning of 21st century, Chinese hackers have engaged in one of the largest espionage campaigns in history. Former NSA and US CYBERCOM commander general Keith Alexander said that cyber-espionage conducted against U.S. companies was the largest transfer of intellectual property from one nation to another.^{xiii} The dominant number of operations was executed by Chinese hackers. First significant hacker operation was known as the Titan Rain campaign, which targeted NASA, the US Army Information Systems Engineering Command, the Defence Information Systems Agency, the Naval Ocean Systems Centre, and the US Army Space and Strategic Defence Installation. The next campaigns targeted a wider range of goals from industry entities to commercial real estates.



F-35, Source: Rock6942/ Wikipedia Commons/ CC 4.0

One of the most valuable assets collected by Chinese hackers was the data on the F-35 fighter jet.^{xliv} In 2018 Senate Judiciary Chairman Chuck Grassley said that "China is believed to

be responsible for 50 to 80% of cross-border intellectual property theft worldwide, and over 90% percent of cyber-enabled economic espionage in the United States.^{xlv} The Chinese espionage campaign was also recognised by the Former FBI Director Chris Wray who said that "there's no country that's even close" to China in regards to such activities.^{xlvi}



Houlin Zhao. Source: ITU Pictures/ Wikipedia Commons/CC 2.5

In 2015 China and the United States agreed that "neither country's government will conduct or knowingly support cyber-enabled theft of intellectual property, including trade secrets or other confidential business information, with the intent of providing competitive advantages to companies or commercial sectors". However, China has not stopped its cyber activity against American companies and broke the agreement multiple times.^{xlvii} China's cyber espionage campaign, according to various estimations, reduced the technological gap between China and the West, which in fair conditions would take 15 years and it is recognisable as one of the most successful cyber campaigns.^{xlviii}

3.4.3. Gaining influence in international technological bodies

China also tried to increase its own position in the technological field by strengthening its position in international bodies. The most visible example was the International Telecommunication Union,⁶ which affected the daily lives by recommending standards for communications and digital technologies. Despite the fact, that they are not binding, they have an enormous informal impact on all the standards adopted around the world and might provide economic advantage to companies that hold patents on technologies essential to those standards. For years, China has tried to influence organisations responsible for adapting technological standards by placing its own citizens there. For almost twenty years Chinese influence has only grown and the most significant achievement was the nomination of Houlin Zhao for the position of ITU Secretary-General. His two terms of office allowed to deepen and institutionalised relations between China and ITU, increase number of Chinese employees in the organisation and also support the Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese also dominated the ITU by sending the largest delegations to ITU study groups and flooded them with proposed specifications and contributions to make the Chinese standards global ones and increase the market share for Chinese companies.^{xlix}



International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Buildings, Geneva, Switzerland. Source: ITU/I. Wood/CC 2.0

6 The International Telecommunication Union is one of the oldest international organizations established in 1865 as an International Telegraph Union. ITU is a very important organization where standards for communications and digital technologies from cellular phones to radio broadcasts to satellite orbits are negotiated and approved. (About International Telecommunication Union (ITU), <https://www.itu.int/en/about/Pages/default.aspx>)



Barack Obama Source: NASA HQ PHOTO/Flickr/CC 2.0

3.5. The reaction of the United States and its allies

The current technological hegemon, the United States, decided to react to stop the Chinese efforts to outrun Washington in the technological field. The Americans used here one of their most crucial advantages over China – a significant number of Allies, which will be ready to join the efforts to limit Chinese ambitions.ⁱ

The Trump administration started the so called “trade war” with China and the technological component played an important role. However, long before his administration, in 2012 President Obama imposed tariffs on Chinese solar imports to protect domestic producers but without success and these measures did not prevent China from building dominant position in this field.ⁱⁱ



Huawei Technology in Shenzhen. Source: Brücke-Osteuropa/Wikipedia Commons/ CC 0

One of the most spectacular illustrations of Trump's efforts was the American campaign to crack down Chinese telecommunication giant Huawei. In 2018 Huawei was eliminated from 5G rolling in the United States, their smartphone banned from use in the military and public administration and finally Huawei was also removed from the list of technology providers for public institutions. Australia, Great Britain, Japan and Sweden followed the American example and also banned the Chinese company from participating in building its new telecommunication infrastructure. Huawei was also blacklisted by the US and cut off from American software and hardware. Chinese giant offered its own system Harmony instead of Google's Android, but it did not achieve success and the global sale of Huawei smartphones significantly decreased. Huawei tried to lobby to influence authors of the most popular applications to move to the Harmony system, but it would mean for American companies that they will be removed from the American market.ⁱⁱⁱ Today, Harmony is mostly used within China as it is not offering the most popular applications and therefore it is not attractive to the western audience.

3.4.1. The Clean Network Initiatives

In 2020 Trump's administration announced the Clean Network initiative, which assumed the clearing of networks from Chinese equipment and software and tried to influence its allies to follow. Secretary of state Mike Pence was sent to Central Europe to convince countries to join the Clean Network initiative. However, the results were not very satisfying as only Romania and Albania decided to participate immediately.

Joe Biden's administration continues the assertive policy of his predecessor. In 2022



Mike Pompeo. Source: U.S. Department of State/Wikipedia Commons/ CC 0

the restrictions on selling advanced Western chip technologies have been imposed to curb the country's access to critical technologies. The new regulations made the companies unable to supply China with advanced computing chips, chip-making equipment and other products used to power artificial intelligence and placed broad limits on chips destined for Chinese supercomputers without receiving a special licence. The license could be granted only in special cases, which will be evaluated individually.^{liii}

Biden's administration new bill also introduced the broad international restrictions, that prohibit all companies (not only Americans) from selling chips used in artificial intelligence and supercomputing in China, if they were made with U.S. technology. Also sending broader American technologies to 28 Chinese companies is forbidden by the Biden administration.^{liv} The Chinese companies, which worked on autonomous driving and gene sequencing and other issues using the advanced algorithms power and artificial intelligence should be affected. Furthermore, the new restrictions imposed by Biden's administration will also

damage the semiconductor producers in China. In that way the United States is trying to establish a stranglehold on these advantageous technologies to curb China's technological ambitions^{lv}. The sanctions were mainly aimed at the most advanced chips and should not have a broad commercial impact, but the restrictions might be expanded in the future if necessary.^{lvi}

The Biden administration sanctions also might hit the American individuals working in China in the chip industry. New export control forbids Americans from supporting advanced Chinese chip design and there have been more than 40 top executives working in this sector in China. It was an element of American broader strategy to cut off Chinese from know-how in this crucial industry.^{lvii}



Biden administration Source: The White House/Wikipedia Commons/ CC 0

China's technological development was hit not only by the United States but its allies as well. The Netherlands imposed restrictions on exports of selected semiconductor equipment. The most painful for China are the limitations on Dutch company ASML – a key equipment supplier to computer chipmakers. AMSL has been forbidden from maintaining, repairing and providing spare parts for controlled equipment without governmental approval.^{lviii} Another key player in semiconductor field - Japan added semiconductor-manufacturing equipment

to its export control list, therefore making it more difficult for China to import tools vital in chips production. With this decision Tokio followed United States' effort to curb Chinese chip technology development.^{lix} The U.S. and its allies sanctions are here aimed at maintaining technological edge by the United States and slowing China development of the newest chips and implementing them into military and intelligence systems. Washington wants to make from China a second-tier technological power as well as to maintain the chip supply chain in the triangle: Europe, the United States, Japan and Taiwan and banning China from being a part of it. Such a way of thinking leads to a decision to create Chip 4 Alliance to create a technological partnership and build resilient chip supply chain.^{lx}



Corporate headquarters of ASML Source: A ansems/Wikipedia Commons/ CC 0

Biden's administration not only introduced sanctions against China but also heavily invested in the development of domestic chip production. The Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors and Science Act of 2022 (CHIPS Act) came into law on August 9, 2022. The new bill invests \$280 billion to strengthen US semiconductor capacity, incentivise R&D and set up a regional high-

tech hub. The general aims of these bills are boosting American competitiveness, innovation and ensuring national security. Furthermore, the CHIPS Act plans to increase investments in domestic semiconductor manufacturing capacity and increase innovation in leading-edge technologies (quantum computing, AI, clean energy, nanotechnology and others).^{lxi} Biden's policy also bears the fruits and has brought significant investment in chip production. The Taiwanese TSMC will increase its investment in the United States to the level of 40 billion USD with one of the largest foreign investments in the United States. First factories should be launched in 2024^{lxii}. Also, the Micron Technology announced its plan to spend 20 billion dollars to build the largest ever U.S. semiconductor factory^{lxiii} and Apple signed a deal with chipmaker Broadcom to develop elements of 5G devices.^{lxiv} These examples show Biden's proposal-initiated changes in the semiconductors and chips quickly after announcement.

Conclusions

1. Despite some pessimistic statements that Chinese technological hegemony is inevitable shared by authors such as David P. Goldman it is too early for such conclusions.^{lxv} There is a "fog of war", which obscures the



President Joe Biden signing the bill. Source: The White House /Wikipedia Commons/ CC 0

clear image of the real technological status of China.

2. China still lags behind in several critical areas and with the growing number of sanctions and a reversal from globalisation it could be only more difficult to balance the West's advantages, not even mentioning outperforming.
3. The strong anti-Chinese tools and measures introduced recently are currently difficult to evaluate but they inevitably harm the Chinese technological position of e.g. manufacturer of chips, which are necessary everywhere. The question remains about the range of Chinese losses and if the world-class Chinese industries and the country's science development could replace the imported technologies.
4. The United States is the most important player on technological field and there are no clear indicators that this situation will change in the foreseeable future.
5. It seems that era of globalisation of every aspect of technologies comes to the end with more focus on decoupling and regionalisation of the technological chain. Europe and Poland will need to adjust to the world, which is more and more technologically divided, and it might not only be a political decision but also a practical one.
6. The current tensions show that the world is heading into a Chinese-American technological division and unfortunately the European Union's strategy of technological autonomy only exists on paper. It means that the EU countries need to choose between China's and the United States' technology. It seems that time of balancing between these two countries has come to the end.
7. In the case of Poland threatened by the Russian neo-imperialism the choice is clear

and favouring the US might end with the deterioration of the Polish-Chinese relations and potential harmful effects on economic cooperation with Beijing. The EU and Poland need to face this challenge but also use the opportunity to bring more technological capital such as semiconductor facilities to its territory. Here is the biggest opportunity for Poland to bring more investment to the country. The Intel investment in creating a of first-of-its kind end-to-end leading edge manufacturing semiconductor value chain in Europe in Wrocław which will create approximately 2000 jobs and thousands of indirect suppliers and temporary workplaces.^{lxvi} Poland has also engaged in a dialogue with Taiwan on semiconductor cooperation hoping for the facilities of the largest chip producer TSMC.^{lxvii}

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4



The rising Chinese assertiveness in relations with neighbours on the South China Sea

Mateusz Chatys

4.1. Introduction

The South China Sea (SCS) is a semi-enclosed marginal area situated within the Pacific Ocean, characterised by its proximity to China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam. The region encompasses over 250 land features, which can be classified into six major groups: the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands, the Pratas Islands, Scarborough Shoal, Macclesfield Bank, and the Natuna Islands. It's significance stems from the abundance of natural resources, vital transport routes, and strategic value. Annually, approximately one-third of global shipping cross the South China Sea, accounting for slightly more than a quarter of global trade in volume and slightly less than a quarter in value. Diverting international trade away from this area would pose substantial difficulties and expenses if not insurmountable challenges. Even alternative routes that bypass

the Malacca Strait via the Lombok, Makassar, or Sunda Straits eventually converge with the South China Sea near the vicinity of the Spratly Island.i

Furthermore, the South China Sea boasts a rich fish stock encompassing a diverse range of 3,365 fish species. This region constitutes one of the world's most biologically diverse marine areas, contributing to approximately 12% of the global fish catch. Consequently, control over this area grants access to a vast resource of saltwater fish. The littoral states heavily rely on maritime resources, with fish protein accounting for 22.3% of the Asian population's diet, compared to the global average of 16.1%.ⁱⁱ

According to U.S. Energy Information Administration estimates, the South China Sea is believed to harbour 11 billion barrels of oil and



The South China Sea with inclusion of apparent Chinese claims. Source: By United States Department of State Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs. CCO

190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. However, the economic viability of extracting these resources remains uncertain.ⁱⁱⁱ

Beyond its transport routes and resource abundance, the strategic significance of the South China Sea extends further. It serves as a natural barrier for mainland countries' ships, impeding their direct access to open oceans. From China's perspective, the eastern and southern peripheries of the South China Sea form what is commonly referred to as the "first island chain." This geographic feature obstructs the Chinese Navy's passage to the Pacific or Indian Oceans without navigating through the vicinity of the littoral states, thereby making their movements easily traceable. Additionally, China regards the South China Sea as the sole accessible sea with sufficient depth to support extensive submarine operations. In contrast, the Yellow and East China Seas are considerably

shallow, rendering them unsuitable for such manoeuvres. As a result, control over the South China Sea becomes a prerequisite for China to project its military power into the open oceans.

4.2 Main disputes in the South China Sea regions between China and its neighbours

The South China Sea, recognised as one of the world's significant and contentious maritime regions represents a complex geopolitical domain. Accordingly, it frequently becomes susceptible to misunderstandings, incidents, propaganda, and, more recently, coercive actions. The South China Sea comprising a series of disputes around land features and maritime borders is a relatively recent occurrence. The mapping and delineation of features within the South China Sea only commenced in the latter portion of the 19th century, and no country asserted substantial claims over these features until the early 20th century.^{iv}

The complexities inherent in the South China Sea situation are characterised by a multitude of interrelated factors, including territorial disputes pertaining to islands, rocks, and reefs, maritime disputes encompassing the utilisation of resources within the waters and seabed, as well as legal disputes concerning rights for economic or military purposes. The dispute involves six primary countries: China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. It is worth noting that Indonesia, to a certain extent, may also be considered part of this group due to its overlapping maritime claims with China in the vicinity of the Natuna Islands. However, the Indonesian government has refrained from officially aligning itself as a party to the dispute, as doing so may confer legitimacy to Chinese

claims articulated through the contentious “9-dash line” concept.^v

The 9-dash line, widely regarded as a key source of contention in the South China Sea holds significant importance in the ongoing disputes. Initially introduced in 1947 by the government of the Republic of China, it took the form of the 11-dashed U-shaped line, which served to delineate Taiwan's territorial claims. Subsequently, following the Chinese Nationalists' defeat, the People's Republic of China (PRC) adopted this U-shaped line concept and modified it in 1953 by eliminating two of the eleven lines. As a result, the 9-dash line emerged, encompassing both Beijing's claims to maritime areas, estimated to cover approximately 60-90% of the South China Sea waters, and territorial claims over the Spratly Islands, Paracel Islands, Pratas, Macclesfield Bank, and Scarborough Shoal.^{vi}

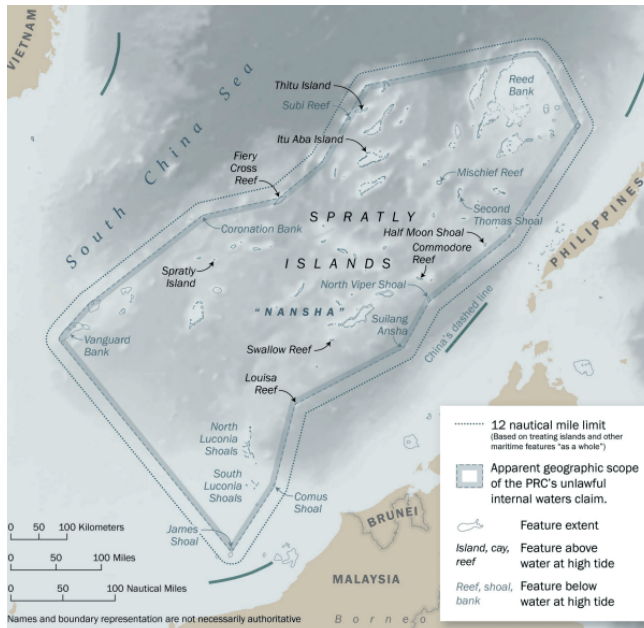
4.2.1. The beginning of China's expansion in the South China Sea

The early 1970s mark a notable surge in international interest concerning marine natural resources, which elevated the significance of controlling sea areas and land features. The Philippines, aiming to strengthen its position decided to assert authority over the initial territories in the Spratly archipelago, successfully occupying five islands and reefs in 1970 and 1971. Subsequently, in August 1973, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) took control of the first six land features in the Spratlys. A month later, Saigon officially incorporated eleven Spratly features into Phuoc Thuy Province. This series of actions, involving the gradual acquisition of land features and the initiation of offshore petroleum resource exploitation programmes, which included conducting the first seismic



Comparison of Dashed Line in 2009 and 1947 Maps. Source: By United States Department of State Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs. CCO

surveys and awarding contracts to oil companies, contributed to taking action by Beijing. China took advantage of the withdrawal of United States naval power from Southeast Asia in the early 1970s and responded by increasing the presence of commercial fishermen in the vicinity of Duncan Island, located within the Crescent Group of the Paracel Islands (which comprise the Crescent Group in the southwest and the Amphrite Group in the northeast). This move led the RVN navy to deploy frigates to the Paracels to safeguard its territory. On the other hand, China swiftly reacted by sending warships from Hainan Island to the Crescent Group, mounting a counterattack. The significant turning point occurred on January 19, 1974, when clashes erupted between RVN vessels and Chinese ships. The PRC emerged victorious in this confrontation, with the RVN navy ultimately compelled to abandon the Paracels due to the lack of assistance from the

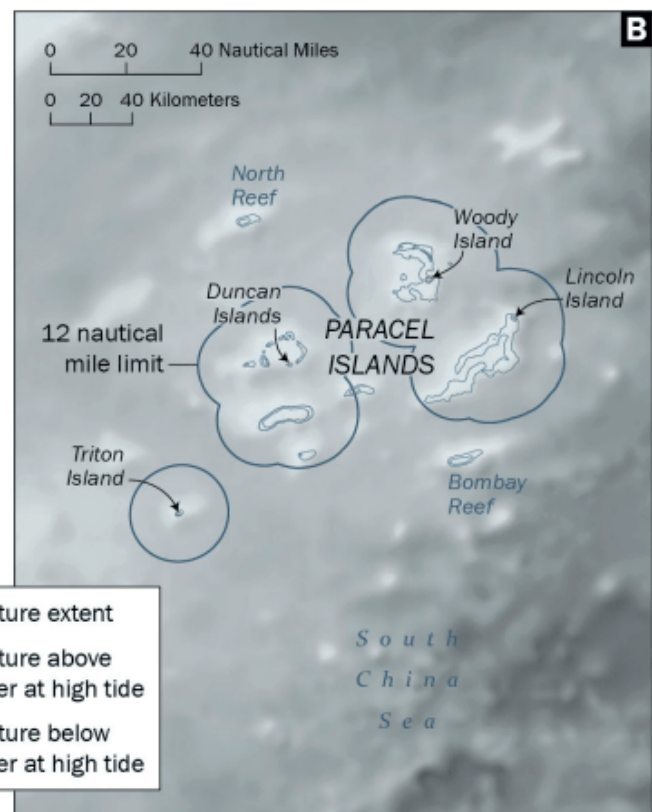
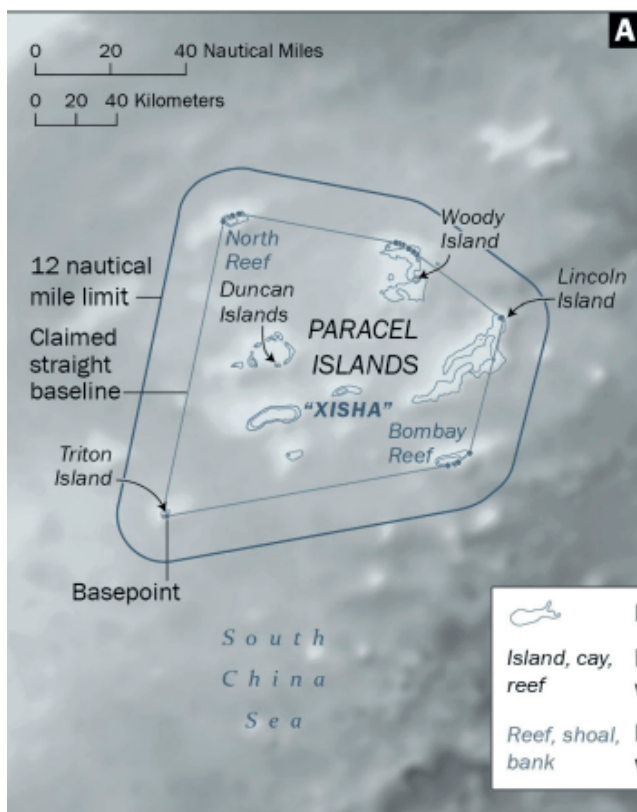


Spratly Islands with inclusion of apparent Chinese claims. Source: By United States Department of State Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs. CCO

U.S. Navy's 7th Fleet.^{vii} Chinese forces sank one South Vietnamese naval vessel and severely damaged three others. In total, 48 Vietnamese and 18 Chinese soldiers were killed in the clash. Moreover, 47 Vietnamese and one American adviser were captured. Beijing used this success

to take control of the entire Paracel archipelago, whilst the government announced that it had control over all resources in this area and their adjacent seas.^{viii}

In the late 1980s, China once again capitalised on favourable regional strategic conditions. This time however, the focus of Beijing's attention was on the Spratly archipelago, where Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia held dominant positions at that particular period. Notably, the Soviet Union, which had been a patron of Vietnam since 1978, gradually diminished its alliance commitments to Vietnam throughout the 1980s. Under the policy of retrenchment led by Mikhail Gorbachev, all support for Vietnam came to an end by 1987. Hence, the PRC perceived a temporary window of opportunity to establish a presence in the Spratlys, with minimal risk of encountering robust international opposition.^{ix} In 1987, the Chinese navy conducted its first



Paracel Islands. With (A) showing the PRC's claimed straight baselines and territorial sea limits and (B) showing the approximate 12-M territorial sea limits from lawful baselines. Source: By United States Department of State Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs. CCO

major survey of the Spratlys, and the following year, in 1988, it proceeded to seize six reefs (including Johnson South Reef) from its former ally, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This military action resulted in the sinking of three Vietnamese ships and the loss of more than 70 Vietnamese sailors.^x In response to China's aggressive move, Vietnam took action by either occupying or reinforcing its existing presence on 21 other Spratly features. This escalation in the region's territorial disputes marked a significant shift in the geopolitical dynamics of the area during that time.^{xi}

4.2.2. Legal and coercive actions of Beijing

On February 25, 1992, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress adopted the "Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone." This legal framework included China's assertion of sovereignty over several island groups, such as the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos and the Pratas Islands. The enactment of this law prompted diplomatic protests from various countries, including Vietnam, which voiced objections at both Party and State levels.^{xii} Other Southeast Asian nations also expressed dismay and concern, as they viewed the law as containing overly ambitious sovereignty claims. Nevertheless, China dismissed these objections. Afterwards, China took advantage of a power vacuum in the region, brought about by the reduced presence of the United States in the region. This reduction occurred following the closure of the Subic Bay naval bases and Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines in 1992, after the Philippine Senate rejected a new military base treaty with the United States in September 1991. Furthermore, Russian naval forces had already withdrawn from Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union

in 1991 further altered the regional dynamics.^{xiii} During this period, instead of Vietnam, it was the Philippines that faced China's maritime coercion. In January 1995, a Filipino fishing boat captain reported being detained for a week by Chinese forces near Mischief Reef, which is approximately 135 nautical miles off the southern coast of the Philippine island of Palawan. This incident led to conducting an air patrol, which revealed China's establishment of structures on the Mischief Reef. Beijing asserted that these structures served as "wind shelters" for fishermen, organised by Chinese local fishing authorities, and offered their use to fishermen from other nations. However, the Philippines declined the offer, as accepting it could imply acknowledgment of Chinese sovereignty claims. Another significant incident occurred in January 1996 when the Philippines and China clashed over Mischief Reef. This marked the first instance of China engaging in a direct confrontation with a littoral state other than Vietnam over a contested feature in the South China Sea.^{xiv} Soon after, in the late 1990s, tensions around Mischief Reef were revived due to enhancements of the Chinese installations on the reef. Moreover, Beijing reaffirmed its South China Sea claims by issuing the "Law on the Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf of the PRC" in 1998.^{xv}

4.2.3 The Scarborough Shoal standoff and its aftermath

The beginning of the 21st century marked a relatively calm period in the South China Sea, during which the PRC directed its efforts towards strengthening relations with Southeast Asian countries, including other claimant states. China's primary aim was to foster economic linkages, thus reinforcing these nations' economic dependence on China. However, in early 2012, the PRC reasserted its policy of

assertiveness in the South China Sea, culminating in the Scarborough Shoal incident in the first half of the same year.^{xvi} Following several months of diplomatic and naval interactions between China and the Philippines, China imposed restrictions on accessing the shoals, effectively taking control and preventing Filipino fishermen from operating in the surrounding waters. As a result, the occupation of the Scarborough



ASEAN Summit. ASEAN Summit Oscar Siagian/ Ec.europa.eu/Public domain

Shoal commenced, constituting a clear violation of the nonbinding *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea*, a framework jointly developed by China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).^{xvii}

In October 2012, Chinese Foreign Minister Fu Ying visited Manila with the aim of resolving the dispute between China and the Philippines diplomatically. However, rather than reaching a compromise solution that would satisfy all parties, the minister issued a warning to the Philippine government. The warning discouraged the Philippines from taking the matter to international forums, such as the United Nations (UN) and ASEAN, which could potentially internationalise the dispute. Additionally, China urged the Philippines not to coordinate actions with other countries, primarily the United States, and to refrain from making press statements regarding bilateral negotiations. Essentially,

Beijing expected the Philippines to tacitly accept China's occupation of the Scarborough Shoal.^{xviii} In an attempt to coerce compliance, the Chinese government resorted to economic pressure by imposing an embargo on the import of Philippine bananas and other fruits. This embargo significantly impacted the Philippine economy, given that around 30% of its tropical fruit exports were destined for China. Consequently, the economic repercussions resulting from the Chinese occupation of the Scarborough Shoal compelled Philippine policymakers to recognise the need for enhancing their own military capabilities and strengthening relations with allies, particularly the United States.^{xix} Contrary to the warnings from Fu Ying, the Philippine government chose to internationalise the dispute by initiating an arbitration procedure on January 23, 2013, at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. This procedure was established under the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), aiming to settle the contested issues between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea. Notably, one of the key aspects to be addressed by the Tribunal was the validity of China's claims based on the 9-dash line and their compliance with UNCLOS. Although Beijing rejected the complaint and subsequently withdrew from the proceedings, it is crucial to emphasise that China's consent was not a prerequisite for the legal process to move forward.^{xx}

4.2.4 Sino-Vietnamese tensions over the HYSY-981 oil rig

Another instance of a significant crisis in the recent history of the South China Sea dispute occurred on May 2, 2014 with the deployment of the Haiyang Shiyou 981 (HYSY-981) oil rig by the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) within Vietnam's Exclusive Economic

Zone (EEZ) near the Paracel Islands. The rig was accompanied by at least 80 other Chinese ships including seven naval vessels. Beijing's provocative actions during this incident triggered one of the most substantial crises in bilateral relations since their normalisation in 1991, with some analysts even comparing it to the border conflict in 1979.^{xxi} Throughout the ten-week crisis, Vietnam responded by dispatching its Coast Guard and Fishery Surveillance Forces to the area where the Chinese rig was located, aiming to exert pressure on China to vacate the Vietnamese EEZ. However, China's significant military advantage rendered it challenging for Vietnam to achieve its objective. Eventually in July, the PRC removed the HYSY 981 oil rig, a month earlier than initially anticipated, and officially declared the completion of its exploration operation. Some observers perceived the HYSY 981 dispute as an endeavour by the PRC to substantiate its claims during the ongoing proceedings at the Permanent Court



Haiyang Shiyou 981 oilrig. Source: Xinhua photo accessed/ USNI News/CC4

of Arbitration, which was handling contentious issues related to the South China Sea dispute. This incident raised concerns about regional stability and underscored the intricate nature of the disputes in the area.^{xxii}

4.2.5. China's claims through the prism of the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal Award

To sum up, the extent and legal basis of China's claims in the South China Sea remain ambiguous, primarily due to the absence of a comprehensive and unequivocal articulation by the PRC government. A definitive and transparent account of China's precise claims and the legal underpinnings supporting them has not been provided. The most substantial information available is a government statement from July 12, 2016, which, in many respects contradicts the provisions outlined in the UNCLOS, ratified by China and all other claimant countries. According to Beijing's stance, groups of islands have the capacity to generate a collective territorial sea and EEZ. Moreover, China asserts the existence of unspecified "historic rights" that extend beyond the rights accorded to it under UNCLOS. These arguments are invoked by China whenever other parties involved in the South China Sea dispute attempt to undertake any activities within the area delimited by the 9-dash line. Consequently, Beijing opposes oil and gas drilling activities conducted by Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines off their respective coasts because such actions are perceived as a violation of China's purported historic rights in the region.^{xxiii}

The Chinese government continues its narrative even though the Arbitral Tribunal, registered under the Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration issued on July 12, 2016 its final award in the dispute between the Philippines and China over maritime claims in the South China Sea constituted under Annex VII of UNCLOS. More than three years since the Philippines filed the case, the tribunal unanimously decided in favour of the government in Manila. According to the tribunal's ruling, China's 9-dash line claim is

inconsistent with UNCLOS, and its historic rights pertaining to living and non-living resources in the South China Sea lack a foundation in international law and are incompatible with UNCLOS.^{xxiv} It is essential to underscore that the Chinese land reclamation endeavours undertaken to establish artificial islands were deemed to be in breach of its responsibilities to safeguard ecologically sensitive marine environments. The tribunal's verdict categorically determined that none of the contested high tide features qualify as "islands" under UNCLOS, as they lack the capacity to sustain human habitation or independent economic activities, being characterised as mere "rocks." Therefore, these features are entitled to generate only a territorial sea of 12 nautical miles. Accordingly, the ruling unequivocally stated that the EEZs in the South China Sea should be calculated based on the coastlines of the adjacent littoral states.^{xxv}

4.2.6. Control over disputed features in the South China Sea

The fundamental fact is that there are no uncontested features in the South China Sea, as both China and Taiwan lay claims to all of them. Notably, the PRC has established 20 outposts in the Paracel Islands and 7 in the Spratlys. Additionally, China exercises control over the Scarborough Shoal, which the Philippines also claim following its seizure in 2012. This control is maintained through a constant presence of the coast guard, although no facilities have been constructed on the shoal. Vietnam is the third party involved in the dispute over the Paracel Islands, yet it currently does not exercise control over any features in the archipelago. However, concerning the Spratly Islands, apart from China, Taiwan, and Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei also assert their claims. The largest feature in the Spratly archipelago, Itu Aba is

under Taiwan's control. Vietnam exercises control over 21 rocks and reefs in the Spratly Islands, while the Philippines occupies a total of nine features in the archipelago, including Thitu Island, which accommodates the only Philippine airstrip in the Spratlys. Furthermore, Malaysia exercises control over either five or eight features, depending on the applied criteria.^{xxvi} Brunei has asserted claims over Louisa Reef, Owen Shoal, and Rifleman Bank, designating them as features within its EEZ since the declaration made in



Chinese Shenyang J-15 carrier-based fighter aircraft. Source: By Japan Ministry of Defense, Joint Staff Office. CC BY 4.0

1984. However, it is noteworthy that Brunei stands as the sole claimant state refraining from asserting sovereignty over these islands, and it does not maintain any military presence in the said areas.^{xxvii}

4.3 China's approach towards its neighbours

In the initial phase of the South China Sea dispute, China adopted a delaying strategy towards its neighbouring claimant states. This approach was aimed at gaining time to modernise its navy and consolidate its influence in the contested areas, thus securing a stronger negotiating position in potential talks or direct confrontations. Since the PRC proclamation in 1949, Beijing pursued mainly a delaying strategy supported by occasional forceful interventions

aimed at bolstering its own position at the expense of other claimants. It is important to note that China's proactive actions occurred under favourable strategic conditions in the region, which helped minimise the risk of facing severe repercussions for its aggressive behaviour. Simply put, Beijing is eager to use a "window of opportunity".^{xxviii}

Consequently, the PRC expanded its influence by asserting control over the Paracel Islands at the expense of Vietnam, starting in 1974. Then, China directly engaged in territorial disputes in the Spratly Islands in 1988 and 1994, which resulted in adverse implications for both Vietnam and the Philippines. It was an example of switching from a delaying strategy to an escalation strategy. The 1994 Mischief Reef incident is of particular significance, which heightened concerns among Southeast Asian states and brought the South China Sea situation to the forefront of discussions within the ASEAN forum. The incident further highlighted the complexities and sensitivities surrounding the disputes in the region. The consequences of this event prompted ASEAN foreign ministers to make the initial proposal for "a regional code of conduct in the South China Sea" in 1996. The primary objective of this code was to establish guidelines aimed at reducing the likelihood of potential conflicts in the region. However, significant disagreements on various matters ultimately resulted in the signing of the nonbinding *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea* (DoC) in 2002. Despite its nature, both China and all ASEAN member states committed to resolving their differences through peaceful means and refraining from engaging in activities that could aggravate disputes or jeopardise regional peace and stability.^{xxix} Therefore, China decided to return to a delaying strategy in order to consolidate its



Vietnamese Naval Infantry in Spratly Islands. Source: By Ha petit. CCO

position in the Spratlys and manage diplomatic blowback at the same time. One of the outcomes of Beijing's change of strategy was the signing of the DoC in 2002, as well as reaching 2005 a joint seismic survey agreement with the Philippines and Vietnam covering a portion of the South China Sea. However, the latter lapsed in 2008 following legal controversy in the Philippines.^{xxx}

China employs diplomacy as a primary tool in its delaying strategy, consistently emphasising the preference for peaceful means and negotiations to resolve disputes in the South China Sea. A prominent example of such negotiations is evident in the China-ASEAN talks since 2002, aimed at formulating a more ambitious version of the Code of Conduct (CoC). Despite a fifteen-year negotiation process, the achieved results have been notably limited, resulting in the establishment of the Framework of the CoC in August 2017,^{xxxi} followed by *the Single Draft South China Sea Code of Conduct Negotiating Text* (SDNT) in June 2018.^{xxxii} The true intentions of the Chinese side are underscored by the declaration made by Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang in 2018, wherein he announced the envisioned development of the final CoC by 2021.^{xxxiii} Despite initial optimism sparked by Chinese assurances, this objective remains unfulfilled. In July 2019, China and ASEAN completed

the first reading of the CoC negotiating text, while the latest advancements include the completion of the second reading of the negotiating text in July 2023, accompanied by the implementation of guidelines aimed at expediting discussions on future drafts.^{xxxiv}

In 2009, diplomacy assumed a crucial role when China addressed a joint application submitted by Malaysia and Vietnam to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS). On May 7, China conveyed two official notes to the UN Secretary-General, expressing objections to the submissions made by Malaysia and Vietnam concerning their extended continental shelves in the Southern area of the South China Sea. Notably, this marked the first instance where China utilised the 9-dash line to assert its territorial and maritime claims in an official international setting.^{xxxv}

Furthermore, China employs diplomacy as a measure to discourage commercial activities in disputed regions of the South China Sea. For example, from 2006 to 2007, China issued 18 diplomatic objections against foreign oil companies engaged in exploration and development projects within 9-dash line. China asserts that any exploration operations in the South China Sea should be subject to consultation with Beijing, and particular decisions made by other parties on this matter are viewed as a violation of Chinese rights, sovereignty, and jurisdiction. Beijing aims to safeguard its maritime rights through diplomatic opposition and dissuade foreign energy companies from collaborating with other claimant states.^{xxxvi}

China's diplomatic stance towards neighbouring states entangled in South China Sea disputes also can be defined by its insistence on addressing

the issues through bilateral negotiations. Simultaneously, Beijing refrains from considering solutions involving arbitration, mediation, or multilateral negotiations. This approach is pursued to uphold its dominant position over rival claimants and to deter the interference of states not directly engaged in the dispute, particularly the United States and its allies such as Australia and Japan, which could counterbalance Chinese advantage in the region.^{xxxvii}

4.4 The main aims of Chinese assertiveness on the South China Sea

From the early 2000s to 2010, China pursued a rather moderate policy, maintaining relatively low tensions, barring occasional incidents in the East and South China Seas. However, since 2012, there has been a notable shift in Beijing's approach to the situation, often referred to as "assertive unilateralism," with the primary objective of asserting its national sovereignty. The pivotal moment that marked China's expansionist ambitions and intensified concerns among other nations regarding Beijing's hegemonic stance was the announcement of the East China Sea Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) on November 23, 2013. Although operational constraints prevented similar actions in the South China Sea at that time, China actively sought to enhance its operational capabilities. To this end, a comprehensive set of operating mechanisms, commonly known as "grey zone activities" have been developed. These activities aim to bolster China's presence and influence in the South China Sea without escalating the situation to a full-blown military conflict. Moreover, grey zone operations are cost-effective and relatively easy to deploy, especially for a country with such potential as the PRC.^{xxxviii}

According to the definition provided by the RAND Corporation report, the grey zone is "an operational space between peace and war, involving coercive actions to change the status quo below a threshold that, in most cases, would prompt a conventional military response, often by blurring the line between military and nonmilitary actions and the attribution for events."^{xxxix} James J. Wirtz identifies three types of grey zone activities: the *fait accompli*, proxy warfare, and the exploitation of ambiguous deterrence situations. Southeast Asian claimant states bordering the South China Sea have experienced Chinese engagement in all aforementioned types of activities.^{xi}

To address its operational limitations in enforcing an ADIZ over the South China Sea, China initiated significant land reclamation and construction endeavours on multiple reefs within the Spratly Islands chain. Over the past decade, starting from 2013, China has reclaimed approximately 1,295 hectares of new land in the region^{xii} Through this reclamation strategically crucial airstrips have been constructed alongside essential supporting infrastructure, including hangars, supply stations, radar and air defence systems. These developments have facilitated China in establishing a forward presence capable of effectively operating a peacetime South China Sea ADIZ. The prime example of Chinese land reclamation is the development of Woody Island in the Paracel archipelago, which is used as the military and administrative capital for all of Beijing's claims in the South China Sea. Within the Spratly Islands, runways have been established on Subi Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, and Mischief Reef, while Gaven, Johnson, Hughes, and Cuarteron Reefs have been equipped with supplementary supporting facilities. The expansion of artificial islands has also provided China with observation

stations to closely monitor other claimant and non-claimant states' activities. As for the latter group, the activity of the United States is a prime objective. Furthermore, another underlying reason behind the land reclamation efforts lies in logistical advantages, particularly concerning fisheries and administrative considerations. Given the significant distance between mainland China and the Spratly Islands compared to the Philippines or Malaysia, such reclamation efforts have offered greater logistical convenience in managing and asserting control over disputed waters.^{xiii} China's extensive construction and fortification efforts in the South China Sea exemplify a *fait accompli*, as they result in a



The USS Makin Island conducts a replenishment with the USS Chung Hoon during a photo exercise in the South China Sea. Source: U.S. Department of Defense CCO

permanent alteration of the existing state of affairs. The actions of other claimant countries cannot undo this situation unless they resort to destroying or taking control of these man-made outposts, which would inevitably lead to a full-scale armed conflict with China.^{xliii}

Over a relatively brief period, China's presence in the Spratlys has undergone a remarkable transformation, evolving from the smallest to the most significant footprint. To effectively compete with China in this domain while avoiding the prospect of overt conflict, the adoption

of comparable strategies represents the sole feasible approach. Among the parties entangled in the South China Sea dispute, the Philippines and Vietnam stand out as the only countries except China known to have engaged in land reclamation endeavours to facilitate further development on their occupied islands and reefs. Notably, Vietnam's involvement in this realm has witnessed recent intensification. As per the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) report, Vietnam has substantially expanded its dredging and landfill activities at various outposts in the Spratly Islands, culminating in the creation of approximately 170 hectares of new land in the year 2022 alone, thereby raising its total land reclamation tally to 219 hectares over the past decade.^{xiv}

In the context of the South China Sea, proxy warfare represents another form of grey zone operations, commonly executed by the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) in conjunction with the China Coast Guard (CCG) and, on occasion, with support from the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). These activities are primarily carried out by the first two formations, which fall under the category of civilian law enforcement agencies, albeit with backing and often military guidance. The strategic utilisation of law enforcement vessels serves as an ideal approach for conducting grey zone operations. Beijing is aware that other nations will likely avoid direct confrontation with such units, perceiving them as less menacing than traditional military ships. Consequently, rival claimants' potential responses are limited to involving similar types of law enforcement vessels, which are inferior in various aspects to their Chinese counterparts. Notably, CCG and PAFMM units possess added advantages including their ability to remain present for

extended durations in disputed South China Sea areas within the controversial 9-dash line. Their operations are sustained by offshore stations established on artificial islands. Leveraging their considerable size and capabilities CCG forces engage in progressively aggressive behaviours towards smaller regional coast guards, resorting to actions such as "shouldering" or ramming vessels to divert them from their intended course or block access to disputed features.^{xiv}



Chinese ships firing water cannons at Vietnamese patrol vessels. Source: By Vietnam National Border Committee accessed via USNI News. CC

The majority of claimant countries in the South China Sea have encountered coercive actions from Chinese law enforcement agencies, with the exception of Brunei, which has not been involved in significant maritime standoffs with Chinese forces. On the other hand, the Philippines and Vietnam have been the primary targets of Chinese proxy warfare. In the case of the Philippines, an escalation in tensions can be observed, beginning around 2018, after a period of improved relations during President Rodrigo Duterte's pro-Chinese policy. However, the Philippine administration came to realise that Beijing would not relinquish its expansionist ambitions, even at the cost of maintaining friendly ties with Manila. By 2020, the deployment of Chinese coast guard and militia forces in the South China Sea reached its peak and has since maintained at a relatively constant level.^{xlvi} China has taken advantage of the global focus on the

fight against the COVID-19 pandemic to subtly intensify its presence in disputed areas, aiming to assert sovereignty and maritime claims. The Philippines has experienced such intensification, exemplified by the presence of over 200 Chinese fishing vessels at Whitsun Reef in early 2021. Consequently, Manila responded with a more assertive posture, mobilising its navy, coast guard, and Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources to monitor the situation and prevent a recurrence of the 2012 scenario around Scarborough Shoal.^{xlvii}

Under the current administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the situation in Philippine waters remains dynamic, with the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) frequently engaged in confrontations with the CCG and maritime militia, especially after the incident with aiming a military-grade laser by a CCG vessel towards the vessel BRP Malapascua on 6 February 2023.^{xlviii}



PRC Maritime Militia ship. Source: By Philippines Coast Guard. CCO

Similarly, Vietnam has been a primary target of Chinese coercion due to its expansion of facilities in the Spratlys and its measured military cooperation with the United States in recent years.^{xlix} For instance, in March 2023, there was notable activity of the Chinese survey vessel, the Haiyang Dizhi 4, accompanied by a significant number of Chinese maritime militia and fishing boats in Vietnam's EEZ waters.^l China has also employed similar actions against Malaysia and Indonesia. In February 2020, Malaysia

was compelled to deploy its vessels near the West Capella, a British drillship contracted to state-owned energy giant Petronas, working in Malaysia's EEZ, in response to an increased presence of the CCG.^{li} Likewise, in late June 2021, when the Noble Clyde Boudreaux, a semi-submersible rig, arrived to begin drilling two appraisal wells in Indonesia's Tuna block, China responded by sending a vessel to patrol the area. Indonesia reacted by deploying Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla) patrol ship KN Pulau Dana, along with several Bakamla and Indonesian navy ships, to monitor the movement of Chinese vessels in the region.

It is worth noting that in both the cases of Malaysia and Indonesia, the actions were related to exploring natural resources. Therefore, the Chinese government employs a combination of diplomatic tools and grey zone operations to prevent oil and gas exploration within the 9-dash line without its approval.^{lii}

Finally, deterrent ambiguities encompass a series of below-the-threshold actions, appearing innocuous or trivial, yet gradually undermining the power or position of the victim over time. An exemplification of this phenomenon can be found in the Chinese government's issuance of new biometric passports since 2012, incorporating a map featuring the 9-dash line in the South China Sea. This move sparked an assumption that by stamping these passports other countries' authorities might inadvertently validate China's expansive territorial claims. Naturally, the primary pressure fell upon rival claimant nations, who could ill-afford their actions being perceived as endorsing Beijing's assertions. Taking a resolute stance, the Philippines and Vietnam refused to stamp China's new electronic

passports that displayed the disputed waters of the South China Sea as Chinese territory, thus demonstrating their rejection of China's claims. Nonetheless, in a tactical response, both countries adopted the approach of issuing visas to Chinese visitors on separate forms, avoiding any implied recognition of the contentious map. After a persistent protest lasting seven years, however, the Philippines ultimately relented in November 2019, ceasing its objection to stamping Chinese passports. This marked a significant indication of the Rodrigo Duterte administration's shift in foreign policy towards China.^{lviii}

China employs various manifestations of the 9-dash line to assert its claims in the South China Sea, and among the neighbouring countries, Vietnam displays heightened sensitivity to such actions, leading to strong reactions against Beijing's attempts at legitimising its territorial assertions. In October 2019, tensions were reignited when a Vietnamese automotive importer was found selling Chinese-manufactured cars equipped with a navigation system featuring the 9-dash line.^{liv} This incident sparked renewed controversies surrounding the maritime dispute and prompted the Hanoi government to urge domestic importers to refrain from dealing with any products displaying similar maps. Furthermore, since 2019, Vietnam has taken additional measures to curb the influence of the 9-dash line in popular culture. Notably, the Vietnamese government banned several films that depicted the contested line, including titles such as "Abominable," "Uncharted," and "Pine Gap."^{lv} In some instances, other Southeast Asian nations followed Vietnam's lead. For example, DreamWorks' animated film "Abominable" was also removed

from theatres in Malaysia and the Philippines in response to concerns over the inclusion of the controversial line.^{lvi}

The category of deterrent ambiguities within the assertive actions of the PRC also includes a range of other initiatives, such as enforcing fishing bans in the South China Sea and introducing new legal acts that extend the authority of maritime law enforcement agencies (often in violation of international law) or unilaterally establishing administrative structures in the South China Sea. The fishing ban has been arbitrarily imposed by China since 1999 under the pretext of promoting sustainable fishing and improving marine ecology. In 2023, the ban was in effect from May 1 to Aug. 16 and encompassed waters 12 degrees north of the equator and included parts of Vietnam's EEZ and the Paracel Islands. Despite protests from Hanoi, the Chinese government has consistently maintained this practice, which not only challenges Vietnam's rights over the disputed region but also serves as a means to justify coercive actions against Vietnamese fishermen.^{lvii}

The establishment of two new administrative structures by the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs in April 2020 represents a recent and potentially perilous illustration of the Chinese government's utilisation of the "deterrent ambiguities" approach. The first administrative district, Xisha, encompasses the Paracel Islands and Macclesfield Bank, while the second, Nansha, includes the Spratly Islands. The primary objective behind the creation of these districts was to enhance administrative control over the disputed territories, thereby streamlining management efficiency and facilitating the construction

of additional infrastructure projects. Concurrently, this move has strengthened China's military presence in the region. By officially pronouncing the establishment of these new administrative districts in the South China Sea, Beijing has effectively formalised its control, producing enduring effects on the region. Despite objections raised by the Philippines and Vietnam, China remained resolute in its decision, disregarding the protests. Consequently, this instance should be regarded as a minor victory for Beijing, further consolidating its position in the contested area.^{lviii}

Lastly, the Coast Guard Law, which was promulgated in January 2021, constitutes another significant example within the "deterrent ambiguities" framework, particularly due to the provisions outlined in Article 22. This particular article grants the CCG the authority to utilise weapons against foreign organisations and individuals that are deemed to infringe on China's sovereign rights and jurisdiction at sea. The implementation of this law raises several problematic issues. China asserts that the Coast Guard Law aligns with international law and customary practices. However, it comes into conflict with certain provisions of the UNCLOS. For instance, Articles 32, 95, and 96 of the Convention establish that warships and government ships enjoy complete immunity from the jurisdiction of any country other than the flag state. Accordingly, if the CCG were to execute actions as defined in Article 22, it would be in violation of international law. Of all the instances, this particular case is the most dangerous as it has the potential to provoke escalation and significantly jeopardises current efforts to maintain peace and security in the South China Sea.^{lix}



The USS McCampbell sails in formation with South Korean navy ships.
Source: By US Department of Defense. CCO

4.5. The reaction of the neighbours and the United States

The involvement of the United States in the South China Sea situation stands out significantly among non-dispute party states. At the same time, it is a manifestation of the broader structural rivalry between China and the United States. China perceives the South China Sea as an opportunity to expand its regional influence, while the US sees itself as the defender of freedom of navigation (FON) in the area. Hence, the South China Sea becomes a contested arena for power struggle between these two major global powers. Specifically, the US contends that China's primary objective is to assert dominance over Asia in the maritime domain, aiming to displace US influence in the region. Conversely, China believes the US seeks to curb its development and preserve its own hegemonic power. As a result, the South China Sea becomes a focal point for the clash of interests and ideologies between China and the US.



The USS Sterett and USS John S. McCain in the South China Sea. Source: By U.S. Department of Defense. CCO

The initial clear indication of heightened US engagement in the South China Sea situation emerged from the speech delivered by then-US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, during the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Hanoi in July 2010. Secretary Clinton emphasised the United States' national interest in preserving freedom of navigation, ensuring open access to Asia's maritime commons, and upholding respect for international law in the South China Sea. She further expressed objection to any employment of force or threats and extended an offer to facilitate cooperation within the framework of the Declaration on the DoC. It is important to note that a few months before, i.e. in March 2010, senior Chinese officials had explicitly warned their American counterparts that they would not tolerate any interference in the South China Sea, asserting it as a core interest of sovereignty.^{lx} Secretary Clinton's statement at the ARF came as a surprise to her Chinese counterpart, then-Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, who accused the U.S. of conspiring against China. It was during this exchange that a Chinese diplomat infamously remarked, "China is a big country, and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact."^{lxi} The US pivot to Asia, as conveyed by Secretary Clinton in 2011, further solidified the increased US involvement in the region.^{lxii}

The dynamic development in Southeast Asia and China's assertive expansion in the South China Sea prompted the United States to take a significant step in October 2015 – the resumption of the Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the region. Notably, the last FONOP of this nature had occurred in 2012. During the 2015 operation, the guided missile destroyer USS Lassen with air support from maritime surveillance aircraft P-8A Poseidon and P-3 Orion transited within 12 nautical miles of Subi Reef, which is located in the disputed Spratly archipelago and has been under Chinese control since 1988. The operation held considerable normative significance as it aimed to underscore Washington's position that reefs, such as Subi Reef, do not constitute a territorial sea or an EEZ. In doing so, the U.S. sought to challenge the Chinese narrative, which asserts that reefs transformed to artificial islands hold the same rights as "islands" under the UNCLOS. While the original intent of FONOPs did not involve military deterrent or diplomatic functions, the complex situation in the South China Sea has imbued these American missions with new meanings in the region. Thus, FONOPs have become a significant hallmark of US involvement in the disputed areas, signifying Washington's efforts to uphold the principles of freedom of navigation and challenge China's expansionist claims.^{lxiii}

In recent years, the frequency of U.S. Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea has displayed dynamic changes. In 2015, two such operations were carried out, and the following year, the number increased to three. During the presidency of Donald Trump, the average number of FONOPs reached six, with a peak activity recorded in 2019, during which a record nine FONOPs were conducted by the US Navy. The Joe Biden administration

has largely continued its predecessor's policies, conducting three FONOPs in its initial years in office. Notably, one of these operations involved a dual-carrier deployment consisting of the Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group and the Nimitz Carrier Strike Group, sailed across the Taiwan Straits and the South China Sea. In 2022, the U.S. conducted quarterly FONOPs, which is likely to set the pattern for 2023 amidst the persisting tensions between China and the United States. The first major FONOP in 2023 was carried out by the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Milius in close proximity to the China-occupied Paracel Islands. These developments in FONOP activities signify the continued importance of the South China Sea as a contentious region in Sino-American relations.^{lxiv}



A Navy CMV-22B Osprey flies over the USS Carl Vinson as it sails the Pacific Ocean. Source: By U.S. Department of Defense. CCO

Notwithstanding the significant attention garnered by FONOPs in the media and public discourse, it is crucial to recognise that the United States' involvement in the South China Sea is multifaceted and goes beyond these operations. A pivotal event highlighting American support for Southeast Asian nations took place in November 2015 with the signing of a strategic partnership agreement with the ASEAN. This agreement set the stage for the U.S.-ASEAN summit held in

February 2016 at Sunnylands, California. During this summit, the "Sunnylands Declaration" was released, representing the strongest language ever endorsed by ASEAN concerning the South China Sea. Although not explicitly referring to China or arbitration, the declaration underscored ASEAN's position on the matter. In April 2016, the U.S. administration further demonstrated its commitment by initiating the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative, also known as the "South China Sea Initiative." The first tranche of USD 425 million was allocated under this five-year program to enhance the maritime domain awareness and maritime security capabilities of several Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. While Brunei, Singapore, and Taiwan were afforded the opportunity to partake in program activities, they did not receive direct financial support. Notably, the Philippines emerged as the largest beneficiary among the direct recipients of support under the South China Sea Initiative. In 2023, the U.S. Congress expanded the program by adding Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to the list of eligible partners and renaming it the "Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative." This development signifies the continued commitment of the United States to bolstering maritime security in the region and strengthening partnerships with key nations in the Indo-Pacific area.^{lxv}

The parties embroiled in the South China Sea dispute can also rely on American support through alternative initiatives as Washington is intent on bolstering their maritime capabilities. This assistance extends even to countries with complex historical relations, such as Vietnam. Following the lifting of the ban on lethal weapons sales to Vietnam during Barack Obama's visit in 2016, new avenues for bilateral security



Hamilton Class Cutter. Source: By U.S. Coast Guard. CCO

cooperation emerged. Subsequently, the United States has aided Vietnam in enhancing its naval capacity by facilitating the transfer of a Hamilton-class cutter in 2017 and another in 2021, totalling transfer support worth US\$51 million in grant security assistance under the US Excess Defense Articles (EDA) programme. Moreover, the US provided 18 "Metal Shark" patrol boats to the Vietnamese coast guard.^{lxvi} Additionally, in 2022, the American government announced its readiness to transfer a third Hamilton-class cutter to Vietnam.^{lxvii}

In alignment with the United States, other nations concerned with freedom of navigation and regional stability in the South China Sea are also taking similar measures. Notably, India serves as a prominent example in this regard. In July 2023, New Delhi provided the decommissioned yet fully operational missile corvette INS Kirpan to Vietnam People's Navy (VPN). This move comes on the heels of another significant gesture in which India transferred 12 high-speed boats to the Vietnamese Navy to bolster their capabilities under a \$100 million line of credit, granted to Vietnam just a year before.^{lxviii}

Of particular note from Beijing's perspective are the port visits of American aircraft carriers to Vietnam, which signal potential support from

Washington in the realm of maritime security for Hanoi. Notably, the latest such visit occurred in June 2023 when the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan, escorted by the guided-missile cruisers USS Antietam and USS Robert Smalls, visited Da Nang port. Prior visits were made by USS Carl Vinson in 2018 and USS Theodore Roosevelt in 2020, respectively. These visits underscore the US commitment to fostering security cooperation and enhancing the maritime capabilities of Southeast Asian nations, especially those entangled in territorial disputes in the South China Sea.^{lxix}

The United States also engages in the transfer of equipment and conducts port visits with other countries in the region. An illustration of this is evident in the case of the Philippines, where the Philippine Navy (PN) acquired three Hamilton-class cutters from the US in 2011, 2013, and 2017, respectively. However, in 2021, the Philippines expressed interest in obtaining newly decommissioned Cyclone-class patrol vessels instead of another Hamilton-class cutter from the United States.^{lxx} Additionally, in 2019, the US State Department announced the transfer of 34 ScanEagle drones with a combined value of USD 47.9 million to Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia.^{lxxi}



Nimitz Carrier Strike Force including the aircraft carriers USS Nimitz, right, and USS Ronald Reagan, left, in the South China Sea. Source: By U.S. Department of Defense. CCO

A critical litmus test for assessing the international response to Chinese actions in the South China Sea was the reaction to the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration on July 12, 2016. Following the Award, several countries, including the United States, Australia, Canada, Japan, and New Zealand, called on China to adhere to the ruling. Vietnam issued a disappointing statement limited to reiterating its support for the arbitration process. Among the three other ASEAN member states, namely Malaysia, Myanmar, and Singapore, the ruling was positively acknowledged, yet they refrained from urging Beijing to comply with it. Notably, the European Union also adopted a similar position three days after the ruling, contrary to earlier announcements made by Brussels a few months prior to the judgment. Despite earlier indications from the Indonesian government expressing support for the tribunal's ruling, Jakarta eventually issued a neutral statement, mirroring the stance of other ASEAN countries such as Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand^{lxxii}

The responses to the unfavourable verdict for China were notably balanced, mainly due to concerns over potential diplomatic and economic repercussions from China. The stance of other countries was also heavily influenced by the reaction of the Philippines, which did not actively seek greater international support for the award. Moreover, President Duterte downplayed the tribunal's decision while actively pursuing efforts to enhance diplomatic ties with China. Despite the pro-Chinese policy pursued by the Philippines, the United States initiated a shift in its position towards China.

A significant signal of change came from U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during his visit to Manila in March 2019. He unequivocally

stated that any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft, or public vessels in the South China Sea would trigger mutual defence obligations under Article 4 of the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) signed in 1951. This statement effectively dispelled all prior ambiguities and understatements surrounding the American government's previous positions, which had been hesitant to engage in an armed conflict with China over features in the South China Sea deemed to hold dubious strategic value.^{lxxiii}



An E-2C Hawkeye during operations in the South China Sea. Source: By U.S. Department of Defense. CCO

Another breakthrough happened in July 2020, when Secretary Pompeo issued a statement directly supporting the merits of the 2016 arbitral award, rather than just the process itself. The United States also pledged support to ASEAN member states involved in the South China Sea dispute if China violated their rights within their EEZ and Continental shelf.^{lxxiv} This shift in position led to the implementation of a new set of economic tools by the U.S. administration to counter China's actions in the region. In August 2020, the U.S. Commerce Department added 24 Chinese companies to the trade blacklist (Entity List) for their involvement in building artificial islands in the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos. This limited the ability of these entities to import specific goods from the United States.

Additionally, visa restrictions were imposed on executives at those companies and other individuals responsible for the island-building activities. These measures demonstrated the United States' willingness to take concrete actions against China's actions in the South China Sea and opened up new opportunities for addressing the territorial disputes in the region.^{lxxv}

The initiatives undertaken by the Trump administration regarding China in the context of the South China Sea were continued by the

Joe Biden administration, which additionally implemented measures to reinforce and modernise existing bilateral alliances, for instance, with Japan and the Philippines, as well as multilateral ones like QUAD. Furthermore, the Biden administration established new formats, such as the trilateral agreement with Australia and the United Kingdom known as AUKUS. The expansionist activities of the PRC in the South China Sea have drawn increasing attention from the international community, which has become more aware of the crucial importance of sea transport routes in the region. These factors have led to changes in the approach to the 2016 arbitral award and a heightened presence of non-claimant states' navies in the South China Sea. As of November 2022, 16 governments have shifted from merely acknowledging the ruling to fully supporting it by issuing statements endorsing its legally binding nature. Notable examples include France and Italy in November 2022, India in June 2023, and 13 European nations (including Poland) in July 2023.^{lxxvi}

In May 2023, the EU special envoy to the Indo-Pacific region announced the EU's plans

to intensify its naval visits and potentially engage in joint military training exercises to



Aircraft Carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth and a Malaysian Frigate in the South China Sea. Source: U.S. Navy, CCO

promote freedom of navigation and uphold international law in the disputed South China Sea. This outreach is part of the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy unveiled in 2021. Some European countries have already witnessed an increase in military activity in the Pacific region.^{lxxvii} For instance, France conducted a passing exercise (PASSEX) in the South China Sea with a Philippine Coast Guard vessel in March 2023.^{lxxviii} Subsequently, in June 2023, the French Destroyer Lorraine participated in the Large Scale Global Exercise (LSGE) in the South China Sea, involving units from the United States, Japan, and Canada.^{lxxix} Additionally, Germany has demonstrated a stronger commitment to safeguarding the rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific region. In December 2021, the frigate Bayern sailed through the South China Sea (for the first time since 2002), marking the first deployment of a German warship to the Indo-Pacific in nearly two decades.^{lxxx} It is worth underscoring that Germany does not intend to limit its engagement to these activities. During the 20th IISS Shangri-La Dialogue organised in June 2023 in Singapore, Germany's Minister of Defence, Boris Pistorius, announced that in 2024, Germany would send two warships to

the Indo-Pacific region amid rising tensions between China and Taiwan and over the disputed South China Sea.^{lxxxii}

The actions of some claimant states, with the Philippines being a prominent example, have effectively countered Beijing's assertive policy through the publicisation of coercive tactics employed by China within the grey zone. Firstly, this approach has led to heightened social awareness concerning the situation in disputed areas, thereby enabling stronger diplomatic responses from governments to address any violations of maritime sovereignty. Secondly, over the long term, such a strategy may impose limitations on China's assertive actions, as it incurs increasing costs in terms of reputational damage and heightened engagement of the international community in the South China Sea situation. We are currently witnessing the latter, as evidenced by a shift in the approach to the arbitration award and the heightened activity of navies in the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusions

1. From the 1970s onwards, the South China Sea situation was characterised by claimant states' endeavours to control numerous land features within the disputed area. This dynamic shifted when China took control of Scarborough Shoal in 2012 and proceeded to build artificial islands a year later. Subsequently, China expanded its activities in the "grey zone," facilitated by the expansion of military infrastructure, bases, and outposts supporting naval, coast guard, research vessel, and maritime militia operations. Through the development of artificial islands, China enhanced its ability to assert sovereignty within the 9-dash line, emphasising the importance of projecting
2. China's focus on the grey zone stems from its deniability, using maritime militia ships that resemble fishing boats but primarily serve to establish presence and lay claim to disputed areas. The effectiveness of the Chinese strategy is noticed by the other parties to the South China Sea dispute, which is best evidenced by the rapid expansion of artificial islands by Vietnam in 2022. Other countries, such as the Philippines are intensifying their activities to hinder China's grey zone tactics, mainly through exposing illegal activities of the Chinese fleet. However, the disparities in military capabilities and economic dependence prevent Southeast Asian countries from effectively challenging Chinese influence, contributing to the prolonged negotiations on the CoC.
3. Given the consolidation of Chinese influence and associated threats, such as freedom of navigation disruptions, sea transport route interruptions, and potential aggression against Taiwan, the United States has increased its engagement with the region. This involvement includes declarative support, direct presence through the FONOPs, port visits, and joint exercises

with ASEAN member states and other allies. To counter Chinese grey zone operations more effectively, the United States must prioritise non-traditional security assistance. This should involve transferring more decommissioned U.S. Coast Guard vessels to select ASEAN states and continuing FONOPs in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, it is essential for the U.S. to ensure that ASEAN member states understand how FONOPs protect their interests without escalating tensions in the region, as China usually portrays. Additionally, strengthening maritime domain awareness cooperation with ASEAN militaries through intelligence sharing can be instrumental, especially with countries frequently targeted by Chinese coercive actions. Publicising malign activities of the PRC in the South China Sea is also crucial to promote transparency and awareness among the international community.

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5



Chinese activity and propaganda in the CEE

Andrzej Kozłowski

5.1. Introduction

Chinese propaganda in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) is becoming more and more active trying to help to achieve Chinese political aims and defend interests of China and its companies in the CEE region. However, the level of awareness and knowledge about these actions is not as high as in the case of Russian information operations. Chinese influence operations are different as they are based more on propaganda, informal networks both online and offline than on brutal and simple disinformation. What is more, many experts and politicians in the region do not see China as a threat, arguing that its rising assertiveness is a problem of Asia not Europe. These factors make combating Chinese propaganda much more difficult.

5.2. Main aims of China's propaganda in the CEE

In 2012 China inaugurated the 16+1 initiative in Warsaw to get a bridgehead in the EU to fight and win public contracts for big infrastructural projects. China assumed that it would be easier to receive such contracts there rather than in Western Europe as the CEE planned a robust infrastructure development. Beijing also planned to improve its reputation in the EU through this initiative. It was an element of Chinese going abroad strategy.¹ It is important to stress that initially CEE was not important for China, which for a long time did not have an investment strategy or any significant Chinese investments in the region. China had a positive experience with similar formats in Africa and with the Arab countries so they decided to use it also in Europe.

¹ It is Chinese policy to encourage enterprise to invest overseas. It was announced in 2000 (Hongying Wang, A Deeper Look at China's "Going Out" Policy, <https://www.cigionline.org/publications/deeper-look-chinas-going-out-policy/>)

Gathering small and medium countries on the one side and China alone on the other side of the summit, where all the things and problems could be solved. It was a Sino centric approach with smaller countries circulating around one big power – China and that CEE countries could be treated as the countries of Third World.ⁱ



Poland's Prime Minister Beata Szydło and China's Communist leader Xi Jinping during meeting, 2016 Source: Kancelaria Premiera from Poland/Wikipedia Commons/CCO.

The inauguration of 16+1 initiative was not successful but the situation changed in 2013 when the Belt and Road Initiative was announced. China decided to add 16+1 initiative to the Belt and Road, which groups Chinese investments, both bilateral and multilateral. One of the aims of it was to stimulate export of infrastructure, increase Chinese investment and also transit commodities abroad. China also hoped that the lack of historical tensions will enable to win hearts and minds of CEE countries population through the systems of grants, loans and investments.ⁱⁱ

Chinese propaganda was aimed to amplify these messages and promote positive narratives about China. They wanted to present China as a peaceful country, which is substantive to the United States and has not ambitions to replace it as a global hegemon. It was also an additional

component of the Chinese aims particularly in Europe to convince European partners, that in case of potential conflict between China and the United States they should remain neutral. Obviously, according to the propaganda, such a conflict could be only provoked by the aggressive policy of Washington. Therefore, all the potential clashes like the case of Huawei removal from Europe would be later presented as a part of American-Chinese confrontation, which European partners should not be part of. In case the European countries side with Washington, China likes to present them as American servants, who threatened by Washington decided to follow the American crusade against China. Beijing also wanted in CEE countries to reduce popular support for engagement with the United States and NATO as well as it criticised the liberal values.ⁱⁱⁱ



Hong Kong anti-extradition bill protest, Source: Studio Incendo/Wikipedia Commons/CC 2.0

Till 2019 there was no serious crisis the Chinese propaganda needed to overcome and it was mainly focused on spreading a positive image of China. But in 2019 the Hong Kong protests took place and later the employee of Chinese telecommunication giant Huawei in Poland Wang Weijing was arrested and accused of

espionage and company has been put in the centre of mainstream media.

5.3. The tools employed by China

China uses a variety of measures and tools to promote its position and spread its influence. These are the online tools but, the offline measures are currently gaining significant weight too. China creates a network of informal contacts consisting of politicians, experts, managers, academics, journalists and others to promote its own vision of the world.



President of the Czech Republic Miloš Zeman, Source: Michał Józefaciuk/Wikipedia Commons/CC 3.0

5.3.1. Politicians

Many politicians in the CEE region established close relationships with Chinese representatives and visited China and then were eager to defend Chinese interests in the region. One of the most prominent figures was former Czech Republic President Milos Zeman elected in 2013, who promised to improve Chinese-Czech relations. Just after being elected, Zeman hired a Chinese entrepreneur as a close advisor, which helped secure Chinese interest in the Czech Republic.^{iv} Not only President Zeman was close to China but former Prime Minister Petr Nečas or the

former minister of foreign affairs Jakub Kulhánek are also examples of politicians tightly linked to China. There were also examples of former government employees, who after leaving public sector found jobs in Huawei. Such situations happened in Poland or Hungary.^v The model of operation of such people is quite simple: they warned that the Chinese companies and interest could not be damaged because China as a big and powerful country will respond.^{vi} This political corruption is also very well known in the case of Russian propagandists, but due to the fact that threat perspective on China and Russia is different in CEE, acting on behalf of China or Chinese companies has not been so visible.

5.3.2. Public Relations Agencies

Huge media outlets, with certain exceptions were not very eager to publish Chinese propaganda so China was more and more eager to use public relations agencies. In 2019 they hired a Powerhouse PR agency in Estonia led by former minister of public administration Janek Mäggi to influence the Estonian politicians not to remove Huawei from 5G networks and Estonia did not do it.^{vii} In 2019, the PR C&B Reputation Management agency in Czech Republic was hired to improve the image of China in Czech Republic. The agency set up a think-tank Sinoskop, which should work on improving relations between Czech Republic and China.^{viii} Also Huawei during the crisis in Poland and beyond in 2019 hired many PR agencies to establish better connection with media and try to smuggle own material and point of view under the press materials prepared by PR agencies.

5.3.3. Funding universities

China believes that investing in education is a good way to increase Chinese popularity among the young and promote the positive image

of China. One of the most important Chinese investments in education system in CEE is the Institute of European Studies localised in Hungarian capital city Budapest. This facility is managed by the Chinese Academy of Social Science and prepares positive, propaganda materials about China.^{ix}

In other countries of CEE, Huawei signed a partnership with Polish universities, including The Military-Technical Academy, and sponsored prize programmes for tech students. Winners had an opportunity to visit Huawei headquarters in Shenzhen and get a free smartphone.^x Also many prestigious Polish universities including one of the best private facilities cooperated with Chinese entities. In Slovakia, 23 state universities and 26 research institutes maintained 113 formal



Faculty of Law, Charles University in Prague, Source: VitVit/Wikipedia Commons/CC 4.0

and informal agreements with universities and other Chinese entities despite the warnings from the Slovakian counterintelligence that the Chinese are attempting to gain information about the ICT sector. Also the oldest university in Czech Republic got money from the Chinese embassy.^{xi} The universities in CEE often lack funds to compete with their Western counterparts and therefore they accept Chinese financial offers.



Confucius Institute, Source: Florian B35/ Wikipedia Commons/CC 4.0

5.3.4. Confucius Institute

It is also important to remember that Confucius Institute, which serves as a Chinese equivalent of Goethe or Cervantes institutes should in theory promote the Chinese culture and language. However, the institute's activity is not innocent as it might look. It is creating a story of Mao Zedong as a revolutionary hero stating that Tiananmen Square never happened, treating Tibet and Taiwan as undisputed Chinese territories and avoiding topics of China's widespread human-rights abuses. The role of Confucius Institute as political instrument was confirmed by Li Changchun, the head of propaganda for the CCP who said that it is important part of China's propaganda setup.^{xii} American National Association of Scholars (NAS) called for shutting down any cooperation between universities in the United States and Confucius Institute warning that these entities are governed by secret agreements enforced in Chinese courts under Chinese law. NAS was afraid of the harmful Chinese impact on the universities in the



Huawei, Source: Matti Blume/ Wikipedia Commons/CC 4.0

United States.^{xiii} In CEE region there are dozens of Confucius Institutes, which for a long time did not arouse suspicions.^{xiv}

5.3.5. Experts

There are also experts and journalists, who reflect the Chinese propaganda. It is difficult to describe their motives, either they have received money or other benefits or they are "useful idiots." They pretend to be experts in China and they appear in public media, which makes them influential. However, their opinions could be shocking for many as they do not recognise the holding of Uyghurs in camps as something bad or they try to compare Hong Kong protests against tightening rules of China to protests in democratic France. When confronted with more humanitarian approach, they try to defend themselves by stating that they are experienced businessmen with long careers in China and their critics are the idealistic cut of reality. This situation in public debate happened in many countries of the region. They also try to present themselves as the realists, warning that adversary movements against China might have a destructive impact. Even in Lithuania, which is perceived as one of the most fierce critics of China, dominant part of society was afraid that

opening of Taiwan trade office² might worsen relations with Beijing.^{xv} In Poland, when the Huawei scandal started, many experts from NGOs, dealing with digital affairs, were defending



Embassy of the People's Republic of China Source: Amaury Laporte/ Flickr/CC 2.0

the Chinese company. Unsurprisingly, they had previously established very good relations with the Chinese telecommunication giant through study visits and lucrative grants.

5.3.6 Diplomats and embassies

China engaged in spreading propaganda through diplomats and embassies, who became especially active during COVID-19 pandemic. Their activity was not limited to the social media but also traditional ones.^{xvi} Chinese ambassadors gave interviews to the popular and influential media as it happened in Poland, when such materials were published by leading media outlet such as Onet or Rzeczpospolita.^{xvii} Similarly in Latvia, the local Chinese ambassador explained the situation around Hong-Kong.^{xviii} Articles published in these media mainly promoted Chinese propaganda and were difficult to understand by the local audience because it reflected Chinese narration addressed to the domestic audience and also used a very specific language.

² Taiwan offices in Europe and the United States use the name of the city Taipei to avoid reference to the island when the Lithuania office is called Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania.



Xinhua News Agency Source: Ming Xia/Flickr/CC 2.0

5.3.7. Journalist and media outlets

In Hungary the government media engaged in spreading the pro-Chinese content and appraising the “wise” policy of Orban’s government, which tries to strengthen relations with Beijing. A similar situation took place in the Czech Republic, where the Chinese businessman Ye Jianming bought assets in the Medea Group and Empresa Media and then the content unfavourable toward China was no longer published. Also Ye Jianming company tried to invest in Slovakian TV and bought assets of it.^{xix} In the time when traditional media has more and more financial problems the rich investor even from China might be a saviour and media outlets choose this option.

There are also Chinese media outlets, which spread propaganda in English. The most popular are Global Times and People’s Daily – official media outlets of Chinese Communist Party. But also the Xinhua News Agency – the official state news agency which has agreements with media outlets in Western countries such Germany, Poland, France, Belgium and others. This sometimes causes a situation where Xinhua is cited by the mainstream media as a normal, reliable source of information.^{xx}

Chinese journalists are also active on social media, where they are responsible for spreading

disinformation. The number of their followers ranges from hundreds of thousands to even millions. They do not share clear pro-Chinese posts, but rather they focus on criticising the United States, focusing on American imperialism, attacking the EU and in regards to the Russian war in Ukraine, they try to explain Russian motivations.^{xxi}

5.4. Case Studies of Chinese information operations

Chinese propaganda was visible in particular cases such as the Huawei affair, when it needed to defend the position and interest of the Chinese telecommunication giant and potential threat



Hong Kong anti-extradition bill protest Studio Incendo/Flickr/CC 2.0

for Chinese interest that this company will be kicked out from 5G network rollout or during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.4.1. Hongkong protests

In 2019 the protests erupted on the streets of Hong-Kong over the introduction of bill to amend the Fugitive Ordinance in regard to extradition. This bill allowed extradition of Hongkong citizens to mainland China. It caused a widespread concern as Hongkong citizens do not trust the Chinese judicial system. It pushed people to organise the largest demonstration in the history of this province but also was a watershed moment in the Chinese information

operations. It was used for the first time on large scale in place of the offensive propaganda machine to defend the new legislation. State media published articles, which later were distributed on social media trying to present protesters in Hong Kong as the extremists working on behalf of the foreign countries trying to overthrow the government. According to Xinhua, the new law would protect from chaos and terrorism. There were also threats to the United States warning American officials from intervening in the situation.^{xxii} It was the first coordinated disinformation campaign with the same messages shared in various languages also in the local languages in CEE region. The



Huawei building Source: Open Grid Scheduler / Grid Engine/Wikipedia Commons/CC 0

information operations around Hongkong showed China the power of the propaganda and disinformation and are often compared to the 2014 and Crimea annexation, when it was a boom for Russian disinformation.^{xxiii}

5.4.2. Huawei

Arresting of Wang Weijing happened during the intensification of the American campaign against the Chinese telecommunication giant. It developed during Trump administration and was a part of its effort to undermine the

Chinese technological growth by hitting one of the most prestigious Chinese technological company. The United States tried to push its allies to follow American examples and ban Chinese companies from participation in 5G. The potential threat of kicking out the Chinese company from 5G rollout in Europe could significantly harm Chinese interest in the region and therefore China launched its tools to defend the position of Huawei.

Chinese propaganda in this case tried to show that Huawei is a victim of American hawkish foreign policy toward China, and Washington is using its influence worldwide to stop advancement of Huawei. The United States were behind China and especially Huawei in 5G race so they tried to use political methods to harm it – the Chinese propaganda claims. China also approached the cybersecurity in the case of 5G rollout. They stressed that cybersecurity should not be politicised and should be a technical one. Many experts raised up concerns about the security of 5G network produced and developed by Huawei. In that time many countries and also the EU were discussing the law, which will allow to eliminate telecommunication providers from the countries outside NATO/EU and partners of this organisation. The law was clearly aimed at Chinese providers and Huawei tried to show it. Also the other controversial issue was the fact of Chinese state links to Huawei and the Chinese cyberespionage law.³ Huawei tried to argue that it is an independent entity without any links to government. Even the CEO of Huawei claims that if the Chinese security apparatus would ask him to provide data of Huawei customers

3 The Article 7 of National Intelligence Law of the People's Republic of China states that „All organizations and citizens shall support, assist and cooperate with national intelligence efforts in accordance with law, and shall protect national intelligence work secrets they are aware of“. (Counter-espionage Law of the P.R.C. (2023 ed.), <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/counter-espionage-law-2023/>)

he would refuse.^{xxiv} The other propaganda tactic used here to defend Huawei's interest was the publication of some economic reports, stating that kicking out Huawei from networks will be very costly. The Oxford Economics created a report stressing the significant role of Huawei in Europe and estimated the cost of removing it from Europe. It seems that everything was legitimate, with a prestigious entity publishing a well-prepared report, however it was ordered and paid for by Huawei, which raised objections about the objectivity of its conclusions.^{xxv} The Oxford's report was not the only source claiming the potential huge cost of Huawei removal as local experts also amplified this message and stressed that the case of Huawei is an element of trade war between the United States and China and Europe should remain neutral.

Huawei used a network of intermediaries such as media outlets, experts, NGOs and others to promote its version of developments. This network was slowly built before 2019 and the espionage scandal through the invitations of journalists for China trips or the most important IT events, sponsorship of media outlets and financing of NGOs. China also used Global Times, where the editor-in-chief laughed at Poland asking if there is anything worth stealing there after Wang was arrested.^{xxvi} Not only did the Chinese propaganda adopt defensive posture but also conducted an attack against persons engaged in drafting law, which could give legal tools to remove Huawei from Polish networks. These attacks were based on providing journalists with fabricated information on these persons.

It is difficult to estimate whether the propaganda campaign was ultimately effective because there is still no decision about Huawei



Protective suit Source: HelenJank/CC 0

participation in 5G network in Poland and in other countries, the limits were introduced but there are also some states like Hungary, which accept the Chinese telecommunication campaign and continue doing business with Huawei.

5.4.3. COVID-19

The topic of COVID-19 pandemic also spurred the intensification of Chinese narratives in CEE as since the beginning Chinese propaganda tried to work on damage control counteracting all accusations against China of slow reactions after the first COVID-19 cases appeared in Wuhan. Furthermore, it also promoted the Chinese help worldwide.

The first aim of Chinese propaganda focuses on responding to the international criticism on the slow, domestic response and hiding facts about the outbreak of the pandemic. China tries to omit these events, when presenting the chronology of the COVID-19.^{xxvii} But Chinese propaganda apparatus quickly started more aggressive movements and began attacking other countries' responses and representatives of foreign governments and also spread fake news about the origin of the coronavirus. Chinese officials spread conspiracy theories that COVID-19 was created by the American military, accusing the United States of spreading

a political virus, calling not to discredit China for its international efforts and also stressed the Chinese help to the CEE countries. Both sides have also been accusing each other of distorting facts and politicising the crisis. Particularly in Poland it caused the fierce debate between Chinese and American ambassadors accusing each other and simultaneously appealing to the local population with certain narratives. The American ambassador stressed the Polish experience with communists and an immunity to Chinese propaganda. He also accused the Chinese of the lack of transparency at the initial stage of the pandemic when the Chinese counterpart appealed to the similarities between Poland and China and its effectiveness in fighting COVID. Chinese ambassador messages were also amplified by a bunch of troll accounts.

China also tried to present itself as a saviour by stressing the huge amount of medical supplies, they offered to different countries in CEE. This was also important to create an image of the country, which successfully overcame virus. Through these actions, China tried to maintain the economic cooperation with the EU and stopped the process of withdrawing European companies from China at that time.^{xxviii}

China's disinformation and propaganda used the mechanisms well known from the Hong Kong protests in 2019 and mainly composed of statements by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs repeated in party newspapers (Global Times and People's Daily). The content was also published in social media by Chinese ambassadors and diplomatic mission accounts and local agents, as well as the media companies which have agreements with Xinhua. PISM Analyst Agnieszka Legucka and Marcin Przychodniak write that the publications of

Chinese ambassadors were aimed to validate the information and allow them to reach a wider audience.^{xxix} As in the case of the heated discussion between American and Chinese ambassadors the content was amplified by thousands of Twitter accounts (including bots and fake ones). This process is not a natural phenomenon but is controlled by Chinese private companies hired by government institutions to increase the number of people targeted with disinformation.^{xxx}

5.5. The cooperation with Russian info ops



President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping meets with President of Russia Vladimir Putin Source: Presidential Executive Office of Russia/ Wikipedia Commons/CC 4.0

Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin met on the sidelines of the Winter Olympics in China in 2022 and signalled that their relationship entered a new era. They announced their aim to reshape the international order and the crucial strategy focused on the information. Therefore they plan to reshape global information space to favour China's and Russia's ambitions as the two leaders called for internationalisation of internet governance, which means that the Internet should be a subject of the control of sovereign states. It is contradictory to the free and open Internet promoted by the Western powers.^{xxxi} These plans should not be viewed as new as

both countries had previously cooperated in many areas with one of them being propaganda and disinformation apparatus.^{xxxii}

In 2013 both countries signed a cooperation agreement between the Voice of Russia and People's Daily Online.^{xxxiii} Later, in July 2021, the two countries signed a bilateral agreement on cooperating on news coverage and narratives and later the representatives of the Russian and Chinese governments discussed during a virtual summit about exchanging news content, trading digital media strategies and even co-producing television shows. They also pledged to "further cooperate in the field of information exchange, promoting objective, comprehensive and accurate coverage of the most important world events". China and Russia also decided to work together on online and social media sphere. According to the information stolen by the Ukrainian hackers, both countries engaged in 64 joint media programs such as agreements between states media to publish stories promoting their partner.^{xxxiv}

It has been particularly visible since the Russian large scale invasion, where Chinese propaganda has been following the Russian perspective on the war. Beijing has not officially supported Russia but Chinese propaganda and disinformation mechanism reflect and amplify Kremlin's propaganda. Even the top Chinese politicians engaged in spreading lies with, for example, China's minister of foreign affairs following Russians claims of the U.S. biological weapons in Ukraine.^{xxxv} The Chinese propaganda and disinformation since the large scale invasion has got many goals and techniques. China official reference to the war is limited to "Ukrainian issue", "Ukrainian crisis", "Ukrainian conflict", "Ukrainian dispute". Ukraine is also not presented

as a victim of Russian aggression. Surprisingly it is often described as the victim of a U.S. plot to weaken Putin regime and in this context Chinese propaganda often reminds about U.S breaking an alleged pledge not to expand NATO eastward, that threatens Russia and therefore Russia must defend itself. NATO alone is also demonized and compared to Lord Voldemort – the main antagonist in the Harry Potter world. China also blames the West for humanitarian crises, migration, food and energy shortages and the higher prices of both. However, the Chinese are omitting topics such as Ukrainian Nazis, de-Nazification of Ukraine, blaming Ukrainians for war crimes.^{xxxvi} So the Chinese and Russian propaganda and disinformation regarding war in Ukraine are similar and differ with only small details but Beijing clearly supports Moscow's position on this issue.

The overlapping of Chinese and Russian narratives was noticed also in Poland. Stanisław Żaryn – government commissioner for information security wrote that both China and Russia were authoring more and more biased stories against Poland. China presents Poland as a country that poses a threat to other countries and by its strong armed forces' modernisation process Warsaw pursues imperial ambitions. China also repeated other Russian disinformation narratives such as Poland pushing for prolongation and expansion of the war or the spreading of fake news about the alleged hostility between Poland and Ukraine.^{xxxvii} The Chinese also hired Russian networks to spread disinformation and also gave them Chinese infrastructure to do it. The cooperation is very close.^{xxxviii}

Chinese application TikTok also plays an important role in broadcasting war but also in spreading

Russian disinformation. The application does not try to eliminate fake content but what is more it delivers false content on war for all the freshly registered users no matter if they are interested in it or not. Furthermore, the attempt to search topics using phrases like Ukraine or Donbas showed that TikTok algorithms showed the disinformation material among the most popular ones.^{xxxix}

China and Russia have a long history of cooperation in the information sphere, which is reflected in cooperation agreements and common media projects and it started before the Russian large scale invasion on Ukraine. Since that time, the overlapping narratives are more common and the Chinese support in the infosphere for the Russian invasion is visible. China and Russia learned from each other in this sphere and exchange tools and techniques and it should be taken into account when thinking about effectively fighting these threats.

5.6. The ways of combating disinformation

It is very difficult to fight effectively with disinformation and propaganda if there is no common knowledge about this threat. While most of the people heard about the Russian information operations, the Chinese ones remain rather mysterious and are not deeply researched and understood, particularly in the CEE region. It needs to be changed and the harmful mindset that disinformation is the tool of Russia only should be changed too.

One of the most effective ways of combating propaganda is revealing it and trying to bring media attention and raise audience awareness of CEE, which is mostly unaware of the Chinese propaganda efforts. Unfortunately, some

leading fact-checker organisations in CEE still do not have their own China category and it should change. However, the situation is getting better and more and more organisations have been set up to examine Chinese influence. One of the good examples here is the project MapInfluenCE focused on examining China influence in Central Europe, especially within the Visegrad nations to identify strategies and tactics employed by



The seat of the EEAS in the European Quarter of Brussels Source: JLogan/Wikipedia Commons/CC 4.0

China.^{xl} There is also a bunch of loosely affiliated researchers and members of think-tanks researching this topic in other countries of CEE. Despite the excellent work they are doing it is not enough. NGOs are great as a supplementary force but organisations based on grants and vulnerable to harm because of the unstable financial sources cannot be at the head of the efforts to fight Chinese propaganda.

There must be a state solution and even better on the EU level. Therefore setting up the new platform to counter disinformation campaigns organised by both Russia and China seems a good starting point. The newly established Information Sharing and Analysis Centre within the European External Action Service (EEAS) will be a decentralised platform, which tracks information about the manipulation done by foreign actors and coordinates its work with the 27 EU countries but also with NGOs which seems a good step.^{xli}

However, it would be important to create a monitoring centre on the EU level, which follows the Chinese investments in the European infosphere such as buying media or other companies vital for the functioning of the infosphere. It could be placed under the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) and consist of the different NGOs already engaged in mapping Chinese influence.

There is a strong role of NGOs in mapping and examining Chinese influence in Europe and therefore the EU should increase grant opportunities for such projects. Considering the current situation when security in Europe is again treated seriously because of the Russian large scale invasion, it might be a perfect moment for such changes and increasing the financing opportunities.

It is also important to reach out to the most experienced entities in fighting Chinese influence operations such as the organisations in Taiwan, Japan or South Korea, which face Chinese influence operations very often. Taiwan especially, has a very rich experience fighting Chinese disinformation so it should be a natural direction of European experts and organisation to build up common networks. The Czech think tank European Values Centre for Security Policy, which examines Chinese influence opened an office in Taipei and also signed a memorandum of understanding with the Institute for National Defence Security Research (INDSR).^{xliii} Other countries in CEE region could easily follow in Czech footsteps and increase cooperation.

The EU should also consider the option of banning China's propaganda media as it did with the Russian outlets. This ban might not be introduced now, as it would not be possible

due to the political objections but this option should be kept as potential sanction if the relations with China further deteriorate. The authoritarian country such as China should not use democratic freedom of speech against the members of the EU.

Conclusion

1. Chinese propaganda in CEE is different than the Russian information operations, which are much better known. Chinese actions are better covered, less visible and hidden and therefore much more difficult to detect and effectively fight against.
2. Beijing has been promoting the positive image of China in the CEE region but also engaged in particular cases such as defending Huawei position or defending the good reputation of China during COVID-19.
3. The Chinese are using a variety of tools from politicians, public relations agencies, diplomats to journalists and media outlets. Messages are amplified by a horde of Twitter accounts (bots and fake ones) created by a special Chinese unit and using traditional media as well as local intermediaries to communicate. It is unimaginable to see in Poland propaganda articles written by Russian ambassadors, but it is happening with the representatives of China.
4. It is also important to stress that China closely cooperates with Russians in the infosphere and it is particularly visible in case of the Russian war in Ukraine. Despite the fact that China officially has not supported Moscow's invasion, in the infosphere China is often repeating Russian propaganda, which should push experts and politicians to focus closer on examining Chinese propaganda activities.
5. In order to fight effectively with Chinese propaganda, knowledge about tactics and

tools is necessary as Chinese influence operations are novel to the CEE region. The EU, state institutions, media and NGOs should cooperate together in spreading knowledge about Chinese narratives, fake news and others. It will also help to avoid the tragic mistakes like giving a space in reputable media outlets to spread Chinese propaganda. The cooperation with Taiwan, Japan and South Korea, which have deeper knowledge and better understanding of Chinese influence operations is also a good idea.

6. The effectiveness of the Chinese propaganda is questionable and it is not often tailored to the local specific but rather reflects the same propaganda addressed to the domestic audience so to the local people it sounds weird.

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Conclusions

China's assertiveness has been growing on the global stage and has become one of the most significant challenges for the Western world.

The long-term attempts to include China as a reliable and stable partner failed with the country more often than not recognised as a rival and competitor especially in the region and in the United States. Chinese growing influence and more assertive policy is visible in many areas. Beijing has increased its presence in international organisations, became more and more assertive in the relations with its neighbours on the South China Sea causing tensions situation there and is aiming to become a technological leader replacing the United States using aggressive methods such as stealing intellectual property on massive scale. Simultaneously, China's propaganda and influence have risen not only in Central and Eastern Europe but worldwide to better promote Chinese interest. China's rising position and more assertive policy has evoked the reaction of the United States, leading to more and more experts calling the situation between both countries a new Cold World.

It seems that the United States and China relations have become more and more confrontational, with the Biden administration continuing the assertive policy towards China adopted by his predecessor president Donald Trump. The rivalry between Washington and Beijing is structural and it is about the shape of the current world. Fortunately, it has not yet transformed into a military confrontation, but this option could not be excluded especially with the increasingly aggressive Chinese policy towards Taiwan. The American-Chinese competition also expands to new areas both

geographically and thematically such as technology, diplomacy or infrastructure.

In the technological area the United States are still a hegemon and despite the latest Chinese advancements, America will maintain the position of the leader for the next years. China has been trying to build up its position with the robust global rollout of 5G network infrastructure and significant investments in technologies such as artificial intelligence or semi-conductors. Despite minor achievements, China lagged behind the United States in the technological field. In addition, the latest restrictions imposed by the U.S. on the semi-conductors industry, will slow Chinese development in this area while simultaneously the significant American investment in this field based on the newly adopted CHIPS act will increase its own potential. Furthermore, not only the Americans imposed limitations on cooperation with China in the field of technology, but its allies as well with key players in this field such as Japan and the Netherlands limiting their cooperation with China. This touched the issue of the semi-conductors industry and also the rollout of 5G technology, where Americans hit the Chinese tech giant Huawei.

The next area of increasing American-Chinese competition is visible in the international organisations. China for long time kept a low profile there and concentrated on domestic modernisation. This changed however, and currently China attempts to present itself as the solid-long-term thinker with a vision of an international actor. China focuses on proposing a reform of the United

Nations, which has been perceived as the symbol of the American-led international order. The growing Chinese influence in the international organisation was visible during the COVID-19 pandemic and the discussion on the role of World Health Organization and in the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), which was headed for 8 years by a Chinese leader. China tries to nominate its own citizens in international organisations for the management and is also buying votes of developing countries to support Chinese position on issues such as the Taiwan issue approach, demographics and other topics such as human rights.

The dynamically changing situation on the international arena linked with the rise of China has posed a significant challenge for the Polish government and Polish diplomacy. The Polish government needs to be more aware of the documents, regulations, and standards coming from the international organisations, which are under strong Chinese and Russian influence such as the WHO, ITU and others. The new proposition of regulations of this organisations should be analysed comprehensively and interdepartmentally by different governmental institutions, which still is not common. In addition, the think-tanks should be invited too as in many cases, they have experience in tracking Chinese influence.

The Chinese-American rivalry could negatively impact the security of the CEE region, because Washington may prioritise the Chinese threat over Russia. However, the increasing competition between both countries might also be a chance for the region, especially in the technological domain such as American support for infrastructure investment in the

region. It might also bring new investments such as semi-conductors facilities due to the changing technological supply-line. Poland and other countries in region should closely monitor initiatives such as Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, looking for additional financial opportunities for infrastructure projects especially these executed in the cooperation with other CEE countries.