



**SHIFTS IN CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY DURING XI'S
SECOND TERM: AN ANALYSIS FROM THE
PERSPECTIVE OF HARD-SOFT-SHARP POWER**

ATA DEMİRUS

Thesis for the Master's Program in Political Science and International Relations

Graduate School
İzmir University of Economics
İzmir
2024

**SHIFTS IN CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY DURING XI'S
SECOND TERM: AN ANALYSIS FROM THE
PERSPECTIVE OF HARD-SOFT-SHARP POWER**

ATA DEMİRUS

THESIS ADVISOR: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sıtkı Egeli

Master's Exam Jury Members

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sıtkı Egeli

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sinem Ünalđılar

Asst. Prof. Dr. Umut Can Adısönmez

A Thesis

Submitted to

The Graduate School of İzmir University of Economics

The Department of Political Science and International Relations

İzmir

2024

ETHICAL DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis, and that I have conducted my work in accordance with academic rules and ethical behavior at every stage, from the planning of the thesis to its defense. I confirm that I have cited all ideas, information, and findings that are not specific to my study, as required by the code of ethical behavior, and that all statements not cited are my own.

Ata Demirus

15 May, 2024



ABSTRACT

SHIFTS IN CHINA’S FOREIGN POLICY DURING XI’S SECOND TERM: AN ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF HARD-SOFT-SHARP POWER

Demirus, Ata

Master’s Program in Political Science and International Relations

Advisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sıtkı Egeli

March, 2024

China’s rise today is a rare and original moment in history that broke the long-prevalled decades-old western dominance. What we are witnessing now, therefore, is not just an ordinary great power challenge; it is more like an East-West competition. From the past to the present, different foreign policy models of regimes such as “survival” (military, balance of power), “hiding and biding” (openness, active diplomacy), and “peaceful rise” (engaging with international institutions) were adopted, which created a proper environment for China. However, when Chinese President Xi Jinping secured a second term in March 2018, the real intentions of China began to surface, and the idea of “reclaiming the proper place on the world stage” emerged, which is very ambitious and yet mysterious and tricky. This motivation was later met with suspicions by all of China’s neighbors in the Asia-Pacific, which led them to take countermeasures by reenergizing their old alliance organizations and even establishing new ones. Their countermeasures have so far been successful as China lost its former economic and political clout, and now has

limited space to spread its influence. It appears that China now has no choice but to return to soft power tools. The channels of diplomacy have again become important in Chinese foreign policy. The problem is that all the previous assertiveness of Xi has damaged China's reputation, which will be a main obstacle in the future. Therefore, the thesis aims to look at how China presents itself as the "new model" and its long-term consequences.

Keywords: Asia-Pacific Security, People's Republic of China - foreign and security policies, Hard Power, Soft Power, Sharp Power, Xi Jinping.



ÖZET

SERT-YUMUŞAK-KESKİN GÜÇ PERSPEKTİFİNDE, XI'NİN İKİNCİ DÖNEMİNDE ÇİN'İN DIŞ POLİTİKASININ DEĞİŞİMİ

Demirus, Ata

Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Yüksek Lisans Programı

Tez Danışmanı: Doç. Dr. Sıtkı Egeli

Mart, 2024

Çin'in bugünkü yükselişi, onlarca yıldır devam eden Batı Hegemonyasını bitirmenin eşiğinde olmasıyla, nadir ve kendine özgü unsurlarıyla tarihe geçecek önemli olaylardan biridir. Bu bağlamda, şu an şahit olunan önemli nokta herhangi bir büyük güç mücadelesinden ziyade, bir Doğu-Batı rekabetidir. Neticede, Çin, şu anki yükseliş koşullarının gerçekleşmesini sağlayan rejimi “ayakta tutma” (askeri, güç dengesi), “vakit kollama” (açılım, aktif diplomasi), “barışçıl yükseliş” (uluslararası kuruluşlarla çalışma) gibi farklı dış politika modellerini uygulamıştır. Fakat, Çin Devlet Başkanı Xi Jinping'in, Mart 2018'deki görevdeki ikinci dönemi başladığında, tesiri çok daha yüksek hamleler yapılmaya başlanmıştır. Çin'in gelecek için vaat ettiği amaçların asıl niyeti artık ortaya çıkmıştır. Hırslı, fakat bir o kadar da gizemli ve şüpheli olan “dünya sahnesindeki hak edilen yeri alma” amacı, bir dış politika misyonu olarak önem kazanmıştır. Birçok Asya-Pasifik ülkesi bu hedefi kendileri için bir tehdit olarak gördüklerinden eski ittifak örgütlerini güçlendirmiş, hatta yenilerini eklemiştir. Bu tedbirler şu ana kadar başarılı olmuştur, çünkü Çin yükselişindeki eski performansını kaybetmiş ve etki alanı oldukça sınırlanmıştır.

Günümüzde Çin'in yumuşak gücün kurallarını uygulamaktan başka bir seçeneği kalmamış, nitekim yeniden kullanmaya da başlamıştır. Diplomasinin tüm kanalları Çin dış politikasında yeniden önem kazanmıştır. Fakat problem şu ki, Xi'nin önceki hırslı dış politikası Çin'in uluslararası saygınlığına zarar vermiştir ve bu durum gelecekte Çin'e büyük bir engel çıkaracaktır. Bu nedenle, bu tezde Çin'in nasıl kendini "yeni model" olarak sunduğu ve bunun uzun vadeli sonuçları incelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Asya-Pasifik Güvenliği, Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti – dış ve güvenlik politikaları, Sert Güç, Yumuşak Güç, Keskin Güç, Xi Jinping.



ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank my advisor, Assoc. Prof. Sıtkı Egelı, for the days he spent correcting the draft of my thesis and for his guidance throughout the research process of the thesis.

I also wish to thank my parents for supporting me both financially and mentally up until now. Without their help, I could not have come this far in my studies.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iv
ÖZET	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	viii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	ix
LIST OF TABLES	xi
LIST OF FIGURES	xii
LIST OF ABBREVIATION	xiii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1. <i>Content</i>	2
1.2. <i>Methodology</i>	3
CHAPTER 2: THE CONCEPTS OF POWER AND THEIR REFLECTIONS ON CHINA	7
2.1. <i>Hard Power</i>	7
2.2. <i>Soft Power</i>	10
2.3. <i>Sharp Power</i>	13
CHAPTER 3: PRC's FOREIGN POLICY: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW	18
3.1. <i>Mao Zedong Era</i>	19
3.2. <i>Deng Xiaoping Era</i>	21
3.3. <i>Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao Eras</i>	24
3.4. <i>China's Foreign Policy during Xi Jinping's First Term</i>	27
CHAPTER 4: PRC's FOREIGN POLICY DURING XIJINPING's SECOND TERM	32
4.1. <i>Emerging from Shadows</i>	32
4.2. <i>Successful Crisis Management</i>	40
4.3. <i>Assertive Foreign Policy</i>	52
CHAPTER 5: CONSEQUENCES OF XIJINPING's FOREIGN POLICY	61
5.1. <i>Loss of Momentum</i>	61
5.2. <i>Taiwan: Learning from the Hong Kong Case</i>	65
5.3. <i>Japan and South Korea: The Asian North Wing of the Western Alliance</i>	67
5.4. <i>India and Australia: From Reluctance to Containment of PRC</i>	73
5.5. <i>ASEAN States: Shifting Stands</i>	78
5.6. <i>Pacific Island States</i>	86

<i>5.7. Xi Jinping's Reversal and Return to Soft Power</i>	89
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION	95
REFERENCES	99



LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Current approaches of ASEAN member states	85
--	----



LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Different approaches of the foreign policy of PRC throughout time	18
Figure 2. PRC's share within global trade in 2019	73



LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIIB	:	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ASEAN	:	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AUKUS	:	Australia-UK-United States
BNO	:	British National Overseas
BRI	:	Belt and Road Initiative
COSCO	:	China Ocean Shipping Company, Limited
DSSI	:	Debt Service Suspension Initiative
EDCA	:	Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement
EU	:	European Union
GDP	:	Gross Domestic Product
IR	:	International Relations
IT	:	Information Technology
NATO	:	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDPG	:	National Defense Program Guidelines
PLA	:	People's Liberation Army
PPE	:	Personal Protective Equipment
PRC	:	People's Republic of China
QUAD	:	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
SCO	:	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
THAAD	:	Terminal High Altitude Area Defense
TPP	:	Trans-Pacific Partnership
UAE	:	United Arab Emirates
UK	:	United Kingdom

UN : United Nations
USSR : Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
US : United States
WFP : World Food Program
WHO : World Health Organization



CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

China, one of the centers of early civilization, has always been an important actor and a great contributor to technological innovations. Its historical legacy as the cradle of one of the ancient civilizations (others were Indian, Greek, and Egyptian civilizations) is at the center of the Chinese mindset for presenting itself to others. Despite this, China has never had the chance of becoming a great power in modern times, but was rather affected by events that have been happening around the surrounding area. This reveals the fact that, throughout history, China has been open to influence or exploitation, not necessarily through colonization but through influence from outside. Based on this historical background, today, under the Chinese President Xi Jinping's leadership, the idea of "reclaiming the right place on the world stage" is at the heart of Chinese foreign policy (Economy, 2022).

The main theme, therefore, goes to China's original way of rising to become a great power. The Chinese effort to identify itself with the countries of the Asia-Pacific as an alternative to the West is the main struggle. When looking at the Chinese political system, it is not a democracy known in liberal terms, but a combination of a capitalist economy and a one-party state that benefits from the fruits of the liberal international order. Yet, China keeps in contact with all surrounding neighbors with active diplomacy and goes so far as to offer cooperation. That's why there is an important element of soft power in its foreign policy, too. However, the uncertainties about the future of China's rise are still an issue. Due to the mindset of core leadership, an unpredictable and assertive approach is a big concern; this problem needs to be evaluated seriously. Since under such conditions, no matter how much China gives importance to diplomacy, an ambitious foreign policy is still there, combined with President Xi's style of rule, which has not been seen since Mao Zedong's time. The soft power illustration of China therefore needs to be evaluated objectively, and this will be a main aim of the thesis.

Concerning the regional and international relations implications of the topic, there are arguments claiming that China has been much more successful than the West in terms of crisis management in the past few years. In this sense, the West also gets blamed for not acting efficiently in terms of multilateralism and dialogue, but this does not mean the entire blame goes to the West. The traditional Chinese foreign

policy, which mainly includes all elements of soft power diplomacy, turned into something very unusual with Xi's new narrative. Given the gravity of the consequences of this narrative, Xi may have missed an opportunity. This claim has solid insights that prove that growing assertiveness may have damaged the appeal of the Chinese model. With such issues at stake, there is uncertainty in the analyses regarding soft power, and that's why exploring them will give important lessons for future studies regarding the China's foreign policy.

1.1. Content

The Thesis will start with identifying the basic definitions and meanings of hard power, soft power, and sharp power in Chapter 2. In each notion, many mainstream international relations (IR) scholars hold different points. They have very significant insights regarding how states interact with each other through different mechanisms, which include military, economy, diplomacy, culture, and so forth. Therefore, hard power, soft and sharp power's connected explanations for China will be highlighted to make logical argumentation for the research and construct a fundamental notional background for the content of the thesis.

In order to better connect the three notions of China's use of power, in Chapter 3, a brief history of the foreign policy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) will be provided to better examine the transformation of its international relations agenda. The Chapter will explain how the foreign policy of the PRC has evolved since its founding in 1949 until the beginning of Xi's second term beginning in March 2018.

Chapter 4 of the thesis will have at its center Xi's second term to have begun in March 2018. The thesis will look at the events until June 2023. This second term signifies in many respects a turning point for China's foreign policy. Xi's second term has been a time of instability and crises, and under such circumstances. Therefore, Chapter 4 in this regard will seek to objectively explore what kind of actions Xi took during his second term.

In Chapter 5, the consequences of Xi's foreign policy during his second term will be examined by evaluating China's political and economic standing. The purpose of this chapter will be to find out whether Xi's second term has produced a positive or negative outcome for the PRC's image particularly in its immediate neighborhood and the Asia-Pacific region.

The 6th Chapter of the thesis will be one of conclusions. Basically, a general analytical overview of PRC's entire foreign policy history, developments during Xi's second term and its consequences would be necessary in order to reach conclusions and also highlight the significance of those conclusions for the future of international relations. This is a hot topic and the long-term implications of the future of China's rise will be a key debate for the mainstream academic literature. Besides, at the end of the concluding chapter, recommendations and venues for future research would be identified for those researchers willing to further elaborate or develop the content and findings of this thesis. The conclusion phase will give an elaboration on the findings and some recommendations for future studies to summarize all information in a combined and simplistic manner so as to guide the researchers in their future studies.

1.2. Methodology

Concerning the methodology, the research itself has opted for content analysis. During the research, multiple interactions between states were identified. This is quite normal in the field of social sciences, as interactions come mainly in the form of communication channels between states. Therefore, the content analysis is used to identify the kind of interactions between China and its opponents as well the friendly states in the Asia-Pacific. In this context, regarding the interaction, no quantitative data or methods are used because the latter are based on the measurements of the subject, such as how large or how much the analyzed subject matter is, which makes observation of interaction harder if not impossible –

“[...] quantitative research refers to counts and measures of things, the extents and distributions of our subject matter: how large a thing, how many of them there are, or how likely we are to encounter one” (Lune and Berg, 2001, p. 12).

Instead, qualitative method and data analysis and presentation were preferred. As contended by Lune and Berg, qualitative method is composed of identifying the how, when, where and why of something (Lune and Berg, 2001). In this respect, the qualitative research deals with the meanings, symbols, and metaphors. In the thesis chapters, there were a lot of concepts, meanings, and descriptions. So, the research's skeleton would be based on this method. China's rise's effect on Asia-Pacific

Security and their reflections on the western world are all the main areas of the analysis. So, their relationship will be highlighted through qualitative research.

Indeed, all these methods have to be implemented by looking at the existing literature to get proper data. The author looked at the data and found some significant insights regarding China's foreign policy concerning the hard-soft-sharp power dichotomy. The data to have been gathered as such was available primarily in online academic papers. Those were employed by the author to prepare a short plan for the thesis. Then, based on the collected data, the question of the PRC's soft power capability against the nations of the Asia-Pacific became the main issue, particularly during Xi's second term as the President of PRC. Against such background, the two complementary and inter-related research questions of the thesis have become: (i) Under Xi's second term, did China use its soft power actively? (ii) If so, was China's use of soft power effective or not?

After formulating the twin research questions that were identified above, the method of content analysis was applied during the literature review in order to build an organized, systematic argumentation of the collected information. Accordingly, the sources were examined, and they were then interpreted to adjust them to the requisites of academic analysis. The sources from which the data was collected are primarily secondary sources, meaning they have already been shared with other researchers, and they can be acquired from someone else's work and archives. In other words, as Lune and Berg asserted:

“Secondary sources involve the oral or written testimony of people not immediately present at the time of a given event. They are documents written or objects created by others that relate to a specific research question or area of research interest” (Lune and Berg, 2001, p. 161).

So, the author has benefited from the above-mentioned type of documents in the form of academic books, journal articles, think-tank reports, and policy papers concerning foreign affairs and foreign policy. For instance, there are no interviews nor any questionnaires were conducted with others. Instead, online archives of the newspapers were used to examine crucial recent events first-hand. These newspapers include famous international ones such as *“The Guardian”*, as well as regional ones

such as *“The Japan Times”*.

Although the thesis utilized mostly secondary sources, the comprehensive information contained in them was organized within the chapters of the thesis respectively, and argumentations were subsequently generated in order to contribute to the existing literature on the subject. As already mentioned above and also pointed out by Lune and Berg:

“Content analysis is a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, assumptions, and meanings”(Lune and Berg, 2000, p. 161).

Therefore, the collected data were examined by the author and turned into systematic reviews by finding their strong and weak sides, and finally converted into a conclusion.

All the while, the author must inform the readers of this thesis about one delimitation concerning the language used during data collection and analysis. Accordingly, the entire literature review was conducted in English language. Among others, the author also utilized the work of the commentators and academicians from China and Asia at large, but only to the extent their writings were published in English language. This delimitation implied that no sources written in the regional Asian languages such as Chinese, Japanese, or Indian could be incorporated neither in the literature review nor the content of the thesis.

When analyzing China’s status in the Asia-Pacific, the author touched upon its relations not only with Asia-Pacific, but also with Europe, America and Africa. But rather than constituting the main focus of the thesis, China’s interactions with those other regions of the world were used as a tool to illustrate what kind of foreign policy China is following in the Asia-Pacific based on the developments in these areas. In this sense, the thesis incorporates a second delimitation, which is geographic. More precisely, the thesis will be scrutinizing China’s image exclusively in the Asia-Pacific region and its effect on China’s relations within that particular region.

A third delimitation concerns the time period covered by the thesis. Accordingly, the thesis will focus primarily and specifically on the events between March 2018, when

Xi secured a second term, and June 2023, the time the author closed his research of the subject. All the while, the previous periods were highlighted in a separate chapter to provide for proper and basic background and information. The period of 2018 to 2023 was chosen due to the fact that important shifts and developments appear to have taken place during that timeframe, and their analysis could hopefully enable us to better understand the long-term ramifications of China's rise within international order.



CHAPTER 2: THE CONCEPTS OF POWER AND THEIR REFLECTIONS ON CHINA

The term power of the state has been much discussed in mainstream IR for a long time; its most basic best definition is the influence a state exerts over of others. For Stoessinger, the power is:

“The ability of a state to use its resources (...) in a way that will influence the behavior of other states” (Stoessinger, 1969, pp. 26-27).

Yet, before him, Morgenthau as one of the early thinkers of what is known as classical realism contended that states’ capacity revolves around power (Morgenthau, 1948). Around the same time, Carr warned about the *“total neglect of the factor of power”* in IR analyses (Carr, 1946, p. vii). For those scholars associated with classical realism, human nature is evil, and the statesmen running states are selfish power maximizers in their pursuit of foreign policy agendas. Hence, at least from the perspective of the realist paradigm, which has found widespread appeal among the scholars of IR, the power is deemed to be at the center of interstate relations. Yet, the notion of power is not unidimensional. Among others, a differentiation has been drawn between what various scholars referred to as hard power, soft power, and more recently, sharp power, too. We shall provide a brief overview of those three sub-sets and variations of the notion power under the following three sections.

2.1. Hard Power

To start with the hard power, the concept has been at the center of traditional IR literature for a long time. Mainly, its power analysis remains within the confines of the state’s military and economic power, whereby the main measurement goes to how much a state builds up its military power using its economic power. In this context, Carr distinguished power into three categories: military power, economic power, and power over opinion (Carr, 1946)¹. For him, military power is the main source of strength. Every act of states in times of war requires their military; they can hold it as a deterrent or coercive element to scare their enemies. If deterrence or coercion does not work, the military will be there to be used as a last resort.

¹The Power over opinion will be highlighted in the soft power section.

In Carr's terms:

“Potential war being thus a dominant factor in international politics, military strength becomes a recognized standard of political values”(Carr, 1946, p. 109).

This argument indicates that the main priority is on military power to show strength so as to dominate the minds of the opponents and make them accept what is being demanded.

But military power is not the only dimension. Economic power needs to supply the military might of states, too. No weak economy can build a strong military. Even during medieval times, the wealthiest princes or lords hired mercenaries for their armies. Without money, they would have never done so. History clearly illustrates that both economy and military are bound up with each other. Therefore, a state's hard power is made up of its military power reinforced by its economic power so as to pursue the state interests and objectives if necessary by implementing physical force.

Another IR scholar, Vasquez pointed out to the following regarding hard power:

“[Hard power] deals with the ability of power politics perspectives to dominate the field of international relations inquiry” (Vasquez, 1998, p. 13).

This is a realist argument stressing the importance of power for domination in IR. Vasquez highlighted the importance of self-sufficiency to achieve dominance in international relations. Accordingly, showing strength by flexing military muscles to the others is the crucial point for him. When this argument is applied to the case of PRC and its use of hard power, the visibility of China's military in recent years becomes evident. Indeed, since the end of the Cold War China fields the largest and one of the most powerful militaries in the world taking the second rank after the US. Likewise, PRC's economy is the second largest after the US as well. So, increased preoccupation in the IR literature with PRC in recent years is no coincidence.

But hard power cannot be explained by scrutinizing solely military and economic

power. The alliance ties of states are a key element, too. In this regard, the ideas of Waltz need to be explained here. In this regard, this prominent scholar commonly associated with the Structural or Neo-Realist² school of thought in IR emphasized the notion of balance of power in his numerous works. The term means that a group of states aligns with each other in order to counter the stronger opponent state or group of states that they see as a threat to themselves. History has witnessed both the successes and the failures of such alliances in balancing the opponent(s) and neutralizing the threat. For instance, Waltz indicated that:

“Many, for example, have claimed that World War I was caused by the interaction of the two opposed and closely balanced collations. But then many have claimed that World War II was caused by the failure of some states to right an imbalance of power by combining to counter an existing alliance” (Waltz, 1990, p. 34).

The same example can be modified and applied to the case of modern China. This state is now faced with a wide-ranging alliance consisting of western states and their regional allies in Asia-Pacific. In response, China has sought to build a countering alliance group consisting of Russia, Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, Pakistan, and Cuba; most of which are the US’ rivals and blacklisted countries. Whereas one can thus talk about two major alliance blocs facing each other, what we observe instead is primarily a Western-led grouping and alliances in Asia-Pacific containing a mostly solitary China in that part of the world. However, the balance of power concept is not the only phenomenon at stake. There is a further proposition of the concept known as the balance of threat, which was touched upon on by another neorealist IR scholar, namely Walt. In his account, “balancing” is more common than “bandwagoning” (Walt, 1987,). However, in Waltz’s view, “bandwagoning” is about allying with the strongest power, which can establish hegemony. For him, such alignment is dangerous for the survival of states (Waltz, 1979). Walt shared a similar point, but elaborated the notion of threat in the following way:

² Realism asserts in its contentions that states are self-interested entities, and their behavior becomes evil and selfish not necessarily as a result of their evil nature, but rather as a consequence of the anarchical structure of the international system in which rules, laws, regulations, and organizations are either absent or too weak to control and regulate state behavior.

“Balancing is defined as allying with others against the prevailing threat; bandwagoning refers to alignment with the source of danger” (Walt, 1987, pp. 17, 21-22).

Walt then went on to complement his argument by asserting;

“The main point should be obvious: balance of threat theory is superior to a balance of power theory. Examining the impact of several related but distinct sources of threat can provide a more persuasive account of alliance formation than can focusing solely on the distribution of aggregate capabilities” (Walt, 1987, p. 172).

So, contrary to Waltz, who had highlighted certain states' sharing desire to balance a power that is on the verge of establishing hegemony within international system, Walt saw the same happening as a result of the desire to balance the threat. After all, states are concerned for their survival and not becoming hegemons. Therefore, they tend to ally with the strongest power within the system. Their continued existence as an independent state is their main goal. This is the main difference between the approaches of those mainstream texts about hard power. Meanwhile, for other scholars, there is much to cover about other elements of power like persuasion or cooperation that could also be used to achieve considerable influence within the scope of interstate relations. This takes us to the soft power subset of the notion of power.

2.2. Soft Power

The term soft power, unlike hard power, does not include coercion elements of military and economic power, but rather it makes use of persuasion elements whereby states allocate their resources of culture, ideology, technology, diplomacy, science, and such similar tools for attracting others. Although the term became popular in the 1990s after Nye first coined it, the notion had found use in academic literature by different names and tags. For example, while analyzing hegemony, Gramsci came very close to the concept of soft power when he wrote:

“The combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally without force predominating excessively over consent” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 80).

In addition, Cox, just like Gramsci, indirectly mentioned soft power through hegemony analysis. For him, it is basically a manifestation of ideology, culture, technology by the ruling class of a state at domestic level and spreading them to the world politics to form an international order checked by international organizations, which would then become a transnational affecting force on others (Cox, 1983). Even though both Gramsci and Cox’s analyses were in a primarily sociological context, they can equally be applied to the IR context to illustrate different channels of communication, China’s use of different channels and projects in several host countries located in Asia-Pacific clearly shows that it does not rely exclusively on solid force, but on means of persuasion as well, in terms of diplomacy, economic cooperation, cultural interaction and technology-sharing which all are compatible with the principles of the soft power as part of IR.

In this regard, Carr’s earlier arguments include relevant points. As mentioned during the previous section on hard power, Carr put forward three classifications of power and among them was the power over opinion. In this regard, the non-material concepts of public opinion and psychology are the fundamental basis of this kind of classification. Carr stated that:

“The art of persuasion has always been a necessary part of the equipment of a political leader. Rhetoric has a long and honored record in the annals of statesmanship. But the popular view which regards propaganda as a distinctively modern weapon is, none the less, substantially correct” (Carr, 1946, p. 132).

So, public diplomacy can be considered as a tool connected to the material instruments of power, namely economic and military. Diplomacy as such remains as an important tool of propaganda. Together with military and economic power, diplomacy brings about the skill of persuading others from a higher point of view.

The above-mentioned scholars mentioned the term soft power, although they did not specifically coin the term. In fact, until the year 1990, soft power as a term in IR did not gain popularity. All changed with Nye, who first coined the term. By modifying the earlier idea of Brzezinski, who saw the international policy as a game of chess composed of military power, economic power and soft power (Brzezinski, 1997)³, Nye opened a new way for explaining power. In Nye's account, culture, political values, and foreign policy that a state implements matters. He argued that:

“Getting others to want what you want— and soft power resources— cultural attraction, ideology, and international institutions— are not new. In the early postwar period, the Soviet Union profited greatly from such soft resources as communist ideology, the myth of inevitability, and transnational communist institutions” (Nye, 1990, p. 167).

By using such instruments as attraction, many actors can try to present themselves as an alternative and superior agent of cooperation. By this definition, certain values are shown as good and beneficial. Nye presented the method employed by the former Soviet Union. During the Cold War period, the Soviets benefited significantly from the communist ideology, communist transnational institutions, and the myth of an inevitable war between the proletariat and capitalist states by increasing their image among their allies and states attached to the non-aligned movement. Another case Nye talked about was the American culture. It can be attractive for some, but equally unattractive and biased for others (Nye, 1990). For example, an individual from China could find the American culture even disturbing, as he or she may be inclined to think that the notion of democracy is interfering in the internal affairs of China and undermining the country's development. Because the emphasis on statism and loyalty to the state are the key values of the PRC, this contra value gives good excuse to the PRC elite to show their success and appeal by filling the gap the West has left. Indeed, this perspective happens to be the main source of China's soft power against the country's rivals within the West. The West's soft power comes mainly from its democratic values, ideals and institutions. The institutions of Europe in this instance

³ Brzezinski would later publish a book in 1997 that contains his early ideas named *“The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives”*.

offer a good model. Likewise, the Americans translate into soft power their relative openness to immigrants from all over the world. For long decades, many around the world wanted to move and live in the US. But when Western values began facing serious challenges and their soft power strength began diminishing, China tried to fill the gap as an alternative. All those developments rightfully confirm what Nye had asserted about the methods for presenting cultural values to the outside world. In this sense, soft power is less coercive as compared to hard power.

But it should be noted here that the suggestion that “getting what one wants through attraction, not coercion”, does not necessarily pose an alternative to the hard power. At the time Nye proposed this term, the aim was not to offer an alternative explanation, but rather to reveal how the notions of hard and soft power complemented each other. Ever continuous confrontation does not have to be the outcome of hegemonic competition. In other words, the ability to cope with the problems regarding the decline of a great power against an upcoming rising power does not only include military competition. Nye described international relations of his time by stating:

“When ideals are an important source of power, the classic distinction between realpolitik and liberalism becomes blurred. The realist who focuses only on balance of hard power will miss the power of transnational ideas”
(Nye, 1990, p. 170).

That means when dealing with rising powers, catching their material strength, in this case military competition is not the only necessity, but their propaganda machine which has potential for attraction needs to be considered seriously as well. Hence, current dominant actors have to carefully evaluate the upcoming powers’ ability to present their identity. This would be necessary for them to protect their international prestige.

2.3. Sharp Power

Adding on top of the two widely used forms of power, namely hard power and soft power, there is yet another classification of power that is known as “sharp power”. This happens to be a much more recent variant of power than the previous two. In

this sense, the concept began to get attention after the end of Cold War, especially after 2014 within the context of the Ukrainian conflict. The observers of IR noted that there is now a new trend whereby authoritarian states are using different methods for projecting their influence. Accordingly, more traditional concepts of hard power and soft power were no longer sufficient to explain some of the phenomena and problems encountered in the analysis of IR.

The term “sharp power” was first coined by Walker and Ludwig in 2017 in an article in which they argued increasing activity and efforts by authoritarian states should not be confused with the soft power of democratic states (Walker and Ludwig, 2017). Instead, Walker and Ludwig contended that those authoritarian states used the method of sharp power, which implied manipulating and deceiving others. The Russian Federation and the PRC single out as the main examples of states resorting to sharp power in the literature. Accordingly, the method and strategy pursued by those two states did not involve “winning the heart of others”, but sought instead to antagonize and divide into camps the citizens of the rival states in order to destabilize the victim state and make it defenseless for any subsequent projection of outside influence. This explanation was a remarkable contribution to the existing literature, because an important property of authoritarian states’ foreign policy agenda has thus been detected. Nevertheless, Ludwig and Walker’s argument was criticized by Nye, the coiner of the term soft power. Nye opposed basically the idea of sharp power as a product of authoritarian states. He claimed democratic states could also use sharp power, as demonstrated during the Cold War by the conduct of the US against the Soviets (Nye, 2018). Nye went further to argue that the use of sharp power by democratic states is tricky, because it can result in causing the decline of their credibility, thus damaging their soft power. Therefore, Nye contended, liberal states have a special responsibility to maintain their openness in order to secure their credibility against autocratic states. Nye’s analysis brings up very good insights for examining the nature of the rivalry between the US and China. Whereas the US has to play its role as a responsible actor so as to demonstrate itself as a responsible democracy and an important bastion for international security.

Nye’s position and contentions were indeed original, and drew as such criticism, as well as support from others. In her article titled “*What Sharp Power? It’s Nothing But “Unsmart” Power.*” Liu disagreed with Walker and Nye when she stated:

“If smart power is the right mix or has the correct ingredients of the hard power coercion and the soft power of persuasion and attraction, I think sharp power is better understood as a result of unsuccessful combination of the two. In other words, I disagree with Walker and Nye in believing that perceived sharp power is neither soft nor hard power-it is the product of an unskilled mixing of the two, or put simply, “unsmart power”. This is not to coin a new term, but rather to make the point that no new term is needed” (Liu, 2018).

In summary, sharp power, unlike the thoughts of Walker and Nye, has little to do with the perfect combination of the soft and hard powers. Nor is it a purely new phenomenon. According to this interpretation and view, sharp power already existed in history in various forms. In addition, when analyzing the hostile intentions of different autocratic states, not all of them can be counted in the same pool. For instance, it may be argued, Russia’s use of sharp power intentions is indeed hostile to the victim states. By manipulating information using proxies, propaganda, and disinformation campaigns (even going as far as to execute cyber-attacks), multidirectional pressure (political, economic, military and diplomatic pressure against the political authorities of a given country), and economic aid (that can include legal and illegal means) to reach to a large audience in the targeted country, an attempt is being made in achieving Moscow’s political goals. Russia’s use of those tactics is indeed hostile, and not necessarily comparable and compatible with the methods used by China. In this respect, compared to Russia, China’s use of sharp power instruments is of a different nature. There is not necessarily, for instance, extensive cyber-attacks or use of proxies in the targeted country. Rather, people-to-people exchanges and cultural events like Chinese New Year celebrations are present, which fall more into the category of propaganda and misinformation. Sometimes, there is partial pressure, but nothing more (Liu, 2018). Therefore, China might be counted as assertive and not totally hostile. But the threat it is posing may still there from the perspective of the victim.

While the concept and the term sharp power is more frequently associated with authoritarian states, the same could be applied to the case of liberal democratic states as well. As already mentioned, Nye has picked the example of US foreign policy

towards the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) during the Cold War. His approach clearly implies that sharp power is not an exceptional feature of authoritarian states, but of liberal democracies as well. Conversely, the propositions of Ludwig and Walker establish an exclusive association between sharp power and autocratic states. On that point, Skoneczny and Cacko identified the disadvantage that liberal democracies are facing against authoritarian regimes:

“Openness should be understood as such features of liberal democracy as: freedom of speech, free media market, political pluralism, meaning the possibility of establishing political parties not under the influence of authorities, the existence of an independent sector of non-governmental organizations, etc. Due to the lack of these elements or their strict supervisions in autocratic regimes, governments in democratic countries have significantly limited opportunities to undertake similar sharp power initiatives” (Skoneczny and Cacko, 2021, p. 329).

This would mean if the governments of liberal democracies were to use the same methods as the authoritarian regimes, they would face strong public opposition, and even lose next election. So, they have to follow responsible foreign policy against authoritarian states. In this regard, China could be said to hold an important leverage over the use of sharp power instruments and strategies as compared to its Western counterparts, because the Central government of the PRC holds the state apparatus tighter, as a result of which their system appears as the perfect alternative to the Western models. And since the PRC sees and presents itself as having no colonial past, given the Western democracies’ desire to avoid appearing like revisionist or assertive powers, their stand vis-à-vis China’s rise and goals becomes a lot trickier and more precarious.

We have identified and discussed in this chapter the concepts of hard, soft, and sharp power and their possible reflections on China’s rise on a more general and generic level. However, in order to scrutinize more extensively the connection of those terms to the specific circumstances of China and its foreign policy agenda, China’s foreign policy approaches and strategies throughout modern times need to be identified and analyzed. The subsequent two chapters of the thesis will seek to do that, first by

providing a historical overview of China's foreign policy since the creation of the PRC, and then focusing specifically on the second term of the President Xi Jinping beginning in March 2018.



CHAPTER 3: PRC's FOREIGN POLICY: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In historical context, PRC's foreign policy could be categorized as a pragmatic one. PRC's strategy varied significantly depending on the circumstances of international relations. The table below is an attempt to illustrate different foreign policy approaches and goals over decades as analyzed by Goldstein, who showed how the grand strategy was shaped. Accordingly, all the strategies adopted by the Chinese elites created momentum for China today in achieving its path to becoming a great power, which is why it is important to compare the current situation of China's rise with its recent past. To this end, this section will analyze this historical aspect to outline the general characteristics of the PRC's foreign policy in historical perspective and so as to better understand the current and future positions and posturing of the Asian Dragon.

Grand Strategies of Survival (1949–89) ^a Enduring Purpose—Cope with Existential Threats to the Regime	
Three Approaches	How Each Approach Serves the Strategy of Survival
Sino-Soviet alliance (Mao Zedong)	gain military backing/economic assistance
Sino-U.S. alignment (Mao)	gain military backing
Sino-U.S. alignment (Deng Xiaoping)	gain military backing/economic cooperation
Grand Strategies of Rejuvenation (1992–present) ^b Enduring Purpose—Regain Standing as an Advanced Country, Great Power	
Three Approaches	How Each Approach Serves the Strategy of Rejuvenation
hide and bide (Deng Xiaoping)	build wealth and power for China's rise (lay low and join existing order)
peaceful rise (Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao ^c)	reduce concerns about China's rise (reassure and adapt to existing order)
Chinese dream (Xi Jinping)	shape world for China's rise (reassure, reform existing order, and resist)

^a During the early to mid-1960s, Mao thought that foreign military threats no longer demanded top priority. He instead pursued a foreign policy that promoted his revolutionary socialist vision. When the danger of departing from China's grand strategy of survival was exposed by a sharply increased Soviet military threat in 1969, however, he subordinated preference to necessity and reverted to a strategy of survival.

^b From 1989 to 1992, the Chinese Communist Party focused on reasserting its grip on political power at home after suppressing popular protests in June 1989 and as it was alarmed by the collapse of communist regimes elsewhere.

^c During Hu Jintao's second five-year term, China's policies undercut rather than served the peaceful rise grand strategy.

Figure 1. Different approaches of the foreign policy of PRC throughout time (Source: Goldstein, 2020, p. 169)

3.1. Mao Zedong Era

After achieving victory in the bloody Civil War (1927-1949), the problem of regime survival was the main priority for the PRC leadership. That could only be achieved by aligning with its northern superpower, the USSR, so as to escape from the US' containment strategy implemented against the communist world. The Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, which was signed on February 14, 1950 is a clear indication of the first grand strategy utilized by the first PRC President Mao Zedong, which could be best characterized as "survival" by means of getting military backing and economic assistance (Goldstein, 2020). Those early years were mainly pure hard power years. The military's assertiveness and provocations were at the center of the PRC.

Truly, the early PRC foreign policy was based on massive militaristic assertiveness in the Korean War (1950-1953), when the US and UN peacekeeping forces were about to attain total victory over North Korea and came close to the Chinese border. Yet, the Chinese involvement changed the tide of the war. North Korea was saved and remained as an ideological ally for the PRC. Similarly, the PRC openly provoked during the two Taiwan Strait Crises— the first during 1954-1955, and the second in 1958. The PRC attempted to capture Taiwan and force to surrender the Kuomintang government of the Republic of China which had sought refuge in the island after losing against the Communists in the civil war. During both crises, the PRC managed to get several tiny islands which belonged to Taiwan, however with the US intervention in each crisis, the conflicts were halted.

It should be also noted that Mao also pursued territorial expansion. In 1951, the PRC brutally annexed Tibet, and Dalai Lama (the title carried by Buddhist spiritual Tibetan leaders) fled to India and established a government-in-exile there (Shair-Rosenfield et al., 2020). The latter would provoke the PRC, and combined with disputed territories in the common border, it eventually spark the Sino-Indian War of 1962⁴.

All these were the result of the harsh ideological foreign policy of Mao Zedong's

⁴Sino-Indian War's true origins can be found in the British-made border proposal named "McMahon Line" during the colonial rule. After the annexation of Tibet by the PRC, this line again came into agenda. India wanted the line as border between the two states, whereas the PRC rejected it, leading the war between two nations. The PRC ruled in the battlefield and reached its political objectives.

mindset, and since he ruled the PRC as a single man, no one had the ability to check and balance him internally. Speaking about the military and ideology-based foreign policy, thanks to Soviet support, the PRC managed to build its first nuclear weapons by 1964, and this has changed the balance favorably in favor of the Chinese and Soviets.

On the other hand, after the death of the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in March 1953, and the consequent de-Stalinization process that began under the next Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, the relations between China and the USSR began to deteriorate starting from late 1950s and continuing throughout the 1960s. Because the Soviets were abandoning the Stalinist hardline Communist mindset, the de-Stalinization was not fitting well into the strict ideological mindset of Mao. He was keeping the original Chinese revolutionary outlook. Therefore, a division of ways emerged between the two allies. Gradually, the Soviets withdrew their military and economic assistance, thereby inflicted economic harm which was combined with the disastrous failure of China's Great Leap Forward policy. The latter was an economic campaign launched in late-1950s and carried out into early 1960s. The aim was to transform China from agrarian economy into a socialist, i.e., developed industrial society. Yet, the campaign ended in total failure and cost the lives of millions of Chinese citizens who perished as a result of famine.

From 1960s onwards, a more independent Chinese foreign policy began to emerge. According to Mark, Mao's perception of foreign policy began to take shape in the form of "struggling against imperialists independently" (Mark, 2012). China had now positioned itself on a more neutral ground between the two opposing blocs of the Cold War. Yet, this shift did not help China but rather isolated it, due to its efforts to spread ultra-leftist ideology— a behavior also shaped by China's Cultural Revolution. This was yet another campaign launched from mid 1960s onwards with the goal of reenergizing the original Chinese revolution against the Soviet de-Stalinization. In the foreign policy dimension, Cultural Revolution aimed to position the PRC as the true defender of Communism on a global scale. One immediate outcome was the Chinese assertiveness and aggression toward Vietnam, and that country in its turn getting closer with the Soviets.

Another repercussion was China's escalating disputes with the Soviets reaching in

1968 to the point of a violent and fierce border war between the USSR and the PRC. On that point, Mao's pragmatist attitudes and the grand strategy of "survival" to get military assistance were retained, but instead of the Soviets, this time China shifted toward the other superpower, namely the US. In fact, the deterioration in Sino-Soviet relations was much welcomed by American foreign policymakers. Hence, a new balance of power structure began to shape up against the USSR. The foreign visits to China of the then-US President Richard Nixon in February 1972 and later by the US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who came to office in 1973, helped the relationship to move to cordial terms. It does not mean that the US and the PRC became allies; rather they were now aligning to get one another's military backing (Goldstein, 2020). All the while, its alignment with what Mao saw as an imperialist power, did not stop China from presenting itself worldwide as the "defenders of the oppressed people" (Mark, 2012).

3.2. Deng Xiaoping Era

With the death of Mao in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping taking over as his successor, the alignment with the US took on new characteristics. For Goldstein:

"Under Deng Xiaoping, the alignment added broader engagement with the United States and the rest of the capitalist world to address the concern that economic stagnation that had resulted from self-isolation under Mao, and not just the Soviet military, posed a threat to the regime's viability"(Goldstein, 2020, p.170).

Deng's foreign policy agenda was basically aimed to adjusting the country to the realities of the world. This implied not adopting democracy internally. Instead, it did involve integrating China into the global economy and foreign policy agenda. On this, Mughal observed:

"New policy emphasized over modernizing China by using ideas of Capitalist West and where possible, also their assistance" (Mughal, 2009, p.250).

This policy used some fraction of liberal policies, or rather capitalist economic model so as to attract support and to gain strength. While the good developments were

taking place such as the US granting China with the most favored nation status in the 1980s and the rapprochement with the USSR in 1989 – China under the rule of Deng must have felt relief and be no longer be concerned with external threats. Still, the same degree of optimism did not extend into the internal affairs of China. The brutal crackdown of dissent in 1989, better known as the Tiananmen Square Massacre, was the other side of the coin. The Communist regime acted relentlessly even against a protest movement that was peaceful in nature. Here the Communist party demonstrated its unwillingness to allow any opposing parties and factions against its authority, and it chose to resort to violence to sustain its single-party system. The regime had drawn two important pillars for that purpose: survival through relying on its own small asymmetric nuclear arsenal and keeping its economic development stable (Goldstein, 2020). Therefore, Deng Xiaoping began to follow a new strategy called “Hiding and Biding”. The new strategy is basically standing on:

“China’s initial grand strategy after the Cold War was summed up in Deng Xiaoping’s call for maintaining caution, restraint, and a low profile. The essence of this approach was captured in four characters—taoguang yanghui. Usually translated as “hide your capabilities and bide your time,” its logic was rooted in the belief that maintaining a low profile would lead others to accommodate, rather than oppose, a rising China’s integration with the international economic order, which was essential if the regime was to increase the country’s wealth and, eventually, its power” (Goldstein, 2020, p. 172).

Basically, the PRC would present itself as a reliable partner despite not being a democracy. The strategy created in the West an illusion of a democratic China being on the way. Against the background of the Cold War ending with the victory of the US-led liberal block, the outcome was US liberal triumphalism in Washington’s foreign policy. This implied the goal and the expectation that the rest of the world would soon be shifting to the liberal democratic system - China not being an exception. Therefore, Washington, they played soft towards the PRC in the hopes that it would sooner or later become a liberal democracy, too. There are several signs of this US approach and expectation.

For instance, despite US President George W. H. Bush's harsh criticism of the events at the Tiananmen Square, there were no harsh stance coming from the US (Mearsheimer, 2021). Two years later, in 1992 the US renewed China's "most favored nation status", which was revoked earlier in reaction to the Tiananmen massacre. The subsequent Clinton administration followed the same path, too (Mearsheimer, 2021). The strategy of "Hiding and Biding" was working properly and China was indeed using that strategy well. Appearing like a status-quo player was generating its fruits for China. As such, China averted the danger of being isolated from international society in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square incident and avoided the liberal tide to have followed the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The regional states of Asia, such as Japan, continued to engage with China. And despite being critical of the 1989 incident, the West nonetheless sought to integrate China into the global markets. There were some, like Mearsheimer, to have criticized harshly the positive and cooperative stand of the US and the West toward China during those years:

"Given the liberal triumphalism that pervaded the Washington establishment in the 1990s there was little chance that realist thinking would inform U.S. foreign policy. Instead, U.S. policymakers assumed that global peace and prosperity would be maximized by spreading democracy, promoting an open international economy, and strengthening international institution" (Mearsheimer, 2021).

Basically, this turned out to be a golden opportunity for China to boost its strength. At that time, China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was only the world's tenth largest, and it stood at only 6.6% of the GDP of the US (Goldstein, 2020). That also gave breathing space to the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Although extensive modernization efforts had followed the death of Mao, the PLA still lagged behind its adversaries and modern standards. Under such conditions, its surrounding neighbors were not concerned about China, and they remained engaged with Beijing through trade deals and investment schemes.

3.3. Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao Eras

The Hiding and Biding strategy in this era remained in place until 1994-1995. But by 1994, as China's economic growth accelerated, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party - Jiang Zemin – began adapting a new foreign policy agenda that was not necessarily consistent with Deng's grand strategy of keeping a low profile in world affairs. Instead, in parallel with the growth in China's economic might, increasing assertiveness based on China's military power became apparent. China under the rule of Jiang undertook to pursue more ambitious nationalistic goals such the peaceful unification with Taiwan. When this goal was rejected by the government in Taiwan, Beijing then began to display a more coercive response. This gave rise to the Third Taiwan Strait crisis, which did not end until 1997 and temporarily paralyzed China's relations with the US. In response, Jiang changed his approach to foreign policy agenda, because:

“The United States and its allies reoriented Cold War alliances from their old mission (countering Soviet power) to one tacitly preparing for the potential threat from Rising China” (Goldstein, 2020, p. 174).

With such an early crisis in response to the shift in China's foreign policy goals and methods, the possibility of China being contained by its neighbors appeared as a realistic prospect, in a similar fashion to have already happened during the Mao era. That's why the wisest thing that the Chinese leadership could do for the time being was to revert to their grand strategy of “Hiding and Biding”, thereby while coping with immediate security threats, stop pursuing the role of regional and global leadership. The time was simply too early for such role, and there was no need for immediate assertiveness. So a new strategy referred to as the “Peaceful Rise” was devised (Goldstein, 2020).

The policy implied that, although China was still not wealthy enough to pursue global leadership, it had nevertheless reached a certain point whereby it could now become a major regional power and make others feel under serious threat. The new approach basically emphasized that China had to be a responsible stakeholder, an actor that could contribute to international stability. For that purpose, China began to engage more actively with international institutions such as the Association of

Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). During that process, China was involved in the ASEAN Plus Three countries, which consisted of the ten ASEAN member states⁵, China itself, plus Japan and South Korea (Mark, 2012; Shambaug, 2004). Those engagement policies worked well to the benefit of Beijing. They have illustrated the soft power vision of adapting to instead of competing with or seeking to change the rules-based international order that was shaped up and led by the US and its allies. The rules of soft power, particularly the active diplomacy used by the PRC brilliantly, helped Beijing to improve its international reputation positively and herald the beginning of a golden era. This was also due to the Chinese success in stabilizing its national currency and financial assistance – both in aid and low-interest loans – provided to the worst-affected economies of Southeast Asia during the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis. China's image as a stabilizer of Asia and of also international order had almost become a reality at that time. Under such circumstances, it was easy to be deceived about Beijing's real agenda. The US hoped at least for a while that China would eventually become a rights-respecting democracy and a defender of the rules-based international order. Thus, the US carried on with its policy of engagement, and the Clinton administration continued to grant China with the most-favored nation status which was an important step that would lead to China's accession into the WTO. President Bill Clinton expressed his hope by stating:

““If you believe in a future of greater openness and freedom for the people of China,” he maintained in 2000, “you ought to be for this agreement””
(Mearsheimer, 2021).

All the while for critics such as Mearsheimer, this was a utopist dream that was utilized by the pragmatic foreign policy of the PRC, and a US foreign policy mistake that had continued throughout the 2000s. In this regard, Bush administration to have succeeded Clinton administration in 2001 walked along the same path by granting China with a permanent most-favored nation status. Thanks to the PRC's membership in the WTO, Beijing managed to seize important opportunities for economic modernization and leverage over world politics. In this respect, using the

⁵ The ten ASEAN member states are: Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, Brunei and Myanmar.

rules of soft power drawing on its peaceful rise was a total success.

In the 2000s, yet another change in leadership took place in China with Hu-Jintao becoming the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2002 and subsequently the President of the country in 2003. Hu continued on with the policy of Peaceful Rise during his term so as to reduce concerns about the rise of China. In this regard, contact with the outside world was maintained. Besides, important contacts were pursued to show the Chinese model as a good and beneficial one for everyone. Beijing never abandoned engaging its enemies either. Some of the important events to prove that point were Hu's announcement at the 2005 United Nations (UN) Summit of the idea of "harmonious world" based on equality, openness, democratization of world affairs, and co-existence of civilizations. Meanwhile, China's support for the pro-independence Taiwanese leader Chen Shui-bian in the 2004 elections and their aftermath helped to improve the relations. Complementing the picture was the PRC joining 2006-2007 six-party talks together with the US, South Korea, and Japan towards resolving international sanctions to have been imposed on North Korea for its nuclear weapons program. During this period, China was indeed pushing hard to improve relations with its neighbors. Throughout the 2000s, a positive attitude towards China was present in all states of the Asia-Pacific region. From Russia to the states of Southeast Asia, relations were either recovered or further improved.

But this golden era began to give signs of stagnation in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. A series of Chinese actions and reactions acted to the detriment of the positive atmosphere in favor of China. In the aftermath of North Korea's highly provocative missile tests in 2009, Beijing tried to shield Pyongyang from international condemnation at the UN Security Council. This move had a deteriorating impact on Sino-Japanese relations. Likewise, China did not participate in sanctions of the UN aimed at punishing Iran for its nuclear weapons program. And the period also witnessed the resurgence of the East China Sea and South China Sea disputes between China and its neighbors. Goldstein explained this shift by pointing arguing that:

"To be sure, the ever improving nuclear and conventional deterrents on which a richer and more powerful China could lean to ensure its security

against foreign military threats limited the severity of the danger Beijing faced”(Goldstein, 2020, p. 177).

Even though the first signs of a menacing China were now emerging, the West never broke its policy of engagement with China. The Obama administration to have come to office by that time in the US maintained a cooperative approach toward China. According to Mearsheimer, Obama administration did not divert from the pattern of the previous five American administrations (Mearsheimer,2021). Conversely, on the one hand Chinese policymakers were trying to maintain their low-profile strategy, but at the same time, they were taking somewhat more ambitious and self-confident foreign policy stand.

3.4. China’s Foreign Policy during Xi Jinping’s First Term

With Xi Jinping’s assuming the office of Presidency in China in 2012, there has been a more visible shift in foreign policy. In Xi’s first term in office, his foreign policy strategy was based on “Reassurance”, which implied carrying on with the legacies of Jiang and Hu and the notion of China’s peaceful rise. In doing so, the first aim was to appease the concerns of the US. In his diplomatic efforts, Xi tried to ensure that China was not a challenge for the international system. Goldstein argued:

“Xi sought to persuade President Obama and his advisers that the two countries should forge a “new type great power relationship” of mutual respect and reassurance that would enable them to avoid falling into the “Thucydides trap””(Goldstein 2020, p. 180).⁶

At that time, Xi Jinping even coined the term “peripheral diplomacy” for China’s regional neighbors to assure them that China was not a threat but a partner. Indeed, when Xi launched the foundation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), China looked more persuasive, whereas the US did not. After all, the US had spent its resources in the Middle East by violating the sovereignty of states such as Iraq. As such Washington had undermined by itself the rules-based international order of its own creation. This attitude provided China and its strategy with some leverage and confidence during the period.

⁶ The Thucydides Trap is an ancient term in the IR literature and refers to a dominant power that could do everything to curtail the rise of an upcoming competitor, even go so far as to wage war to stop it.

Another strategy to have been introduced during Xi Jinping's first term was that of "Reform", which is also known as "reshaping the international order". This strategic tenet does not imply a dramatic departure from the original "Hiding and Biding Strategy". Instead, it simply called for "reforming" the current international order without estranging other stakeholders (Goldstein, 2020).

All the while, signs of increasing Chinese assertiveness that were to become much more striking during Xi's second term, had begun emerging even during his first term (Ferdinand, 2016). The strategy implemented for long to keep a low profile as well as the semblance of a responsible stakeholder could not more hide the ultimate goal of the "Chinese Dream" of national rejuvenation (Xuetong, 2014). The goal of attaining Chinese influence in world affairs was already materializing. The PRC's prestige was on the rise at an ever-accelerating pace. A main pillar of this favorable reputation was soon to become the "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)", a massive foreign investment and trade scheme to have been launched the year after Xi took office in 2012. The details of this initiative will be elaborated more within the fourth chapter of the thesis. But for the time being, it should be noted that the project itself contained:

"Bilateral and multilateral cooperation system, to enhance the mechanism of economic integration, supporting the trade flow" (Khalid and Chawla, 2020, p. 4429).

The framework of the BRI is mainly about assisting the host countries with infrastructure, highways, railways, and education. So, Xi in his early years played well his cards to improve China's image. The methods were brilliant to attract support and a successful implementation of the Chinese conviction that the country had no colonial and exploitative past. Unlike the West, this line of thought contended, brutal force or assimilations were not embedded in Chinese history. To the contrary:

"[...] China was a fundamentally different kind of hegemon. As the Chinese version of story goes, unlike other colonial powers, China managed its neighbors through kindness and virtue and so had little use for military

power” (Economy, 2017).

What is rather surprising is the fact that, irrespective of China’s self-perception and reflections and what they wanted their neighbors to think about China, China’s rise to a great power status with peaceful intentions has been quite questionable. Indeed, China was entangled in serious territorial disputes with several of its neighboring countries and outside powers even during Xi’s first term. Those included serious disputes over South China and East China Seas, border clashes with India and periodic standoffs with Taiwan over China’s refusal to recognize the latter’s sovereignty.

The divide between rhetoric and real life was somewhat visible in China’s strategic stand toward the rest of the world and international order. The fact that “Reform” was added during Xi’s first term perhaps in itself did not imply to replace completely the current international order, but rather fix the current problems of the system and reform so as to improve it. This is not a reflection of a revisionist power that seeks to destroy the current international order. Yet it did not entail the outlook of a rising power which is ready to join the existing order without questioning it either. Hence, Xi at that time stood probably at somewhere in between revisionist and status quo stands. This was a pretty ironic situation at the time for the Obama administration and the US. Because, the US as the founder of the liberal international order was criticized by a late-comer to that system who benefited to become a great power and began afterwards to challenge the US hegemony. And now, this new great power, China, advocated changing the existing order. Yet, the US continued to advocate the policy of engagement with some differences without major impact.

“Obama vowed a tougher line against Beijing during his presidency contesting its maritime claims and filing suits against it within the WTO, but these halfhearted efforts amounted to little” (Mearsheimer, 2021).

Although hopes for the emergence of a liberal China were fading away, the cooperation option was still seen as possible by the US administration. As to be seen shortly, the liberal international order was indeed under stress, and Xi Jinping was aware of its weakness. His true intentions began to be revealed prior to his second term as the President of the PRC.

Indeed, Xi's emphasis on reforming the global order became visible during his speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, which took place on January 17, 2017. From Goldstein's analysis of the speech, it was detected that Xi emphasized support for open economic order, shared prosperity, and the problems of globalization that needed to be fixed (Goldstein, 2020). For him, all this happened in the midst of a series of important events: first in the US, Donald Trump was elected as the new President. In Europe, nationalist movements were on the rise. Multilateralism, free trade, and multilateral cooperation were all on the verge of serious decline (Goldstein, 2020). So, it was a perfect time, Xi believed, for him to reveal his true thoughts and intentions. Given the gravity of the situation, Xi thought he had the power to reform the international order according to his and China's vision. Basically, even before the beginning of his second term, Xi's goal began to slowly surface in the international sphere, the goal of restructuring the international order with China at its center.

There was also another grand strategy known as "Resistance" and to be subsequently applied by Xi, but this will be explained in the next chapter focusing on Xi Jinping's second term in office. For now, the important point is that, during his first term Xi began to slowly modify his approach towards the big challenges facing the existing liberal order.

Our overview of the PRC's foreign policy approaches and strategies from the early days of the founding of the new republic and reaching out all the way to March 2018, the beginning of the second term of President Xi, encompass few important observations and patterns. Accordingly, the PRC has never advocated liberalism, even when it has benefitted most from the rules-based international order. Instead, rather pragmatically, the PRC used liberalism to ensure that its economic development could be sustained. In other words, the PRC used the soft power dimension of its foreign policy by acting and appearing as a responsible stakeholder. As the literature on both soft power and sharp power points out, the PRC indeed did not act totally as a revisionist state, and there was little manipulation, provocation, or aggression in the sense of a revisionist power. Instead, it has fit in a spot between status-quo powers and revisionist powers. Conversely, this does not mean the PRC stayed away from assertiveness by all means. On the contrary, especially the world vision of China under the President Xi:

“[...] places the country not only at the center of the international system but also above it, casting the nations as one that inspires emulation by the force of its advanced culture and economic achievements” (Economy, 2017).

This outcome was the product of decades-old plans whose objective was exactly to reach that point. And from that point on, China saw and presented itself as a successful alternative role model. It is against this background that the next chapter will scrutinize as to whether this success could be sustained, and whether soft power remains as an effective policy tool for China or not.

Having completed the historical overview of the PRC's foreign policy, it will be easier to analyze Xi's second term and its aftermath as the main focus of the thesis. Thus, the plans for the next chapter is first to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the PRC's emergence in Xi's second term as a great power, and then how Xi managed to overcome recent crises while the West was divided and on decline. In this sense, the chapter will take a closer look at China's assertive actions under the leadership of Xi in order to find out whether soft power-based Chinese strategies were still useful and successful in achieving China's foreign policy goals.

CHAPTER 4: PRC's FOREIGN POLICY DURING XIJINPING'S SECOND TERM

4.1. *Emerging from Shadows*

To better evaluate the PRC's actions in this era, it is important to pay extensive attention to what Xi considers as China's future. As mentioned under the section, China's centrality in the world stage is at the core of this vision of future, but a brief sentence is not sufficient to summarize it all. Firstly, the nature of the Chinese historical world view should be better identified. The core idea in this respect is "reclaiming China's historical proper place in the world". Rudd, who served as the Prime Minister of Australia between of 2007 and 2010, and briefly in 2013, explained the latter in the following manner:

"Xi's worldview places greater emphasis on the centrality of the Chinese Communist Party over the professional apparatus of the state and of communist ideology over policy pragmatism. It is one of the Chinese nationalism suffused with a cocktail of economic achievement, political nostalgia, and national grievance together with a new culture of political self-confidence that represents a clear departure from Deng Xiaoping's orthodoxy of "hide your strength, bide your time, never take the lead" (Rudd, 2018).

Building upon this premise, the following is the fundamental formula behind Xi's mindset: to establish his authority as a single man and to make the PRC a global power. The irony here is that previously, many scholars failed to focus on the internal dynamics of the PRC. Some even misunderstood and anticipated that China would embrace democratic liberal values. On the contrary, what happens in China is not systemic change. Instead, the party and the state have been indispensable tools for the PRC since 1949. The party has always been at the center of the system. But with the coming to office of Xi, the indispensability of the party gained a new dimension: not just the party is at the center, but also the leader is at the center of the system, in a fashion that has not been observed since the Mao era. In Jonathan Tepperman's description:

“Xi in his single-minded pursuit of personal power, has systematically dismantled just about every reform meant to block the rise of new Mao—to prevent what Francis Fukuyama has called the “Bad emperor” problem”(Tepperman, 2022).

This simple fact is also connected to the first of the seven concentric circle identified by Rudd in analyzing PRC’s security and policy vision:

“Xi has unapologetically asserted the power, prestige, and prerogatives of the party apparatus over the administrative machinery of the state” (Rudd, 2018).

That’s why, despite active diplomacy and the fact that cooperation and assistance to other countries remained as one of the priorities of the PRC, one man makes the decisions on the policy, meaning it becomes utterly more difficult to predict what will happen in the future. The change in grand strategy has just been a matter of time, whereby it could be replaced by something softer or else more assertive.

In addition, constituting Rudd’s second concentric circle, China’s territorial integrity is vital for the PRC leaders (Rudd, 2018). This is the redline that is not open to negotiation. In Beijing’s eyes, Hong Kong, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang (East Turkestan), and Taiwan are all issues that represent the core foundations of internal and external security. Tibet is vital for Beijing’s strategic relations with India, which has been the basis of political sanctuary for Dalai Lama for decades. Xinjiang, for the PRC leadership, is a corridor to the hostile Islamic world. As for the Inner Mongolia, even though the border dispute with the Soviets was resolved in 1989, the Chinese anxiety persisted.

Hong Kong and Taiwan issues are problematic hotspots, too. To ease the immediate challenges, the “one-country-two systems” formula was proposed toward Hong Kong in early the 1980s. The Chinese leadership at that time:

“Believed that “one country, two systems” for Hong Kong would facilitate China’s reunification with Taiwan” (Overholt, 2019, p. 1).

In this respect, the optimistic expectation has been that anticipated economic development of the mainland would eventually serve the ultimate unification goal of the mainland with Taiwan, along with which;

“By 2047 the mainland would have developed to Taiwan’s level both economically and politically, and therefore would be attractive partner” (Overholt, 2019, p.1).

But China’s sincerity in forwarding this formula is still disputed, and the contested freedom given to the people of Hong Kong after 1997 reunification of this former British colony with the PRC has remained as a major sticking point proving the PRC’s uncompromised approach in handling its re-claimed territories and people. To complement all these, Western support for Hong Kong and especially for Taiwan give good excuse to the PRC to seek controlling these two territories by any means necessary.

In addition to territorial integrity, economic structure based on state capitalism is crucial for the PRC. Rather than full-fledged liberalism, the model embraced by Xi in his mindset has social development, and state-led economy is its main pillars (Zeng, 2013). Economy described this model as:

“Institutions, laws, and technology in this new order reinforce state control, limit individual freedoms, and constrain open markets. It is a world in which the state controls the flow of information and capital both within its own borders and across international boundaries, and there is no independent check on its power” (Economy, 2022, p. 3).

For Xi, these factors will continue to serve the economic growth of China by providing an alternative way for international society, too.

So far, the issues covered involved the internal dimension of Xi’s and PRC perspective. Yet, here are also factors relating to external dimension. First and foremost is China’s position in its region. Xi and China’s central leadership consider their fourteen neighboring states to be within China’s sphere of influence. The area surrounding China has historical significance for national security of China. Those

states and regions thus correspond to the fourth concentric circle of Rudd:

“Historically, they’ve been the avenue through which China’s national security has been threatened, resulting in successive foreign invasions” (Rudd, 2018).

Therefore, by applying political and economic diplomacy, China aims to build a positive image on them, and even beyond that, China is engaged in the continental periphery through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which was established in 2001 for the purpose of economic, security and defense cooperation among its member states⁷. Likewise, BRI is employed to consolidate PRC’s position as a reliable regional actor. In other words, the PRC is engaged in active diplomacy for persuasion, but that is not the entire story either. If none of those steps worked, China would then be ready to show its full military might in order to force its neighbors to comply with its demands (Rudd, 2018).

This is connected to yet to Rudd’s fifth concentric circle and important aspect of China’s view of its place in the world, and it concerns China’s strategic interests in its maritime periphery (Rudd, 2018). Xi and the central leadership consider the maritime area off China to be a “core national interest”, just like the territorial issues of Hong Kong and Taiwan. The South China and East China Seas are seen in Xi’s mind as historical Chinese zones. In this contention, the Chinese were after all the first ones to have explored and exploited the resources in those maritime zones.

In dealing with those littoral areas,

“China has grown preoccupied with achieving near-term tactical gains in both its territorial disputes with neighbors and its quest for deference from other countries” (Taffer and Wallsh, 2023).

Consequently, the PRC has opted to put aside international law and began making assertions based on its own interpretation of history. The ultimate goal is gaining respect of all fourteen neighboring states and attaining dominance in PRC’s maritime

⁷ SCO members are as of 2023 China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Iran and Russia.

periphery.

The next level of PRC's foreign policy could be identified as the country's global significance and its relations with the rest of the world. During the Cold War, it was handled through the non-aligned movement. Today, this is still valid in sustaining China's relations in Africa where multiple Chinese investment projects have been flourishing (Soetopo and Uspenskikh, 2021). In this sense, China presents itself as a model for developing nations. Ironically, the West has been losing its high ground to China in this regard.

The last dimension in China's foreign policy perspective is China's future role and influence within the international order, and in this respect, what would happen to the international order established after World War II. The US has so far sought to defend and preserve that so-called rules-based international order through its allies and alliance ties. But Xi is simply opposed to such US dominance within the system.

“His understanding of the centrality of China signifies something more than ensuring that the relative weight of country's voice or influence within the existing international system is adequately represented. It connotes a radically transformed international order” (Economy, 2022).

The Chinese's weigh on multiple continents are getting stronger, like in the case of Europe, where Chinese investments are becoming permanent. For instance, China Ocean Shipping Company, Limited (COSCO) received the right to operate the container terminal in the port of Hamburg. This is crucial in the sense of shaping Europe's critical logistic facilities and transportation lines (The Maritime Executive, 2023), hence may be seen as proof of an act to replace the US' dominance.

In Rudd's presentation, through this seventh concentric circle:

“[Xi]made clear he does not see China's role as simply replicating the current U.S.-led liberal international order of the future” (Rudd, 2018.).

In other words, what is targeted by Xi is not the creation of a new and separate order from the existing international order, but instead it concerns a vision of defending

China's core interests within the current system.

Xi Jinping in other words aims a cooperative stance. For instance, in one of his addresses in 2018, Xi emphasized the importance of “harmonious world” like his predecessor Hu Jintao:

“We advocate inclusiveness and oppose zero-sum game featuring winner-takes-all and I-win-you-lose mentality” (Xinhua, 2018).

He was basically promoting his own version of multilateralism for the international system by presenting the Chinese model as new alternative great power drawing on eastern civilization. At the same time, he also assumed the role of a “parent” for Asia-Pacific states, a narrative which was also used by Xi in China's regional disputes with other regional states in the South China Sea.

The elements identified so far are some of the key ideas and visions comprising President Xi's mindset. When all of them are analyzed together, it is possible to conclude that on the one hand, China offers cooperation. But in parallel with it, another element of his strategy to have come to mark Xi's second term is the so-called “resistance”. This implies while benefiting from the liberal international order created after the Second World War, China is nonetheless assertive and defiant. Its massive military build-ups in the South China Sea, and its assertive attitude and actions are significant elements of China's conduct of foreign policy. Beijing has come to demonstrate its strength in order to protect its core interests, and the control of the neighborhood and assertive positions in maritime disputes are all in there (Goldstein, 2020). Indeed, while doing all this, China still tries to stick with the rules of a soft power game. While under Xi's directives to “reclaim its proper place in the global order”, the Asian Dragon does not necessarily rely on the use of force. This military force option has of course always remained on the table.

To summarize the Chinese view, a prominent Chinese scholar's argumentations are worth highlighting:

“China has become a global power that can meet the rest of the world on equal footing” (Xueting, 2021).

That means China challenges on the one hand the hegemony of the West by offering an alternative model for the developing world, and all the while continued to perceive itself as a developing country. This point was confirmed by Xi Jinping in one of his addresses when he claimed that China would in 2018:

“forever belong to the family of developing countries” (Xuetong, 2018).

Obviously, this is not about assuming the role of a world’ sheriff like the US did since the end of the Second World War. Instead, it implies China as a role model for the developing and underdeveloped countries. In other words, there is a dual identity in Xi’s mind: on one hand, China does not seek to assume the role of world’s policeman, but on the other hand, it still seeks to challenge the U.S. in military, economic and diplomatic domains. The PRC is more like an alternative trying to get away from the Soviets’ Cold War-style confrontation with the West, fearing that it could quickly lose momentum in doing so. This was the idea, at least from a Chinese perspective, of not becoming a global power and leader like the US did.

In Xi’s mind, even though China is still a developing country, it could nonetheless fill the vacuum left by a receding West. The most prominent ramification of such vision is the BRI – a very ambitious trade and transport infrastructure scheme. According to Khalid and Chawla:

“For United States, BRI comes as a direct challenge to its objectives in Asia and threatens its status as the balancer and security provider in Asia-Pacific” (Khalid and Chawla, 2021, p. 4230).

Moreover, the expectation is China’s economic dependence on the US support will decrease, which will help it to establish its hegemony in the future, particularly within its region. Therefore, the regional implications of such development would indeed be beneficial for the PRC. If China managed to establish its absolute hegemony in Asia-Pacific, its global leadership would also become imminent. After all, the power is shifting on a global scale in the direction of Asia-Pacific. Brands and Sullivan argued:

“The merging conventional wisdom holds that China will try to establish global influence by first establishing regional hegemony. This does not mean physically occupying neighboring countries (with the potential exception of Taiwan), as the Soviet Union did during the Cold War. But it does mean that Beijing must take itself the dominant player in the Western Pacific”(Brands and Sullivan, 2020).

So, the precondition for becoming a global power is becoming the leading regional power. This objective necessitates weakening of the US alliances in the region. In Xi’s mindset, the US should retreat from the Asia-Pacific and return to the Western Hemisphere, not as a superpower, but as another great power of the international system (Brands and Sullivan, 2020). If Xi’s narrative on China’s centrality and “reclaiming the rightful place in world affairs” are to be taken granted, then the strategy to meet the goals identified under the previous sentence would be the wisest one to follow for China for the foreseeable future.

All the while, establishing regional hegemony in Asia-Pacific Region does not necessarily require use of physical force. Instruments of soft power can be applied, too. According to Brands and Sullivan:

“Economic and technological power is fundamentally more important than traditional military power in establishing global leadership, and that a physical sphere of influence in East Asia is not necessarily precondition for sustaining such leadership” (Brands and Sullivan, 2020).

Such conduct to attain global leadership would normally give China the upper hand in winning the hearts and minds, which is compatible with the objectives of soft power. Conversely, the idea of benign control of its neighbors in the Chinese mindset and the shift toward increasing authoritarianism under Xi have become obstacles in China’s conduct of foreign policy and made the latter appear more like sharp power. We have to briefly scrutinize the origins and evolution of this particular premise of foreign policy recently. So, the following section will summarize how China managed to fill the vacuum left by receding West, and how this vacuum provided China with a golden opportunity in its endeavors especially in the Asia-Pacific

region.

4.2. Successful Crisis Management

China's success and capacity in handling recent international crises not seen since the Second World War have also accelerated its rise in global scene. For instance, unlike the West, China managed to use global institutions much more effectively and frequently during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence the PRC has got the upper hand during those the troubling times. How China has managed to do that deserves further scrutinizing, and this will be the main objective of this section.

During the period of 2018 to 2020, the West had already suffered major setbacks. In 2016 US presidential elections, an isolationist and protectionist minded leader named Donald Trump was elected, and this did put an abrupt end to the decades-old US engagement strategy. President Trump initiated instead a strategy of containment by declaring a trade war against China in 2018. But this step did not hurt the PRC much. Instead, it did more harm to the US (Goldstein, 2020 ; deLisle, 2021).

Such unilateralism had already begun damaging Washington's alliance ties, and its standing within the international institutions even before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. Conversely, China had begun gaining the upper hand on both accounts, thanks to Trump's isolationist containment strategy, which in fact was not containment at all. One evidence was provided by the Trump administration's approach to the human rights violations in China. The administration chose to simply ignore the ill-fated 2019 protests in Hong Kong, as well as the detention of one million Uighurs without a fair trial (Cabestan, 2022). This was a major blow to US containment strategy in place since the beginning of the Cold War. Previously, the US had supported its fellow democratic allies since the time of its confrontation with the Soviets. But now with the Trump administration, while many of EU and Pacific democracies expected US attention and into the issue, the US simply left them in the open by preventing the formation of collective voice against the PRC.

Another major blow to US containment strategy was that Trump only saw containment as unilateral actions, most notably imposing tariffs on trade on unilateral basis. Cabestan pointed out:

“Trump chose to place tariffs on China unilaterally, rather than attempting

to resolve that dispute through international institutions, such as the WTO”
(Friedman, 2022, p. 1301).

Trump’s actions certainly damaged US’s stance with its allies and international institutions. Therefore, such containment had begun hurting US rather than China even before the COVID pandemic arrived.

In late-2019 and early-2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic began hitting the World, initially China’s global image suffered serious damage. Before COVID-19 became a global pandemic, the PRC’s fight against the virus was not transparent at all, and this has prevented the World Health Organization (WHO) from effectively addressing the information about the virus and from taking necessary first steps. The Chinese authorities tried to hide the epidemic from the public eyes as they sought to contain it themselves with minimum damage. Consequently, there was this initial antagonism towards the PRC, and China’s image subsequently hit the lowest point of all times, though for a short period of time. China’s initial mismanagement of the crisis and its aggressive narrative made the world perceive China as “virus infector” (Onnis, 2021, p. 2).

This adverse image spread throughout the western world to such a point that it became to be known as the Chinese Xenophobia. It was very undesirable for China to continue with such an image. The pursuit of a strong international status has always been an important motivation for Chinese foreign policy. Conversely, in the early days of the COVID-19 epidemic, the PRC was facing the threat of being isolated. For a rising power, its international image matters a lot. Historically, such isolation was something already experienced by Beijing, as:

“China made significant efforts to overcome an external blockade in the early days after its establishment, vigorously undertaking economic, trade, and cultural relations with foreign countries” (Amigo, Candor and Tsukue, 2021).

On the occasion of COVID-19, and after a long time, a similar external blockade was in the shaping. Until the pandemic, China had been viewed positively. More and more states and their private companies had been investing in China. Non-Chinese

were arriving in loads in China for work, studies, or simply for vacation. From the perspective of the PRC, the pre-pandemic status quo would have to be restored urgently, if China's rise was to be sustained. To this end, China began playing nicely once more within the international community through its positive contributions in such multinational institutions such as the WHO, the UN, and the African Union. For instance, under the directives of Xi, the PRC donated USD55 million to the WHO (Amigo, Candor and Tsukue, 2021). Moreover, Xi offered to donate USD2 billion in additional aid for countries badly affected by the pandemic.

The more striking development in this respect was China's innovation of the first vaccine against COVID-19, named Sinovac. Thus, the so-called vaccine diplomacy was added to the foreign policy agenda of the PRC. The vaccine diplomacy promised to share the new anti-COVID innovations with the rest of the world. In addition, the World Food Programme (WFP) established the UN Global Humanitarian Response Hub in China, making the PRC a center for helping the poor people affected by the pandemic (Amigo, Candor and Tsukue, 2021). This was again a very important development serving China's soft power. Overall, China was very active in crisis management by taking advantage of its financial wealth and level of economic development. All those provide a good indication of how China can present itself as an alternative to the Western model by aiding developing countries, and demonstrated that China could restore its badly tainted reputation in the international arena.

Indeed, during this period, the international aid provided by China became very extensive, and it was made available to almost every region of the world. COVID-19 vaccines, test kits, and experts were sent to ASEAN countries, to Latin America, and even to some European countries. Under Xi Jinping's directive, in October 2020, the PRC joined the UN-led initiative named COVAX for the fair distribution of vaccines (Onnis, 2021). Xi saw this move as a significant step to improve China's reputation in the eyes of other countries. Indeed, there were certain cases proving that others placed their trust with China. For instance, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt approved the use of Sinopharm and other brand-new vaccine developed and promoted by China, but not to have completed its testing. Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines were provided to the ASEAN states, Latin America, and the Middle East, long before the completing the vaccination of the Chinese people,

constituting a quiet “generous act” in foreign policy. Some Chinese vaccines even were approved for use by some EU states. For instance, Hungary became the first country to approve the Sinopharm. These cases are strong evidence that many countries including Europeans showed confidence in PRC’s engagement of the pandemic. China in retrospect mended its image and reputation as a reliable partner and a capable actor.

All those developments illustrated beyond any doubt that there was significant Chinese pandemic engagement not just in its own region, but also throughout the world. As such, China has successfully used the occasion to present its system as a better model for the rest of world, and gained important leverage by filling the void left by the West during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to the opportunities provided by the COVID-19, when speaking about humanitarian aid, it is equally important to pay tribute to the positive role played by the BRI. In this respect, the BRI has almost become an equivalent of the US Marshall Plan that was implemented after World War II to put back devastated European economies in working order. The BRI targeted mostly the Asian region due to this region’s historical significance for China, as well as the importance of several regional actors for the PRC. In the words of Khalid and Chawla:

“Not only because of its prime geostrategic location but also because of the presence of the most volatile yet important states in the region. India and Pakistan”(Khalid and Chawla, 2021, p. 4231).

Those two happen to be the nuclear states bordering China from the South. The PRC has had close relations with Pakistan, which sometimes leads to tensions with India. In this sense, BRI here was utilized by China to improve its partnership with Pakistan, which in its turn proved useful as a leverage against India.

In recent years, the BRI has been quite active in Pakistan.

“By one assessment, the BRI now touches more than 60 countries and has exceeded \$200 billion in Chinese investment. Some countries, such as Pakistan, are being transformed by the BRI, with energy projects, new roads,

and a massive upgrade of both is Gwadar port and its digital infrastructure”(Economy, 2022, p.8).

The projects aimed to bolster the PRC’s footprint and reputation not just in Asia but also in other parts of the world, most importantly in Africa in the past few years, and particularly during the COVID pandemic.⁴⁶ African countries joined as participants in the BRI, and when the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, conducted trips to the five African nations of Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Botswana, and Seychelles in the first week of 2021, the PRC managed to adjust the environment for establishing footholds in the African continent (Soetopo, 2021).

The pandemic continued to reinforce this presence, such as through the sending of medical equipment and professionals. A mechanism which is called Group 20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) helped the poor countries that were hit hard by the Pandemic by cancelling their debts (Soetopo and Uspenskih, 2021). These efforts helped the Chinese gain a significant strategic advantage. The West was really losing the high ground in its competition with PRC. The global governance capability of the PRC during the pandemic was indeed successful.

In addition to the PRC’s capacity to oversee multilateral initiatives, just like the BRI, the Confucius Institutes played an important role, too. If this is to be mentioned briefly, the core charge behind this instrument is the presentation of Chinese culture and language in the international sphere, as a main tool of soft power. To spread how China contributed to world civilization and to display its leading role currently as a responsible stakeholder. All these have been organized carefully by Xi for his goals. For Economy:

“For example, Xi has championed the adoption of Chinese language and Chinese cultural offerings through the establishment of Confucius Institutes in overseas universities and classrooms” (Economy, 2022, p. 11).

There is an active effort to increase the China’s image in the international system. So those were the main actions and tools used by the PRC in the past few years, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. As it can be seen, they had some success. Hence, we should also take a look how they were seen and responded to by

the West.

Throughout these developments, the responses from the US and other Western countries can be summarized in a few words: diverted, uncoordinated, and even paralyzed. To begin with, it is a pretty ironic situation for the Western world to remain ineffective in protecting the international institutions.

Firstly, the US was struggling during the Trump era due to the poor handling of the pandemic. In the words of deLisle:

“The United States has been admired, envied, hated and feared in the post-Second World War era, but never before pitied”(deLisle, 2021, p. 32).

The so-called leader of the “free world” faced a tragic humiliation due to high COVID cases and deaths at home combined with the democratic setback caused by Trump’s rhetoric. The eruption of violent protests against racism around the George Floyd incident, increasing polarization of the US population, and the violent and embarrassing Capitol raid added to this tragedy. All these events suggested that the US’ management of the pandemic was a total failure, the scope of which was not limited to internal policies, but extended to external affairs as well.

The US’ reputation in the international arena, already damaged by the country’s mismanagement of the pandemic, was only worsened by Trump’s constant and baseless accusations against China of spreading the virus. The Trump administration’s use of nationalistic responses to a global pandemic gave China the perfect argument to openly criticize the US. As deLisle observed:

“Chinese official sources, especially, sought to highlight the U.S.’s uncooperative approach and— mirroring the darkest charges U.S. sources leveled against China — even insinuated that the virus came from the U.S. military” (deLisle, 2021, p. 32).

Consequently, China gained important leverage over the US’ pandemic response and even dared to claim conspiracy theories regarding the origin of COVID, which, in China’s perception, was intentionally created by the US.

The US also failed to adopt a multilateral approach in face of COVID; while China cooperated with international institutions in addition to its own programs for humanitarian aid, the US under Trump did the opposite. Friedman described this situation in the following way:

“He cut off US support for the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the UN Human Rights Commission; he withdrew support for the World Health Organization; he cut US funding for the Organization of American States; he unilaterally blocked appointments to the WTO’s court of appeals and he applied sanctions to the International Criminal Court” (Friedman, 2022, p. 1301).

In short, Trump’s reaction to the pandemic has been destructive for the country’s reputation in every possible way. Quitting the WHO during a pandemic outbreak particularly hurt US’ relations with international community.

To take it to the extreme, the Trump administration’s isolationist rhetoric caused the new threat of a revisionist US, which would be no different from Russia or China. As a matter of fact, under the circumstances, China appeared to be more of a status-quo player than the US, even though in reality it was not. The policies implemented by the US caused this unprecedented negative image. Trump-era policies raised concerns about an accelerated US decline. The US’ withdrawal from the aforementioned institutions left a power vacuum for China within those institutions, and the PRC started acting almost like a new global sheriff. The damage has not been limited with these consequences; the US’ allies also paid the price, including the ones in the Asia-Pacific region.

Clare observes:

“The United States lacks a coherent economic response to China’s commercial power, although it tried to develop one under former President Barack Obama, when U.S. diplomats led the initiative to establish the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). When former President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the TPP, he weakened U.S. leverage in a region primarily composed of two types of states: “developing” states that are trying

to get rich and “developed” ones that are trying to stay rich” (Cleare, 2022).

Its Pacific allies came to see the US now as a “distracted power”. During the reign of the Trump administration, the US policy simply abandoned its Pacific allies, putting the raising serious question marks about the credibility of the US in the region and the Alliance agreements signed by the US (Seebeck, 2021).

Then, the policies of the Trump era forced the Pacific allies of the US to hedge and develop their own security policies against China, Russia, and North Korea, even causing some to withdraw whenever convenient from international institutions and alliances. A more isolationist world system was created as a side effect, which was to China’s advantage in its struggle to become a hegemon in the Asia-Pacific region. Significant enough, China’s assistance in providing essential supplies to the states of the Asia-Pacific exceeded those by the US and other Western countries. A stark contrast with the US’ lack of action, Beijing maintained close in-person relationships with regional states during the pandemic and assisted them through teleconferences to share China’s experiences. Although those steps did not result in China gaining new allies in the region, they nonetheless signified a partial victory against the US. In this sense, the US’ passive approach diminished its capability to sustain its unquestioned global leadership. China turned Asia-Pacific into, in their perception, a “big family”. To quote Economy:

“Xi has been particularly successful in cementing China’s position as the regional economic leader” (Economy, 2022, p. 6).

Indeed, as of 2021, ASEAN states ranked China as their top trading partner. A year before, in late 2020, Xi had concluded the negotiations over the Chinese-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership with ten South East Asian countries, including Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand. Xi also had made a significant effort to advance membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a Japanese dominated free-trade agreement. These developments had already reinforced China’s dominance in the Asia-Pacific while weakening the US. The US’ lack of support to its allies during the pandemic caused its Pacific allies to become skeptical to the US’ request to help

contain China's growing power. Some of these allies, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, were also important trade partners with China and wanted to continue their trading with China despite the pandemic.

In addition to the US, Europe also faced its share of challenges during the pandemic, a situation that China, once again, turned into an opportunity.

First of all, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was seen already by many as a weakened military alliance. After all, in realist paradigm, military alliances are temporary; when the threat is over, their goal of mutual protection is achieved and members of the alliance will eventually disband their security commitments against one another. From this perspective, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War, the NATO alliance would have normally disintegrated. Instead, it has thrived by adapting and finding new rivals in distant geographies. Sauer argued:

“NATO's post-Cold War track record is dismal, which is not surprising, given the nature of the beast. Apart from Balkans, which are more or less stable (although tensions are flaring up again these days), the NATO military interventions in Afghanistan and Libya are a complete failure” (Sauer, 2017).

So now, after all its failures, a new security challenge was about to face NATO, and renewed unification was needed within NATO, after all, Russia was threat since 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the PRC was coming to picture as the potential rival to the long-term. In fact, in NATO Leaders' Summit held in London between 3-5 December 2019, a holistic response to strategic challenges posed by China's growing influence had already been recommended. Yet, given the absence of consensus or sense of urgency on the part of NATO's European allies, it was still too difficult a task for the US to mobilize its NATO allies to contain China at that time now (Brzozowski, 2019).

NATO had wasted too much of its resources on unnecessary wars that brought nothing in the end in terms of regional stability to Middle East, North Africa and southeastern Europe. Moreover, it was already struggling with internal conflicts before the pandemic, and even before the beginning of Xi Jinping's second term. NATO did not even have a consensus on whom constituted the common enemy. The

states on the Eastern flank of NATO saw Russia as the main threat, whereas those on the Southern flank saw the flow of refugees and Islamist extremist terrorist groups as the more pressing threats (Sauer, 2017). The Trump administration's detachment from the organization, accusing Europeans of "hiding behind the Americans", inflicted another major damage and further divided the NATO, allowing China to get more influential within European affairs. As a matter of fact, some of the NATO members did not see the PRC as a threat at all. Michell stated:

"The Trouble is that some allies do not see China as NATO's business while others are afraid that putting it on the alliance's agenda will antagonize a powerful trade partner" (Michell, 2021, p. 1).

The PRC was well aware of this divide within NATO.

While discussing the trade partnership with the PRC, it is worth mentioning the attitude of EU members and non-members (including non-NATO members as well), who have often been slow to react against their international opponents. Xi used the BRI as a demonstration for economic cooperation and antidote against the effects of the pandemic. BRI and the COVID vaccine diplomacy were the two main soft power instruments from which Beijing hoped to generate benefits. One prominent example was China's relationship with Serbia. As explained by Soetopo and Uspenskikh:

"During the observed period, among all the other countries in the region, Serbia had the most interaction with China and received the most of Chinese pandemic aid among European countries to a great concern of the European Union, which is in talks with Serbia on its membership in the EU, but also of Russia that considers Serbia its main European ally"(Soetopo and Uspenskikh, 2021, p. 4).

It was no coincidence that Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic praised the PRC more than once for its assistance, investments, and construction projects. As an undemocratic state, China aimed to "win the hearts and minds" of Serbian people as a main soft power strategy. Serbia even openly assured their Chinese counterparts that

the US would not manage to harm the bilateral relations between the two countries. The more tragic part is the division between northern and southern Europe. While Britain, France, and Sweden banned the use of Chinese 5G technology provided by Chinese contractors Huawei or ZTE, states with more vulnerable economies remained passive and silent on the issue. For Chen and Gao:

“Notably, while France, Germany and Britain wanted to adopt an assertive approach urging China to uphold international law, other EU member states including Hungary and Greece were unwilling to criticize Beijing”(Chen and Gao, 2020, p. 13).

Due to their vulnerable economies, those states preferred to stay silent against China’s controversial policies and actions, such as the human rights violations that Beijing conducted in the Xinjiang province. Italy, for instance, refused to join the ban on Huawei technologies since it was the first developed country in Europe to join the BRI project. Under these circumstances, the PRC managed to get footholds in the EU, such as the Chinese investment in the port of Piraeus in Greece, a priority strategic trade destination in Europe.

More examples can be given to illustrate the Chinese influence in Europe. However, the main point is that the economic relations mentioned above have split Europe into two spheres: one group of states that supported China and one that opposed it. China’s ability to create such division has been due to its economic power, which also provided the impetus for its foreign policy.

The group of states that were willing to continue cooperating with China were Serbia, Hungary, Romania, Italy, Greece, and Poland. They have all distanced themselves from the political debate about pressuring China concerning human rights violations and absence of democracy.

Conversely, the states that took a tough position towards China were Britain, France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium. However, even these countries had disagreements with each other. The Netherlands and Belgium were hesitant to engage in harsh criticism of Beijing before and during the pandemic era. Even now, this attitude still dominates Europe.

“As Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte told a Davos audience last week “China is a huge economy with huge potential and a huge innovation base”, even if “legitimate security concerns” exist”(Walt, 2023a).

More surprisingly, France took a milder attitude towards China than Britain:

“French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire echoed this view, saying “The U.S. wants to oppose China, we want to engage China. ... I strongly believe that in the world game, China must be in, China cannot be out”” (Walt, 2023b).

As can be seen, even the detractors camp is divided. Under these conditions, the EU lacked a collective response, and the economic and political influence of the PRC is very visible in this division. The Netherlands preferred to support China for economic reasons. France, while still maintaining an anti-Chinese rhetoric, did not openly oppose Beijing like Britain or Germany did, because France has been trying to conduct an independent foreign policy from the US. Such divisions were further highlighted in the EU’s shortcomings in distributing of COVID vaccines among its member states. Beijing had promised to supply COVID vaccines to European countries, but there was significant competition among those countries for vaccines. This situation clearly implied that the European states, particularly those within the EU were slow and uncoordinated in their responses. EU failed the simple test of coordinated distribution of medical supplies, presenting yet another manifestation of the decline of the West. This has provided further breathing space to China’s alternative model drawing on state-led economy as against liberalism of the West.

The resulting emergence of an assertive Chinese foreign policy broke a long-lived strategic mindset. Even though the PRC has remained as an autocracy and has been viewed as an unreliable actor by its neighbors, Beijing has continued using soft power tools to protect its image. Yet, Xi’s growing confidence resulting from his upper hand in the face of the West’s ever-deepening decline between 2018-2020 and events during the pandemic was to soon lead him to abandon soft power tools and adapt the policies of highly assertive, revisionist state.

In the following section, we shall explore Beijing's shift to assertive foreign policy and its consequences in the past few years⁸.

4.3. Assertive Foreign Policy

Arguably, one of the reasons for China's shift to the conduct of more assertive foreign policy is China's comparative success in managing its internal and external crises. It is fair to assert that China was more successful than the West in handling the COVID crisis. This success has led to Beijing's confidence growing significantly. As Sun explained:

“The growing confidence of Beijing is best reflected in the Fifth Plenum of the 19th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party held in October 2020. According to the tradition, the Fifth Plenum of each party Congress is devoted to announcing the next Five-Year Plan. This one was no exception, not only did the CCP publish the primary goals for the 14th Five-Year Plan, but it also announced a mid-term 2035 Vision, including “major elevations of China’s economic, technological, and comprehensive national power””
(Sun, 2021, p. 18).

Accordingly, the PRC defined a clear and ambitious goal for its long-term future: The domination over the West, whereby China would be at the center of the world affairs. President Xi has adjusted his foreign policy based on the current state of the international arena and positioned China as an important window of opportunity for developing nations and European countries with struggling economies. As mentioned under the previous sections, the US had already become a “distracted power”, and even an “uninterested one”. The position of the US had been a continuation of a pattern observed since the 9/11, which had triggered America's so-called “War on Terror” in the Middle East. Since then, Beijing had been able to subtly grow its relative power. Now, thanks to Trump and his poor handling of the pandemic,

⁸ Xi Jinping used the assertive and coercive sharp power's use of economic aid as political blackmailing (Xi's use of BRI project against partner states as political weapon), to impose economic sanctions (sanctions against Australia), cyber-attacks (Chinese cyber-attack against Malaysia) aggressive military demonstrations in Taiwan, South China Sea and spreading China's autocratic government model to some Pacific Island States. However, in the following sections, progress of Xi's assertive policy and its consequences will be analyzed, rather than the China's use of sharp power methods directly.

conditions similar to the 9/11 had emerged, and China had turned those into an important advantage.

In parallel, a shift in global power configuration in favor of the Asia-Pacific region had been underway. Sun highlighted:

“China’s “advantages” in the changing power equilibrium include “its political system, improved governance capacity, positive economic growth, accumulated material wealth, rich human resources, huge domestic market, economic resilience, social stability.” In the Chinese view, these “advantages” have not been removed or significantly weakened by U.S.-China great power competition, the trade war, or COVID” (Sun, 2021, p. 18).

From this point of view, the PRC needed no longer to keep a low profile. At least this is how things looked from Beijing. The U.S. decline was by then obvious, and this had now created the belief that the PRC’s governance model run a higher chance of being adapted as the more preferable option for the future international relations. The inadequate responses from the Western countries to the public health crisis caused by the pandemic contributed significantly to China’s growing confidence in China’s own success and its ability to seek global dominance.

All the while, the US hopes and wishes to reach a compromise with the PRC, were proven as an erroneous, idealistic and utopic dream. According the Mearsheimer:

“But great powers are simply unwilling to let other great powers grow stronger at their expense. The driving force behind this great-power rivalry is structural” (Mearsheimer, 2021).

If the US wanted to remain a global superpower, it should have never abandoned the rules of the Great Power politics– as dictated by the “Thucydides Trap”. This simple fact was ignored by consecutive US administrations from 1980s all the way to 2010s. The country’s reputation was damaged, most significantly during the pandemic crisis in 2020. This crisis had inflicted more damage to the US than any external force, causing it to lose not only its economic and political edge, but also its liberal values.

Its decline was not limited to that. The US military power and particularly the US Navy had also seen constant erosion during the previous thirty years. The US naval power was kept in constant deployment and motion in the Arctic, Baltic Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, Black Sea, Persian Gulf and the Pacific. There were reports to have leaked after a series of accidents and mishaps suffered by naval vessels of the 7th Fleet in the Pacific between 2017 and 2018, exemplified by the letter of an aircraft carrier commander:

“This is obviously an extremely serious incident and is the second such incident in a very short period of time, inside of three months, very similar as well, and is the last of a series of incidents in the Pacific fleet in particular, and that gives a great cause for concern that there’s something out there we’re not getting at” (USNI News, 2017).

Indeed, those naval incidents came to agenda again during the Pandemic and brought US military capabilities under serious questioning. According to many observers, what was being observed was the ultimate decline of the US power on all fronts; foreign policy, norms, and material strength included.

Therefore, China’s growing confidence became an assertive one, which no longer followed the rules of soft power, but instead turned to the tools of sharp power. The following are some of the most visible indicators of such shift.

The first indications are the issues concerning the province of Xinjiang in western China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Reports of human rights violations in Xinjiang and Hong Kong became more severe in the past few years, attracting negative global reaction. For instance, the labor camps where Uighur Muslims are being held in Xinjiang province caused skepticism in the neighboring states, US and rest of the Western World towards China (Economy, 2022). The repression of the local Muslim population through military measures rendered unrealistic Xi’s hopes of China seen as “respected, credible, and loveable” (Economy, 2022). On the contrary, such violations create a negative image of the PRC comparable to that of Russia in the eyes of the international community, diminishing China’s likelihood of achieving its goal of becoming a central power.

In addition, the brutal Chinese crackdown on Hong Kong protesters broke the promise of “one country, two systems” proposition. Beijing’s use of security laws to suppress peaceful protests damaged international image of China and together with it, the so-called Chinese model. As a matter of fact, China’s core national interests were incompatible with such model in the first place, because national unity is so vital for the rulers in Beijing. China’s national unity stands on a delicate balance, so no outside interference is allowed. Therefore, the issue of Hong Kong and Taiwan are not up for negotiations in the eyes of Beijing. As Soetopo explains:

“China was responding with the same arguments by reiterating that Hong Kong affairs were purely Chinese internal affairs” (Soetopo, 2021, p. 5).

Beijing used the promise of “one country, two systems” to bide time so as to appear to the international community as a role model. But Xi’s harsh methods revealed his true intentions. Since the 2019 Hong Kong crackdown, China has openly accused the US and the United Kingdom (UK) of interfering in its internal affairs. By taking a harsh stance, the PRC stopped recognizing the British National Overseas (BNO) passports granted by the UK to Hong Kong citizens. Overholt argued:

“If the government wants to reach a resolution, it needs to negotiate with the leaders of an organized movement. Jiang Jingguo, who led Taiwan in the 1970s and ’80s, understood this. For years the laws that made the dissident movement illegal, but he informally encouraged them to organize so that, when there was a problem, he had effective interlocutors for a deal” (Overholt, 2019, pp. 21-22).

Those same figures are missing in Hong Kong due to the PRC’s use of sharp power and assertiveness. China’s harsh treatment of its own citizens in Hong Kong is also having negative consequences in Taiwan. In this regard,

Xi made visible attempts to impose Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan by deploying military instruments, especially after the visit to Taiwan by the former Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi. In China’s perspective, those measures

would make the US to accept the “One-China”⁹ policy and allow China’s reunification with Taiwan.

China’s assertive policies were not limited to what China saw as its “internal affairs” concerning Hong Kong and Taiwan. Its other neighbors began to also face China’s assertiveness at an unprecedented degree. Xi created and militarized seven artificial features in the South China Sea, undermining the maritime rights of Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Brunei. The pandemic was seen by Xi as an opportunity to push forward with China’s assertiveness; after all, the neighboring states were too distracted to give a proper response to Chinese steps in the archipelago. Likewise, Xi asserted himself in the contested islands of the East China Sea against Japan, namely, Senkaku/Diaoyu¹⁰ Islands. Accordingly, China conducted constant air and naval incursions into the Japanese territorial waters and airspace. Moreover, China followed what many referred to as the “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy in its foreign dealings during the pandemic. This implied punishing the states that are critical of the PRC through coercion and threats. Economy stated in this regard:

“China’s “Wolf Warrior” diplomats weaponized the production of personal protective equipment (PPE) by threatening to cut off supplies to countries that criticized China” (Economy, 2021, p. 12).

China did not allow for any exceptions in implementing those policies. For instance, when Australia attempted to initiate an investigation to find out the origins of COVID-19, China immediately responded by putting restrictions and tariffs on some of Australia’s popular export products. In another instance, China issued an ultimatum to South Korea, threatening economic punishment if South Korea did not stop Washington’s deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) antimissile system in the Korean peninsula¹¹. A final example is the PRC’s aggression at the border with India in 2020, based on the presumption that India

⁹ “One-China” is a term used since 1949 due to the fact that of both Beijing and Taipei claim themselves as the true legitimate government of the mainland China. Later, Taiwan abandoned that goal and chased independence from the mainland.

¹⁰ “Senkaku” in Japanese, “Diaoyu” in Chinese.

¹¹ The details about South Korea’s stance vis-à-vis China will be highlighted in more detail in the Consequences chapter of the thesis.

would act strongly in order not to risk its increasing trade and normalized diplomatic ties with the PRC. According to Singh, such presumptions gave PRC the confidence to increase its pressure against India:

“Modi is trapped by his own nationalist rhetoric: Since deadly border clashes in Ladakh in 2020, India’s government has downplayed the border crisis to shield the prime minister’s macho image. China has been quick to exploit this weakness, which is likely emboldened it to put even more pressure on India” (Singh, 2022).

As it can be seen, those neighboring rivals of China have been falling victim to Xi’s assertive strategy.

China also pressured the international investors in order to legitimize its actions. Beijing went so far as to threaten international airline, retail, film, and hotel industries with financial sanctions if they refused to recognize China’s illegal claims of sovereignty over Hong Kong, Taiwan, East China Sea, and the South China Sea. Beijing believed that it had a right to do everything it wanted, ignoring other parties’ agendas and perspectives. Ironically tough, by threatening activist groups, the PRC has inflicted a major blow on its own soft power tools. A country trying to present itself as a role model has ironically undermined its own image by threatening cultural and artistic organizations with its assertive policy agenda.

Evidently, Xi had thought that the time for a strong China had finally arrived. Therefore, as an unchecked autocrat, he applied every segment of his tools to expand his influence, if necessary, by even taking the risk of outright confrontation and conflict. This is the Chinese idea of centrality and so-called “reclaiming the rightful place in world”. This idea even goes so far as to protect the authoritarian regimes in the world. In a fashion similar to the Cold War years, it involves an ideological war to expand China’s sphere of influence. Subsequently, it is hardly surprising that the PRC supported Russia in its illegal invasion of Ukraine. After all, Russia is the only other state to have sincerely supported the “One-China” policy, not to mention Russia being run by a strongly anti-Western regime, just like China’s own. Gabuev highlighted that:

“Beijing sees its relationship with Moscow as being of paramount importance for several reasons: The two countries share a sprawling 4,200-kilometer border. Their economic relationship is perfectly complementary: Russia is rich in natural resources but needs technology and investments, while China can offer technology and investments but needs natural resources” (Gabuev, 2022).

The two brothers in arms have been protecting each other in the UN Security Council and refrained from criticizing gone another for their human rights violations. Therefore, it was quite normal for the PRC to support Russia, especially under the conditions of Xi’s “resistance” against the West. Besides, as partner neighbors, Russia and China deepened their cooperation in the Arctic – a step clearly beneficial for Chinese interests in terms of economic, energy security and political influence in the Arctic region. This has given rise to a very challenging environmental conditions for the West, as they were forced now to engage a combined Chinese-Russian bloc. So far, China’s economic, and military strategic support for Russia has remained steady. The only exception was China refraining from openly supporting Russia against Ukraine; after all, if the PRC openly stated its support of Russia and challenged a basic premise of the rules-based international order, the benefits gained from being a player and benefactor of the liberal international order would be put at risk. Therefore, at different points during the war, Beijing has emphasized the importance of finding a diplomatic solution. Zhao and Yu highlighted that:

“Despite the official claims that the friendship between China and Russia has “no limits”, the two States are strategic partners but no allies that aim at conformation or deterrence. Both sides maintain a high level of strategic autonomy. At the same time, the US and EU have a great stake in China’s economic and foreign policy. China’s leaders are keenly aware that any support to Russia over Ukraine would aggravate relations with the EU and the United States” (Zhao and Yu, 2022, p. 4).

This does not mean that the PRC is a defender of Ukraine or it is anti-Russian., The PRC still sided with the revisionist Russia, because Xi and the top Chinese leadership are perfectly aware that abandoning Russia would isolate the PRC.

Furthermore, if Russia is defeated in Ukraine, then Vladimir Putin's regime would most likely fall and be replaced by a new one that could be less favorable towards China. Therefore, from Beijing's perspective, it would be unwise to leave Russia alone in this conflict (Carlson, 2022). This was another significant reason for the PRC's commitment to such an assertive approach; by applying pragmatic strategies aimed at advancing and imposing its own model in the international sphere, the PRC preferred to remain in the same revisionist camp with Russia, which openly sought to change the current status-quo.

China's backing of Russia is not limited to Ukraine. The PRC even goes so far as to using humanitarian affairs as a weapon by linking it to the issue of state sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of states.

In this regard, Hall and Lang pointed out:

“In recent years, Russia and China have shown themselves more willing to use their diplomatic muscle and veto power at the Security Council to enable governments to deprive their own people of humanitarian aid”(Hall and Lang, 2023).

The two autocratic powers in the summer of 2022 led the Security Council to delay meetings over the famine in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, thereby protected the repressive measures of the central government of Ethiopia by citing non-interference in internal affairs. For Russia and China, sovereignty is not up for discussion, even when an oppressive regime is conducting siege warfare in a civil war in which non-combatant civilian population is suffering from the famine. By weaponizing humanitarian aid, which is compatible with the practices of sharp power, China and Russia have sought to expand their influence at the expense of destabilizing the international relations. Hall and Lang pointed out:

“If oppressive government can manipulate relief aid to prosecute their own internal conflicts, the international community loses an essential tool to alleviate suffering and manage crisis” (Hall and Lang, 2023).

In this case, the PRC began using its role as a rule maker in the game of geopolitics,

by contending that humanitarian aid would be subject to PRC's consent. And such approval would depend on non-interference in internal affairs of receiving country as well as the principle of PRC's national unity. Just like no one can interfere with what happens in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Tibet, or the Inner Mongolia, China believed other oppressive regimes in the world should also be exempt from such foreign intervention.

Consequently, in the past few years, the Russian Federation and the PRC have blocked the UN Security Council from condemning humanitarian crises and calling for strong action in both Myanmar and Ethiopia. This has left the citizens of those two countries at the mercy of their oppressive regimes. As a result of its overconfidence, the PRC joined forces with Russia, and it has thus broken with its traditional practices of vaccine diplomacy and humanitarian aid to developing and underdeveloped countries. From then on, the PRC has found itself in a situation similar to Russia's: a country centered around a single leader, Xi, who run an assertive foreign policy under the so-called goal of "reclaiming the rightful place on the world stage". The expectation was that all in China's surrounding geography and beyond would accept this policy line. But in reality, the neighboring countries began reacted. The reason behind this reaction was Xi resorting to sharp power and assertiveness. And the consequences were to prove that this was too early of a move in the pursuit of hegemony for China. Such an ambitious and assertive foreign policy caused problems not only in China's external affairs, but also domestically. In the next chapter, the consequences of Xi Jinping's foreign policy with a particular focus in the Asia-Pacific region will be elaborated.

CHAPTER 5: CONSEQUENCES OF XI JINPING'S FOREIGN POLICY

5.1. Loss of Momentum

Xi Jinping's shift toward assertive foreign policy produced several negative consequences for China. According to Tepperman:

“Ten years of Xi's “reforms”— widely characterized in the West as successful power plays — have made the country frail and brittle, exacerbating its underlying problems while giving rise to new ones” (Tepperman, 2022).

The first damage to have been inflicted was on country's economic rise. This is to say, until Xi's second term, which is viewed by Western scholars as the rise of single-man rule, the PRC was doing pretty well in terms of its economic and political performance. Yet, Xi destroyed this momentum, and now China's continuous economic growth has been curtailed. PRC's harsh zero-pandemic policy to diminish COVID cases and keeping information on COVID cases from the public was dramatically costly for the Chinese economy. The old days of 10% annual growth in GDP became a history. The government's projected growth rate for 2022 was 5.5%, and even that figure was an ambitious goal (Tepperman, 2022). In sum, the damages to the China's economy caused by Xi's policies were major and detrimental.

In this sense, some argued the rise of the single-man rule ended a remarkable, decades-old opportunity for the PRC. The loss of confidence in China's economic performance is the result of Xi's radical vision. Tepperman argued:

“Over the last ten years, he has consolidated power in his own hands and eliminated bureaucratic incentives for truth-telling and achieving successful results, replacing them with a system that rewards just one thing: loyalty” (Tepperman, 2022).

On that point, it is important to remember what Rudd had asserted: in China the state being centered on the party, and with Xi, the party being centered on one leader

(Rudd, 2018).

With economic slowdown, a lot of state enterprises in China have gone bankrupt. There have been reports of schools, hospitals, and bus lines closing. The economic gap between coastal China and internal China has traditionally been wide, has become more extreme. In the words of a leading expert on China:

“Think of how much disruption to the international economy and to world politics the unification of Germany created in the 1990s. But now, you have something that’s ten or twenty times as large as that, and the income gap between internal China and coastal China is greater than the income gap between East Germany and West Germany at the time” (Gisiger, 2023).

The resulting situation has made the PRC’s position questionable as an alternative to Western powers. In other words, this is a farewell to the “reclaiming the historical proper place in the world”, for which Xi’s regime had stood for. The consequences also reflected very badly on the international economy.

One-man rule essentially makes the entire Chinese economy ineffective, creating a trust gap for foreign companies. Due to the declining growth of new investment and transfer of skills, combined with Xi’s single-man rule that diminished any element of trust, investments began shifting to Malaysia, India, Vietnam, and other Asian states considered safer by foreign companies. For instance, Apple decided to shift its production towards India, and is seriously considering reducing its dependence on its Chinese plant, the world’s largest iPhone factory. Other companies are trying to adopt a similar attitude and stop their investments in China (Gisiger, 2023).

All these developments not just led to a decline in foreign investments in China, but also hindered China’s plans and ambitions with respect to its external affairs. The BRI project suffered from such negative consequences. Although the BRI holds considerable potential for bringing benefits to China through infrastructure projects, the scheme has created its own controversies, including poor labor conditions, environmental pollution, high levels of debt, and corruption. These controversies led to a backlash in host countries, such as protests and demonstrations in Asian and African states including in Kazakhstan, Cameroon, Zambia, and Pakistan. Such

reactions caused the BRI to lose its significance in certain countries.

In addition, the Confucius Institutes also began suffering from similar damage. Economy pointed out that:

“In Kazakhstan, where the daughter of the former prime minister has been an outspoken champion of China and Chinese-language study, a public opinion survey conducted by the Eurasian Development Bank revealed that only one in six Kazakhs view China as a “friendly country”” (Economy, 2022, pp. 11-12).

Therefore, the influence of the Confucius Institutes, seen by many Western states and particularly by the US as the source of media’s and academia’s self-censorship, was restrained. There is now a strong emphasis among the US public and political elites on banning these institutions from receiving federal funding, including student loans and grants (O’Brien and Herman, 2023).

Similarly, prominent Chinese technological information technology (IT) applications are no longer considered trustable as their parent companies do not function independently from the Chinese government. Tiktok, WeChat, and other Chinese apps are regarded as spying tools for the Chinese government. O’Brien and Herman highlighted this danger by stating:

“Tiktok executives deny that their parent company, ByteDance, is controlled by the Chinese government, and that the CCP uses the app to aid its intelligence efforts. Such claims are difficult to credit, however; a former head of a unit within Tiktok’s safety operations told the Washington Post “lying” to U.S. government officials about privacy and said that “a truly leakproof arrangement for Americans” data would require a “complete re-engineering of how Tiktok is run” (ByteDance said these allegations were unfounded)” (O’Brien and Herman, 2023).

Whether these claims are true or not, the skepticism towards Chinese companies and institutions cannot be dismissed. This reaction is a result of China’s coercion and ambitions in foreign policy. Despite China’s desire to be respected and trusted by the

international community, Xi took harsh steps against its neighbors and others, and caused China to lose its viability as a hegemon. His “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy halted the growth and spread of the soft power instruments such as the BRI, the Confucius Institutes, and China’s technological instruments. Instead, the latter were now seen as sharp power instruments used for information manipulation, bullying, and corruption by Beijing. As a consequence, Chinese central position within the international arena was challenged.

While China remained stagnant, the Western world regained its power, especially after the Biden administration came to power in January 2021. The Western allies in Asia-Pacific came together to form security alliances against Xi’s assertive threats, and a coalition-based containment strategy resurfaced in the Asia-Pacific. From Japan to India, the PRC has found itself surrounded by the widest alliance, which has been unparalleled since the Second World War. In addition, the Biden administration returned to the classical American strategy of working with international institutions, trying to reestablish itself as an attractive partner for other states and abandoning the image of a revisionist and isolationist power that was previously created by Trump’s withdrawal from international institutions. The collective approach in countering the PRC has been regaining traction. The Biden administration also tried to reconstitute pre-pandemic position of the US. For instance, the US tried to help now its Pacific allies with COVID vaccine production and supply chain management so as to weaken the PRC’s vaccine cooperation with those states (Sun, 2021). This action was meant to signal to the PRC that the West did not lose its strength and remained powerful.

In short, the US and its Pacific allies have regained their power and formed a new bloc contain China. From this perspective, Xi’s aggressive tone did not yield positive outcomes for China. Furthermore, the US adopted a foreign policy with unprecedented effectiveness. PRC backing Russia in Ukraine did not help either (Gisiger, 2023).

In the following sub-sections, we shall take a closer look at the attitudes of each and every major state and international organization within the Asia-Pacific region towards China and Xi’s policies.

5.2. Taiwan: Learning from the Hong Kong Case

Since the failure of the “one country, two systems” promise became apparent in the Hong Kong case, where protesters faced a brutal crackdown, the self-governing island nation of Taiwan knew that they could face a similar fate if they were to be reunited with the mainland China. There exists the potential for an imminent PLA operation against Taiwan and many observers believe that the PRC is planning indeed to attack Taiwan. Tepperman warned that:

“The greatest danger, of course, would be a military power move on Taiwan. The parallels here to Russian President Vladimir Putin and his calamitous war on Ukraine are chilling” (Tepperman, 2022).

Hedrew attention to the fact that the international environment is unpredictable due to yes-man rules around the world. Xi, just like Putin, created a system based on loyalty to the one man. The leaders like Xi and Putin only pay attention to what they wish to hear from their close circles, causing them to take irrational and unwise decisions and actions. Thus, Taiwan could not remain indifferent to the threat of Xi’s unpredictable moves.

In Xi’s mind, unification with Taiwan is vital for the Chinese rejuvenation. Conversely, the Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen to have been elected in 2016, has prioritized independence and maintained this agenda in the face of Xi’s constant threats. According to Economy:

“Xi’s efforts to intimidate Taiwan have failed to convince the island nation to embrace unification. Instead, they have produced a backlash both within Taiwan and aboard. A greater percentage of Taiwanese than ever before—64 percent—favor independence, and few Taiwanese retain faith that a “one country, two systems” framework could ever work, particularly in the wake of the crackdown in Hong Kong” (Economy, 2022, p. 6).

Xi Jinping’s assertive diplomacy damaged the purpose of “winning hearts and minds” and unintentionally led other side to win the sympathy and support of the West. In fact, even some European states that were previously not involved in Asia-

Pacific affairs, came together to defend the case and independence of Taiwan. In 2021, several EU states, including Czechia, Slovakia, and Lithuania, showed their diplomatic solidarity with Taiwan. Even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the growing PRC threat towards Taiwan had led to this anti-PRC mood.

Nevertheless, some multinational corporations yielded to Chinese coercion. For instance, in the airline industry, some airlines dropped Taiwan from their websites. But Taiwan is still defined separately from mainland China, and buying tickets with Taiwanese currency is still allowed. The PRC's coercion was not very effective.

The US also showed its support for Taiwan, by August 2022 trip to Taiwan of the House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Besides, the US would constantly engage Taiwan against the PRC by "*reminding them that a powerful China would pose an existential threat to them*" (Mearsheimer, 2021). The US aims to gain control in areas of potential confrontation with China, like the Western Pacific. For this purpose, the US provides Taiwan with economic and military assistance, aiming to make Taiwan a difficult target for China and driving the PRC into a potential Pyrrhic victory (Soetopo, 2021).

In adapting such strategy, the US aims for an easy way to prevent further rise of China. Now, fighting with Taiwan is like stepping into mine field for China. Yet, even though Xi must be well aware of the risks of attacking Taiwan, he attaches a lot of nationalistic value to Taiwan and could still decide to proceed with such an invasion. Even though the risks and costs are known to everybody, a single man regime, Xi could do the unthinkable. Indeed, even if there were not Xi, someone else in China would become single man. After all, in a system of party-state, strong leaders could emerge. As the earlier case of Mao illustrated in the past, such leaders could pursue nationalistic agendas. Referring to the historic origins, Mearsheimer contended:

"Also raising the odds of war are China's regional ambitions. Soviet leaders, busy recovering from World War II and managing their empire in Eastern Europe, were largely content with the status quo on the agenda in East Asia. China by contrast, is deeply committed to an expansionist agenda in East Asia. Although the main targets of China's appetite certainly have strategic

for China, they are also considered sacred territory, which means their fate is bound up with Chinese nationalism. The Chinese feel an emotional attachment to the island that the Soviets never felt for Berlin, for example, making Washington's commitment to defend it all the riskier” (Mearsheimer, 2021).

Given the PRC's recent loss of economic momentum, PRC may be facing difficulties. In 2022, the real growth rate of GDP was just around 2.99 per cent. Conversely, India's 7.24 per cent was higher. Japan's 1.05 per cent, and 2.1 per cent for the US were lower, but the gap with PRC was very close (Statista, 2022; Statista Research Department, 2023; Textor, 2023; O'Neill, 2023a; O'Neill, 2023b). Thence, the danger is that all the success stories of the PRC could be tarnished by Xi, and he may now be forced to write a new success story for his own survival. There is a growing concern that out of desperation, the PRC may resort to military action towards Taiwan. China has abandoned the position of soft power that it had adopted for the past few years and displays now a different attitude. Under these circumstances, Taiwan would align more closely with the US, making in the process a confrontation between the PRC and the US more likely, perhaps even inevitable. To sum up, Xi's ambitions have driven Taiwan further into the arms of the West, and as the subsequent subsections would display, this trend was not limited to Taiwan.

5.3. Japan and South Korea: The Asian North Wing of the Western Alliance

In the past few years, Japan and South Korea have put aside their disputes, as they have gotten closer with each other and with the US, and taken unprecedented defense measures against the threat of not only North Korea, but also a revisionist PRC. In an ironic turn of events for the PRC, its assertiveness has led to a reactionary formation of balance of power dynamics by other regional players, which have shifted towards adhering to the traditional notions of hard power. Consequently, the PRC has begun to feel increasing pressure in this geography, which is attributable mainly to Beijing's shift away from its previous soft power strategies.

To begin with, Japan finds itself at the center of an increasingly threatening environment. For a long time, Article 9 of its Constitution, which prohibits waging war and maintaining armed forces, prevented Japan from developing military assets offensive in nature. But China's assertiveness, as well as the rising North Korean and

Russian threats, led Japan to take unprecedented military measures. This has already been the case even before the pandemic. In Japan's National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2014, the US was cited as the ultimate guarantor of Japan's security (Congressional Research Service, 2019). Subsequently, shift began with 2018 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG):

“the 2018 NDPG shows stark shifts in content from previous iteration. The guidelines openly acknowledge “Japan’s security environment is becoming more testing and uncertain at a remarkably faster speed than expected when the “National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2014 and beyond”... was formulated” (Congressional Research Service, 2019, p. 44).

The 2019 Defence White Paper went further:

“The 2019 Defence White paper recognized the extraordinary threats emerging from an increasingly challenging security environment, presumably a reference to Chinese aggression. It stressed on the need to deal with this handicap, arguing for sharpening the country’s defence capability as it is “the most for important strength for Japan in retaining self-sustained existence as a sovereign nation”” (Mehra, 2020, p. 26).

By abandoning the military restraint policy which had been dominating its foreign policy since World War II, Japan reverted to the position an active security player in the region. As of late 2022, Japan not only decided to double its military spending, but also made a commitment to add USD 315 billion to its defense budget over the next five years (Lind, 2022). Additionally, Japan is in the process of developing new “counterstrike capability”, which would enable it to execute retaliatory attacks on enemy territory (Lind, 2022). This new scheme caught the attention of many; Japan had already the potential for becoming a leading global power thanks to its economic, technological, and demographic strengths. But until recently, Japan had not posed a military threat due to its multilateral foreign policy approach to have confined Japan to joining peacekeeping missions, and limited defense spending that stood only at only 1% of its GDP, and its alliance with the US. Obviously, the

change in regional and global power dynamics caused by the PRC has been dramatic. Mehra emphasized that:

“Over the last few years, the situation in the South China Sea has also worsened with China’s land reclamation activities and militarization of islands. Japan sees the South China Sea as key to its security because it houses crucial sea lanes vital to its trade and economic health” (Mehra, 2020, p. 25).

After the Chinese aggression in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Japan definitely abandoned its long-lived limited defense strategy. In response, Beijing blamed Japan for returning to its dark militaristic past (Lind, 2022). Even if unfounded, such accusations find good meaning within the context of security dilemma. Due to China’s aggressive interventions and increasing military presence, Japan is taking similar modernization and expansion measures for its military. Yet, such measures are also partly due to North Korean aggression; in the year 2022, North Korea conducted 86 missile tests, compared with a previous high of 26 in 2019 (Lind, 2022,). Japanese citizens were extremely worried by the frequent sound of sirens and seeking shelter due to missiles launched by North Korea passing through Japanese airspace. To add on top, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has further deteriorated the image of Russia and its ally PRC among the Japanese public.

Under these circumstances, it is quite expected for Japan to feel insecure. Lind pointed out that:

“Japan currently spends \$54 billion on defense, and the shift will increase it to almost \$80 billion by 2027” (Lind, 2022).

If this situation continues, Japan will become the third largest military spender, after US and China. In fact, Japan is the third largest economy after US and China, and such growth in military spending would be consistent with its economic size. That means the PRC sparked a chain reaction that led Japan to feel insecure, fall into the

security dilemma¹², and even go so far as to become a great power in the future.

Japan's close pro-Western neighbor South Korea, sees itself as another victim of the PRC's "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy, hence taking steps to counter the PRC.

Back in 2013, during the early times of Xi's presidency, the PRC had originally adopted a cooperative diplomatic strategy and succeeded in gaining the trust of South Korea's then-President Park Geun-hye in restraining North Korea. In 2014, this modus vivendi resulted in a rift between South Korea and the US over the deployment of the latter's THAAD antimissile systems, because South Korea's Park did not want to lose the support of Beijing which he saw as the only opportunity to have some degree of control over the volatile North Korea. Thus, South Korea rejected the deployment of the THAAD systems. While the PRC has got what it wanted, with increasing confidence gained as a result of this dealing, the PRC undertook more assertive and threatening attitude towards Seoul. In this regard, Taffer and Wallsh argued:

"Not only did this behavior fail to halt the system's deployment but it dramatically soured the South Korean public's perception of China: according to one 2021 public opinion survey, South Koreans view China even less favorably than they view Japan, their former imperial master and traditional foe" (Taffer and Wallsh, 2023).

South Korea's shifting perception of China has been visible not only at the level of public opinion, but also at the political level. During South Korea's 2022 presidential elections, both major candidates demonstrated anti-Chinese rhetoric. Yoon Suk-Yeon won the election because he was comparatively more pro-American. Since then, South Korea has increasingly cooperated with the US and Japan (Taffer and Wallsh, 2023). In fact, China's threatening assistance to North Korea led to another extreme possibility: the idea of South Korea acquiring nuclear weapons (Walt, 2023b). This is not a coincidence, and in fact a clear indication of China's deteriorating image, as well as its ally North Korea's nuclear threat. The PRC has now become to be viewed as a threat by Seoul, which in turn formulated a traditional hard power and balance of

¹² On the vicious cycle of the security dilemma, when state A commits to military buildup to feel safer, its adversary state B feels threatened by this buildup and responds in kind. As result, neither state A nor state B feel safer, and the end up in a spatial of mutual suspicions and arms races.

power reaction in alignment with Japan and the US.

Hence, the northern wing of the Western Alliance in Asia has now stepped up its defenses against China. In January 2023, Japan and South Korea pushed back against the “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy by putting pandemic-related travel restrictions on Chinese citizens, a move that further antagonized the PRC and pushed it to take even more aggressive actions.

The northern wing also established closer relationships with Western powers. First and foremost, among those was the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). This was founded in the aftermath of a major tsunami to have hit the region in 2004 when Australia and Japan worked together for disaster response. Afterwards, the US and India joined in as well. The Japanese Prime Minister at the time (Shinzo Abe) saw QUAD as opportunity to advance political and security cooperation, but the responses from potential partners were weak. So, for a while QUAD had existed only in paper. However, due to PRC’s increasing tensions, it reenergized. In November 2017, Japan’s commitment to QUAD has increased in parallel with that of the other countries such as Australia, India, and the USS, and Japan continued to strengthen its cooperation with other QUAD members (Mehra, 2020). According to Rudd;

“After years of growing U.S.-Chinese tensions, assertive Chinese behavior in the South China and East China Seas, and repeated clashes between Chinese and Indian forces along their contested land border, the strategic calculus on China had evolved in all the Quad capitals” (Rudd, 2021).

The PRC continued to ignore and underestimate this bloc, which turned out to be a big mistake; even non-member South Korea began to engage with the QUAD in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian border clash of 2020. Tokyo sponsored the QUAD foreign ministers’ meetings and encouraged South Korea to take part in the “QUAD Plus” talks on various topics such as trade, technology, and supply chain security. South Korea’s interaction with Western countries, particularly with the US, and its involvement in the QUAD, eventually caused the PRC to worry about South Korea becoming a member of the QUAD, thus the QUAD becoming “the QUINT”¹³. From

¹³ QUINT is a potential future name for the QUAD if and when the South Korea becomes the new member of the organization, making the QUAD an entity with 5 members.

China's point of view, the QUAD is like an Asian NATO in the forming, and the Chinese government was concerned about being surrounded by the allies of the West in Asia Pacific (D'Ambrogio, 2021). In summary, the northern wing of Asia developed increasingly cordial relationships with the West.

All the while, Japan has extended its engagement with the West beyond the Asia-Pacific region by getting into dialogue with NATO as well. The PRC's assertiveness and its partnership with Russia reached to the point where even NATO allies in Europe decided to take steps to counter concerns over the PRC in collaboration with Japan. In early 2023, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg discussed their possible partnership on security in cyberspace, space defense, and similar areas (Yamaguchi and Nuga, 2023). Japan has also planned opening a representative office at the NATO Headquarters in Brussels and host NATO office in Tokyo. Such cooperation did not equal to anything like Japan's membership in NATO. Still, NATO infrastructure and support units were required in the Pacific. Due to such necessities, NATO and Japan opted to limit their relations to cooperation in military training. Nonetheless, this new partnership was a direct outcome of the actions and policies of the PRC, Russia, and North Korea. In this regard, for Yamaguchi and Nuga:

“Tokyo was quick to join in U.S.-led economic sanctions against Russia's war in Ukraine and provided humanitarian aid and non-combative defense equipment for Ukrainians. Japan fears that Russian aggression in Europe could be reflected in Asia, where concerns are growing over increasing Chinese assertiveness and escalating tensions over its claims to Taiwan” (Yamaguchi and Nuga, 2023).

Obviously, if the PRC had not abandoned its soft power approach in favor of sharp power, Japan would not have pushed cooperation with NATO at those levels. In fact, South Korea also took similar actions; NATO and South Korea are strengthening their “practical cooperation” in maritime and cyber security. NATO is now establishing a presence in the Asia-Pacific.

The focus of the next section will be the Southern perimeter of the Asia-Pacific region, where leading regional powers - India and Australia –have also struggled to

counteract against the PRC.

5.4. India and Australia: From Reluctance to Containment of PRC

India and Australia used to be known as the hesitant members of the QUAD. But with the PRC shifting to hard and sharp power and assertiveness, they too opted to step up, just like Japan and South Korea did.

India in particular was cautious not antagonize the PRC. For instance, immediately after its 2020 border clash with China, New Delhi refused to take serious military actions. Singh highlighted that:

“Chinese provocations in the east reflect a breakdown of Indian deterrence. New Delhi’s trade with Beijing has increased, diplomatic ties have remained normal, and India has not undertaken local military operation” (Singh, 2022).

India’s position can be explained by its interdependence with the PRC, which has been a general strategy adopted by the PRC in its relationship with all regional states. The table below shows that its trade with the PRC’s made up 10 per cent of its total trade for India in 2019, the year before the border conflict. Despite it was the least country which dependent on trade. It had still significant trade relations. After all, the PRC is the second largest economy and India’s powerful northern neighbor. So, from China’s perspective, conditions were ready to challenge India.

Figure 2 – China's share of total trade in selected countries in 2019

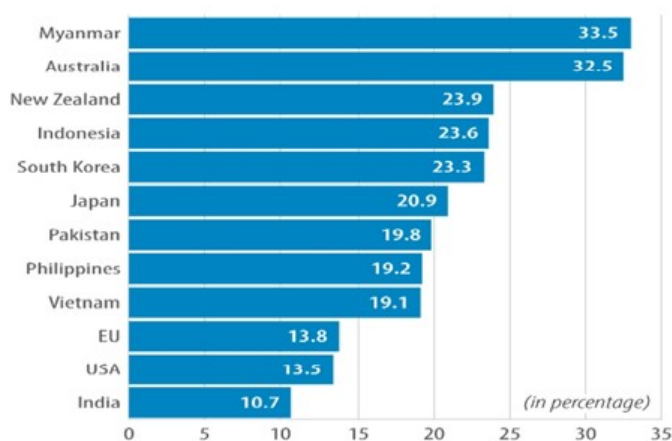


Figure 2. PRC’s share within trade in 2019 (Source: D’Ambrogio, 2021).

But Chinese aggressions against India would be counterproductive in the long run. Indeed, India was deterred during the 2020 border clash from taking strong action toward China: In the long term, however, India began engaging with QUAD, and aligning itself more closely with the West. Indians had felt extremely exposed during and after the 2020 border dispute. D'Ambrogio emphasized that:

“Beijing does not recognize over the north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh. This adds to India’s feeling of being trapped inside a growing ring of Chinese power and influence, including through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the Indian Ocean and the Himalayan Neighborhood, regions that Delhi traditionally considered its sphere of hegemony” (D'Ambrogio, 2021, p. 5).

Basically, India felt surrounded by various tools of Chinese assertiveness. The BRI, ostensibly designed to help poor countries, has been used as a sharp power instrument in this context. Through BRI, PRC has widened its presence in Pakistan, the main archrival of India. The construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which crosses through the Islamabad-administered but disputed part of Kashmir region, has been a concerning development for India. Moreover, there has also been a potential commercial competition between the Chabar port in Iran operated jointly by India-Iran and Gawadar port in Pakistan under run jointly by Pakistan and China. Both ports are strategically important as Afghanistan’s gateways to the outside world. Consequently, just like Japan and South Korea, India did not trust China and positioned itself against China.

India began engaging other QUAD members, through 2+2 ministerial-level dialogues increasing the number of bilateral military exercises, exchanging military supplies and services on a reciprocal basis, and lastly, cooperating on infrastructure development. India’s increasing alignment with the West provoked reactions even from Russia, India’s traditional ally and longtime friend since the Cold War. Just like China, Russia is also critical of the QUAD.

In December 2020, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov issued the following statement about India:

““India is currently an object of Western countries” persistent, aggressive and devious policy as they are trying to engage it in anti-China games by promoting into Indo-Pacific strategies” (D’Ambrogio, 2021, p. 9).

India has indeed distanced itself from the East and joined the Western bloc in order to deter the PRC. The obvious reason has been to decrease its dependency on China and avoid another Chinese economic leverage in case of another border conflict. Thus, India, along with Japan and Australia, launched a supply chain resilience initiative to counter their excessive dependence on trade with China, and used the pandemic as an opportunity to break the myth of China as an alternative to the West. As a continuation of this approach, India has assumed a more active role within the QUAD.

Further to the south, Australia, a country relatively distant from China, has also assumed new roles within the QUAD to counter the growing influence of the PRC. Even beyond that, Australia became a founding member of Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) along with the US and the UK. This was a new partnership formed in September 2021 to support Australia in aspirations for the acquisition of nuclear submarines and other advanced military capabilities. There are several reasons for Australia’s resorting to such extreme measures.

First of all, Australia faced the economic sanctions of Beijing’s “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy which led to a radical shift in Australian’s foreign policy toward the PRC.

Previously, Beijing seemed to have avoided tensions with Australia. Their bilateral economic relations were so strong as to even lead to several disputes between Australia and the US. For instance, when a Chinese company signed a 99-year lease agreement to conduct their operations in an Australian port located just miles from the US Marines Corps’ base of operations, this had caused a friction between the US and Australia (Taffer and Wallsh, 2023). In other words, the PRC’s early soft power policies had helped drive a wedge between Australia and its western allies. But this rare achievement was simply ignored during Xi’s second term and China revealed soon its true intentions. This was evident even from the early days of Xi’s second term beginning in 2018, when the PRC immediately canceled the purchase of Australian export products in response to Australia’s passing of a law that restricted

foreign interference in its domestic affairs. Through this move, the PRC began exerting pressure on Australia. Rudd pointed out that:

“Beijing had previously seemed intent on improving relations with Canberra. But without specific explanation, it suddenly imposed restrictions on imports of Australian coal—and then meat, cotton, wool, barely, wheat timber, cooper, sugar, lobster” (Rudd, 2021).

This is hardly surprising since the PRC also cornered Australia through “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy, knowing that Australia had a trade vulnerability. In response, Australia began building its own “Strategic” Fleet to protect its economic sovereignty by boosting the movement of cargo in the event of a crisis, and particularly for shipping of its agricultural cargo to its important customer Indonesia (Bovenizer, 2023). This was also partly the reason why Australia had joined the AUKUS, so as to keep the sea routes open and secure them against possible threats. Now, the fear of being cornered by China had pushed Australia to take countermeasures. Under the so-called “most ambitious plan,” it has increased the country’s defense budget from USD 26.84 billion to USD 48.75 billion to meet the demands of national defense, a measure that it had not taken since the Second World War (Mehra, 2020; Macro Trends, 2023.). Australia was concerned by the developments in the South Pacific due to Beijing’s increasing presence through ports and infrastructure projects in countries such as Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Vanuatu. Just like India, Australia feels cornered by China. Starting in 2020, with the support of India, Australia as the once-hesitant QUAD member became more active within the partnership. For Rudd;

“India invited Australia to join its annual Malabar naval exercise held with the United States and Japan. This was notable because India had previously refused to allow Australian participation in the exercises for fear of antagonizing Beijing” (Rudd, 2021).

Border clashes with India, together with the increasing Chinese presence just north of Australia compelled these two nations to strengthen their alliance against China. This development could thus be seen basically as an outcome of Xi’s miscalculation and

mistake in his conduct of foreign policy. China's assertive steps led to the reinforcement of the QUAD and the emergence of the AUKUS.

In this regard, the AUKUS pact to have been formed on September 15, 2021, is not any ordinary alliance. The alliance brought back a former actor, the UK, into the Asia-Pacific. Additionally, and this new alliance has also demonstrated that the US commitment to the Asia-Pacific and Washington's re-focus in the region after years of setbacks. Therefore, this new trilateral alliance holds considerable strategic significance.

At the military level of AUKUS, the US and UK have promised technological and nuclear material to build at least 8 nuclear-powered submarines for Australia. There is even a long-term goal of building a fleet of up to 19 nuclear-powered submarines. Additionally, cooperation on long-range strike missiles, artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, and quantum computing are on the agenda of the alliance. Through these measures, the militaries of the US, UK, and Australia will be more compatible with each other.

Indeed, this alliance gave Australia a significant deterrent capability. Herscovitch stated that:

“Unlike Australia’s previously planned diesel-electric submarines, the AUKUS boats will be able to project power for extended periods”
(Herscovitch, 2023).

That step basically gives an extended period of military maneuvering capability for Australia, with the caveat that Australia did not commit supporting the US in contingencies involving Taiwan. Overall, Australia's submarines and frigates are obsolete and modernization of Australian navy is a clear sign of Australian distrust for the PRC.

Australia will also invest in the US and UK's defense industrial bases and their strained shipyards to sustain their capacity to construct naval vessels (Sevastopulo and Cameron-Chileshe, 2023). Consequently, a regional arms race with the rising China is on the way, and this will continue for the foreseeable future.

Basically, Xi Jinping's assertiveness shifted Australia's position from friction in

relations with the US to reengagement with Washington through QUAD and Australia becoming the recipient of support through the AUKUS alliance. Instead of extending its influence over the QUAD members, Xi has found himself stuck in an arms race and increased challenges of a disturbed balance of power. In this sense, the PRC's assertiveness has proven to be counterproductive. South Korea, Japan, India, and Australia have formed bonds with each other stronger than ever before, and the major regional powers now stand as one against China. Thus, the balance of power has shifted away from China's favor. The implications of this shift have been far-reaching as several other ASEAN states also re-positioned themselves against Xi's assertiveness.

5.5. ASEAN States: Shifting Stands

ASEAN was founded in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Later it was joined by Brunei in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Myanmar in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999. As of today, it composes of 10 members. ASEAN functions as a political and economic union among its members, offering economic and security cooperation between member states and neighboring partners.

Like QUAD and AUKUS member states, Xi's assertiveness also changed the position and rhetoric of many ASEAN states. The organization's members had always sought to ensure a peaceful relationship with China. Almost all ASEAN states wanted to enjoy trade with China, one of their biggest economic partners. For last 13 uninterrupted years, the PRC has been the top trading partner of ASEAN (Cleare, 2022). Under BRI project, it has been investing billions of USDs in infrastructure and manufacturing in ASEAN members (Cleare, 2022). However, Xi's growing self-confidence and constant threats toward several ASEAN members, specifically the territorial disputes he has escalated in the South China Sea, changed the ASEAN countries' stance on their relationship with China and made them increasingly suspicious of China's intentions. Although some members still maintained good relations with the PRC, the more influential ASEAN states became engaged in territorial disputes with China.

To illustrate these countries' shifting approaches towards China, the Philippines' stance would be a primary example. The country has historically been a close ally of the US. In the Trump era, however, their alliance endured stress because despite the

concerns of the Philippine public and many government ministers over the PRC's expansionist policies, particularly in the South China Sea, the former President Rodrigo Duterte had sponsored closer cooperation with China. Chatterji stated that:

“In early 2020 he terminated a key military pact with the US, the Visiting Forces Agreement, which is the foundation of the long relations between the two countries. Although the cancellation has been suspended, it shows Duterte's resolve to build not only economic but security relations with China” (Chatterji, 2021).

Yet Xi's military assertiveness changed the rhetoric of Duterte, too, whereby his earlier threats to end the Philippines' decades-old alliance with the US were replaced towards the end of his term by his desire to upgrading defense relations with the US (Economy, 2022).

Consequently, in February 2023, the Philippines and the US agreed to expand their defense pact through fully committed implementation of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), allowing the US to deploy its troops to four additional military bases inside the Philippines. The US, under the EDCA, allocated more than USD 82 million for the infrastructure investments in the Philippines (Lema and Mcpherson, 2023).

This has equaled basically to a reversal of the policy by the Philippines amid the Chinese threats. Other ASEAN countries followed a similar trend. Among them was Vietnam, a state already holding extremely anti-Chinese stand since the Cold War. In fact, Vietnam fought a war with China in 1979, in which both sides suffered high casualties. Even though Vietnam and China shared a similar ideology, Vietnam also has held a significant distrust towards China and the Sino-Soviet ideological split had also pushed Vietnam to adopt a different path against China during the Cold War years.

Subsequently, during the COVID pandemic, Xi Jinping utilized other countries' distractions to exert even more pressure on Vietnam. It should be kept in mind that for a while, Vietnam was the only country that had dared to stand up against the PRC within the ASEAN regarding disputes over the South China Sea and Hanoi had paid

a high price for of this. A Chinese coast guard vessel's ramming and sinking of a Vietnamese fishing boat in 2020 was one of the notable cases of China's aggressive response against Vietnam (Economy, 2022). Therefore, ironically, Vietnam was already getting closer with its former foe, the US, as well as strengthening its ties with Japan, Australia, and India, in a clear response to the escalating Chinese threat. Hereof, Chatterji indicated that:

“The [US] State Department has also come out of its generally neutral stand on South China Sea disputes to give more overt support to Vietnam” (Chatterji, 2021).

The cooperation between the US and Vietnam increased exponentially. Furthermore, to prevent Chinese information manipulation, Vietnam expelled Huawei's 5G network and began to develop its own alternative (Chatterji, 2021). Despite resisting against Xi's assertiveness by any means, Vietnam still maintained diplomatic dialogues with the PRC, due to the fear of Beijing's and Xi's unpredictable actions and reprisals.

Both the Philippines and Vietnam, while being concerned about Xi's policies, they nonetheless have strong economic and trade ties with China, and they therefore prefer to keep economic benefits of having close relations with China. In other words, they want to benefit from the advantages of their strong trade relationship with China, while also benefiting from security provided by the US (Cleare, 2023). Strong economic ties with China does not mean those regional states have turned away from the West; on the contrary, they have been closer to the West in recent years than ever. We can rather assume they want to sustain an economic cooperation with China, because during the rule of the Trump administration, they have seen the US as an unreliable actor that could abandon its Pacific allies at its convenience.

Other ASEAN states are also taking a cautious approach in handling their alignment with the US due to its unpredictable foreign policy on the part of Washington.

Indonesia is one of those states, trying to preserve its strategic partnerships with both the US and China. During the COVID pandemic, China offered financial and health aid to Indonesia, while US-Indonesia trade stagnated during COVID-19 (Chatterji,

2021). China and Indonesia also decided to trade in their local currencies instead of USDs. It is also important to note that Indonesia is one of the host countries of the BRI. However, this is causing some complexities in the Chinese-Indonesian partnership, because BRI, as mentioned previously, is a source of corruption, too. BRI projects in Indonesia triggered a series of protests within the Indonesian public (Economy, 2022). Moreover, tensions emanating from the South China Sea have remained high in the past few years. For instance, in December 2020, a Chinese underwater surveillance drone was found inside Indonesian sovereign territory. Still, while becoming increasingly concerned as a result of such incidents, Indonesia tries to find a middle ground between the US and China. In order to strike a middle way between the two great powers and as well as benefiting from the US' security umbrella, a motivation different from that of Vietnam or the Philippines, Indonesia has allied with the US, however at the same time moving closer to China. Indonesia had worried about US-China rivalry's potential destabilizing effects on the region. Therefore, it was enjoying trade relations with China and resuming its alliance with US. Such positioning was considered ideal by Indonesian policymakers.

Another country sharing a similar stance on China is Malaysia. Compared to the above-mentioned states, Malaysia is in a weaker position in terms of political, economic and diplomatic leverage against its relationship with the PRC. In this context, Chatterji stated that:

“Despite China’s regular presence on Malaysia’s maritime economic zone, Malaysia has avoided a confrontational posturing. On economic issues too, it has deepened its relations with China and welcomed Huawei’s 5G network. It has chosen to not comment on China’s treatment of the Uighur Muslims” (Chatterji, 2021).

Malaysia’s foreign policy needs to ensure a delicate balance between domestic public pressure on the one hand and maintaining stable relations with China on the other. Malaysia’s refusal to return back Uighur refugees to China clearly demonstrated how Malaysia’s foreign policy at times contradicted with China’s expectations. In addition, just like with the case of Indonesia, some of the BRI projects in Malaysia are regarded as untrustworthy by Malaysian public. However, due to its economic

dependence on China, Malaysia's only reaction has been to ask for a renegotiation of some of the deals. After all, Malaysia, together with Indonesia, is one of the largest countries to directly receive foreign investment from China (Chatterji, 2021).

Malaysia has also remained mostly passive towards China's actions in the South China Sea, even though Malaysia acknowledges that China has no legal basis for its claims.

Malaysia's weakness in face of the Chinese threat can also be illustrated by its response to China's relatively recent cyber-attacks. In August 2022, a leading cyber security firm based in California published a report that contained a mysterious phishing operation in the South China Sea (Subramanian, 2023). The operation was conducted from March 2021 to June 2022 by offshore energy companies that were active in the Kasawari gas field off the coast of Sarawak, Malaysia. The companies that participated in the operation received an e-mail that contained links to legitimate Australian websites. When the link was clicked, a malware called scanbox became activated, thus giving hackers partial control over the targeted computer. The hacker group based in Hainan, China supposedly had links to China's Ministry of State Security. Malaysia's weak response to the issue was noteworthy. Subramanian stated that in this regard:

“Malaysia's muted response may reflect the country's policy of non-confrontation on any issues relating to the South China Sea. For example, when China Coast Guard vessels enter coastal waters, the Royal Malaysian Navy employs a “shadowing” tactic without overtly challenging the boats or forcing them to leave” (Subramanian, 2023).

In essence, Malaysia remains hesitant in its foreign policy to openly challenge China. This hesitance can be attributed to Malaysia's fragile economy. Still, Xi's assertive sharp power strategies, illustrated by the 2022 cyber-attacks, caused Malaysia to distance itself from a fully pro-Chinese position. Malaysia's stance remains somewhere in between pro-Chinese and anti-Chinese.

Other ASEAN states have either aligned more closely with China or maintained an ambiguous stance like Malaysia, thus preventing the ASEAN from taking a shared stance vis-à-vis China. For example, Brunei's relationship with China remains

relatively unproblematic. The country benefits from China's investment in several fields such as infrastructure, oil refineries, aquaculture, and telecommunications. Despite recent Chinese aggression in South China Sea, Brunei still managed to maintain its cooperation with China and reach a consensus on how to address their respective areas of jurisdiction, even though the two countries have overlapping interests in the area.

Thailand is another country in the region that leans towards a more pro-Chinese attitude. Interestingly, Thailand has never considered China as a threat, even though China's damming of the Mekong¹⁴ River has hurt the country's agriculture. This can be explained by Thailand's pro-Chinese administrative structure. Thailand is an autocracy of military and royalist elites who view China as a "friend". The country cooperates with China on 5G technology and artificial intelligence, thus improving its surveillance capacity. Yet, the US also supports Thailand in the Lower Mekong Initiative¹⁵ against China and the US is a partner for the country's infrastructure deployment (Chatterji, 2021). Nevertheless, the US' effort so far has not succeeded in getting Thailand to distance itself from China. It looks like in this case, Xi's assertive strategy may have worked to some extent. China's deep involvement in Thai affairs and its weaponization of political and economic powers prevent Thai policymakers from raising their voice against Beijing.

China uses a similar policy leverage against Cambodia. For the past few years, Cambodia has also benefitted from China's BRI project. Consequently, just like Malaysia and Brunei, Cambodia has remained mostly passive against China regarding the disputes over the South China Sea. This has even caused tensions between Cambodia and the US. On the other hand, the Cambodian public holds antagonistic sentiments towards the Chinese (Chatterji, 2021) because of the legacy of Chinese support for the catastrophic Khmer Rouge rule during 1970s. Besides, protests erupted in Cambodia against the BRI projects due to high levels of corruption (Economy, 2022). Hence, Xi Jinping's success in forming alliances within

¹⁴ Mekong River springs from Tibetan region of China and flows through Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. For more information, see: Soutullo, J. 2019. The Mekong River: geopolitics over deployment, hydropower and the environment. European Parliament.

¹⁵ The Lower Mekong Initiative is a partnership between US and Cambodia, Laos Thailand and Vietnam. The initiative aims to support these 5 states on coordinating infrastructure and development.

Asia despite his assertiveness is not due only to its use of soft power tools, but also his strategic employment of China's economic leverages. In Cambodia's case, such leverage appears to be working; the country decided to side with the PRC out of concern for the survival of its authoritarian regime. After all, Cambodia is one of the ASEAN countries to have received loans from China, and those loans were vital for its economic development.

Laos is aligned with China as well in order to benefit from the BRI projects. The partnership between Laos and China is moving towards the goal of building the so-called "community of shared future" (Chatterji, 2021). Laos is also one of the ASEAN countries to have received the highest levels of loans from China, and therefore it has downplayed the South China Sea dispute within the ASEAN.

Another ASEAN state, Myanmar, hosts a significant Chinese presence in terms of trade, aid, investment, and infrastructure through the BRI. Geographically speaking, Myanmar is strategically important for China because the country itself is a vital pathway to access the Bay of Bengal. Therefore, the PRC has invested in railways and hydropower projects within Myanmar in the recent years. However, this does not mean their relationships stable. Myanmar is skeptical of China due to its regional ambitions, yet it has troubled relations with the US as well. The military coup of February 2021 has received serious criticism from the Biden administration, although the US tried to find means to provide humanitarian assistance. Myanmar was put under US sanctions, limiting the regime's political maneuver room. The PRC utilized this situation by supporting the military regime in its crack down on the opposition. Beijing has used the national sovereignty justification to impose its own rhetoric on the Myanmar issue in the international arena (Hall and Lang, 2023). Myanmar's approach to Beijing can be considered as the middle ground, due to its mistrust of China and strained relations with the West. This was highly evident in the case of the UN Security Council voting over Myanmar, for which China's supported Myanmar's military junta and this has led Myanmar to pragmatically welcome Chinese assistance. In brief, Myanmar maintains a cautious alliance with China while taking a negative stance against the West.

Lastly, Singapore remains neutral in between the US and China. Chatterji pointed out that:

“For Singapore, the US is a “resident power with vital interests in the region”, while China “is a reality on the doorstep”. Singapore in other words of its Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, “does not want to choose sides between the US and China ”” (Chatterji, 2021).

Despite its neutral stance, Singapore is still concerned about its security in view of the growing Chinese threat. Singapore advises Beijing on acquiring legitimacy by producing more public goods globally, aiming to lead China towards alternative approaches. It is ironic that a small island state offers advice on soft power tools to a great power aiming to “reclaim its proper place in the world” through sharp power assertiveness.

In sum, several ASEAN states, while being cautious in their relationships with the PRC, continue to preserve their neutrality vis-à-vis China mainly for economic reasons. Cleare’s argument of *“avoiding alienating either power”* (Cleare, 2022) holds true in such cases. Iwamoto:

“China was given nod by the majority of respondents from seven of the 10 ASEAN countries, with 69% from Brunei favoring the country, 58% from Cambodia, 52% from Indonesia, 74%, from Laos, 61% from Malaysia and 52% from Thailand” (Iwamoto, 2020).

Despite the favorable view of the native people of the ASEAN states, Xi’s ambition for fully drawing these countries to China’s side has failed as they are still afraid of forming an extensive partnership with China. The table below summarizes each ASEAN countries’ current approach towards China:

Table 1. Current approaches of ASEAN member states.

Aligned with China	Neutral but Chinese Skeptic	Aligned with the West
Cambodia	Indonesia	Philippines
Brunei	Malaysia	Vietnam
Laos	Myanmar	
Thailand	Singapore	

The table demonstrates that the positive outcomes of Xi's assertiveness in the case of ASEAN countries have been limited. Xi's policies have caused the Philippines and Vietnam to form closer alliances with the West. Many ASEAN states, despite remaining neutral, have sought any opportunity to cooperate with the West against the PRC. Only Cambodia, Brunei, Thailand, and Laos hold a positive approach towards China based on economic and ideological reasons.

Last but not least, we shall take a look at the reflections of the PRC's policies on the Pacific Island states will be analyzed.

5.6. Pacific Island States

The countries which are the subject of this section happen to be the poorest one in the Pacific region.

In the past few years, Beijing has responded to the needs of the Pacific island states through infrastructure loans and economic aid. Primarily, Pacific island states such as Nauru, Palau, the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, the Solomon Islands, as well as the France's overseas territories of French Polynesia and New Caledonia, have been targeted by a China's diplomatic and cultural drive so as to expand its influence (Courmont and Delhalle, 2022). This strategy is assertive in the sense that it aims at isolating Taiwan diplomatically. The momentum was in favor of China for a while. In 2019, Kiribati and the Solomon Islands switched their diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing, further diminishing Taiwan's diplomatic maneuver room. Moreover, the Solomon Islands signed a secret security pact with China in April 2022, hence terminating their traditional reliance on Australia—a regional power firmly within the US-led bloc. Even though no Chinese military bases were opened, a police force from China was brought in under a separate agreement, and the PRC agreed to train more than 300 police officers in the Solomon Islands, which equals to about one fifth of the total size of the country's total police force.

China's success in exerting its assertiveness within the Pacific was not limited to the Solomon Islands. The President Taneti Maamau of another Pacific island state, Kiribati, did not attend the US-Pacific Island States summit held in Washington in 2022 and refused to sign the US President Biden's declaration of partnership with the Pacific States. This was due mainly to China's "generous" economic aid to the country and granting of loans (Wright, 2022).

However, just like the cases of the ASEAN states analyzed under the previous section, China has eventually lost its influence over the small Pacific states as well. Roy stated that:

“The Full picture suggests Beijing’s attempt to make the Pacific a Chinese lake has stalled and will face strong countercurrents for the foreseeable future. Much of the opposition Beijing faces in the Pacific is stimulated by the Chinese government’s own actions – a classic characteristic of overreach” (Roy, 2023).

The PRC lost ground in 2022 and 2023 due to the slowdown in its economy, as well as the true nature and the Chinese motivations behind the BRI becoming obvious. Indeed, there has been a decline in Pacific island states’ interest in Chinese loans, because those loans began leaving Pacific states in major debt and thereof threatening their sovereignty. In 2016, the loans were at USD 384 million, but by 2021, the number had dropped to USD 241 million (Voice of America, 2023). The PRC’s approach towards those island states was similar to its approach towards China’s other neighbors. Chinese officials in the Pacific countries attempted to severely pressure and restrict local media access for native population of the Pacific Island States. This has contradicted the PRC’s long-standing argument about respecting the equal sovereignty of countries. When the then-Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited the region in May 2022, his attitude created the impression that China treated the region as a Chinese province (Roy, 2023).

The Pacific states reacted negatively to such attitudes of China. They began to fear their agreements with China risked turning them into vassal states. Therefore, Xi’s positive image began to deteriorate. For instance, Samoa was worried that China would exploit its infrastructure projects to build a security presence in the region (Dziedzic, 2023). Consequently, despite keeping its distance to the West, Samoa adopted an anti-Chinese stance.

In other cases, Xi’s image deteriorated even further. In early 2023, Fiji, for instance, has been in the process of terminating an agreement with on China for training the Fijian police force – an obvious sign of declining trust in China. Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka expressed concerns about China’s strict system being

incompatible with that of Fiji. As a result, Fiji and most other Pacific countries turned to Western countries such as Australia and New Zealand, both of which took advantage of the situation and increased their aid to the Pacific states. For instance, New Zealand signed a defense agreement with Fiji in June 2023, and Australia signed a security deal with Vanuatu to prevent China from expanding its sphere of influence in there.

The US also grabbed the opportunity to limit PRC's political influence by increasing its aid to the Pacific states to unprecedented levels. The Biden administration announced in late 2022 that they would provide USD 810 million in aid to Pacific States.

“Over the next six months, the Biden administration has spring into action, addressing the concerns of the Pacific Island community, tackling climate change, protecting fisheries from encroachment, strengthening regional institutions and promoting sustainable development” (The Economic Times, 2022).

The US drive to improve relations with the Pacific states proved rather successful. In May 2023, the US and Papua New Guinea signed a new security pact on security cooperation to provide assistance to Papua New Guinea's defense forces (Perry, 2023). Additionally, the US signed a maritime agreement with Papua New Guinea, allowing the U.S. Coast Guard to counter illegal fishing and drug smuggling in the country. The US has sought to improve its relationship even with the pro-Beijing states of the Pacific. For instance, the US opened embassies in the Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Kiribati, aiming to weaken Beijing's ties with these countries. The US even went so far as to allocate more than USD7.1 billion in aid for the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau for the first time in history (Voice of America, 2023). All those are indicative of the US is extending its alliances in the Pacific to counteract against China's political maneuvers in the region.

At the organizational level, the QUAD partnership began to engage with Pacific states through the Maritime Domain Awareness Program to help those states to increase their capacity to combat illegal fishing. Under the so-called “Partners in the Blue Pacific Initiative” announced in June 2022, the QUAD members pledged to

counter the PRC's activities in the Pacific states.

Overall, the PRC's use of sharp power tools such as leveraging indebtedness resulted in China losing its influence in this region, because the Pacific states became increasingly aware of the PRC's interest in exploiting its influence. According to Roy:

“Recent research reveals that university students in Papua New Guinea and Fiji- the future elite of their countries – mostly oppose taking additional aid”
(Roy, 2023).

The Pacific countries are concerned about the non-transparency of their deals with China, which contradicts the region's political culture of consensus building. Besides, these countries do not want to be entangled in the US-China competition, and see China as turning their countries into an area of confrontation with the West. Xi's government is regarded among those countries (with the exception the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, and Tonga) as more of a neocolonial power – in fact, more so than the case of the US, New Zealand, and Australia. Overall, the balance of power has shifted towards the West in this region as Western democracies now have the advantage of filling the gap where China failed to establish its dominance.

In light of these developments, Xi has eventually adjusted his rhetoric. In the section below, the more recent shift in Xi's conduct of foreign policy will be analyzed.

5.7. Xi Jinping's Reversal and Return to Soft Power

Recently, Xi has been experiencing challenges within China due to the failure of his foreign policy. Shortly after securing a third term at the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party held in October 2022, a tenure lengthen seen since the Mao era, he unexpectedly shifted towards softer policy. Firstly, after the Congress he has completely abandoned the costly zero-COVID policy in response to the strong backlash from the Chinese public towards the mandatory COVID lockdown practice. As the reaction of the public had reached the level of demanding Xi's resignation, he was forced to reverse this policy so as to retain his position as the President. The zero-COVID policy was also pointed at as one of the reasons for China's loss of economic momentum (Tepperman, 2022).

Elsewhere, Xi has partially moderated his stance on China's Marxist-Leninist policies (Walt, 2023b). In an interview with Christoph Gisiger, Anne Stevenson-Yang observed that:

“The same goes for policies on loans concerning stalled property projects and policies on tech companies. All of a sudden, the government started to make positive noises about private companies” (Gisiger, 2023).

Xi has also become more lenient in his foreign policy as his previous approach had not produced positive outcomes for China. According to Walt:

“It was a mistake to combine a major military buildup with militarized “island-building” in the South China Sea. It was short-sighted to reject the ruling of an international tribunal that dismissed the Chinese territorial claims in this crucial waterway, and counterproductive to threaten Taiwan and Japan by sending planes and ships into contested areas. It made little sense for Chinese troops to clash with Indian forces in the remote Himalayas. And it was surely a mistake to align China so closely with Russia on the eve of its invasion of Ukraine” (Walt, 2023b).

Subsequently, the PRC began reengaging inactive diplomacy, especially with the Western world. China began to actively reuse channel of communication with the US. Xi and Biden, after a long time, met at the Bali G-20 Summit in November 2022. Xi welcomed German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in his state visit to Beijing, conducted meetings with the heads of state of Southeast Asia, traveled to Saudi Arabia for a series of meetings, and invited Australian officials to discuss improving trade relations. The effectiveness of this renewed efforts on the part of Xi is questionable and varies according to different perspectives. Several cases indicate that Xi reverting to soft policies have been effective to some extent, like in the case of Australia. Due to Australia's commitment to the QUAD and their core position within the AUKUS, starting in early 2022, the PRC had adopted a more collaborative approach towards Australia. Accordingly, Beijing abandoned its plan to ban Australian exports and stepped back from the pandemic period's “Wolf Warrior”

diplomacy. According to Herscovitch:

“Notwithstanding China’s harsh anti-AUKUS rhetoric, Australia will probably be able to steam ahead with its nuclear-powered submarine plan without upsetting the overall positive trajectory of the bilateral relationship” (Herscovitch, 2023).

Even though both parties attach importance to their respective relationship, Australia still retains its caution against China. Canberra sustains a policy of minimizing China’s influence in the Pacific and continues its military involvement in the South China Sea dispute. Therefore, PRC is being forced to take further action to soften its policies in the South China Sea dispute.

On this, even though the South China Sea dispute seems unlikely to be resolved anytime soon, the PRC once again opted to resort to diplomatic channels to facilitate the progress. In April 2023, China and the Philippines agreed to establish additional lines of communication in order to immediately resolve any tensions that may occur in the West Philippine Sea. The agreement involved the principles of cooperation, tradition of friendship, and proper resolutions of differences (Morales, 2023), and the Philippines reaffirmed its recognition of the One-China policy. China readopting diplomatic tools aims now to protect stability within the region. After the PRC’s image suffered an irreversible damage, Xi has come to prioritize soft power tools and returned to the traditional Chinese foreign policy of setting sight on future prospects.

On the one hand, the reversal of China’s previous rhetoric and actions came too late, only after the PRC’s relations with the majority of Asia-Pacific countries was damaged. On the other hand, the US as China’s rival continues to suffer from the power vacuum created during the Trump administration, and the Biden administration did not manage to repair fully the damage inflicted during the Trump period. Surely, the PRC is an assertive power. Yet, the US in the past had done nothing different than today’s China. The US’ policies over the past 30 years of forcing its democratic and liberal values on non-Western countries also resulted in several costly invasions, failed states, rise of terrorism, and the counter-block of the autocrats (Walt, 2023a). During the Trump era, the liberal values that the US had long defended were rendered into hostile ideas. Besides, Trump rejected and

challenged the rules-based international order. Those are some of the burdens that the Biden administration has to carry and failed to resolve. The US has reduced itself its previous role as a mediator in international affairs – a role it had played in the last 20 years. Now this role is being claimed by the PRC. As vivid examples, the PRC took advantage of the détente between Saudi Arabia and Iran and succeeded in getting the two bitter rivals to agree to reestablish their relations and end their hostilities. China’s success was due to its active relationship with many states, whereas the US only maintains ties with particular states. Walt suggested that:

“Given the United States’ outsized global role since 1945, Americans have become accustomed to assuming that most states will follow our lead, even when they have reservations about what they are doing. China would like to alter that equation, and portraying itself as a more likely source of peace and stability is a key part of that effort” (Walt, 2023a).

European states fear that complete dependence on the US would drag them into a direct conflict with China in the Asia-Pacific. While taking a collective stance against China, they are still open to cooperation in areas such as trade and climate change. Therefore, Xi Jinping’s recent retreat from assertiveness has increased Europe’s willingness to cooperate with China in certain areas, while avoiding too much dependency on Beijing. After all, China remains as the second largest economy and a leading global power, which makes its exclusion from global alliances challenging. Unlike Russia, China has adopted a more cooperative approach towards western institutions, and Xi owes his rise in power to this approach. And Europe needs China, a fact evident during French President Macron’s visit during which the meetings were attended by President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and over 50 French business leaders from wide array of industrial areas. France and China signed several deals in areas of transport, agriculture, energy, culture and science (Szumski and Babuer-Babef, 2023). The reason is simple:

“Across the European continent, leaders have carefully calibrated their approach toward Beijing, and it’s clear that they are walking a tightrope trying to balance economic interests with other priorities” (Haddad, 2023).

The European block seeks a foreign policy independent of the US, because they fear that complete dependence on the US would drag them into a direct conflict with China in the Asia-Pacific. They have unified against China, but still kept context for of cooperation in areas like trade and climate change on the table. We can therefore conclude that Xi's reversal from assertiveness turned the tune in Europe in favor of cooperating with China in certain areas, while avoiding too much dependency on Beijing. After all, no one can totally exclude the second largest economy, which is expected to increase its share of global GDP to 23% by 2045 (OECD, 2023). Besides, unlike Russia, China is a leading figure within the international system engaging with the international institutions. If China acts like Russia, the result will be for Fix and Kimmage:

“By giving Russia its military support, China would join the ranks of pariah states such as Iran and North Korea. It would worsen its already adversarial relationship with the West, for which it would pay a substantial economic price. And China would be less able to paint itself as a benign international presence in a world spinning out of control” (Fix and Kimmage, 2023).

Therefore, Beijing is avoiding the full commitment on supporting Russia in Ukraine and continues to work together with the Europeans. After all, the PRC and European countries need each other's assistance in various fields beyond security and military, and this highlights the essence of China's relationships with Europe.

In a similar fashion, the necessity exists for mutual assistance between China and the Asia-Pacific states due to shared concerns about climate change and economic relations. Even though the negative image of China triggered by Xi's assertive policies still continue to influence China's relationship with its Asia-Pacific neighbors, Xi's recent reversal over his previous rhetoric has equaled to a reset of China's foreign policy. However, China's current policy is different from its previous strategy of “keeping a low profile” or “peaceful rise”. Xi has not given up on some of his goals, such as forceful re-unification with Taiwan. This results in strengthening the Taiwanese attachment to sovereignty and independence of Taiwan as a separate state more than ever in the entire Taiwanese history. Its alignment with

Russia, and the support provided to oppressive regimes has further undermined China's image as a constructive actor, even though it eventually backed down from its assertive rhetoric (Marks, 2023). China's new strategy therefore has an uncertain future and potential to fail. In Walt's terms:

“States in the international system rarely react strongly and negatively when a foreign country's economy is growing rapidly; on the contrary, they often welcome it because they can benefit from expanded economic opportunities” (Walt, 2023a).

The main point above is that the PRC should have never abandoned its adherence to soft power and should have prioritized instead its role as a global power and responsible stakeholder. The PRC's attempt to combine hard power and soft power strategies has proven to be counterproductive.

One final note is that despite its shift in rhetoric, China has never reduced its military spending. On the contrary, in March 2023, China decided to increase military spending by more than 7%, bringing the total to USD255 billion (Wright, 2023). Consequently, most of China's neighbors would certainly have second thoughts. While severing their relations with China is out of question, they will carefully watch and evaluate the developments in Taiwan and South China Sea, and China will continue to be viewed by other regional states with suspicion.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This thesis analyzed the PRC's changing strategies in the conduct of its foreign policy with respect to the notions of soft power, sharp power, and hard power. We have tried to analyze with respect to this research question: (i) Under Xi's second term, did China use its soft power actively in Asia-Pacific? (ii) If so, was China's use of soft power effective or not vis-à-vis Asia-Pacific states? Answering those questions is important, because under Xi's leadership, the PRC is constantly contending that it is promoting and offering its own model vis-à-vis the states of the Asia-Pacific region through active use of soft power instruments.

In order to simplify the analysis and reduce the independent variables at stake, we have opted to limit the period of time to the second term of Chinese President Xi.

To set the context properly, it is important to note that from 1950s through late 1970s, China's main goal was the survival of its one-party regime. Therefore, this period was highlighted by the adoption of hard power strategies, supplemented by military and economic cooperation with the two superpowers, namely the Soviet Union and the US (Goldstein, 2020). In other words, this was a foreign policy based on the balance of power dynamics pursued primarily through instruments of hard power. Subsequently in the late 1970s, the PRC abandoned this uncompromising Maoist approach and began to use soft power instruments more pragmatically to ensure the regime's legitimacy in the international arena. This approach was highlighted by Deng's economic openness and his strategy of "hide and bide" aimed at demonstrating that the PRC could take part in the rules-based international order. In a way, China chose to be cautious in the international arena until the circumstances allowed it to disclose its actual intentions.

This line of conduct and rhetoric dominated the PRC's foreign policy for over 40 years, to be precise from 1976 all the way to 2018. The grand strategies of first "hide and bide" and then the "peaceful rise" was successful. China's role as an international mediator and its successful management of the economic and political crises of the late 1990s and mid-2000s clearly presented China as a responsible stakeholder within the international system. Despite being a one-party autocracy, China was still able to present itself as an advocate of the rules of international law for a while. Whereas the West, and particularly the US, was hopeful about China's

respect for international law, some prominent IR and realist thinkers – among them were Walt and Mearsheimer - harshly criticized this expectation as delusional idealist thinking. Especially the US policy toward China drew criticism for falling into liberalism blindness (Mearsheimer, 2021). Accordingly, the West failed to take notice of Thucydides' teachings by allowing a new actor to emerge unopposed. It was claimed that this mistake was not noticed until it was too late.

In one respect, those realist criticisms proved to be accurate. Chinese President Xi, particularly during his second term in office, tried to transform China into a central power along with the so-called “reclaiming the rightful place in the world” mindset. The consequence was a more assertive policy line resorting to sharp power instruments. Yet, Xi seems to have failed in his attempts to exert assertiveness through sharp power. The latter in this respect is a reference to manipulative policies, sometimes filled with corruption, and goes so far as to threatening a targeted state by weaponizing economic aid, disinformation, cyber-attacks, and so forth. During Xi’s second term beginning in 2018, and particularly by the time the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, China’s BRI scheme, its vaccine diplomacy, and financial assistance provided to several states bolstered Xi’s self-confidence. This period was also characterized by deep divisions within the West. Consequently, Xi may have falsely assumed that the PRC was finally ready to challenge the hegemony of the West and the US within the international system. He must have presumed that by showing off China’s strength, its neighbors would concede and accept the PRC’s rise and be open to further cooperation. However, contrary to his expectations, Xi’s hard power tactics resulted in failure of his assertive policies and ruined China’s decades-old soft power gains and potential.

In consequence, China’s economic growth has been negatively impacted most by Xi’s assertive policies. Xi’s single-man rule, which was not seen since the reign of Mao in China, was combined with the lack of transparency in China’s domestic affairs and undermined the perception of China as a secure destination for investment (Gisiger, 2023). Furthermore, China’s harsh zero-COVID policy damaged the image of China not just among its neighbors, but also among its own citizens. Due to this lack of confidence, foreign companies began exiting China in search of alternatives, and several other foreign companies decided not to enter the Chinese market. After all, those investors could not trust that their companies would be able to operate

independently from the Chinese government.

China's desire to become a central power was reflected in its foreign policy in the form of domination over neighbors instead of cooperation. One observer described China's attitude as "do business with us, or consequences would be dire" (Rudd, 2020). Such approach has set off a chain reaction resulting in containment blocs comprising countries such as Japan and India. In certain ways, this was similar to the beginning of the Cold War era, when a group of states combined their powers to contain what they saw as the rising Communist threat. In this regard, faced with an increasingly assertive China, the disarrayed QUAD security dialogue's member states were regrouped and the scheme was revitalized. And AUKUS has emerged as a new regional security arrangement and brought in additional non-Pacific great powers into the region. Many ASEAN states, together with the West have got closer to each other so as to stop China.

China's use of sharp power tactics, including the BRI scheme, Confucius Institutes, as well as its "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy, are considered by certain observers as indicators of China's similarity to Russia, in terms of both countries being run by autocratic regimes. Yet, as differently from Vladimir Putin's Russia, China began to reverse its rhetoric and sought recently a return to soft power instruments. Xi began to pursue once more cooperative and diplomatic relations, and he even reassumed China's self-assigned role as a global mediator. This recent shift improved China's image to some extent. Yet, China is far from being close to its pre-pandemic status. Xi sought to position China as an alternative to the United States. In Beijing's eyes, China is a global power treating other states on equal footing, which sets it apart from other great powers in history (Xuetong, 2021). This view may partially be true as the PRC indeed strives to treat all nations equally. On the other hand, China's assertive conduct under Xi ran against this important characteristic of China's foreign policy. Subsequently, Xi sought to readopt a diplomacy- and dialogue-based policy, which has been demonstrated by China's recent engagements with the EU and its mediation efforts in the Middle East. The effectiveness of those efforts in the long run remains to be seen. China will most likely continue to bide its time until its self-confidence reaches the levels to convince Chinese leaders to resort once more to assertiveness.

Its author is convinced that the biggest contribution to literature of this research has been an objective analysis of China's original manifestation of its model to Asia-Pacific and how such an endeavor was ruined by the yes-men rule of the President Xi Jinping. Now the latter is once more pressing with soft power instruments, until switching to more radical stand when he deems the time is appropriate for that.

Lastly, this author's suggestion for future studies on the subject is that analyses on China should be pay tribute to this fact and take into account that even if China returned to biding its time, restoring the country's previous image will not be an easy task. The countries of the Asia-Pacific would retain their suspicions towards Beijing's and its next moves.



REFERENCES

- Alunaza, H., and Sherin, V. (2022). *The Strategic Value of China's Foreign Policy and the Rivalry of the Majors Power in the Indo-Pacific*, Jurnal Ilmu Sosial, Vol. 21(1), pp. 1-13.
- Amigo, C. M. D., Candor, A. M. M., Tsukue, J., and Isumaeru, S. (2021). *Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic Outbreak on China's Image towards International and Foreign Relations*. Cavite State University. PSEL 113 International Political Ideologies, Lecture Notes, Cavite.
- Bo, X. (2018). "Xi Calls for Building Inclusive, Harmonious World", Xinhua, 4 November [Online]. Available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-04/11/c_137103610.htm (Accessed: 17 May 2024).
- Bovenzier, N. (2023). *Australia to Move Forward with Domestically Owned "Strategic Fleet"*, Ship Technology, 8 November [Online]. Available at: <https://www.ship-technology.com/news/australia-domestically-owned-strategic-fleet/?cf-view> (Accessed: 27 November 2023).
- Brzezinski, Z. (1997) *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*. 2nd edition. New York: Basic Books.
- Brzozowski, A. (2019). "With New Focus on China, NATO Patches up Stormy Summit", Euractiv, 5 December [Online]. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/with-new-focus-on-china-nato-patches-up-stormy-summit/> (Accessed: 30 December 2023).
- Cabestan, J. P. (2022) *The COVID-19 Health Crisis and Its Impact on China's International Relations*, Journal of Risk and Financial Management, Vol. 15(3), pp. 2-11.
- Carlson, B. (2022). "Russia's War in Ukraine: China's Calculus". CSS Analyses in Security Policy, 6 May [Online] Available at: <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse303-EN.pdf&ved=2ahUKEwjwzqOS9b->

[GAXXhhv0HHe2zDiUQFnoECBsQAQ&usg=AOvVaw3qELAmVm0Necglbs2uF_v](https://www.orfonline.org/research/china-relationship-asean-explainer/?amp)
N (Accessed: 25 May 2023).

Chatterji, R. (2021). *China's Relationship with ASEAN: An Explainer*. Observer Research Foundation. 15 April [Online]. Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/china-relationship-asean-explainer/?amp> (Accessed: 20 April 2023).

Chawla, M. I. (2021) *China's BRI: Regional Prospects and Implications*, Psychology and Education, Vol. 58(1), pp. 4229-4235.

Chen, X., and Gao, X. (2022) *Analyzing the EU's Collective Securitization Moves towards China*, Asia Europe Journal, Vol. 20(2), pp. 195-216.

Chestnut Greitens, S. (2022) *China's Response to War in Ukraine*, Asian Survey, Vol. 62(5-6), pp. 751-781.

"China's Declining Aid to Pacific Islands Increasingly Goes to Allies, Think Tank Reports". (2023). Voice of America, 30 October [Online]. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-s-declining-aid-to-pacific-islands-increasingly-goes-to-allies-think-tank-reports-/7333052.html> (Accessed: 27 November 2023).

Cleare, I. (2022). *Asian States are Worried the U.S. is a Perennially Distracted Superpower: A More Assertive China Policy May Alienate Potential Allies*, Foreign Policy [Online]. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/12/15/asian-states-trade-war-biden-xi-jinping-china-japan-korea-vietnam-pacific-trade/> (Accessed: 25 February 2023).

Congressional Research Service. (2019). *The U.S.-Japan All*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33740&ved=2ahUKEwj3sjYlumCAxWV7AIHHfelCQ8QFnoECBUQAQ&usg=AOvVaw3ZV9fg5wlCUUTbPubzKgGp> (Accessed: 27 November 2023).

"COSCO's Investment in Hamburg Terminal Finalized". (2023). The Maritime Executive, 19 June [Online]. Available at: <https://maritime-executive.com/article/cosco-s-investment-in-hamburg-terminal-finalized> (Accessed: 26 November 2023).

Courmont, B., and Delhalle, H. (2022). *A China's Soft Power in the Pacific: The Example of the Solomon Islands*. Asia Programme. The Catholic University of Lille. Lille.

Cox, R. W. (1983) *Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method*. Millennium, Vol. 12(2), pp. 126-155.

D'ambrogio, E. (2021). *The Quad: An Emerging Multilateral Security Framework of Democracies in the Indo-Pacific Region*. European Parliament, Strasbourg.

deLisle, J. (2021) *The COVID-19 Pandemic and Geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific: A View from the United States*. Joint US–Korea Academic Studies, Vol. 32, pp. 31-61.

De Maizere, T. and Mitchell, A. W. (2021). *NATO Needs to Deal with China Head-on: The Western Alliance is Unprepared to Counter the Direct and Growing Challenge from Beijing*. Foreign Policy [Online]. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/23/nato-china-brussels-summit-biden-europe-alliance/> (Accessed: 5 March 2023).

Depetris, D. R. (2023). “*China is Its Own Worst Enemy*”, The Lowy Institute, 6 April [Online]. Available at: <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/china-its-own-worst-enemy> (Accessed: 20 April 2023).

Economy, E. C. (2017). *History with Chinese Characteristics: How China's Imagined Past Shapes its Present*. Foreign Aff., Vol. 96(4), pp. 141-148.

Economy, E. (2022) *Xi Jinping's New World Order: Can China Remake the International System?* Foreign Aff., Vol. 101(52), pp. 1-20.

“*Fiji's Rethinks Police Deal with China amid Rising Pacific Tensions*”. (2023). The Guardian, 7 June [Online]. Available at: <https://www.google.com/amp/s/amp.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/07/fiji-rethinks-police-deal-with-china-amid-rising-pacific-tensions> (Accessed: 7 June 2023).

Ferdinand, P. (2016) *Westward Ho—the China Dream and “One Belt, One Road”:* Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping. International Affairs, Vol. 92(4), pp. 941-957.

Fix, L and Michael, K. (2023) “*How China Could Save Putin’s War in Ukraine: The Logic— and Consequences—of Chinese Military Support for Russia*”, Foreign Affairs [Online]. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/how-china-could-save-putins-war-ukraine> (Accessed: 26 April 2023).

Friedman, J. A. (2022) *Is US Grand Strategy Dead? The Political Foundations of Deep Engagement after Donald Trump*. International Affairs, Vol. 98(4), pp. 1289-1305.

Gabuev, A. (2022). *China’s New Vassal: How the War in Ukraine Turned Moscow into Beijing’s Junior Partner*, Foreign Affairs [Online]. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-new-vassal> (Accessed: 30 February 2023).

Gisiger, C. (2023). “*I Think There Has Been Some Kind of Quiet Internal Revolt Against Xi Jinping’s Personal Rule*”. The Market NZZ. Available at: <https://themarket.ch/english/i-think-there-has-been-some-kind-of-quiet-internal-revolt-against-xi-jinpings-personal-rule-ld.8148>(Accessed: 12 January 2023).

Goldstein, A. (2020) *China's Grand Strategy Under Xi Jinping: Reassurance, Reform, and Resistance*. International Security, Vol. 45(1), pp. 164-201.

Gray, C. S. (2011). *Hard Power and Soft Power: The Utility of Military Force as an Instrument of Policy in the 21st Century*. Strategic Studies Institute US Army War College.

Haddad, B. (2023). “*Macron Said out Loud What Europeans Really Think About China*”, The Foreign Policy [Online]. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/14/france-china-taiwan-macron-visit-europe-strategic-autonomy-trade/> (Accessed: 17 April 2023).

Hall, N. and Lang, H. (2023). “*The Weaponization of Humanitarian Aid: How to Stop China and Russia From Manipulating Relief Money*”, Foreign Affairs [Online]. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/weaponization-humanitarian-aid> (Accessed: 5 February 2023).

Herscovitch, B. (2023). “*China’s Sound and Fury over AUKUS will Mean Little for Ties with Australia*”, The Guardian, 15 March [Online]. Available at: <https://www.google.com/amp/s/amp.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/16/c>

[hinas-sound-and-fury-over-aucus-will-mean-little-for-ties-with-australia](#)(Accessed: 20 March 2023).

Hoare, Q., and Nowell-Smith, G. (2005). *Selections from Prison Notebooks*. 2nd edition. Lawrence and Wishart. Elec Book. London.

Iwamoto, K. (2020). “*New Year’s Resolutions Have Been Settled*”, The New York Times, 16 January [Online]. Available at: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/7-of-10-ASEAN-members-favor-China-over-US-survey> (Accessed: 26 November 2023).

Keen, M., (2022). “*Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare is Coming to Australia. What Should We Expect from His Visit*”. Lowy Institute, 12 October [Online]. Available at: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/solomon-islands-prime-minister-manasseh-sogavare-coming-australia-what-should-we> (Accessed: 10 December 2022).

LaGrone, S (2017) “*Chain of Incidents Involving U.S. Navy Warships in the Western Pacific Raise Readiness, Training Questions*”, USNI News, 21 August [Online]. Available at: <https://news.usni.org/2017/08/21/chain-incidents-involving-u-s-navy-warships-western-pacific-raise-readiness-training-questions> (Accessed: 26 November 2023).

Lema, L. and Mcpherson, P. (2023). “*US, Philippines to Announce New Sites for U.S. Military As Soon As Possible – U.S. Official*”, Reuters, 20 March [Online]. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-philippines-announce-new-edca-sites-soon-possible-us-official-2023-03-20/> (Accessed: 2 April 2023).

Lind, J. (2022) *Japan Steps up: How Asia’s Rising Threats Convinced Tokyo to Abandon Its Defense Taboos* Foreign Affairs, [Online]. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/japan/japan-steps> (Accessed: 3 April 2023).

Ljuslin, L. (2022). “*China’s Use of Soft- and Hard Power under the Leadership of Xi Jinping*”. PhD Thesis. Uppsala Universitet. Available at: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&url=https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1629476/FULLTEXT01.pdf&ved=2ahUKEwjOpdieyaP7AhV4QvEDHediDIYQFnoECEYQAQ&usg=AOvVaw04J8-Pj70OYjkgP99Nk8_t (Accessed: 15 April 2023).

Lune, H., and Berg, B. (2001) *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. 9th edition. Long Beach, Los Angeles: California State University.

Macro trends (2024). *Australia Military Spending/Defense Budget 1960-2024*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/AUS/australia/military-spending-defense-budget#:~:text=Australia%20military%20spending%2Fdefense%20budget%20for%202022%20was%20%2432.30B,a%204.68%25%20increase%20from%202019> (Accessed: 20 February 2024).

Mark, C. K. (2013). *China and the World since 1945: An International History*. 1st edition. Oxford: Routledge.

Mearsheimer, J. J. (2021) *The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics*. Foreign Aff., Vol. 100(48).

Mehra, J. (2020) *The Australia-India-Japan-US Quadrilateral: Dissecting the China Factor*. ORF Occasional Paper, London, No. 264.

Mercer, P. (2023). “New Zealand Seeks to Consolidate Pacific Relations amid Challenges from China”, The Voice of America, 17 April [Online]. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/amp/new-zealand-seeks-to-consolidate-pacific-relations-amid-challenges-from-china/7053400.html> (Accessed: 17 April 2023).

Morales, N. J. (2023). “Philippines, China to Set up More Lines of Communication to Resolve Maritime Issues”, Reuters, 23 April [Online]. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/differences-south-china-sea-are-not-sum-total-philippines-china-relations-2023-04-22/> (Accessed: 15 April 2023).

Morgenthau, H. J. (1948). *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. 1st edition. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Mughal, Rases, A. (2009). *Chinese Foreign Policy: A Study into Consistency and Change*, Vol. 3(2), pp. 246-258 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228277678> (Accessed: 6 March 2023).

“New Caledonia Votes to Stay in France amid Boycott by Separatists”. (2021). NBC NEWS, 13 December [Online]. Available at:

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/new-caledonia-votes-stay-france-amid-boycott-separatists-n1285804> (Accessed: 27 November 2023).

Nye, J. S. (1990) *Soft Power*, Foreign Policy, no. 80, pp. 153-171.

Nye, J. S. (2018) *How Sharp Power Threatens Soft Power: The Right and Wrong Ways to Respond to Authoritarian Influence*, Foreign Affairs (Online). Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-01-24/how-sharp-power-threatens-soft-power> (Accessed: 5 February 2023).

O'Brien, R. and Herman, A. (2023). "The President Can't Counter China on His Own", Foreign Affairs, 5 May [Online]. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/president-biden-counter-china-congress-american-bipartisan> (Accessed: 5 May 2023).

OECD (2023) [X] 29 October. Available at: <https://twitter.com/OPECSecretariat/status/1729863700226388095?s=20> (Accessed: 30 November 2023).

Oehler-Şincai, I. M. (2016) *United States' "Pivot" towards Asia-Pacific: Rationale, Goals and Implications for the Relationship with China*. Knowledge Horizons. Economics, Vol. 8(1), pp. 25-31.

O'Neill, A. (2023a). *Japan: Real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Growth Rate from 2018 to 2028*, Statista, 8 May [Online] Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/263617/gross-domestic-product-gdp-growth-rate-in-india/> (Accessed: 28 November 2023).

O'Neill, A. (2023b). *India: Real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Growth Rate from 2018 to 2028*, Statista, 17 May [Online] Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/263771/gross-domestic-product-gdp-in-india/> (Accessed: 28 November 2023).

Onnis, B., (2021) *Policy Brief COVID-19 and China's Global Image*, EU-Asia Project Issue no. 2021/57, pp. 2-10.

Overholt, W. H. (2019). *Hong Kong: The Rise and Fall of the "One Country, Two Systems"*. Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation; Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government, Harvard Kennedy School.

Pei, M. (2018) *China in Xi's "New Era": A Play for Global Leadership*. Journal of Democracy, Vol. 29(2), pp. 37-51.

Perry, N. (2023). "US Signs New Security Pact with Papua New Guinea amid Competition with China", ABC News, 21 May [Online]. Available at: <https://www.google.com/amp/s/abcnews.go.com/amp/US/wireStory/us-sign-new-security-pact-papua-new-guinea-99496252> (Accessed: 25 May 2023).

Roy, D. (2023). "How China Overreached and Lost Its Grip in the Pacific" MENAFN- Asia Times, 30 March [Online]. Available at: <https://menafn.com/1105903339/How-China-Overreached-And-Lost-Its-Grip-In-The-Pacific> (Accessed: 10 April 2023).

Rudd, K. (2018). *How Xi Jinping Views the World: The Core Interests That Shape China's Behavior*. Foreign Affairs [Online]. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-05-10/how-xi-jinping-views-world> (Accessed: 20 December, 2022).

Rudd, K. (2021). *Why the Quad Alarms China*, Foreign Affairs [Online]. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-06/why-quad-alarms-china> (Accessed: 15 December 2022).

Sauer, T. (2017). *Take It from a European: NATO is Obsolete*, the National Interest [Online]. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/take-it-european-nato-obsolete-19537> (Accessed: 8 January 2023).

Sevastoupulo, D. and Cameron-Chileshe, J. (2023), "AUKUS Allies Unveil Plan to Supply Australia with Nuclear-Powered Submarines", Financial Times, March 14 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/b4d7a277-095a-4e33-9fbc-d05395885522> (Accessed: 20 March 2023).

Shair-Rosenfield, S. (2020) *China*. 1st edition. Bergen: University of Bergen.

Shambaugh, D. (2004) *China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order*. International Security, Vol. 29(3), pp. 64-99.

Singh, S. (2022). *India and China's Latest Border Clash is Not a One-off: The Skirmish in Arunachal Pradesh Reflects Beijing's Confidence—and New Delhi's Diminished Deterrence*, Foreign Policy, [Online]. Available at:

foreignpolicy.com/2022/12/23/india-china-border-clash-arunachal-pradesh-deterrence (Accessed: 5 March 2023).

Siow, M. and Sipalan, J. (2022). “*Why Do Singapore and Malaysia Have a More Favorable View of China than the US?*” *The South China Morning Post*, 23 June [Online]. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3186192/why-do-singapore-and-malaysia-have-more-favourable-view-china-us> (Accessed: 26 November 2023).

Skoneczny, Ł., and Cacko, B. (2021) *Sharp Power—Introduction to the Issue*. *Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego*, Vol. 13(25), pp. 325-340.

Soetopo, C., and Uspenskih, T. (2021). *China’s Foreign Policy Strategic Monitoring September 2020 - 2021*. Sciences Po Strasbourg Ecole de l’Université de Strasbourg.

Statista Research Department. (2023). *Annual Growth of the Real Gross Domestic Product of the United States from 1990 to 2022* [Online] Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/188165/annual-gdp-growth-of-the-united-states-since-1990/> (Accessed: 20 November 2023).

Subramanian, S. (2023) “*Phishing in the South China Sea*”, *The Diplomat*, 3 April [Online]. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/phishing-in-the-south-china-sea/> (Accessed: 5 April 2023).

Sullivan, J., and Brands, H. (2020). *China Has Two Paths to Global Domination*. *Foreign Policy* [Online] Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/22/china-superpower-two-paths-global-domination-cold-war/> (Accessed: 12 February 2023).

Sun, Y. (2021) *The Pandemic as a Geopolitical Game Changer in the Indo-Pacific: The View from China*, *Joint US–Korea Academic Studies*, Vol. 32, pp. 15-28.

Szumsk, C. and Babuer-Babef, C. (2023). “*France Signs Economic Deals with China*”, *The Euractiv*, 7 April [Online]. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/france-signs-economic-deals-with-china/> (Accessed: 26 November 2023).

Taffer, D. A., and Wallsh, D. (2023) *China’s Indo-Pacific Folly Beijing’s Belligerence is Revitalizing U.S. Alliances*, *Foreign Affairs* [Online]. Available at:

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/asia/china-indo-pacific-folly> (Accessed: 30 April 2023).

Teixeira, V. (2019). *The United States' China Containment Strategy and the South China Sea Dispute*, Central European Journal of International and Security Studies, 13(3).

Textor, C. (2023). *Growth Rate of Real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in China from 2013 to 2023 with Forecasts until 2029*, Statista, 30 May [Online]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/263616/gross-domestic-product-gdp-growth-rate-in-china> (Accessed: 27 November 2023).

“US Initiative Checkmates China in Pacific Islands”. (2022). The Economic Times, 23 October [Online]. Available at: https://www.google.com/amp/s/m.economictimes.com/news/defence/us-initiative-checkmates-china-in-pacific-islands/amp_articleshow/95051639.cms (Accessed: 30 March 2023).

Vasquez, J. A. (1998). *The Power of Power Politics: From Classical Realism to Neotraditionalism*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Walt, S. M. (1990). *The Origins of Alliances*. 1st edition. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Walt, S. M. (2000). *Keeping the World off Balance: Self Restraint and US Foreign Policy*. 25 October [Online]. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=253799 (Accessed: 2 February 2023).

Walt, S. M. (2023a). *Saudi-Iranian Détente is a Wake-up Call for America: The Peace Plan is a Big Deal — and It's No Accident That China Brokered It*, Foreign Policy [Online]. Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/14/saudi-iranian-detentechinaunitedstates/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Editors%20Picks%20OC&utm_term=73990&tpcc=Editors%20Picks%20OC (Accessed: 20 May 2023).

Walt, S. M. (2023b). *Can China Pull off Its Charm Offensive? Why Beijing's Foreign-Policy Reset Will-or Won't-Work out*, Foreign Policy [Online]. Available at:

foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/23/can-china-pull-off-its-charm-offensive (Accessed: 10 May 2023).

Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. 1st edition. Boston: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Waltz, K. N. (2000). *Structural Realism after the Cold War*. *International Security*, Vol. 25(1), pp. 5-41.

Weiss, J. C., and Wallace, J. L. (2021). *Domestic Politics, China's Rise, and the Future of the Liberal International Order*. *International Organization*, Vol. 75(2), pp. 635-664.

Wilson III, E. J. (2008) *Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power: The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 616(1), pp. 110-124.

Wright, S. (2022). "Kiribati President Praises China's Culturally Sensitive Dealing with Pacific Countries", *Benar News*, 18 October [Online]. Available at: <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/pacific/kiribati-china-development-aid-10182022010008.html> (Accessed: 20 March 2023).

Wright, G. (2023). "China Discusses Military Budget while Warning of Escalating Threats", *BBC News*, 5 March [Online]. Available at: <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-64857194.amp> (Accessed 10 May 2023).

Xuetong, Y. (2021) "Becoming Strong: The New Chinese Foreign Policy". *Foreign Affairs*, 22 June [Online] Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-06-22/becoming-strong> (Accessed: 3 December 2022).

Yammaguchi, M., and Nuga, H. (2023). "NATO Chief Wants More "Friends" as Russia, China Move Closer", *AP News*, 1 February [Online]. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-nato-politics-jens-stoltenberg-china-aeb7fdc3ff76413aab3a84c8afa22288> (Accessed: 15 April 2023).

Yan, X. (2014). *From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement*. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol.7(2), pp. 153-184.

Zeng, J. (2013). *State-led Privatization in China: The Politics of Economic Reform*. 1st edition. Florida: Taylor and Francis Ltd.

Zhang, D. (2020). *China in the Pacific and Traditional Powers' New Pacific Policies*. *Security Challenges*, Vol. 16(1), pp. 78-93.

Zhao, H., and Yu, J. (2022). *Understanding China's Diplomatic Stances vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine Crisis*. GIES Occasional Paper, no. 1, pp. 45-49.

