

Domestic Stability and Economic Growth: China's Foreign Policy Under Xi Jinping's Administration (2013-2022)

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Abstract

This article aims to examine the role of domestic stability and economic growth in China's foreign policy under Xi Jinping's administration, from March 2013 to July 2022. I argue that one of the most relevant goals of China's foreign policy is to preserve domestic stability and economic growth, which are necessary for the survival of one-party rule. China may be best seen as a responsible reformer that tries to facilitate for permanent regional and global cooperation, but at the same time brings alternatives to the liberal international order. The main foreign policy strategy is to capitalize on Chinese economic power to strengthen China's political and military influence in regional and global affairs.

Keywords: China, Xi Jinping, foreign policy, domestic stability, economic growth, international business

1. Introduction

The People's Republic of China's military and economic influence in regional and global issues has remodelled the geopolitical landscape and compelled great powers such as the United States to redefine their strategic actions in the Asia Pacific. Since Xi Jinping started to serve as the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012 and China's President in 2013, some analysts have argued that China has adopted a more aggressive and assertive foreign policy orientation, which would be a departure from Deng Xiaoping's low profile to avoid confrontation in global affairs. Despite the strengthening of regional and global power by economic aid and military expansion, China has tried to assume responsibility in solving global problems based on mutually beneficial peace and politics, which can be identified in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the rejuvenation of the notion of "the common destiny of mankind", brought up at bilateral, regional, and multilateral institutions. China's involvement in negotiations on the Korean Peninsula and the deployment of Chinese troops to Africa's peacekeeping missions have indicated China's interest in defining world affairs, which matches with its economic and military capacity to influence them. It also aims to drive the US military force out from important strategic regions such as Central Asia, which has been experiencing higher inflation than other regions in the world in 2022. It has been directly affected by the fallout from the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine in terms of supply disruptions and elevated energy, grain, and fertilizer prices. China's economy has been growing slower than in the past because it maintained COVID-19 restrictions that generated supply disruptions, limited international travel, and prevented the tourism and transport sectors from returning to their normal situation. The circumstances can get worse with the emergence of new variants, but Xi's administration is adopting various initiatives to support China's economy by offering credit and tax breaks to enterprises, reducing mortgage interest rates, and investing heavily in infrastructure projects (Connolly, 2016; Dominguez, 2022; Dyrenforth, 2021; Qadeer, n.d.; Zhekenov, Makisheva & Jakubayeva, 2019; Zhou, 2019).

After succeeding Hu Jintao as the CCP leader, Xi vowed to imprison corrupt officials under the slogan of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation – China Dream" as the core policy objective on the domestic front. Through the anticorruption slogan, XI has centralized power and made his leadership lifelong possible by revising the Chinese Constitution. In the international arena, the idea of a "community of common destiny" was incorporated in the Charter of the Chinese Communist Party, as well as in resolutions of the UN Commission for Social Development, the UN Security Council, and the UN Human Rights Council. China does not show expansionistic ambitions and gains more supporters of its attractive proposals to deal with terrorism and global warming, for example. Major international meetings show Xi's ability to attract leaders from all over the world, such as the fourth summit of the

2014 Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit, the 2016 G20 Summit in Hangzhou, the 2017 One Belt-One Road International Cooperation Forum and the BRICS Summits. Xi's administration also initiated the creation of relevant financial institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Silk Road Fund, and the New Development Bank, for example. China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the second largest economy in the world, which shows its ability to assume more responsibilities in global issues and contribute to peace and development. China also built manmade islands in the South China Sea. However, since its economic progress alone cannot serve as the basis for the CCP's legitimacy, Xi relies on instruments to guarantee public loyalty, such as nationalism – seen in the confrontation in territorial disputes in the South China and East China Seas and the tougher stance in dealing with the United States, particularly during Donald Trump's administration – and Xi's personality cult, destined to restore public confidence in the authorities and eliminate political opposition that challenges Xi's authority. He tries to brainwash Chinese people by manipulating China's history and national identity to achieve his political goals. Foreign policy was used to divert attention from social instability domestically, particularly the rivalry among CCP's factions (Bhattacharya, 2019; Hu, 2014; Zhekenov, Makisheva & Jakubayeva, 2019; Zhou, 2019).

China's proposal of establishing a new great type of great power relations had a tepid response from the Barack Obama's administration and a strong backlash from the Trump government in the United States. China has cooperated with Russia, Japan, and the European Union to limit the pressures from the West but received little in return. Many leaders and specialists understand that China uses its sharp power to strengthen its authoritarian influence through the manipulation of information and the educational system internally and repudiates international liberal political norms by selectively participating in the existing order. Although China has embraced the general principles in framework agreements, it has refrained from binding itself to the more concrete obligations, particularly human rights issues. The clash between China's core interests under Xi's administration and the international liberal and political order seems inevitable (Zhou, 2019). In the search for a new type of major power relations, Xi tried to reinforce the strategic cooperation with Russia to counterbalance the United States and developed diplomatic initiatives toward China's surrounding states, but he preserved assertiveness in territorial disputes with Japan to protect China's territorial and maritime interests, for example (Hu, 2014). Some Chinese initiatives such as the BRI have been criticized by Japan and the European Union in a pushback that could undercut Xi's domestic legitimacy. In the context of the China-US trade war, Xi's government came under intense scrutiny and criticism (Loh, 2018).

Even though China tried to develop an idea of a united world with less confrontation with the global order and play pragmatically the role of a responsible power, Xi also sought more international power by redefining the political and economic rules of the "community of common destiny" and protecting the CCP's interests, particularly when bullying neighbors over territorial claims, which is supposedly a contradiction. A critical assessment of most studies about Xi's foreign policy points out that they do not explain precisely why the contradiction is only apparent. They also typically consider elements such as domestic stability and economic growth separately and do not show how these elements interact to define the content of China's foreign policy under Xi's rule. In this context, this article aims to cover the gap and make a difference in China's foreign policy analysis by investigating the interaction between domestic stability and economic growth in the implementation of reforms essential for international cooperation and showing that the facilitation for China's international collaboration with other states does not contradict the proposals of alternatives to the liberal international institutions. This study shows that there are multiple possibilities to define global cooperation stimulated by China, but they do not need to follow the same liberal principles on which most international institutions are based.

The aims of this article are to examine the role of domestic stability and economic growth in China's foreign policy under Xi Jinping's administration, from March 2013 – when Xi came into power as China's president – to July 2022. Based on the perspective as that employed by Bhattacharya (2019), Gupta (2015), Wang (2017), Weissmann (2015), and Zhou (2019), I argue that one of the most relevant goals of China's foreign policy is to preserve domestic stability and economic growth, which are necessary for the survival of one-party rule. China's foreign policy is also related to the Chinese multitude of overlapping identities about what China is and should be that allow the construction and the consolidation of partnerships and alliances with various states. China under Xi's administration cannot be categorized as a status quo power that accepts the world as it is nor as a revisionist state which aims to redefine the international order completely. China can be best seen as a responsible reformer that tries to facilitate for permanent regional and global cooperation, but at the same time brings alternatives to the liberal international order. The main foreign policy strategy is to capitalize on Chinese economic power to strengthen China's political and military influence in the regional and global affairs.

2. Method

This article has a qualitative approach of categorial content analysis aimed at strengthening the knowledge about the relations among domestic stability, economic growth, and the Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping's administration. The analysis of highly cited articles and books about China's foreign policy, Xi's foreign policy, and China's economy and domestic situation under his rule may be a strategy to identify trends – particularly regarding domestic stability and economic growth –, as well as reflect on the prominent arguments and identify research gaps. Arden et al. (2018) argue that the categorial content analysis is a tool to better understand present contexts – such as China's foreign policy in the last nine years –, which gives elements for criticism by future researchers. They will be able to get a deeper look at publications during this specific period – from March 2013 to July 2022 – and the chosen issues.

Based on the stages developed by Arden et al. (2018), I elected the search procedures based on the guidance provided by the scholarly literature and elected the main books and articles with high circulation and use in prior analysis from 2013 to 2022. The criteria mobilized for searching and constructing the database encompassed the authors' names, the books' and journals' names, and the citation count in Google Scholar. The results of this stage were cross-checked to assure that all the cited works met the established criteria. Some books and articles identified inappropriately by search instruments were not taken into consideration, as well as duplicates.

Two categories were used to distribute the chosen information: 1) the history of Chinese foreign policy, and 2) the basis of Xi Jinping's foreign policy. The purposes were to identify the authors' main arguments in defining the general aspects of Chinese foreign policy – with the focus on the last nine years – and indicate gaps and limitations of the analytical works that would be overcome by the reflections proposed in this article.

The discussion brought in this work was built through bibliographical research and a qualitative approach of categorial content analysis. Although the search procedures and the database construction based on cross-checking were also used at this stage, the main categories to assign the selected information were distinct: 1) Xi Jinping's Foreign Policy Achievements and Opportunities, and 2) Xi Jinping's Foreign Policy Challenges. The aims were to evaluate China's foreign policy during Xi's rule in the considered period and identify the role of domestic stability and economic growth in China's foreign policy. These aims allow the evaluation of Xi's administration in positioning China internationally as a status quo power, a revisionist state that challenges the international order, or a responsible reformer that supports permanent cooperation, but offers alternatives to the liberal international order.

3. Results

3.1 *The History of Chinese Foreign Policy*

The interconnection between domestic politics and foreign policy is very strong in China because the state's international affairs are largely driven by its domestic politics and serve the interests of the ruling individuals, particularly the CCP's members. In the past, China suffered multiple military defeats, including occupation by British and Japanese forces. In the 1937 Sino-Japanese War, Japan captured large swathes of the Chinese territory, but, in 1945, after the end of World War II, the Japanese forces surrendered under the US attack and were forced to retreat from China. Right after the withdrawal of Japanese troops from China, the power struggle between then Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) led government and the CCP triggered a civil war. At the time of growing schism in the Chinese society between the landowners and workers, Mao Zedong promised to address the sufferings of the Chinese peasantry with the redistribution of the land and power in communist controlled regions, as well as the limitation of the influence of the landlords. KMT was defeated in 1949, and CCP came to power in mainland China, when Mao introduced land reforms and collectivized Chinese agricultural sector. Since then, the CCP has used the "century of humiliation" between 1839 and 1949 as a political rhetoric to highlight China's past suffering, which continues to play an important role in defining Chinese foreign relations. Under Mao, China regarded the international order as illegitimate and called for a more democratic one because the existing order represented the triumph of the strong over the weak, a viewpoint shared among the Nonaligned Movement members – with which China agreed with the general policy orientations but maintained its free hand – and reflected the "century of humiliation" of occupation and invasion. Mao wanted China to undergo a revolutionary change with no external intervention. China condemned all the major multilateral institutions and regimes, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), understood as a rich states' club destined to preserve capitalist rule, and the global nonproliferation regime, seen as an instrument of nuclear superpowers to limit the technological growth of other states. China also criticized regional arrangements dominated by the United States, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the U.S.-Japan alliance. During the revolutionary period, China supported insurgents in Southeast Asia, fought alongside North Korea in its war against South Korea and the United States, and

supported revolutionary movements in Africa, seen as struggles for national liberation (Bader, 2016; Qadeer, n.d.; Zhou, 2019).

Chinese leaders have used hawkish rhetoric during Mao's administration (1949-1976), but the push for socialist changes was modified by Deng Xiaoping's policy of "de-collectivization". Under his administration, China enacted the "Four Modernizations" enunciated by Zhou Enlai in 1975, which focused on Agriculture, Industry, Science and Technology and National Defense and experienced unprecedented economic growth. Deng initiated economic reforms and liberalized China's trade policies through the opening to the global economy. Such strategy required foreign investment, trade, knowledge, technology, and cooperation. During Deng's administration, China started the path to join key organizations in the United Nations system that it had once denounced, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). It stopped the condemnation of NATO, seen as a useful balance against the Soviet Union, and joined Asia Pacific institutions, such as APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao periods made China's emergence easier as a major player based on economic growth and collective leadership and continued to join Third World states in calling for a more democratic international order (Bader, 2016; Qadeer, n.d.; Scobell, 2020).

Under Mao's administration, China implemented the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence based on the fact of that China was isolated by Western states. Deng defined basic principles into China's foreign policy – "Tao guang yang hui, you suo zuo wei" [keep a low profile and bide its time, while getting something accomplished] – to improve the living standard of the Chinese population. Hu brought the notion of "harmonious world" to develop peaceful relations with neighbors and the West, the so-called Good Neighbor Policy. China's core interests took a more precise form in 2009, when State Councilor Dai Bingguo officially interpreted them as fundamental system and state security; state sovereignty and territorial integrity; and the stable development of the economy and society. Since then, the scope of China's core interests has been broadening to include, in 2011, the ideas of "peaceful development" and "national reunification" (Zhou, 2019). China tried to preserve a friendly external arena for its economic growth, because the deterioration of relations with partners – such as neighboring states – might negatively impact its international position in the Asia Pacific region. A sense of urgency has prevailed to counter threats and define a more positive security environment regionally and globally in the context of its pressing domestic agenda and the relevance to guarantee economic growth (Hu, 2014).

The multitude of China's overlapping identities as a developing state, an emerging power, a global power, and a regional power brought the possibility to build partnerships and alliances with multiple states. As a developing state, it shares objectives with less developed ones. As an emerging power, it develops partnerships with other dissatisfied large states, such as Brazil, Russia, India, and South Africa in the BRICS. As a global power, China shares responsibilities with other states as a G20 member and a permanent member of the UN Security Council. As a regional power, China tries to preserve its interests regarding its neighbors and adopts strategies to preserve security and regional stability (Weissmann, 2015).

3.2 The Basis of Xi Jinping's Foreign Policy

The China that Xi Jinping inherited was the second world's largest trading state, the fastest growing source of outward direct investment, the center of a regional manufacturing hub linking the Western Pacific states, and one of the largest world economies after two decades of near double-digit growth. China's need for raw materials oriented global commodity prices. Its military resulted from two decades of budgetary growth, seen in the modernization of its nuclear and missile forces into a more capable second-strike force and the development of a massive fleet of Coast Guard vessels to monitor the South and East China Seas and a fighter aircraft inventory able to create an Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea. These changes raised doubts on China's ambitions. Xi Jinping was an opportune figure to redefine China's approach to foreign policy. His father had been one of the heads of the Communist revolution and suffered the hardships imposed by the Cultural Revolution. When the Cultural Revolution ended, leading to the reform period lead by Deng, Xi emerged in China's politics with the faith in the necessity of a strong CCP as a governance instrument in an authoritarian but market-dominated system and an aversion to social instability. However, Xi would have to deal with many domestic challenges, such as providing employment, housing, transportation, and medical services for the population; developing energy sources to fuel Chinese economy; coping with a growing inequality and corruption; and preserving peace in restive minority areas, for example. Xi has articulated a broad vision of "the China Dream" to promote national renaissance and international influence, which entailed a far-reaching anti-corruption campaign against senior and lower-level Party cadres, new laws on national security, the limitation of non-government institutions' role, and the condemnation of Western constitutional and political systems and theory. In some situations, he slowed and reversed processes of opening defined by Deng and

his successors and eliminated constitutional limits even of his term as China's leader. Before he took power, CCP had been run by a collective leadership among officials in the Politburo Standing Committee, but Xi has centralized political authority, used the anticorruption campaign to undermine the power of his political enemies, and assumed control of important committees such as those concerning cyber issues, economic reform, and national security. In this context, he has matched the growth of his personal power with the intensification of the CCP's power in Chinese society and economy. Instead of accelerating market-based reforms, he has strengthened the position of state-owned enterprises and the CCP's committees in these enterprises. He has also given these firms a decisive role in economic development strategies. They must seek CCP's advice or even approval for major decisions. Similar rules apply in joint ventures with multinational corporations and even private companies, such as media and technology firms (Bader, 2016; Economy, 2018).

Xi's worldview of the political universe is as cooperative on the nature as Hu's perspective. Nevertheless, Xi's strategic approach to achieving goals may imply a more assertive direction than that of Hu, which means that China's foreign policy under Xi's administration can be cooperative in nature and assertive in practice (Kai & Huiyun, 2013). The Chinese government published Xi's collected works regarding international relations between 2014 and 2018, with a considerable intellectual and propagandistic treatment. Xi tries to present himself as an advocate of traditional thoughts on peaceful development, interstate cooperation, and non-interference. He aims to reassure that China's rise will not threaten others and show his commitment to the peaceful settlement resolution, a non-protectionist global trading system, and the respect for different political and social systems. Some aspects present previous Chinese foreign policy priorities, such as the preservation of an external environment conducive to long-term peaceful economic development; the promotion of win-win interstate relations, with an emphasis on the neighborhood; the opposition to the Cold War adversarial thinking; and the consolidation of a comprehensive, common, and cooperative security architecture for Asia and the world. The presentation of his new initiatives, such as the BRI and investment infrastructure institutions, provide examples of how China's strength can benefit the international community. The core of Xi's foreign policy perspective is highly conventional, but he usually does not indicate exactly how China intends to solve the uncertainties and tensions that China's growing power and influence may cause, which enhances his ability to play the national and international rules according to the particularities of each situation (Hu, 2014; Swaine, 2015; Zhang, 2019; Zhou, 2019).

Most thoughts of the Chinese state and its foreign relations as embodied by Xi were not generated by him, but they were based on modern and premodern Chinese history and culture, reflect continuities and adaptations of actions of previous leaders such as Mao and Deng and even imperial Chinese rulers, and reverberate historical Chinese concerns and sensibilities. To advance CCP's missions, Xi and members of his administration are guided by three frames of reference. The first frame – “national rejuvenation” – is focused on a humiliation-inspired quest for power and the restoration of China's wealth and weight. To make his ideas clearer, Xi divided China's recent history in three stages: Mao's standing-up stage, Deng's growing-rich stage, and his becoming-strong stage, with the realization of socialist modernization in 2020-2035 to turn China into a great modern socialist state and the development of China as a global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence in 2035-2050. In 2017, Xi presented these ideas as a two-stage development plan. The first stage extends to 2035, when China intends to become a global leader in innovation, have soft power resources, and strengthen the rule of law domestically. The second continues to 2050, when China will be prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious (Hu, 2014; Zhang, 2019; Zhou, 2019). As one of CCP's ambitions for a long time, the concept of “national rejuvenation” precedes Xi but the term became a prominent element of Chinese propaganda under his administration, as well as the 2020-2035 and 2035-2050 stage development goals, which were built around important 100-year anniversaries and appeared in less formalized terms in previous administrations' documents: the first goal seeks a modern society by 2021, a century after the CCP's founding, and the second relates to the fulfilment of China's national rejuvenation by 2049, a century after the founding of the People's Republic of China. The key elements of Xi's agenda are deeply rooted in the CCP's ideas (Doshi, 2021; Gupta, 2015).

The second frame – “global community” – aims to promote win-win cooperation – a concept used in Hu's administration – and help smooth China's international engagement with the idea of an open and inclusive community with a shared future for mankind, focused on the respect for the diversity of civilizations, exchange, mutual learning, and coexistence. Nevertheless, Xi moved beyond Hu inserting more traditional Chinese concepts into different foreign policy areas, such as amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, inclusiveness in the neighborhood policy, and justice while pursuing shared interests, truthfulness, honesty, affinity, and sincerity in relations with developing states. The third frame – “Chinese contribution” – brings a 21st-century version of a China-centered regional order and the international roles of “builder of world peace,” “preserver of international order,” and “contributor of global

development.” What was new was Xi’s consideration of “making new and greater contributions for mankind” as a CCP’s “abiding mission”, which seems to promote a Chinese model of international relations (Gupta, 2015; Hu, 2014; Zhang, 2019; Zhou, 2019).

Under Xi’s administration, China’s foreign policy has given more focus on national security, which has allowed more influence for the military in policy making. China created a National Security Commission (NSC), headed by Xi, Premier Li Keqiang, and the Chairman of National People’s Congress, Zhang Dejiang, and designed to eliminate the fragmentation of foreign policy making by putting Xi at the center of the leadership and abandoning the collective leadership upheld since Deng’s administration. Besides advancing Xi’s initiative to strengthen his personal position over the internal and external coercive and diplomatic arms of the governing structure, the Commission also aims to better coordinate a very fragmented bureaucracy. Xi has implemented a two-way reform of the foreign policy decision making structure to involve more participants in the policy design and centralize the decision power to himself. Although the enlargement of participation brought more talents into the top of the decision-making process to provide policy suggestions, the centralization of the decision power in Xi’s hands occurred simultaneously. Xi has been firm on territorial or sovereignty disputes, and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) became more influential in foreign policy making. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) shares responsibilities with the Central Military Commission (CMC). However, since the CCP’s positions are more relevant and the military’s autonomy is related to its historical relationship with the CCP, the MFA’s role is generally the implementation of policies made elsewhere. The civilians are responsible for Chinese daily diplomacy, but the security-related foreign affairs are the military domain, and the PLA – which is subordinate to the party – is ultimately the CCP’s armed wing. The military plays an important part of China’s foreign policy making through three channels: the CMC, a high-profile institution under the party that aims to control the PLA and has Xi as its chairman; the Politburo, in which Xi represents the PLA’s interests and foreign policy views in the Standing Committee, and the Leading Small Groups (LSGs), vectors for the PLA to feed in the foreign policy process. Although the LSGs are advisory and the final decisions are taken in the Politburo Standing Committee, the small groups cover multiple issues, and Xi is one of the Chinese leaders more involved in the LSGs. The consensus between the PLA and CCP to give priority to domestic issues and avoid war has enabled the PLA to strategically support the civilians’ foreign policy. In this context, Xi adopts a proactive stance and a cautious mobilization of hard power. As a foreign policy tool, military diplomacy is a top-down activity, in which the Central Committee of CCP establishes broad foreign policy objectives, and the CMC defines specific actions for multiple PLA’s parts. The military rarely consults diplomats on foreign policy, which shows their lack of coordination. The PLA also has a larger and more personal influence on Xi, which can turn China’s foreign policy into a matter of specific domestic actors (Jakobson & Manuel, 2016; Lampton, 2015; Sinaga, 2020; Wang, 2017).

China’s assertiveness shows ambition and alarm in Xi’s administration members, whose priority seems to be the regime survival, but Xi and his fellow Politburo members are confident that the CCP’s position is secure for the near term. Because no absolute guarantees exist in politics, permanent surveillance through a highly sophisticated and strong coercive apparatus to protect CCP’s political power with calculated intimidation is fundamental. Therefore party, military, and state elites have confidence in the near-term hold on power, but plan in five-year and ten-year increments. The risks of social instability and financial turmoil domestically have not made state-owned enterprises refrain from building infrastructure around the world under the BRI’s umbrella, for example. The CCP responds fiercely to internal dissent, particularly among ethnic and religious minorities (Scobell, 2020).

Long-term strategic priorities include preserving political control and social stability, promoting continued economic development through advanced science and technology, and modernizing national defense. Chinese core interests are based on maintaining the CCP’s position, the socialist system, and the national unity of mainland China and Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Taiwan; promoting peaceful relations with neighbors and developing states; expanding China’s sea power; and reforming the current Western liberal order. The United States has been perceived by the CCP as being far more hostile in recent years, particularly during Donald Trump’s administration. The 2019 National Defense White Paper indicates that the United States has provoked and intensified competition among great powers and undermined the strategic stability among them because of the increasing of its defense expenditure and the push for additional capacities in nuclear, outer space, cyber and missile defense. The 2019 White Paper also indicates that military modernization is necessary to protect China’s territory and sovereignty, its investment, and citizens overseas. These indications may not be separated from Xi’s ambitions under the BRI. As there is no peaceful domestic situation without a stable international system, Xi realized the relevance of making peace with the international society. To achieve these goals and face deficits on peace, development, and governance, Xi strengthened the strategic partnership with Russia to counterbalance the United States’ Asian policy, used “periphery diplomacy” to stabilize and deepen cooperation with neighbors, and cultivated cultural relations with multiple states.

Nevertheless, in some situations, Xi has shown his willingness to challenge other states and international organizations, which generated more domestic and international instability (Gupta, 2015; Hu, 2014; Rühlig, 2018; Scobell, 2020; Sinaga, 2020; Zhou, 2019).

Although Xi's personality cult and power consolidation may give him relevant political autonomy, it is not possible to say that he has defied the CCP's main perspectives regarding foreign issues. A great part of Chinese international initiatives under Xi should be understood as an extension of underlying trends and policies, such as the emphasis on blue-water capabilities, the infrastructure investments, the launch of supplementary financial institutions, and the territorial assertiveness. The continuities in Chinese foreign policy show that many Chinese international actions are not generated by a highly personalized lens of the present, but the outgrowth of long-term CCP's planning (Doshi, 2021; Hilpert & Wacker, 2015).

4. Discussion

4.1 Xi Jinping's Foreign Policy Achievements and Opportunities

Strong reasons may suggest that the elements of continuity are stronger than those of change in Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping. One of the most important reasons indicate that Chinese foreign policy is very connected to Xi Jinping's concepts of "socialism with Chinese characteristics", such as the adoption of the principles of mutual respect and mutually beneficial cooperation to achieve cohesion among states and promote universal peace and development, the notions of justice and equality – particularly seen in the defense of the reform of the global governance system – and the idea of joint consultation, construction, and use of the benefits from development with the construction of a global partnership considering the protection of national sovereignty and security and China's traditions based on openness and inclusiveness to solve complex conflicts and stimulate cultural exchanges. The "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is seen as the only way to realize the "China dream" by Xi and his administration. Xi believes that, in the light of the interconnectedness of all states, difficulties require joint efforts to be solved, such as environmental pollution, food crises, lack of natural resources, climate change, network security, diseases such as COVID-19, terrorism, and transnational crime (Qadeer, n.d.; Sørensen, 2015; Zhekenov, Makisheva & Jakubayeva, 2019). Nevertheless, Xi has shown a benign vision of foreign policy which is different from the Western model of liberal democracy. His emphasis on constructing "a new type of international relations" contrasts with what he sees as an "old colonial system," represented by military coalitions against a "hypothetical enemy". In this context, the building of a global network of partnerships while abiding by the principles of non-alignment is the manifestation of a more pragmatic perspective to achieve geopolitical and economic benefits (Poh & Li, 2017).

Xi frequently says that China "will never give up its legitimate rights and interests", particularly its sovereignty, security, and development interests. These interests include Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the Korean peninsula, and Xi has drawn a clear line of what is unacceptable, acting forcefully to defend China's growing core interests, including the use of Chinese soft power to cooperate with other states and position Chinese society as a model of social and economic success. It could be seen in the financial aid for many states and the critical role China has played in many international organizations and forums (Zhou, 2019). Xi reaffirmed China's commitment with relevant institutions, such as the United Nations as one of the largest P-5 contributors of the organization's peacekeeping operations; the World Trade Organization (WTO) as a frequent user and target of dispute settlement cases; the World Bank, as one of the largest contributors and recipients of loans; the IAEA as a member of the group that tried to achieve an agreement on Iran's controversial nuclear weapons program; and the IMF. China under Xi's government has also shown respect for the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other states, voted for and adhered to UN Security Council resolutions to send peacekeeping forces to troubled areas and impose sanctions on international lawbreakers, and cooperated with the United States and other states to fight terrorism and piracy (Bader, 2016).

To implement these efforts, China has stepped up its contributions to international peace efforts, such as a \$1 billion to the Peace and Development Fund for the next ten years and the establishment of an 8,000-troop regular peacekeeping force. Although once a reluctant supporter, today China is the second largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping and a major contributor to training international peacekeepers. Chinese peacekeepers represent a diverse PLA's cross-section including combat troops, force protection soldiers, medical personnel, military engineers, logisticians, and staff officers deployed to some of the UN's most dangerous operations. Since 2013, China has been more involved peacekeeping operations around the world, such as in Mali. In 2015, China deployed 700 combat troops to South Sudan, a remarkable change from China's traditional non-interference policy. With its major BRI's investments, China's cautious contribution to peacekeeping seems more like a pragmatic attempt to defend its interests through a legal and normalized means, as well as to obtain hard and soft military skills and strengthen its

reputation as a benevolent rising power. It is also important to indicate that a Chinese naval frigate evacuated 225 foreign people of different nationalities from Yemen, which was the first time that the Chinese military evacuated foreigners from a conflict area. Xi's administration also showed its willingness to play a larger role in the Afghan reconstruction as the US and its allies began to withdraw from the state, including the creation of a forum for peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban (Dyrenforth, 2021; Poh & Li, 2017; Sørensen, 2015).

China does not show the intention to invade or occupy areas of the Asia Pacific, except Taiwan and formations in the South and East China Seas, but it manifests the ambition to consolidate a Sinocentric regional order leveraging both its hard and soft power resources. Regarding hard power, for the first time in Chinese history, China publicly revealed in 2015 its Military Strategy White Paper, which defines a strategy of active defense and indicates the main domains for China's force development: cyberspace, outer space, nuclear forces, and the oceans (Sinaga, 2020). Soft power strengthens the legitimacy of Xi's government, its nationalist objectives, and Chinese values, and counteracts Western ideas of democracy, human rights, and freedom of religion. The most explicit manifestation of Chinese soft power is Xi's articulation of the "China Dream", which intends to offer Chinese population a vision of a prosperous and promising future not through individual opportunity as the American Dream but collective achievement and national glory and rejuvenation under the CCP's orientations. Domestically, the "China dream" also aims to ensure the pre-conditions for difficult economic reforms and China's further modernization. Internationally, the "China dream" is typically seen by Western states as a nationalist doctrine with dangerous consequences for world security and the focus on consolidating – with military force if necessary – China's status (Scobell, 2020; Sørensen, 2015).

China's diplomacy with neighboring states has the purpose to achieve national rejuvenation. Since the 1997 financial crisis in Asia, China has highlighted the mutual benefits in its cooperation with Southeast Asia. At that time, China did not devalue its currency and helped to stabilize the region's economy. Since 2003, China and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have developed a strategic partnership for peace and the world's largest free trade area among developing states. Xi and Premier Li Keqiang created a charm offensive in Southeast Asia in 2013 to strengthen friendly relations with neighboring states. According to Xi, China should work with its neighbors to strengthen interconnectivity and establish a new Silk Road economic belt and a maritime silk road for the 21st century, as well as free trade zones with neighbors as the pillars of the initiative (Hu, 2014). A relevant element of the campaign regarding the "China dream" – a plastic, vague, aspirational, and open-ended amorphous notion that offers a new narrative of hope that could supplement the older ideological rhetoric of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" and inspire younger generations – is related to the growing self-confidence within Xi's administration over China's past economic achievements compared with states in the developed and the developing world. The enhancement of CCP's self-confidence is connected to the need to restore ideological legitimacy and attractiveness, and huge infrastructure projects such as the BRI – a main innovation of Xi's administration – represent the attempt to lay the basis for a more active and distinctive long-term foreign policy, based on an amalgam of national traditions, experiences, models of ordering the economy and society, and development trends which could integrate the state, the people, and the individual instead of focusing on the individualism associated with the American dream (Ferdinand, 2016; Sørensen, 2015).

China has consolidated its engagement with an "infrastructural foreign policy", in which international initiatives are driven forward by the construction of physical infrastructure, particularly railways, roads, and telecom networks in areas that typically were neglected by Western development assistance (Heilmann et al., 2014). In 2013, Xi outlined plans for the New Silk Road, which would include the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, land-based and sea-based economic roadmaps, respectively, designed to export the output of excess production capacity in China – mainly by constructing infrastructure, including digital – and excess labor, foster export markets for Chinese goods, and strengthen economic and geopolitical connections between China and these states. Xi's rationale for the Belt and Road Initiative also indicates that it aims to develop the western parts of China – which have been left behind by the eastward export-oriented strategy of previous administrations – and bring alternative investment opportunities abroad for Chinese companies engaged in infrastructural projects across the state for more than a decade as Chinese national economy gradually rebalances from its focus upon investment and towards greater consumption. The BRI focuses upon creating shared transport links, leaves the production structure in each participating state intact, and shows respect to national sovereignty. The Belt would connect China with Central Asia, West Asia, and Europe, including Russia. The Road would link China's east coast with the Indian Ocean through Gwadar in Pakistan, reaching the Mediterranean. The plan would also give China greater access to energy and other natural resources from the Central Asian states and Russia, bring opportunities for new partnerships with developing states along the route, reinforce China's geopolitical and economic position overseas, and give China an opportunity to advance its military objectives (Economy, 2018; Ferdinand, 2016; Poh & Li, 2017; Qadeer, n.d.; Scobell, 2020).

The BRI has also given Chinese state-owned enterprises now run at least more than 75 ports and terminals out of 34 states. Official Chinese documents indicate that the initiative aims to promote policy coordination, connectivity, trade, financial integration, and people-to-people exchanges among more than 60 states. Some economic corridors have been envisioned, such as a new Eurasian Land Bridge, China–Mongolia–Russia, China–Central Asia–West Asia, China–Indochina Peninsula, China–Pakistan, and the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar economic corridors. China has also declared that it will define special arbitration courts for BRI's projects, which would allow the creation of an alternative legal system based on Chinese rules. There are political risks of stimulating fears about China's long-term intentions instability in the BRI's neighbouring areas and sucking China into conflicts involving potential partners, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and possibly other states in the Middle East and Central Asia. In this context, Xi tried to protect the BRI's projects from international intervention, which was visible when China blocked a UN Security Council resolution to appoint a special envoy to Myanmar and downplayed concerns about the plight of the Rohingya ethnic majority. It also presented China as a positive global force that promotes international development and prosperity (Economy, 2018; Ferdinand, 2016; Poh & Li, 2017; Qadeer, n.d.; Scobell, 2020). More recently, a decline in BRI engagement comes in the context of growing scrutiny of how the project loans strengthen financial pressures on vulnerable states, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although BRI engagement may not return to past peaks, China still focuses on deals to preserve its access to strategic resources, including minerals for a clean technology supply chain and oil and gas in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America (White, 2022).

In association with the BRI, China has advanced in setting up alternative institutions that allow it to exercise influence overseas, particularly alternative tools to strengthen Chinese autonomy in U.S.-dominated institutions and expand its foreign sphere of interest. Xi has strategically targeted gaps within established intergovernmental structures and focused on marginalized states that seek new partners for development assistance, particularly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The intention is not necessarily to destroy current multilateral institutions, but generate supplementary – in part complementary, in part competitive – forms to define the international order beyond Western perspectives to leadership, as well as limit American and European predominance in important international institutions and policy areas. The Chinese multiple parallel structures encompass financial and currency policy, trade and investment, transregional infrastructure projects, security, and technology (Heilmann et al., 2014).

One example of these parallel institutions is the Chinese-led Asia Investment Infrastructure Bank (AIIB), established in 2015. The bank includes many U.S. allies and partners and five of the G7 economies, except Japan and the United States. These projects have the potential to anchor regional economies to the Chinese market. Xi announced the establishment of the new international development bank to assist and finance regional and multilateral infrastructure development of states through which the BRI routes will pass. As Asia has massive infrastructure funding disparities, the construction of these large-scale projects may give China more opportunities to protect its economic and security interests, increase its geoeconomic influence in the West dominated international financial system, and manifest its frustration with the slow pace of reform of this system that seems not to recognize its status as the rising global power. China still has limited voting powers in the decision-making process in the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the World Bank and the IMF. After Trump's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) – an ambitious trade deal proposed by Obama –, many states in the region are looking towards China for new trade opportunities. At their 2014 summit in Brazil, the BRICS states (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) officially founded the New Development Bank (NDB), with an initial authorized capital of \$100 billion, which is intended to promote investment in infrastructure and sustainable development foremost in the BRICS states themselves, but also in other emerging states. The NDB was originally jointly owned 20% by each BRICS member, but now it has Bangladesh, Egypt, the UAE, and Uruguay as additional shareholders and an extensive portfolio of investments with a strong focus on green infrastructure projects. The public-private partnership arrangement is seen by the group's members as a way of getting private finance into government partnerships. The BRICS also launched a \$100 billion Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), a swap financing tool to diminish their reliance on the IMF and the US dollar. At their 14th Summit in 2022 in China, the BRICS members highlighted that contingency planning for disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic would have been better managed if the WHO, the World Bank, and the IMF had CRA style initiatives instead of working based on reaction-led decisions. The BRICS declaration at the end of the Summit calls for more multinational support, including for programs such as COVAX and assistance from philanthropists in the battle against diseases (Cook, 2015; Devonshire-Ellis, 2022; Hilpert & Wacker, 2015; Qadeer, n.d.; Scobell, 2020).

The AIIB and the NDB will concentrate on funding infrastructure initiatives to bring new priorities and orientations for development assistance. At the same time, financial structures to internationalize the Chinese currency (Renminbi, RMB) through a cautious and explorative step-by-step expansion of the RMB use in foreign trade and investment have been developed. A worldwide network of deals with central bank currency swaps, the direct exchange of the

RMB with other currencies, and RMB clearing hubs has been established to limit the function of the US dollar as a globally predominant reserve currency. To provide crisis liquidity, China has supported the East Asian Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization (CMIM), a \$ 240-billion reserve pool, and surveillance activities by the ASEAN+3 Macro-economic Research Office (AMRO). The BRICS' CRA, modelled on CMIM, is financially less well-endowed, but China plays a leading role in the initiative (Cook, 2015; Heilmann et al., 2014).

4.2 Xi Jinping's Foreign Policy Challenges

There are some challenges to put Xi's regional and global policies in practice. Although his administration has shown its intentions to define new rules in international politics and institutions to better suit Chinese interests, Chinese foreign policy is constrained by permanent domestic preoccupations, China's lack of experience in undertaking more international responsibilities, and conflicting economic and security interests in its neighborhood. Despite the rhetorical campaign centered on the "China dream" and the "community of common destiny" and a more active position regarding global governance, some unresolved obstacles keep limiting the Chinese leadership's ability to completely abandon the "lying low" strategy in the context of continued domestic preoccupations, a relatively fixed mindset among the Chinese elite's members on China's role in world affairs, China's lack of capabilities and experience in undertaking more worldwide responsibilities and regional insecurity over its rise have created barriers to China's political interests (Poh & Li, 2017). Domestically, Xi's new foreign and security policy organizational pattern is not transparent, and there are multiple zones of uncertainty and overlap among government agencies, which opens the possibilities of clashes and unpredictability. Although there is centralized power structure held in check by Xi in the context of his anti-corruption campaign and the military's restructuring, the CCP's ability to control the PLA depends upon Xi's own relationship with the generals. He has remained the only hierarchical link between the PLA generals and the CCP leadership, which highlights the fragility of Chinese institutional setting. As Xi seems to be inclined to rely on a larger number of closer political allies with more participation in foreign and security policy, he may have concentrated more power in his hands and, to some extent, better coordinated domestic and external objectives. Nevertheless, these transformations have only partly limited the power fragmentation developed under Hu's rule. Instead of institutionalizing decision-making processes at the CCP top, Xi has generated bureaucratic overlaps and tensions and fed frustration and rivalry among agencies and officials (Cabestan, 2017).

Xi shows more flexibility to Taiwan's authority and civilians to achieve China's short-term goal of preventing the growth of Taiwan's independence movement, but China is still far from its goal of reunification with Taiwan, which has the United States as its largest provider of defensive weaponry. Although Trump's administration tried to normalize its nondiplomatic relations with Taiwan, the CCP still claims the island as a province, and the United States formally discourages attempts of a declaration of independence, which limits the threat of Taiwan's invasion by the PLA. Xi's administration occasionally issues press statements to show its displeasure and criticizes what it views as US intervention in its domestic issues. China even sent fighters and bombers into Taiwan's airspace as a demonstration of Chinese military power, but there has been no concrete evidence of a great shift in its policy vis-à-vis Taiwan compared to China's previous administrations since the late 1970s. China demands that the United States adhere to the "One China principle". Xi's administration has eroded Hong Kong's autonomy through multiple political and legal actions. For example, there were attempts by Xi's administration to have dissents arrested and extradited to China where they would be at heightened risk of torture. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region owes its relatively open political and legal system to the handover of Hong Kong by the United Kingdom to China in 1997. Hong Kong is a quasi-democratic enclave within a larger authoritarian state, which gave rise to greater levels of free speech, press and political association that would never be allowed on China's mainland. The notion of "One Country, Two Systems" was built to last for fifty years, with the same political and economic structures of the British administration and the legal system established as part of the Hong Kong Basic Law. Nevertheless, the 2017 Hong Kong National Security Law has been a major change in China's position towards Hong Kong since the handover, because peaceful protesters may be imprisoned for up to ten years if the presiding judge deems that the protests have foreign links, and the Ministry of State Security is immune to any existing Hong Kong law in pursuant of Chinese national security. Hong Kong has been undergoing various political convulsions, which led to city-wide protests with a limited number of voices calling for independence. Most Hong Kong's residents only wanted to preserve the status quo and the democratic rights, as hundreds of pro-democracy activists, human rights lawyers, and former candidates for the Legislative Council have been arrested. Xi tried to make clear that dissent would not be tolerated, and wealth and status would not shield anyone from prosecution. This posture may indicate that the CCP is strengthening its grip on Hong Kong, but it does not mean a complete change in Hong Kong's status quo. A radical transformation could lead to capital flight and a mass exodus of foreign companies (Enright, 2021; Hu, 2014; Sinaga, 2020).

Although the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs LSG was chaired by Zhang Dejiang, Xi endorses the major decisions, such as the interpretations of the Hong Kong Basic Law. Xi chairs the LSG in charge of Taiwan and all other leading structures in charge of foreign policy and security affairs. As the foundation and the tool of an assertive foreign policy, the PLA has convinced Xi to adopt a stricter approach to protect China's national security. Xi also defines his leadership by reasserting maritime territorial disputes, mainly in the South China and East China Seas, and increasing the Navy's role in national security. In this context, China needed to change its national defensive security strategy from only land to land and sea defense. The territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas have brought tensions between China and its neighbors, as well as between China and the United States. Although China keeps defending stability at home and peace in the region, it has been drifting toward violent showdowns with Japan and other states, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam, over ownership of rocky islets and the seas around them. The nationalist action feeds rivalry in the other concerned parts that could challenge China's long-term goals of peace and stability (Cabestan, 2017; Hu, 2014; Sinaga, 2020).

Xi's administration adopted some assertive positions in and across Asia, particularly in the maritime areas where China has long-standing territorial claims. It became possible because of the creation of a supersized coast guard which combined four of China's five maritime enforcement agencies. The result is that China had the world's largest coast guard in tonnage (190,000 tons) and the greatest number of vessels of Asian states. In 2018, in a bureaucratic reshuffling to centralize responsibility for maritime security, China's coast guard was placed under the control of the People's Armed Police, which, in turn, was placed under the CMC's command. China's coast guard has engaged in recurring aggressive actions, including ramming against other states' ships, particularly in the South China Sea (Scobell, 2020).

The South China Sea has remained at the center of tension due to overlapping claims among China and states such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei. China's sovereignty claims over the Pratas Islands, the Paracel Islands, the Macclesfield Bank, and the Spratly Islands derive from its historical rights as the state that discovered, named, and used these islands for more than two centuries. The South China Sea is also an important waterway, with huge volume of traffic, and the territorial disputes involve potentially lucrative deposits of oil and gas. Xi has launched an unprecedented effort to build large artificial islands on existing reefs and rocks in the region also claimed by the Philippines and Vietnam, which has resulted from the coordination among civilian, military, and paramilitary government offices and ministries and entailed the construction of fortifications, airfields, and port facilities. China prefers to deal with each state instead of ASEAN as a bloc, in a context in which ASEAN insists on the development of a multilateral Code of Conduct in the South China Sea and deepens China's worries. The preference for bilateral diplomacy may be understood as an indicator of China's great power perspective to deal with ASEAN states instead of the construction of better relations with its neighbors. Recently, Xi has increased China's military presence in the region and ratcheted up tension on the diplomatic arena. Despite China's periphery diplomacy to reduce tensions with ASEAN states, Hainan province authority issued new Chinese laws in 2013, brought into effect in 2014. They required foreign fishermen to seek China's approval to operate in the disputed waters, which made the Philippines and Vietnam express alarm. The presence of Chinese vessels in Malaysia's, Vietnam's, and Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) has created tensions between China and these states since 2014. In 2016, the Hague International Arbitration Court rejected China's claims to its exclusive control over large swathes of the South China Sea, but China rejected the verdict, and the United States intensified its warship manoeuvring near the islands built by China according to the principle of Freedom of Navigation. Meanwhile, Russia has backed China's stance on the arbitration case while Xi has adopted a careful position on the Ukraine conflict, which pushed Russia closer to China, as well as reinforced Russia's willingness to build overland energy supply lines and access to China's market and capital, particularly in the context of Western sanctions (Hu, 2014; Qaader, n.d.; Scobell, 2020; Sinaga, 2015, 2020).

Regarding the East China Sea, China has growing tensions with Japan over the Senkaku Islands in Japan or Diaoyu in China, which are currently under the Japanese control. Japan also hosts US military capabilities in the context of their close strategic ties (Qadeer, n.d.). From China's perspective, the acceptance of Japan's ownership of the disputed islands is unacceptable and challenges the status quo. The dispute involves a standoff among paramilitary ships, military vessels, and planes. Basically, China demands that Japan recant the decision to nationalize the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and acknowledge that there is a territorial dispute before both states resume normal political and military ties, which would encompass consultations on conflict avoidance measures. However, China hopes to stabilize relations with Japan only on its terms regarding the islands. In 2013, Xi declared China's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea to cover the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, which has heightened tensions in the area because the Chinese ADIZ overlapped with South Korea's and Japan's ADIZs, including the

airspace over the disputed islands. From the Chinese perspective, the assertiveness is the result of Japan's unilateral moves regarding the disputed islands. Some days later after the creation of the Chinese ADIZ, the United States sent B-52 bombers over the zone to show China that its assertive initiative would not be accepted. The need to cope with contingencies in the East and South China Seas in part explains the strengthening of China's maritime power, a CCP's top priority. In 2013, China spent 720.197 billion yuan on national defense, a 10.7% increase from 2012, mainly to increase the efficiency of battle readiness and promote a sweeping structural reform, which would bring China's military fully into the information age, revamp the command system for joint combat, and reform the leadership structure (Cook, 2015; Hu, 2014; Scobell, 2020).

Another important issue for Xi is North Korea, whose leaders argue that calls for North Korean denuclearization is a non-negotiable goal. In the context of North Korea's continued provocative actions, the cooperation between the United States and China on the issue remains complex after concerns in the United States over China's influence in the South China Sea and China's opposition to the United States' and South Korea's decision to deploy the THAAD (Terminal High-altitude Area Defense) missile defense system. Although China supported UN Security Council Resolution 1718 which imposed sanctions on North Korea after its nuclear and ballistic missile tests, China is against strong sanctions against North Korea as most of the North Korean trade flows through China. Even though China implemented new trade sanctions, reduced energy supplies to North Korea, and called for the Six Party Talks launched in 2003 aimed at ending North Korea's nuclear program through negotiations involving China, the United States, North and South Korea, Japan, and Russia, China is still North Korea's biggest trading partner, as well as North Korea's main source of food and energy. The US naval presence in the Asia Pacific and its growing military engagement with India has discomfited China. Xi views these US actions with its allies and partners as an attempt to counter China's rise (Qadeer, n.d.). In the Asia Pacific region, for example, Xi's approach to the South Pacific is based on the search for diplomatic partners amongst the Pacific Islands Forum states to support an assertive foreign policy and the contribution of funds to the Melanesian Spearhead Group and the Pacific Island Development Forum, which rival regional groupings to the Pacific Islands Forum and exclude Australia and New Zealand. Chinese state-owned companies have invested in Pacific fishing, mining, timber, petroleum, and tourism (Connolly, 2016).

The US pressure to strategically rebalance the Asia Pacific region has become stronger since Obama's administration, which has encouraged East Asian states with territorial issues with China to take a tougher position. In this context, China has tried to develop a new type of great power diplomacy, particularly with the United States. Chinese leaders under Xi's administration argue that China as an emerging power and the United States as the dominant power may have conflicting views of security but China shows neither the intention nor the ability to challenge the United States' position soon. However, Chinese authorities defend that the United States needs to respect China's core interests in East Asia and the principle of non-interference in Chinese domestic affairs. In 2014, Obama received the Dalai Lama in the Map Room of the White House, an action that was criticized by Chinese authorities that see problems in Tibet as derivative of the Dalai Lama's travels to the West or the India's "hidden agenda" rather than China's own migration and cultural assimilation policies (Bader, 2016; Hu, 2014; Lampton, 2015; Jesus & Kamlot, 2017). In 2014, the CCP started a People's War Against separatism, terrorism, and extremism in Xinjiang. Since at least 2017, Chinese leaders have headed internment camps to indoctrinate Uyghurs and other Muslims as parts of the People's War. These camps have been criticized by the United States, other states, and human-rights organizations for abuse and mistreatment. In 2021, the United States banned imports from Xinjiang. Joe Biden's administration has described the abuse of Uyghurs and members of other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang as state-sponsored forced labor and mass detention (Macias, 2021).

The hostility between the United States and China has increased under Trump's administration, particularly on bilateral trade and the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding bilateral trade, Trump condemned China for long-standing unfair trading practices and launched a trade war against the Asian state. Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. officials blamed China for mishandling the issue and being neither truthful nor transparent with other states abetting the global spread of COVID-19. US leaders have repeatedly referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as the "Wuhan Virus" or "China Virus" and criticized China's lack of transparency about the true extent of the outbreak due to political imperatives and economic concerns. Some US politicians even made unsubstantiated claims that the virus has been created in a Chinese lab or as a bioweapon. The United States was one of the first states to impose restrictions on people traveling from China. Chinese propaganda machine has credited the CCP with having reduced the global threat, and the Chinese MFA has even claimed the virus did not originate in China. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were delays to BRI's infrastructure projects in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, because travel bans have prevented Chinese workers from returning to BRI's worksites abroad, and the shutdown of Chinese factories that supply machinery and raw materials for BRI's projects has created obstacles to

implement these initiatives. Despite the setbacks, China is unlikely to abandon the BRI. Some states that have benefited from the BRI's investment and development opportunities such as Cambodia have come to China's defense during the outbreak (Haenle, 2020; Scobell, 2020).

Xi's zero-COVID-19 policy has had deep impacts on global supply chains due to the large-scale lockdown of major cities and restrictions that have caused the decline in China's manufacturing capacity, logistics, and human mobility, as well as business and consumer confidence. The wave of Omicron infections led to a 70-day-long lockdown of Shanghai, Chinese economic powerhouse. With the endangerment of China's economic growth target rate of 5.5 per cent for 2022 and the risk of social unrest connected with strict monitoring measures, China has signalled that the zero-COVID-19 policy will be gradually relaxed and implemented in a more balanced way, expressed in softer expressions such as "dynamic zero-COVID-19" and "zero-COVID-19 at community level" to halt community transmission to an acceptable level. This shift helps strike a balance between combating COVID-19 and pursuing economic resilience. At the same time, China has developed policies that emphasise the need to ensure that the major players in supply chains can restore manufacturing capacity. In the context of the weak consumption and investment demand and the difficulties of small and medium-sized enterprises, the Chinese government may have to adopt a more expansionary fiscal and monetary policy. However, implementing this policy is constrained by China's strategy for combating COVID-19. A flexible exchange rate and a certain amount of capital controls might preserve China's independence of monetary policy and ensure financial stability. Despite facing many pandemic-related setbacks in early 2022, long-term growth perspective is still preserved (Kong & Zhou, 2022; Yu, 2022).

The US-China competition will keep reshuffling the world trade order and cause uncertainty and complexity in global supply chains, as well as the 2022 Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As some other BRICS members, China has largely refrained from criticizing Russia regarding the Ukraine situation, which is predominantly understood as an issue created by NATO. Nevertheless, Chinese BRI's investments in Russia have fallen to zero for the first time in 2022, and Russia has been among the BRI's top beneficiaries. China still depends on Russian supplies for about 15 per cent of its oil and 8 per cent of its gas. New energy deals expanding these arrangements were signed in early 2022, days before Russian troops invaded Ukraine. China's purchases of Russia's energy exports have increased despite the war. China has criticized international sanctions on Russia, and many Chinese companies are being careful not to breach them. Although China slows its investments in Russia and deepens its engagement with the Middle East through large energy and construction agreements – particularly with Saudi Arabia, now one of the biggest BRI's beneficiaries –, there is still a strong engagement between Russia and China (Devonshire-Ellis, 2022; White, 2022).

China and Russia have been closer in many international and regional economic and geopolitical issues under Xi's administration. The two states held joint military exercises in the Sea of Japan in 2013, the largest naval drills China has conducted with other states. In the same year, China supported Russia's push for a political solution to the Syrian civil war. China and Russia dominate the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a Central Asian security and economic organization aimed at combatting terrorism, fundamentalism, and separatism in the Asian states of the former Soviet Union. The SCO also aims to limit American interests – particularly in Afghanistan after NATO's withdrawal –, and China strengthened its position in the Middle East after the US formally ended its combat mission in Iraq. The SCO also creates an arena for Xi's administration to sign deals with Central Asian states to explore for oil and gas and transport to China. Although the coordination among the SCO members has remained low and there may be difficulties in joint actions between China and Russia regarding regional issues, China's efforts to redefine the regional security institutions overlap with large-scale infrastructural projects in Central Asia. The CICA, which is originally a Kazakh initiative, is based on the idea that Asian states can solve the regional security issues with no interference from the US and the European Union. At the 14th SCO summit in 2014, Xi announced his desire to strengthen the SCO and expand coordination with the CICA (Bader, 2016; Heilmann et al., 2014; Hu, 2014; Jesus, 2014a; Kong & Zhou, 2022; White, 2022).

Russia and China show the interest to redesign the post-Cold War global political architecture to reflect a multipolar distribution of power and use other cooperation mechanisms to have the support of emerging states such as the other BRICS members in the context of the growing weight of China and other emerging economies in international institutions and diplomatic forums and the relative loss of power of the United States and Europe. The G20's framework has been useful for Xi to strengthen the representation of emerging economies especially in international financial institutions and keep issues such as energy, food security, climate change, and infrastructure development on the group's agenda. The coordination among the BRICS members relates to regional forums to raise China's profile in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. China has initiated and supported financially the Forum of China-Africa Cooperation, the China-CELAC-Forum, and the China-Arab States Forum. These are clear indications that China is

trying to be more than a passive recipient of rules and become an active player in the definition of global institutions (Bader, 2016; Heilmann et al., 2014; Hu, 2014; Jesus, 2014b; Poh & Li, 2017). Due to the Ukraine war and tightening sanctions on Russian oil and gas in 2022, energy and food prices might increase further. As the largest trading state in the world, China's manufacturing products depend heavily on imported parts and components. Higher prices of intermediate products in the United States and other advanced states will pass through into China's price indexes. China is likely to partially regain its growth momentum, but when downward pressure on inflation created by weak aggregate demand is reduced, inflation in China might worsen quickly. China might need to learn to deal with a higher inflation rate, because the top priority for the Chinese government is to bring an end to the gradual but steady decline of the GDP growth rate (Yu, 2022).

China adopts a careful position in the context of European sanctions against Russia in the context of the Ukrainian issues because the European Union is China's most important trading partner. The relationship between China and the international organization has been characterized by multiple trade disputes, ranging from steel and wine to solar panels. Xi aims to expand trade and investment cooperation and promote agreements in areas such as politics, trade and economy, urbanization, finance, agriculture, science and technology, education, and culture. The EU keeps persuading China to open its markets and attract more investment (Bader, 2016; Heilmann et al., 2014; Hu, 2014).

Regarding the developing world, China has strengthened its relations with neighbors, but most of them worry that these relations bind them more than China, which might give the Chinese increased leverage over them. China's increasing political and military power only potentializes the unease (Bader, 2016). China under Xi's administration also developed soft power diplomacy in Africa and Latin America through non-military inducements, such as culture, foreign aid, trade, and investment. China buys the loyalty of Latin American and African states by investing in infrastructure development, such as roads, railways, stadiums, schools, and hospitals. In 2015, Xi called for an upgrade in China-Africa relations to a comprehensive strategic and cooperative partnership with \$60 billion of assistance and loans for African development. China is the largest investor in Africa, with more than \$ 200 billion invested in oil, minerals, timber, telecommunications, infrastructure, manufacturing, and agriculture. The strategy is designed to guarantee natural resources, not necessarily the loyalty of the local population. China has also strengthened its diplomatic and military-to-military cooperation relations with African states and the African Union, established its first overseas military base in Djibouti, stimulated state-owned companies across the continent, made extensive BRI's investment, and, more recently, developed its COVID-19 diplomacy in Africa. China also promotes public diplomacy to improve its image through its values, such as non-interference in domestic affairs. For example, in Ethiopia and Sudan, the CCP is training officials to manage public opinion and the media and use monitoring and surveillance technologies. China has also promoted its vision of a closed Internet under the "cyber-sovereignty" label, which privileges states and excludes representatives from civil society. The Confucius Institute tries to promote Chinese language and culture learning, and China Central Television (CCTV) supports international broadcasting in different languages (Dyrenforth, 2021; Economy, 2018; Hu, 2014; Qadeer, n.d.; Zhou, 2019).

Even though Xi's administration has made great efforts to improve China's global image such as public diplomacy and the promotion of cultural activities and brands, these initiatives have had little influence in the global community in the context of resistance from many states, seen in the disconnection between many Western universities and the Confucius Institute, which has come under scrutiny in the United States and other states for spreading CCP's propaganda. China also mobilizes its overseas communities to protest visits by the Dalai Lama and represent the government's position on sensitive issues such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, which creates a climate of intimidation (Economy, 2018; Hu, 2014; Qadeer, n.d.; Zhou, 2019). Some nationalistic appeals to a domestic audience for the purposes of international status-signalling and Xi's domestic legitimacy were used to show Chinese displeasure at some actors such as South Korea. After South Korea's decision to deploy the US's THAAD system in 2017, Chinese citizens supported governmental moves to stop tours to South Korea, ban K-Pop, and cease buying South Korean products (Loh, 2018).

China works to move towards a multipolar economic international order that would be more suited to its core interests. Although at the 2017 World Economic Forum in Davos Xi promised that China would be open for global trade and promote greater liberalization, the principle of China's core interests directs to the opposite path because the CCP is not ready to fully implement the market system and reform the state-owned enterprises. The Chinese market system is guided and supervised by the Leading Group for Financial and Economic Affairs of the CCP, headed by Xi. The Chinese market system protects state-owned enterprises (SOEs) because the ownership of SOEs is the CCP's power source. Some of these enterprises in strategic sectors – such as telecom, oil, power, aviation, and banking – are protected from private competition by the government, whose members implement multiple barriers to foreign competition, and others are not but they benefit from government's preferential decisions and subsidies.

However, they fall far behind the development of private economy. In 2015, Xi acted to prevent China's currency from depreciating and its foreign reserves from plummeting. He placed strict controls on Chinese citizens' and corporations' ability to move foreign currency out of the state. Xi's administration also launched in 2015 the "Made in China 2025" program, a self-sufficiency initiative that sets out ten key industries, from materials to artificial intelligence, in which Chinese companies are expected to control as much as 80 percent of the domestic market by 2025. The situation shows that it is almost impossible for China to comply with the international trade norms. More than a decade later, China has failed to fulfil many of the commitments when it was allowed to access the WTO in 2001, such as significantly reducing intellectual property theft and violations, and substantially reducing production and/or export subsidies, for example. Xi's preference for control over competition often generates policies that may appear suboptimal in the short run but have long-term political payoffs. His administration may tolerate the inefficiencies of nonmarket policies, such as money-losing state-owned enterprises, because they may enhance China's political power in longer-term strategic initiatives. For example, Xi encourages some state-owned enterprises to invest in high-risk economies to support the BRI by controlling strategic ports or setting technical standards (Economy, 2018; Jesus, 2017; Zhou, 2019).

Under Xi's rule, China preserves the position to adhere to international norms only when they fit China's interests. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and ethnic and civil strife in Central and Western Asia would damage China's core interests, so China decided to adhere to international norms regarding these issues. Nevertheless, it has shown hostility or indifference to some international norms related to problematic issues for the Chinese government. Although China has declared its nominal acceptance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and diplomats in the Xi's administration have advertised China's contribution to human rights regimes through its international aid and development programs, China has acted in multiple forms against liberal human rights structures, which have been seen as threats to its sovereignty and led China to implement reactive-defensive diplomatic actions that insisted on non-intervention against the normative pressure from liberal states. The Chinese human rights discourse has focused on a nationalist agenda and state-driven developmentalism, which strengthens state power in relation to individual liberties and criticizes state-specific monitoring mechanisms targeting human rights abuses. For China, rights refer to economic, social, and cultural entitlements of individual citizens and social groupings, which require the provision and enforcement of government regulations. The rights-as-capacity narrative legitimated China to expand infrastructural and coercive state power for rights protection and allowed its engagement with international human rights actors. Despite its communicative moderation, China under Xi's administration has actively promoted its human rights perspective abroad and tried to market its illiberal model of national development as a new global framework for the international human rights system. China's moderate behaviour is also related to its economic influence. As more states sought development assistance from China, they avoided levelling human rights criticisms against China (Bader, 2016; Chen & Hsu, 2021).

Xi's pragmatic approach to international norms is also identified in maritime issues in the South China Sea. China's position is contrary to the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea. The ambiguous position regarding international norms and institutions typically results from its assertions of sovereignty, including in economic issues. For example, China has not implemented standards conditioning its overseas aid and investment along the OECD lines, making such activities rife with corruption, lack of transparency, and environmental destructiveness. The protection of domestic sectors and brands has been supported by the disrespect to intellectual property rights and forced technology transfer imposed on foreign investors. China has also used cybertechnology to hack into foreign government, private, and corporate targets (Bader, 2016). Chinese national standards serve to make Chinese companies less dependent on foreign patents and licensing. Relevant domestic companies such as Huawei and Alibaba have been protected from relying on or competing with foreign giants. China's ICT standards are designed to make China more independent of US dominated cyber infrastructures. The international spread of these standards are implemented by state-supported exports and may support Chinese partners, some under authoritarian rule, with tools to control the media and the Internet (Heilmann et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, Chinese elites remain apprehensive over taking on too many international actions and responsibilities, particularly when Chinese interests are not directly at stake. This view arises from a broad consensus that China still requires relevant resources for its domestic problems and economic development. Overstretching its resources by taking on more international responsibilities could create obstacles for China's growth. China also needs the cooperation and continued growth of other emerging states such as India to create a multipolar order and limit the US power. At the same time, it also competes with these states for global and regional influence, which brings in coherence to its multilateral initiatives. China also remains concerned that the US and its allies want to deplete Chinese resources by encouraging it to undertake responsibilities beyond its capabilities while refusing China the

influence and decision-making powers that it deserves, particularly when they know China's lack of experience in handling some international security and multilateral negotiations. Another obstacle is related to China's longstanding rhetoric on non-interference because it creates fundamental dilemmas to its involvement in international security, particularly in conflict areas such as Sudan and Libya, where China's economic interests expand. China also remains far behind the United States in terms of its overseas power projection capabilities, which has imposed strong constraints on Xi's ability to respond to international crises (Poh & Li, 2017).

5. Final Considerations

China's revival does not lead to restoring its former greatness, but to changing the world into a "society with a single destiny," particularly through the BRI and the creation of new types of international interactions (Zhekenov, Makisheva & Jakubayeva, 2019). Although a constructive intention can be identified behind the Chinese invocation of its core interests, the global ambitions of the "China Dream" were accelerated by Xi's more assertive foreign policy in the protection of the CCP's interests without negotiation, which has generated more international resistance and domestic instability (Zhou, 2019). Nevertheless, Chinese leaders are still preoccupied with sustaining China's economic growth and its domestic problems and reluctant to accept too much international responsibility in a context of China's lack of experience in dealing with some international issues. Xi's initiatives to portray China with the image of a benign great power contradicts the desire to maximize its interests over disputed territories (Poh & Li, 2017).

In this context, China is likely to preserve a zig-zag path in its attitude toward the international system: while it develops relations with other states, it will selectively adhere to international norms whenever they fit its interests and ignore or seek to change them whenever they do not (Bader, 2016). Important elements of change blend with considerable continuity with issues from the past. The CCP under Xi's administration keeps trying to preserve power and suppress dissent, maintain the economy's growth, achieve technological development, and build powerful armed forces, but in a more assertive way in multiple occasions (Scobell, 2020). In this context, it is fundamental for other states to speak with one voice vis-à-vis China, which, in recent years, has established a divide-and-rule policy towards the member states of institutions such as the EU and ASEAN. Although it is important to respect China's preference for sovereign self-determination and non-interference, other states such as the United States and the EU members may develop more predictability in their relationship with China based on stricter rules and conditions for engagement that serve the world's interest (Rühlig, 2018; Hilpert & Wacker, 2015).

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