

The Reactions of the Asia-Pacific Countries amid China's Rise: Xi Jinping's Limitations on Persuasion Capability - Ata Demirus



China under President Xi Jinping has demonstrated a strong weight and bold motive to the international stage. This indeed has come through presenting a new alternative to the West. By managing strong economic performance, active diplomacy and all sorts of engagement with others, China has become a new center of world affairs. This also has come to its neighborhood with new suspicion whether China's rise is something beneficial or a threat to the regional countries. In general, neighbors of China have been enjoying from trade with China. Some of

them are even economic partners with it. However, since 2019, Xi has been pushing for an assertive strategy. He basically expects China to be 'respectable' actor through demonstrating economic weaponization and aggressive military actions. Yet, these moves implemented by Xi appear to be counter-productive. The majority of China's neighbors have taken preemptive measures. Countries such as Japan, South Korea, India and Australia have increased their military capability against China, and even more than that they have restored their commitment to Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), strengthened their security cooperation and taken a collective stance against China. In addition, the new alliance pact AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) has been formed to enhance the military cooperation between its members. All these cases indeed demonstrated that Xi Jinping has pushed too hard of country's limits to appear as a status-quo player. Therefore, the assertive actions of Xi Jinping and their consequences will be analyzed to give possible answers for future of China in the Asia-Pacific.

Introduction

China under Xi Jinping picked a different course unlike his predecessors. He has simply emphasized the People's Republic of China's centrality on the world stage since he came to office. This was evident:

'On November 15, 2012, the day he became general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping stood onstage at the Great Hall of the People. In Beijing, to reflect back on his 5,000 years of history. After citing China's 'indelible contribution' to world civilization, Xi called for the great revival of the Chinese nation' (Economy 2017).

Xi's narrative of national rejuvenation does not only put PRC a major player, but also above it, making center in the international system as an indispensable actor. Indeed, China's current goals are not the result of Xi alone. Previous presidents Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao had all embraced the national rejuvenation to keep it alive the glorious historical successes. Xi however managed to achieve what his predecessors could not. He has activated massive

infrastructure plan, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), giving loans to its neighbors to strength its position in Asia-Pacific. All those are being done in the name of resurgent, unified China. Yet, Xi's vision is highly misinterpreted in the sense of transforming the current international order to protect the core Chinese national interests in the Asia-Pacific, a defensive act to achieve its political objectives and protect the internal political system which is based on strict sovereignty measures. This will indeed inflict a complicated view among its neighbors.

This paper sought answers to the following research question: Under Xi Jinping, did China manage to get positive view from the Asia-Pacific countries? To find out the possible answers to this question, the article is to analyze on the China's self-presentation as an alternative and then second goal is to what kind of response PRC's neighbors have taken. Then, an evaluation will be made whether the PRC can overcome the skeptic image that has been dominating the neighbors for a long time by relying on preferring a softer rhetoric.

PRC's World View

Since PRC's foundation in 1949, it has adopted different strategies to adjust the state to changing international dynamics. During the Mao Zedong's presidency, the strategy was based on the classic balance of power relations by getting military and economic assistance of the major superpowers. First it was done with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and then with the US to achieve the survival of the regime. (Goldstein 2020).

Later the grand strategy turned in the form of 'hide and bide' under the presidency of Deng Xiaoping, a moderate stance which is based on accepting capitalist model, focusing the economic development and avoiding negative attention of other states.

In 1990s and 2000s, under the presidency of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, 'the hide

and bide' strategy turned in the form of 'peaceful rise' to appearing like responsible stakeholder, a center of stability in the international system to reduce concerns and to indicate that China's rise is not a threat but an opportunity (Goldstein 2020).

Xi Jinping has changed these previous rhetorics and applied to much more radical vision. First, Xi, unlike the presidents before him, weakened the party's strength, eliminated bureaucratic incentives and rewarding only one thing: loyalty to a single man (Tepperman 2022). Therefore, while the Communist Party used to be a center in the Chinese affairs, with Xi, the leader has become the center of the system (Rudd 2018).

Secondly, national unity of China is the redline for Xi that cannot be negotiated. In Beijing's eyes, Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Taiwan are indispensable and core security interests. Particularly Taiwan is seen as by Beijing as;

the equivalent of a large American aircraft carrier in the Pacific, represents in the Chinese strategic mind a grand blocking device against China's national aspirations for a more controlled, and therefore more secure, maritime frontier, as well as an impediment to national reunification'. Hence, deep Chinese neuralgia over the recent passage of the Taiwan Travel Act, authorizing the resumption of official-level contact between all levels of the U.S. administration and their Taiwanese counterparts (Rudd 2018).

Thirdly, economic structure of China follows a different path. It is not based on full prevailing liberalism, rather in the form of state-led capitalism (Zeng 2013). Basically, the circumstances limit the flow of free market without any constrain, the state strictly follows flow information, at home and abroad (Economy 2022).

Concerning the neighborhood, the PRC has assumed the role of becoming 'parent' to the nations of the Asia-Pacific. China considers the surround 14 neighboring states as the sphere of influence; therefore, Xi seeks to manage a secure, positive

and if possible, a compliant individual relationship with all these states (Rudd 2018). Link to this dimension, the PRC therefore highly defends the status in the East and South China Seas, the role of 'parenting' to neighborhood can be achieved if carrying a high ground in the maritime domain in Beijing's eyes.

Lastly, China under Xi's leadership constantly emphasizes the revision of the international system. In fact, back in 2017 in one of his addresses, he advocated a reform for the current global order (Goldstein 2020). Xi openly declared for the first time that China is ready to meet the challenges of the current order. He basically aims to make a renew version of the rule-based order created after the Second World War. The post-war order fundamentally composes of liberal institutions namely, the United Nations (UN), the Bretton Woods system and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) which would later become World Trade Organization (WTO). The US has so far sought to defend all these foundations through large network of alliance: North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Europe, bilateral security partnerships in Asia-Pacific and thanks to all those efforts, the US has managed to remain dominant superpower. However, the US is now in a position to openly be challenged by the upcoming great power China which offers alternative to the American model.

China's Initial Advantage and the West's Setback

While China had the upper hand, its success was not the result of decades-old careful calculating foreign policy alone. First it should be noted that the US from 1980s to 2010s had kept a cooperative stance towards China, believing liberalism would be eventually embraced by Chinese leaders. For Mearsheimer, *"it was thought China would even mature into a rights-respecting democracy and a responsible actor. Unlike realism, which feared Chinese growth, engagement welcomed it. For such a risky policy, the breadth and depth of support for engagement was remarkable, spanning four administrations"* (Mearsheimer 2021).

The US administrations from 1980s and 2010s simply chose to engage with China

despite the human rights violations like 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. Even after the Cold War ended, the US continued to pursue same cooperative stance blinded by liberal triumphalism, an idea that the entire world would embrace liberal democracy and follow the US's path. However, unlike the US's expectation, what it has been experienced was the opposite. The PRC has become an economic power house who is ready to challenge the US and its system.

Yet, the more dramatic development came between 2018 and 2020, when the West suffered major setbacks. The European world was dealing with populist parties and democratic backsliding. In 2016, isolationist minded leader Donald Trump came to power in US. He ended decades-old engagement strategy with China and instead initiated containment strategy by declaring so-called trade war imposing unilateral sanctions (Goldstein 2020; deLisle 2021). Although seemed like a containment strategy, it was not containment at all, because the policies that implemented by the Trump administration were not done in cooperation with the allies however by itself alone completely. So, the Trump administration abandoned the alliance network in Asia-Pacific. Even worse, the administration did not raise its voice the brutal crackdown on Hong Kong protesters, and the detention of 1 million Uighurs without a fair trial.

When the COVID-19 arrived, already existing complicated state of affairs just intensified. The Trump administration's ill-management of the pandemic, social unrest, democratic setback at home; disengagement with international institutions, abandoning its allies at abroad damaged US's image unprecedentedly. China on the other hand managed to increase its weight in the rules-based international order. Right after the US's withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO), the PRC took a prominent role at the organization, in fact, Xi during this time acted like 'champion of the international collaboration' instead of the US (deLisle 2021).

Moreover, the Chinese vaccine development during the pandemic further outpaced the US's role in the world. The PRC distributed and donated its vaccines the world's most vulnerable countries (deLisle 2021). According to Soetopo (2021:2):

Xi Jinping also positioned China as the major friend of developing, especially African, countries, advanced the necessity for all international community to join efforts in order to Chinese vaccine “a global public good” that will be provided to developing countries on a priority. In opposition to Chinese “openness”, Xi Jinping criticized the unilateral approach to international relations, together with protectionism and building blocks, indirectly criticizing the US, and more specifically the Trump administration’s policy.

As it can be seen, China during the pandemic era, concentrated all the political and diplomatic capabilities to assisting third world countries from Latin America to Asia-Pacific, while the US simply chose to do nothing and make baseless accusations against the PRC regarding the origin of the virus. Yet, Xi Jinping saw all these favorable developments to push for an assertive strategy that would change everything.

China’s New Face

New Assertive Strategy

The PRC’s successful handling of the crises of the rules-based international order in the past few years created proper moment at least from Beijing’s perspective. For Xi, the PRC no longer need to lay low possible Western reactions against him, after all, there is no unified West to do that.

Internally speaking, China’s so-called ‘advantages’ here are mainly its political system, improved governance capability, economic growth, economic resilience, rich human recourses, huge domestic market that are all main pillars of the PRC’s strength.

Externally, China is emerging role as the new alternative. In Asia-Pacific region, many countries have been benefiting from its economy through loans, the BRI

project and trade. Unlike the US, the PRC is their big nearby neighbor therefore they have to rely on China economically.

Xi Jinping knows these facts and assumes the role of big 'parent' in Asia-Pacific. He wants to a harmony of countries, a harmony that China will lead. In fact, back in 2018, in one of his addresses, he openly stated that "Countries should all be committed to building an inclusive world and creating a harmonious atmosphere" (Xinhua 2018).

Therefore, Xi prefers a new way to achieve domination over the Asia-Pacific. Firstly, for Xi, to make China a 'respected, lovable partner is through the implementation of the 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy. The strategy basically stands on the weaponization of the production of the personal protective equipment (PPE) against countries which dares to criticize China (Economy 2022). Usually, measures implemented by the PRC come in the form of economic sanctions, restrictions and trade tariffs. For instance, when Australia attempted to discover the origin of the COVID-19, Beijing immediately responded by in the form of imposing restrictions and tariffs on some of the Australia's most popular exports. The 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy basically aimed by Xi to gain respect of the neighbors by bullying foreign diplomats and government officials, which would help the PRC to win 'friends' and enhance Chinese officials.

This bullying strategy indeed sought to divide the Western camp like in the case of South Korea's rejection regarding the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system by the US. Due to fear of antagonizing China and its nuclear ally North Korea, Seoul had previously opposed the US proposal of the THAAD system. However, Beijing did not appease with that and instead began threatening move toward Seoul by demonstrating economic sanctions as a threat (Taffer and Wallsh: 2023).

In addition to diplomatic and economic intimidations, Beijing even go so far as to military demonstrations for Tepperman: "Xi will also face external problems on just about every front— again mostly of his own making. Having abandoned

Deng's dictum that China " "hide its strength and bide its time", he has instead sought confrontation" (Tepperman 2022). Of course, the biggest ambition goes to Taiwan. Here China tries to impose its sovereignty on Taiwan under the claim of internal affairs, just like the dirty business in Xinxiang and Hong Kong. For Beijing, Taiwan is the biggest obstacle to achieving national unity and China's complete reunification.

The same military demonstrations were valid in South China Sea where the PRC chose to ignore the third parties namely the ASEAN states, they were faced with a fait accompli situation. China simply steals sovereignty rights of its neighbors, particularly Vietnam and Philippines by building militarily fortified artificial islands, which is illegal under the international law.

Finally, the use of military also comes with a presumption that China's neighbors would not dare to raise their voice even if they are attacked due to their economic dependency,. India for instance, has high levels of trade with Beijing. The PRC took this situation as an opportunity and initiated border conflicts. In this regard, Taffer and Wallsh had stated: "*Beijing's persistent assertiveness along its disputed border with India led to a major standoff in Doklam in 2017, a deadly clash in the Galwan Valley in 2020, and a additional confrontation in 2021 and 2022*" (Taffer and Wallsh 2022). India, on the other hand, lost its deterrence capability and kept the diplomatic channels normal, but changed its foreign policy from non-aligned to a Western ally in the QUAD.

All these cases demonstrate that Xi Jinping prefers an alternative model over a modest one, in order to protect the PRC's status-quo, he simply follows a big 'parent' strategy for the neighborhood, but, this parent would be the uncompromising big boss to prevent the surrounding countries from going to arms of the US. However, unlike Xi's expectations, such strategy is counterproductive and causing damage to the China's rise both economically and diplomatically. Countries that were previously non-aligned now are part of the Western alliance security system. Japan and South Korea put aside their differences and stand as one against the PRC; India reengaged with QUAD; new pacts were formed. So, the current image of Beijing can be summarized with one

sentence: China's public standing has fallen to near- or all-time lows which is unprecedented in the entire history of the PRC.

The Reactions of the PRC's Neighbors amid Xi Jinping's Assertiveness

The PRC's military demonstrations, weaponization of economic cooperation through 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy did not help Xi to win the hearts and minds, but instead further antagonized them.

Internally, the Chinese crackdown broke the promise of one country two-systems which was basically proposed in late 1980s under the pretext that China's economic development would contribute to the peaceful reunification with Taiwan (Overholt 2019). For a while, Hong Kong remained a good model for this system in terms of allowing having a separate system aside from the one-party communist regime and an autonomous status. However, Xi ruined the one country two systems' spirit by suppressing a peaceful protests in Hong Kong and afterwards continued to apply repressive measures against residents of the city. Taiwan has carefully observed these developments with great concern and has been closer to the West rather than the PRC. In fact, anti-Chinese sentiment in Taiwan led to the election of Lai Ching-te of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) who is a pro-independence leader of Taiwan. The president, unlike his predecessor Tsai Ing-wen who worked to strengthen Taiwan's defensive capability but also avoided making statements which would provoke Beijing, is much more determinant to prevent the PRC from threatening Taiwan. He made it clear right after he became the President by this statement: *"Taiwan is a de facto sovereign and independent country that is neither a part of subordinate to China"* (Glaser and Lin 2024). His address clearly nothing but stating the obvious. The PRC's growing political, military and economic pressure led to unprecedented negative view of China among the Taiwanese public opinion. In addition, Taiwan has become a much harder target. The US and the Western world showed their commitment by giving military and economic assistance, aiming to make Taiwan a harder target and plunging China into costly occupation which would become a Pyrrhic victory. The US here tries to damage China as much as possible in case of potential regional hot conflict.

In addition to Taiwan, there is now a multilateral stance against China, namely among the members of the QUAD, AUKUS and ASEAN. When looking at them one by one. Japan and South Korea's stance comes as number one.

For a long time, Japan had to obey Article 9 of its Constitution which basically prohibits Japan from waging war and maintaining an armed forces of its own like the most states of the world. Traditionally, Tokyo relied on multilateral peacekeeping, the US-Japanese alliance which was founded in 1951 and kept only a limited defense spending that only one percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Lind 2022). But this has changed in Japanese foreign policy. Due to increasing threatening environment of the past few years caused by Beijing and its ally Russia, a radical shift is present in Japan's scheme in the form of active engagement with its Western partners, regional allies and investing the defensive capabilities. The growing threats have forced Japan to take historic counter measures. Japan currently spends USD 54 billion on defense requirements, and plans to increase it around USD 80 billion by 2027. This is extremely a radical change; because since 1958 Tokyo has kept its military budget about one percent of GDP, a previous prevailing symbol, both inside and outside state of affairs in Japan's politics of national restraint. However, due to concerning assertive bullying foreign policy of the PRC together with its allies Russia and North Korea, this is no longer possible, and now Japan is on the route to have third-largest defense spender after the US and China (Lind 2022).

In addition, China and North Korea's increasing missile capabilities caused Tokyo to abandon its sole reliance on missile dense to embrace 'counterstrike' capabilities. That means in the event of possible war in Taiwan or Korea, a 'counterstrike capability' would allow Japan to hit retaliate against enemy's missile launchers (Lind 2022). What happens simply is the PRC unintentionally led to the initiation of the vicious cycle of security dilemma.¹ China's heavy militarization forced Japan to take counter measures due to insecurity sparked by PRC. There is also possibility that Japan may interested to become a major great power in the future.

Japan's close neighbor South Korea is also reacting similarly. South Korea's Chinese perception is undergoing a radical change both domestically and internationally.. As mentioned above, Beijing pressed Seoul on preventing deployment of the THAAD system by demonstrating economic sanctions as political weapon and blackmailing. (Taffer &Wallsh: 2022) But this did not deter South Korea from allowing to the US deployment of the THAAD system. The damage is not only limited to that, the public perception of the South Korean people changed negatively too.

According to one public survey conducted in 2021, South Koreans view China even less favorably than Japan, their former imperial master and old traditional enemy. In fact, during South Korea's 2022 presidential elections, both candidates demonstrated their strong determinant anti-Chinese sentiment in their campaign. The election was won by Yoon Suk-Yeol who shared the more American stance during the election campaign. Since taking office, he has deepened its cooperation with the US and Japan, while China has sought to avoid. undesirable consequences Moreover, the PRC's threatening moves have led to another unthinkable idea in South Korean foreign policy: Acquiring nuclear weapons. In fact: "South Koreans hints that it might acquire nuclear weapons, which are partly a response to North Korea's actions but also a reflection of concerns about China" (Walt 2023), a view that shared not just by South Korea, but also by Japan. As a matter of fact, both Japan and South Korea are now becoming closer together more than ever. They increased their engagement with the QUAD. Japan even sponsored the QUAD foreign ministers' meetings and participation of South Korea in 'QUAD Plus' talks on variety of issues such as trade and supply chain security. All these developments may have opened the way for South Korea to become an official member of the QUAD, turning the alliance into the 'QUINT'.²

When looking at the South, India and Australia has also stepped up too against Xi Jinping's assertiveness. Both countries used to be reluctant member of the QUAD, however they too had to change their stance.

India was very cautious for a while not provoking China. For instance, after 2020

border conflict with China, New Delhi simply dismissed the option of taking serious military operations. This move indeed perceived by the PRC as the breakdown of the Indian deterrence (Singh 2022). The dismissive attitude of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government toward the border crisis, demonstrated India's weakness and quickly exploited by China. The PRC perfectly knows economic interdependence of India pushed further India into corner. Through BRI which is on the paper designed to help poor vulnerable countries, India is being surrounded. The PRC's ally Pakistan and partner of the BRI project, China is causing difficulties for India particularly, through construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which crosses Islamabad-administered but disputed part of the Kashmir region is definitely highly sensitive security issue for India. Furthermore, there is also potential commercial competition between Chabar port in Iran operated jointly by India-Iran and Gawadar Port in Pakistan under joint run by China and Pakistan. As the consequences of all these developments, India felt highly surrounded by Beijing's threatening moves. Therefore, as a response to this assertiveness, New Delhi increased its engagement with the QUAD through 2+2 ministerial dialogues, joined military exercises with the other member of the alliance, increased supply chain resilience to counter the Chinese economic exploitation of India as a political weapon (D'Ambrogio 2021). As it can be seen, India and China's relations are not same as it used to be, a more skeptical mutual distrust. Yet, the process from reluctance to realignment with the Western world is not only limited to India. Australia also reacted just like India against Xi's assertive foreign policy. As mentioned above, Australia was a victim of Xi Jinping's 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy. Previously, the PRC stayed away from any tensions with Australia. They had very strong economic relations of mutual respect which even caused a divide between US and Australia. For instance, when a Chinese Company signed a 99-year lease to operate an Australian port where it is located just few miles from the US Marines Corps' base of operations inflicted a friction between the two allies (Taffer and Wallsh).

However, the relations began to deteriorate after revelation of the Chinese interference to Australian society and politics. The interferences even went so far as to threaten the Australian politicians to accommodate Beijing by supporting extradition treaty with the PRC. When Canberra passed anti-interference law as response to these Chinese motives in 2018, Beijing put sanction on import of

Australian minerals and did not permit the Australian wine to enter the Chinese market. Yet, the actual deterioration of the relations came during the middle of the pandemic when Australia attempted to investigate the origin of the COVID-19 which even led to more serious aggressive political and economic punishment (Taffer and Wallsh). Canberra, due to these assertive Chinese behaviors radically changed its foreign policy rhetoric.

Firstly, Australia under the 'most ambitious plan' increased its defense budget unprecedentedly since the Second World War. It has increased the defense budget from USD 26.84 billion to USD 48.75 billion (Mehra 2020; Macro Trends 2023). In addition, like India, Canberra has realigned with the QUAD. India invited Australia to join naval exercises held with US and Japan due to the fact that India was cornered by the PRC during the 2020 June 2020 border clash and Australia faced the same pressure just like India (Rudd 2021). So, they had the common threat which led them to active participation after a long- prevailed hesitation in the QUAD.

Furthermore, to help new security pact known as AUKUS were formed between Australia, UK and the US. The new pact is meant to help Australia through technological and nuclear material to acquire at least 8 nuclear- powered submarines. There is even proposed long-term goal of building a fleet for Canberra which consists of 8 nuclear-powered submarines. And yet, it is not only limited to that. The pact also keeps cooperation on long-range strike missiles, artificial intelligence, quantum computing and cyber capabilities in its agenda. As it can be seen, China is stuck with the new regional arms race with much more durable and united QUAD and AUKUS members. Rudd explained that "The consequences of Beijing's grievance driven behavior on the strength of the U.S. alliances have been clear to for some time now" (Rudd 2021). Definitely, the current situation will continue for the West's favor.

And yet, the damage is not only with QUAD and AUKUS's combined strength. The ASEAN members have also share distrust and skepticism towards China. Many ASEAN states particularly, Vietnam and Philippines are extremely anti-Chinese and seek protection from the US's alliance system. Irony here is that Philippines

previously viewed China as a friend and avoid any interaction with the US which almost ended the decades-old alliance. Yet, the Xi's military assertiveness in the South China Sea changed Philippines dramatically. Now the country seeks to enhance defense relations with the US (Economy 2022). In February 2023, Philippines and the US agreed to develop their defense pact through Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), opening four additional bases to US military operations. Moreover, Philippines received USD 82 million from the US for infrastructure assistance. Yet, Philippines is now part of new alliance group dubbed the 'SQUAD' which formed in June 2023 between US, Australia, Japan and Philippines against Chinese assertiveness in South China Sea (Tapan 2024). In April 2024, the four countries conducted joint maritime patrol within the Filipino exclusive economic zone. The SQUAD aims to counter coercion across Asia and enhance interoperability of depends capabilities among the four members (Tapan 2024).

Just like Philippines, a shift in foreign policy is present in Vietnam's foreign policy. Although Vietnam and the PRC share the same ideology, Vietnam has kept huge mistrust towards China. They fought their last war in 1979, during which both sides suffered heavy casualties. Recently, the Chinese assertiveness in the South China forced Vietnam to take counter measures. It has become closer with its former enemy the US. Their cooperation has increased unprecedentedly. In addition, to combat Chinese interference to internal affairs of the country, Vietnam expelled Huawei's 5G network and began to develop its own alternative version to that technology (Chatterji 2021).

When looking at the other ASEAN members, the Chinese image is not so bright among them either. Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore have uneasy relations with China, although they carry a neutral stance between the US and China, they still have Chinese skepticism. Only countries that remained within the ASEAN as China's ally are Cambodia, Brunei, Laos and Thailand.

However, it should be noted that although China remains as a threat for many ASEAN members, there are still important factors that prevent the ASEAN from full committing to the US's containment strategy under the Biden Administration.

Cleare highlighted that:

China is economically powerful. For 13 uninterrupted years, it has been top trading partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Through the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing has invested billions of dollars in infrastructure and manufacturing in countries throughout the region. China also imports billions of dollars in commodities and products (Cleare 2022).

The US lacks such economic power. Although attempts were made to overcome this problem during Barrack Obama's Presidency like Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) initiative, the Trump administration withdrew from the TPP and ruined any possible American leverage against China. The Biden administration returned the US to support TPP however, the ASEAN and the other Pacific states already took the note of the Trump-era policies.

In addition, the US in the last 20 years did not fully give consistent attention to Asia-Pacific. Indeed, the US is a dominant power in Asia, but it is also a 'distracted power'. The unpredictability of different administrations, US' commitment to different parts of the world which divide its energy is making difficult to focus for serious and sustain Asia-Pacific policies (Cleare 2022). Therefore, Pacific states have to carefully observe China's growing military power as Beijing simply dare to deny their aerial and maritime access to disputed territories and seas. They are extremely dependent on maritime trade routes for the import of the essential resources. As Cleare warned that: "Hardening their China posture may pose strategic dangers now that China is the world's largest naval power and the United States' military advantages are in relative decline. The United States is a distant friend, while China is a geographical fact" (Cleare 2022). So, there is a necessity ASEAN and the other Pacific states want to keep their economic relations with the PRC but from a higher under the protection of the US' alliance system.

China's Game Changer Status: Opportunities and Challenges for its Neighbors

In general, the relations of China towards its neighbors are neither purely negative nor positive. Economically, no one can dismiss the power and attractiveness of the PRC for the third world countries. It has successfully managed to become a successful economic power giant thanks to the years of successful economic growth, huge market and overseas projects like BRI offers an alternative for the developing nations of the Asia-Pacific. However, Xi's goals here to utilize this situation as the press for assuming the role 'parent' of the neighborhood became at the same time counterproductive and damaged the PRC's image. Yet, it should be also noted that Xi at the same time adapted to the foreign policy problems.

Firstly, even if autocrats seemingly have the supreme power and do not have to worry about the bureaucratic rigidity, domestic opposition or independent judiciary, they too have the risk of facing potential rivals. Xi Jinping after consolidated his hold on power at 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2022, responded unexpectedly to an outbreak protest by totally abandoning the harsh Zero-COVID policy. He even partially moderated his stance on Marxist-Leninist policies to attract foreign investment and tried to reassure China's private sector on economic reliability (Walt 2023).

Secondly, this adaptation also reflected to foreign policy approach of Xi Jinping too. 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy was abandoned, so there are no more threatening moves like economic sanctions, military demonstrations in disputes, territories and maritime domains. In the short-run, developing nations of the Asia-Pacific will continue to show their desire for close economic ties with China and the people of some of those countries, particularly in the ASEAN will demonstrate their sympathy for the PRC. Beijing's ultimate hope is that the competition with the US will largely remain in the economic realm and will avoid military clashes (Xuetong 2021).

Yet, in the long-run, Xi's softer tongue will not repair the damage that already inflicted during the implementation of the assertive foreign policy. The new approach will likely to fail to reach its objectives. Xi Jinping simply do not follow his predecessors' strategies like 'peaceful rise', because he remains fully

dedicated to achieving core targets such as the unification of Taiwan. So economically, the PRC offers alternative to surrounding countries, yet at the same, Beijing is the supportive of military confrontations and opposes alliances in the region. The PRC's role model attractiveness has certain limits.

Conclusion

In this paper, a critical assessment of the China's image on the Asia-Pacific has been conducted. As it can be seen, China under Xi Jinping offers an alternative to the Asia-Pacific. There are definitely strong bilateral and multilateral initiatives. The Pandemic-era crisis management is the biggest proof of it, when the West simply failed to address issues of the rules-based international order, the PRC continued to cooperate with the institutions of the international order.

The issue here is that Xi is simply going against a tradition that has dominated Chinese foreign policy for decades. Demonstrating China's true strength which was misinterpreted by Xi led to skepticism of the surrounding states. Surely, the PRC is economic power, but also was preparing the conditions favorable for achieving ultimate goals.

Yet, the Pacific states and China are close neighbors. This implies that they need each other. The Pacific states require China for economy-related issues even security to some extent and China dependent on Pacific states to get maritime access to prevent the US containment through its alliance network of QUAD and AUKUS. Therefore, the PRC still can assume the role of 'parent' by using its economic might to do something fair for all, instead of blackmailing for assertive purposes.

However, it should be also taken account that Xi Jinping's previous assertive strategy has already inflicted a serious on China's image that will not be repaired at least for a long time. All he can do now is to tone down his uncompromising approach and keep the economic and diplomatic relations with the neighboring

countries steady.

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