CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY

Strategic Monitoring
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Introduction

The international system is in constant transformation and international centers of power have always been shifting from one actor and region to another. Arguably, nowadays, Asia, or the Pacific region in a larger sense, is becoming the new center of the world's attention with China having the predominant role in the regional affairs and aiming at the same position at the global level. Thus, the decision to do the strategic watch on China's foreign policy and hence, to gain a day-by-day opportunity of observing the Chinese approach to international relations during the last 5 months was a natural move, proved to be very useful. That decision provided us with a deeper insight into the world's global political dynamics, as well as it gave us the possibility to observe in practice the way that a country with non-democratic and non-liberal systems interacts with and tries to lead the world based on liberal and democratic values.

Besides, our strategic watch covered a very important period, in many ways, both for China itself and for the international community in general. For instance, the Covid-19 pandemic, first detected in China and provoked at the beginning of the 2020 global health crisis and economic recession, put China in the necessity to remedy its global image and to restore confidence in its policy among other actors. The paper will discuss some of the ways China undertook these tasks during the last five months. On the other hand, September 2020 - February 2021 was the period of active preparation for the US presidential elections and consecutive transit of power in the USA. Bearing in mind the already existed difficulties between China and the US, their bilateral relations during this time were further challenged in almost all aspects. The paper provides an overview of China-US relations during this timeframe, which, as we will see, affected, directly and indirectly, China's relations with other actors. What is more, in June 2020, the first in several decades major military standoff between China and India, two nuclear states, around the Himalayan border dispute attracted the whole world's attention. Consequently, tackling this issue was one of the areas for Chinese diplomatic efforts' application during the last months, and we will see what has been done on this matter until now.

In addition, the overview of our strategic watch will cover the remaining most important directions of China's foreign policy, judged as such by the Chinese government itself or proved to be such following the observation of China's latest external actions. This will include relations with ASEAN countries, with African and European countries, with countries of the Pacific region, but also with Russia, as well as will take into account some other issues of Chinese foreign policy such as space diplomacy, interactions with international institutions, and definitely the implementation of the Beijing's largest external initiative – the Belt and Road infrastructure project – being omnipresent in Beijing's interactions with others. In the end, following the tracked and detected trends surrounding China's foreign policy, the paper will provide a brief perspective on the events and aspects that can be of great importance or that can have a great influence on international relations during the coming months.

Sources and methodology

Talking about our sources of information, we opted for a multiplicity of points of view, the approach that contributed to a better understanding of China's foreign policy from different perspectives. To start with, in order to have an insight into the Chinese vision of world politics, we worked with the official website of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the biggest Chinese state-media such as Xinhua, Global Times, and CGTN, bearing in mind the control that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) undertakes over these sources. Secondly, we also tried to diversify our sources according to geographical zones, languages, and the media's different attitudes towards China, sometimes even within the same country. For instance, we consulted US media being very critical towards China in all aspects, such as the New York Times, the CNN, and others, as well as the one being more moderate towards China such as CNBC, ABC News, Bloomberg, and others. Besides, we also checked other Western information sources in English, such as (among the most consulted ones) BBC News, the Guardian, Reuters (as a news agency), but also in French presented by Le Monde, La Croix, or RFI. Moreover, official media such as Hong Kong's South China Morning Post, India's The Economic Times, or Russia's Russia Today also composed sources of reference for our strategic watch, together with an online news magazine The Diplomat designed to cover regional Indo-Pacific affairs and providing more in-depth analyzes than a simple event covering. Finally, we tried to search for experts' analyzes made by different think tanks, such as Brookings or Carnegie Center.

Methodologically speaking, we mainly used Feedly to help us collect the relevant information since the tool provides an overview of a variety of different sources. Moreover, we also regularly checked other media websites, especially of the Chinese state-media since the latter does not automatically connect to Feedly. On top of that,
Google Alerts was another instrument that helped to keep us updated on recently published articles about China's foreign policy. In order to classify all the gathered information, we also created a common Google Docs, which we filled in on a daily basis. We shared our responsibility and worked once every two days. Then, every week, we organized meetings to discuss the evolution of China's foreign policy and do a short resume of major events of the week.

What is more, we decided not to consider Beijing's policy towards Taiwan and Hong Kong as part of China's foreign policy. First of all, by studying China's foreign policy, we based our work on the Chinese official government's position and its understanding of the country's foreign policy directions, so that we could better understand what Chinese officials themselves consider as Beijing's main foreign policy directions. Meanwhile, we decided to continue examining the Chinese government's actions in response to other international actors being involved in the relations between Beijing on the one side, and Taipei and Hong Kong on the other. For us, this decision was crucial to allow our work to be more focused on Chinese bigger projects and ambitions at the global level.

**China and institutions of global governance**

Our strategic watch started on September 22 with the analysis of China's President Xi Jinping's speech on the 75th session of the UN General Assembly (via a video link). In this speech, China was claimed to be the guardian of multilateralism, an absolute supporter of all multilateral formats of cooperation, especially UN institutions, and the champion of environmental global policy. 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 overcome the consequences of the pandemic and help the countries the most in need, as well as promised to make 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. Xi Jinping also delivered an ambitious promise to reach the peak in Chinese carbon emissions before 2030, earlier than it had been planned previously, and make China carbon neutral by 2060.

Those statements provoked different reactions from the international community. While some actors were praising the Chinese willingness to assist the developing countries and its new goals in terms of environmental protection, others were doubting the Chinese real intentions. Many claimed that China's rhetoric does not always match the facts on the ground, where China's market remains one of the most difficult to access for foreign companies and where Chinese environmental policy remains one of the most controversial. In addition, the use of "nice phrases" in order to create a positive image of Chinese policy on the world stage was seen as an aspiration to remedy the spoiled perception of China among international society after the pandemic outbreak. The most prominent accusations came from the US, blaming China on the lack of transparency, growing militarism, and an attempt to assert China's dominance at international bodies like the UN.

Practically, this first piece of analysis set the tone for the rest of the strategic watch. On the one hand, the China-US standoff lasted during the whole monitoring period with almost the same accusations from both sides. On the other hand, China's rhetoric advancing multilateralism, "win-win cooperation", help to developing countries, environmental protection, vaccines as "global public good", has been used by Chinese officials during all the period of the watch in all forums for international cooperation. To illustrate, four months later after the mentioned address, on January 25, 2021, the delivered Xi Jinping's speech at the Davos International Economic Forum (via a video link), showed one more time a reiteration of Beijing's usual stance.

What is more, China's relations with international institutions can also be demonstrated by its relation with WHO. Thus, while China has been officially supporting the organization on multiple occasions, WHO met difficulties to finally arrive in China in order to conduct the second phase of the investigation of the Covid-19 pandemic's origins. First of all, in the first half of 2020, China refused under different reasons, mostly under virus concerns, to allow WHO experts to undertake the investigation on the ground and conducted its first investigation phase by itself. Meanwhile, during the observed period, China and WHO maintained negotiations on the frameworks of the second phase of the investigation, which was finally decided to be conducted in January 2021. However, on January 5, the head of WHO, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, adopted a firm stance towards China for the first time and expressed its disappointment that China had not authorized the entry of the WHO team for the investigation since it had not yet finalized the necessary entry permissions. China responded by saying that there was not only a visa problem, but also organizational issues linked to difficulties posed by the pandemic, and affirming that...
China will always adopt an open, transparent, and responsible attitude towards the organization. On Thursday, 13 January 2021, the WHO-led expert team finally arrived in Wuhan in order to conduct its scientific research. After two weeks of isolation, they undertook two weeks of visits to different sites important for the investigation such as the Wuhan Seafood Market, Wuhan Institute of Virology, or Wuhan hospitals having treated the first Covid-19 patients. Nevertheless, advancing strict rules of visiting under virus concerns, the head of WHO announced that the team would not meet representatives of the local population, while the latter was claiming this right and accused China of silencing them. On top of that, at the end of the mission, it was revealed that China refused to get the WHO experts access to raw data on the first identified cases of the Covid-19 in December 2020 by providing only official summaries and analyses on this information. The act raised further questions on the transparency of China towards the world community on the matter.

**Chinese diplomacy around the Covid-19 pandemic**

The proclaimed solidarity with the world fighting the Covid-19 pandemic, and especially with developing countries, during Xi Jinping's speech at the UN General Assembly was reflected in practice by shipments of medical aid to other countries. This move is described by many scholars and political experts as a way for China to improve its reputation harmed by the pandemic outbreak, but also as a tool to reinforce its ties with beneficiaries of the aid.

To start with, considering itself as a country where the pandemic was under control, China concentrated much of its political and diplomatic efforts in assisting other countries, especially developing and the poorest ones, mainly on the African continent, while conducting phase III trials of its vaccines in other states. Thus, in the September-early December period, the assistance consisted mainly of sending or donating medical equipment, Covid-19 tests, and medical expert groups to primarily African, ASEAN, Latin American countries, but also to some European ones, such as Serbia. While assisting others, China has continuously emphasized its success in dealing with the pandemic by putting in advance the effectiveness of its state model. Besides, on October 10, China officially joined the UN-led initiative for fair vaccine distribution, COVAX, the move seen as a way for China to gain trust from other countries regarding its homemade vaccines and to promote them on the global market. Another way for China to help lower-income countries in the context of the pandemic was the decision to join the international initiative of debt freezing.

In the meantime, on December 9, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) became the first country to fully approve the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine, including for public use, followed shortly by Bahrain. Subsequently, the so-called "vaccine diplomacy" became the main tool of Chinese medical assistance to other countries in fighting the pandemic. The first countries to receive the jabs were the ones having conducted the phase III trials on their territory, being mainly Middle East countries (UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, etc.). Noteworthy, Chinese vaccines, provided at "fair" or sometimes at "friendly" price, have an advantage of requiring storage at the standard 2C-8C, in contrast to the new mRNA vaccines developed by Western countries, facilitating logistics in particular for lower- and middle-income countries. Thus, even amid questioning in the efficiency of the Chinese vaccines, especially after different and sometimes law phase III trial results for the Sinovac jabs, millions of doses of the two most advanced Chinese vaccines developed by Sinopharm and Sinovac groups are being sent around the world to ASEAN, Latin American, and other Middle East countries. In addition, at the beginning of February, Mexico authorized and received 2 million of the first CanSino doses, the third Chinese vaccine on the global market, which has been previously tested in Mexico and Pakistan.

Meanwhile, China is not the only actor that is eager to fill the void left by Western countries, more concentrated on vaccination of their own population. Starting from January 2021, India supplied millions of doses of its homegrown vaccines to its neighboring and some ASEAN countries by boosting its regional presence and then going further by donating some countries with its vaccines for free. Following those steps, in late January, China also started to donate its vaccines to some countries beginning with Pakistan, the country being at the crossroads of the China-India competition. The Chinese government promised to provide vaccine donations to 13 countries during February and to further help 38 countries, the promise, which is already under action. It is obvious that despite joining the Covax initiative, the main tool for China to distribute its vaccines is bilateral contracts while only 40 000 doses were sent once to serve the Covax ambition.

In the meantime, Chinese vaccines are also gaining their ground in Europe, where in mid-January Serbia became the first European country to authorize and receive the first batch of one million doses of Sinopharm's vaccine. Two weeks later, on January 29, Hungary became the first country of the European Union to approve China's
China and Europe

China develops its relations with Europe through different tracks: bilateral ties with European countries, cooperation with the European Union as a block, but also by initiating new formats for cooperation such as the "17+1" format, also called the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC). Launched in 2012, the format consists of 17 European countries, among which are twelve EU member states and five non-member states.

Speaking about the CEEC, also considered as a tool to increase Chinese influence within the EU, we observed during our strategic watch how China was actively promoting this format of cooperation in all other interactions with the members of the group – bilateral phone calls, high-ranking meetings within other formats, or meetings with countries' diplomatic representatives, and so on. Finally, on February 9, Chinese President Xi Jinping hosted a virtual summit with presidents of the CEEC countries, the initiative which has been delayed for nearly a year due to the pandemic. The topics discussed during the meeting were particularly articulated around enhancing cooperation in terms of the pandemic response, including in terms of vaccine, where China promised to provide more support to the CEEC countries in their efforts of combating the pandemic, as well as pointed out the importance of further deepening of trade ties, especially amid the health crisis. In addition, Xi Jinping advanced the positive effects that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), according to China, brought to the countries' economic development.

These two topics – the Belt and Road Initiative and cooperation amid the pandemic – were among the main in China's bilateral relations with European countries. This is especially obvious by taking the example of Serbia, the European country that deepened the most its ties with China in the course of the last year. During the observed period, among all the other countries of the region, Serbia had the most interactions with China and received the most of Chinese pandemic aid among European countries to a great concern of the European Union, which is in talks with Serbia on its membership in the EU, but also of Russia that considers Serbia its main European ally. Serbian president on multiple occasions praised China's pandemic assistance, but also its investments in and constructions of Serbian roads, plants, factories, etc. in the frameworks of the BRI, which continued despite the world health crisis. Assuring the Chinese “brother” in its absolute friendship, Serbia emphasized that it will not succumb to the US pressure of splitting with China.

This attempt to prevent European countries from further developing their ties with China was insistently made by the US during the last months of the Trump presidency. In its last months at the Office, Pompeo conducted several tours to European countries (September and November tours) alerting them about the pitfalls of China's growing influence in Europe and pushing them to renounce the use of Chinese 5G technologies. Therefore, Britain and France decided to eliminate progressively and Sweden banned the use of 5G equipment provided by Chinese firms such as Huawei or ZTE. Meanwhile, Italy, being the first developed country participating in the Belt and Road, refused a complete ban on Huawei’s technologies. Moreover, despite strongly manifested US opposition, Vatican decided to renew its agreement with China on bishops' nomination on October 22, even though later in November, Pope Francis needed to make an official statement acknowledging for the first time that China's Muslim Uighurs were "persecuted people". However, China's bilateral relation with a European country that deteriorated the most was the one with the UK, being the main US ally in Europe, due to China's imposition of the security laws in Hong Kong (a former British colony), its policy in Xinjiang region, which the UK considers persecution of Uighurs, mutual accusations of misinformation, and the latest mutual bans on national broadcasters – Chinese CGTN in the UK and British BBC in China – that came one after another in the early February.

Meanwhile, amid the controversial achievements of China's diplomatic efforts towards European countries individually, the main event of the Chinese foreign policy in the European direction was probably sealing the investment deal with the European Union on December 30. With this agreement, Beijing promised to provide unprecedented access to European business while reinforcing its efforts against forced labor that happened to stall investment deal talks with the EU. The two sides endorsed the "in principle" conclusion during a video link and the official signature is supposed to come later, after legal and technical finalization, which could take months. However, according to analysts, this investment deal will give Beijing "much-needed diplomatic breathing space” as Joe Biden prepares to forge stronger ties with European partners to counter Chinese growing influence.
Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang: between China’s "domestic" and foreign policy

Hong Kong, according to the principle "one country, two systems", is officially a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China which is supposed to have its political autonomy. Chinese Xinjiang, officially known as Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, is home to about 12 million Uighur Muslim minority which China considers extremists or terrorists. Tibet Autonomous Region became a Chinese province (which is seen in Tibet and in Western countries as an annexation) in 1951 while having its government-in-exile headquartered in North India. The three regions, as well as Taiwan, whose proclaimed in 1949 independence China does not recognize, were, during our strategic watch, at the crossroads of China's relations with other actors often contributing to the escalation of tensions between China and other states.

For instance, while Western countries, especially US main allies, under the US pressure were openly accusing China of committing human rights violations in the Xinjiang region by detaining the Uighur population in what they called "concentration camps" and using them as forced labor, China denied all the accusations by saying that there are only "re-education camps" necessary for preventing terrorism and eradicating Islamist extremism from the region. Besides, in October, at the General Debate of the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly, China managed to receive praises from 70 countries, including the ones being members of the Arab League, that stated their support to China on Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and human rights issues by highlighting China's achievement in this field and expressed their judgment to other countries of using those pretexts in order to interfere in Chinese internal affairs. Nevertheless, later in October, a Canadian parliamentary committee concluded that China was perpetrating "genocide" against ethnic Uighurs in Xinjiang and called for sanctions. This move deteriorated further the China-Canada relations being already under tension since the 2018 detention of Huawei's Financial Director, Meng Wanzhou. Then, in January 2021, the former US State Secretary Mike Pompeo also determined that China has committed "genocide and crimes against humanity" and banned all cotton and tomato products coming from Xinjiang following the allegations that they were made using forced labor. China strongly opposed that move, calling all the allegations "lie of the century" and naming Pompeo "Mr. Liar" while, in its champion-of-multilateralism posture, accusing the USA of violating market principles by the ban introduction.

In the meantime, Beijing's imposition of the security law in Hong Kong and what was described in Western media as a "crackdown on Hong Kong democracy", also deteriorated China's relations with other states. Numerous detentions of Hong Kong democratic protesters and revoking licenses of lawyers defending them provoked calls from other countries to release the detained, as well as sanctions, mainly from the US, on Hong Kong officials that participated in the adoption of the security law. China was responding with the same arguments by reiterating that Hong Kong affairs were purely Chinese internal affairs and also imposed sanctions on four Americans who have acted "viciously" on issues related to Hong Kong. However, Hong Kong events were the most deteriorating for China's relations with the UK, which is especially due to the increased number of issued British National Overseas (BNO) passports from the UK government to Hong Kong citizens giving them rights to obtain residence privileges in the UK. Therefore, China accused Britain of interfering in Chinese internal affairs by repeatedly violating its commitments according to the Sino-British 1984 Joint Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong. Starting from January 31, China announced that it would no longer recognize BNO passports as a valid traveling document while advancing the possibility of taking further countermeasures.

Speaking about Tibet and Taiwan, Beijing is especially concerned about the growing number of interactions between representatives of these territories with the US officials. One of the most important Chinese reactions came after the first in six decades visit of the Tibetan Government-in-exile to Washington on November 20. The two sides expressed their willingness to further formalize the meeting format in the coming years. China denounced this action by saying that the US was using Tibet to promote "splitsitism" in China. On top of that, on January 28, the leaving Trump administration adopted the 2.3 trillion "pandemic aid and spending package" containing special clauses on Taiwan, Tibet, and Hong Kong with a view to reinforce US support for these territories. Regarding Tibet, Trump has also signed an act that will put sanctions on Chinese officials who interfere in the selection of the Dalai Lama's successor. China firmly opposed both acts reiterating that the territories are purely China's internal affairs.

In addition, we noticed that the necessity to follow the "one-China policy" is a constant Chinese narrative used to denounce mainly US actions towards Taiwan (arms sales, economic cooperation, cooperation in the military field, etc.) and present in Beijing's diplomatic interactions with other actors. What is more, on January 10, the US
decided to lift the self-imposed restrictions limiting the communication between American diplomats and their Taiwanese counterparts which practically signified the disruption with the "one-China policy" officially followed by the US since the establishment of diplomatic relations with China in 1979. Together with these far-going US actions towards Taiwan, China's mainland rhetoric also toughened, moving to warn of consequences and further to announcing on January 28 that "Taiwan independence' means war". All those warnings were happening in parallel with multiple passages of warships one after another through the Taiwan Strait undertaken by both the USA and Beijing in the late months, as well as Chinese military planes being constantly detected in the Taiwan air-identification zone with an unusually big number of more than 20 identified planes in a couple of days difference at the end of January. The move was described by Beijing as a "solemn warning to external forces" and came the same week as the official entry into powers of the new US President Joe Biden, whose stance on China and China-related issues, while yet to be dressed, seems to be tough.

**China and the United States**

US-China relations highly deteriorated during the whole period of monitoring. After three years of steady decline under the Trump administration, Beijing and Washington continued to exchange blame regarding the coronavirus pandemic, remained locked in a trade war, competed over 5G networks and other technologies, as well as clashed over human rights violations in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, among other concerns. Thus, US President-elect Joe Biden was likely to deal with all of these challenges from his first day in the office.

It seemed for many scholars that one of the objectives of the Trump administration's strategy over China was to establish as many policies at the last minute to ensure that the Biden administration will be left with a small corridor of actions and thus forcing him to continue Trump's approach toward China. Therefore, during the whole period of presidential transition starting from November 2020 until late January 2021, it is not surprising to observe how the US was putting in place new sanctions and new restrictions almost every day. At the beginning of November 2020, the tension was more likely around the media field where the US designated six Chinese media outlets as agents of China's government, followed by the US decision to offer only a three-month visa extension for Chinese reporters where during this period of extension's application, Chinese reporters were banned from conducting reporting activities. In response to these restrictions, Beijing's reactions were limited to a simple warning where China announced to apply countermeasures to restrict American reporter's activities in Hongkong. In December 2020, the frequency for the US to put in place new sanctions and new restrictions almost every day. The new orders were ranging from limiting visa validity for Chinese Communist Party members and their immediate families, designating Chinese companies as "controlled by China's military", cutting five cultural exchanges, to sanctioning officials and companies suspected of human rights abuses in Xinjiang. What is more, the Trump administration was appeared to strengthen its presence in the Pacific region by on the one side, deploying frequently its warships and vessels to the South China Sea, while on the other side, contributing to reviving the Quadrilateral Dialogue with Australia, India, and Japan. The US also seemed to reinforce its bilateral ties with Taiwan where this move has been accused by Beijing as interference to China's national interest. However, despite the Trump administration's sanctions tool, China appears to be more reluctant to participate in the sanctions game, but it doesn't necessarily mean that Beijing didn't start developing tools to fight back. One of the most important measures taken by China was the sanctions imposed on the day of Joe Biden's inauguration to 28 US individuals, including former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo who, according to Beijing, have seriously violated China's sovereignty, and thus, mainly responsible for a series of anti-China actions taken by the Trump administration. The move is considered to be a sign from Beijing to the new US administration for not following the same path as its predecessor.

Another important issue that shaped China-US relations is the escalation in the technology competition, especially concerning the US campaign against Huawei, a Chinese company that is the largest provider of telecommunications equipment, in particular the 5G wireless network. The US accuses Huawei's products of purposely containing security holes that China's government could use for spying purposes. Thus, the US carried on different strategies to convince other countries, especially in Europe, to not use Huawei. In addition, the Trump administration decided to ban Chinese-owned apps like WeChat and is trying to do the same with TikTok for national security reasons, which would mark the first time the US widely blocks foreign information technology. At the same time, the coronavirus pandemic has also exposed further deterioration in China-US ties. Washington always adopted the same discourse calling China to be held "accountable" for the pandemic and accusing the World Health Organization of being Beijing's puppet. Moreover, conspiracy theories about the origins of the outbreak, which were encouraged by disinformation and misinformation efforts from both sides, exacerbated mistrust between China and the US.
Therefore, the election of Joe Biden is believed to bring a new start to China-US relations. Re-joining international institutions and agreements, partnering with European allies, as well as reconstructing the US-China diplomatic framework are likely all on Biden’s agenda, which could be able to offer the chance to pause and examine the widespread view adopted by the US over China. However, even though for now Biden administration's strategy over China is still in preparation, it already appears that Biden is looking forward to forging the US influence, together with its allies, to counter China's rising power. To illustrate, Biden's new cabinet consisted of politicians known for their firm stance toward China. This move thus demonstrated that zero-sum competition will likely continue to dominate the US approach to China.

China and Pacific countries (Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand)

As a part of Beijing's effort to expand its influence across the world, China is currently emerging as an important actor in the Pacific region. However, this move is unsettling for the US and its allies, such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, who have been the dominant powers in the Pacific since World War II. Therefore, during the period of monitoring, it is not surprising to observe how the bilateral and multilateral relations between China and these four regional powers were tough and challenging. At the multilateral level, especially with the rising tension in the South China Sea, China must face the reinforcement of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or known as the Quad or Asian NATO. It is an informal strategic forum between the US, Japan, Australia, and India initiated in 2007 that tried to maintain military drills between its member states. In October 2020, we witnessed not only the Quad meeting hosted by Japan but also the naval exercises in the Pacific that deployed one of the world's largest military vessels. It is then followed by the Malabar exercise conducted in November 2020. Initially launched in 1992 as a bilateral military exercise between India and the US, then followed by Japan's participation since 2015, and this year, for the first time in 13 years, Australia decided to join this Malabar military exercise. What is more, the leaders of Australia and Japan made concrete progress in the conclusion of the Reciprocal Access Agreement, a legal framework to allow their troops to visit each other's countries to conduct training and joint operations. All of these military and defensive moves by Pacific regional powers have demonstrated collective fear of Beijing's rising influence. In response to this, China not only increased the number of its military drills in the region but also introduced the Coast Guard Law at the beginning of November 2020 that allowed Chinese coast guards to attack ships of other countries entering Chinese territorial waters without permission and being considered as a threat to the mainland. This law has definitely provoked reactions from regional actors, in particular from Japan that considered this law targeting Japan's navigation around the disputed Diaoyu Dao/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.

At the bilateral level, the situation is far from ideal. One of the most important issues was definitely the tension between China and Australia. First of all, the whole period of monitoring was marked by a severe trade war between the two countries. It started in September 2020 when China suspended barley imports from Australia, followed by Australia's accusation in October 2020 that said China has instructed buyers to avoid Australian coal, then succeeded by China's decision in November 2020 to impose heavy tariffs, which is up to 212%, on Australian wines, as well as to ban imports of log timber from Victoria. In addition, during the whole autumn period, Beijing also suspended imports of different Australian products such as sugar, timber, lobster, and copper. Thus, Canberra decided to raise the issue of barley imports suspension, judged as "unjustified and aggressive", to the World Trade Organization. Moreover, the economic tension is added by another diplomatic tension related to the tweet posted by a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson in November 2020 in which it contained a caricatural image showing an Australian soldier murdering an Afghan child. This action has definitely worsened the bilateral ties while provoked different international reactions at the same time. The rising tension with China also became one of the reasons explaining why Australia finally decided to join the India-backed Malabar exercise.

However, the relations between China and Pacific regional powers have also been characterized by several positive outcomes. The most important achievement was certainly the signature of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) known as the biggest trade bloc history, in which Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea are all signatories of this free trade agreement. Hence, China benefited from the conclusion of the RCEP to advance its economic cooperation with each regional power. For instance, at the end of November 2020, just several days after the conclusion of the RCEP, China's Foreign Minister made an official trip to Japan and South Korea where a trilateral free trade agreement was one of the priorities of the meetings’ agenda given that the RCEP has just been signed and the US was in the middle of a presidential transition. These meetings also became an opportunity for China to express its concern over the rising influence of the Quad in which Japan is
highly involved. Finally, in January 2021, it was New Zealand's tour to upgrade their free trade agreement with China.

China and India

The international landscape is currently being shaped by the ongoing rising tension between Asia's two largest nuclear powers, China and India. While the two countries had never agreed on their border, they had largely given each other space around their respective claims for decades until a showdown in June erupted into a deadly clash that left 20 Indian soldiers and an undetermined number of Chinese soldiers dead. Since then, the ill-defined 3,400 kilometers-long borders in eastern Ladakh, in the Himalayan region, also known as the Line of Actual Control (LAC) [Annex 1], became the source of the current ongoing tension, where both countries are competing by building infrastructure along this border. Moreover, the situation became more complicated because different attempts to stabilize the tension never achieved any successful outcomes. During the past five months of monitoring, there were several rounds of corps commander meetings that were being held, where, diplomatically, both sides already expressed their willingness to disengage their respective troops in the border. However, following these meetings, we observed how both countries always adopted opposite concrete actions by continuing to reinforce their military presence on the ground. What is more, we observed how China relies on other regional powers, such as Pakistan, to counter India's influence. For instance, China decided not to oppose Pakistan's decision to accord a provisional provincial status to the Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, which is the disputed territory with India. As a result of the rising border dispute, India tried to forge its influence in the region with the help of its closest allies by conducting the Malabar exercise in November 2020 amidst the increasing tension in the relationship between each of the four member countries of the Malabar exercise and China. It was further interpreted as a demonstration of the joint force in the face of Beijing's increasingly "muscular" foreign policy. Despite that, this ongoing border dispute might actually start to see the light at the end of the tunnel. The ninth round of China-India corps commander level meeting held in late January 2021 has finally been able to reach a consensus where both parties committed to starting a synchronized and organized troops disengagement at the south and north bank of the Pangong Tso Lake.

At the same time, the tension between China and India is not only limited to territorial disputes and military concerns. In order to counter China's influence and, as it is claimed, to protect India's national security and sovereignty, New Delhi decided in January 2021 to ban 59 Chinese apps, including Tik Tok. Also, this move is being described as India's strategy to put in place economic punishments since India has acknowledged that Beijing has an immense military advantage. However, India's limited economic leverage over China has rendered these measures relatively ineffective. On China's side, Beijing only responded by urging the Indian authorities to immediately correct its discriminatory measures and avoid causing further damage to the bilateral cooperation. This narrative matched China's desire already expressed since the beginning of the tension, to not link the border dispute with China-India bilateral relations. For China, cooperation and competition between the two countries must be able to coexist. Therefore, this idea was being translated, for now, at the multilateral level. To cite an instance, both Chinese and Indian heads of State attended the 19th Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization held in November 2020 that turned out to be the first official meeting between both heads of State since the beginning of tension in June 2020. During this meeting, the necessity to uphold multilateralism and cooperation was expressed by both countries.

China and ASEAN

Southeast Asia is a huge neighboring geographical area for China, to which it is connected by land and the South China Sea. As the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) becomes the only community uniting all countries in the region together, China's relations with ASEAN are shaped on three tracks: bilateral relations with each member state, collective and multilateral relations with ASEAN as a regional organization, as well as within a larger form of cooperation with countries in the Pacific region (such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, etc.) Thus, while dealing with complex bilateral relations with each ASEAN country, it is not surprising to observe, during the period of monitoring, how China has given priority to developing and reinforcing its relationship with ASEAN. For instance, on several different occasions, such as at the 27th China-ASEAN Expo held in November 2020, ASEAN+ summits, as well as during direct bilateral exchanges with each member states, Beijing expressed clearly its firm willingness to strengthen its cooperation with ASEAN and emphasized how the latter is the key priority for China's foreign policies. This narrative was being translated by various reached agreement and consensus especially in terms of economic cooperation and joint efforts in fighting the global pandemic. One of the most historical milestones was the adoption of the Regional Comprehensive Economic
Partnership (RCEP) on 15 November 2020 after eight years of negotiations. Once it is ratified, it will represent the largest Free Trade Zone agreement between 15 Asia-Pacific countries, including all ASEAN member states, covering a market of 2.2 billion people with a combined size of US$26.2 trillion or equivalent to 30% of the world's GDP. Therefore, the RCEP is often considered a significant geopolitical win for China. Before, China already became the largest or the second-largest market for all countries in the region, as well as a key import supplier, and with the signature of the RCEP, it enables China to bring the region closer into Beijing's economic orbit. Moreover, China also benefited from the Trump administration's retreat from predecessor Obama's pivot towards Asia, added by the on-going presidential transition.

Nevertheless, China's relationship with ASEAN is currently being challenged by the rising disputes over the South China Sea. It all started when China claimed its sovereignty over the sea that estimated to reserve 11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. As a result, not only China, but also countries in the region such as Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, started to claim islands and various zones in the South China Sea, particularly in the Paracel and Spratly Islands, which possess rich natural resources and fishing areas [Annex 2]. Besides, what makes the situation more complicated is the close involvement of extra-regional powers, especially the US that maintains an important interest in ensuring, what it calls, freedom of navigation with a special focus in the South China Sea. During the period of our watch, we observed how on the one side, China continued to increase its military presence in the area that led the US to also step up its military activity and naval presence in the area. For instance, on 27 to 30 of January 2021, Beijing deployed new military drills in the South China Sea at the same moment when the US aircraft entered the waters of the sea for ensuring the freedom of navigation. Meanwhile, on the other side, there have been several attempts and willingness from China and countries in the region to start negotiating and adopting a binding code of conduct. At the same time, China also adopted a firm position emphasizing that the dispute in the region must be resolved without any foreign interference, which makes a direct reference to the growing presence of the US.

The dispute in the South China Sea carries evidently great risks for the relations between China and ASEAN. Thus, the US tried to benefit from this situation as a way to forge its influence in the region, in particular by building a stronger relationship with Vietnam. Vietnam's position is often observed as a focal point in the tension between the US and China, especially, unlike other Southeast Asian countries that resent China's maritime expansion in the South China Sea, Vietnam has been outspoken about its view. Besides, it seems that China adopted a withdrawn position regarding Vietnam. For instance, during China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi trip to Cambodia, Malaysia, Laos, Singapore, and Thailand in October 2020, followed three months later by another tour to Myanmar, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines, it is obvious that Vietnam was left behind. As a result, the US tried to bring Vietnam closer to the Western allies despite Vietnam's communist government and protracted war with the US. To illustrate, the US Secretary of State Pompeo added Vietnam at the last minute as his last destination in the latest Asian trip in October 2020 where the US invited Vietnam to join the Quad talks in March 2021. The US also benefited from the momentum since Vietnam is currently the chair of the ASEAN. This phenomenon was further observed as a tool to solidify the US foreign policy in Asia characterized by the anti-China campaign.

**China and Africa**

For the past few years, China has become a central player in Africa in particular through the so-called Belt and Road Initiative. China has always claimed that its initiative contributes to building roads, ports, railways, power plants all over the continent, and thus, participates in helping the African countries to develop. Hence, it is undeniable that China has put Africa as one of its top foreign policies' priorities. Among other powers, China's Foreign Ministers chose Africa to be their first destination at the beginning of each year. This tradition has symbolically demonstrated the importance China has attached to African countries. As a result, during the first week of 2021, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi kicked off his official visit to five African nations: Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Botswana, and Seychelles, where this African tour has generated successful outcomes. Firstly, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Botswana have decided to join the Belt and Road Initiative that now counts 46 African countries as its participants. Besides, after the Democratic Republic of Congo's decision to do so, China canceled the country's US$28 million loans that matured in 2020, then promised to fund infrastructure projects in the country by providing US$17 million financial support. In the meantime, in Tanzania, two Chinese firms were awarded a US$1.32 billion contract for the construction of a 341 kilometers rail line in the country. In addition, in the aftermath of this African trip, China's government issued a white paper on the country's international development cooperation entitled "China's International Development in the New Era". We observed once again how, through this document, China reiterated its promise to give high
priority to the least-developed countries, in particular in Africa, and other developing countries participating in
the Belt and Road Initiative.

Moreover, by taking into account the current global pandemic situation, China has reinforced its presence in
Africa, as one of the continents that suffered the most from the pandemic and economic recession, by sending
medical experts and equipment as well as put African countries on the top of Beijing's priority regarding the
vaccine's distribution. What is more, in October 2020 China also participated in the mechanism of the Group 20
Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI), even though this decision needed to be encouraged by the World Trade
Organization since China appeared to be reluctant toward this kind of move. With this initiative, China decided
to cancel debt for coronavirus-hit poor countries, in particular those in the African continent. It is then followed
by China's additional initiative to one the one hand, sign debt suspension agreements with 11 African countries,
while on the other hand, waive interest-free loans due to mature by the end of 2020 for 15 African countries.

However, despite China's efforts to reinforce its influence in Africa, in particular by continuously emphasizing
Beijing's affiliation as one of the developing countries, China's presence in the region has raised different
concerns. Some African governments started to consider that Chinese investment in Africa as a threat to their own
national security. Concerns are also being raised about the role of private Chinese companies in the continent,
especially because under Chinese law, the line between public and private companies is blurred. Even though
these companies had a "private" status, they contributed actively in securing Chinese national interest. Last but
not least, China's Belt and Road Initiative was being analyzed to have troubling implications for debt
sustainability. This phenomenon is usually described by a concept known as a "debt trap". To say it differently,
Beijing is often accused of luring African countries to borrow money for infrastructure projects, usually under the
pretext of the Belt and Road Initiative, and later controlling them if they fail to pay off their loans in time. As a
result, many scholars and media, especially the Western sources, claimed China's "debt trap" strategy as a way
for Beijing to gain political leverage with economically vulnerable countries, while on the other side, China's
media and institutions continue to manifest the opposite by recalling China's important role in helping the
development sector of the African continent.

China and Russia

Relations between these two states remain controversial either from the points of view of other actors or from the
practical perspective of the bilateral ties. On the one side, the "rapprochement" between China and Russia and
mutual declarations of priority status for relations with one another during the last years is seen, mostly in Western
countries, as a sign of precautions. Their blossoming ties in economic, political, and now military terms, together
with their nuclear arsenal and the veto right in the UN Security Council, worry Western countries that have long
seen Russia as a threat and are adopting a similar approach towards China nowadays. The direct manifestation of
this is the new "NATO 2030 - United for a New Era report", published at the end of November 2020 and focused
on two main challenges for the alliance which are "persistently aggressive" Russia and rising China. The report
recommended following more strictly their bilateral cooperation and not allowing them to exploit intra-Alliance
differences.

On the other hand, during the five months of monitoring, we noticed that there were not so many real practical
interactions between the two states, but mostly mutual declarations or references to one another. One of the main
was made in October 2020 when the Chinese government welcomed the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs
Sergei Lavrov's declaration that Russia will not join "the U.S.-led anti-Chinese coalition", as well as praised the
Russian leader's statement on the possibility, if necessary, to forge a military alliance between Russia and China.
There were also several international summits where China and Russia participated, the most notable among
which were the November Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS summits since the two countries are
the founding members of the mentioned organizations. Meanwhile, there were only two direct bilateral
interactions between China and Russia: the 25th regular heads of government meeting on December 3 where the
two sides announced an expansion of their cooperation in space exploration and related technologies, right after
the Chinese lunar spacecraft achieved the Moon; and the "New Year phone conversation" where Xi Jinping told
his counterpart that "cooperation between China and Russia can effectively resist any attempt to suppress and
divide the two countries".

Obviously, there were other different ways of cooperation that the two countries held during the observed period
such as siding together to block some UN Security Council Resolutions, or to support each other's candidacies for
the United Nations Human Rights Council in October 2020, etc. However, in the meantime, there was much more
interaction that the Chinese government held or organized with other actors, especially with the ASEAN countries. Therefore, the idea that relations with Russia represent a priority for China's foreign policy can probably be questioned.

Advancing Chinese leadership in the space field

Despite the pandemic and all the economic consequences that it has entailed, 2020 was a pivotal year for Chinese space activity and marked Chinese rise in this domain provoking different reactions from other international actors. Among multiple important initiatives in the space field undertaken by China in the last year, the period of our strategic watch was highlighted by two main events for China's space diplomacy not only in 2020 but also in all the history of China's space activity.

Thus, on November 26, China launched its Chang'e-5 spacecraft aiming to collect and return samples from the moon. On December 3, the spacecraft landed on the moon's surface, and on December 17, it returned to the Earth carrying about 2 kg of collected lunar samples. It was the first time that the country retrieved samples from an extraterrestrial body. Besides, it was the first retrieval of lunar material since the US and USSR missions in the 1960s and 1970s. What is more, the samples' extraction site used by China had never been used before. In the attempt to manifest its commitment to the fact that all the outer space resources remain a “commonwealth of all mankind” China promised to share the collected samples with the global scientific community or provide them as gifts to other countries and organizations like the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs.

This success came a bit more than a year after the Chang'e-4 probe landed on the far side of the moon making China the first nation to organize and succeed in such a mission. In addition, following the November 2020 launch, Chinese officials repeatedly announced that there are more Chang'e missions planned and that China is going to construct an international research station on the moon. Consequently, Beijing's aspirations to become a space superpower were met with different reactions. Russia, right on the day of the spacecraft's landing on the moon, proposed China enhancing their space cooperation. On the contrary, the United States' reaction towards the Chinese mission was appealing to its allies to reinforce their space cooperation in order to handle the “threat” that China and Russia present over space since the two countries, according to the US, are aiming to stop the American access to space.

Meanwhile, another important event for China in the field that happened during our strategic watch, on February 10, was the entering of China's Tianwen-1 mission into orbit around Mars for the first time. Launched in July 2020, the spacecraft marked the Chinese most ambitious space mission yet. The landing on the Red Planet is supposed to happen in some months. If succeeded, this could be an important symbolic achievement for China since 2021 marks the celebration of the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party. What is also interesting, this year, for the first time, three different nations pursue their Mars missions almost simultaneously: the UAE spacecraft entered the Mars orbit a day before the Chinese Tianwen-1, and the arrival of NASA's Mars rover Perseverance is planned for the third week of February. Thus, the successful outcome of the landing on Mars is becoming even more important for China's government.

Perspectives on the future of China's foreign policies

On China-US relations, their new dynamic under the Biden administration will definitely be an important aspect shaping the international scene. On the one hand, Biden already affirmed Washington's willingness to engage in multilateral cooperation in areas such as climate change and global efforts to fight the Covid-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, on the other hand, Beijing expressed its willingness to restore the relations between the two nations and build a "win-win cooperation". Hence, China-US relations are likely to stabilize under the new US administration. However, it is important to see, even though Biden's administration already declared that it would pursue a policy of "strategic patience" toward China, it still appears as a sign that the US will continue to prioritize domestic consolidation while reinforcing its ties with traditional allies. One of the main issues that will determine China-US relations is concerning Taiwan. It is predictable for China to continue reinforcing its military presence in the region if the US continues to approach Taiwan, a move seen by Beijing as an attempt to support Taiwan's independence. Therefore, it is really important to monitor America's national strategy toward China that is currently under preparation which it will mention the Biden administration's approach over Beijing in areas such as military, intelligence, and technology.
On China-Europe relations, it can be important to follow the European stance on China since the EU is more and more solicited by the USA to elaborate a common position on China. Bearing in mind the already existing criticism towards Chinese politics and the achieved agreement on investments between the two sides, its full formulation and implementation will probably provoke further debates within the EU countries and institutions. It will be also interesting to see if China will abide by its commitments and ratify the world's most important labor conventions, the move which can also be done as a way to encourage the EU countries to achieve the full conclusion of the investment treaty.

On China-Russia relations, while we noticed that China and Russia bilateral cooperation was not of a great extent during the last five months, it is important to bear in mind the political alliance, which was formed between the two nations. Besides, this year is the anniversary of the 2001 China-Russia Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, which put the ground for the current cooperation. On this occasion, both sides promised to renew and deepen their commitments “to everlasting friendship”. Thus, it remains to be seen if there will be new steps in deepening their bilateral relations.

On relations in the Pacific region, since a couple of last months, China expressed on multiple occasions and in different ways its willingness to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. It is important to see thus if China will do the next steps towards joining this format. However, taking into account Joe Biden's relation to Obama, who had launched the TPP in 2016, it is also possible that in response to Chinese aspirations, the USA will also announce their return to the initiative in order to not allow China to dominate the block. Hence, a new point of tension may emerge between the two states in the Pacific.

On China-Africa relations, it is important to keep an eye on the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Summit (FOCAC) which is expected to take place this year in Dakar, Senegal, with a high chance that the event will be moved online due to the persistent global pandemic. Some key themes likely will be on the meeting's agenda such as vaccine delivery, debt sustainability, reaffirmation of solidarity between China and the African continent, especially amidst the potential rising cooperation between the US and the EU, as well as the integration of the Belt and Road Initiative. Moreover, it is also highly probable that African integration into the Belt and Road Initiative will become a much more important priority in 2021 as Beijing is currently seeking to leverage its prior investment for building a vaster trading network. Thus, it is not surprising to see how China will remain as a key actor in Africa providing logistics, technology, and setting standards.

On China's Covid-19 diplomacy, it is necessary to monitor how the Belt and Road Initiative's future could be focused on healthcare sectors more than others. It is expected for China to provide various countries with medical supplies and experts in what is seen as an establishment of the Health Silk Road. In other words, Beijing is likely to concentrate its efforts on providing medical aids to countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative and thus, pulling them further to China's economic orbit.

On China-India relations, even though both countries already committed to disengage their respective troops along the LAC, many experts have estimated that with the massive military deployments by both sides, added by a strong emphasis on territorial control, it is difficult to see that both parties will actually walk away in the short term.

Last but not least, keeping in mind the celebration of the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party this year, some scholars assumed that in order to manifest the regime’s force at the international scene but also to its own population, Beijing will probably try to demonstrate its control over the proclaimed-sovereignty in surrounding disputed territories, such as the LAC and territories in the South China Sea, but also in regards to Taiwan. Thus, it is highly expected to witness new political and potential military pressures on these areas, which definitely will deteriorate the situation in the Pacific region in general. Therefore, it is predicted for China to remain as one of the key leading actors as well as a center of attention for the whole international community during 2021.
ANNEX

Annex 1: The Location of the India-China Border Row (Source: BBC)

Annex 2: Territorial disputes in the South China Sea (Source: South China Morning Post)