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POSTSCRIPT

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Focus
On China's Peripheries: Recent and Current Developments across the Frontiers

Focus Issue Editor

Emile Kok-Kheng Yeoh

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Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal

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Focus – *On China's Peripheries: Recent and Current Developments across the Frontiers*

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On China's Peripheries: Recent and Current Developments across the Frontiers

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The Hong Kong Pro-democracy Movement: Challenges and Divisions in the Past Decade

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to examine the challenges to Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement and the movement's internal divisions in the past decade or so. It is based on the author's research and writing on Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement in the past decades as well as his role as a close participant/observer when he served as co-ordinator in a number of campaigns of the movement. In various activities and protests, he had numerous informal discussions and conversations with leaders of pro-democracy groups, activists and ordinary participants. This article does not argue that improved unity and performance of the pro-democracy movement might have changed the outcome; after all, Chinese leaders' assessment of the broad domestic environment and their Hong Kong policy were the more determining factors. This article has no intention to allocate responsibility and blame either.

Keywords: *pro-democracy movement, progress in democracy, provocative campaigns, younger generation of activists, internal divisions, "one country, two systems" model, electoral competition*

1. Introduction

This article is an attempt to examine the challenges to Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement and the movement's internal divisions in the past decade or so. The movement was frustrated with the lack of progress in democratisation since 1997; by the end of the 2010s, it experimented with more provocative campaigns to exert pressure on the Chinese authorities and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government to seek a breakthrough.

Allowing genuine progress in democracy in the territory would not only have strengthened the legitimacy of the HKSAR government, but also enhanced the appeal of the "one country, two systems" model to Taiwan, and improved the domestic and international image of the Chinese leadership as progressive reformers. However, with the rejection of this win-win scenario by the Chinese leadership who perceived the demand for democracy as a challenge endangering the Party regime, these provocative campaigns prompted Chinese leaders to tighten control over the territory, leading ultimately to confrontations and a severe crackdown.

After 1997, the radicals within the pro-democracy movement began to challenge the moderates who did not have the solutions to break the impasse. At the same time, the multiplication of political parties within the movement exacerbated inter-party electoral competition and handicapped honest exchanges within the movement. The differences gradually crystallised into a clear radical segment and a moderate segment of the movement, and open criticisms against each other emerged and intensified.

These sharpening internal differences took place when the younger generation of activists, especially those from the student groups, refused to accept the established leaders of the movement and intended to pursue

an autonomous role for them with more emphasis on the meaningful experiences of political campaigns and less emphasis on their objectives, strategies and tactics. Leadership of the movement naturally weakened, and in the second half of 2019, spontaneous political protest activities took over.

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2. Background: Dissatisfaction Emerged after 1997

In the initial years of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), Chinese leaders demonstrated to the local and international communities that they intended to follow a strict hands-off policy towards Hong Kong. The return of the Democratic Party and its allies to the legislature through the impressive electoral victory in the May 1998 elections, however, did not change the fact that they could have very little impact on the government's policy-making processes.[1] As the Tung Chee-hwa administration enjoyed the backing of a safe majority in the legislature, it did not have to lobby for the approval of the pro-democracy groups which were treated as the opposition. The Democratic Party complained that, as the largest party in the legislature,

there had been little meaningful consultation between the party and the government.

The massive protest rally against the Article 23 legislation in which more than half a million people took to the streets on July1, 2003 was a landmark and a surprise to all parties concerned. The Tung administration and its supporters blamed the economy for the grievances of Hong Kong people, but they were seriously concerned about the legislation's threat to civil liberties and human rights.[2] The pro-democracy movement linked the opposition to the Article 23 legislation to the demand for democracy, and the anger with the Tung administration also highlighted its significance. People realized that they had no part in the re-election of Tung; and while his performance was terrible, the community could not force him to step down.

Although the pro-democracy camp was able to secure impressive gains in the 2003 District Council elections, its momentum was only partly maintained in the September 2004 Legislative Council elections. The Chinese authorities' strategy regarding political reforms in the territory became quite clear after Tung's visit to Beijing in early December 2003. In the first place, through formal and informal channels, Beijing was telling Hong Kong people that the Chinese authorities had full control over the entire reform process, and that they had considerable reservations on democratisation. In this way, Beijing was trying to lower people's expectations. Further, the Chinese authorities adopted delaying tactics, avoiding the reforms as promised earlier.

Then the Chinese authorities fully mobilised the territory's united front and business leaders to articulate support for the central government's position. Not only did they have to show support for the Chinese authorities, they also had to criticise the pro-democracy camp. Funding and political support for the pro-Beijing united front were much

increased; and it then launched a propaganda campaign against leaders of the pro-democracy movement like Martin Lee and Emily Lau. The campaign was aimed at reducing Hong Kong people's support for the pro-democracy movement, and to justify Chinese leaders' worries about democratisation in Hong Kong. (Cheng, 2004a)

By the middle of the 2000s, the difficulties facing the pro-democracy movement became obvious. The macro-political environment was unfavourable, prospects for genuine democratisation were dim, it had very limited influence on the government's policy-making processes, concentration on elections could not achieve significant breakthroughs, and the hostility of Beijing and the pro-Beijing united front was escalating. The pro-democracy movement largely failed to produce the leadership, solidarity and mobilisation power to overcome the above challenges. In fact, as the political environment continued to deteriorate, its difficulties increasingly exacerbated.

While the Tung administration failed to show Hong Kong people the way ahead, the Democratic Party and other pro-democracy groups were not able to demonstrate significant initiatives in presenting Hong Kong people with well-researched policy alternatives. They failed to perform the role of an effective and constructive opposition from the perspective of policy platform. They certainly suffered from inadequate resources; and as the government and the business community ignored their policy proposals, they did not get much media attention too.[3]

The challenge of the "Young Turks" in the Democratic Party against its leadership in December 1998 highlighted many important issues in the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong (Choy, 1998). Before the territory's return to China, there was substantial moral and public opinion pressures to maintain unity within the pro-democracy camp. Such pressures soon evaporated after July 1997. In the frustration

in the political wilderness, differences in political orientations were exacerbated and could no longer be contained.

Initially, some of the "Young Turks" left the Democratic Party and joined more radical groups such as The Frontier, and the differences existed both at the intra-party and inter-party levels. It was natural that splittism bred more easily in political wilderness. Politicians in the pro-democracy movement believed that the Chinese authorities had no intention of allowing genuine democracy in the territory in the foreseeable future; there was therefore no chance to form a government. Unity and discipline had less and less appeal to the politicians in the pro-democracy camp. Moreover, the multi-member, single-vote geographical constituencies in the Legislative Council elections further facilitated splittism. In the largest constituency, i.e., New Territories West, which returned nine legislators at its maximum, a candidate could secure a seat with 7-8 percent of the votes. Hence moving towards a more radical position might contribute to a sharp image with a strong appeal to a sufficient minority of the electorate.

Emily Lau adopted this approach successfully, and she was followed by "Long Hair" Leung Kwok-hung. At the other end of the pro-democracy political spectrum, the Hong Kong Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood avoided controversial political issues and concentrated on district work in Sham Shui Po. Their different political orientations made the maintenance of solidarity within the pro-democracy camp more problematic.

The pro-democracy parties also encountered difficulties in their relationship with grassroots community organisations, which emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s and which had been supporting them. The latter could certainly help to raise issues of importance to grassroots community organisations in the legislature or with the authorities concerned, thus exerting pressure on the HKSAR government to provide

solutions. However, their high profile and eagerness for publicity often resulted in failures to compromise and delays in achieving settlements. Many grassroots organisations worried that they might be taken for a ride, and they often preferred to act without the involvement of the pro-democracy parties.

It was in this context that new groups like Power for Democracy, Hong Kong Democratic Development Network, and Civil Human Rights Front emerged in early 2002. They planned to concentrate on the cause of democracy and human rights, and wanted to offer an alternative to political parties in political participation. Their emergence and development reflected the disappointment with the political parties in the pro-democracy camp and the suspicions against its politicians. At the beginning, these groups tried to bring together various types of organisations in support of democracy and human rights because of the decline in the appeal of the pro-democracy political parties. They later served as co-ordinators in various political campaigns. (Cheng, 2004a) This was not an encouraging phenomenon as the political parties had the resources and the most important role to play in the push for democracy in the territory. These umbrella groups could not provide effective leadership in the intermediate and long term.

3. Challenges to Solidarity of the Pro-democracy Movement

The massive protest rallies against Article 23 legislation in 2003 and 2004 boosted the morale of the pro-democracy movement, and the pro-democracy political parties managed to present a united platform in the District Council elections in November 2003, demanding direct election of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage by 2007 and the direct elections of all seats of the legislature by universal suffrage by 2008. There was close co-ordination among the pro-democracy political

parties for the District Council elections in 2003 and the Legislative Council elections in 2004. (Cheng, 2004b; Cheng, 2005)

It was obvious that Chinese leaders would not meet such radical demands, and there was no negotiating strategy on the part of the pro-democracy movement. In fact there were not much discussions among its leaders whether or not they should approach the Chinese authorities, what were the movement's minimum demands/baseline, and so on. It was easy and safe to articulate a bold maximalist position, and thus uphold the movement's apparent solidarity. The pro-Beijing united front maintained contacts with probably all important pro-democracy activists, and the HKSAR government officials continued their dialogues with leaders of the pro-democracy parties. It seemed that the latter made no attempts of co-ordination in handling these contacts and dialogues, and there were scant exchanges on analyses of the current political situation.

It was in this context that the Donald Tsang administration introduced its political reform plan in October 2005 for consultation.[4] Basically it proposed to expand the membership of the Election Committee from 800 to 1200; and increase five more directly elected seats in the legislature in 2008, plus another five to be elected among all the District Councillors. The reform package did not respond to the pro-democracy camp's demand for a timetable for the introduction of universal suffrage as well as a roadmap showing how the final goal would be achieved.

The Chinese authorities and the Tsang administration worked very hard to persuade at least six legislators (out of 25) in the pro-democracy camp to defect so as to secure a two-thirds majority in the legislature to endorse the political reform proposal. They failed; the pro-democracy legislators remained united and defeated the Donald Tsang administration's reform package.

The inauguration of the Civic Party in March 2006 and the League of Social Democrats in the following October made the maintenance of solidarity within the pro-democracy movement much more difficult. Obviously electoral competition became much more intense. Before this, leaders of the pro-democracy camp knew each other quite well, and there was an implicit consensus to avoid open mutual criticisms and maintain solidarity. Civic Party had no intention of violating this consensus, but some of its leaders openly declared that it wanted to be the largest party in the pro-democracy movement; this certainly made the Democratic Party uncomfortable. Its strong middle-class orientation was probably not acceptable to some radical groups, and unsuccessfully they tried to reject the party's application to join the Civil Human Rights Front.

Class orientations and personality conflicts were probably less significant, but electoral competition became unavoidable. Both the Civic Party and the Democratic Party had to compete for the moderate, middle-class supporters of the pro-democracy movement; and the room for expansion of this group was limited because upon the return of the territory to the Motherland, a considerable segment of the population had, to some extent, accepted the substitution of stability and prosperity for democracy.

Meanwhile, another segment of the pro-democracy movement became radicalised. They were dissatisfied with their leaders' concentration on parliamentary work, and were frustrated with the lack of progress in democratisation. They were more inclined to return to the grassroots to engage in political mobilisation and campaigns to exert pressure on the HKSAR government. Some of them would even consider the pro-democracy legislators as part of the Establishment.

The pro-democracy movement gradually divided into a moderate wing and a radical wing, with the latter exerting pressure on the former

and expanding at the expense of the former. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party and the Civic Party competed against each other. Wong Yuk-man, the charismatic leader of the League of Social Democrats then, openly attacked the Civic Party as a "blue blood party" in its early years. The radical leaders fully realized that their followers would likely come from the moderate pro-democracy groups and not from the pro-Establishment camp.

In late 2009 and the first half of 2010, the Civic Party formed an alliance with the League of Social Democrats in a pseudo-referendum on democratisation. The alliance intended to join hands with the other pro-democracy parties to exert pressure on the Donald Tsang administration to promote political reforms. If the Tsang administration failed to produce a roadmap leading to full democratisation when it released its intermediate political reform plan for 2012, then the pro-democracy camp would ask one of its legislators to resign in each of the five geographical constituencies, forcing by-elections allowing the entire electorate to vote as a *de facto* referendum on the political reform plan of the pro-democracy camp which was released by the Civic Party on September 9, 2009. And if the *de facto* referendum did not work, all the pro-democracy legislators would resign by July 1, 2011 in protest.

The Donald Tsang administration refused to communicate with the Civic Party and the League of Social Democrats. The pro-Beijing camp boycotted the *de facto* referendum since the Chinese authorities were very sensitive regarding referenda in Taiwan; hence they treated referenda as a taboo in Hong Kong too. It chose to discredit the by-elections posing as a *de facto* referendum. Fortunately the university student unions offered candidates to compete so as to avoid the scenario of all the pro-democracy candidates elected unopposed.

Admittedly the electorate was not very enthusiastic, and the voter turnout rate was only 17 percent. But the participation of 570,000 voters

was nonetheless impressive; they came out to vote in support of the pro-democracy movement's political reform plan. These were its hard-core supporters.

The *de facto* referendum attempt resulted in a severe division within the pro-democracy movement. The Democratic Party and the Hong Kong Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood decided to enter into negotiations with the Central Liaison Office at the same time; the former was subsequently attacked by the radical wing of the pro-democracy movement for many years afterwards. The Chinese authorities succeeded in splitting the pro-democracy camp as one segment was ready to negotiate and the other segment refused. They also secured the support of the former to endorse the Donald Tsang administration's political reform proposal. The appeal for all pro-democracy legislators to resign naturally evaporated.

The *de facto* referendum was an important indicator that many supporters for democracy realized that concrete actions were necessary to exert pressure on Beijing and the HKSAR government to secure genuine progress for democracy. The hitherto approach would not work. It later paved the way for Benny Tai's Occupation Campaign. It was significant that the Civic Party, the League of Social Democrats and the student unions of the universities co-operated. But the split among the pro-democracy parties led to their loss of momentum and the erosion of confidence in them, especially among the young activists.

A decision of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in December 2007 promised that the election of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage could be implemented in 2017, and the election of the entire legislature by universal suffrage could then follow. The Democratic Party and the Civic Party realized the need to respond, and they approached the author to form an umbrella group among all pro-democracy parties to promulgate the issue of democratic elections.

The platform established in March 2013, the Alliance for True Democracy (ATD), was able to include all pro-democracy legislators except Wong Yuk-man. There was deep distrust between the Democratic Party and People Power, a splinter group from the League of Social Democrats.

Despite internal quarrels and disagreements, the ATD managed to fulfil its basic objectives. It formulated a set of political reform proposals accepted by the pro-democracy camp; and in the referendum held by the Occupation Campaign in June 2014 in which 787,000 people took part, its proposals came first with over 331,000 votes. While the ATD was happy with the results of the referendum, the Democratic Party held a press conference on June 30 indicating that it would withdraw from the platform. The author secured the ATD's authorisation to invite the Democratic Party to continue its co-operation with the ATD.

The broad picture was certainly far from optimistic. The Chinese authorities formally ignored the platform, and so did the HKSAR government. They had no intention to negotiate with the pro-democracy movement, and they had no plan to promote democratisation. With the benefit of hindsight, since the façade was broken, Beijing would further tighten its policy towards Hong Kong. Although the formal decision on political reforms was to be announced by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on August 31, 2014, the writing had been on the wall. The Chinese leadership would nominally keep its promise of allowing Hong Kong people to elect their Chief Executive by universal suffrage, it would, however, control the nomination process so that the community could only choose from a list of candidates approved by it.

The previous consensus of the pro-democracy movement was to use the ATD as the umbrella platform to negotiate with the HKSAR government. Since there were no negotiations and the Chinese position was unacceptable, the initiative moved to the Occupation Campaign.

The Occupation Campaign attracted substantial attention and support of Hong Kong people (Cheng and Chan, 2017). It reflected that they understood Beijing's conservative position on political reforms, and were ready to engage in peaceful campaign action to articulate their demands and exert pressure on the authorities. The Occupation Campaign had an elaborate program of mass mobilisation through community-wide deliberations; this program in turn generated an accountability system. The campaign leaders were ready to maintain close dialogue with the pro-democracy political parties, but they intended the campaign to be a civil society movement separate from the political parties.

The ATD was perfectly willing to terminate its operation as agreed, but the pro-democracy parties definitely wanted a role in the Occupation Campaign. As the campaign attracted a lot of people outside its original mass deliberations network, its accountability mechanism was challenged as it could not absorb, co-ordinate and be accountable to the large number of people who spontaneously participated in the daily gatherings.

As reflected by the absence of negotiations, the pro-Beijing united front had abandoned the soft persuasion approach, i.e., it would no longer preach the gradualist road and that democracy would be implemented when the conditions were ripe. It understood that this approach had lost its credibility and persuasive power. Hence it would no longer engage in deliberations on the subject, nor in a kind of "give and take" negotiation process. The united front, however, would continue to infiltrate the pro-democracy movement and absorb those who would abandon the cause for personal gains.

This hard line coincided with the developments in Mainland China. Most China experts agreed that the Chinese leadership began to exercise increasing suppression against all types of critics and dissidents since the

Beijing Olympic Games in the summer of 2008, especially in view of the troubles in Tibet in the previous spring and the riots in Xinjiang in the following year. The underground churches, the autonomous labour groups and the human rights lawyers especially came under pressure. This suppression has been intensifying during the Xi Jinping administration.

The pro-democracy political parties probably did not have adequate mutual trust and were too busy to engage in meaningful and constructive exchanges of views on broad issues of analysis of the macro-political environment, the situation in Mainland China, Beijing's Hong Kong policy, the pro-democracy movement's intermediate- and long-term strategy, etc. The ATD simply followed its agenda to arrive at a consensus on a common set of political reform proposals and worked hard to secure public support for it. The Democratic Party and People Power especially did not intend to reveal their respective plans. The author's understanding is that such discussions seldom took place within the individual political parties themselves. Their leaders were too preoccupied with daily parliamentary work and party administration.

4. The Rise of Radical Politics and the Erosion of Leadership in the Pro-democracy Movement

The mass media observed that Benny Tai and his colleagues soon lost the initiative after the launch of the Occupation Campaign in the early morning of September 28, 2014. The Hong Kong Federation of Students and Scholarism refused to accept the leadership of Benny Tai even before the launch of the campaign, as they were impatient and more inclined to take radical action. The generational differences among leaders of the pro-democracy movement were exposed.

A tripartite co-ordination mechanism was almost immediately established including leaders of the Occupation Campaign, responsible persons of the major pro-democracy parties as well as leaders of the Hong Kong Federation of Students, Scholarism and the student unions of the tertiary institutions. The Occupation Campaign failed to maintain its initiative though it had spent great efforts in preparatory fundraising and logistics work; the student activists wanted independence of action and refused to accept the leadership of the other two groups, they were not very well co-ordinated among themselves though; and the political parties' leadership or guidance were not well accepted.

The groups met frequently, and uneasy compromises were often reached on daily routine arrangements, while no in-depth discussions were held to deal with the broader questions. Student activists usually arrived quite late for the morning meetings because they slept late and got up late; the more elderly pro-democracy leaders were unhappy with such behaviour. The young student activists in turn resented the patronising attitude of the other two groups. There were simply insufficient mutual tolerance and respect for close co-operation.

Very soon they all had to face the challenge when strategic decisions had to be made on important issues like the termination of the occupation, etc. ln the gatherings in Admiralty, Causeway Bay and Mongkok, local small groups emerged and they demanded a say in the running of the occupation zones. Many of the activists who emerged in the Occupation Campaign accepted no leadership, a common slogan in the mass deliberations was "They don't represent me". This was the fundamental difficulty resulting in the Occupation Campaign dragging on for too long to sustain public sympathy and support, as no leadership existed who could command the respect and legitimacy to make strategic decisions.

The author almost went every evening to participate in the gatherings during the campaign period, often at the Admiralty and usually departing for home shortly before midnight; but did not once speak at the platform[5]. He talked to the participants informally whenever he could. The most significant impression received was that the participants, especially the young ones, valued the experience of participation; they usually did not expect that the Occupation Campaign would lead to important positive outcomes. They therefore were not much concerned about strategy and tactics, nor the issue of leadership. They had their heroes in mind, but very often not the leaders of the pro-democracy movement. With the benefit of hindsight, these attitudes probably led to the spontaneous street protests in the second half of 2019.

In the early years of the new century, the keen interest of the community in the protection of the Victoria Harbour and the preservation of some historical sites including the Star Ferry Pier in Central, Hong Kong Island had caught the government and all political parties by surprise. The local pro-democracy movement had not been effective in the policy areas of education, health insurance, youth work, community building, etc.

Globalisation had led to a widening of the gap between the rich and the poor, even young university graduates became uncertain of their middle-class status. The slowing down of economic growth, the downsizing of the civil service and most public sector organisations, the streamlining of enterprises to enhance profit rates, and so on meant that the younger generations of middle-class professionals and executives encountered more limited opportunities (Ohmae, 2006), and they probably would have to seek new sources of satisfaction. This trend might promote the further development of civil society, or might exacerbate the community's dissatisfaction and lead to protests.[6]

The body of literature on the emergence of new social movements (NSMs) in Hong Kong is still developing; there is naturally the argument that the "newness" has been exaggerated (Jordan and Maloney, 1997: 46-74; Scott, 1990). Their ideological orientation is perhaps the most important characteristic differentiating them from their predecessors; this ideological orientation is reflected by the NSMs' objectives, organisational structures, and social patterns. Post-materialism and libertarianism are considered to have an important influence on them. (Dalton, Kuechler and Burklin, 1990)[7]

In the case of Hong Kong, radical civil groups and their activists were disappointed with the pro-democracy parties, partly because they resented electoral politics that had to accommodate considerations of pleasing voters, seeking publicity, and making compromises so as to secure partial results and avoid failures. Since the design of the Basic Law normally provides a safe majority support for the administration in the legislature, the pro-democracy parties had not been involved in the policy-making processes in a meaningful way since 1997, co-operation with them was not very helpful in securing concessions from the government. The NSMs therefore tended to contest individual issues on their own. (Lui and Chiu, 2000)

The NSMs wanted to develop loose non-hierarchical forms of organisation, and they valued the experiences of participation and the community spirit almost as much as achieving their policy objectives. Typically they developed collective decision-making processes, appealed to the community through skilful media strategies to win public opinion support, rejected the mediation of political parties and politicians, demanded direct dialogues with the government and power holders, and were willing to engage in confrontational actions. (Ng, 2013: 185-186) As observed by Ma Ngok, they sought to avoid the contamination of partisan politics and co-optation by the government in

order to maintain the purity of their causes (Ma, 2009: 50). In the middle of the first decade of the new century, the annual number of reported protests increased from under 100 before the millennium to around 200 (Ng, 2013: 181).

Such political and social conditions contributed to the surprisingly strong support for Benny Tai's proposal for the Occupy Central Campaign presented in his *Hong Kong Economic Journal* column in January 2013[8]. Tai hoped that the occupation would rally support from the public and exert pressure on Beijing to allow for democracy for the territory. Tai's proposal was based on the belief that unless Hong Kong people were willing to sacrifice and engage in political struggle, the Chinese authorities would not concede democracy to them. The campaign ignited the enthusiasm of the pro-democracy supporters, and the idea developed into a movement because the participants were convinced that democracy was not a gift bestowed from above, and that the old approach of the pro-democracy parties would not work.

The philosophical paradigm of the Occupation Campaign came from the concept of deliberative democracy advocated by James Fishkin. Tai and his team emphasised rational discussion through deliberation day exercises to find a consensus on the method of electing the Chief Executive while the civil disobedience campaign would serve as a last resort. According to Fishkin, deliberative democracy offers the entire nation the opportunities for thoughtful interaction and opinion formation that are normally restricted to small group democracy (Fishkin, 1991: 4). Deliberative democracy brings the face-to-face democracy of ordinary citizens who can participate on the same basis of political equality as that offered by the ancient Athenian Assembly (*ibid.*). This certainly was a significant attraction and a rewarding experience to those in Hong Kong who sought meaningful political participation.

The emergence of the localism groups during and after the Occupation Campaign in 2014 had been a significant development in the pro-democracy movement. Young people's general frustration with their socioeconomic conditions and their anger with the undemocratic and repressive C.Y. Leung administration had prompted them to advocate for the independence of Hong Kong. Hence, some critics called the Chief Executive C.Y. Leung "the father of Hong Kong independence". To some extent, this was a kind of youthful defiance rather than a serious independence movement. The groups involved had not developed credible political discourses, nor had they offered any action plans or timetables. Hong Kong people are fully aware that independence is not a realistic option, yet, in the September 2016 Legislative Council elections, these localism groups secured 18 percent of the popular vote in the elections with a record turnout rate (58 percent turnout rate).[9]

In 2016, almost every student union in the tertiary institutions in the territory adopted a localism position, and many young people since then declared that they were not Chinese, but Hongkongers. The change of sentiments took place very rapidly, as public opinion surveys indicated that Hong Kong people's identification with the Chinese nation reached a peak in 2008, the year of the Beijing Olympics. These student unions refused to co-operate with the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China for the annual June 4 memorial activities, resulting in some inter-generational ill blood in the pro-democracy movement. (Cheng and Yuen, 2019)

During the Occupation Campaign in 2014, student activists seized the leadership and organisation of the campaign from the original initiators. Differences emerged and continued between the activists and the leaders of the pro-democracy political parties. While some of these "Umbrella groups" openly articulated support for Hong

Kong independence, others like Demosistō (the political wing which emerged from the student group Scholarism) adopted a more moderate stand, calling for an official referendum on the future of Hong Kong.

In the September 2016 Legislative Council elections, Democracy Groundwork, Land Justice League, Demosistō, Civic Passion and Youngspiration all won seats, demonstrating the appeal of their causes and the supporters of the pro-democracy movement's preference for new faces.[10] In these elections, the mainstream pro-democracy parties all encountered the challenge of inter-generational leadership changes. The Democratic Party and the Civic Party, which had prepared well, achieved satisfactory results in the elections; while the Labour Party and the Hong Kong Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood, which had neglected the challenge, suffered badly.

While the espousal of the causes of Hong Kong independence and localism served to distinguish the mainstream pro-democracy parties and the newly-emerging young radical groups, their differences in style, the lack of trust between them, and accumulated frictions had made it difficult for them to co-operate closely. They seemed to enjoy the support of different constituencies — the mainstream parties received support from liberals who were often aged 40 years and above, well-educated with middle-class status; while the radical groups attracted the support of younger generations. The former upheld the principle of non-violent political campaigns, and they shared a concern for the development of China. The latter were sometimes tempted to engage in confrontations with the police, and believed that Hong Kong should maintain a separate identity as well as a certain distance from China.

5. From Low Tide to Spontaneous Street Protests Leading to Crackdown

At the end of the Occupation Campaign, the pro-democracy movement understood that it had entered a period of low tide, as it had no realisable short-term objectives and therefore it could not effectively mobilise the community (Chen and Szeto, 2015). The number of people taking part in demonstrations and protest activities had been in decline. Meanwhile, the C.Y. Leung administration adopted a tough line against the radical localism groups whose leaders had been bogged down by court cases, even the banks refused to allow these groups to open bank accounts. In early 2017, it appeared that the localism groups had lost some of their appeal, and their future became uncertain. However, the crackdown had not reduced the levels of frustration and anger among the people (especially the young), whose political identification and political participation patterns meant that the deep polarisation in society was far from being healed. This helped to explain the pro-democracy groups' relative success in the elections after 2014.

During the second half of the C.Y. Leung administration, independence advocacy became a "straw man" which was conveniently used as an excuse for political suppression. The latter in turn eroded the cherished pluralism in society, exacerbated political polarisation and enhanced mutual intolerance. All of these factors contributed to the popular statement: "This is not the Hong Kong I used to know."

There was no dialogue between the pro-democracy camp and the HKSAR government. Obviously, given the political climate in Beijing, Xi Jinping was in no mood for such a dialogue. Without a dialogue, there was no competition between the moderate wing and the radical wing within the pro-democracy movement, and the confrontation with the HKSAR government was dominated by the radical wing.

Civil society groups in Taiwan observed that there were frequent reviews among themselves after a major movement or campaign, and they were surprised that such assessments were almost absent after the Occupation Campaign. The probable explanation was the differences among the pro-democracy groups and the lack of achievements; there was serious concern that reviews and assessments might engender open mutual criticisms and affect the preparations for the elections in 2015 and 2016. A low-key closed-door seminar was subsequently held among the pro-democracy political parties, and the public statement issued was that they should strengthen co-operation at the grassroots level. New School for Democracy, a group dedicated to the promotion of democracy in Chinese communities, launched an oral history project on the campaign; but it abandoned the idea of publication because of the court cases of the responsible persons who had been interviewed.

On June 9, 2019, 1.03 million Hong Kong people took part in a protest rally against the introduction of the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019 ("Fugitive (Amendment) Bill") by the Carrie Lam administration.[11] The amendment bill allowed Hong Kong people to be extradited to Mainland China for trial for crimes committed inside and outside Mainland China. Hong Kong people felt threatened and perceived this as a significant indicator regarding the erosion of the rule of law in the territory.

Immediately after the protest rally, the Carrie Lam administration refused to make serious concessions; and the Legislative Council scheduled to vote on the bill on June 20. It was this arrogance and total disregard for the protest rally that provoked about 40,000 young people attempting to surround the Legislative Council in the morning of June 12, when deliberations on the amendment bill were to begin. This action led to some violent clashes with the police in the afternoon, who

however succeeded in dispersing the bulk of the protesters later in the evening. It was a sad scene as tear gas and rubber bullets were deployed, and at least seventy-two people were injured.

Despite Carrie Lam's promise to shelve the bill on the following Saturday, two million people poured to the streets the next day. The Chief Executive delivered a public apology on June 18, indicating that the Fugitives (Amendment) Bill would likely meet a natural disappearance at the end of the present legislative session in July 2020. But she refused to resign as requested by the pro-democracy movement; and she also rejected its other demands including the formal withdrawal of the bill, the retraction of labelling the June 12 confrontation as a riot, the release those arrested, and an investigation into the related police violence. The shelving of the bill indefinitely was undeniably a victory for the protesters.

Chinese leaders since the Sino-British negotiations in the early 1980s had been most concerned about investors' interests because they realized that as an international financial center, money could leave Hong Kong very easily. But in this case, despite the articulation of reservations by the business community and the expatriate business community, the Carrie Lam administration only offered limited concessions without resolving the basic issue of lack of confidence in the Chinese judicial system guided by the Communist Party of China. Apparently Beijing and the Hong Kong government considered that the perceived political challenges from the opposition and dissidents more significant than the territory's good business environment.

Most local people believed that the Chinese authorities' tightening of their Hong Kong policy had been the root cause of the territory's problems. In the first place, Chinese leaders considered that Hong Kong was very dependent on the Chinese economy; and in view of China's economic strength and prosperity, Hong Kong's contributions to its

modernisation had been on the decline. This attitude had often been voiced by local leaders of the united front as well as by Mainland visitors to Hong Kong.

Especially since the demand for political reforms in 2013-14 resulting in the Occupation Campaign, Chinese leaders perceived Hong Kong as a crying baby all the time asking for more. Hence Hong Kong people should be taught a lesson and should learn to respect the parameters and red lines of the "one country, two systems" model as defined by Beijing. The emergence of localism and pro-independence groups provided the Chinese authorities and the HKSAR government a convenient excuse; in defence of state sovereignty, national security and in the combat of Hong Kong independence, the Carrie Lam administration felt it had a free hand.

The mainstream pro-democracy political parties probably shared the above understanding, but they did not publicly articulate their assessments of the political situation and exchanged views among them. Intra-party discussions on such assessments seemed to be few. Apparently the same applied to the radical political groups too. In the political campaigns and protests in the second half of 2019, the established pro-democracy groups offered no leadership, and the activities were basically spontaneous.

On April 18, 2020, the Hong Kong police arrested fifteen prominent pro-democracy activists in the morning for organising and participating in illegal protest rallies on August 18, October 1 and October 20, 2019. They were illegal because the police had refused to grant permission despite the fact that formal application procedures had been observed. Actually four of the activists appealed for holding the protest rallies as planned; the other eleven simply assumed prominent positions in the rallies without involvement in the co-ordination of the activities.[12]

This appeared to be the extent of the involvement and organisational activities of the recognised leaders of the pro-democracy movement, as reflected by the official prosecutions till now. There were many protest rallies organised by individual activists, and most of them were subsequently prosecuted. In these protest rallies, there was a clear understanding that they would start in the early afternoon, and the vast majority of the participants would return home at around 6 p.m. or so. Small groups of young radical protesters usually stayed behind and engaged in confrontations with the police, often involving violence. Hence it was obvious for the entire Hong Kong community that the protest rallies before evening would be peaceful and orderly.

The hitherto low tide of the pro-democracy movement was perhaps best illustrated by two successive defeats in by-elections in the Kowloon West Legislative Council constituency in 2018 to fill the two seats vacated by the legislators disqualified because of their violations of the oath-taking ceremony. The pro-democracy camp was expected to win in the single-seat constituency, simple-majority scenarios as it usually secured a 55-60 percent majority support of the electorate. The major cause of the electoral defeats was that the camp could only mobilise 60 percent of the voters who had supported pro-democracy candidates in the 2016 elections to the Legislative Council, while the pro-Establishment alliance managed to mobilise more than 80 percent of their supporters in the 2016 elections. Differences between generations and those between the radical wing and the moderate wing of the movement were negative factors too.

The protest activities in the second half of 2019, however, helped to restore unity among various pro-democracy groups. A common line was that mutual support was essential because all parties suffered under the suppression of Beijing and the Carrie Lam administration. Mainstream supporters of the pro-democracy movement who favoured non-violent

political struggle, came to accept the radical protesters' clashes with the police as well as their violence and vandalism, believing that the main provocateur was the Lam administration and its refusal to accept the pro-democracy movement's demands. After the break-in at the Legislative Council building, a slogan was displayed stating that Carrie Lam had taught the protesters that peaceful demonstrations would be useless. For their part, the radicals avoided criticisms of their moderate counterparts, perceiving them as important political allies.

Individual pro-democracy legislators often appeared in the confrontations between the young radical protesters and the police; they often tried to protect the protesters from police brutality as their presence attracted media attention. They too aroused police resentment and were sometimes arrested and prosecuted. These pro-democracy legislators won considerable goodwill of the community.

The police brutality rapidly escalated the level of violence in the clashes between the protesters and the police. The use of Molotov cocktails could not have been imagined before. The peaceful demonstrations of secondary school students in the mornings and their organisational competence were most impressive. In the final months of 2019, the protest activities became more dispersed, smaller in scale and, in some instances, more violent as police and protesters clashed.[13] These incidents often shut down traffic. Several universities were locked down; and there was a siege of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University that was violent and led to a brutal response from the authorities.[14] At the end of 2019, more than 8,000 protesters had been arrested. And from the launch of the campaign against the Fugitives (Amendment) Bill in 2019 to the end of 2020, the police had prosecuted more than 2,300 pro-democracy activists.[15] It was the arrival of COVID-19 which stopped all protest activities.

Despite the usual shunning of violence by the Hong Kong community, opinion surveys in the second half of 2019 consistently showed that more than 70 percent of the respondents considered that the main responsibility for the violent confrontations fell on the Carrie Lam administration and the police, and slightly more than 40 percent of them believed that the protesters should assume major responsibility. The community's strong sympathy for the pro-democracy movement led to its landslide victory in the District Council elections in November 2019, winning 390 seats out of slightly more than 450, controlling a majority in 17 among the 18 District Councils. Most of the newly-elected were young activists emerging in the political campaigns of the past decade.[16]

This new batch of District Councillors did not have much time to do useful work before the crackdown. But these activists obviously much broadened the base of support for the pro-democracy movement and were able to cultivate considerable mobilisation power. The mainstream pro-democracy parties had been trying to groom candidates for the District Council elections in the past two decades and largely failed. Before the 2019 District Council elections, the pro-democracy camp could only field 250 or so candidates for more than 400 seats, thus allowing many pro-Establishment candidates to be elected unopposed. In 2019, the situation was dramatically altered.

The election results might have shocked the Chinese authorities. In the beginning of 2020, the responsible cadres of the Central Liaison Office in Hong Kong and the State Council's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office were reshuffled. Much encouraged by the results of the District Council elections, Benny Tai and some activists began to plan and co-ordinate for the Legislative Council elections scheduled in September 2020 and the Election Committee elections in 2021, as well as the election of the new Hong Kong Chief Executive by the Election Committee the following March. Tai and his group hoped to achieve a

small miracle through exceptionally high voter turnout rates and careful co-ordination among the candidates to secure a slim majority in the Legislative Council and the Election Committee, and they intended to influence the outcome in the Chief Executive election and the election process. This significant initiative at this stage came from outside the pro-democracy political parties, in fact some of their leaders had reservations about Tai's co-ordination process, demanding the weaker candidates to withdraw before the polling day to concentrate votes for the stronger candidates as revealed by surveys in the campaign period.

This planning was derailed by the National People's Congress's May 2020 resolution to introduce the National Security Law in Hong Kong to align with China's own laws. Apparently when the moderates in the community were appealing for an independent investigation into the police violence in the autumn of 2019 as a first step in the process of reconciliation, the Party Central Committee's plenum then made the decision. It came as a surprise because it had been kept confidential and quite unanticipated. But tightening control over Hong was the logical response of the Chinese authorities and the HKSAR government to the political turmoil. As the latter refused to engage the pro-democracy movement and the protesters, rejected any attempts of reconciliation and concessions, a crackdown was the inevitable outcome.

A poll at that time showed that 64 percent of the respondents indicated that the National Security Law damaged the "one country, two systems" model; and 63.7 percent said that it would damage the territory's status as an international financial center.[17] The pro-democracy movement considers this the end of the "one country, two systems" model, as this was imposed on Hong Kong people without consulting them and it totally bypassed the local legislature.

At the end of July 2020, the Carrie Lam administration announced that the Legislative Council elections would be postponed by one year to

September 2021, citing the COVID-19 epidemic as the rationale. Before the postponement, the administration had already disqualified several pro-democracy activists from participating in the elections after their registration as candidates.

Earlier on April 18, 2020, the then Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Secretary in Hong Kong, Patrick Nip Tak-kuen, released three versions of the interpretation of Article 22 of the Basic Law to justify that the Central Liaison Office in Hong Kong and the State Council's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office had the authority to supervise the HKSAR. Then on February 22, 2021, the director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, Xia Baolong, indicated that the Chinese authorities would implement the "patriots govern Hong Kong" policy line, meaning that the governance of Hong Kong had to be grasped by "patriots".[18] To achieve this purpose, Beijing would have to "perfect the electoral system concerned".

Following the decision of the National People's Congress on March 11 at its annual conference, the Carrie Lam administration and the local Legislative Council dutifully proceeded to complete the necessary legislation.[19] When the final plan emerged about a month later, an expanded Legislative Council (from 70 to 90 seats) meant that the pro-democracy camp could, at best, hope to secure 20 seats. Worse still, candidates for the Legislative Council elections and the Election Committee elections would have to go through a qualifications review process in which the national security apparatus could reject candidates, with further suggestion that this process would extend to the District Council elections. So far, no concrete proposals have emerged; but the District Councils have largely become defunct because of mass disqualifications and resignations.

For Legislature Council candidates, their nominations would require two members' support from each of the five categories in the Election

Committee, and at least two of these categories (the industrial and commercial category and the Hong Kong representatives of national political institutions category) are dominated by the pro-Beijing united front. This proposal implied that the Chinese authorities and their local allies controlled the nomination process. Regarding the Election Committee for the Chief Executive, with many new restrictions introduced, the pro-democracy camp could at best secure slightly more than 200 seats out of 1,500. It subsequently refused to take part in the Election Committee elections and the Legislative Council elections in September and December 2021 respectively.

By now, it is obvious that the pro-democracy parties have very little room to survive and operate. Most of them are still struggling to survive, though many of their leaders are under detention because of the court cases involved. In contrast, major civil society organisations like the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, Civic Human Rights Front, the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, etc., have chosen to disband or cease operation. The same applied to the independent Internet media; and the vast majority of Internet commentators have left Hong Kong. Almost without exception, student unions no longer exist in the local tertiary institutions.

Hong Kong's responses to these changes have been muted, reflecting despair and a strong sense of impotence. There was a realisation that when the Chinese leadership was willing to pay a heavy price in terms of damages to the territory's functioning as an international financial center and the Party regime's international image to secure complete control, there was not much Hong Kong people could do.

6. Some Reflections

Since 1997, the Chinese authorities have shown no inclination for granting the territory genuine democracy. They are ready to maintain Hong Kong as an international financial center and business services center, but the highest priority is ensuring that Hong Kong does not pose a threat to the Party regime's monopoly of power. It seemed that the current Chinese leadership considered the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement dangerous and threatening as it had a potential demonstration effect on Mainland China itself. Hence, the pro-democracy movement was perceived as an enemy and the relationship with it was one of contradictions between enemies, and it needed to be severely restrained. (Cheng, 2023) The appropriate model would be the so called "democratic parties" in China.

A pro-democracy movement in perpetual opposition without a realistic opportunity to capture government almost inevitably encounters internal challenges and divisions. The crisis of returning to Mainland China and strong leadership before 1997 served to forestall such challenges and divisions. But divisions soon emerged in the Democratic Party in late 1998, and other political parties were established. These developments were almost inevitable. Better co-ordination mechanisms among the pro-democracy political parties, enhanced communications with various civil society groups and the absorption of young talents to the leadership of the political parties were certainly necessary and were neglected.

Given the Chinese authorities' basic position of the denial of genuine democratisation, the concentration on the parliamentary and electoral processes could not satisfy the pro-democracy movement's supporters, especially the younger generations. In the end, confrontations with the Chinese authorities could not be avoided. The leaders of the mainstream pro-democracy parties were not ready

for confrontations; but their moderate supporters were not too. In the end, it was the young activists who took the initiatives in the second half of the last decade. They valued the experiences and were willing to pay the price.

The Chinese authorities paid a heavy price too. They had no difficulties in crushing the pro- democracy movement in Hong Kong, and easily secured complete control of the territory. The turmoil in the second half of 2019 in Hong Kong and the subsequent crackdown on the territory, however, had a significant demonstration effect on Taiwan. They contributed much to the major electoral victories of the Democratic Progressive Party in early 2021; and destroyed the prospects of cross-Straits peaceful negotiations. Efforts and resources spent on cultivating the goodwill of the Taiwan people were wiped out. The image of the Chinese Party regime had been much adversely affected; and the Western world has been re-assessing the nature of the regime. With more than one million Hong Kong people holding foreign passports or permanent right of abode in Western countries, it is obvious that a considerable segment of the population wants to leave the territory. In March 2021, an opinion survey by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute indicated that 21 percent of the respondents had plans of permanently leaving Hong Kong; other polls in the recent one or two years reflected similar trends.[20] The desire to depart is abetted by the United Kingdom, Taiwan and a few English-speaking democracies offering various types of schemes to help Hong Kong people emigrate.

This is likely to result in a Hong Kong pro-democracy movement in exile, keeping the territory's situation in the spotlight, reminding the world to have a realistic assessment of the nature of the Chinese Communist regime. In the United Kingdom, the U.S. and Australia, many small groups have emerged serving the new Hong Kong immigrants, attempting to fulfil the above objectives. On important days

like June 4, July 1, etc., they have organised gatherings in several cities, sometimes attracting two to three thousand people in a major city.

The issue of insisting on peaceful, non-violent campaigns has disappeared as they are operating in Western countries; inter-generational differences are hardly relevant since the majority of the activists are relatively young, especially among the responsible persons. They seem to be aware of the problems among the pro-democracy groups from Mainland China established after the Tiananmen Incident. Fundraising does not appear to be a serious challenge yet, as their modes of operation do not require much financial support. Future development may well be different.

As many Internet media commentators have left Hong Kong and continue to operate overseas, and as independent media find it difficult to survive in the territory, Internet media among overseas Hong Kong communities may have considerable attraction among the diasporas and Hong Kong people. Here funding can be a challenge depending on the scale of operation.

Pro-democracy activists are acquiring new skills in their advocacy and lobbying work. They often co-operate with the Taiwanese, Uyghurs and Tibetan diasporas. Some of them may even think of standing for elections in the countries where they reside. Unfortunately, pressures from the pro-Beijing united front also exist in the major English-speaking countries.

In the foreseeable future, pro-democracy groups outside Hong Kong are likely to be more active than those inside the territory. The most difficult challenges are to maintain the attention of the international community and sustain the enthusiasm of the diasporas. Mutual support, tolerance and better co-ordination among these groups are naturally expected.

Notes

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1. For analysis of the elections, see all major newspapers in Hong Kong on May 25, 1998. See also Ma and Choy (1999), especially pp. 26-27.
2. See: *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), September 25, 2002.
3. See: Cheng (2007), especially Section IV.
4. See all major newspapers in Hong Kong on October 20, 2005.
5. 大台 /*datai*.
6. See, for example, Cheng (2014).
7. See also Wong and Wan (2009).
8. Tai, Yiu-ting Benny (戴耀廷) (2013).〈公民抗命的最大殺傷力武器〉[the greatest destructive weapons of civil disobedience].《信報財經新聞》(*Hong Kong Economic Journal*), 16th January 2013.
9. See all major newspapers in Hong Kong in the two days after the Legislative Council elections on September 5-6, 2016.
10. See all major newspapers in Hong Kong, September 5-6, 2016. Another group, Hong Kong Indigenous, had its political star, Edward Leung Tin-kei, disqualified and could not take part in the elections.
11. The full text of the bill is available online at: <*https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr18-19/english/bills/b201903291.pdf*>.
12. 蘋果日報 /*Apple Daily* (Hong Kong), April 19-20, 2020.
13. See, for example, *Channel News Asia*, November 19, 2019.
14. See: *Financial Times*, November 23, 2019.
15. 蘋果日報 /*Apple Daily* (Hong Kong), February 16, 2021.
16. See all major newspapers in Hong Kong in the two days after the District Council elections on November 24, 2019.
17. 明報 /*Ming Pao* (Hong Kong), June 1, 2020.

18. *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), February 23, 2021.
19. *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), March 31, 2021.
20. 美國之音 / *Voice of America*, March 29, 2021.

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Political Challenges in Hong Kong: Identity Politics, Legitimacy Crisis, and Cultural Clash

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Abstract

With its trade potential and rich cultural tradition, Hong Kong is now facing significant political challenges resulting from polarization in Hong Kong society, where localists are looking for their political identity. Drawn from contextual and textual analysis of the documentary analyses of periodicals, policy papers, official statistics, and relevant readings and empirical evidence, this paper aims to explore and analyze historical discourses delimited to the political identity, legitimacy crisis, and bursting cultural clash in HKSAR to address the political development in Hong Kong. The issue in Hong Kong is not to assess who is a loser or gainer as a result of the shift in authority from British to China and change in the policy arena endeavored to be sustainable but rather what is required, how policies are framed, and what are the consequences as a result of adopting different approaches. Hong Kong exhibits both political and cultural forms of localism. Political localism carries the idea that supports deliberative democracies in Hong Kong,

while cultural localists distinguish themselves from mainlanders and reject the yoke of Chinese identity in its current form. Nevertheless, localist has been able to express a pluralist and alternate vision against globalism and neo-liberalist implications. Thus far, the future of Hong Kong has seen localists transitioning in their stances – initially advocating for Hong Kong nationalism and independence, and now seeking a distinct local identity through reforms within the region. This shift has ushered in a new era of identity politics, transcending the postcolonial handover phase.

Keywords: *localism, mainlanders, identity politics, legitimacy crisis, culture, China, Hong Kong*

1. Introduction

The rise of localism is a significant event in the history of Hong Kong (HK). The emergence of localism in Hong Kong is mainly attributed to historic conflicts between Mainland and Hong Kong further highlighted through elections 2015-2016, added to localists' struggle to safeguard the identity and values of Hong Kong alongside taking anti-Sino positions in the process of democratization. Subsequently, the National People's Congress (NPC) imposed the National Security Laws on Hong Kong in 2020, raising widespread concerns in Hong Kong and the international society. The high-handed treatment extended to protestors creates a more polarized division amid a hybrid regime and political movement of localism (Veg, 2017).

The political movement, which Wing-sang Law (2013) regards as one that targets changing the political culture in Hong Kong, indirectly supporting the rise of localism, was constituted by multiple groups that had different goals, started with demanding greater autonomy for Hong

Kong, but mostly got sentiments of acquiring local identity and resentment against mainlanders for political interference in the political and socio-economic affairs of Hong Kong (Kwong, 2016). Veg (2017) asserted that the rise of new localisms in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) polity raised the issue of national identity that was acceptable to Beijing. When the localists felt that they were confronting the legitimacy crisis, it was a failure of the government administration. Furthermore, the incapacity of the HKSAR added fuel to the fire, and its outburst of dependence on Beijing hurt the democratization of Hong Kong (Lo, 2001).

Historically, Hong Kong has been a "Golden Bird" due to its immaculate trade potential and rich cultural tradition and heritage, but it faced significant political challenges that widened polarization in Hong Kong society (Lam, 2020). Twenty-five years later, since 1 July 1997, Hong Kong still lacks political homogeneity; it may not have a political identity on a collective basis; instead, it has local identities in thousands sharing common political and economic aspirations. By creating the large based on the small, localists and mainlanders are yet to learn from this indigenous psychology in Hong Kong.

One piece of evidence states that the previous order showed dominance under the pretext of modernization. This position got strength in the aftermath of visible moves to maintain environmental well-being along with social justice in the advanced age, while the sustainability engine does not work to drive it. Here, twinkles of hope still survive amid the political deliberations, ground realities, and immense turbulence. The element of exploration is equally essential to incorporate the fortune of experience.

This research conceives the premise that political development is hampered by political alienation in Hong Kong that causes mistrust among localists; further creating a legitimacy crisis over the

incompetence of handling issues in Hong Kong that invoked legal disaster in the polity of HKSAR; moreover, cultural clash burst in society as a result of polarization between localist and mainlanders. This paper does not intend to offer a moral judgment on either the localism movement or the choices made by the Chinese central government. Rather, this paper aims to explore and analyze historical discourses delimited to the political identity, legitimacy crisis, and bursting cultural clash in HKSAR to address the political development in Hong Kong.

2. Theoretical Framework: Identity Politics, Legitimacy Crisis, and Cultural Clash

This section critically reviews the issues regarding identity politics, legitimacy crisis and cultural clash. In the wake of their interrelationships, it is argued that the localists in Hong Kong are experiencing an identity crisis due to the advent of identity politics, legitimacy crisis and cultural clash.

2.1. Identity Politics

Identity politics gets strength from the social as well as cultural perspectives of the subaltern populations that were kept away socially, politically, and geographically from the mainstream hierarchy of power in an imperial set-up (Heyes, 2002). The imperial setup takes on to maintain natural harmony among different races of humans since everybody has a definite cultural identity, a social stand-up, and an economically assigned role thereby colored people need moral and intellectual reformation. Hence, the excluded segment of society poses a cultural resistance that complicates the process of establishing a postcolonial society. In this critical discourse of identity, the society of Hongkongers is facing confusion amid contradictions amidst the

hybridity of culture and social disorder along with transitional stages of liminalities (Bernstein, 2005). Hence, the decolonized world passes through a stage of cultural recognition; this study used postcolonial theory to get theoretical specificity and analyze the intellectual space in the context of the post-colonial era. The rise of localism in Hong Kong should be seen from the perspective of multi-cultural awareness reaffirming its dogmas and ideological beliefs (Araeen, 2000).

Hongkongers lived a life as both international citizens and the colonized before 1997, making their identity a complicated mix. Some scholars suggested that Hong Kong had actually enjoyed substantial autonomy from London when it was a colony of the United Kingdom (Hung, 2014). The trance of identity becomes even more distinct under the backlash of the transition from the United Kingdom to China. In the preceding decade, a new discourse has swept across Hong Kong society in a quest of local identity. A recent rise of localists provides ample evidence of their vocal presence. The localists are building a claim to seeking self-determination (Demosistō), by the Hong Kong Indigenous Party and the Hong Kong National Party. At the same time, a new localism emerged from the womb of conventional "Hong Kong identity".

The current political struggle in Hong Kong for political identity is dominated by the China factor fueled by the cultural clash of locals with mainlanders. It resorts to distinguishing amid groups advocating civic identification. Following the eruption of months-long protests mainly attributed to the outreach of Beijing's side-by-side feelings of seismic changes of identity in Hong Kong, some Hong Kong citizens felt that they were besieged by the authoritarianism of mainland Chinese. Economic turmoil and the heave of immigration further aggravated the traditional identity crisis among Hongkongers. Consequently,

identity took them to different discourses, many of which became narrower, and some became argumentative and confrontational. The divide is widening between Hongkongers and the people living in Mainland China. Many people on both sides show non-acceptance of the other, and the expression of hate has become routine on social media, e.g., Weibo, Zhihu, Facebook, Hong Kong Discuss Forum, and Golden Forum. Looking back, Hong Kong holds the status of a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC), operating under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework, as stipulated by the Sino-British Joint Declaration—a treaty signed by China and the United Kingdom in 1984. This doctrine explicitly dictates that the PRC would refrain from implementing its socialist system within the confines of Hong Kong, allowing the former British territory to maintain a semblance of political and economic autonomy for a subsequent period of 50 years till 2047 following the sovereignty transfer. Consequently, Hong Kong preserves its democratic ethos and capitalist orientation, evident in its distinct currency (Hong Kong dollar / HKD) and independent executive, legislative, and judiciary branches that oversee all domains with the exceptions of military defense and foreign affairs. Moreover, both English and Chinese are recognized and maintained as the region's official languages.

2.2. Legitimacy Crisis and Articulation of Cultural Clash

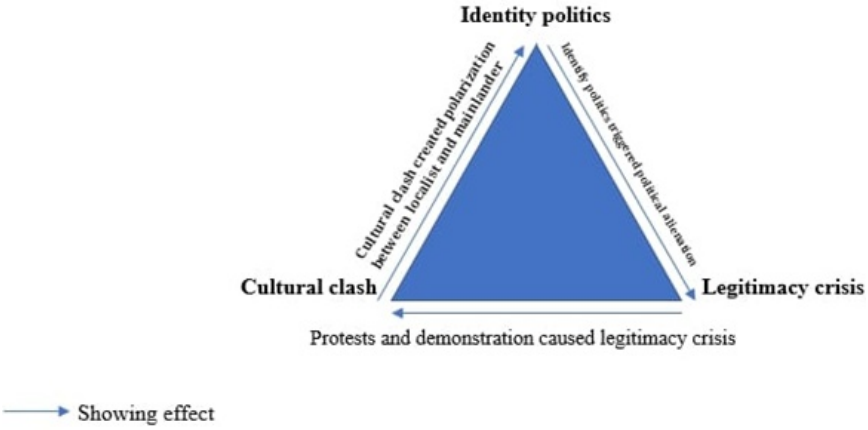
The Basic Law, as enacted, stipulates that the residents of Hong Kong will possess the right to vote for their Chief Executive. However, there has been consistent contention from the pan-democratic faction which alleges that the Chief Executive is, in practice, an appointee of the Beijing government rather than a choice of the election committee. This contention is rooted in the perceived lack of universal suffrage in the

Chief Executive's election process. The first Chief Executive was elected by the 400-member Selection Committee, and all Chief Executives since then were elected by the Election Committee. The number of members of the Election Committee expanded to 800 in 1998, and from 800 to 1200 in 2010. Nevertheless, it is still criticized as a "small-circle" election, especially considering that most of the committee members were from the pro-Beijing camp, which makes it possible for the Beijing government to choose a "trustworthy" Chief Executive, who will never oppose the policies decided by Beijing.

Identity politics has a close relationship with regime legitimacy, and any deficiency in this regard causes legitimacy crises within a polity. The discussion illuminated above accentuates the existence of causal relationships amid identity politics, regime legitimacy, and subsequently the legitimacy crisis. It is, therefore, vital to comprehend the idea of "legitimacy" and its allied crises. Legitimacy provides the foundation for a government to rule a state, as well as a reflection of public opinion, and its attitude towards the government. Certainly, a government if proves deficient in obtaining general support, the regime loses its legitimacy and authority, which will create a crisis on an enduring basis. According to Beetham (1991), legitimacy denotes a government's capacity to get adequate support, command or authority to rule a state. Diamond (2008) asserted that legitimacy points to the moral title possessed by the state to rule. To sum up, a legitimacy crisis refers to an issue that indicates a tussle between the government and the masses as a result of the inability of a regime to get desired public support. It was argued by Pye (1971) that the demonstration of a legitimacy crisis indicates an open conflict between the government and the public. In other words, the government is deficient in governance in the capacity of a regime. By advancing his arguments, Pye (1971) established that a

legitimacy crisis occurs due to ideological differences, and rivalry between different political parties or pressure groups that force political instability. Przeworski (1986) vetted the major arguments given by Pye about legitimacy, that losses regarding legitimacy are caused by mass unrest as well as mass non-conformity. Huntington (1991) raised an alternative perception and argued that identity politics and subsequent legitimacy crises might cause democratic declines thereby weakening the democratic values as well as political institutions. The trans-border movement of the mainlander population of China and Hong Kong within the first decade of the handover gave rise to a conflict of identity and cultural clash between Hong Kong's locals and mainlanders from China. The locals (six million) were outnumbered by Chinese visitors who "damaged" public facilities as well as the welfare system, and affected daily necessities negatively (Chan, 2014).

Figure 1 The Relationship between Identity Politics, Legitimacy Crisis and Cultural Clash



2.3. Hongkongers – Aftermath of Handover

Among the ethnic Chinese residents of Hong Kong who settled prior to 1949, a majority identified with their Chinese heritage. Their migration to Hong Kong was often driven by factors such as wartime displacements or political persecution in mainland China. For them, Hong Kong is not a homeland but a temporary living land. "They had little loyalty to Hong Kong," said Alexander Grantham (2012), a British colonial administrator who governed Hong Kong. However, many of the Hong Kong people born after the establishment of the People's Republic of China have a weak sense of identity as Chinese. Their parents might be dissidents, or citizens of the Republic of China, who might not be in favor of the People's Republic of China ruled by the Communist Party. Also, only 94% of the Hong Kong people are ethnically Chinese. Many people from other countries also have the permanent identity of Hong Kong, which means they have the right to vote, and they are legally Hongkongers (Census and Statistics Department, HKSAR, 2012).

Below the Lion Rock (獅子山下) stands as an emblematic television series in Hong Kong's broadcasting history, premiering in 1972 with five subsequent broadcasts. The series not only depicted the tribulations of Hong Kong's working class but also popularized the term "Lion Rock Spirit". This ethos, which emphasizes perseverance, collaboration, and communal authorship of the "Hong Kong Story", has been assimilated into the core values of many Hong Kong residents. Despite their technical designation as citizens of the United Kingdom, this shared cultural narrative fostered a burgeoning sense of identity as "Hongkongers". The Governor of Hong Kong was appointed by the Queen or King of the United Kingdom until 1997, which means that the Hong Kong people never had the right to vote for their political leader. However, the Hong Kong government got administrative and financial

autonomy after the Second World War. In addition, Hong Kong has entered international organizations with an independent status and established trading relationships across the world. As Wu (2016) pointed out, Hong Kong used to have independent systems of laws and civil service, and the government could make social and economic policies on its own.

While transferring sovereignty in 1997, Hong Kong was populated by 6.5 million with an economy having a size of 1/5 that of the Chinese economy inhabited by 1.2 billion. But the case is no longer this. In the last two decades, the economy of Hong Kong has gone into stagnancy, with no change in outlook, gross domestic product (GDP) growth retarded, giving way to inequality. Meanwhile, China has ascended to economic might while the Hong Kong economy has shrunk to 3%.

Historically, it would be unreasonable to presume that the political and economic systems of Hong Kong could operate entirely devoid of intervention from the Chinese central authority. However, given China's trajectory towards global prominence, the central government might seek tighter control over the autonomous region. The resistance has heightened the central government's vigilance, as it cannot afford to have an uncontrollable city within its jurisdiction. To further enhance the control, various mechanisms were employed, including the provision of loans, acquisitions of publishing entities, and the suppression of content deemed critical of the Communist Party. Notably, the strategic endeavors extended to bolstering pro-Beijing lobbying activities and enacting laws and regulations, such as the National Security Law in Hong Kong. A particularly contentious instance was the proposal of the extradition bill, which stipulated the extradition of criminal suspects to mainland China. This proposition instigated profound apprehension among Hong Kong residents due to concerns about potential exposure to inequitable trials and undue harshness. There existed a prevailing

sentiment that such legislations, if enforced, could be weaponized against political adversaries, civil activists, and journalists.

In recent years, there has been palpable tension between protestors and law enforcement agencies. On the other hand, the central government was celebrating its 70 years of rule in China underscoring its enduring authority and stability. A pivotal moment in this backdrop was the 2019 District Council Election where democrats achieved a resounding victory, securing 17 of the 18 District Councils. It is clear that the government is facing a legitimacy crisis.

To summarize, Hong Kong used to be an "independent city" under the rule of the United Kingdom, while its new generation knows little about mainland China. The previous economic success achieved by Hongkongers made them culturally confident and lacking in this vein has given fertile ground for localism. "Localism" has been used to redefine the political landscape, cultural practices, as well as identity politics of Hong Kong. The term implied the unparalleled repositioning of the political dichotomy extended over decades amid the camps of "pro-establishment" and "democrats" in Hong Kong as a result of which a distinct category of "localists" came into being. In the wake of the fluidity of their organization and the existence of internal ideological rivalry, after the Legislative Council elections in 2016, members were steered towards localist discourses as per their political affiliations winning 8/70 seats in the law-making constituency (Kaeding, 2017). Moreover, the rise of localists promptly resulted in creating scholarly dialogues in Hong Kong encompassing areas such as China–HK bondage, the escalation of nationalism, the identity quest, and the advent of social activism. This context led to developing an ideological base to build up a collective action among Hong Kong localists to counter the "hegemonic shadow" of the Beijing government on the city through social confrontation.

According to So (2015), the renaissance of Hong Kong identity is due to the intervention made by China in sabotaging the process of democratization of Hong Kong and damaging civil liberties creating socio-economic mayhem in the city. Some researchers have conceptualized a central–marginal framework theorizing the uprising of localists in Hong Kong and linked it with ideological and shared response to state-sponsored nationalism by China (Fong, 2017b). A strategy boosted by rigid "Communist China" based on political activism to govern the regime in Hong Kong was noticed (Chan, 2017). Thus, localism in Hong Kong, to some extent, reflects "anti-China" implications, and caused political and excursive breaches in Sino-HK relations. Therefore, the exogenous significance of the China factor that exists behind the rise of localism in Hong Kong demands a pedagogical debate on the endogenic impetus that triggered localism in Hong Kong. Furthermore, it seeks to look out for the forces that drive Hong Kong localism besides the China factor.

Discourses leading to the rise of localism after deteriorating the bond between Hongkongers and mainlanders in current times helped to reshape the party-political ambitions and socio-cultural cognitive process of Hongkongers. These factors were identified as important variables behind the rise of localism in Hong Kong. Apart from this reality, localism delivers a pluralist as well as an alternative vision that is in contradiction to globalism as well as neo-liberalist implications. It contradicts nationalism and points to national pride in terms of centralized state power as a replacement for shielding the liberties and people's freedom (Moore, 2014). The digressive development of localism in Hong Kong finds its basis in the diversity of ideological orientations coming out of the footmark of the China factor.

The first is linked with the association of Chinese nationalism with Hong Kong identity, including the uncertainty of dialogue amongst the national and local levels of Hongkongers. The second relates to the rise of nationalism among Hongkongers since the city attained the 20th anniversary of handover (Fong, 2017b). The presence of the China factor behind localism triggered local identity later in the post-colonial period coming out of its hybridized nature of identities, in which Hongkongers were able to carry a culturally distinct identity (Fung, 2007).

The intricate interplay between Chinese and Hong Kong identities has precipitated the emergence of Hong Kong nationalism, particularly in the face of increasing tensions between the city and mainland China. Despite the assurances encapsulated in the "One Country, Two Systems" framework, China has begun to exert its influence on the democratization process in Hong Kong. This includes matters of national identity, press autonomy, and economic stakes (Fong, 2017a). Such maneuvers reflect China's intention to solidify its control over the former British colony, aligning with what it perceives as its sovereign priorities.

3. Political Development in Hong Kong

Dating back to 2011, Occupy Central, an occupation protest, was staged to support the "Occupy Wall Street" movement in Central, Hong Kong, which is the central business district (CBD) of the city. This protest was portrayed by the mainland media as an anti-China protest. Initially, the occupation protest was organized by some left-wing student groups, aiming to oppose the capitalists' designs which were backed up by the Communist Party of China against the British colonial government. The left-wing pro-democratic parties were involved in the movement. For decades, customary pro-democratic parties (泛民主派) sought

democratic reform in the political system of Hong Kong with the support of the Chinese government. Importantly, most members of pro-democratic parties acknowledged the "One Country, Two Systems" framework. Indeed, public sentiments towards localist campaigns were not that high due to non-interest from pan-democrats; all happened in 2014 during the Umbrella Movement.

People of Hong Kong were losing their trust in Beijing's policies as Beijing did not show its interest in granting democracy to Hong Kong but rather aimed to control it; this factor created disappointment in the rank and file of Hong Kong society. The drop in trust came up on the horizon: at the time of the Beijing Olympics in the year 2008 when 53.1% of respondents showed their trust in the Beijing administration, while only 14.4% showed distrust, whereas towards the close of 2015, nearly 40% showed distrust, while only 35.2% showed their trust. This disillusionment was compounded by perceptions of the "One Country, Two Systems" policy and emergent resistance strategies. Some quarters placed the blame on the leadership of the pan-democratic parties, leading to a pivot towards "localism" as an alternative approach. However, the evolutionary process of democracy became hampered and could not make headway. Democrats in Hong Kong became a victim of "transitional fatigue", which commonly emerged in hybrid regimes having a blend of both democratic and authoritarian elements (Ma, 2011).

Against this backdrop, an increased number of people in Hong Kong, mostly youth, were feeling disgruntled with the conduct of pro-democratic parties. This discontentment took them to the localist camp to stand off political intervention of China and in search of a new direction. The transition from the pro-democratic faction has resulted in creating localism, denoting a political movement that had the supreme aim of preserving the identity and autonomy of Hong Kong (Kwong,

2016). The growth of civil society has also contributed to awakening local conscience in Hong Kong. Society is getting away from the prevailing slogan of unitary nationalism as of Chinese and focusing on rebuilding a new identity for Hongkongers. In 2011, Chin Wan (陳雲)'s well-known publication *On the Hong Kong city-state* (香港城邦論) won the Hong Kong Book Prize organized by Radio and Television Hong Kong (RTHK, 2012), which is the symbol of the popularity of localism as an emerging political idea.

In 2014, the Hong Kong University Students' Union published the book *Hong Kong nationalism* (香港民族論), raising the concepts of nationalism in Hong Kong. The publication suggested that the political illusion of the pro-democratic camp was bankrupt. Hence, Hongkongers should affirm their will for sustainable autonomy and set self-determination of the future as the goal of the Hong Kong community (*Undergrad*, 2014).

The social unrest of 2019 in Hong Kong finds its linkage with riots that popped up in the 1960s powered by social unrest caused by impermanence, a sense of deprivation and polarization among the Hong Kong inhabitants (Cheung, 2009). Hong Kong had a young people population of about 3.3 million in 1966, below the age of 21 years (Jones and Vagg, 2017). Social unrest spread in the country when youth had allegiance to communist leftists who took part in the riots of 1967 responding to and supporting the Cultural Revolution in the Chinese mainland (Cheung, 2009; Adorjan and Chui, 2013).

Chinese culture is believed to have strong assimilative ability ethnically found in the Chinese nation (中華民族). Both immigrants and natives are eventually, if not easily, integrated into the Chinese society. Joseph Kitagawa (ed.) (2002) provides interesting examples regarding the cultural assimilation of Chinese. This is not a patent of communist China, since it dates back to thousand years ago. Even in the

1940s, after moving his government to Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek had clear intentions to sinicize the inhabitants of Taiwan who were assimilated by the Japanese under their regime. This includes renaming streets with names of mainland geographical regions, using Mandarin Chinese, forbidding the use of regional languages, growing pan-Chinese nationalism, and building a vision for Taiwan in the light of the Chinese perspective. The motivation behind the policy was to make the current immigrants approaching Taiwan from mainland China show more loyalty to the Republic of China, or the Chiang Kai-shek government, as compared to the previous tendency to remain loyal to their respective cities rather than to China (Morais *et al.*, 2010). The same motivation might lead to the adoption of the sinicization policy by the central government in Hong Kong. In recent years, due to the rising independence movement in Taiwan, some Chinese officials and diplomats also advocated the "reeducation" of Taiwan and the Taiwanese after the "reunification" (*National Review*, 11th August 2022).

The Sinicization attempts sometimes incite desensitization or localization movement (Morais *et al.*, 2010). In the case of Hong Kong, the localization movement reached a climax in 2014. On August 31, 2014, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress made a decision, commonly known as the "831 decision", that changed the Election Committee into the Nominating Committee. There will be a so-called "universal suffrage", but the candidates, two to three, must be nominated by the committee. Students led a series of protests against the NPCSC's decision implemented on 22 September 2014, often called the "Umbrella Revolution". It was assumed that over 1.2 million people participated in the protests, which were denounced as "illegal" by government officials in Hong Kong and Beijing (CCPOS, 2014).

4. Discussion

Originally, localism did not find its roots in politics. Starting with saving the Star Ferry Pier and Queen's Pier from demolition in 2005, the movements took a turn towards the political identity of Hong Kong. Truly, localism has embarked on a political dimension that culminated to differentiate itself from the mainlanders. The Legislative Council (LegCo) of Hong Kong after protests and successive elections provides a mirror image of 70 seats amid pro-government (establishment) and a blend of political integration, pan-democrats and localists (protest leaders). Consequently, localists remained successful in retaining a veto in government-supported legislation. However, despite passing through the electoral process, political conflicts arise. Though both the political camps such as the pan-democratic and localist camps vowed to promote democratic development, their mutual relationship did not reach a feasible end, but rather went into a confrontation with less cooperation. Their focal interests remained in China and Hong Kong respectively. There is another reality: the soft line approach followed by pro-Beijing legislators facilitated localism to grow and rise. Moreover, Hong Kong people had an inherent emotional attachment with a praiseworthy pride towards their identity as a citizen of Hong Kong; this led them to grow into a constructive force instead of following destructive protectionism. However, the transition in demands towards anti-Chinese sentiments raised concerns within the Chinese government, emphasizing their commitment to maintaining a certain "red line".

According to Oxford Analytica (2016), conflicts between mainland and Hong Kong fostered the rise of localism in the polity of Hong Kong. Moreover, the ideology borne by localism signifies an anti-China component for protecting Hongkongers' identity, interests, as well as values. Furthermore, the rise of localism supported the process of democratization in the state though it created challenges as well as

opportunities among the camp of pan-democrats. Hence, the ideology of localism brought an original thought in the political rank and file of the country. On the other hand, the Hong Kong administration, with the support of the central government, has taken a series of actions attempting to eliminate the localism activists. In 2016, five LegCo candidates, all of whom are localists, were disqualified by the Electoral Affairs Commission for advocating or promoting Hong Kong independence. After the election, Baggio Leung and Yau Wai-ching were sued by the government for their "misconduct" during oath-taking as elected members of LegCo.

Since then, the 6th Legislative Council (2016-2021) of Hong Kong has never met its full membership of 70 members. In fact, more legislators with localist or pro-democratic backgrounds were disqualified later, leading to a mass resignation of pro-democratic legislators. The council was then dominated by the pro-establishment camp. On 27 May 2021, the controversial bill named Improving Electoral System Bill 2021 was passed with a 40-to-2 vote.

Elected in December of 2021, the 7th LegCo is also dominated by the pro-establishment camp. In fact, because of the revised electoral system, not even one legislator is from the pro-democratic or localist camp. To some extent, the opposition parties in the legislative and political institutions have been eliminated. However, the identity issues of Hong Kong people could not be resolved. The localist groups grew with the loss of trust in the HKSAR officials who tended to punish rather than respond, which disappointed its residents. Adorjan and Chui (2013) raised an argument that a penal elitist was primarily concerned with seeking their legitimacy along with promoting citizenship as well as citizen identification with Hong Kong. According to Chris Cunneen (2011), a punishment policy targeted towards Hong Kong society is a kind of tool used as moral censure to finalize the national boundaries and

raise questions on shaping identity, sovereignty, and sense of citizenship for Hong Kong society.

Theoretically speaking, the localist discourse reflected significant implications for understanding the relationship amid the identity politics, legitimacy crisis and cultural clash in Hong Kong. Legitimacy crisis according to the localists, emerged as a result of intervention from the PRC. The localists regarded these interventions as illegal, and under this resentment, many perspectives regarding the governance of HKSAR and the future of Hong Kong popped up.

Proponents of the self-rule of Hong Kong held that Hong Kong has the capacity of self-governance. Therefore, the intervention by the PRC in the affairs of Hong Kong is illegitimate. According to them, the legitimacy crisis is due to the non-existence of democratic institutions and the lack of popular voting. Another perspective on "maximal autonomy" exercised by the PRC in the political development of Hong Kong holds it caused a legitimacy crisis among the public and lost its credibility.

5. Conclusion

The issue in Hong Kong is not to assess who is a loser or gainer as a result of a shift in authority from the United Kingdom to China and change in the policy arena endeavored to be sustainable. Rather, it is about understanding the framing of policies, their sustainability, and the consequences that arise from various policy decisions. While the Chinese central government understands some of the socio-economic underpinnings of the localist discourse, it remains particularly sensitive to any challenges to its sovereignty or the "One Country, Two Systems" principle. It is evident that certain localist movements, especially those advocating for Hong Kong's independence or self-rule, confront this

principle directly. Moreover, there is a prevailing sentiment in Beijing that some localist demonstrations might be fueled by external entities seeking to destabilize China, and the Chinese government has the ability and willingness to confront the international pressure (Qin *et al.*, 2021).

The China factor has triggered the identity politics and the legitimacy crisis in Hong Kong aggravated by a cultural clash between Hong Kong residents and mainlanders. More significantly, the public discontent amid localists is due to actions of the HKSAR government that ignited the legitimacy crisis, though this can also be viewed in an opposite way. Hong Kong exhibits both forms of localism, i.e., political and cultural localism. Political localism carries the idea that supports deliberative democracies in Hong Kong while cultural localism distinguishes itself from mainland-Chinese-orientated identity and rejects the yoke of Chinese identity in its current form and existing Chinese culture. Nevertheless, localist has been able to express a pluralist and alternate vision against globalism and neo-liberalist implications.

Over time, localist positions have evolved from advocating for Hong Kong nationalism to demanding outright independence, and now to a call for a distinct local identity through reforms. This evolution represents a fresh phase in identity politics during and after the colonial transition. This paper offers a unique analysis of political development in Hong Kong after assuming the HKSAR. To strengthen the "One Country, Two Systems" framework, it is suggested that the central government and the HKSAR might have regular dialogues to ensure clarity and understanding of respective roles and responsibilities, and ensure that economic integration with the Greater Bay Area respects Hong Kong's unique business environment and practices.

Note

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The Myth of Institutionalizing Hong Kong–Taiwan Relations: 26 Years after the Handover

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Abstract

Liberal institutionalism theorists argue that institutional establishment would promote cooperation between the two political entities of the exchange in terms of strategic interests, which is facing many obstacles in the internationally anarchist system. It could function especially well during external interactions at the sub-state level. However, after Hong Kong was handed over to the People's Republic of China (PRC), the development of relations with Taiwan was full of twists and turns, approaching the opposite. Formal and bureaucratic interactions have prompted Hong Kong officials to make conservative decisions about Taiwan's sensitive relationship, stifling the strategic ambiguity needed to utilize Hong Kong as a buffer for cross-strait tensions. Especially

during the Democratic Progressive Party's reign, the institutionalization seems to have opened a loophole and given Taiwan an "international" form to interact with Hong Kong, crossing the red line of Beijing's "One China Principle". Coupled with the closer connections between the civil societies of Taiwan and Hong Kong since the mid-2010s, Beijing has imposed a clampdown on institutionalized Hong Kong–Taiwan relations. The previously subtle interaction between Hong Kong and Taiwan, being leveraged during the cross-strait conflict, has been greatly weakened since the mid-2010s.

Keywords: *city diplomacy, cross-strait relations, institutionalization, strategic ambiguity, sub-state diplomacy*

1. Introduction

Regardless of the tradition of any theoretical school, the basic analytical unit of international relations studies is mainly the state. However, the increasing interaction between cities at the international political level challenges this premise. Today, cities engage in bilateral and multilateral relationships, including sister cities mechanisms, multilateral cooperative agencies, and so on (e.g. United Cities and Local Governments, Sister Cities International). More than a decade ago, Rogier van der Pluijm discussed the concept of "city diplomacy" to capture the mechanisms by which cities interact with cities to represent their own interests (van der Pluijm, 2007). However, compared with the literature on subjects such as governance studies and urban sociology, especially at the theoretical level, the discipline of international relations studies has not responded to this until recent years. Simon Curtis argued that this challenge made the assumptions about forming a modern international system no longer static. However, he also saw this as an

opportunity for the theoretical resources of the discipline of international relations to contribute to the study of global cities or even to reform the discipline itself through a processual understanding of international relations (Curtis, 2016a, 2016b, 2014, 2011). In studying the city's companion practice and the city-city pairing, some scholars also reconsider the "inside" and "external", "domestic" and "foreign" implications of the international relations theory (Joenniemi and Sergunin, 2017). Traditional boundaries between "state" and "international" are becoming more blurred. The experience of institutionalizing interaction between cities becomes more and more prevailing. This paper examines the applicability of international relations theory to the interaction between Hong Kong and Taiwan, which may help to connect "city diplomacy" literature with international relations studies and enrich relevant research literature. The authors understand that many may not consider either or both of the actors discussed in this paper as "states" in the strictest definition (although Taiwan does have a national character in practice), but critically reviewing the experience and challenges of institutionalizing the Hong Kong–Taiwan relations at the sub-state level is a valid reflection of unconventional theories (Chiu and Law, 2023).

2. Institutionalization: Strategic Miscalculation?

A concise revisit to the different views on institutionalization in international politics, namely realism and institutionalism, should inspire further analysis of the case. According to institutionalism theory, institutionalization in international relations refers to establishing institutions to regulate and promote cooperation between states. However, the debate over whether institutionalization really benefits cooperation between nations has always been a diving line between the

realism and the liberalist tradition, i.e. while they all see the state as an actor in their own interests and admit that the international system is anarchical, they have different views on the prospects for cooperation between countries. Realism holds that cooperation between countries in anarchy is constrained by deception and relative gain. In such cases, international institutions cannot mitigate the constraints of anarchy on international cooperation (Grieco, 1988; Mearsheimer, 1994). On the contrary, neoliberal institutionalists argue that institutions are central to promoting cooperation even in an anarchic international system (Axelrod and Keohane, 1985; Keohane, 1989, 1984). The crucial difference is how they understand the results under the anarchic international system. Realists argue that countries only care about relative gains in cooperation, which are difficult to materialize because countries fear being deceived in the real world. Even if countries succeed in reaching international agreements, they will still worry that other countries will benefit more from these systems than they do.

On the contrary, institutionalists rebut that by reducing the cost of verification and providing valuable information, establishing international institutions precisely resolves distributional conflicts and reduces fears of deception and unequal relative interests between countries. The core idea of neoliberal institutionalists is that state actors in anarchy cooperate through international institutions to promote mutual interests. According to R.O. Keohane, a master theorist of it, this view relates to the impact of the system on national action and the reasons for institutional change. In the assumption of free trade and interdependence, like the liberalist tradition, actors must derive potential benefits from their cooperation. However, somehow different to other liberalist factions, neoliberal institutionalists argue that international cooperation between nations is not based on altruism, idealism, personal honor, common purpose, internal norms, or a common belief in a set of

values embedded in a culture and that countries choose to institutionalize cooperation because of strategic calculations. It can also facilitate an understanding of what is happening to each side and the motivations and interests of other sides (Keohane, 1989). In the international system, cooperation refers to the process of one government's policy being coordinated through policy which is consistent with another government's policy. Such negotiations usually take the form of international agreements (Keohane, 1984). In short, the institutionalized international system encourages countries to act in new ways. In some specific respects, such as environmental protection, researchers believe subnational governments can join with regional peer groups to explore new approaches in mitigating or adapting policies through institutionalized collaboration, especially those that might be less attractive within a national context (Duggan, 2019).

Diplomacy between other sub-state entities tends to focus on non-political issues. Still, the relationship between Hong Kong and Taiwan remains highly politically sensitive due to its special historical background. Hong Kong and Taiwan do not only share a common history of post-World War II "economic miracles" but have been separated from the Chinese mainland under communist rule for more than half a century. More importantly, the relationship between Hong Kong and Taiwan is one of the most subtle cases in East Asia, as the development of their relationship is inextricably linked to the prospects for cross-strait relations. Although Hong Kong–Taiwan relations are not state-to-state type, due to the special nature of cross-strait relations, the sensitive status of the two places enjoys more autonomy in foreign exchanges than other non-state actors. As a result, after the 1997 handover of Hong Kong from British colonial rule to the Beijing authorities, the latter formulated the "One Country, Two Systems" (一國兩制) model to attract Taiwan's peaceful reunification, a national

priority concerning territorial sovereignty. Therefore, the significance of Hong Kong–Taiwan cooperation should focus on social and economic agreements and seriously consider their political interaction.

The Taiwan government first proposed setting up institutions to manage bilateral relations shortly after Hong Kong's handover, which it said would provide a more direct way of constructive interaction and resources. This call was first responded to in 2002, with the responsibility for managing the relationship transferred to a formal government department, culminating in the establishing of a formal institution for both sides in 2010 to facilitate cooperation. However, it is not necessarily accurate to examine this particular situation by applying traditional rationalism in international relations studies because the strategic interests of the actors were no longer merely economic but entangled with political considerations. Specifically, the institutionalization of Hong Kong–Taiwan relations since 2010 has stifled the subtle strategic ambiguity between previous interactions. However, Hong Kong–Taiwan relations seemed to be getting closer in the Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) era (Ma was Taiwan President from 2008 to 2016) when institutionalization initially led to certain co-operation agreements. Meanwhile, it was also the beginning that Hong Kong government's management of this relationship became more and more formalistic and bureaucratic, and it was often conservative in decision-making. In other words, even if Beijing authorities do not directly manipulate the Hong Kong government's decision-making, bureaucrats tend to prioritize non-risk and closely follow Beijing's official line, especially on sensitive and complex issues, such as cross-strait relations. Ultimately, institutionalization is not about promoting co-operation but about making Hong Kong–Taiwan relations more fragile and vulnerable to fluctuations in cross-strait relations, as evidenced by events that followed the change of administration in Taiwan's 2016 presidential

election. In other words, Hong Kong has lost the flexibility needed to play a mobile role in cross-strait politics, and establishing an office to deal with Hong Kong–Taiwan relations has ultimately deviated from its original intention of encouraging interaction and communication between the two places through strategic ambiguity.

3. How Strategic Ambiguity Worked before the Institutionalization

According to institutionalism theory, mutual economic interests among actors are the prerequisite for cooperation. Economic consideration is certainly part of the calculations in the relationship between Hong Kong and Taiwan. Cross-strait trade had long been banned, and Hong Kong had been the centre of Taiwan's extensive trade and investment with the Chinese mainland and Southeast Asia. In 1996 (on the eve of the 1997 handover), Hong Kong was Taiwan's largest export destination, accounting for more than 24% of Taiwan's exports. Politically, although the two major political parties, i.e. the Kuomintang (KMT, 中國國民黨) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民主進步黨), have different positions on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, both parties agree that Hong Kong is different from the Chinese mainland and that the people in Taiwan and Hong Kong have similar aspirations for freedom and democracy. Therefore, after the transfer of power in 1997, Taiwan intended to maintain friendly relations with Hong Kong for economic gain, and all parties had good intentions to establish good relations.

However, the interaction between Hong Kong and Taiwan is not just about the economy. As a place under British colonial rule, Hong Kong hosted many KMT members who failed to flee from the Chinese mainland to Taiwan around 1949. They formed an organized and intimate community, which considerably impacted Hong Kong society.

In the early days of KMT's move to Taiwan, they even used Hong Kong as an intelligence centre to prepare for a counter-offensive against the communist rule in the mainland (Lee, 1997; Lombardo, 1999). Before the handover, Hong Kong was also regarded as a neutral place where Beijing and Taiwan authorities could engage in dialogue to reach the so-called "1992 Consensus" (九二共識). Hong Kong provides an indirect channel for the two sides to mediate and enhance mutual understanding. If cross-strait relations deteriorate, Hong Kong can act as a buffer to ease tensions. In other words, the essence of Hong Kong is to travel across the difficult territories of the two sides of the Taiwan Strait, providing flexibility for political adjustment. When cross-strait relations are tense, Hong Kong's strategic ambiguity makes it vital to the interaction between Hong Kong and Taiwan.

The 1997 handover caused great uncertainty about the trade and social ties between Hong Kong and Taiwan at that time. The relationship between Hong Kong and Taiwan has changed from a relationship between two independent entities to a secondary relationship between two territorially disputed "China". Hong Kong became part of the PRC, not a neutral place for mediation between the two sides across the Taiwan Strait. Before the handover, Beijing proposed an unprecedented "One Country, Two Systems" model. It is generally believed that this was not designed specifically for Hong Kong but that Beijing authorities hope to use this model to attract Taiwan to the peaceful reunification of the PRC. This unprecedented arrangement, certainty and stability were what the parties needed most at the time. Attempting to calm the wave of doubt, in 1995 Beijing authorities announced "The Basic Principle and Policy of Hong Kong relating Taiwan issue" (i.e. "Qian's seven rules", 錢七條) in 1995 to ensure that all existing "unofficial" links can be maintained under Beijing's overseeing. As one of the core national interests, Beijing authorities hope to use these ties through economic and

social means to attract Taiwan to achieve national reunification (Fravel, 2008). Regardless of the future development of cross-strait relations, Beijing had hoped to maintain a channel of communication through the links between Hong Kong and Taiwan. Under this strategy, Hong Kong–Taiwan interaction was deliberately designed to be informal, with no institution, giving both sides flexibility to operate, as distinct from more formal and organized interaction between Beijing's Association for Relations across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS, 海峽兩岸關係協會／ 海協會) and Taiwan's Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF, 海峽交流基金會／海基會).

In the early days after the 1997 handover, the development of Hong Kong–Taiwan relations largely followed these arrangements and operated smoothly. A post entitled "Special Advisor" to the Chief Executive (CE) of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) was set up. Yip Kwok-wah (葉國華) was appointed by the first CE, Tung Chee-hwa (董建華), to specifically manage Hong Kong's relations with Taiwan "outside the institution" to fulfil the "non-official" requirement of the "Qian's seven rules". Yip was close to Tung but was not considered a government official. This institutionally ambiguous arrangement deliberately provides flexibility in dealing with Taiwanese politicians, and Yip was also a businessman with good connections and knowledge on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. One of his most important objectives was establishing and maintaining good relations with Taiwan, so he actively participated in several activities organized by pro-Taiwan organizations in Hong Kong, such as the federation of Hong Kong and Kowloon Trades Union Council (HKTUC, 港九工團聯合總會). However, he subtly denied representing the official position on these occasions but only spoke for himself. Meanwhile, Taiwan figures still hoped to understand Hong Kong's policy towards Taiwan and its bottom line through Yip. Although such arrangements may be indirect and

inefficient in reaching agreements, together with some politically minded people, they were sufficient to provide prospects and opportunities for good relations in the performance of Hong Kong's subtle role under such complex circumstances.

Although Yip has publicly stated that Hong Kong–Taiwan exchanges must follow cross-strait relations, the fact was that he maintained Hong Kong–Taiwan relations during the turbulent period of cross-strait relations and acted as a political lever between the two sides (Shen, 2010). The most typical example is the first "Hong Kong-Taipei Twin Cities Forum" held in January 2000 and re-held in 2001 after the unrest since July 1999 caused by Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui (李登輝)'s "Two-state theory" (兩國論). This was the first and most successful city diplomacy during the period of cross-strait tensions. The two sides discussed non-political city governance issues, such as traffic operations and management. These links have proved to be essential for maintaining communication in times of uncertainty in cross-strait relations. Although Yip has said that it is difficult for Taiwanese officials to visit Hong Kong, a year after the DPP came to power, Ma Ying-jeou was officially received by the Hong Kong government as KMT's Taipei Mayor. Tung became the first Hong Kong leader in 50 years to formally meet with senior Taiwanese officials. In addition, Yip attended Taiwan's National Day celebration every year to show his goodwill towards Taiwan. It was reported that the relevant activities after the 1997 handover could be held indoors as usual, and it was also the tacit understanding reached between Yip and Taiwan's Consul de facto in Hong Kong (CNA, 1st July 2022).

Although no formal co-operation agreement was signed during these years, and cross-strait relations fluctuated from time to time, Hong Kong and Taiwan followed the pre-handover unofficial approach to maintain stable relations. However, since Yip did not belong to any

particular government department, the development of Hong Kong–Taiwan relations was rather limited in resources. Taiwan's government has repeatedly raised the concern over the years, such as Vice Premier in 1998 (*Sing Pao Daily News*, 5th December 1998), Taiwan's Consul de facto in Hong Kong in 1999 (*Sing Tao Daily*, 24th November 1999), and the Deputy Minister of the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC, 大陸委員會 / 陸委會) in 2001 (*Hong Kong Economic Times*, 1st December, 2001), etc. According to Chang Yong-shan (張永山), who led the Department of Hong Kong and Macau Affairs in MAC in the 1990s and revealed to this article's authors during an interview in April 2022, the will for institutionalizing the Hong Kong–Taiwan relation had even begun before the 1997 handover. They argued that formal institutions and problem-solving mechanisms can provide better services, which is also in line with the logic of institutionalism theory. Taiwan's enthusiasm for institutionalization, as suggested by neoliberal institutionalism, is to maximize the information available to both sides and reduce the likelihood of cheating and risk. Moreover, Taiwan, especially the DPP administration, may believe that through the institutionalization of interaction with Hong Kong, the diplomatic status of Taiwan would be somehow enhanced. However, the wishful thinking was not actualized in that way.

4. Constitutional Affairs Bureau: A Risk-averse Bureaucracy

Hong Kong government positively responded to Taiwan's call for institutionalization in 2002 by removing the unofficial Special Advisor from dealing with Hong Kong–Taiwan relations and transferring its responsibilities to the Constitutional Affairs Bureau (CAB, renamed in 2007 as the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau / CMAB, 政制及內地事務局), a high tier government office with substantial financial

and human resources. This is the first step towards the formalization and institutionalization of Hong Kong–Taiwan relations, and part of Tung's major initiative to introduce political accountability for principal officials. The purpose of the system is to place political responsibilities for making "political decisions", including those concerning relations with Taiwan, to be shouldered by the principal officials appointed by the CE rather than by career civil servants (Cheung, 2003). The shift was initially seen as a welcome move by both sides, and Hong Kong officials affirmed that it would provide "rich resources" for the development of relations with Taiwan, not just through middlemen such as Yip.

However, the new strategy did not pan out as both governments expected. Those years were one of the low points in the bilateral relationship. For example, during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) pandemic in 2003, relations between the two sides were strained when the Taiwan government required Hong Kong tourists to be quarantined for 10 days. The increasingly hostile cross-strait relations driven by Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) also undermined the quality of Hong Kong–Taiwan relations. However, not only did institutionalization not facilitate cooperation, but the official nature of CAB/CMAB has constrained its capacity for interaction with Taiwan by deviating from Beijing's official line. In dealing with this relationship in a politically sensitive environment, the formal department of a very young SAR government lacked the diplomatic experience and skill to play the role of Hong Kong. The management of this special relationship by government departments was also at odds with the "Qian's seven rules", which constrained official links between the two governments and undermined the space of strategic ambiguity previously enjoyed.

More importantly, managing this delicate relationship requires political shrewdness. The original purpose of Tung's accountability system for principal officials was to enhance their legitimacy and

accountability. However, under an undemocratic political system, the system would only discourage principal officials from making risky decisions on sensitive political issues, which is one of the main shortcomings of institutionalization under such context. According to Bernard Silberman, institutional bureaucrats have more than one type of "rational" response in suspending disbelief for the moment, i.e. (1) they will provide efficient responses to overcoming the oft-noted gap between stated policy goals and their implementation; (2) the responses are not functional, but responses to individual fears over uncertain futures, then some policies will never be implemented (Silberman, 1993). To avoid being held accountable, Hong Kong principal officials preferred to make conservative decisions at the expense of the primary goal of maintaining friendly relations with Taiwan. Several incidents during the Chen administration reflect this dilemma: the Secretary for CAB/CMAB had not attended Taiwan's National Day banquet since the Bureau took over the responsibility. The popular Ma Ying-jeou was not allowed to visit Hong Kong again in 2005, prompting criticism from the Taiwan government that the Hong Kong government had formalized everything and accused Hong Kong of being responsible for the deterioration of bilateral relations. Even after relations between the KMT and the Beijing authorities warmed up in the same year, Taiwan's Consul de facto in Hong Kong were not allowed to meet with Lien Chan (連戰), then KMT Chairman, at the Hong Kong airport. These incidents revealed the self-censorship character of Hong Kong officials, limiting any risks for interaction that could lead to embarrassment. It was a gesture that would certainly be detrimental to bilateral cooperation. Although the KMT's relations with the Beijing authorities had become more friendly, Hong Kong–Taiwan relations had not been strengthened through unofficial contacts. On the contrary, Taiwan officials have been repeatedly rejected by Hong Kong, avoiding any

embarrassment or accountability. As a result, some Taiwan officials complained that their interactions with some Chinese mainland cities were even more closely than with Hong Kong. This scenario also illustrates the gradual shift in strategy on the part of Taiwan and the gradual decline in Hong Kong's importance as a middleman in cross-strait relations.

It was not until the KMT returned to power through the 2008 presidential election and devised a détente policy between the two sides that Hong Kong–Taiwan relations returned to warm friendship. The Hong Kong government became active again in seeking contact with Taiwan under "safe" conditions consistent with Beijing's policy of reconciliation with Taiwan. However, when the two sides of the Taiwan Strait maintain friendly relations, Hong Kong's role as mediator is less significant.

During 2008–2010, before the further step towards institutionalization of establishing formal organizations, the attitude of the Hong Kong government towards their relations with Taiwan changed remarkably. The Hong Kong–Taiwan relations appeared in the CE's Policy Address of 2008 for the very first time, elevating the importance of bilateral economic cooperation. Mutual visits were re-activated for both sides, including certain high-level officials, such as the KMT Taichung Mayor Jason Hu (胡志強), KMT Taipei Mayor Hau Lung-pin (郝龍斌) and DPP Kaohsiung Mayor Chen Chu (陳菊). The Hong Kong government agreed to set up the Twin Cities Forum in Hong Kong with Taichung, which was held in April 2009. Stephen Lam (林瑞麟), the Secretary for CMAB, also visited Taiwan twice under his official title during this period and met the Minister of MAC, the highest-ranking office for cross-strait affairs. Lam announced the establishment of the Hong Kong–Taiwan Economic and Cultural Cooperation and Promotion Council (ECCPC) and the Taiwan–Hong Kong Economic

and Cultural Co-operation Council (THEC), an institutionalized platform for future communication and exchanges. Apparently, the improvement in Hong Kong–Taiwan relations is blessed due to the easing of cross-strait tension after KMT regained power through the 2008 election. However, the leverage role of Hong Kong during hostile cross-strait relations was gradually lost as the Hong Kong government increasingly subordinated to the policies of the Beijing authorities. It must be stressed such an outcome resulted from the rigidness brought by the institutionalization of interactions and cooperation that began in 2002. The fate of Hong Kong–Taiwan relations followed much of the rhythm of cross-strait dynamics.

5. Institutionalization before Mid-2010s: Passer-by on the Stage of History

As cross-strait relations experienced detente, the further stage of institutionalization began when the Hong Kong and Taiwan governments set up an organization on each side to specifically engage with its counterpart to promote economic, trade and cultural exchanges, based on the model established in cross-strait relations. The creation of the platform for dialogue showed the sophisticated difference between the two sides in terms of their official status. To Hong Kong, the ECCPC was similar to other platforms in the Chinese mainland, such as Beijing and Shanghai. To Taiwan, contrarily, the THEC was equivalent to the embassies de facto of Taiwan all over the world. In other words, the arrangement degraded the status of Taiwan and its office to the sub-state level from Beijing authorities' perspective. The upside of institutionalization in facilitating cooperation was immediately evident under the warm cross-strait relations – the two councils worked together and were responsible for organizing joint meetings and coordinating

exchanges among government officials for the common well-being of both places' people. The councils were also authorized to sign agreements whenever necessary. The ECCPC set up a Hong Kong office in Taipei, the Hong Kong Economic, Trade and Cultural Office (Taiwan) (HKETCO, 香港經濟貿易文化辦事處), for the first time to deal with the issues of Hong Kong residents in Taiwan. This was the climax of the bilateral relations under the context of the rapprochement of the cross-strait relations. Previously, the unequal status and the lack of a common platform had been the main constraint for the official relations between Hong Kong and Taiwan. This platform could provide the mutuality and certainty that both sides hoped for. Yet, such flexibility was not replicated in their handling of issues. As the following discussion shows, although such modes of interactions has favoured some short-term positives in reaching an agreement, this endeavour towards the institutionalization of the relations also signalled a fundamental shift in the role of Hong Kong in cross-strait relations by removing the ambiguity required for Hong Kong to be the leverage and dialogue channel between Beijing and Taipei, especially when the two sides are in conflict. This structural change rendered Hong Kong an ordinary Chinese city.

Institutionalization seemed to have played its role in fostering cooperation from the outset. During the meetings organized between the two councils, the two governments reached nearly 20 agreements in areas including trade, culture, tourism, tax and public health and consensus in food safety, double tariff of goods transit avoidance and insurance supervision (ECCPC, n.d.). The Taiwan government announced that Hong Kong tourists visiting Taiwan could apply for a visa online for free to stay in Taiwan for a month. Hong Kong Monetary Authorities also signed a memorandum of understanding with the

respective authorities of Taiwan to strengthen the supervision of banks. Apart from the meetings of the two councils, institutionalization also brought government officials together to have high-level exchanges. For instance, Lai Shin-yuan (賴幸媛), then Minister of the MAC, visited Hong Kong, and Hong Kong's Financial Secretary John Tsang (曾俊華) visited Taipei. Taiwan's politicians from both parties, including former DPP presidential candidate Frank Hsieh (謝長廷) and DPP Tainan Mayor William Lai (賴清德), also had free entry to visit Hong Kong. Particularly, Frank Hsieh not only interacted with the Hong Kong government and public but also communicated with certain Beijing authorities' officials, thereby restoring the special status of Hong Kong as a platform for pioneer cross-strait communications.

Apart from regular official interaction, some political gestures by the Hong Kong government also reveal the enhanced friendship between Hong Kong and Taiwan. First, Leung Chun-ying (梁振英, CE from 2012 to 2017) received his first guest from Taiwan, the former Chairman of Straits Exchange Foundation Chiang Pin-kung (江丙坤), "in the office" to symbolize the formal nature of the meeting. This is an unprecedented move by the Hong Kong CEs, who in the past have often met with Taiwan officials outside their office for political correctness. Moreover, Christina Liu (劉憶如), the former Minister of Finance in the Taiwan government, was included as a non-official member of the Economic Development Commission set by Leung in his first Policy Address. Leung's pragmatism was evident in dealing with these sensitive relations.

Second, the iconic Twin Cities Forum between Hong Kong and Taipei was reconvened in June 2013, the previous time dating back to Ma's tenure as Taipei Mayor in 2001. This kind of summit allowed the cities with similar scales to exchange their experiences in city

governance, in which policy transfer was a primary way to learn from each other's experience in different areas (Evans and Davies, 1999). In fact, given that most of these summits were non-political and within the city level, the sub-state level diplomacy provided Taiwan with new opportunities as it could surpass its contested statehood. This strategy of "pragmatic diplomacy" was utilized as a significant channel for Taiwan to break through its diplomatic isolation since the 1990s (van der Pluijm, 2007; Chang, 2005). It also offered a model for Hong Kong and Taiwan to establish normal relations regardless of the cross-strait political atmosphere. Thus, Hong Kong should have also used this dimension to maintain links with Taiwan by building an institutional mechanism for organizing city summits (Shen, 2015). Yet, the government did not tap into such potential fully.

Thirdly, the waiting time for issuing visas for Taiwan's leading officials in Hong Kong was regarded as an indicator of the bilateral relations. For instance, for the Kwang Hwa Information and Culture Center (KHICC, 光華新聞文化中心, Taiwan's Cultural Consulate de facto in Hong Kong), the waiting time for the visa of director Ping Lu (平路) in 2002 was more than a year. However, that time was greatly reduced to less than a month for Lee Ying-ping (李應平) in 2012, which showed the confidence of the Hong Kong government in its friendliness with Taiwan.

Finally, the people's degree of movement freedom also demonstrated how much trust was placed in the other government. Hence, the more liberal the immigration system was towards their residents, the better the relations were. Before 2008, Taiwan residents were allowed to stay in Hong Kong for at most seven days without a permit. The number of days was later extended to 30 days for Taiwan residents with a Mainland Travel Permit. Since the start of September 2012, Taiwan residents have been allowed to complete the immigration

procedures online before they travel. The highly convenient immigration arrangements encouraged the movement of people between the two places.

6. When Institutionalization Meets Socio-political Movements

Although both Hong Kong and Taiwan enjoyed the benefits of institutionalization since Ma's first presidency, the institution encountered challenges in its flexibility in 2014, which ultimately exposed the shortcomings of institutionalization under such context, i.e. failure in promoting co-operation in the face of political conflict related to the Beijing authorities. Although the immediate context of the two large-scale socio-political movements that happened in Taiwan and Hong Kong differed, both predominantly aimed at rebuking the increasing control and influence in respective societies from the Beijing authorities. The Umbrella Movement, which began in October 2014, was a direct response to defy Beijing's control over Hong Kong's democratization, demanding Beijing's restoration of its commitment to granting autonomy to the SAR and striving for genuine universal suffrage (Wong and Chu, 2017; Chan, 2014). In terms of Hong Kong–Taiwan relations, however, the ramifications on bilateral relations were particularly notable after the Sunflower Movement happened from March to April 2014 in Taipei. The movement gave birth to the panic mentality that Taiwan would be "Hongkongized" (Kaeding, 2014), i.e. Taiwan was somehow on the path to post-1997 Hong Kong under the severe manipulation of the so-called "China factor". Some Taiwanese people were really afraid that a united front (e.g. in economic and mass media aspects) like the one being in Hong Kong was taking place in Taiwan would eventually be forced to unify with the communist mainland, which was against the will of people's majority. This

mentality was clearly reflected in the protestors' slogan, "Today's Hong Kong is the Future of Taiwan", during the Sunflower Movement.

The Sunflower Movement marked a great setback for Beijing's effort since 2008 in attempting to win over the hearts and minds of Taiwan's people by offering economic benefits. More significantly, in the context of Hong Kong–Taiwan relations, rather than attracting Taiwan to unify following the model of Hong Kong, Beijing's plan of applying "One Country, Two Systems" in Taiwan failed spectacularly because of the negative demonstration in Hong Kong for almost 20 years. It begs the question: does Hong Kong still play a mediating role in terms of cross-strait relations?

The two socio-political movements converged the civil societies of Hong Kong and Taiwan to resist their "common enemy". Under such a narrative in the aftermath of the movements, the two societies, especially the socio-political movement activists, became aware of their common experience in resisting the impact of the Beijing authorities. Such realization developed a new dimension in Hong Kong–Taiwan relations that was inactive before, which is the interaction between the civil societies, and their solidarity was apparent. For instance, Joshua Wong (黃之鋒), one of the leading activists in the Umbrella Movement who has enjoyed international popularity since the Anti-National Education Movement in 2012, paid frequent visits to Taiwan to express their determination to fight for democracy and share their experiences with the leaders of the Sunflower Movement, Lin Fei-fan (林飛帆) and Chen Wei-ting (陳為廷), after their movements. Apart from the mainstream activists, another group of activists labelled as "localists" emerged after the Umbrella Movement, which predominantly strived for Hong Kong's self-determination and independence. Localists also visited Taiwan and shared their experience with their counterparts in Taiwan for the first time in May 2015. However, it was subsequently

labelled "the collusion between members of Hong Kong and Taiwan independence" by the Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO, 國務院台灣事務辦公室／國台辦) of the Beijing authorities. Such political judgment has revealed Beijing's suspicious attitude towards civil interactions between Hong Kong and Taiwan that were once encouraged after the handover.

Theoretically, this type of "new public diplomacy" (Melissen (ed.), 2005), where diplomatic practices are not limited to between governments but also among people, could be the potential new dimension for the demonstration of the discredited model of "One Country, Two Systems" where different views and opinions were tolerated in Hong Kong society. Public diplomacy has provided great potential for delivering soft power for a country (Nye, 2008), which the Hong Kong and Beijing authorities desperately need to convince Taiwan to accept any form of unification (Wang, 2008). However, given Beijing's hostile attitudes since the mid-2010s, these interactions were not relished by the Hong Kong government and were even worsening the existing Hong Kong–Taiwan official links under the institutional structure. Under Beijing's authoritarian context and its growing control in Hong Kong, they were unfortunately considered threats to regime security, which is of prime importance to the communist rule. Thus, to prevent the possible embarrassment to the Beijing authorities, their visa applications were immediately rejected by the Hong Kong government without any reason when the Taiwan civil society activists planned to meet their counterparts in Hong Kong and participate in the 1 July Rally in 2014. This was the first time that Taiwan residents without any political party backgrounds were refused entry. This official decision sent a clear message that the Hong Kong government did not welcome people who were considered threatening from Beijing's perspective. Not only did this rejection violate the "Qian's seven rules" of encouraging interactions between civil societies, but it also fed into the perception

that "One Country, Two Systems" only existed in its name, which is exactly what socio-political activists in both societies believed. In other words, the Hong Kong government did not tackle the root problem but only fueled the support of the socio-political activists at home and abroad and legitimated their frequent exchange. As a result, this incident failed to discourage the interactions of the socio-political activists but only stimulated more of them to express their agency. Nevertheless, in the whole situation, institutions' supposedly role of defusing potential conflicts before they happened was sidelined.

7. The Myths of Institutionalization for Sub-state Level Bilateral Relations

Despite the uncertain factors affecting Hong Kong–Taiwan relations, the institutionalized interactions in the immediate aftermath of the socio-political movements during the Ma administration were not disrupted. Joint meetings between ECCPC and THEC were organized in December 2014 and September 2015, albeit with less agreements achieved. Two further meetings were held, but the issues touched on lacked any follow-up. One of the platform's achievements was the inter-cities forums co-operated with Taichung (July 2014) and Taoyuan (August 2015) to exchange their experiences in tourism, air travel and logistics. The Hong Kong-Taoyuan Summit was particularly significant because it was the first one held between Hong Kong and the DPP city government. The summit demonstrated that city diplomacy between Hong Kong and Taiwan was a possible strategy to bypass party lines and political disputes. Nevertheless, these exchanges were only possible since the KMT remained in power. Interactions and communication as a result of institutionalization only work when cross-strait relations are friendly. Moreover, the efficacy of these meetings cannot be denied, but these

forums were on an ad hoc rather than a regular basis where a resolution mechanism could be devised at times of conflict. Such distinction proved to be significant as it failed to take advantage of one of the key merits of institutionalization in providing valuable information of the other side to maintain cooperation in times of disagreement (Keohane and Martin, 1995).

When it came to an economic cooperation framework like the cross-strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), one of the most important agreements that would deliver concrete benefits and one of the most vocal demands of Hong Kong's top officials to maximize the economic synergistic effect among the greater China, the institutionalized interactions failed in reaching an agreement. Hong Kong top officials had repeatedly proposed negotiations in the councils to secure the complimentary production chain for Hong Kong, but Taiwan's reaction was lukewarm. Both sides only fudged the issue by "studying the possibility" of building such a framework. Taiwan representatives had only responded to repeated calls with "considerations" over the years but refused to enter into any negotiation timetables. This rejection revealed one of the major limitations in interactions of Hong Kong–Taiwan relations, i.e. when the relations became tense, such kind of agendas were dropped altogether. This example urges reflection on how far these institutionalized councils could sustain the shocks in the cross-strait relations since the mid-2010s. Rather than fostering economic cooperation out of the self-interest of both sides, institutionalization only brought formalization of the meetings and some technical sectoral deals that failed to deliver overwhelming benefits.

Economically speaking after signing ECFA with Beijing in 2010, the previous transit role of Hong Kong in cross-strait trade was compromised. During 2010–2016, the annual growth rate of the cross-

strait trade re-exporting through Hong Kong was only 6.4 percent, which decreased from 8.5 percent during 2004–2010. The annual growth rate of the Hong Kong–Taiwan trade during 2010–2016 was 3.57 percent, which decreased from 6.34 percent during 2004–2010 (Chiu and Law, 2020). The trading relations with the Chinese mainland were diversified to other Chinese cities instead of centralized in Hong Kong as the distribution center. Consequently, Taiwan did not feel any urgency to enter similar agreements with Hong Kong, as admitted by the director of the Hong Kong Economic, Trade and Cultural Office. Without such agreement, however, Hong Kong's economic development became lagging behind in a world with increasing emphasis on connectivity within a production chain of the regional economy (Khanna, 2016). Hong Kong as a city must especially engage in the network of the regionalization of trade in a globalized world. This was why Hong Kong's top officials had been so enthusiastic about it, and its failure to negotiate such an agreement bore more significant consequences than those fragmented agreements in various fields achieved by the mutual platform.

The limitations of institutionalization under such a context were exposed when DPP's Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) was elected as President in January 2016. Since the Sunflower Movement's poor management of the KMT consequently won the DPP a landslide election, a tough attitude, at least through political rhetoric, towards cross-strait relations was expected by the voters. For instance, Tsai refused to recognize the "1992 Consensus" but only to accept the "historical fact" of the "1992 Negotiations", a red line for Beijing's "One China Principle", which has certainly enraged the Beijing authorities. This showdown by the DPP administration under such unconventional cross-strait settings squeezed out the constructive ambiguity in Hong Kong–Taiwan relations, which was key to the bilateral cooperation.

Nevertheless, in the previous DPP administration under Chen Shui-bian, when cross-strait relations were strained, Hong Kong was often utilized as the strategically ambiguous channel to have informal communications for both sides to settle their conflicts, which was also one of the priorities for Hong Kong–Taiwan relations. Yet this function was lost through all the efforts of institutionalization and interactions of social activists that raised the defence mechanism of the Beijing authorities. As a result, this period was the lowest point in the 20-year relations between Hong Kong and Taiwan. Instead of performing the role of defusing conflicts, the degree of inharmony between the two governments was comparable to, if not worse than, that cross-strait relations.

Due to institutionalization, all official ties abruptly collapsed after Tsai won the presidential election. Mutual visits of senior officials or party leaders ended (Table 1) (Chiu and Law, 2020). The meetings between the ECCPC and THPC stopped. The trust and friendship that had been established over the years was replaced by a war of words between the two governments. Again, the social activists were caught in the middle, which alerted the Hong Kong government to shut out any possible "danger". For instance, responding to the reports that Taiwan's New Power Party (NPP, 時代力量) would campaign for Youngspiration (青年新政), the Hong Kong localist organization standing for the Legislative Council in 2016, the Hong Kong government explicitly dismissed the possible visit even before the reports were confirmed. The Hong Kong authorities also warned against intervening with Hong Kong's internal affairs when the MAC recognized the democratic legitimacy of the two then-disqualified Legislative Councilors, Yau Wai-ching (游蕙禎) and Baggio Leung (梁頌恆) from Youngspiration. This was the first time such a warning

was made against the Taiwan authorities. Hong Kong government's response demonstrated the huge concern and sensitivity towards the comments made by the new Taiwan government. The most significant factor that led to the deterioration of Hong Kong–Taiwan relations was undoubtedly a pro-independence DPP that came into power in Taiwan. The original intention of encouraging Hong Kong–Taiwan interactions and devising Hong Kong as the leverage in cross-strait relations was no longer relevant. It demonstrated a subtle change in the role of Hong Kong in cross-strait relations, diminishing as a mediating point for mutual negotiations in times of tension. The strategic ambiguity between Hong Kong and Taiwan was replaced by explicit clarity to indicate that Hong Kong is part of the PRC and follows Beijing's cross-strait policies strictly.

Table 1 Number of Mutual Visits by Senior Officials and High-profile Politicians in Each Administration (Including Transit)

Hong Kong government	**Tung Chee-hwa era (1997–2005)**		**Donald Tsang era (2005–2012)**		**Leung Chun-ying era (2012–2017)**		**Carrie Lam era (2017–2022)**
Taiwan government	**Lee Teng-hui (1997–2001)**	**Chen Shui-bian (2001–2005)**	**Chen Shui-bian (2005–2008)**	**Ma Ying-jeou (2008–2012)**	**Ma Ying-jeou (2012–2016)**	**Tsai Ing-wen (2016–2017)**	**Tsai Ing-wen (2017–2022)**
Number of visits	**2**	**2**	**4**	**21**	**16**	**0**	**1**
Total	**4**		**25**		**16**		**1**

Meanwhile, despite the cut-off of interactions at the institutionalized official level, when the action of control towards dissent escalated, the cooperation between Hong Kong and Taiwan civil societies was only further fueled up. Otherwise, these two societies would not have shared a "common enemy". Between Tsai's victory in the election to the end of Leung's administration, the social activists of Hong Kong publicly visited Taiwan at least five times to seek support and discuss strategies that could break through the deadlock in Hong Kong society under Beijing's control, the most frequent period since the handover. As a gesture of solidarity, the NPP and DPP members of Taiwan's Legislative Yuan (中華民國立法院) formed a front concerning Hong Kong's democratization. These actions reinforced the aforementioned intrinsic inertia of the Hong Kong government created by the institutionalization of Hong Kong–Taiwan relations. In other words, the Hong Kong government has been increasingly cautious and defensive in dealing with the relations with Taiwan. Since Beijing has been more directly intervening in Hong Kong affairs, the government has avoided making delicate decisions and has looked to Beijing to avoid any political responsibilities concerning the sensitive cross-strait issues. As a result, in August 2016, the TAO and the Beijing authorities' Liaison Office in Hong Kong (香港中聯辦) decided to refuse the entry of any DPP politicians with official positions to Hong Kong. It was the first time such a decision was made by the Beijing authorities instead of the Hong Kong government, which demonstrated the shift of decision-making power from Hong Kong to Beijing regarding its relations with Taiwan. Many popular public figures from Taiwan, regardless of political affiliation, were also refused entry subsequently. Such a trend damaged the distinctiveness of Hong Kong, which was not conducive to the reconciliation of Hong Kong and Taiwan. The loss of autonomy of

Hong Kong in dealing with its relations with Taiwan only contributed to the homogenization of Hong Kong–Taiwan relations and cross-strait relations. The former took a drastic turn for the worse during the era of Leung Chun-ying who succeeded Donald Tsang (曾蔭權) as CE in 2012 (Table 2) (Chiu and Law, 2020).

Table 2 Important Events in Hong Kong–Taiwan Relations during Leung Chun-ying Era

July 2012	C.Y. Leung (梁振英) becomes the Chief Executive of Hong Kong.
September 2012	Third meeting between ECCPC and THEC.
September 2012	C.Y. Leung shares his views on Hong Kong-Taiwan relations for the first time.
November 2012	Hong Kong's Secretary for Home Affairs Tsang Tak-sing (曾德成) visits Taiwan, and Taiwan's Culture Minister Lung Ying-tai (龍應台) visits Hong Kong.
March 2013	Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) regards the bilateral relations as in their "best period".
April 2013	C.Y. Leung urges Hong Kong and Taiwan to sign economic agreements like ECFA.
June 2013	Hong Kong-Taipei City Summit reconvenes.
June & July 2013	DPP's Frank Hsieh (謝長廷) and William Lai (賴清德) visit Hong Kong.
September 2013	Fourth meeting between ECCPC and THEC.
October 2013	Social activists including Chu Yiu-ming (朱耀明) meet with their counterparts in Taiwan including Shih Ming-teh (施明德).
March 2014	Sunflower Movement in Taipei.
May 2014	Joshua Wong (黃之鋒) visits Taiwanese activists including Lin Fei-fan (林飛帆) and Chen Wei-ting (陳為廷).
June 2014	Sunflower activists are rejected entry to Hong Kong.
July 2014	Hong Kong-Taichung City Summit.
September 2014	Occupy Central campaign in Hong Kong.
December 2014	Fifth meeting between the ECCPC and THEC.
March 2015	New Taipei City Mayor Eric Chu (朱立倫) visits Hong Kong.
May 2015	Localist Chin Wan (陳雲) visits Taiwan to share experiences with independence activist Lin Cho-shui (林濁水).
August 2015	Hong Kong-Taoyuan City Summit.
September 2015	Sixth meeting between ECCPC and THEC.
January 2016	DPP's Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) is elected President of Taiwan.
March 2016	National University saga.
August 2016	Former KMT and DPP politicians are rejected entry to Hong Kong.
October 2016	Localist Legislative Councilor Baggio Leung (梁頌恆) and Yau Wai-ching (游蕙禎) meet with pro-independence activists in Taiwan, characterized by Beijing's Taiwan Affairs Office as "joining of two independence forces".
October 2016	Hong Kong government warns against Taiwan's intervention in internal affairs.
December 2016	Hong Kong National Party (香港民族黨) convener Andy Chan Ho-tin (陳浩天) visits Taiwan.
June 2017	Taiwan Congressional Hong Kong Caucus is inaugurated. Hong Kong Legislative Councilors and activists are invited.

The situation further deteriorated in Hong Kong under the Carrie Lam (林鄭月娥) administration (2017-2022). Lu Chang-shui (盧長水), who was supposed to come to be Taiwan's Consul de facto in Hong Kong in July 2018, failed to be issued a visa by the Hong Kong government. The story of Kwang Hwa Information and Culture Center was similar, i.e. successor from Taiwan was not facilitated by the Hong Kong government to come after its last director's duty was finished in December 2018. In March 2019, the popular KMT Kaohsiung Mayor Daniel Han (韓國瑜, who became Tsai's KMT rival in the presidential election 2020) transited Hong Kong for one day before his high-profile visit to the Chinese mainland, the SAR government's official reception process was significantly dwarfed, could only become an unimportant pawn for the Beijing authorities to put the KMT into its united front for boycotting the DPP. Han became the only senior official visit that was undertaken between Hong Kong and Taiwan during Carrie Lam's era.

The outbreak of the Anti-Extradition Law Movement (AELM) in Hong Kong in June 2019 was also triggered by the loss of flexibility in Hong Kong–Taiwan relations, as the two governments were unable to resolve the extradition of a Hong Kong man in a murder case happened in Taiwan. During this unprecedently large-scale socio-political movement, on the one hand, Taiwan's politicians and people gave great support to Hong Kong civil society's struggle for democracy in terms of public opinion, materials and concrete measures. On the other hand, Beijing authorities offered strong recognition of the Hong Kong police's heavy-handed crackdown on the protests. Civil societies of Taiwan and Hong Kong became more united in terms of their resistance to the "bullying" from Beijing, and the image of "One Country, Two Systems" was rotten to be irretrievable in these two societies (Ma, 2020).

"Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region" (中華人民共和國香港特別行政區維護國家安全法) was enacted in the summer of 2020, legally claimed Taiwan as an "external force" and the risk for Hong Kong–Taiwan interactions to carry the charge of "collusion with external forces". Since 2020, Taiwan's National Day activities in Hong Kong, which were never interrupted after the 1967 Leftist Riot, have been prohibited to be held both outdoors and indoors. In June 2021, The Taiwan government recalled all the Taiwanese staff working at the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Hong Kong (TECO, 臺北經濟文化辦事處, Taiwan's Consulate de facto in Hong Kong) due to the Hong Kong government demanding them to sign a document supporting "1992 Consensus" or no visa would be renewed. All these actions practically imply that attempting progress through the institutionalization model to facilitate Taiwan-Hong Kong relations is almost impossible after the AELM.

Since Taiwan–Hong Kong relations were locked into this pattern of interaction by institutionalization, the change of Hong Kong CE in July 2022 did not resolve much of the trajectory. If anything, the antagonization between the two sides under Lee Ka-chiu (李家超) became even more imprudent. The homogenization of Hong Kong and Beijing authorities in dealing with Taiwan incidents was not just reflected in the actions but also in its rhetoric. In response to the United States House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, Lee Ka-chiu followed the same language as Beijing's response, condemning the visit as "interfering with China's domestic affairs" and "infringement of China's sovereignty and territorial integrity". When the Beijing authorities published the "White Paper on the Taiwan Question" shortly afterwards, the CE quickly issued his support for Beijing to "show its resolve to achieve unification of the motherland". It was the

first time the CE of Hong Kong engaged in the cross-Strait quarrel in such a high-profile manner and backed up by the team of principal officials.

On the other hand, Taiwan was increasingly treating Hong Kong as if it were part of Mainland China. The special status that was given to Hong Kong citizens previously began to be rescinded gradually since the promulgation of the Hong Kong National Security Law, making it harder for them to visit and settle in Taiwan. For instance, when pro-democracy District Councilors in Hong Kong applied for visas to visit Taiwan, their applications were unprecedently rejected on "national security" grounds (*Ming Pao*, 7th April 2023). The rules of immigration for Hong Kong people to settle in Taiwan have been tightened since 2020. In March 2020, the Taiwan government raised the threshold of investment migration. In addition to the amount of investment, the applicant also has to open an actual store, hire Taiwanese staffers and operate continuously for at least three years. The government subsequently considered in 2023 raising the bar for all Hong Kong immigrants applying for permanent residence in Taiwan from one year to four years, regarding them as the same as foreign citizens who wish to apply for settlement (Chen, 2023).

8. Conclusion: No More the Patented Player of Cross-Strait Strategy?

Although the neoliberal institutionalist theory predicts institutionalization of international relations would bring about closer cooperation between states, this article has argued that institutionalization of sub-state diplomacy does not necessarily contribute to the intensification of cooperation. Instead, this case study demonstrated that the policies of the state that cities belong to and the

domestic developments within cities are important factors that have an effect on the efficacy of the institutionalization of city diplomacy. It contributes to the growing literature on international relations at a sub-state level in challenging the existing discipline's examination that has been dominantly focused on states. Also, a critical review of the variations in cooperation driven by sub-state level diplomacy an institutionalism perspective is not absent, but mainly on cases in the Western world and non-political issues (Alvarez, 2020; Royles, 2017).

Under the special context of Hong Kong and Taiwan, institutionalized interactions endowed the "state" status of Taiwan, which violated Beijing's red lines of maintaining interactions between Hong Kong and Taiwan informal and unofficial. It also weakened the strategic ambiguity for Hong Kong to perform the role of mediator between cross-strait relations. Despite the promising signs during its early stage, the shortcomings of institutionalization were immediately evident since the DPP came into power. In the early period since the handover when Hong Kong–Taiwan relations were conducted informally, links between the two societies could be maintained despite the cross-strait tensions during the DPP administration. This heyday of relations has been replaced by hostility towards Taiwan under the Tsai administration since 2016.

Although both sides have hoped to facilitate cooperation through institutionalization since the handover, such goodwill has not been transformed into much more concrete economic and political benefits. Institutionalization has brought about certain agreements, such as the intensification of the movement of people between the two sides, increased direct flights and other numerous technical agreements. However, other important deals, such as a comprehensive free-trade agreement, have not been negotiated even when ECFA could be

completed between Beijing and Taiwan. The two heads of successive governments have never visited each other.

Apart from conveniently attributing the fluctuation to the uncertainties and instabilities in the development of cross-strait relations, especially under the Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian administrations in Taiwan (Wong, 2007), the developments of the wider environment have also been unfavourable for the development of Hong Kong–Taiwan relations. Two main changes have occurred. Firstly, the gradual liberalization of trade since the beginning of the 2000s by the successive governments of Taiwan and the ratification of ECFA between the two sides have significantly diminished the economic role of Hong Kong as a transit point of trade to the Chinese mainland. In other words, Hong Kong has lost its economic leverage against the Chinese mainland and Taiwan.

Secondly, as a response to Taiwan's violation of red lines, the Beijing authorities have supposedly been tightening their control on Hong Kong on all fronts, including Hong Kong's decision-making concerning relations with Taiwan. Whether the analysis is true, this perception undeniably weakens the distinctiveness and autonomy of Hong Kong in cross-strait relations. In the broader context, this analysis can also be regarded as Beijing's overall strategy to neutralize or marginalize Hong Kong against other rising Chinese coastal cities. These circumstances have diminished the political role of Hong Kong as a unique mediator in cross-strait relations. Thus, Hong Kong–Taiwan relations unsurprisingly look increasingly anchored in the fate of cross-strait relations, deviating from its role in the early era. Institutionalization under such a context only made the situation worse.

City diplomacy has always been a strength of both Hong Kong and Taiwanese cities to reach out to other cities around the world. It is also another good channel for sub-state governments to represent themselves in the international arena and to develop interactions on more apolitical issues (van der Pluijm, 2007). Taiwanese cities have been very active in establishing sister and friendship cities worldwide to break through the diplomatic isolation on state level. During Tsai's presidency, six special municipalities of Taiwan developed at least 67 such city-to-city relations, and the quantity increased by more than 30 percent (Table 3).

Table 3 Sister/Friendship Cities of Taiwan's Special Municipalities

Six main cities of Taiwan	Total number of sister/friendship cities	Sister/friendship cities since 20th May 2016
Taipei	**51**	**5**
New Taipei	**55**	**10**
Taoyuan	**35**	**18**
Taichung	**40**	**14**
Tainan	**49**	**12**
Kaohsiung	**38**	**8**

Back in 2001, Hong Kong and Taipei reconvening their inter-city forum despite the hostile rhetoric made by then-President Chen was a perfect demonstration of what city diplomacy is for. However, as a result of institutionalization, while the inter-city forums have been organized between Shanghai and Taipei every year since 2010 and KMT ex-Chairman Eric Chu (朱立倫) could visit Nanjing and Shanghai as New Taipei Mayor in 2018 without any disruption, the relations between Hong Kong and Taipei and other Taiwan cities are still in deadlock. While the Kaohsiung government received the Governor of Yamagata Prefecture of Japan without any opposition from the Beijing authorities in 2018 (*Taro News*, 28th May 2018), the Hong Kong government repeatedly ignored the invitation by the Taipei government, fearing the discontent from Beijing. On one hand, this showed the sensitivity of this pair of relations was complicated by the societal interactions. On the other hand, it also reflects the Hong Kong bureaucrats' lack of capability and ambition to take the sub-state level diplomatic initiative as a result of the more institutionalized approach to interactions.

Fourteen years ago, an important think-tank on the diplomatic policy of the Beijing authorities have used to define the functional role of Hong Kong in China's city diplomacy strategy according to such a way that "Hong Kong has a well-developed economy, a mature civil society, and has great advantages in conducting public diplomacy, promoting people-to-people exchanges and expanding its soft power." (Shanghai Institute for International Studies, 2009: 8). However, in recent years the Beijing authorities has been using city diplomacy to strive united front for cross-strait relations directly by cities of the Chinese mainland. In fact, since the Sunflower Movement in March 2014, although the cross-strait relations were somehow damaged, mayors of the six special municipalities have visited cities in the

Chinese mainland ten times (Table 4). Mayors and county chiefs were also invited to Beijing to meet with the Taiwan Affairs Office after Tsai came into power. So long as the aforementioned factors remain, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region is considered not necessarily the patented player of the city diplomacy strategy, and the prospect of Hong Kong–Taiwan relations is bleak.

Table 4 Visits to the Chinese Mainland by Taiwan Cities' Leaders

Time	Event
June 2014	**Tainan Mayor William Lai (賴清德) visited Shanghai with city government officials.**
May 2015	**New Taipei Mayor Eric Chu (朱立倫) visited Shanghai for the KMT-CCP forum and met Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) in Beijing.**
August 2015	**Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) visited Shanghai to attend the Taipei-Shanghai city forum for the first time as mayor.**
September 2016	**Eight county chiefs were invited by the Taiwan Affairs Office to visit Beijing.**
July 2017	**Ko Wen-je visited Shanghai for the city forum.**
March 2018	**Eric Chu visited Nanjing and Shanghai, met Taiwanese working and studying in Chinese mainland.**
March 2019	**Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜) visited Shenzhen and Xiamen after visiting Hong Kong.**
July 2019	**Ko Wen-je visited Shanghai for the third time as Taipei mayor.**
September 2019	**Taichung Deputy Mayor Bruce Linghu (令狐榮達) visited Fujian and Zhejiang with city government officials.**
August 2023	**Taipei Mayor Wayne Chiang (蔣萬安) visited Shanghai for the city forum.**

Notes

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Chinese–German Relations and the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the effect of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023 on Chinese–German relations. American–German relations were considered as the most important variable impacting relations between Beijing and Berlin. A methodological media content analysis, using context coding, was used to arrive at findings and discussion. An unstructured interview with an expert on media studies confirmed essentially the findings of

the media content analysis. An integrated literature review on the American–German conflict indicated a contribution of the Crisis's long-term effects to an essential, economic weakening of Germany in the years to come. Another Trump administration could deliver this outcome. Ultimately, the strategic partnership between China and Germany could end. German interaction with Beijing would politically be aligned with American interests. Control over Germany, Europe, the West, and world domination could be delivered to the United States. China and Russia would probably remain independent.

Keywords: *China, Germany, Taiwan, America, Donald Trump*

1. Introduction

The purpose of the study was to analyze the impact of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023 on the development of Chinese–German political relations. The bilateral relations between the two powers had already been stressed as a result of the Russo-Ukrainian War since 2022. As Russia's political partner, Beijing had indirectly, and to some extent, been associated with Russia's actions. The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis led to a further decline of Chinese–German relations: the German government warned Beijing of severe consequences, should the military component of the Crisis escalate (*Deutsche Welle*, 5th August 2022). As the most important intervening variable affecting those relations, American–German political relations also had to be studied. Past, current, and potential development trends were examined – using political, historical, economic and media perspectives. I accounted for the nature of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023 as an important indicator for a potential military escalation between a Western camp, including Germany, on the one side and an emerging Eastern bloc

on the other side, including China and Russia. While the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023 would not lead directly to a military escalation, it possesses the potential to foreshadow such an escalation. The term "Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis" was coined for a series of Chinese military exercises in August 2022, nearby Taiwan. Delury, Haggard and Lee (2022: 13) suggested the term, as it represented a consensus amongst several academicians who had investigated the Crisis. Anand (2022), Twomey (2022) and McKinney and Harris (2022) also supported the use of the term for the August 2022 military exercises. These military drills continued in April 2023, what allowed framing the resumed naval exercises as an element of a long-lasting crisis. Also, the overall temporal scope of all military exercises justified even more the use of the term "Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis".

After Nancy Pelosi, high-ranked United States (US) politician and Speaker of the House, had landed in Taiwan on 1st August 2022, Beijing conducted several military exercises around the island of Taiwan: lasting from 4th August until 15th August 2022. The communist Chinese government considered the democratically ruled island as a separatist part of China. During the exercises, four Chinese missiles flew over Taiwan (Delury, Haggard and Lee, 2022: 8). Beijing also imposed limited economic sanctions against Taipei (Anand: 2022) and blocked the island of Taiwan. Electronic displays in Taipei spread false information about the impact of a Chinese attack that never happened. The fake news was interpreted as the result of Chinese cyber warfare – and an indicator of what Beijing might be capable of in the case of a potential future attack (Lin, 2022: 27-28). Also, many Taiwanese doubted that they would receive sufficient US military support in the hour of need. The Crisis turned out to be ongoing beyond the initial time period in August 2022, as additional military exercises took place from 8th April until 10th April, 2023. Such a continuation of the original

Crisis in form of extended military drills had already been anticipated in 2022 (Delury, Haggard and Lee, 2022: 12-13). Already as of 2022, the Crisis was perceived as the most severe crisis in the Taiwan Strait since the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis ended in 1996 (*ibid.*: 8). The Crisis in 2022 and 2023 demonstrated that Beijing would not be willing to accept if the island of Taiwan would formally declare its independence.

The effects of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis could be long-lasting. While Anand (2022) believed that the risk of open war was not imminent, not aligning with the official narrative spread by the US military, Ferguson (2022) contradicted. The historian drew a parallel to the preface of the military confrontation between the United States and Japan in the Pacific theatre of the Second World War. US sanctions 1939 until 1941 triggered Tokyo's attack on Pearl Habour (Ferguson, 2022). Now, the US had imposed severe sanctions to cut Beijing from accessing semiconductor chips: which China urgently needed for its technological and economic growth. Taiwan was an essential semiconductor producer (*ibid.*). By obtaining control of Taiwan, Beijing could access the needed semiconductors directly. Also, with the Chinese economic growth slowing down, China needed a success in terms of foreign policy. Xi Jinping had already declared that the unification with Taiwan was one of his goals (Anand, 2022). US-Chinese tensions had seriously increased under Trump's presidency. It was Trump, who had started a trade war with China, and who had changed and upgraded US relations to Taiwan (*ibid.*), making Nancy Pelosi's visit in August 2022 possible. Should Trump be reelected as US president in 2024, a military escalation in the Taiwan Strait appeared to be more likely.

Trump could likely become next US president in the 2024 US Presidential elections despite facing legal persecution on several accounts as of 2023. Even if Trump would be successfully indicted based on at least one charge, he would still be allowed to run for the

White House (*Politico*, 6th April 2023). As of 2023 he will likely be the nominee for the Republican Party (Enten, 2023). Additionally, his popularity exceeds the popularity of his Democratic opponent, US president Joe Biden (*The Hill*, 17th February 2023). In case of a likely re-election as US president, Trump would probably even in case of a successful indictment be allowed to reside in the White House and could pardon himself for past legal trespassing (*Politico*, 6th April 2023).

As Germany was part of America's alliance system, future military escalations around Taiwan may trigger an irreversible decline in Chinese–German relations (*Deutsche Welle*, 5th August 2022). The new German government coalition with the Greens party, in power since 2021, emphasised political values as more important than economic ones (Oxford Analytica, 2022a: 4). Increased economic collaboration between China and the European Union, and further Chinese access to German technology, could be significantly hindered (Oxford Analytica, 2022b: 11). As economic cooperation was at the core of political relations between Beijng and Berlin, political spillover effects were to be expected as well (Ehret, 2019: 3). Due to the potentially ongoing nature of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and in 2023, further research was needed to understand all consequences in the study context in full scope (Delury, Haggard and Lee, 2022: 13). The development of bilateral relations between both Eurasian nations would also strongly be influenced by American–German political relations as most important factor (Ehret, 2019: 14-15).

Previous literature focusing on American–German relations, with a special focus on the time of Donald Trump's presidency (Aunesluoma, 2020: 14; Felbermayr, 2018: 260; Kanat, 2018: 10-11; Mahmood and Cheema, 2018: 17-18), ignored to a large extent scope and real nature of above relations – and the existing conflict between both Western powers: arriving at insufficient explanations (Ehret, 2019: 7). Bilateral

relations between both nations were stressed because both competed for the position of leadership of the Western world. Donald Trump's presidency was especially worth studying, as these tensions surfaced in a harsher way, than during previous presidencies (Brattberg, 2020) – because Trump, a provocateur, and an outsider to the political establishment, advocated perceived US positions more aggressively and openly. One important issue was the competitiveness of the German industry – according to Trump enabled by a devalued Euro: which led Trump to threaten the EU with a trade war (*Asia News Monitor*, 7th February 2017; *Asia News Monitor*, 4th November 2020). Further issues were Trump's concerns of Germany not contributing enough to NATO's budget (Kanat, 2018: 10-11) – and Trump's fear of a German-Russian energy alliance (Stent, 2019: 97-123). American–German relations were examined also during the time of the Biden administration (from 2021 onwards) to discover continuities and discrepancies, when comparing to the time of the Trump administration.

Study research objectives were to arrive at a better understanding of the following aspects: How would the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023, and its aftermath, impact American–German relations? How would American–German relations affect Chinese–German relations? How would the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023, and its aftermath, affect if the partnership between America and Germany would remain politically more important than the one between China and Germany?

Studying Trump's presidency in the above context was especially helpful for a better understanding: as many underlying problems in the US–German relations surfaced. The outcome of the American–German conflict possessed the potential to decide whether the US would remain the dominant world power – or if this status would be passed on to the aspiring People's Republic of China. Germany functioned as an enabler:

both for China's rise to power and for America to preserve its status. Moreover, the relations between China and Germany possessed the potential to decisively influence the political map of Eurasia. The study was therefore significant.

Research assumptions were that the US would remain the dominant world power – but only within limitations. The American–German conflict would reach its points of resolution in the next years to come. The conflict would end with a significant weakening of Germany's political and economic position – Germany would be irreversibly tied to US foreign policy. Germany's ties with the US would remain stronger than Berlin's connection with China. The strategic partnership between China and Germany would probably not last. Economic collaboration between both Eurasian powers would be weakened, even against both nations' vital interests.

2. Integrated Literature Review: Study Context and Background

The researched keywords on different academic online platforms used for literature review on American–German Relations, in the build-up to the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023, were "American", "German" and "relation" for publications starting from 2016 onwards. Examining American–German political relations during the time of the Trump administration (2017–2021) and Biden administration (since 2021) mattered, as it could help to better understand potential developments to come after 2024. In this regard, especially the Trump era was significant, as Trump could likely be re-elected as US president in 2024. The researched keywords on different academic online platforms used for literature review on Chinese–German relations, in the build-up to the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023, were "China", "German" and "relation" for publications starting from 2016

onwards. Studying Chinese–German political relations during the time of Trump's reign mattered especially: Trump had essentially prepared the China course of the Biden administration – which contributed to the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023.

2.1. American–German Relations (2017–2023) in the Build-up to the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023

It was Donald Trump who had triggered a trade war between America and China (Anand, 2022). Also, his administration had reevaluated and improved relations with Taiwan. Taiwanese citizens had shown appreciation by mostly supporting Trump over Biden in the US Presidential elections in 2020 (*NPR*, 21st October 2020). Without Trump's strong stance against China, Pelosi's Taiwan visit in August 2022 would probably not have happened. Trump had therefore prepared essential elements of the Biden administration's China course. In the likely event of Trump's return to the White House, because of the 2024 US Presidential elections, Trump's anti-Chinese approach could be strengthened. Academicians agreed that the US–German political alliance deteriorated dramatically during the Trump presidency. During this time, ties between the US and Germany likely hit their lowest point since World War II (Brattberg, 2020). Of the EU nations, Germany was Trump's most popular country to criticise (Mahmood and Cheema, 2018: 7). In 2017, Trump said that he had the same faith in Merkel as he had in Russia's Vladimir Putin: an opponent of the US (Ikkenberry, 2017: 6). Trump blamed Berlin of attempting to create political and cultural dominance over Europe through means of the EU (Ivanov, 2019). Trump warned the EU with a trade war, citing aluminum and steel as targets, as well as the German automobile sector (*Asia News Monitor*, 4th November 2020): as Germany was exploiting the EU to harm America on trade, according to the real estate mogul in the White House

(Ikkenberry, 2017: 4). Trump blamed Merkel of taking advantage of a devalued Euro to gain a competitive edge for Germany's export-driven economy (*Asia News Monitor*, 7th February 2017). Furthermore, Trump saw Berlin as an untrustworthy ally that would work against American interests (*Financial Times*, 27th April 2018). He criticised Germany for not contributing enough money to NATO's budget (Kanat, 2018: 10). The EU, Trump believed, was damaging to American interests, just to a lesser extent than China (Felbermayr, 2018: 257). One must keep in mind that Germany had been named one of America's best allies by the preceding Obama administration (*Financial Times*, 27th April 2018) – close collaboration had continued despite existing German suspicions caused by the NSA surveillance of former chancellor Angela Merkel's mobile phone (Larres and Wittlinger, 2020: 127). Trump's level of criticism set therefore a new tone in the post-World War II bilateral relations. But Larres and Wittlinger (2020: 43) admitted that Germany had in the late 20th century turned into an economic competitor of the US.

According to academic literature, Trump's political aversion for Germany was reciprocal. A poll performed by the German organization Atlantik-Brücke revealed that 85 per cent of all respondents rated bilateral ties as low to extremely poor (*Asia News Monitor*, 20th August 2019). German statesmen have already begun comparing China's Communist Party with Trump's government (*Asia News Monitor*, 28th November 2019). Heiko Maas, Germany's former foreign minister, warned that trans-Atlantic relations might be irreversibly harmed (*Asia News Monitor*, 4th November 2020). Trump's designation of the EU as the "Fourth Reich" led to Germany's strongest open rejection of US foreign policy since World War II (Ivanov, 2019). Germany had become Europe's geo-economic center (Fröhlich, 2017). Merkel had been designated as the new leader of the West by the globalist movement in

the West, including America (Larres and Wittlinger, 2020: 95). The Western-based globalist movement advocated international power projection of Western political leaders and their corporate allies beyond the borders of traditional nation states (Nye, 2004: 33). In the sectors of military and security, Germany and France have begun to work together more closely (Ivanov, 2019). Germany would be able to improve its situation by aligning with France's intelligence, UN security, and military potentials (Lehne and Grabbe, 2017). In 2017, French president Emmanuel Macron proposed Merkel the establishment of an EU Army (Aunesluoma, 2020: 14): providing security also against a future US threat (Ehret, 2019: 7). Der Spiegel, a prestigious German publication, advocated a political-economic EU strategy to defend from Trump (Ikkenberry, 2017: 6). Fröhlich (2017) felt that ties between the United States and Germany would survive Trump's presidency. However, most academics believed that the bilateral ties had deteriorated.

The Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, based on a 2015 deal, connecting the Russian Ust-Luga and the German Greifswald, was a particular source of anxiety for Trump (Stent, 2019: 97-123). Due to domestic compromises and pressure, and despite having personal sympathy for Russia's Vladimir Putin, Trump backed sanctions against the project: which was perceived as a threat to US energy and business interests (Larres and Wittlinger, 2020: 67). Nord Stream 2 would, like the first Nord Stream pipeline, create a direct connection between both European nations. Already in 2017, the US Congress backed penalties on Nord Stream 2 (Naumescu, 2017: 84). In 2018, Trump accused Germany of turning into a Russian pawn (Stent, 2019: 97-123). He warned of penalties for supposedly jeopardising Europe's energy security (Aunesluoma, 2020: 14). Pepe Escobar (2021), interpreting Trump's fears, believed that Nord Stream 2 would give Germany control over European energy provision, more influence over the EU, and

restore complete German autonomy. Also, Nord Stream 2 may serve as the foundation for a tight German-Russian partnership. By extension, a Chinese–Russian–German coalition could end America's hegemony (Escobar, 2021). Escobar's views could be regarded as true, despite being far-reaching.

The two US scholars Daniel Quinn Mills and Steven Rosefielde released a book on America's foreign policy and Trump in 2016. The book provided readers with insight into the dangerous mindset of Trump and his followers. Yet, the interpretative usefulness of the book is limited. According to the writers, Germany's rebirth as a power would be as important to America as China's and Russia's ascent. Germany was viewed as a long-term adversary and priority, with the potential to defeat America. Mills and Rosefielde (2016: 68) regarded the Central European country as one of four strategic powers posing a threat to the US and blamed Germany for being cunning. They believed that Germany's ascension would occur during the following two decades – or about until 2036, counting from the book release date (*ibid.*: 148).

Germany, according to Mills and Rosefielde (2016: 86), was building its independence from Washington while exerting dominance over the EU. Since 1945, Berlin would not have possessed an influence like this. Germany had pushed its authority eastwards, perhaps involving the US in a clash with Russia. Currently, the Western world would be divided into two camps: one containing the US and the United Kingdom (UK), and the other containing the EU under Germany's lead. Germany's export competitiveness would be aided by the depreciation of the Euro (*ibid.*: 141). Mills and Rosefielde (2016: 145) defined Germany's EU as a non-democratically legitimised political institution: indicating that use of force may be justified because America had previously attacked non-democratic countries. The subtext of the preceding sentence allowed a hazardous interpretation, as aggression

was indicated and justified in an indirect manner. Worse, the justifications that were being utilised were faulty. To begin with, NATO's eastward expansion against Russia supported American intentions more than German interests. Both experts blamed Berlin for pushing the US into a conflict with Moscow. But it was the US that was pushing Germany into a conflict with Russia. The Ukrainian colour revolution, which removed Kyiv from the Russian sphere of influence, was supported by Washington (Hahn, 2018: 327). The objective had been laid out decades ago by former US national security advisor Zbigniew Brzeziński in *The Grand Chessboard*: to limit Russia into not being much more than a "gateway to Asia" (Brzeziński, 1997: 52) – which eventually also contributed to the 2014 Russo–Ukrainian War and to Russia's aggression against neighboring Ukraine in 2022. Not the United States, but Berlin was affected by East European instability.

Germany's control over the European Union and the Euro's role were also misrepresented. The Euro was not in Germany's best interest, despite its benefits for Germany's export-oriented industry. For their backing of a German reunification in 1989/90, the French requested from the Germans a unified European currency (*SPIEGEL International*, 30th September 2010). Germans exchanged their stable D-Mark for a new currency shared by nations with a history of fiscal instability. Germany guaranteed from 2009 onwards a substantial portion of the debt of South European nations: to resolve the European debt dilemma (Degner and Leuffen, 2019: 96). In a worst-case situation, if too many European countries would need to be bailed out simultaneously, the European dream may end up costing Berlin hundreds of billions of Euros. A future European transfer and fiscal union was also considered – with weaker nations having practically direct access to federal German financial reserves (Howarth and Schild, 2021: 219-221). German sacrifices for the EU were explained by Simon Losch's (2017: 368-387)

definition of current German identity: Germans wanted to expiate for their perceived historical guilt. Because the previous notion of national identity carried a negative association for many Germans (*ibid.*), affiliation with the European Union had largely supplanted it. France was the primary benefactor of the Euro: both in terms of possible future transfer and current financial debt agreements. In America's interest and following Brzeziński's intended meaning, France turned into the nation to counterbalance Berlin's dominance. The statements of Mills and Rosefielde did not only present dangerously twisted facts, but they also aligned with anti-German propaganda reaching back to the time before 1945. The academically dubious remarks must be taken into account since they might serve as a foreign policy template for a potential future American administration: possibly even another Trump administration. After the German federal elections in September 2021, the German Green Party joined a governing coalition, taking stronger postures towards Russia (Lees, 2021: 7), which benefitted Washington's intentions. Following past trends, a hypothetical Trump government in the White House may wreak havoc on American–German ties on political, economic, and security levels. Such measures could be precipitated by a growing economic crisis. The possibility for conflict between the two ostensibly allied trans-Atlantic nations existed because of structural factors that previous studies had just scratched the surface of. The conflict potential derived from America's and Germany's substantial national interests.

Under the Biden administration (from 2021 onwards), the relations between Washington and Berlin began to become warmer. Yet, animosities with regards to the Russian–German pipeline project Nord Stream 2 remained (de Jong, 2022: 1). Acting against the gas pipeline on the ground of the Baltic Sea was one of the few continuities between the Democratic and the preceding Republican administration in the White

House. The Biden administration insisted that Germany should give up on this project, as it would otherwise become too dependent on Russia's energy supply (*ibid.*: 12). Russia's 2022 invasion of the Ukraine caused a fundamental change for American–German relations. The Western camp was from then on united under American leadership, including Germany. Mills and Rosefielde's (2016: 68) concern about Germany being a threat to US interests seemed to be unfounded. Germany agreed on far-reaching sanctions against Russia, including the withdrawal from the Nord Stream 2 project, which the Merkel administration had previously defended against all odds (Nelson, 2022: 50-51). But anti-Russian sanctions could cost Germany dearly: skyrocketing oil and gas prices, as a result of giving up on cheap Russian resources, could mean that the German economy and the living standards of private citizens would be significantly affected. Germany could face the largest decline in welfare since 1945 (*Financial Times*, 21st April 2022). The US–German alignment was therefore happening at Germany's expense. A massive economic decline of Germany could also mean that Berlin could reconsider its political position in the future: what might in effect lead to resurfacing, open tensions between Washington and Berlin.

Four detonations seriously damaged the two Nord Stream pipelines on 26th September 2022. Three gas pipeline strings were destroyed, only one string belonging to the non-certified Nord Stream 2 pipeline survived. The explosions were interpreted as a nation state's deliberate acts of destruction (*BBC News*, 28th September 2022; *Télévision Française 1*, 3rd October 2022). In effect, the attack against the Nord Stream pipelines would be the most severe 21st century terrorist attack: perpetrated against the countries of Russia and Germany. Berlin even accused Moscow for having blown up its co-owned, critical energy infrastructure costing billions of Euros (Bloomberg, 30th September 2022). Furthermore, Putin could after the attack not use the pipelines as

tools of pressuring the European Union anymore. In response, the Russians hinted at an American attack (*Al Mayadeen*, 1st October 2022): as the explosions happened near a Danish island, used as training site for US amphibian operations, and in NATO-surveilled areas. Moreover, the USS Kearsarge was nearby the site of the assumed attacks until about a week before it took place (*Télévision Française 1*, 3rd October 2022). Plus, US president Biden had in February 2022 openly declared that the US government would be capable of ending the Nord Stream 2 pipeline (*The Local*, 28th September 2022). If Moscow's accusations against the US were correct, Washington would have militarily attacked its own ally Germany – what would constitute the most serious turning point in binational relations after the Second World War. Swedish authorities started an investigation into the supposed attack, but ultimately decided not to share information publicly, citing national security as reason (Reuters, 15th October 2022).

Germany now strongly relied on extremely high-priced Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) from America. The situation Germany was in had become so severe, that huge German corporations contemplated about outsourcing production sites to America, citing lower energy prices. Notable businesses in this regard were BASF, Lufthansa, Siemens, and Volkswagen (*Handelsblatt*, 29th September 2022). A massive, and likely permanent, economic decline of Germany had begun. The Russians offered Berlin to receive gas through the one intact Nord Stream 2 string (*Deutsche Welle*, 12th October 2022). Should Berlin welcome the offer to secure its future, US–German tensions would probably become even more serious. In the aforementioned context, America's attention was mostly on German–Russian ties, as it had been throughout the 20th century. Control of Germany by the US may also potentially prevent China from becoming the world's leading power. In the above setting, further study is needed to better comprehend past,

current, and future development patterns of American–German relations. As Germany already seemed to become more dependent on Washington, such a dependency could in the aftermath of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023 even increase.

2.2. Chinese–German Relations (2017–2023) in the Build-up to the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023

Trump had essentially prepared the China course of the Biden administration - which contributed to the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023. In the case of Trump's return to the White House after the US Presidential elections in 2024, and in the aftermath of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis, Chinese–German relations could reach a new and even permanent low. During his first term in office, the Trump administration took already more aggressive stances against Beijing – and Germany's relations to China began finally to worsen. Yet, most political scholars agreed that Trump's presidency (2017–2021) forced both China and Germany initially into a mode of closer cooperation. The White House used during Trump's reign a clearly hostile tone. A change from a unipolar to a multipolar world order was happening from the perspectives of both China and Germany (Ehret, 2019: 3). The Eurasian partners saw the cooperation as advantageous for both countries. The German newspaper *Linke Zeitung* (in English "Leftist Paper") even declared that the strategic partnership between Beijing and Berlin would have achieved a higher degree of political relevance than the pact between America and Germany as of 2017 at least (*ibid.*: 11). This was not true, but the statement expressed for easily comprehensible reasons the desire of both the left-leaning newspaper and the communist Chinese government. As a collaboration between both Eurasian powers could result in advantages for both sides, Beijing was very interested in expanding its partnership with Berlin into a full-blown pact. But Chinese

politicians knew that Germany's obligations as a member of the trans-Atlantic network prevented such development from happening (Cunha, 2017: 16). Alberto Cunha (*ibid.*) even asked: could the partnership between America and Germany be superseded by the one between China and Germany in terms of political importance? Would the United States act against this development? Both questions were answered in the study.

China's long-term plan was to introduce a mix of diverse currencies to replace the US Dollar as only global reserve currency. This ambitious endeavor included both the German-backed Euro and the Chinese Yuan (Staack, 2018: 45). Beijing was also strongly interested in making Germany participate in its strategic One Belt, One Road infrastructure project (OBOR), possessing a value of US Dollar 900 billion. This way, China could project its influence with Berlin's help across entire Eurasia: by creating sea and overland connectivity. While the German administration appeared initially not to be interested, Berlin's political attitude signaled support after 2015 (Ehret, 2019: 3).

Academic scholars perceived the Chinese–German political relations as improving. Will a future Germany be able to choose between America and China to protect its diverse interests? (Farnell and Crookes, 2016: 218) Germany was the 3rd most cited country in the party-owned Chinese English-language newspaper *China Daily*. Furthermore, the newspaper mentioned Germany mostly in a positive connotation (Puglisi, 2017: 305). Galimzyanova (2019: 5) stated that the relations between both Eurasian partners were not only already friendly but even becoming better. The academic consensus in the year 2018 would probably have supported a similar conclusion (Ehret, 2019: 4). But the good relations would not last.

From China's position was Germany a preferred strategic partner for long-term collaboration. A conflict between Washington and Beijing

was from the Chinese perspective inevitable. China had potential border disputes with India, Russia and Japan. In some Muslim countries existed anti-Chinese animosity due to the perceived conditions of the Muslim community in China's Xinjiang province. With Germany, Beijing had no comparative problems. Instead, a cooperation with Germany offered Beijing plenty of gains while facing low risks at the same time.

Economic cooperation was at the core of Chinese–German political relations. Plenty of examples delivered evidence for the width of the collaboration. China and Germany teamed up to coordinate measures against trade surplus penalties (Farnell and Crookes, 2016: 90). Despite American concerns (*ibid.*: 204) did Germany participate in 2015 as one of 57 countries in the creation of China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (*ibid.*: 54; Feng, He and Li: 2019: 102). Berlin might be able to conduct future trade deals in Chinese Renminbi (Zhang, 2016: 60). The US could retaliate by forcing European Union countries to observe mandatory trade hurdles for the China trade. Washington could also use punitive measures to weaken Germany in terms of trade – rendering Berlin less useful as an economic partner of Beijing.

Both Eurasian partners invested heavily into the economy of the other nation. Because German companies perceived the Chinese market despite hurdles as promising, 5,000 German businesses operated there in 2018. But Germany also received as one of the major target markets plenty of investment from China (Amendolagine, Amighini and Rabellotti, 2017: 235). The agriculture, automotive, communications, energy, foods, IT, machine construction, and real estate sectors were from Beijing's perspective important (Ehret, 2019: 3). In 2016, 1,300 Chinese businesses were active in Germany. Self-reported German management experiences were usually positive. Chinese cash influx could until 2030 even increase by factor three (*ibid.*). The cooperation benefitted both sides. Germany was put in a position, in which its

economy could achieve long-term growth. Beijing would be able to access German know-how: with a special focus on the sectors automation, digitization, IT, robotics, and space travel (*ibid.*: 3-4). Under the umbrella term of *Industrie 4.0* were both nations engaged to push a 4th industrial revolution forward (Corrocher, Mavilia and Giorgio, 2020: 433). Access to latest German innovation could also help China to make its 2025 plan "Made in China" come true (Ehret, 2019: 4). Already in the early 20th century, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, did Germany provide technical access that helped China significantly to modernise the own nation.

How American and German interests are divided when it comes to dealing with China, became evident in the case of Huawei. Washington banned the telecommunications expansion plans of the Chinese tech giant in North America, but Berlin did not share the same concerns (Kostecka-Tomaszewska and Krukowska, 2020: 281). Germany introduced stricter security measures – but did not block the phone technology from entering the German market. Security-wise, Germans rated in April 2021 Huawei's 5G networks as being on the same threat level as similar American networks (*Global Times*, 25th April 2021). US businesses were losing ground in Europe – not only when they were competing against Chinese smartphone providers, but also against Chinese high-speed rail technology (Kostecka-Tomaszewska and Krukowska, 2020: 281). Europe and Germany had turned into a battleground on which America and China were fighting for economic advantages – causing political consequences.

As of late, conflict potential was emerging in the Chinese–German relations. While the strategic partnership still existed, the bilateral relationship was worsening since 2019. Currently, relations between both Eurasian states were still good – the strategic partnership was still existent. But especially the years 2019, 2021 and 2022 could be

perceived as benchmark years indicating a decline in bilateral relations. Chinese investments were since 2017 perceived as more critical than positive (Barkin, 2020). The German administration also checked bilateral business mergers more and more when sensitive German technology was involved. As a result, cash influx began to decline since 2018. China was increasingly also perceived as a business competitor (Shi, 2021: 52, 71). More bilateral conflict potential would surface in the years to come.

China was since 2019 perceived as a "systemic rival and competitor" by the European Union commission (*Politico*, 10th September 2020). This statement could have indicated an important turning point in bilateral Chinese–German political relations: as it also mirrored Berlin's point of view. In 2020, German foreign minister Heiko Maas criticised China for threatening a Czech politician who had travelled to Taiwan. This incident indicated a new, worsening quality in bilateral relations (*ibid.*). China also became more and more capable of producing elaborate products – what threatened the German export concept which was based on the same premise (*ibid.*). Members of the German Green party, advocating self-declared moral principles, openly spoke against Beijing's treatment of the Muslim minority in the Chinese Xinjiang province. The Green party demanded a stronger emphasis on upholding human rights when dealing with China (*ibid.*). As the Green party joined a German government coalition as a result of the federal elections in September 2021, its positions increasingly influenced and shaped German foreign policy. This was especially evident, since Annalena Baerbock, in 2021 chancellor candidate for the Green party, had become German foreign minister. Already before the elections did Baerbock advocate a tougher stance against China. During the Taiwan tensions in August 2022, in the context of US politician Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei, Baerbock even warned China, Germany's largest trade

partner, of serious consequences in the case of military action against Taiwan (*Deutsche Welle*, 5th August 2022). Moreover, the German education ministry was also focused on diminishing the impact of China-financed Confucius Institutes in Germany (*South China Morning Post*, 3rd July 2021). The European Union forced for the first time in over twenty years sanctions onto China in March 2021. Reason was the perceived situation of members of the Muslim minority in China's Xinjiang province. Beijing responded by imposing sanctions against politicians of the European Parliament (*Deutsche Welle*, 28th April 2021). More importantly, the approval process of an investment arrangement between Beijing and Brussels was put on hold. Policy makers from both sides had been working on this agreement for seven years. Moreover, the trade arrangement would have been especially advantageous for Germany. From the German point of view, there were mounting concerns (*ibid.*). The relationship between Beijing and Brussels seemed to be deteriorating. The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023 made things only worse.

A variety of academic articles already focused on the increasing conflict potential. Whitten *et al.* (2020: 1) foresaw that the economic relationship could suffer as a result of a deteriorating political relationship. The concern turned out to be true. As political tensions mounted, the trade flow between China and Germany suffered. German public opinion during times of the COVID-19 pandemic expressed an anti-Chinese sentiment. Germans were against a coordination of Chinese and German foreign policies. Moreover, China was viewed less favorably than America or even Putin's Russia (Rühlig *et al.*, 2020). Due to China's increased military might and lack of democratic institutions, 60 per cent of all Germans citizens arrived at an opinion towards Beijing, that was at least negative (*ibid.*). The Polish scholars Kostecka-Tomaszewska and Krukowska (2020: 272, 287) saw Beijing utilising its

OBOR project to extent its power into Europe: at Washington's expense. Both academicians recommended common economic measures combining the power of the European Union and the United States to counterbalance Beijing's influence. The scholars were under the impression that American dominance would benefit the European Union countries more than Chinese hegemony. The pro-American stance of the two authors came to no surprise: given that in the Polish academic mainstream, Beijing's partner Russia was perceived as enemy, and Germany as a long-lasting antagonist. Warsaw followed throughout the early 21st century in a political sense Washington's directives and guidelines from the other side of the Atlantic. But why were German citizens worried about China? Germans were concerned about the military power of a faraway country in another continent – which had not been at war for over forty years. Moreover, the United States outspent China by far in terms of military budgeting (*CIA World Factbook*, 2022). Furthermore, was China automatically a rival of Germany – simply because its economic manufacturing capacities had improved so much? Also, human rights aspects influenced German investment considerations – although such issues did practically and directly not touch Berlin's interests. There was no deep structural foundation for bilateral conflict potential. Yet, the evolution of this conflict potential could determine the nature of the bilateral strategic partnership – and whether both Eurasian nations would be close allies or not.

Academic scholars (Oxford Analytica, 2022b: 9) already believed that the 2022 Russo–Ukrainian War, triggered by Beijing's partners in Moscow, had a negative impact for Chinese–German relations. The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in August 2022 and April 2023 led to a further deterioration of the bilateral relations. Foreign minister Annalena Baerbock openly threatened Beijing with grave consequences, should

China use military force against Taiwan (*Deutsche Welle*, 5th August 2022). In the aftermath of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in November 2022, when German chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Beijing, Baerbock dared to heavily criticise him for his journey to China. The new German administration with the Green party attested primacy to political over economic values (Oxford Analytica, 2022a: 4). Baerbock did not only want to take a tougher stance against Russia, but also against other countries with not democratically elected leadership (*Politico*, 10th September 2020): including China.

The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis from 2022 and 2023 foreshadowed a hypothetical, major military escalation in the Taiwan Strait. Furthermore, such an escalation was not expected to occur before 2025, when Donald Trump would likely be US president again (*South China Morning Post*, 30th January 2023; *Insider*, 29th January 2023). However, such a hypothetical event would have a significant impact on Germany's economy, outweighing even the impact of the 2022 Russo–Ukrainian War. If Germany would cut its business ties with China as a consequence, it would lose its largest export market (Cafruny and Fouskas, 2023). Moreover, Volkswagen's economic viability itself would be at stake due to its dependence on the Chinese market (Volkswagen Group, 2022). Volkswagen (VW) was not only Germany's leading car manufacturer, but the automotive industry was also the key sector of the entire German economy. Also, advanced Chinese access to German technology could essentially be prevented. By extension, the once intended stronger economic cooperation between Brussels and Beijing could not happen (Oxford Analytica, 2022a: 4). If political relations between China and Germany would decline, economic relations would likely deteriorate as well (Ehret, 2019: 15).

Due to the recent and potentially ongoing nature of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023, academic scholars should follow

up on examining the evolution of Chinese–German bilateral relations in a broader temporal scope. For China, the stakes were high. Beijing's relationship with Berlin possessed the potential to decisively influence if China would be the next dominating world power or not. The alignment between Berlin and Washington, as indicated in the Crisis, would probably affect Chinese–German relations negatively. The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023, and its aftermath, could essentially contribute to a stronger partnership between America and Germany: while the one between China and Germany would politically decline.

3. Media Content Analysis: Methodology

A media content analysis was conducted by selecting articles from two German online media publication formats. The used formats were the left-leaning weekly *Der Spiegel*, one of Germany's intellectually most impactful weeklies, and the more conservative daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (*FAZ*), which was the leading non-tabloid daily in the country. Both formats were chosen to represent relevance, diversity and consistency when comparing to a previous study. The keywords used for the search were *Deutsch* (the German word for German), *China* (also the German word for China) and *Partner* (what is not only the German word for partner, but also forms part of the word *Partnerschaft*: the German word for partnership). The chosen time period were the first nine months of the 2022 Russo–Ukrainian War, from 24th February 2022, until 23rd November 2022: as Chinese–German relations were seriously affected by the War in Europe – and as the War prepared the further decline of Chinese–German relations during the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis and in its aftermath. Alternatively focusing on only the 12 days in August 2022 and the 3 days in April 2023, while the Crisis lasted

as of 2022 and 2023, would have made only very limited sense. The keyword search was a follow-up to a media content analysis, which had been conducted in the same context for the years 2013 to 2018 by Ehret (2019: 4-5). The previous analysis had used the same keywords and the same online publication formats. Ehret (2019: 14) had already called for a temporal extension of the existing media content analysis.

The researcher conducted a context coding for 24 articles which were retrieved as a result of the keyword search. The articles covered a variety of themes. Mentions of actors and authorities in China were grouped into one of the three categories: positive, neutral, and negative reporting tendencies. The reporting tendency was identified according to the news outlet's perceived impact of Chinese actors' plans and actions on Germany economically and politically – and whether plans and actions were from the applied moral standards of the German journalists desirable or undesirable. In that regard, reporting tendencies could be perceived as rather positive or as rather negative. If no clear preference in the above context could be determined, the reporting tendency was judged as being neutral. Each of the three categories was distinguished from the others by using a distinctive colour. Such an approach can obviously not be totally objective. The researcher's own bias may have been present. Yet, as the same strict standards were applied as for a previous publication of the researcher before (*ibid.*: 4-5), the researcher believed that the results fulfilled standards of verisimilitude: and are therefore useful.

For the purpose of verifying findings in form of an academic discussion, the researcher conducted an unstructured interview with a media expert on the results from the media content analysis. The expert held a PhD in media studies. His knowledge on *Der Spiegel* and the *FAZ* was assessed. Furthermore, his evaluation of the researcher's methods and findings, resulting from the media content analysis, was required.

4. Media Content Analysis and Findings: Chinese–German Relations

Purpose of the new keyword search was to understand how the binational and already existing strategic partnership had developed during the time of the 2022 Russo–Ukrainian War: what included the much more limited temporal scope of the initial Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022. The newly retrieved findings also offered the possibility of comparison to the older results in terms of political reporting tendency. The current results were shown in reverse chronological order with the youngest articles on top and the oldest entries at the bottom.

Using the online presence of *Der Spiegel*, the search was conducted in the three sections *DER SPIEGEL*, *SPIEGEL+* and *SPIEGEL International*. In total of 24 articles were found, mentioning Chinese–German relations. Of the 24 articles, four mentioned China in a neutral context, 20 in a rather negative context. The mentions were more neutral in the beginning of the time period and turned out to become more negative, the longer the War lasted. Late articles were only negatively framed. Neutral mentions referred to China as a producer of Covid-19 protections masks, a BRICS member, and an evacuation of Chinese students from war-torn Ukraine. Negative mentions of China were often related to the 2022 Russo–Ukrainian War. China was criticised for not supporting sanctions against Russia, still supporting Russia to a certain extent even during times of war, following the wording of the Kremlin and calling the war a "military operation" only. China was also not seen as Germany's partner anymore when Berlin was dealing with Russia, and as a less important Asian partner than in the past. Moreover, China was called a "systemic rival", a "torture state", a "hegemonial power" with aspirations of "dominance", a nation that was negatively influencing the German education system, the Global South,

and which was a challenge for NATO. Beijing was also criticised for the perceived treatment of the Muslim Uyghur community in its Xinjiang province – and for perceived human rights violations. Commentators furthermore believed that Germany had economically tied itself too much to China. Especially German chancellor Scholz's November 2022 China visit, in the aftermath of the initial Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022, was repeatedly subject of criticism. It can be summed up that China's association with Putin's Russia reflected negative on the East Asian power. In a comparison with the previous media content analysis covering the years 2013 until 2018, for which 50 per cent of all analyzed *Der Spiegel* articles had a rather negative tendency of reporting on China, now during the first nine months of the 2022 Russo–Ukrainian War, 83.33 per cent of all articles showed such rather negative tendency. Was the political collaboration between China and Germany in the past perceived as positive (*ibid.*: 4), as in the context of the Syria conflict, no such perception existed for the binational cooperation of both Eurasian partners in the 2022 East European conflict. Economic collaboration between China and Germany, crucial for the relationship, was in the analyzed *Der Spiegel* articles from 2022 not often mentioned.

The above keyword search was for the same time period from 24th February 2022, until 23rd November 2022, also conducted on the website of the *FAZ*. Eighteen results were found, mentioning Chinese–German relations, using the same keywords as for the search on the online platform of *Der Spiegel*. Of the 18 articles, five mentioned China in a neutral context, 13 in a rather negative context. At first glance, this outcome seemed to be an odd finding. Should a daily not have significantly more articles than a weekly? But there were two explanations. Articles in *Der Spiegel* were content-wise usually much longer, going more into detail and containing more in-depth analysis.

This circumstance increased, not decreased, the possibility of referencing the binational partnership. Furthermore, such articles were not necessarily material for breaking news to be published very often in a daily like the *FAZ*, but such articles were published occasionally – being a better fit for a weekly like *Der Spiegel*. That more mentions in the study context could be retrieved from *Der Spiegel* instead of from the *FAZ* fell in line with the observations from the study conducted by Ehret (2019: 1) and provided a further indicator of consistency.

While the negative reporting tendency was predominant in general, the mentions in the *FAZ* turned over time out to become slightly more negative than in the beginning of the time period: but the degree of negative framing did not increase to the same extent as in the *Der Spiegel* publications. Neutral mentions referred to China as a source of Lithium, a potential market for German Bundesliga football matches, an important partner for cooperation that Berlin should deal pragmatically with, and as a country that Germany and France would have different positions towards to. Negative mentions of China stressed that Germany was too dependent on China, that China was a "rival", a "threat", a country that was expanding its power, that Germany enabled China's means of "repression". As in *Der Spiegel*, chancellor Scholz's visit to Beijing in the aftermath of the initial events of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 was repeatedly the focus of partly extensive criticism. It was notable that also Washington's political position towards Beijing was highlighted – as if German and American interests were identical. Economic collaboration between China and Germany occupied a much more important position in the *FAZ* articles than in the articles from *Der Spiegel*. In a comparison with the previous media content analysis covering the years 2013 until 2018, for which 20 per cent of all analyzed *FAZ* articles had a rather negative tendency of reporting on China, now

during the first nine months of the 2022 Russo–Ukrainian War, 72.22 per cent of all articles showed such rather negative tendency: what was a strong increase.

In comparison, articles in *Der Spiegel* were more critical, and used to some extent harsher formulations, than articles in the *FAZ*. This fact may appear as surprising, given that the *FAZ* had a more conservative orientation than the more left-leaning *Der Spiegel*. The stronger degree of criticism of *Der Spiegel* against the communist government of China might be explained from its stronger ideological position, whereby the *FAZ* was rather more pragmatically oriented. The increasingly negative perception of China in both publication formats, and from a German perspective, fell in line with and confirmed the results from the literature review.

The increasingly negative reporting tendency on Chinese–German relations in *Der Spiegel* and the *FAZ* is expected to be mirrored by the release of Germany's inaugural National Security Strategy in 2023, in the wake of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis. This significant document, supposed to be unveiled by the German Federal Foreign Office in 2023, is likely to illustrate an emerging ambivalence in Germany's political approach to its principal trade partner in that year (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 3rd January 2023). The strategy document is expected to mostly characterize China's foreign policy endeavors in an adverse manner. Such a shift in Germany's official stance could be attributed to the influence of American foreign policy, echoing US emphasis on a self-declared "rules-based international order" (*ibid.*). Such a version of this strategy paper would enable an interpretation of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis as a pivotal occurrence, signaling an ongoing deterioration in the political-economic relations between China and Germany.

5. Discussion on Media Content Analysis: Chinese–German Relations

The findings of the media content analysis were debated with an expert on media studies and sociology, located in Pfaffenhofen in Bavaria, Germany. An unstructured interview was conducted with the expert. The interviewee was 55 years of age and working for a German broadcasting organization at the interview time. Moreover, the study participant was male and held a PhD in media studies and sociology. His age and educational background both supported an understanding of the media content analysis. Additionally, the subject specialized in analyzing diverse media formats. The unstructured interview gave him important information on the two different German media outlets *Der Spiegel* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, as well as on their political reporting tendency in the study context. The interview was necessary as an introduction to the specific topic. The interviewee understood both the topic and the interview questions comprehensively and with ease.

The study participant answered all interview questions during the interview. These interview questions aimed at gathering personal background information of the expert, assessing his knowledge on the two German media publication formats, and asking for the interviewee's evaluation of the media content analysis results, and of the research methods. The expert had to decide to what extent he agreed with the researcher's findings and methods. The academic debate showed that the study participant was already familiar with both German media outlets prior to the study, but the interview increased his knowledge and made him very familiar with both *Der Spiegel* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Furthermore, the expert believed that the political reporting tendency of *Der Spiegel*, when covering Chinese–German political relations during the first nine months of the Russo–Ukrainian War of

2022, was very negative. Also, the reporting tendency on the above relations in 2022 was according to the interviewee different from the coverage of the same relations from 2013 to 2018, as it had turned more negative than before. The subject judged the degree of realism in the coverage of the above relations as unrealistic, with a tendency towards being very unrealistic.

The study participant assessed the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in the above context similarly to *Der Spiegel*, but with slight deviations. Moreover, the expert believed that the political reporting tendency of the *FAZ*, when covering Chinese–German political relations during the first nine months of the Russo–Ukrainian War of 2022, was negative, but not as negative as in the case of *Der Spiegel*. When it comes to the reporting tendency on the above relations in 2022 comparing to the coverage of the same relations from 2013 to 2018, it had turned much more negative than before – indicating an even stronger worsening of the reporting tendency than in the comparative case of *Der Spiegel*. However, the subject judged the degree of realism in the coverage of the above relations as unrealistic just as in the case of *Der Spiegel*, but unlike *Der Spiegel* with the opposite tendency towards being neutral.

Both the methodological approach of comparing a weekly such as *Der Spiegel* with a daily such as the *FAZ*, and the choice of keywords used for the media content analysis, were strongly approved as being very useful by the expert. Also, the interviewee agreed that the number of reviewed articles of both media outlets, the chosen time period, and the context coding into three categories used for the media content analysis were useful in the study context. Overall, the interview confirmed the findings of the study sufficiently.

6. Conclusion

Conducting a media content analysis on the bilateral relations, using context coding, proved to be useful to understand the long-term impact of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023 on Chinese–German relations. It became evident that German media coverage of the above political relations, and for the selected news outlets, was to some extent aligned with the changing stance of the German government towards Beijing: which became more critical. An unstructured interview with an expert on media studies and sociology confirmed essentially the findings of the media content analysis in form of an academic discussion. The theoretical implication is that reporting tendencies of Western news outlets need to be more critically scrutinized. American–German relations strongly impacted the relations between both Eurasian powers. Tensions in the American–German relations surfaced stronger during Trump's reign and indicated an underlying conflict. America and Germany functioned as competitors over the role of the leading Western power. The conflict could likely be resolved in the next years to come – also in conjunction with a major military escalation in the Taiwan Strait: with an essential and final weakening of Germany, which would probably be of an economic nature. Another Trump administration could deliver this outcome. Germany's best chance to secure its interests would be in an alliance with China and Russia. Despite alternative options, and due to Germany's essential loss of national identity, the German political establishment would likely accept the final, detrimental impact of the intra-Western conflict for Germany. Future Germany would be aligned with America's interests. As a result, the strategic partnership between Beijing and Berlin would end. Bilateral relations would turn unfriendly. China would not benefit from access to German technology anymore. As a result of also the 2022 and 2023 Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis's aftermath, America could remain the more

important partner for Germany than China. Control over Europe, the West, and world domination within limitations could be delivered to the United States. America would be unable to dominate China or Russia.

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Notes

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Unveiling ASEAN's Diplomatic Equilibrium: Assessing Member Nation-States' Responses to Russia's Attack on Ukraine amidst the Rivalry between United States and China

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Abstract

Since the beginning of Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022, the stance of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) towards the crisis has been grounded on one of its core principles as a regional bloc—non-interference, with member nation-states expressing varying levels of concern, neutrality, and implicit condemnation. ASEAN as a supranational institution trying to consolidate power in the region's security, economy, and diplomacy has attracted the eyes of the global powers, such as the United States (US) and China, as they seek support in resolving the conflict and advancing their own interests. With Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the backdrop, the Sino-US rivalry has intensified in the region through their strategic attempts in influencing the Southeast Asian (SEA) nation-states' stance in the on-going crisis. It

is on this premise that this paper delves into several key interwoven politico-economic relations and historical ties that justify ASEAN member nation-states' responses in the crisis by (1) tracing the SEA governments' immediate responses, (2) comparing proactive measures taken by these governments to pursue decisions that align with their respective interests, (3) examining the bases of SEA states' actions and public responses, (4) probing into the existing varying interests among SEA governments, and (5) establishing the links between SEA governments' responses to that of US and China. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of ASEAN's roles and actions in global politics, specifically in dealing with issues on peace, security, and stability, amidst the intricate geopolitical landscape of the Asia-Pacific region.

Keywords: *ASEAN, Russia-Ukraine conflict, US-China rivalry, ASEAN diplomacy*

1. Introduction

The prevailing dynamics between the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have undergone a discernible evolution into a nuanced rivalry, manifesting as a spectrum of persistent tensions in the realms of international security and economic primacy. This rivalry has unfolded through a nuanced progression of diplomatic interactions, encompassing military exercises, impactful economic stratagems, explicit and implicit condemnations, as well as comprehensive high-level sanctions.

After the second World War, the US has adeptly sustained its ascendancy across a spectrum of global equilibrium facets. The US government has strategically wielded both its robust and subtle forms of

influence—coercive and non-coercive, solidifying its status as a paramount global superpower (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). This ascendancy extends to its position as a preeminent international hegemon in the theaters of military and security affairs, harmoniously interwoven with its role as a potent force within the expanse of the global economic matrix.

In parallel, the PRC has embarked on an incremental yet steadfast trajectory toward global presence and influence. PRC's economic prowess, exemplified by its status as a primary global manufacturing nucleus, has experienced striking amplification in recent years (Chabra *et al.*, 2020). Notably, China has surpassed the US in becoming the primary trading partner for across Latin America, Africa, and, notably, in the Indo-Pacific Region (U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, 2021). These assertive actions by China have prompted concerns among incumbent powers invested in the Indo-Pacific Region, thereby triggering a sense of circumspection and vigilance.

In the Southeast Asian (SEA) region, the rivalry between US and China is encapsulated in their relationships with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The US-ASEAN relation is characterized by extensive commercial and trade ties, with the US being ASEAN's largest source of foreign direct investment. The US has provided significant development, economic, health, and security assistance to SEA allies and partners, including ASEAN member nation-states. The US and ASEAN are working together to address shared challenges and promote a free and open Indo-Pacific (U.S. Department of State, 3rd August 2022; ASEAN, 7th March 2023). On the other hand, China's relationship with ASEAN is complex, with some member nation-states enjoying longstanding and substantive relations with China. PRC has been actively strengthening its ties with ASEAN

countries, particularly through economic cooperation and people-to-people exchanges. However, ASEAN leaders are cautious about China's new foreign policy initiatives through the Global Security Initiative (GSI) but remain to appreciate the country as an economic partner. (Hoang Thi Ha, 2023).

Russia's military invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, provided a novel scenario that illustrates the US-China rivalry and their influence on the responses of ASEAN member nation-states. The conflict between the two countries is deeply rooted in the post-Cold War era when a deal for greater economic integration with the European Union (EU) faltered. In the past three decades, Russia made significant strides to consolidate Ukrainian civic identity, especially since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and intervention in the Donbas region (Mankoff, 2022).

Russia formally sent its troops to the Ukrainian territory on the same ground they asserted for Crimea's annexation. Undeniably, it is more than just a battle of arms, assuming the contours of a clash of competing narratives. The Western powers, which are the primary sponsors of Ukraine's defense, described Russia's action as an unjustifiable invasion, regardless of the profound history and cultural linkages that exist between the two countries (Masters, 2023).

On March 2nd, 2022, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution on the "Aggression against Ukraine" with ASEAN members Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Timor-Leste in favor. Vietnam and Laos abstained. The resolution condemns Russian aggression, demands cessation of hostilities, withdrawal of Russian forces, and adherence to humanitarian and human rights laws, stressing Ukraine's sovereignty and civilian safety (UNGA, 1st March 2022). On March 24, 2022, the "Humanitarian consequences of aggression against Ukraine"

Resolution passed with similar ASEAN support except for Brunei, Laos, and Vietnam abstaining, urging hostilities end, civilian protection, and infrastructure safeguarding through international cooperation and diplomacy (UNGA, 24th March 2022). On February 23, 2023, the "Principles of Charter for comprehensive peace in Ukraine" Resolution gained ASEAN backing, except Laos and Vietnam abstaining. Addressing global impacts of the Ukraine conflict, it urges just and lasting peace per United Nations (UN) Charter, supports Secretary-General and state peace efforts, emphasizes sovereignty and territorial integrity, and advocates withdrawal of foreign forces, cessation of hostilities, and global cooperation (UNGA, 23rd February 2023).

The advent of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has exposed the lack of unanimity in ASEAN's response to the conflict (Storey and Choong, 2022; *Nikkei Asia*, 28th February 2022). The responses of ASEAN member nation-states varied considerably, with Singapore explicitly condemning Russia by name and announcing a range of sanctions, Myanmar endorsing the Kremlin's actions, and the relatively mild and muted responses from the rest of the ASEAN member nation-states (*ibid.*). Two days after the invasion, on February 26, 2022, ASEAN issued a "lowest common denominator response" to the conflict with the ASEAN Foreign Ministers stating that they are "deeply concerned over the evolving situation and armed hostilities in Ukraine" (Storey and Choong, 2022). Despite its urge for both parties to exercise maximum restraint and highlighting the principles of the United Nations Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the statement was criticized for its lack of significant substance as it failed to mention Russia as the aggressor (*Benar News*, 3rd March 2022; *Nikkei Asia*, 28th February 2022; Shoji, 2022).

Given China's substantial economic influence and presence, alongside the US military strength, foreign aid, and soft power in the

region, the intensified rivalry between these two superpowers has placed SEA in a prominent position, elevating the regional significance of the ASEAN bloc. By adopting a comprehensive perspective that encompasses both ASEAN as a regional organization and the individual responses of its member nation states, this study explores the delicate balancing act undertaken by ASEAN member nation-states in harmonizing their respective interests and norms by (1) tracing the SEA governments' immediate responses, (2) comparing proactive measures taken by these governments to pursue decisions that align with their respective interests, (3) examining the bases of SEA nation-states' actions and public responses, (4) probing into the existing varying interests among SEA governments, and (5) establishing the links between SEA governments' responses to that of the US and China.

2. ASEAN Members' Immediate Response to Russo-Ukrainian Crisis

The Russian invasion of Ukraine demonstrated the complexity and diversity of ASEAN member-nation states' reactions, a reflection of their interests in regional and global politics. These responses encompass a wide spectrum, illustrating the intricate web of diplomatic considerations, political alliances, and economic ties (Storey and Choong, 2022). This section highlights the immediate responses of each ASEAN member nation-state to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, based on the formal statements of their respective governments, including the statements of their foreign ministers in ASEAN, voting patterns in the UNGA resolutions condemning Moscow, and sanctions imposed on Russia.

The immediate responses of the ASEAN member nation-states are analyzed through a comprehensive categorization framework that

encompasses four distinct classifications: (1) Hardline Response, (2) Measured Diplomacy, (3) Neutrality, and (4) Affirmative Endorsement. The countries having a hardline response demonstrated explicit condemnation of Russia's actions, consistently aligned their official statements and participation in international responses such as the UNGA resolutions and ASEAN official statements, and have imposed sanctions against Russia. Countries exhibiting measured diplomacy in their responses include those that voted in favor of the UNGA resolutions condemning Russia and advocate for peaceful resolution, but at the same time consistently failed to call the conflict an "invasion" or name Russia as the "aggressor". Neutral countries are those that stayed relatively muted as the conflict progressed, neither voting for or against Russia in UNGA resolutions nor condemning or calling out Russia by name. Lastly, the country with affirmative endorsement of Russia's actions explicitly justifies its actions and continuously supports the country's campaign towards Ukraine.

2.1. Hardline Response

Among all the ASEAN member nation-states, Singapore is the only country having a hardline response to the Russian invasion. Singapore has exhibited a robust and unequivocal response to Russia's incursion into Ukraine by explicitly condemning Russia by name and announcing a range of sanctions (*ibid.*; *The Straits Times*, 28th February 2022). Along with Cambodia and Timor-Leste, Singapore co-sponsored the March 2, 2022 UNGA resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Shoji, 2022). Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore underscored the violation of established international norms and the UN Charter by Russia's unprovoked military intervention, underscoring the imperative of upholding a rules-based international order to safeguard the interests of smaller nations (Lee, 2022). Moreover, Singapore's

Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan articulated the gravity of the situation, denouncing the transgression of fundamental norms, highlighting the unsettling precedent set by the invasion, and underscoring the inherent risk to smaller states within a "might is right" paradigm (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, 5th March 2022). This response, characterized by explicit condemnation of Russia's actions, is reminiscent of Singapore's principled approach during historical events such as Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and Russia's annexation of Crimea (Storey and Choong, 2022).

2.2. Measured Diplomacy

Most of the ASEAN member nation-states can be classified as having a measured response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Singapore, along with Cambodia and Timor-Leste, co-sponsored the UNGA resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, while Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Brunei, and Myanmar (UN seat held by National Unity Government) voted in favor of the resolution as well (Shoji, 2022). However, outside of the ASEAN member nation-states' votes in favor of the UNGA resolution, each has lacked publicly naming Moscow as the aggressor nor imposing sanctions against the country (Storey and Choong, 2022).

Initially, Indonesia's government response was muted. Later, with Indonesia's Foreign Ministry calling the attack on Ukraine "unacceptable" without naming Russia as the aggressor (Murphy, 2022), the Indonesian government supported the UN resolution condemning the invasion. Supporting the UN resolution, Indonesia highlighted the fundamental principles of the UN Charter, territorial integrity, and sovereignty while forwarding its call to address the situation in a "balanced manner" (*ibid.*; *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 17th July 2022; Engel, 2022). Indonesia's commitment to peacekeeping was also

pronounced in President Widodo's speech during his visits in Kiev and Moscow (Bloomberg, 2022). However, despite Indonesia's efforts, its responses were criticized as "inadequate," as it refused to impose sanctions on Moscow or clearly condemn Putin's actions in Ukraine (TASS, 9th March 2022; *Asia Times*, 27th July 2022; Engel, 2022).

Similarly, Malaysia's immediate response to the conflict was relatively weak. Though its government expressed concern about the increasing tensions of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, with Malaysia's Foreign Ministry issuing a statement that called the attack on Ukraine "unacceptable" (*The Star*, 3rd March 2022), it refused to mention Russia or endorse Ukraine's sovereignty (*The Diplomat*, 1st April 2022). Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob also stated that his government' s priority is ensuring the safety of Malaysian families in Ukraine and hopes for a peaceful settlement between Ukraine and Russia (*The Straits Times*, 24th February 2022).

Malaysia voted in favor of the UNGA resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine on March 2, 2022, emphasizing its commitment to the principles and purposes of the UN Charter, as well as the significance of territorial integrity and sovereignty, but aside from these responses, not much has been heard from the Malaysia's government (*The Star*, 3rd March 2022).

The Philippines, on the other hand, responded to the Russian invasion of Ukraine with a mixture of neutrality and condemnation, prioritizing its national interests by securing ties with the US (De Castro, 2022). Initially, the Duterte Administration announced a policy of neutrality in the conflict (Philippine News Agency, 10th June 2022; De Castro, 2022). The Philippines later condemned the invasion and voted in favor of a UNGA resolution demanding an immediate halt to Moscow's actions (Associated Press, 10th March 2022). At the change of administration in the Philippines, after his inauguration, President

Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. denounced the war as "unacceptable" and called for a diplomatic resolution, expressing concern for global economic repercussions without explicitly naming Russia as the aggressor (*Philstar*, 19th November 2022). This approach highlights the intricate balance the Philippines keeps to maintain in addressing regional security challenges while promoting peace in the Indo-Pacific region (De Castro, 2022).

Despite voting in favor of the UNGA resolution condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine, Thailand's Foreign Ministry did not explicitly name Russia as the aggressor (Storey, 2022a). This behavior reflects Thailand's delicate balancing act between its historical relationships and commitment to neutrality. This cautious approach is attributed to Thailand's long-standing friendship and neutrality stance which was driven by its national interests (*Bangkok Post*, 3rd March 2022; Storey, 2022a). It is aligned on its constructive engagement and crisis diplomacy concerning politicization of international principles and the potential impact on diplomatic efforts (*Bangkok Post*, 10th March 2022; *Benar News*, 3rd March 2022). Thailand's diplomatic strategy is further underscored by its support for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and opposition to the use of force in annexations (*ibid.*).

Cambodia's response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict is marked by Prime Minister Hun Sen's unexpected stance against Russia's invasion, contrasting his close relations with Russia (Storey, 2022b). While initially appearing neutral, the shift on Hun Sen's stance is translated to Cambodia's UNGA vote that is aligned with the Western views that emphasize principles, history, and economic consequences (*The Diplomat*, 11th November 2022; Storey, 2022b). He condemned the invasion and supported ASEAN's call for a ceasefire (Reuters, 28th March 2022). The statement is also in parallel with Cambodia's past experiences and expression of solidarity with Ukraine (Sokvy Rim,

2023). The statement, further, reflects Cambodia's concerns on the security of smaller states and its drive against powerful countries' interference (*ibid.*).

Amid the conflict, Brunei exhibited deep concern and condemned any violation of sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of nations (*The Scoop*, 28th February 2022; Shoji, 2022). Brunei's foreign ministry urged all parties to de-escalate tensions, seek peaceful resolutions, and avoid the use of force (*The Scoop*, 28th February 2022). In a display of solidarity with Ukraine, Brunei-based envoys from various countries also joined in condemning the Russian invasion and called for Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine to prevent further escalation, echoing the UN Secretary-General's appeal (German Embassy in Brunei, 2022).

Timor-Leste's immediate response to the conflict is rooted in its historical experience with war and invasion. Despite its size and limited influence, Timor-Leste courageously condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine by co-sponsoring and supporting the UNGA resolution (Fahey, 2022). Aside from supporting the UNGA resolution, the Timorese government donated USD 1.5 million to the UN World Food Programme (WFP) for urgent humanitarian aid in Ukraine, drawing parallels between Timor-Leste's historical experiences with conflict and war and the current crisis faced by Ukrainians (WFP, 7th April 2022).

2.3 Neutral Countries

Among Southeast Asian nations, only Vietnam and Laos abstained from the resolution due to their longstanding ties with Russia and the former Soviet Union (*The Diplomat*, 28th February 2022). Despite Western pressures, Laos has maintained its neutrality and abstained from endorsing UN resolutions condemning Russia, a stance that is underpinned by its long-standing relationship with Moscow (*The Star*,

27th February 2022). However, Laos has sought a peaceful solution to the crisis through diplomatic means. Laos' Ministry of Foreign Affairs released an official statement expressing its hope for a peaceful resolution by all parties involved and urging restraint and de-escalation of tensions (*Laotian Times*, 26th February 2022) while Vietnam maintained to abstain from taking sides. Vietnamese government's response to the crisis is anchored to its adherence to its principle of neutrality. Vietnam's perception is that the conflict's categorization as an "invasion" could have been avoided (Huynh Tam Sang, 2022) and that directing its position to abstain from UN resolutions. The Vietnamese has maintained a similar response since Russia's annexation of Crimea (*The Diplomat*, 28th February 2022). This tepid, but consistent approach of Vietnam, however, emphasize "deep concern" and calls for peaceful solutions from both sides.

2.4 Affirmative Endorsement

Among the Southeast Asian countries, only Myanmar instantly spoke in favor of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Myanmar's military junta has aligned itself with Russia, asserting that the action is "justified" to protect sovereignty and exhibit global power (*The Straits Times*, 25th February 2022). The junta's spokesperson, Zaw Min Tun, emphasized Moscow's significance as an ally and arms supplier (*ibid.*). Despite global condemnation and sanctions that followed against Russian "invasion" of Ukraine, Myanmar's military council's supported Russia's actions and went on to further highlight its closer ties with Moscow (*VOA*, 2022).

However, Myanmar's voting behavior at the UN, where it supported Ukraine, diverged from its military regime's stance. This divergence reflects the multifaceted nature of Myanmar's response to the Ukraine crisis (Kawsar Uddin Mahmud and Nasrin Jabin, 2022) and its complex

dynamics, as well as the influence and the role of UN representative Kyaw Moe Tun (*ibid.*).

The multifaceted responses of ASEAN member nation-states toward the Russo-Ukrainian crisis have unveiled the intricate web of diplomatic considerations, historical ties, and geopolitical interests that define the region's international engagements. The diverse reactions underscore the complexity of ASEAN's unity in the face of a crisis, revealing the individual priorities and stances of each nation.

Table 1 ASEAN Members' Immediate Response to the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict

Hardline Response	Measured Diplomacy	Neutral Stance	Affirm/Endorse
Singapore	Indonesia Malaysia Philippines Thailand Cambodia Brunei Timor-Leste	Vietnam Laos	Myanmar

3. SEA Governments' Proactive Actions on the Crisis

3.1. Support for Ukraine – Humanitarian Aid

Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste have taken similar actions to provide humanitarian aid and assistance to Ukraine in the on-going crisis. However, each country has made their own unique contributions.

Singapore has imposed sanctions and restrictions against Russia, including a ban on the transfer of military goods, export controls on items that could facilitate offensive cyber operations (Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, Singapore, 5th March 2022), and financial restrictions on Russian financial institutions, entities, and activities in Russia. Singapore has also extended a humanitarian assistance package to Ukraine (*Channel News Asia*, 10th June 2022), which includes ambulances, firefighting protective gear, rescue equipment, mine detectors, and crucial medical supplies.

Malaysia has provided medical assistance to Ukraine (*New Straits Times*, 7th February 2023), including medical supplies such as Levothyroxine Sodium tablets, Fentanyl Citrate injections, Amikacin injections, and Propofol injections. The Malaysian government has also expressed its commitment to fostering enhanced collaboration with Ukraine, specifically on healthcare, and proposing a diplomatic solution and ceasefire before considering sanctions (*Benar News*, 8th March 2022).

Thailand has offered a platform for direct dialogue between Russia and Ukraine to facilitate negotiations among the conflicting parties and attain a peaceful resolution to the ongoing conflict (TASS, 5th November 2022; *Bangkok Post*, 25th February 2023). The Royal Thai Government has also approved the provision of humanitarian aid to Ukraine, amounting to two million baht (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand, 12th April 2022), which includes essential provisions such as food, blankets, sleeping bags, baby and child items, hygiene products, and first aid kits.

Vietnam has extended a humanitarian aid donation totaling USD 500,000 to Ukraine (*Hanoi Times*, 12th May 2022), which is allocated to the Central Emergency Response Fund, the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN International Children's Emergency Fund, and the Ukraine Red Cross. Vietnam's decision for this contribution is based on the immediate necessity to terminate the use of force, ensure

civilian security, safeguard critical infrastructure, uphold international humanitarian law, and facilitate humanitarian access and the evacuation of foreign communities, including the Vietnamese population, residing in Ukraine (Vietnam News Agency, 12th May 2022; *VOV World*, 23rd February 2023).

The Philippines has pledged a sum of USD 100,000 to facilitate essential humanitarian aid for the afflicted population, encompassing those displaced beyond national borders. The Philippines also underscores its commitment to welcoming Ukrainian refugees seeking refuge from the conflict (Philippine News Agency, 7th April 2022).

Timor-Leste has provided USD 1.5 million in aid, allocated through the UN's World Food Programme (*UCA News*, 10th March 2022), to extend the solidarity of the Timorese people with the Ukrainian people. The government of Timor-Leste has also advocated for an immediate ceasefire and a diplomatic solution to the conflict.

3.2. Support for Ukraine – Pledge for Material Support

Indonesia and Cambodia have both pledged material support for Ukraine, but their contributions differ in some ways.

Indonesia's President Joko Widodo visited both Kyiv and Moscow in June 2022, with the aim to address the global food supply crisis that has arisen due to the conflict (*Deutsche Welle*, 7th July 2022). Widodo conveyed his desire for the conflict to end during his visit in Kiev and Moscow and advocated for the peace mission for both countries (Bloomberg, 3rd July 2022).

Cambodia, on the other hand, has actively extended material support to Ukraine's war effort by dispatching demining experts to assist in the eradication of landmines laid by Russian forces (*The Diplomat*, 2nd November 2022). A contingent of Ukrainian experts also traveled to Cambodia to acquire insights into the process of dismantling

Russian-laid mines, with the help of Cambodian Mine Action Centre trainers (*Euronews*, 19th January 2023).

3.3 Favorable Support for Russia

Laos and Myanmar have taken similar actions at the advantage of Russia. Laos has refrained from endorsing UNGA resolutions that condemn Russia and has expressed skepticism about the efficacy of economic sanctions and embargoes. Lao President Thongloun Sisoulith, moreover, expresses his government's commitment to impartiality in contemporary conflicts and disputes, stating that Laos will not take sides in the conflicts and disputes (*Asia Times*, 27th July 2022). On the other hand, Myanmar has endorsed the UN resolution condemning Russia's aggression towards Ukraine on March 2nd, 2022 when their seat at the UN was held by the National Unity Government, but abstained on the February 23rd, 2023 UN resolution where the seat was occupied by the military junta (*VOA*, 11th March 2023). The junta's overt support for Russia's incursion into Ukraine is accompanied by an explicit offer of Myanmar as a conduit for Russian business penetration into Asian markets, thereby sidestepping imposed sanctions (Justice for Myanmar, 27th March 2022).

3.4 Limited to No Development

As for Brunei, there is a lack of accessible data concerning the ongoing actions undertaken by the government related to the on-going crisis. Their most recent engagement pertains to an announcement made at the outset of the invasion, where they declared their alignment with Ukraine in solidarity. Within Brunei, a country characterized by peace and the prevalence of legal norms, there is a noticeable absence of discernible actions pertaining to the conflict (Vongpaseuth *et al.*, 2022).

4. Bases of SEA Governments' Actions

Primarily, the UN Charter serves as a foundational treaty for its establishment and its system. Beyond its role as a multilateral international agreement of 192 member states, the UN Charter reaffirms numerous key tenets of international law, as well as encompassing customary norms. This is specifically expressed in Article 1, Chapter 1: Purposes and Principles, 1st paragraph of the UN Charter reads, "To maintain international peace and security and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace." This provision dictates that the UN shall secure and maintain peace and security, and should be collectively enforced by its member nation states.

With the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the individual response of most of the ASEAN member nation-states to the issue has cited the UN charter as their basis for promoting peaceful negotiations in resolving the conflict. The non-interference policy of the ASEAN Charter has also been adopted by a few of the ASEAN member nation-states that did not show a strong stance on the issue.

Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, Cambodia, Brunei, Timor-Leste, and Myanmar (UN seat held by National Unity Government) expressed their support for the UNGA condemning Russia for the use of armed actions against Ukraine. Laos and Vietnam abstained from voting in the UNGA Resolution, citing neutrality. Meanwhile, Myanmar's military junta took a separate stance and showed its endorsement of Russia's actions (Premesha Saha, 2022). The military junta argued that Russia needs to protect its sovereignty and went to

praising Moscow's role in global power balance (*The Irrawaddy*, 25th February 2022).

Along with Cambodia and Timor-Leste, Singapore has expressed strong condemnation of the Russian invasion, aligning its stance with international law, the UN Charter, and the principles of sovereignty and independence. The three countries co-sponsored the UN resolution condemning Russia's actions. This reflects their consistent advocacy for international law and principled stands on global conflicts. However, there are varying opinions within Singapore about aligning with Western powers due to potential economic implications (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, 5th March 2022; *The Straits Times*, 26th March 2022). Cambodia's stance emphasizes adherence to international principles, reflecting its history and commitment to a rules-based international order. Its proactive foreign policy aligns with the trend in Southeast Asia to uphold international norms (Storey, 2022b; *The Phnom Penh Post*, 1st March 2023). Timor-Leste's condemnation of the invasion anchored on its commitment to democratic values and its support for Ukraine through humanitarian aid showcases its solidarity and empathy, drawing from its own history (Fahey, 2022; WFP, 7th April 2022).

Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have advocated for diplomatic negotiations and peaceful resolutions while emphasizing the significance of international legal norms in maintaining global stability (*Jakarta Globe*, 24th February 2022; *The Star*, 3rd March 2022; *Interaksyon*, 2nd March 2022). Brunei's response highlights the importance of respecting fundamental principles and emphasizes its commitment to regional stability and global peace. Its solidarity with Ukraine underscores its dedication to diplomacy and peace (*The Scoop*, 28th February 2022; German Embassy in Brunei, 2022). Thailand's approach involves nuanced diplomacy; voted to denounce the Russian

invasion while expressing neutrality by not taking any further actions. The Thai Government's stance reflects its desire to facilitate diplomatic resolution, balancing its neutral stance with regional stability considerations (Storey, 2022a; *The Diplomat*, 13th October 2022).

Lastly, Vietnam and Laos abstained from voting on two separate UNGA resolutions – one condemning the Russian invasion and the other calling for the withdrawal of Russian troops. Despite their abstention, Vietnam and Laos underscores their commitments to international law, regional stability, diplomatic engagement, and dedication to peaceful resolution (Vietnam News Agency, 6th October 2022; Vietnam News Agency, 22nd February 2023; *Laotian Times*, 26th February 2022).

5. Interests of Governments and Citizens in Southeast Asia

The Russo-Ukrainian crisis has triggered a spectrum of responses among SEA countries, revealing a nuanced tapestry of positions that bear the imprints of economic interests, geopolitical calculus, historical affiliations, and domestic sentiments. This section undertakes a comprehensive synthesis of the multifaceted reactions across in the region, categorizing them thematically to elucidate discernible patterns and offer an extensive overview of the region's intricate geopolitical landscape.

5.1 Economic Interests and Geopolitical Considerations

Indonesia and Laos have demonstrated adept maneuvering between economic interests and geopolitical considerations. Indonesia's response is characterized by a careful equilibrium between its "free and active" foreign policy approach and robust economic ties with Russia. It proceeds judiciously, balancing defense collaboration and economic relations while prudently safeguarding its economic interests amidst

disruptions in vital commodities (Engel, 2022; *Asia Times*, 27th July 2022). Laos' alignment with Russia is likewise founded on historical connections and pragmatic economic necessities, as evinced by their joint initiatives in unexploded ordnance clearance and shared facility construction (*Asia Times*, 27th July 2022).

5.2 Domestic Sentiments and Historical Affinities

Domestic sentiments and historical connections have significantly molded responses across the region. Malaysia has borne witness to the emergence of pro-Russia sentiments, which are steeped in narratives of anti-Western inclinations and historical skepticism towards the US, collectively contributing to a prevailing public endorsement of Russia (*Al Jazeera*, 18th November 2022). Moreover, according to a 2022 survey conducted by market analyst Ipsos Malaysia titled "The War in Ukraine Today," 81 percent of Malaysians polled said that Malaysia should avoid military involvement in the Ukrainian conflict, and 59 percent of Malaysian respondents believe the war in Ukraine is none of Malaysia's business (*Malay Mail*, 27th April 2022).

In Indonesia, there has been a disparity in the responses of civil society and the government. According to Evello's digital platform analysis, many Indonesian citizens clearly support Russia's position on the conflict. This is due to a strong anti-American sentiment in Indonesian society and Russia's successful soft power campaign in the country (Gerstl *et al.*, 2022). Vietnam, on the other hand, projects a nuanced stance from its historical affinity with Russia and exposure to international news, which in turn resulted in a diverse gamut of responses within its populace (*The Diplomat*, 18th March 2022).

Cambodia's alignment with a UN resolution denouncing Russia's invasion served as a surprising assertion, driven by historical bonds and a principled government commitment (Storey, 2022b).

5.3 Non-Interventionism and Pragmatic Diplomacy

Singapore's response is emblematic of non-interventionism harmonized with pragmatic diplomacy. The majority of Singaporeans advocate for a policy of non-intervention, buttressed by a government stance that is rooted in principled nonalignment and an aversion to military entanglement (Ipsos, 26th January 2023). Vietnam's pragmatic approach finds expression in its abstention from a UN vote on Ukraine, reflecting a calibrated pursuit of national interests and the seamless continuation of its foreign policy prerogatives (*The Diplomat*, 24th February 2023). Thailand, initially inclined towards neutrality in the name of national interest, subsequently transitioned to supporting a UN resolution, thereby showcasing its diplomatic pragmatism (*Bangkok Post*, 25th February 2023).

5.4 Security and Regional Power Dynamics

Beyond immediate economic concerns, the repercussions of the conflict extend to security imperatives and regional power dynamics. The Philippines proffers caution against dismissing the conflict's pertinence predicated solely upon geographical distance, emphasizing the potential to recalibrate the regional security landscape (Gallaga, 2023). Vietnam navigates the security implications of its strategic partnership with Russia while adroitly managing its relationships with both Moscow and Beijing (Hoang Thi Ha, 2022; Nguyen Quang Dy, 2022). Meanwhile, Myanmar's response unveils internal cleavages, reflective of geopolitical complexities, media reportage, and internal political dynamics (*VOA*, 25th February 2022; Kawsar Uddin Mahmud and Nasrin Jabin, 2022).

The manifold SEA responses to the Russia-Ukraine conflict unveil the intricate geopolitical mosaic of the region. Economic interests, geopolitical calculus, historical ties, and domestic sentiments intricately

intersect to form a rich tapestry of reactions. As nations negotiate these multi-layered dynamics, their positions evolve, thus offering a panoramic insight into the nuanced diplomatic choreography that shapes their engagement with a global crisis. This synthesis stands testament to the intricate realm of SEA politics and governance, proffering illumination into the intricate interplay that molds their international standing.

6. Competing Influences of US and China in Shaping ASEAN Members' Stances

This section analyzes the impact of the US-China rivalry in shaping the international order and in resolving the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, to the positions of SEA states. The analysis focuses on assessing ASEAN member nation-state's position and alignment. By adopting a comprehensive perspective, this section aims to shed light on the complex dynamics at play in the regional and international politico-economic landscape and, finally, to provide insights in the strategic choices made by the nations facing the stakes of this rivalry in relation to the on-going crisis.

Amidst Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, the US and its allies employ diverse sanctions, export controls, and trade measures to hinder Russia's war capabilities. Sanctions on Russian financial institutions and defense-related goods force Russia to seek alternative weaponry sources. US Congress ends Russia's trade status, raising tariffs on imports while safeguarding vital sectors. Also together with its allies, the US offers energy aid, exerts more efforts to stabilize markets, and mitigates nuclear risks. The US has utilized the Presidential Drawdown Authority for military support, with USD 12.1 billion in Fiscal Year 2023 via the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative. Military aid includes surplus

defense items and Coast Guard cutters. The US continues comprehensive backing for Ukraine, enhancing defense, providing humanitarian aid, and ensuring economic stability (The White House, 21st February 2023; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 24th February 2023). Related to this, a Humanitarian aid amounting to more than USD 1.9 billion was also allotted. Economic support bolsters basic services.

PRC's multifaceted response to Russia's 2022 Ukraine invasion spans informational, diplomatic, economic, and military dimensions. Beijing's alignment with Moscow, driven by countering the US and safeguarding Chinese interests, is evident in resolute rhetorical support, sustained military collaboration, and pragmatic economic actions. China's strategic stance is influenced by internal stability concerns, its critique of existing security architectures, and implications for Taiwan.

While backing Russia, China carefully balances its support to maintain its own stability and interests (Greitens, 2022). All the intertwined internal and external conditions made China's behavior toward securitizing its geopolitical and economic interests in this crisis (Flores, Castaño and Bautista, 2022). Hence, China's Ongoing strategic response to Russia's involvement in Ukraine entails a nuanced approach. A swift ceasefire without direct support for Russia to evade sanctions, Beijing prioritizes EU markets for economic gains while cautiously collaborating with Moscow on specific security matters. This move is consistent with its goal of establishing a multipolar world order that counters the US dominance. China's involvement aims not only to address immediate concerns but also to reshape global power dynamics for a more inclusive international order (Kusa, 2022).

As the rivalry between the US and China intensifies, the SEA states are confronted with the conundrum of aligning with either Washington or Beijing in relation to the Russia-Ukraine conflict; and in the absence of a unified strategic stance, each member nation-state is left grappling

with the undeniable fact that a continuation of their conventional diplomatic and geopolitical practices is no longer feasible (Stromseth, 2019). The prevalent dynamics within the global arena compel these nations to initiate a practical recalibration of their strategic stances, acknowledging the inescapable necessity of forging meaningful alignments within the prevailing international landscape (Premesha Saha, 2022).

6.1. Singapore

Primarily, Singapore stands as the sole SEA state that has chosen to join the barrage of Western economic and political sanctions directed towards Russia, suggesting a visible alignment with the West, fore fronted by the US. This stand is affirmed by the country's favorable votes for UN resolutions aimed at condemning Russia's actions, indicative of a shared perspective with the US on the matter (Storey and Choong, 2022). Additionally, Singapore's provision of humanitarian aid to alleviate the ground situation in Ukraine manifests a sense of resonance with the values and beliefs espoused by the US and the Western countries (*Channel News Asia*, 10th June 2022). The bold move to block and prohibit a substantial volume of Russian commodities advances its economic solidarity alongside Western narratives. Singapore's hardline response exhibits its strong strategic partnership with the US, signifying a shared commitment to addressing the conflict with a resolute posture.

Considered as the US' best friend in the region, Singapore has positioned itself as an integral partner of the Western countries in the Indo-Pacific Region. This best-friend-like relationship is further solidified by their joint military participation in the US and European countries. This suggests Singapore's strong security alliance with the

West (Scott, 2022; The White House, 21st February 2023). China, on the other hand, has likewise maintained its ties with Singapore in defense, economy, culture, education, and the Belt and Road Initiative (*The Straits Times*, 21st September 2017). However, it is noteworthy that these bilateral relations are not, in any apparent way, infringed by the stance that both of them have in relation to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

6.2. Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste, though has been striving since 2002 to establish a strong effective state (Croissant and Rebecca Abu Sharkh, 2020), courageously manifested its condemnation against Russia's aggression in Ukraine. It did not only co-sponsor the UN General Assembly resolution (Fahey, 2022), but have donated a monetary amount for urgent humanitarian aid in Ukraine to the UN World Food Programme (WFP, 7th April 2022). Its Foreign Minister, Adaljiza Magno, also called for an immediate ceasefire and diplomatic resolution to the ongoing conflict, emphasizing the futility of war and the lack of benefits for all involved (*UCA News*, 10th March 2022).

6.3. The Philippines

The response of the Philippines highlights its prioritization of national interest in navigating the US-China rivalry balancing its longstanding history with both superpowers with its territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea in the backdrop. Initially the country's stance was marked by President Duterte's policy of neutrality, but later reverted by voting in favor of condemning Russia's actions through March 2, 2022, UN resolution (Philippine News Agency, 10th June 2022; De Castro, 2022).

Beyond advocating for a peaceful resolution and expressing concerns over economic repercussions, the Philippines, under the Marcos administration, committed to humanitarian efforts by providing USD 100,000 worth of assistance to Ukraine and willingness to open its borders to Ukrainian refugees affected by the conflict (Philippine News Agency, 7th April 2022).

Drawing parallels with the US, the Philippines both implicitly and explicitly showcases its national interest by renewing its ties with the Western superpower. Historically, the Philippines has a strong connection with the US including the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (De Castro, 2022). By far, the Philippine pivot toward the US was due to the perceived threats of the conflict extending into Asia; with China potentially using Russia's tactics in Taiwan and the South China Sea dispute (*ibid.*).

Despite efforts to distance itself from the superpower rivalry and efforts to reform its foreign policy to be independent from the US, the Philippines still perceives the Western power as its primary ally amid China's threat. The current administration's renewal of security ties with the US that led to enhancing its maritime cooperation and mutual defense posture signifies the country's strategy in protecting its national interests over regional security challenges (*ibid.*).

6.4. Brunei

While Brunei is viewed as heavy reliant on the US security umbrella, there is no other information available supporting that there is such a strategic alignment on specific geopolitical concerns (U.S. Department of State, 28th May 2021). However, its robust economic ties with China reflect a multifaceted relationship that extends beyond a singular geopolitical conflict (Chinese Embassy in Brunei, 17th August 2022).

The country's cautious and non-committal foreign policy approach, rooted in prudent diplomatic practices, is evident in its lack of explicit statements or proactive measures in relation to the on-going crisis in Ukraine.

6.5. Indonesia

Indonesia's stance on the Russia-Ukraine conflict is evident through diplomatic maneuvers and actions, displaying a seemingly independent yet divergent approach, avoiding explicit associations with the US or China. Notably, Indonesian President Joko Widodo's distinction as the first ASEAN leader to initiate a diplomatic visit to both Kyiv and Moscow during the onset of the conflict reflects a proactive engagement related to the crisis that aligns to the comprehensive understanding of global dynamics often propagated by the US (Associated Press, 30th June 2022). This action by Indonesia, relatively, follows the diplomatic pathway endorsed by the Western powers. Furthermore, Indonesia's commitment to peacekeeping was elaborated by President Widodo during his visits citing his country's participation in various UN Peacekeeping Missions and post-conflict stabilization efforts (Bloomberg, 3rd July 2022). However, Jakarta's behavior relative to the international call to end hostility in Ukraine has been described as somewhat "inadequate" – a narrative that Western powers are akin to propagating against countries that do not agree much with their values (Murphy, 2022; Engel, 2022). Hence, in general, Indonesia's favorable behavior toward the US stance in relation to the Russia-Ukraine conflict have emerged due to reasoned presumptions stemming from shared values, diplomatic engagements, and a comprehensive understanding of global dynamics, that are often championed by the US.

6.6. Thailand

Thailand's response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict is based on its desire to maintain independence and avoid a zero-sum game between the US and China; and following its previous approaches to international conflicts that is characterized by neutrality, value to historical relationships, and most importantly national interest (*Bangkok Post*, 10th March 2022; Storey, 2022a). Over the past two decades Thailand has been balancing its relations with major powers, including the US, China, and Russia. Thai Government's crisis diplomacy avoids the "politicization of international principles" which was demonstrated in its reluctance to explicitly call out Russia while voting in favor of condemning its aggression (Storey, 2022a; *Benar News*, 13th October 2022) and publicly committed to helping to find means for peaceful resolution and providing humanitarian assistance to Ukraine (TASS, 5th November 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand, 12th April 2022).

6.7. Malaysia

Malaysia's strategic balancing act in response to the conflict contrasts with that of the US and China, but draws parallelism with other ASEAN member nation-states that employs measured diplomacy. The country's voting pattern in the UN is a reflection of its government's respect for international law, national integrity, and sovereignty. However, Kuala Lumpur avoided to call out Russia in its official statements, instead called for a peaceful resolution. Its decision to avoid imposing sanctions on Russia was also a manifestation of its reluctance to take a strong stance in relation to the conflict. This careful approach detaches Malaysia from being associated with the superpower rivalry amid the Russia-Ukraine conflict (*Benar News*, 8th March 2022).

Generally, according to Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob, the safety of Malaysians in Ukraine remains one of government's paramount concerns. The country's efforts to provide Ukraine with essential medical supplies through its embassy in Malaysia likewise exemplifies its pledge to humanitarian needs (*New Straits Times*, 7th February 2023).

Malaysia's decision to avoid sanctions against Russia is based on its understanding of how the crisis could affect civilians, particularly its citizens. Politically, economically, and strategically, Malaysia has enjoyed the fruits of functional and productive relationships with both China and the US and competitions between these two powers have also been beneficial to Malaysia (Daniel, 2023). While Malaysia has deepened its economic relations with China, it has able to warm relationship with the US. Malaysia's new Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, has described their ties with China as "pivotal". Anwar was previously seen as 'pro-West', but experts view that the veteran politician is likely to take a more balanced approach (*South China Morning Post*, 24th November 2022) as he also hoped to strengthen ties with Beijing, the Washington, and other partners.

6.8. Vietnam

Vietnam's response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict exemplifies its unique non-alignment principle and neutrality policy, rooted in its history of being caught between great power politics. Vietnamese government is one of the two Southeast countries that abstained from two separate UNGA resolutions deploring Russia's actions and calling for the withdrawal of Russian troops (*The Diplomat*, 18th October 2022; *The Diplomat*, 24th February 2023). The country poses itself as a non-aligned, neutral country, and goes as far as avoiding referring to Russia's actions as "invasion" (*The Diplomat*, 18th October 2022). Nonetheless,

Vietnam has contributed a substantial amount of humanitarian assistance to Ukraine highlighting its commitment to humanitarian law and civilian security (Vietnam News Agency, 12th May 2022). It likewise expressed its commitment to contribute to diplomatic initiatives and rehabilitation of the affected areas. Vietnam's approach to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict reflects introspection over foreign and defense policy, cautioning against great power conflict and risk-averse hedging between the US and China (*The Diplomat*, 18th October 2022; Hoang Thi Ha, 2022) and is influenced by its geopolitical position, historical ties, and need to navigate relationships with major powers without necessarily aligning closely with the US or China.

6.9. Laos

China is considered as an important partner to Laos. However, the State of Southeast Asia Survey Report shows that China's influence in Laos may be significant yet slowly waning (Seah *et al.*, 2023). Accordingly, despite Western pressures and condemnation from Southeast Asian countries, Laos has maintained a neutral stance amidst the US-China great power rivalry. In separate UNGA resolutions, a significant number of Southeast Asian states voted to condemn Russia's actions in the Ukraine conflict (*The Diplomat*, 24th February 2022). However, Laos and Vietnam, abstained from endorsing the resolution due to their historical connections with Russia (*ibid.*). Laos' asserts that its decision to abstain demonstrates the government's commitment to a neutral stance on contemporary conflicts and disputes (*Asia Times*, 27th July 2022). This was articulated by Lao State President Thongloun Sisoulith in May 2022 by asserting that Laos would not take sides in current conflicts (*ibid.*). President Sisoulith aims for diplomatic neutrality and doubts economic sanctions' effectiveness in global conflicts citing its limited trade and geopolitical impact (*ibid.*).

6.10. Cambodia

Cambodia's stance on the crisis is marked by ambiguity as it has consistently employed a balancing approach in its diplomatic engagements. This indicates a lack of a definitive or overtly clear position over the crisis. It is noted that China is the largest investor and donor, contributing to a whopping 21.8 percent of the country's cumulative foreign direct investment (FDI) from 1994-2019 (Kin Phea, 2020). Looking at this vantage point, the Cambodia's historical relationship between China and Cambodia can never be discounted. This relationship spans from the 13th century which harmoniously grew to have forged and nurtured an unbreakable "ironclad" friendship that weathered many storms and survived many difficulties.

Prime Minister Hun Sen's statement was unexpected as he forwarded a bold statement against the Russian invasion (*The Diplomat*, 2nd December 2022). There are two foreboding critiques of these actions. While Hun Sen's move was viewed as against the aggressor, the statement could also be a reflection of its diplomatic pragmatism and cordial historical relations with both China and Russia.

On the other hand, although it can be discerned as a completely unexpected stance, Cambodia has able to translate its commitment to contribute in global efforts to stabilize the global matrix that is disrupted by the conflict. The publicized telephone conversation between Cambodia's leadership and Ukraine, pledging support in the form of demining experts exemplifies a distinct degree of diplomatic independence within their existing relations with China (*Euronews*, 19th January 2023). Notwithstanding the un-discountable certainty that such actions underscore a hard commitment to helping Ukraine and stabilizing the region.

In order to ascertain the contemporary trajectory of the nation's perspective, it is imperative that a more abundant corpus of accessible

information and empirical data be made available. This expanded informational foundation would afford a more comprehensive latitude for nuanced analysis and interpretation. It is therefore acknowledged that the stance of Cambodia toward either the US or China in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict is inconclusive.

6.11. Myanmar

The political landscape in Myanmar is divided between the Military Junta, which took over in February 2021, and the National Unity Government asserting position against the coup. As expected, these two opposing sides have opposing stances toward crisis. The Junta has openly and explicitly supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine and offered the country as a base for Russian businesses to access Asian markets (*VOA*, 25th February 2022). Clearly, this bold move by the junta is bypassing the sanctions forwarded by the US and favors Russia – the main arms sponsor of the Junta (*The Straits Times*, 25th February 2022).

China's strategic partnership with Russia has been utilized to achieve political goals in Myanmar including the efforts to counter western sanctions, support democracy and human rights, and prevent international involvement in Myanmar's periphery (Tower, 2022). The National Unity Government and its supporters, on the other hand, supports Ukraine and views the conflict as a reflection of their current situation. Their stance aligns with the US, but their visibility is difficult to discern due to the country's current domestic political landscape (*The Diplomat*, 11th March 2022).

Overall, although there is an un-discountable reality that Myanmar has been divided due to its present situation, the existing entities vying for superiority have not failed to express their stance towards the conflict.

Figure 1 ASEAN Members' Stances towards Russo-Ukrainian Conflict



7. Conclusions

This paper presented the delicate balancing actions undertaken by ASEAN member nation-states toward the Russo-Ukrainian crisis alongside the US-China politico-economic rift on the issue, and beyond. SEA governments' responses to the conflict have displayed varying patterns that are reflective of the region's diversity yet interwoven political systems, economic interests, international linkages, and historical ties. Moreover, the rivalry between the US and China has, to some extent, shaped the varying responses of the SEA states in the absence of a solid stance from the ASEAN as a regional bloc. The extent and strength of the US and China's influence are clearly evident in the individual SEA nation-states' actions, responses, and positions over the conflict which were earlier defined as a form of: (1) Hardline Response, (2) Measured Diplomacy, (3) Neutrality, and (4) Affirmative Endorsement of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Notes

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Development of a Public Diplomacy Model for Kazakhstan through the Analysis of the International Political Activity of the USA and China

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Abstract

Investigating the practices of the United States of America and China as pillars of two opposing models of diplomatic activity is useful and relevant in the light of the development of new strategies for public activity in the Republic of Kazakhstan and the implementation of best practices in the political sector of the state. The purpose of this study was to determine the best way to develop the model of public diplomacy for Kazakhstan by investigating the features and establishing the specifics of democratic and authoritarian methods of conducting international relations in the 21st century using evidence from the USA and China. The main method of scientific cognition used in this study was the method of system analysis, using which the following tasks were completed: the stages of public diplomacy of the United States and China were investigated, their specifics and orientation were determined; the effectiveness of two models of political activity was summed up,

proceeding from the results of which relevant solutions for updating the diplomatic doctrine of Kazakhstan were presented. The study results included the coverage of the specifics and methods of American and Chinese diplomatic activities; summary of the strengths and weaknesses of the democratic and authoritarian model of international political activity of the two countries; finding the best mechanisms, tools, and methods for introducing them into the diplomatic practice of Kazakhstan.

Keywords: *political war, propaganda, state body, information policy, diplomatic doctrine*

1. Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, as a result of the reformatting of the former world order system, in the early 1990s, there was a decrease in the global nuclear potential, the fall of the socialist regime in the member countries of the Warsaw Pact, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union into several independent states. It was for the young republics that the vital task was to form an image of new democratic states for the world community, based on a political system with collective decision-making and equal rights for all participants in this structure. The beginning of the 21st century was also marked by another round of transformational processes: as a result of numerous military confrontations (in Ukraine, Georgia), as well as economic and social upheavals (migration crisis), a new stage of development of the world security and stability system was launched, where the countries of the former Soviet Union occupy a strategically important place (Budjeryn, 2022). The creation of a favourable image and a positive impression of Kazakhstan's activities in the foreign policy arena contributes to the becoming of the Republic of Kazakhstan as a legal, reliable, and

friendly subject of global international events at the present stage of the development of the world order.

Urazaeva (2020) investigated the phenomenon of public diplomacy as an important vector in foreign policy and a modern tool for forming a dialogue with the public through the media. The differences and similarities between the two opposite models of public diplomacy – democratic and authoritarian – were considered by a group of researchers, including Kazakh specialists Kukeyeva *et al.* (2020). Burt (2020) covered the aspect of public diplomacy in the relations between the United States of America and China in the context of historical parallels and forecasts for the near future. Burt believed that the results of the interaction between the two countries will have global consequences. According to Albishri *et al.* (2019), analysing the visit of the 45th US President Donald Trump to Saudi Arabia, one can imagine the general structure of the country's public diplomacy, identify strengths and weaknesses, and understand how the state is trying to influence the moods of local citizens. Exploring the history and modernity of public diplomacy in China, specifically the phenomenon of "panda diplomacy", Reed (2022) concluded that this tool is an excellent mechanism for Beijing to achieve its goals using the so-called "soft power".

Digital diplomacy as a new and developing tool of public diplomacy in the 21st century was presented by Tassilova *et al.* (2018) as a future vector in international relations of the Central Asian countries. The authors were convinced that the diplomatic services of the states of the region need to use the digital aspect of relations to build a successful line in the international arena. Thanks to active cooperation within the framework of the Chinese initiative "One Belt, One Road", according to Chiusi (2021), Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and neighbouring countries have the opportunity to use all the advantages of this strategy for the

benefit of their own image, provided a competent approach to the implementation of strategic goals in foreign policy.

According to Iztaeva and Abzhaparova (2017), public diplomacy includes such elements as public institutions and associations, international non-governmental organizations, contacts at the level of sister cities; for the country, the use of all possible mechanisms and tools of public diplomacy is the right way to recognition on a global scale. Kazakh specialists Abzhaparova and Sarsembaeva (2013) investigated the activities of Kazakhstan within the framework of Central Asian organizations. Rakhimov (2014) studied the work of the Republic as part of the initiatives of the United Nations. The main emphasis in the studies presented above was placed on the decisive role of the Republic of Kazakhstan in making important decisions by taking part in common missions under the auspices of global institutions and alliances.

The problem of this paper is the emphasis on the key features of the American and Chinese models of public diplomacy to identify the best tools and mechanisms for their implementation in the practice of popularizing the Republic of Kazakhstan as a successful, peaceful, and open state. The purpose of this study was to outline the dynamics of Kazakhstan's public diplomacy within the framework of its activities in the international arena through the lens of the analysis of the democratic and authoritarian type of this area of diplomacy and the selection of best practices for their implementation in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

2. Literature Review

Studying the issues of public diplomacy, some researchers focused both on the entire system as a whole and on certain of its structural elements – information technology, cultural and traditional values, and the diversity of active participants in the process. International broadcasting, defined

as the use of electronic media by one society to shape the opinions of the people and leaders of another society for the purposes of public diplomacy, has been investigated by Osipova-Stocker *et al.* (2022). The authors illustrated the activities of news agencies using evidence from countries such as the United States of America, France.

Flew (2020) believed that excessive attention to the aspect of culture, traditions, and national identity in the question of building the image of the state in the international arena adversely affects the final result – the country is no longer perceived as a serious geopolitical unit. The main concepts, key terms, semantic messages and ideological vectors of different types and models of public diplomacy in the world at the present stage were investigated by Cull (2008). The author clearly distinguished the meaning of such policy instruments as cultural diplomacy and cultural exchange, information technology, etc. in the context of American scientific thought.

Ayhan (2019), analysing all known techniques and methods of conducting public diplomacy in the United States, concluded that the accumulation of services, as well as the mass of active participants in the process, creates confusion and difficulties in performing basic tasks of the vector, namely, clearly communicating the correct information to the audience. The authoritarian variant of conducting public diplomacy using evidence from China has been investigated by many experts. Thus, Jiang (2022) analysed the annual speeches of the President of China Xi Jinping within the framework of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative as a tool to influence public opinion on the activities of the state.

Huang and Wang (2020) tried to explain why the phenomenon of "panda diplomacy", which was actively used by Beijing officials during international visits, was so in demand in the world at one time. Zhang (2022) considered such a phenomenon as Confucius Institutes to be an important platform for spreading Chinese culture and teaching Chinese

in Europe and the world, which, however, is now perceived rather negatively. The difficulties and promising areas in public diplomacy of the Republic of Kazakhstan have been summarized in several case studies. For instance, Vanderhill *et al.* (2020) considered the situation through the lens of the geographical location of the country in terms of being surrounded by strong and powerful neighbours. According to the authors, the positive aspects of such a situation still outweigh because China, which is nearby, having all the mechanisms to put pressure on Kazakhstan, nevertheless very subtly and competently builds a relationship with Astana.

Tjia (2022) predicted that the international economic and political activities of Kazakhstan in a strategic alliance with China will create a precedent for successful cooperation between the two states on the continent, which will bring excellent reputation dividends to the two countries. While the deliberate exclusion from the activities of other neighbouring countries will help the Republic of Kazakhstan avoid the fate of a state that supports the hostile foreign policy of some subjects, which will positively affect the international reputation. Omonov (2019) considered the "soft power" strategy (following the example of Chinese practices) the best way for ensuring foreign policy results and gaining recognition in the world for the countries of Central Asia. In addition, using evidence from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, the author gave examples of the fine work of certain institutions in the field of public diplomacy to achieve short-term goals.

3. Materials and Methods

The main methods of scientific cognition that were used in this study included the method of system analysis, the historical-comparative method and predictive research methods. Using the method of system

analysis, the basic methods and means of conducting public diplomacy were classified using evidence from the United States of America and the People's Republic of China, and similar and different characteristics of the systems of this sphere of politics in the two countries were summarized, while conventional tools and mechanisms used in the Republic of Kazakhstan to create a positive image of the country abroad were emphasized.

Using the historical-comparative method, the specifics were analysed, and common and distinctive features of public diplomacy models in the United States, China, as well as Kazakhstan on the border of the 20th-21st centuries were identified. Furthermore, the level of effectiveness of methods of activity in the field of topics used in democratic and authoritarian systems of public diplomacy at different stages of historical development was determined.

The use of predictive methods contributed to the presentation of practical recommendations and working scenarios for the implementation of the best international practices in public diplomacy in the Republic of Kazakhstan. This served to stimulate further scientific research on the subject under study to obtain broader and more comprehensive results for the development of up-to-date guidance in the field of promoting the country abroad.

During the study, a variety of literature was used: scientific and analytical publications of Nye (2020) and Omonov (2019); critical reviews (Rakhimov (2014), Abzhaparova and Sarsembaeva (2013)); state strategies, plans and concepts (U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication (PCC, 2007), On Approval of the State Program "Digital Kazakhstan" (Ministry of Justice, 2017)); methodological and statistical materials (Number of Internet Users in China from 2012 to June (Statista, 2022)).

In addition, to provide more complete and extensive research results in terms of analysing the legislative framework and regulatory documents of the United States, China, and Kazakhstan on public diplomacy, a wide range of regulatory and constituent acts was investigated and conceptualized. For instance, the United States International Broadcasting Act of 1994, according to which there was a serious reorganization of the international broadcasting system existing at that time in the States, the creation of an independent body responsible for the information policy of public diplomacy. Furthermore, the document "On Approval of the Action Plan to Support Ethnic Kazakhs Abroad for 2018-2022" (Ministry of Justice, Kazakhstan, 2018), which describes the full significance of the activities of the Kazakh diaspora for the international reputation of the Republic of Kazakhstan and building a positive image of the country according to citizens of other states. "On the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan" (Ministry of Justice, Kazakhstan, 2019), which proclaimed the tasks for the coming years, namely strengthening Kazakhstan's international positions and forming a positive image of the country in the world community, ensuring information independence and security.

4. Results

In internationally accepted practice, the term "public diplomacy" refers to any of the various government-sponsored initiatives aimed at direct communication with a foreign public. Public diplomacy includes all official efforts to persuade target segments of foreign public opinion to support or tolerate the government's strategic goals; synonyms of this expression are national policy, social diplomacy, people's diplomacy. Public diplomacy is a complex mechanism that includes many methods.

The American analyst of political processes Cull (2008) called the following the main instruments of national policy in the 21st century: protection of interests, exchange, and cultural diplomacy, international broadcasting. In certain periods of history, public activity within the state has had different names – both official, documented in legislative and statutory documents, and unofficial, appearing among the population of the United States of America (USA), the People's Republic of China (PRC) or other states (Table 1).

Table 1 Different Interpretations of Public Diplomacy in the USA and China

Country	Official name	Unofficial name	Images
United States of America	Cultural diplomacy and public (social) diplomacy	Propaganda "charm offensive"	"Gunboat diplomacy", "Carrier diplomacy"
People's Republic of China	Public diplomacy, people's diplomacy	Soft power	Panda diplomacy

Source: Urazaeva (2022). Presently, the classic examples of opposing models of public diplomacy are the United States – the image of a democratic model and China – as an authoritarian system.

4.1. The Democratic Model of Public Diplomacy Using Evidence from the United States

The United States has long sought to influence the populations of different countries through public diplomacy. After the end of the Cold War, the States intensified their efforts to develop an effective strategy for promoting democratic and liberal values. The state's efforts in the field of public diplomacy at that time were carried out, first of all, by the United States Information Agency (USIA), established in 1953, as well as by various broadcasting institutions under the auspices of the agency.

USIA was a basic tool for coordinated and extensive work in the field of public diplomacy. It covered over 170 countries and was broadcast to over 100 million people; the alliance also published books, magazines, organized courses for learning English, opened libraries, exhibitions, showed films, programs, promoted cultural and scientific exchange for millions of citizens from around the world. The USIA was a key information resource of the United States within the framework of projects under the auspices of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and in those countries where the States were particularly active. In 1999, the Law on Restructuring and Reform of Foreign Affairs abolished the USIA and transferred its responsibilities to the State Department, but with a much smaller budget (U.S. Department of State, 1999). After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, interest in public diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy and national security resumed. At the end of the 2010s, new trends in the world order and changes caused by the widespread penetration of the Internet and digital technologies created unusual conditions for the development of the vector in the country, specifically, the intensification of discussions of world events on the pages of online blogs and social networks, as well as the strengthening of public influence and control over activities in national policy. There was an urgent need to develop a fundamentally new concept of public diplomacy, which would differ favourably from the old form of conducting politics in the 20th century (Table 2).

This need appeared because the method of delivering and receiving information has fundamentally changed; it has become literally instantaneous, taking seconds of time. Social networks (Twitter, MySpace, Facebook, Telegram) now allow people to communicate with each other on a global scale, discuss major events among themselves, bypassing the main source of information (Jia and Li, 2020).

Table 2 The Essence of the US Public Diplomacy Strategy in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Strategy of the 20th century		**Strategy of the 21st century**	
Purpose	Army, state, state institutions, heavy industry	Purpose	Ruling elite, civil society, cultural values, traditions, history, public institutions
Tools	Military, political, economic, diplomatic	Tools	Psychological, informational, political, economic, diplomatic
Means	Military clashes, armed conflicts, blockades, blackmail	Means	Informational and psychological impact

Sources: Kukeyeva *et al.* (2020); Osipova-Stocker *et al.* (2022).

The essence of the transfer of useful data has changed dramatically, and it is proceeding from this fact that the United States began to develop an updated strategy of public diplomacy. Currently, there are four principal legislative acts regulating public diplomacy activities in the United States: United States Information and Educational Exchange Act (1948), State Department Basic Authorities Act (1956), Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act (1961), United States International Broadcasting Act (1994).

Even though their adoption took place quite a long time ago, they are still the principal regulatory instructions, according to which all the tasks of public diplomacy in the United States are coordinated and accomplished. The correction of these documents takes place by introducing minor adaptive acts and revisions of existing norms.

4.1.1. Structure of US public diplomacy

As of 2021, there are about 20 different departments at the cabinet level in the United States and more than 50 independent agencies and commissions that take part in at least one form of official national policy in the United States. This creates a certain oversaturation of the system

and begets difficulties in achieving the goals set. The recommendations of some analysts are aimed either at reducing the number of responsible bodies, or at excluding functions in the field of public diplomacy from some organizations and institutions. Today, the State Department Basic Authorities Act (1956) manages the planning, financing, and implementation of public diplomacy programs through the Deputy Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Relations. Their duties include leading the overall efforts of the US government in the field of public diplomacy, strengthening the influence of educational and cultural exchange, developing and using new technologies to improve the effectiveness of public diplomacy programs (Gallarotti, 2022). The following institutions operate under the auspices of the Department:

1. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA). Main functions: appointment of sponsoring organizations that implement international exchange programs; control over organizations for compliance with federal rules relating to each exchange category; analysis and solution of problems that may arise with participating international exchange students in exchange programs.
2. Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP). Main functions: managing programs for providing information about foreign policy, society, and American values to a foreign audience through the media; political and technical support in outreach through US embassies and consulates in more than 140 countries.
3. Bureau of Public Affairs (PA). Main functions: organization of briefings for the domestic and foreign press; management of web resources of the State Department; holding town meetings on foreign policy; preparation of historical studies on US diplomacy and foreign affairs.

4. Office of Policy, Planning and Resources (R/PPR). Main functions: strategic planning and evaluation of the effectiveness of all public diplomacy programs and public relations initiatives.
5. Office of Private Sector Outreach (R/PSO). Main functions: support of relations with private sector leaders in American companies, organizations and foundations to promote foreign policy goals and to strengthen international education.

The work related to US public diplomacy in other countries is also very active. Each US Embassy has a public relations department to manage information and cultural programs in the host country (Albishri *et al.*, 2019). The responsible departments are tasked with explaining the policies and actions of the US government to officials, the media, and the people of this country. In 1998, Congress passed a law establishing the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG, known as the United States Agency for Global Media (USAGM) after 2018) as an independent organization of the executive branch, abolishing the USIA. Since 2003, BBG has been responsible for overseeing, directing, and controlling the activities of the International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB). IBB, in turn, controls the worldwide broadcasting services of the *Voice of America* and various television programs. Since 2010, BBG also has an impact in territories such as Tibet, Burma, Somalia, North Korea, Venezuela, Cuba, and Iran. In Iran, *Voice of America* broadcasts seven hours a day on satellite television and, through two radio networks, reaches about one-third of Iranian adults every week; in the early 2020s, active debate began on an even larger expansion of the rights of BBG in the field of public diplomacy to increase influence on the countries of the Asian region (Güleç, 2021).

While the State Department is the recognized leader of US public diplomacy efforts, a number of government agencies are involved in

communicating with the foreign public by virtue of their missions. These include the US Department of Defense, Agency for International Development (USAID), etc. Furthermore, in the field (e.g., in most universities, companies, institutions) there are special departments whose activities are related to the tasks of public diplomacy, but most of them lack the full set of powers to carry out this work. The administrations of Presidents Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden continued the previously established tradition of conducting public diplomacy by providing information to the process of creating an exceptionally positive image of the state, playing on contrasts with other countries, especially with the PRC. The presentation of the American lifestyle, traditional values, and democratic aspirations through active interaction with foreign societies through the Internet and social networks is the main feature of the American model of public diplomacy in the 21st century (Humeniuk, 2022).

In summary, it can be argued that in the new millennium, the structurally saturated apparatus of public diplomacy in the United States works for one goal – the dissemination of exclusively positive information about the state, its traditions, values, and lifestyle. The scale of the policy and the quality of the results of the activities indicate that the bodies responsible in the States for public diplomacy approach the tasks seriously, with an understanding of the importance of spreading information about the democratic values of the United States around the world.

4.1.2. Advantages and disadvantages of the model

The main advantages of American public diplomacy include a few components. The first one is a strategy of activity to reduce the level of attractiveness of extremism for the population. Using the media, the United States opposes the statements of hostile radicals (jihadists,

neo-Nazis, and other extremists) whose activities threaten the national security of the state, especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Flew, 2020). By providing an opportunity for the population to channel their energy into solving political issues peacefully, the American authorities thus expose the recruitment calls of these groups and weaken their growing influence. The basic tool here is to provide an alternative for the younger generation of Americans – the opportunity to get a first-class education, a well-paid job, to determine their life and professional path, which is not in the appeals of radical groups (Gallarotti, 2022). Such tactics negate all efforts to destroy the democratic system and reduce the level of influence of extremists in the country.

The second component – systematic aid to friendly countries in improving the quality of everyday life in the "American" style. In the era of the development of information and communication technologies, the United States strives to use all physical and virtual platforms to tell the history of America as convincingly as possible (Boyd-Barrett, 2023). For this purpose, in the early 2000s, the so-called "American Corners" program was developed in the United States, the purpose of which is to provide maximum access to materials that explain America in simple words, touching on topics such as the democratic system of government, guarantees of freedom of speech and freedom of religion, the values of American culture (Burt, 2020). There are other programs (such as American History and American Educational Tourism) that promote transnational entrepreneurship, education, and other business opportunities. The results of such work are especially noticeable in African countries, where American activity is more than active; the main slogan there is – tomorrow can always be better than today.

The third component is a principle of "direct" communication with the population of states, and not only with their governments. The idea

of "bottom-up" cooperation, when the people of the country clarify it for the authorities what they need right now, is the basic postulate on which American public diplomacy has been built for centuries (*ibid.*). It expands the US presence in a constructive, non-threatening way, forming a positive perception of the United States as a leader in many areas through direct communication with an ordinary citizen of any country (Abudaqa *et al.*, 2019). The national policy is negatively affected mainly by the oversaturation of the public diplomacy apparatus; many areas of activity create difficulties in various factors, namely:

- the issue of leadership (both the President of the country and the responsible departments have the decisive word; this creates confusion in some situations);
- obsolete national strategy of public diplomacy (the general up-to-date document dates to 2006);
- exchanges and other outreach activities (a large number of participants in public diplomacy creates difficulties in the way of coordination and concerted actions in this area; often the statements of some representatives contradict each other);
- rights, duties, and interdepartmental coordination, personnel and organizational issues (the weighted mechanism of national policy in the United States entails a pile of overlapping functions, which also creates the problem of an overcrowded staff and spending budget funds).

4.2. The Authoritarian Model of Public Diplomacy in China

Recently, China's activities in the international arena have become more visible and active, work has intensified to adapt to the growth of economic demands and events on the world stage (Reed, 2022). Apart from the fact that Beijing plays an essential role in world affairs through

its multi-level and complex system of contacts, today it is taking many actions aimed at creating a certain way of thinking among the world community (Jia and Li, 2020). For these purposes, state officials make frequent visits abroad, receive foreign delegations, and the Chinese leadership actively uses the media to convey its initiatives and narratives.

During its development as a state, the PRC created unique systems and strategies based both on the borrowed practices of other countries and on its own cultural and historical traditions; this fact also applies to the sphere of public diplomacy (Chiusi, 2021). However, the combination of these factors and national characteristics creates an original model, unlike others. The main difference between the Chinese model of people's diplomacy is its initial development from traditional political propaganda, which was created under the conditions of a one-party regime in an authoritarian state (Jia and Li, 2020). If Western democratic systems of diplomacy proclaim freedom of speech, actions, thoughts, then the Chinese model, proceeding from exclusively centralized power, acts rigidly, is controlled by the authorities, leaving very little room for initiative by other participants in the activity (Omonov, 2019).

Public diplomacy in China is aimed at creating a positive image of the state, namely: a country that is peaceful, reliable, easy to contact, developing, caring about its population, and advocating entirely for building a national "harmonious society" with the transfer of these qualities to the global level (Jia and Li, 2020). The focus of Chinese policy on the above elements is clearly explained by Joshua Kurlantzick, who in 2007 introduced the term "charm offensive" to denote China's use of "soft power" to improve its global status and role (Jiang, 2022). In this context, it is also worth mentioning the so-called "panda diplomacy" – the practice of sending giant pandas from China to other countries as a

means of establishing diplomatic relations (Huang and Wang, 2020). The method was first used during the Chinese Tang Dynasty (618-907), when Empress Wu Zetian, the only female emperor in the history of China, presented two pandas to the Japanese ruler (Reed, 2022). After the policy change in 1984, pandas began to be leased, not donated, and since the beginning of the 21st century, this practice has practically not been used (Huang and Wang, 2020; Zheng, 2023).

In 2009, during his speech at the 11th Congress of Chinese Diplomatic Representatives Abroad, Chinese President Hu Jintao emphasized the exceptional importance of public diplomacy, especially for China's foreign policy (Nye, 2020). Specifically, it was stated that Beijing should strengthen public and humanitarian diplomacy, initiate various types of cultural exchange activities, spreading Chinese culture around the world (Vanderhill *et al.*, 2020). After Hu's speech, the first serious discussions of the concept of people's diplomacy at the national level began in the state. In the future, this line continued: in 2012, during the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the new President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping stated that Beijing will make every effort to promote national policy (Nye, 2020). In addition, Xi introduced the concept of "telling China's story well", the essence of which was to spread the positive aspects of life in the country and expand the geography of Chinese culture (Chiusi, 2021). This appeal quickly became the main principle of Chinese public diplomacy.

To achieve the set goals in the field of public diplomacy, various public and private institutions have been created in China to perform the functions of changing the country's global image (Nye, 2020). At the State level, the Department of Public Diplomacy was established in 2009 as the main body for monitoring the implementation and coordination of tasks related to public diplomacy in the sphere of powers of various

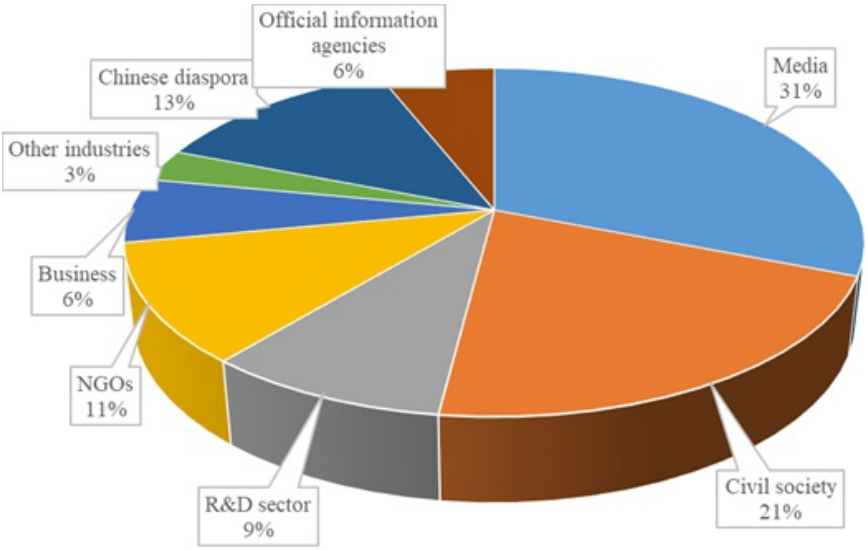
bodies and departments (Jiang, 2022). About twenty alliances and public diplomacy organizations were opened in the regions in cities such as Shanghai, Guangzhou and Nanjing (Nye, 2020). Furthermore, more than ten higher educational institutions and research institutes have started functioning throughout the country to investigate the issues of public diplomacy. An example of a private institution acting for such purposes is the China Public Diplomacy Association (established in 2012) to set up relations between China and other countries through the exchange of scientists and public figures, participation in common events (Chiusi, 2021).

4.2.1. The structure of China's public diplomacy

The mechanism of public diplomacy in China is complex and multifaceted, there are many responsible bodies, institutions, and other entities. In general, the functions of people's diplomacy are more or less performed in all areas and spheres of political, economic, and social life in the PRC (Figure 1).

First of all, the main decision-making body in this area is the CPC Central Commission for Foreign Affairs, reformatted in 2018 (Omonov, 2019). It is responsible for making decisions regarding public diplomacy in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Information, which are engaged in providing services to foreign media, covering major events, organizing numerous events, collecting important information and secret data from other countries about China (Nye, 2020). The prerogative of introducing changes to the current procedure for conducting public diplomacy and presenting recommendations in the field belongs to the Information Bureau of the State Council of the People's Republic of China. The next group of subjects dealing with public diplomacy issues are the Ministries of Culture and Education. The Ministry of Culture of China is of primary

Figure 1 Percentage of Chinese Entities Performing Public Diplomacy Tasks



Source: Nye (2020).

importance, since it is Chinese culture that is the fundamental element of national diplomatic practice. The institution organizes cultural events (the proclamation of the Year of Culture of China, the opening of cultural centres abroad). The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China also organizes various events, initiates exchange of students and researchers, promotes the idea of learning Chinese at the international level (Huang and Wang, 2020).

Apart from state institutions, there are some private institutions in the country whose activities are vital for achieving effective public diplomacy. First of all, it is worth noting the Confucius Institutes, which are foreign agencies around the world promoting the Chinese language,

culture, and values (Peterson, 2021). The first such institution was established in Seoul (South Korea) in 2004, and as of 2020, there are 108 Confucius Institutes and 14 classes in the European Union alone (Zhang, 2022). They are engaged in organizing events, teaching languages, information and consulting services, mainly by creating a positive image of the PRC in the world through these activities. However, recently, the leadership of these institutions has been accused of aggressively instilling communist principles in the countries of their location, from which the attitude towards Confucius Institutions has somewhat deteriorated.

It is worth mentioning the Chinese media and other information tools, among which the Xinhua News Agency, the official information representative of the PRC government, stands out. The organization broadcasts in eight languages, including English, but this does not contribute to creating the image of Xinhua as a serious agency; in the West, it is considered an instrument of Chinese propaganda and a "mouthpiece" of the country's ruling party, especially after Xi Jinping came to power (Zhu, 2022). Furthermore, there is also the Central Television of China and the Chinese Bureau of Publications in Foreign Languages, which, however, are also not taken fully seriously in some other countries due to their status as fully government-controlled institutions. Civil society is very widely represented in the field of public diplomacy in China. Chinese community leaders and general public actively take part in global international projects and initiatives (Nye, 2020). They create connections and lobby China's interests to create a positive image towards the country.

Thus, having considered the main participants in the sphere of public diplomacy in China and having investigated the specifics of their activities, as well as the vector of their work, it can be concluded that

public and private institutions, scientific organizations and public groups of the country are working to achieve the same goal using similar methods, giving Chinese public diplomacy greater legitimacy. The country's authorities are trying their best to use modern technologies in the field of computer science, computer systems, video monitoring with the aim of total control over public opinion within the state and to create an aura of peacefulness and reliability of Beijing according to foreign media.

4.2.2. Advantages and disadvantages of the model

The following examples can be attributed to the specific features of the authoritarian model of public diplomacy on the Chinese model. The first example – improving the image due to one of the most recognizable religions in the world. The most popular and positive aspect of Chinese culture and tradition is Buddhism, one of the world's religions, which is practised by almost 10 percent of the world's population (Zhu, 2022). The basis of Buddhism is the principle of peace, balance, and harmony with nature, as well as the denial of violence, any manifestation of brutality, hostility, and other types of power influence. These qualities are ideally suited to the specifics of the "soft power" strategy of Chinese diplomacy. While the CPC is officially atheist and has historically seen traditional religions as potential ideological rivals, in recent years, the party has recognized the utility of cultural and religious diplomacy as a tool for enhancing its global image and influence. This nuanced approach is particularly evident in the case of Buddhism. Buddhism has deep historical roots in China, and despite the party's secular stance, the Chinese government has, in certain contexts, harnessed Buddhism as a cultural bridge to foster diplomatic ties with neighbouring Buddhist-majority countries. Basically, the PRC uses this factor in its activities in

relation to Japan, India, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and other Southeast Asian countries. The Buddhist Association of China and the Association for Religious and Cultural Exchange are engaged in the development of the Buddhist part of Beijing's people's policy (Nye, 2020). But a long conflict with the spiritual leader of the Tibetan Buddhists, the 14th Dalai Lama and his admirers, somewhat overshadows the positive effect of the country's religious policy (*EurAsian Times*, 7th October 2022).

The second example – sporting achievements as the main pride of the state. China has long promoted the successful results of its athletes at international competitions as one of the factors of the favourable reputation of the PRC. Popularization of not only professional sports among the population, but also physical education and other active types of exercises, which positively affects the health of the nation, is one of the key tools for the success of Chinese public diplomacy. The entire state machine is working to improve the quality of athletes' performances and this work is bearing fruit: recently, representatives of the People's Republic of China have won prizes many times in such sports as gymnastics, athletics, shooting, figure skating. In addition, not the last place among the policy instruments is occupied by Beijing's organizational skills in sports events (the annual China International Football Cup, the Luge World Cup 2021/2022, the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing).

The negative aspects of public diplomacy of the People's Republic of China are as follows: inaccuracy in the definition of the concept, as well as connecting terms and meanings. Even though the term "public diplomacy" is given clearly in the reports of Chinese officials (Nye, 2020), there is still no clear understanding in society exactly how to implement this policy in real practice. While official Beijing assumes the inclusion of all governmental, non-governmental, private, scientific, and

public organizations in the processes aimed at fulfilling tasks in this area, there are several alternative interpretations of what rules and obligations exist for different participants in these processes (Orobets *et al.*, 2022). Being outside the country, its representatives are obliged to know what line of behaviour to follow and what information to voice to the masses to prevent the publication of contradicting narratives.

Monopoly of power as a contradiction of public diplomacy. Authoritarianism is a sign of the lack of diplomacy and equal relations in various spheres (Ayhan, 2019). Therefore, in other countries it is quite problematic to understand and accept China's public actions in the light of its political regime. Although it is believed that public diplomacy can be carried out regardless of the type of government in the country (Flew, 2020), the highly centralized management in the PRC only exacerbates the problem, implying strong control from above. Confucius Institutes, opened all over the world, were originally called the true sources of Chinese culture and values. However, as critics have pointed out, disguised to convey knowledge about the Chinese language and customs to the outside world, the Confucius Institute also encourages students to appreciate China and its ruling political power. For this reason, several previously opened institutes in the USA have already ceased to exist.

The dawn of Chinese "digital" authoritarianism. At the beginning of 2022, over 1 billion people in China already have access to the Internet and every year the number of active users will increase. Long before that, predicting current trends, in 2006 (and development began in the 1980s), the Chinese government created the Great Firewall (GFW) – a set of software and hardware systems used to monitor and filter messages on national Internet gateways (Wang, 2020). The tool filters and blocks objectionable content on the direct instructions of the CPC, thereby forcing foreign businesses interested in doing business in the

country to adapt to domestic legislation. In addition, the state has introduced a large-scale system of surveillance and control over the population (e.g., the Eyes' Program, known colloquially as the "Skynet Project" – a video surveillance system in crowded places, such as transport interchanges and checkpoints; as well as a system of social trust of the population – a scheme of ratings and credits for proper conduct and "punishment" for misconduct) (Gershgorn, 2021). Notably, the outbreak of COVID-19 coronavirus infection in 2019 and the associated large-scale operation to isolate a vast number of the Chinese population made it possible for Beijing to test new information tracking and monitoring systems in real conditions.

4.3. The System of Public Diplomacy in the Republic of Kazakhstan

Analysing the models of public diplomacy in the United States and China, specifically assessing the level and quality of the structure, the completeness of functionality and the degree of involvement, as well as the positive and negative aspects of the sphere, that the goals and aspirations of the policies of the two countries are similar, but the means, mechanisms, and powers to achieve the tasks are different. In the era of globalization, the reputation and image of a country increasingly determines its importance in the world. Since gaining independence, the Republic of Kazakhstan has had a need for self-identification and creation of its image in the international arena. The state conducts public diplomacy in the context of the transformation of the modern international system, forming its own civil society and developing new communication technologies (Voyvoda, 2022).

Thanks to the economic, social, and other reforms carried out to improve various aspects of the political life of the state and society, Kazakhstan has received support among the civilized countries of the world regarding the beginning of the creation of a free and democratic

system in the country (Tjia, 2022). However, by and large, this fact did not greatly affect the creation of a positive image of the country abroad because the focus of activities and results was directed inside Kazakhstan; the information campaign of this process was practically not voiced by Astana in the international space. This is the main difference and key feature of Kazakhstan – the principle of a centralized approach to creating a better image of the state in the world, using traditional tools and methods of public diplomacy and piecemeal release of a certain type of information outside the country (Nurtazina *et al.*, 2015). However, presently, simultaneously with the transformation of the world order system, which is accompanied by total changes in the usual scenarios and structures, the Republic is beginning to use the multi-vector principle both in foreign policy – traditional diplomacy, and in creating the "right" image in the field of public diplomacy (Urazaeva, 2022).

Considering the aspects of the topic under study in the context of Kazakh practices, it is worth noting that the sphere of public diplomacy in the country is at the stage of development and initial action (Omonov, 2019). Many elements of the system are imperfect, a number of terms and concepts are not fully defined or even absent, but the process of developing and implementing the principal concepts and rules of public diplomacy is in full swing. The desire of both the official authorities and civil society to spread a positive image of the state is steadily growing, the request for a legislative and legal definition of the sphere is substantial and rather clear.

Until recently, there was no clear definition of the concept of public diplomacy in the legislative field. In 2019, Kazakhstan adopted "On the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan", according to which the state promptly and fully provides the world community with information regarding its position on international issues, foreign policy

initiatives, as well as social, economic, and cultural issues (Ministry of Justice, Kazakhstan, 2019). In addition, the Republic, unlike other states with their "strict" methods, implements its own concept of "soft power", which includes a peaceful foreign policy, political and social stability, sustainable and dynamic economic growth, the effectiveness of the model of interethnic and interfaith harmony, the attractiveness of the investment climate, ease of doing business and innovative education.

The structure of the people's diplomacy of the Republic of Kazakhstan practically does not differ from the systems in other countries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the main state body responsible for planning, organizing, and performing the tasks in this respective field, as well as for communication at all levels with foreign partners (Abzhaparova and Sarsembaeva, 2013). Apart from the Ministry, Kazakhstan's leaders – the President and the Prime Minister – have a full set of powers in the field of public diplomacy, who, using international visits and multilateral meetings, try to create a good impression of the country. Under the leadership of the President of the country, the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan (the only such organization among the countries of the former Soviet Union) operates, the main functions of which include implementation of state national policy, promotion of the international authority of the state, increasing the effectiveness of interstate contacts at all levels.

Other notable participants in the system include scientific, cultural, and educational institutions, as well as the business environment. However, unfortunately, their activities are not officially consolidated; all the work they do for the benefit of the image of the country, the growth of the attractiveness of the Republic according to citizens of other states, is based on the principles of informal cooperation, since there is no document that would legitimize this activity.

4.4. Implementation of International Practices: Recommendations for Kazakhstan

Considering the issue of legislative consolidation of the principles of public diplomacy in the Republic, responsible representatives should pay attention to the resources of the country that are already available, and it does not take much effort to use them to create a favourable image. The practices of both the USA and China show that to promote a favourable impression of the country into the world space, the best tool is advertising its own natural resources and centuries-old history (Osipova-Stocker *et al.*, 2022). Nature, culture, traditions, as well as art, education, language – all this, with the right approach, creates a powerful foundation for promoting national values on a global scale.

Thus, Kazakhstan has a sharply continental climate with hot temperate summers and cold, snow-free winters, which creates unique natural conditions for each season (Iztaeva and Abzhaparova, 2017). Information about this will attract tourists and researchers, which will create an added positive aspect for the state. The centuries-old cultural tradition of the country, together with modern trends, attracts a large number of both adult connoisseurs and young people around the world. To form the image of Kazakhstan as a unique country that combines history and modernity, this direction will allow it to declare itself as an international platform for cultural and educational art.

In the modern world, education plays a crucial role because the importance of cultural and civilizational relations is constantly growing. Continuing the practice of the United States and China, Kazakhstan is developing student exchange programs, grants for scientists and other specialists in various fields (Tassilova *et al.*, 2018). For national policy, an extremely effective tool is the promotion of opportunities and prospects that open up during education in a particular country because the main advantage of providing educational services over other political

and economic instruments is the possibility of influencing the formation of values and perceptions of citizens of other countries, i.e., the struggle for the minds of future elites (Urazaeva, 2022). For these purposes, the Bolashak project was developed in the Republic – an international educational scholarship of the first President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev, established in 1993. The main task of the scholarship program is to train personnel, specialists, and other experts to achieve successful solutions in priority sectors of the country's economy; the program is still active today, opening new areas of cooperation since the 2020s. A principal factor for the popularization of the state is also the knowledge of the native language; the number of Kazakh schoolchildren who have decided to receive education in the Kazakh language is growing every year (Table 3).

Table 3 Dynamics of Teaching in the Kazakh Language in Kazakhstan's Schools

Academic year	Total number of students (thousand)	Percentage of students learning in Kazakh (%)
2000/2001	3247.4	52.10
2005/2006	2824.6	56.80
2010/2011	2516.1	62.50
2015/2016	2785.3	–
2016/2017	2917.8	65.65
2017/2018	3039.1	65.64
2018/2019	3175.0	65.69
2019/2020	3327.8	65.60
2020/2021	3481.3	65.35

Source: Ministry of Justice, Kazakhstan (2022).

Another effective tool for improving the country's image is working with the diaspora. Thus, as of 2021, the number of Kazakhs living abroad amounted to over 4 million people. Presently, the state has the "On Approval of the Action Plan to Support Ethnic Kazakhs Abroad for 2018-2022" (Ministry of Justice, Kazakhstan, 2018) in effect, for the implementation of which more than 400 million tenge was allocated in 2021 alone. The Action Plan makes provision for the following work: provision of a scholarship program for representatives of the Kazakh diaspora studying in Kazakh universities and colleges; provision of Kazakh schools and cultural centres abroad with textbooks, scientific materials, and other manuals in the humanitarian field. Evidently, work with the diaspora continues, but to perfect the relationship and strengthen ties, state bodies need to actively support the cultural and educational centres of Kazakhstan in other states, especially those that were created on the initiative of the diaspora and carry out activities to promote the image of Kazakhstan and its traditional values.

A particularly important aspect of public diplomacy is traditional diplomacy. In this sense, Kazakhstan takes an example from the world's leading states. Thus, at the initiative of Astana, several international events were held: Conference on Interaction & Confidence Building Measures in Asia (2022), International Day of Action against Nuclear Tests in 2000 (Rakhimov, 2014), Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions (2003), The International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures will be held by the UN at the Initiative of Kazakhstan (*Zakon*, 19th December 2012). The active position of the state on the settlement of problems of peace and stability on the continent (the Syrian crisis, Russia's war against Ukraine). In this context, the Republic uses a multi-vector approach of "soft power", trying to strike a balance between different participants in international events, declaring itself as a reliable partner.

Fully supporting China's initiative to introduce digital technologies in the country, Kazakhstan is developing digital diplomacy at all levels of government. Astana is exploring the possibilities of using Internet resources to promote Kazakhstan's cultural values on a global scale. Thus, today, the results of this activity include the development of the Kazakh version of the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, the addition of the Kazakh language to the Google Translate service, the opening of the free library of Kazakhstan, etc.

Having considered all aspects of public diplomacy in Kazakhstan, having determined its priorities, strengths and weaknesses, as well as having investigated the prospects for development, it can be stated that presently the country is at the stage of transformation in this sphere – the transition from an authoritarian model following the example of the PRC to a democratic form supported by the United States. But for a complete and successful transition, it is necessary to consider not only the positive examples of the two models, but also to consider and try to correct and avoid negative components. In summary, some basic recommendations that may be useful in the practical plane of public diplomacy in Kazakhstan can be outlined.

Development of an extensive network of foreign services to promote Kazakhstan's traditional values and customs of everyday life. The image of the Republic is not supported by special institutions at a high level abroad, as is the case in the USA (*Voice of America*, *Radio Liberty*, USAID) and the PRC (Confucius Institutes) because such organizations have not been established; the available individual entities are unable to perform global tasks of people's diplomacy. But for the large-scale opening of such institutions, colossal funds are needed. Therefore, for these purposes, it is recommended to allocate budget funds for this activity (national aspect) and strengthen ties with the governments of other states (support in the deployment of Kazakhstan's

information infrastructure abroad through responsible representatives of the hosting country).

Development of a clear legislative framework in the field of public diplomacy with simple and understandable definitions and terms. As in the USA, Kazakhstan has a sufficient number of cells (institutions, organizations, and other entities) that handle public diplomacy issues to a certain degree, although their total number is still small (Zhanbulatova *et al.*, 2020). However, despite this, due to some immaturity of the system, from time to time, there is a situation of misunderstanding of certain points (the place and role of a particular participant, their rights and obligations, as well as powers and subordination). Therefore, the development of regulatory documents in this area contributes to the resolution of many controversial issues that hinder the intensification of work to create a positive image of Kazakhstan in other countries.

The highly centralized vertical of power makes it difficult to adequately perceive the information voiced by official representatives of the state, who are considered unwitting executors of the orders of the leadership and the semantic message is ordinary propaganda, which now has only a negative connotation. In this case, Astana in some way follows the example of Beijing, where the Xinhua News Agency is considered the "mouthpiece" of the PRC all over the world and is not taken seriously enough. Therefore, it is necessary to develop democratic values and political freedom to use the maximum advantages of conventional information technologies to promote the country on the world stage.

Dissemination of information about "inconvenient" issues of life in Kazakhstan. Following China, Kazakhstan builds a positive image of the state based on cultural heritage, educational and scientific results, history, and traditions. Therewith, issues concerning internal aspects – the political regime, human rights and freedoms, corruption – are not

brought up for discussion in the international plane. Since the world community has practically no information on these issues, it is very difficult to recreate the image of a correct, peace-loving, and friendly state. It is necessary to provide data on the above-mentioned aspects to the international public, at least using piecemeal approach and not in full – thus it can be demonstrated that Kazakhstan is fully open to discussing its issues.

5. Discussion

Evaluating the array of available information and various materials on this issue, namely, regarding the best options for the transformation of public diplomacy in the Republic of Kazakhstan, and presenting practical recommendations for various elements of this policy through the analysis and summary of the strengths and weaknesses of democratic and authoritarian models of diplomacy, the following conclusion can be drawn: scientific literature on the subject under study is widely presented in the form of articles, critical reviews, and methodological, analytical and statistical publications. Special emphasis was placed on various forms of leading this vector of foreign policy contacts: "American style", "American dream" in the USA and "soft power", "panda diplomacy" in China. The materials prepared by Asian experts, primarily from Kazakhstan, turned out to be the most informative; the information presented in the papers of Kazakh authors became especially useful in developing new concepts and approaches to the issues under study. Regulations and legislative documents of the countries whose activities were considered in the present study were considerably helpful for the conduct of this research.

The present paper considered the importance of public diplomacy, the essence of which was to promote national interests abroad by

establishing active interaction with civil society, which forms public opinion; researcher from Kazakhstan Urazaeva (2020) also considered public diplomacy an important vector in foreign policy, through which the country's foreign policy goals are achieved through effective interaction with the target audience.

The assumption that it is possible to neutralize the negative narratives of the hostile policy of the enemy or to attract the attention of young people and adolescents to their side through education, providing opportunities to study, get a profession and thereby achieve career heights in the future, was voiced in her article. An analogous idea was put forward by the Italian scholar Gallarotti (2022), who emphasized that throughout the history of the nation they have been promoting their culture through special organizations, among which, first of all, educational institutions such as, e.g., Chinese Confucius Institutes stand out.

The practice of using "soft power" tools, such as science, art, culture, sports, and media through a unified information resource in the field of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is not widely known, but such an area exists and completes its objectives, which was indicated in the present paper. Political commentator Güleç (2021) also stated that since NATO is widely associated with security and defence issues, it is also important to follow and understand how it reacts to modern diplomatic problems through its public diplomacy and communication activities.

The study emphasized that a well-structured and properly organized system of people's diplomacy will give the most productive and positive results when completing the assigned tasks. A group of international scientists, including Albishri *et al.* (2019) also agreed with this aspect. Having used the historical example of interaction between the States and Eastern countries, the authors assumed that an unreasonable approach to

organizing and conducting large-scale events, such as the first foreign visits, may be overshadowed by some minor but sad mistakes during the implementation of work.

The study considered the situation when the outbreak of COVID-19 coronavirus infection in 2019 in China contributed to the accelerated development of digital public diplomacy in the state; the pandemic has introduced substantial changes in the lives of citizens, forcing them to seek new sources of information on self-isolation. Uzbek economist Amanov (2021) continued this idea, concluding that aspects of the political system, features of public and foreign policy of the People's Republic of China had a strong influence from coronavirus infection, which Beijing used to introduce digital tools into the dissemination of "correct" information.

This study pointed out that both the American model of public diplomacy and its Chinese counterpart have both strengths and weaknesses; the two systems skilfully use the advantages associated with historical and cultural heritage, the educational sector, economic, and social influence. American political scientist Nye (2020) also contemplated the heterogeneity of the above types of diplomacy and pointed out that in certain situations, the open rhetoric of the American state in some way destroys the carefully constructed scheme of China's influence on international society.

The initiative of the Chinese government "One Belt, One Road", which is aimed primarily at the Central Asian region and affects all areas of the country's activities on a continent-wide scale – political and economic decisions, foreign policy, diplomatic events – is called one of the fundamental plans to introduce the idea of a peace-loving and easy-going nature of the PRC. An analogous assumption was made by a public activist from Uzbekistan Omonov (2019), arguing that the

location of the region makes it a geostrategic "bridge" connecting East and West, and therefore it plays a crucial role in establishing ties between the leading countries of the world and asserting itself as important foreign policy players. At the same time, the author suggests that, using evidence from public diplomacy in Uzbekistan, it is possible to state some distance from the priority of work within the framework of the initiative.

An important role in promoting the image of the state in the international arena is played by the country's top officials – the President, Prime Minister, and other official representatives. Their direct dialogue with the foreign public and the local elite can create a positive effect and give good results in the field of popularization and information policy, which was demonstrated in this study on the example of the USA, China, and Kazakhstan. The personal charm of statesmen during international visits is of strategic importance for the sphere of public diplomacy. However, arguing that the becoming of public diplomacy in the country was mainly due to the authority of the first president Nursultan Nazarbayev, as well as the current president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, without considering the efforts of other unofficial subjects of public diplomacy in the state.

Thus, having considered and investigated all available material on public diplomacy in the USA, China, and Kazakhstan, namely focusing on the ways and methods of conducting this policy according to the democratic scenario (e.g., the States) and authoritarian (e.g., China), as well as the system of public diplomacy in the Republic of Kazakhstan, the following conclusion can be drawn: in the near future, the quality of scientific information, results, and conclusions of research in this area will stay at a consistently prominent level. The subject of further studies will probably become somewhat wider due to the transformation of the

existing tools of public diplomacy caused by global changes and the transition of information technologies to more modern standards. The results of scientific research by Central Asian specialists, primarily from Kazakhstan, will also have a decent level because currently the country is reforming its foreign policy and transforming other areas related to these changes, including in the field of public diplomacy.

6. Conclusions

During the present study, models of public diplomacy in the United States of America and the People's Republic of China were investigated for the introduction of their individual elements into the practical activities of the Republic of Kazakhstan. It was found that each form of public diplomacy, namely democratic and authoritarian, has its history, stages of development, and prospects for further evolution, depending on the adoption of certain national and international decisions regarding issues of the modern world. Analysing various aspects of public diplomacy using evidence from the United States and China, the strengths and weaknesses were outlined, with information and communication resources and technologies being the most effective tools of diplomacy, and the centralization of the management and its excessive congestion definitely being the disadvantages.

The study indicated that Kazakhstan is relatively successful in conducting its own public diplomacy, combining national unique traditions and the best practices of the countries of the world; however, there are also several issues that will require certain reforms and transformations to solve. Based on the results obtained, having analysed the effectiveness of the activities of the United States and China in the field of national policy to promote a positive image of the state and create a reputation of a viable partner, it can be assumed that the

achievements of Washington and Beijing in this area can be used to conduct one's own line of diplomacy by other countries, primarily by Kazakhstan. Despite the geographical remoteness of Kazakhstan from the States, Astana successfully uses some mechanisms of the American model. However, close political, economic, and other ties with its closest neighbour – China – drive the Central Asian state to adopt its practices as much as possible, weaving individual elements into the national structure of public diplomacy.

Notes

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Editorial Postscript and Commentary

Shackled Hong Kong, Invaded Ukraine, Encroached Taiwan: Stirrings across the Chinese Communist Frontiers in a World Transformed by Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

From Hong Kong's journey since the tumultuous struggle for democracy under the shadow of the tentacles of the authoritarian People's Republic of China overlord till the dark descent into outright suppression of dissent beneath the pall of a Beijing central State-imposed draconian "national security law", to the increasingly repressive authoritarian Russia's Putin regime launching an outright murderous irredentist military invasion of Ukraine and blatant annexation of Ukrainian territories, to the increasingly frequent and numerous mainland China warplane flybys crossing the median line in the Taiwan Strait, the Chinese Communist Party dictatorship's continued bullying military

harassment in the skies and waters off Taiwan's coast and threatening live-fire military exercises encircling the vibrantly liberal democratic Taiwan with Chinese missiles flying over the free island nation during the military drills, this article explores the current continuing assault on the liberal democratic world from repressive authoritarian powers.

Keywords: *Hong Kong, China, Ukraine, Taiwan, Russia*

This special focus issue, ***On China's Peripheries: Recent and Current Developments across the Frontiers***, represents the first issue of the ninth volume of *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal*. It features six articles including the first three on Hong Kong tracking her journey from the tumultuous struggle for democracy under the shadow of the tentacles of the authoritarian People's Republic of China overlord to the dark descent into outright suppression of dissent beneath the pall of a Beijing central State-imposed draconian "national security law" and within this context the development and changes of this formerly free-spirited city's unique relations with the vibrantly democratic long-*de facto*-independent island republic of Taiwan (officially the Republic of China). After these three articles – Joseph Yu-shek Cheng's "The Hong Kong Pro-democracy Movement: Challenges and Divisions in the Past Decade", Qian Qin's "Political Challenges in Hong Kong: Identity Politics, Legitimacy Crisis, and Cultural Clash" and Chi-yeung Chiu and Kam-yee Law's "The Myth of Institutionalizing Hong Kong–Taiwan Relations: 26 Years after the Handover" – a fourth paper, Marian Ehret, Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani and Mohammad Zaki Ahmad's "Chinese–German Relations and the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis", focuses, in the context of the bilateral relations between China and Germany, on the recent eruption of China–Taiwan crisis with the gargantuan Mainland dictatorship's

bullying military exercises encircling the vulnerable small democratic island state in 2022 in response to then U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and meeting with Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen on 2nd-3rd August 2022 which Pelosi said representing the United States' "unwavering commitment to supporting Taiwan's vibrant democracy", and in 2023 in response to Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen's meeting with U.S. Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy (who replaced Pelosi in January 2023) at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California in early April 2023.

After the four papers on the semi-enclave of Hong Kong and the island republic of Taiwan, this focus issue moves to explore the diplomatic orientations of China's Southeast Asian frontier neighbours of the member states of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), both the maritime members that have territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea and those mainly mainland members that do not, in terms of their varied responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine – in part influenced by their own respective relations with Russia, but also importantly by the varying degree of their alignment with the stance of Chinese Communist Party dictatorial regime in strong support of its authoritarian ally the Putin regime of Russia. After the fifth paper, Reymund B. Flores, Jose Emilio Luis T. Combatir, John Patrick S. Palquiran, Earlsen C. Pinuela and Michael John B. Subigca's "Unveiling ASEAN's Diplomatic Equilibrium: Assessing Member Nation-States' Responses to Russia's Attack on Ukraine amidst the Rivalry between United States and China", this focus issue closes with the sixth article, Ramina Alipkyzy, Assel Utegenova, Klara Makasheva, Yermek Chukubayev and Bakyt Byuzheyeva's "Development of a Public Diplomacy Model for Kazakhstan through the Analysis of the International Political Activity of the USA and China", that takes us across China's northwestern frontier to explore how this largest and

most prominent among the post-Soviet Central Asian republics squeezed between the adjacent behemoths of Russia and China is finding her voice on the world arena.

* * *

[In 1989 one and a half] million people took to the streets to support the demonstrating students in Tiananmen Square and condemn the bloody tyranny of the Chinese Communist Party dictatorship. When Regina Ip of the HKSAR government at that time advocated the passage of the national security legislation to implement Hong Kong Basic Law Article 23, 500,000 people took to the streets to protest against that evil law. To fight for true universal suffrage, two to three hundred thousand people sat on the road for 79 days until the government cleared the site. What did our struggle achieve in the end? No, we did not gain anything, but lost a lot; young students were persecuted and became political prisoners and were imprisoned; journalists stationed in Hong Kong were refused entry after business task trips, and intellectuals who criticized the CCP and those who supported Taiwan independence were also refused entry; the government violated the constitutional right of freedom of speech and illegally disqualified pan-democrat LegCo councilors; well, now it has even introduced the extradition law and revised the "Fugitive Offenders Ordinance" to open the gate to the rule of law in Hong Kong to allow Mainland China to shackle and bring at will Hong Kong citizens to the Mainland to "stand trial", thus completely destroy Hong Kong's judicial system, press freedom and the protection of personal safety of Hong Kong citizens, and gradually turn Hong Kong into a dark purgatory where the people cannot hold their heads up and breathe. Yes, our struggle has not gained us

> *anything; instead, we have lost a lot. But would we gain more if we did not fight but were left to their mercy as dying lambs? No, we have long since become a black jail like every city in Mainland China. There are 110 million electronic surveillance cameras across China monitoring you. Facial recognition systems are installed in all public places on the streets and alleys to monitor you and know where you are and what you are doing. Your online chat content is being monitored and eavesdropped on with AI, and you will be held criminally responsible if you say something wrong. The Chinese police learn every move on your mobile phone through the masking software. Even for minor traffic violations, your photograph can be publicized immediately, and your name, identity, etc. can also be made public online and publicly judged. The police can randomly check your mobile phone at bus and train stations, gas stations, etc., and if it is found that WhatsApp, Facebook, Google and other banned apps are installed on your mobile phone, you are likely to get into trouble, etc... Can you withstand these horrific surveillances? When that time comes, you will have to endure it even if you can't bear it! Just like our current compatriots in Mainland China. Are you going to be the dying lamb, or are you going to fight? Needless to say!*[1]
>
> – Jimmy Lai (8th December 1947 –), Hong Kong's dissident, democracy advocate and prisoner of conscience

During British colonial era of rapid economic growth, the Hong Kong people seemed to have "a single-minded focus or obsession: making money and securing a decent standard of living […] the general idea of popular elections for the territory's leaders was probably far from most people's minds and the details even further" (Bush, 2016). The Hong Kong people then happily left political governance to the British colonial masters and were happily making money in an "'economic city' with a

solely economic reason for existing". Why has this hedonistic outlook undergone such a sea change once the prospect of "returning to the embrace of the Motherland" set in? "Hong Kong's political history makes nonsense of the decolonizing process as it is usually imagined", according to John Darwin, a specialist on British colonial history, as cited by Richard Bush (*ibid.*), as it had undergone no significant change and would "never travel the colonial cursus honorum from crown colony rule to representative and then responsible government". So why has the Hong Kong people been fighting the Beijing government now to demand the right of complete freedom to elect the city's top leader whereas this is something they never voiced during the British colonial era?

Far above the post-1997 threat of creeping "Mainlandisation", it is the very nature and deeds of this brutal, ruthlessly dictatorial Leviathan that never fail to give the Hong Kong people the chill, the morbid fear of the future, fear for the fate of their next generation. While the Hong Kong people might just watch, though not without trepidations, as spectators from a safe distance the madness that descended on mainland China during Mao's brutal political campaigns including the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (无产阶级文化大革命), the atmosphere changed when the "return to the Motherland" became imminent. Whatever reassurance the Hong Kong people felt during the more liberal reform years of Hu Yaobang (胡耀邦) and Zhao Ziyang (趙紫陽) was squandered when the Communist Party resorted to a massacre in Beijing on that fateful night of 3rd-4th June 1989 to settle the Tiananmen crisis and the subsequent large-scale arrests, imprisonment and even execution of dissidents. Whatever reassurance that had since returned with continued open-door policy and economic boom was squandered again with the mysterious death of Li Wangyang (李旺陽) towards the end of the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao (胡锦涛－温家宝) administration, the intensification of political

repression under the subsequent Xi Jinping (习近平) administration, and finally the outrageous disappearance of the Causeway Bay Five that brought closer home for the Hong Kong people the dreaded future directly under the CCP dictatorship.

Although Lee Bo (李波) is not the most important among the five from Mighty Current/Causeway Bay Books (巨流傳媒有限公司／銅鑼灣書店) who mysteriously disappeared, his case has managed to turn the disappearances into a cause célèbre because he definitely did in fact go missing in Hong Kong which raised the dreaded spectre of the CCP regime having finally crossed the line drawn by the "one country, two systems" agreement and made cross-border arrests of Hong Kong-based dissidents. However, even more chilling is probably the fact that on 13th November 2015, Thailand's military junta government put China's exiled dissident cartoonist Jiang Yefei (姜野飛), dissident and human rights activist Dong Guangping (董廣平) together with Mighty Current co-owner and Causeway Bay Books shareholder Gui Minhai (桂民海) on a plane chartered by the Chinese government and deported them to China. For the vast Hong Kong people who are seeing the daily erosion of civil liberties and political freedoms after the Handover to the "motherland" in 1997, the Thai military junta government's complicity with the Chinese authorities in kidnapping Gui Minhai to mainland China is particularly ominous. When Gui Minhai, the China-born Swedish national and co-owner of the Mighty Current publishing company and shareholder of the Causeway Bay Books (owned by Mighty Current since 2014), known for selling books critical of the Chinese government including those published by Mighty Current, failed to return from a holiday in Thailand's beach resort town of Pattaya in October 2015, he was the fourth person linked to the company who had disappeared in that same month.

As for Hong Kong, since the time when the June 1989 Beijing massacre "shattered the illusions of Hong Kong residents that the [post-Mao] CCP was a humane regime, and called into question the widespread assumption that Beijing would take a benign approach to Hong Kong after reversion" (*ibid.*), the chilling examples of how PRC now continues to treat its dissidents and political prisoners, the unending stream of tragedies from Cao Shunli (曹順利) to Peng Ming (彭明), from Li Wangyang (李旺陽) to Liu Xiaobo (劉曉波), and a future prospect that they never had to considered when they were under British rule has been made more real when China again breached the "one country, two systems" agreement to snatch Lee Bo from Hong Kong soil, and when China could even with the complicity of a client government in Bangkok snatch Gui Minhai from streets of Pattaya.

Almost half a decade of desperation down the line from 2014, those Hong Kong kids of 2019 did know exactly what they were doing, callous their actions might sometimes seem, for they were just deciding to waive the prudence of 2014 to further test their rights, a dignified Hong Konger's rights, a prudence where elsewhere in China most citizens are still too scared to wave, too scared of the prospect of disappearing into the Chinese gulag under the pocket charges of "inciting subversion of state power" and "picking quarrels and provoking troubles", shackles finally imposed on Hong Kong through Beijing's introducing the new "Hong Kong national security law" by mid-2020, gleefully welcomed and deployed by a SAR government and its leadership that had not hesitated in using it to disqualify "unpatriotic" legislators who had been elected by the people[2], before proceeding to use it to launch larger and larger waves of arrest of pro-democracy activists and politicians.

Such intensified creeping authoritarianism has meant one thing: Hong Kong citizens will no longer be so different from those in other cities in the vast Mainland in terms of matters of legality.[3]

The same adjustment to new legal reality should be pervading Hong Kong after the introduction of the new national security law for the territory, after seeing how a "lenient" judge in a trial of anti-extradition bill protesters could be condemned by Mainland China's State media and local pro-Beijing forces and even replaced, and how Jimmy Lai (黎智英) was repeatedly denied bail, thus making him newly one of the prisoners of conscience oldest in age in the vast land under the boot of the CCP, and abhorrently brought to court in metal chains,[4] in the twilight of this former British crown colony that was once upon a time rightly proud of its independent judiciary and incorruptible police force.[5] The adjustment to this new reality is much more dreadful than the creeping authoritarianism the Hong Kongers have been feeling over the decades since the Handover, much more than seeing the blatant "interpretations" of the Basic Law (Hong Kong's mini-Constitution) by the powers that be in Beijing, much more than seeing the extraterritorial crime committed by the Mainland CCP regime in the kidnapping of dissident Hong Kong booksellers and publishers.

As expected, thundering came large-scale crackdown on pro-democracy activism, following the advent of the new "Hong Kong national security law". Among those arrested expectedly was Jimmy Lai, businessman and founder of *Apple Daily* and prominent critic of the Chinese Communist Party dictatorship, who was swiftly arrested and jailed since 2010 under various charges but "awaiting trial" under the new national security law.[6] Many pan-democrats were arrested under different charges, some out on bail. Dissident university academics were fired, including Benny Tai.[7] Apparently the whole purpose of the new law is to crack down on pro-democracy activism, instil fear and

White Terror among dissidents. It is a standard Chinese Communist Party policy approach, now newly applied to Hong Kong.

There is a Chinese proverb from the pre-Ch'in dynasty (先秦, before 221 BC) classic *Tso-chuan* (左傳, composed probably during the latter half of the 4th century BC, during the Warring States era / 戰國時代): *ch'un wang ch'ih han* (唇亡齒寒, literally "if there be no lips the teeth feel cold", i.e. sharing a common fate; neither can survive without the other; one's demise is the premonition of the other's doom): "What happens in Hong Kong has implications not only for Hong Kong and the future of China but also for Taiwan and the United States" (Bush, 2016), and as for the U.S., her position on Hong Kong and the latter's pro-democracy struggles is contingent upon what America sees as the implication for the possible future political change in China and Sino-U.S. relations as well as the coming world order under the shadow of superpower relations (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, the fact that during Hong Kong's Occupation protests, "Washington probably took the strongest position of any foreign government, mainly through statements that boiled down to support for a truly competitive election" would actually serve to further raise "fears in the Chinese regime, which inferred from the sympathy felt by many in Hong Kong for the plight of the demonstrators and the assistance that some protest leaders received from the territory, that Hong Kong's political system might be used as a platform to subvert the Communist regime" (*ibid.*).

As for Taiwan, it was Beijing's original "hope that a successful transition in Hong Kong would create a positive demonstration effect for Taiwan and gradually reduce the latter's recalcitrance" (*ibid.*). That probably explains why Beijing is restrained or feeling the need to be restrained in its handling of Hong Kong – though the Hong Kong High Court's stripping four opposition lawmakers, "Long Hair" Leung Kwok-hung (「長毛」梁國雄), Nathan Law Kwun-chung (羅冠聰), Lau

Siu-lai (劉小麗) and Edward Yiu Chung-yim (姚松炎), of their seats in the legislature, for improper oath-taking, coincidentally a day following the death of Liu Xiaobo, did not help to improve Beijing's image in the eyes of the pro-democracy Hong Kong or Taiwan people.

It is interesting to note that Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement that came six months later did draw some inspiration and borrow some political tactics from Taiwan's Sunflower Movement (太陽花學運), in a "demonstration effect from Taiwan to Hong Kong" (*ibid.*) which Professor Sonny Shiu-hing Lo (盧兆興) of the Hong Kong Institute of Education[8] calls the *Taiwanisation of Hong Kong politics*: "The "Taiwanisation" of Hong Kong politics can be seen in the way local pro-democracy campaigners are pushing for change. The Taiwanese have a strong sense of their own identity. In recent years, the SAR has also witnessed the growth of a very strong Hong Kong identity, in some extreme cases leading to calls for secession or even independence by a minority of vocal Hongkongers […] Younger Hongkongers, like their counterparts in Taiwan, are increasingly distrustful of political parties. Taiwan's students demonstrated their political autonomy during the Sunflower movement. Similarly, the Hong Kong student movement spearheaded the Occupy protests." (Lo, 2015)

Besides that "Hong Kong's young activists have been taking inspiration from the Taiwanese democracy movement", with the Sunflower students' movement six months earlier helping to shape Hong Kong's Occupy campaign, Lo also points out that "Taiwan's rowdy electoral campaign styles, punctuated with violence, are emerging in Hong Kong", and finally concludes that while "Beijing may well seek to use the Hong Kong model of democratisation to appeal to Taiwan for political dialogue, Taiwanese-style politics has already penetrated Hong Kong, elevating the Taiwan factor in shaping Beijing's policy towards

Hong Kong and its political development, now and in the years to come." (*ibid.*)

If we see the series of events and developments in Hong Kong since the June Fourth 1989 Beijing massacre in relations to China and Taiwan, despite the intensive work of the powerful and resourceful Beijing's United Front Work (統戰) in Hong Kong through, as Wai-man Lam and Kay Chi-yan Lam (2013) describe, "the soft tactics of integration, cooptation and collaboration, as well as the hard tactics of containment and denunciation" that all seek to "ultimately consolidate China's hegemony in the local society" (Lam and Lam, 2013: 306), it is difficult to see any success in China's exercise of her so-called "soft power" (a "factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength" – as described by former president Hu Jintao in a 2007 speech to the national congress of the CCP in declaring an openly stated strategy to enhance culture as a part of soft power). On the contrary, Taiwan, through the "Taiwanisation" of Hong Kong politics, have made impressive soft-power inroads into Hong Kong based on its vibrant liberal democratic culture as a "best-case democracy" (Rigger, 2004) in the Greater China area. This is succinctly reflected in what popularly elected President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) of Taiwan (Republic of China), who was included in the decision-makers category of U.S.-based *Foreign Policy* magazine's 100 Leading Global Thinkers of 2016 for "for poking the bear", i.e. for not kowtowing to the CCP dictatorship of Mainland China, and instead telling the latter to "face up to the reality that the Republic of China [i.e. Taiwan] exists and that the people of Taiwan have an unshakable faith in the democratic system"[9], said in her condolences for Liu Xiaobo that she sent on Twitter in both Chinese and English right after Liu's death, which ended with a reference to his 2010 Nobel Lecture in Absentia[10]: "We hope that the Chinese authorities can show confidence in engaging in political reform

so that the Chinese can enjoy the God-given rights of freedom and democracy. This will be a turning point in cross-strait relations. The Chinese dream is not supposed to be about military might. It should be about taking ideas like those from Liu Xiaobo into consideration. Only through democracy, in which every Chinese person has freedom and respect, can China truly become a proud and important county. If the Chinese Dream is democracy, then Taiwan will provide any assistance necessary to achieve this objective. I believe that this is what he would have wanted. Liu Xiaobo had no enemies, because democracy has no enemies."[11]

* * *

> *Nemtsov believed that only by attempting to stop the war could one display real patriotism. The war in Ukraine was a despicable and cynical crime for which our country was paying with the blood of our citizens, with an economic crisis and with international isolation. No one in Russia needed this war except for Putin and his entourage.*[12]
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> – Free Russia Foundation on *Putin. War: An independent expert report* (May 2015) – *based on materials from Boris Nemtsov* (9th October 1959 – 27th February 2015), Russian dissident and democracy advocate murdered near the Kremlin on 27th February 2015

As Russia (Россия)'s military invasion of Ukraine (Україна) is still going on since it was launched over a year ago, it is becoming clearer through the Vladimir Putin (Влади́мир Влади́мирович Пу́тин) administration's rhetoric that the essential reason for its war against Ukraine is the fact that the increasingly repressive authoritarian Putin regime is finding irredentist nationalism with nostalgic claim on Soviet

lost lands, especially within the Kievan Rus' heartland, is impressively useful in rallying support from Russian voter-citizens, and the post-Orange Revolution Ukraine drifting away from Russian influence towards the liberal democratic Europe of the European Union (EU) is posing a grave threat to the authoritarian Putin regime's increasingly repressive stranglehold on Russian political power, in stark parallel to the East Asian scene where a vibrantly liberal democratic Taiwan has become an increasingly pain-in-the-neck contrast in the eyes of the brutal, repressive Chinese Communist Party (CCP)[13] dictatorship of mainland China. Definitely becoming the mortal worries of the repressive Putin regime of post-Communist Russia and the brutal Communist Party dictatorship of mainland China is the fact that behind both Ukraine's Orange Revolution (which bears a striking similarity to the now legendary People's Power revolution of the Philippines that overthrew the Ferdinand Marcos regime) and the amazing transition to liberal democracy in Taiwan during the later part of the Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國) administration (and looking north, South Korea's transition away from military dictatorship towards the end of the Chun Doo-hwan (전두환 / 全斗煥) presidency), the shadow of the United States of America and her European allies' influence and support were clearly evident – and as the CCP regime had observed, it was also clear the U.S. and her European allies were equally behind Hong Kong's civil disobedience from the Umbrella Movement to the anti-extradition-to-China protests where many protestors were receiving not only moral and material support but even tactical trainings from American and European civil rights groups. This is the main factor behind Communist China's current strong support for the Putin presidency. Clearly this is a mainly tactical alliance of two repressive regimes supporting each other's survival against the threat from the liberal democratic world, as the historical territorial grievances are supposed to have go against this

alliance if the CCP regime were to stay true to its relentless brainwashing of its subject people with ultra-nationalism anchored on the "Hundred Years of National Humiliation" (百年国耻).

Undoubtedly from the perspective of demography and ethnicity, there are a lot of grey areas in both the Russia-Ukraine and mainland China-Taiwan relations. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union – in 1991 with Ukraine and the other 13 republics gaining independence from the Russian-dominated Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) Communist Party empire (technically Russia herself also gained "independence" from her post-Tsarist Soviet Union empire), the political, cultural, and economic boundaries between Ukraine (and Belarus) and Russia was at first blurry, especially for the people living on frontiers both sides of the border, who live almost as a community. This was very similar to the China-Taiwan case, except for the state of war that technically still exists between the two sides across the Taiwan Strait, as the politically repressive Kuomintang (國民黨 , KMT) regime from 1949 to mid-1980s remained an exiled mainland China political force, and the exiled mainland population, hardly reaching one fifth of the island's population, made the island only their temporary abode, while waiting for KMT to re-conquer the mainland. The majority of the local inhabitants (mainly with Hoklo/Minnan and Hakka ancestry) were brutally subjugated, ever since the 228 Massacre, and subjected to indoctrination to inculcate or strengthen their loyalty to China – albeit that was the "Republic of China" with Taiwan as a province under the Kuomintang state-of-war Marshall Law dictatorial rule.

In Ukraine, came 2004, under increasing anxiety with the repressive Putin regime's cross-border manipulation of their national elections getting more and more blatant, the Ukrainians defended their sovereignty and freedom and protested against voting fraud. An Orange Revolution – the latest in the series of the so-called Colour Revolutions

that swept through the post-Soviet Communist states – broke out, resulting in the defeat of the existing regime's candidate, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych (Віктор Федорович Янукович), in a presidential election claimed to be marred by massive corruption, voter intimidation and electoral fraud and rigged by the authorities in favour of the prime minister. Due to the nationwide protests, the questionable results of the original run-off were annulled, and a second run-off was conducted under intense scrutiny by domestic and international observers, resulting in a clear victory for the prime minister's opponent Viktor Yushchenko (Віктор Андрійович Ющенко), thus beginning the irrevocable deterioration in Moscow-Kyiv relations. However, In the 2010 presidential election, Viktor Yanukovych managed to return to power but after a series of policies aiming at moving away from the EU for closer integration with Russia, and with his years in power characterized by democratic backsliding, the jailing of former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko (Юлія Володимирівна Тимошенко) whom he defeated in the 2010 presidential election, a decline in press freedom coupled with increase in cronyism and corruption, and was ousted from power in the Revolution of Dignity four years later following the February 2014 Euromaidan (Євромайдан, "Euro Square") clashes in Kyiv (Київ)'s Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Майдан Незалежності, "Independence Square") which resulted in more than 100 deaths in the government's crackdown on protesters. This second revolution saw the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovych, who then fled into exile in Russia, and a return to the 2004 Constitution of Ukraine, but eventually it also led to the present Russian invasion of Ukraine.

As a parallel to this, mainland China-Taiwan relations also went abruptly into an irrevocable downward spiral with the KMT losing the majority electorate's support after the local Taiwanese's increasing anxiety over the KMT's steering the island state closer and closer to the

CCP regime – that over-integration economically with the mainland might result in the repressive dictatorial giant, beyond notorious in human rights abuses. Such worries that over-integration economically across the Strait might lead to the notoriously human-rights-abusive mainland CCP dictatorship annexing the vibrantly liberal democratic, human rights-respecting, independent island state by stealth eventually triggered the tumultuous Sunflower Movement that paved the way for the Independence-minded localist-inclined Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) back to control of the presidency and the legislature. The consequential two-terms (8 years) of the strong-willed, global-oriented Tsai Ing-wen presidency rekindled the hope and zeal of the majority of the Taiwanese people for freedom and ethnic autonomy, and of the localists for an eventual breakthrough of a de jure independent state with an independent seat in the United Nations, whether she be simply Taiwan, or the Republic of Taiwan, or the Taiwan Republic of China, or the Chinese Republic of Taiwan.

This situation raised great alarm in mainland China's CCP dictatorship, whose international clout has already been long worsened by the decade's deterioration in China-U.S. and China-West European relations accentuated by strained trade relations, alleged CCP regime's technology theft, CCP regime's strong expansion of its international influence and its authoritarian ruling model into the developing countries, the inhumanity prevailed in the suppression of, not only democracy activism, unofficial trade unionism and civil rights lawyers in general, but also brutal suppression of Tibetans' and Uyghurs' struggle for freedom and ethnoterritorial autonomy, and in the case of the Uyghurs, with the creation of the almost unbelievable million-people strong brutal concentration camps of ideological indoctrination for assimilation bordering on cultural genocide. Increasingly leaving the island state of Taiwan in the hands of the independence-minded

government voted in by the majority of the Taiwanese people, both as a beacon and model of hope for freedom and prosperity in the eyes of the politically suppressed, civil rights-abused mainland people – at least those who are better educated, having a broader and more cosmopolitan worldview and upon whom the CCP State's ultra-nationalistic brainwashing and censorship have not been successful – and as a conduit where the human rights-respecting liberal democratic ideals of the U.S. and Europe could influence and infiltrate the mainland (a scenario recently seen in Hong Kong, but which could be worse than Hong Kong if that involves the liberal democratic world's armed support for Taiwan) is becoming a potential time bomb for the survival of the CCP dictatorship on the mainland, especially in the potential possibility of mainland China's economy going into a decline.

On the other hand, annexing Taiwan by military force may look attractive and even rally support from the mainland China masses long brainwashed by extreme State censorship of information and by ultra-nationalist indoctrination, if a "peaceful" means of annexation by stealth – especially by influencing the democratic process and political change in Taiwan – (like in Ukraine before the 2004-2005 Orange Revolution and between the Orange Revolution and the 2014 Revolution of Dignity / Maidan Revolution) fails, assuming that the liberal democratic West has no stomach for a costly – in terms of lost in human life too – support to defend Taiwan.

An important question is of course how far Taiwan's U.S. ally and the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are willing to help defend Taiwan – risking high troop casualties on their part – against a military invasion from China which is a nuclear power. The stakes are high. Is the loss of American and European lives worth it? The so-far successful defence of Ukraine with arms but not U.S. or NATO troops might have pointed a way. But question remains about whether the

Taiwanese have the determination, like the Ukrainians are doing now with huge loss of lives, to defend the independent island state's freedom and democracy, given that many on the island are not adverse to the prospect of unification, especially among the part of population who find partial subjugation under a "One Country Two Systems" preferable to fighting and dying (though the belief in that has received a blow after the practical death of that promise in Hong Kong after Beijing imposed the National Security Law for Hong Kong on the former British crown colony), and those who still believe in the workability of the Consensus '92 that peace can be maintained (allowed by the giant CCP mainland regime) with the unspoken self-recognition of a separate China in the name of Republic of China.

On the other hand, the record of American and NATO military intervention around the world in recent history have been mixed. While the U.S.'s pivotal role in the creation of the NATO in 1949 has proven to be successful in checking the global expansion of repressive Communist Party dictatorships, many brutal or even genocidal, and in eventually bringing about the collapse of the Communist Party dictatorships in the Soviet Union – with the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev's political reform as a catalyst – and its satellite states from Eastern Europe to Mongolia, the untold misery and resentment of the people ruled by the brutal tin-pot dictators and military juntas supported by Washington around the world under the Kirkpatrick Doctrine (authoritarianism can be reformed, influenced to democratise later while totalitarianism, being more self-perpetuating and influential, cannot; stopping the Red Tide first, influencing democratic change later – for democratic change may bring about immediate take-over by the left-wing political forces by vote, whose Marxist ideology had such a charm over young idealist of that era who were so frustrated by the greed and corruption of the elite and

impoverishment of the farmers and workers brought about by Western colonialism and unfettered capitalist exploitation.

While the U.S. and her allies under the aegis of the United Nations Command managed to rescue South Korea from Communist North Korea's invasion (militarily supported by North Korea's totalitarian patrons China and USSR with troops and weapons respectively), with tremendous loss of lives on both sides, and eventually, four decades later, successfully steering South Korea's transition from repressive strongman dictatorships to full liberal democracy (in a way a late-coming vindication of the Kirkpatrick Doctrine as some may wish to interpret), the Vietnam War, also with heavy casualties on both sides, had turned out to be a disaster for the U.S. that was forced to support one after another autocratic, corrupt and inept administrations in South Vietnam deeply resented by the common people, just like the Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) regime on mainland China before the Communist takeover. Without enough years to steer these regimes towards eventual democratisation, the U.S. military might alone was not adequate to stop Communist Party totalitarian forces – which have popular support from the working class, the peasants, the young intellectuals and the larger society who were intoxicated with the ideals of an egalitarian society promised by Marxist socialism but unable to foresee the even more brutal totalitarian state it would in reality lead to, one ironically much more brutal and inhuman that the perceived corrupt capitalist structure they had set their minds on overthrowing – from taking over the whole of Vietnam and the rest of Indochina, with the resultant sea-borne massacre when over a million Vietnamese fled in rickety boats to escape political persecution and inhuman collectivisation among whom between 200,000 and 400,000 perished in the high sea, and the shocking genocidal "killing fields" of Cambodia where the Khmer Rouge took the lives of at least close to 2 million innocent civilians by execution,

starvation and hard labour in its efforts to create a new people for its Marxist Utopian vision of the new totalitarian "Democratic Kampuchea".

While the U.S.'s 1980s military intervention in Grenada and Panama had managed to restore stable democracy, her 1990s Gulf War and support for the Arab Spring and 2000s War on Terror had only had debatable success, though U.S.-led NATO's military intervention to stop the militant Serbs' ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo has been critically successful in saving tens of thousands of lives from genocide. The dramatic overthrow of long-ruling brutal dictators across Arab lands and of the harsh misogynist religious obscurantist regime in Afghanistan, while so far not being successful to bring long-term stable democracy due variously to new corrupt local leaderships, lack of social cohesion in these divisive tribal societies and the strong militant religious obscurantist forces, murderously intolerant of both religious diversity and secularism, often with strong popular support, that had risen to the surface hijacking the revolutionary movements, had somehow sowed seeds of the liberal democratic tradition of human rights-protection in these post-dictatorship states, and the destruction of Al-Qaeda and then the Islamic State power – which at the regional level, had rescued thousands of people of the minorities including the Yazidis rom massacres and religiously sanctioned subjugation and sexual enslavement – has so far given the world, from Africa to Southeast Asia, from Europe to North America, more than two decades of respite from large-scale devastation and human casualties being committed by religious fundamentalist terrorist forces since the 911 Terror Attack and the Bali bombing.

However, unlike those regions mentioned above where the U.S. and NATO has previously militarily involved themselves, Taiwan is a prosperous country, about the geographical size of the Netherlands and

population size of Australia, with one of world's most vibrant functioning liberal democracy whose economic strength is roughly equivalent to Sweden, per capita GDP to Germany, size of imports about the level of Switzerland and exports Spain, which is constantly under threat from a military invasion from mainland China's Communist Army (euphemistical still called "People's Liberation Army" even after slaughtering thousands of civilians in 1989 Beijing Massacre in serving to maintain the perpetual unchallenged rule of the Communist Party dictatorship) and annexation by mainland China's CCP regime, one the world's most brutal, repressive dictatorships. The liberal democratic world's resolve in defending this prosperous and vibrantly liberal democratic island state from the dictatorship across the Strait can be loud and unequivocal, as the people's political freedom and civil liberties, freedom of expression and free press, and freedom from the State's rule-by-law prosecution (instead of rule of law), have already become the global norm after the end of the Cold War and fall of the repressive Communist Party dictatorship from Eastern Europe to Russia to Mongolia, in an era where without the huge threat from behind the Iron Curtain policies twisted by the Kirkpatrick Doctrine are no longer pertinent, and most authoritarian states once ruled by military juntas or tin-pot dictators from Latin America to Africa, from Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia (including South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines) had long transitioned from dictatorships to vibrant liberal democracies. Today's world is thus much less dubious than previously during the Cold War. Even the remaining major Communist Party dictatorship, China's CCP regime, has to constantly resort to repeated lame shop-worn Soviet-era tu quoque whataboutism, as well as cloak its raison d'être in heavy doses of the nomenklatura conspiracy, re-branding ("with Chinese characteristics") such terms like human rights and democracy with endless warped definitions – lame as it is, this

perversion of language has somehow been critically instrumental in the terrifying *saturnic* power (with a long-term toxicity far beyond the conventional s terms of "soft", "smart" or "sharp" power in international relations theoretical constructs) of a totalitarian ruling regime, the low poisoning of the mind, which is gradually, but effectively, after subjecting a whole generation to relentless, brutal brainwashing, enforced amnesia and stringent censorship, leading down the road of the tragic closing of the Chinese mind in serving a brazen regime's perpetuating its political power monopoly through domestic repression and external propaganda.[14]

The major source of the dramatic change in Ukrainian-Russian relationship lies in Russia's nonstop meddling in Ukrainian political affairs including the Kyiv central State relations with its highly Russified eastern regions (the Donbas). On the eve of the 2004 Ukrainian general election, Putin went to Kiev in person, confidently promoting his favourite Yanukovych (who was up against his opponent Yushchenko). Unsurprisingly, sovereignty- and independence-minded Ukrainians were outraged by Putin's grandiose interference in their country's elections. To Putin, Ukrainians' aspiration for self-determination was tantamount to a betrayal of Mother Russia. Disregarding Ukraine's post-Soviet Union status as a sovereign, independent nation, Putin accused the West Europeans and Americans of supporting Ukraine's "colour revolution" (even though their support then for the "Orange Revolution" was just verbal – a moral support at best of Ukrainian's determination to embrace freedom and democracy, and against the return to authoritarianism), and equated that support to an act of international aggression, a serious hostility to Russia, and an interference in Russia's internal affairs, as Putin gradually gave up all restraints on pronouncing his view that denies Ukraine as an independent country.

But the tide of democracy and freedom can never be fully turned back. It may ebb and flow, but it moves on. Even if Russian influence and manipulation manages to return Yanukovych to power, the Ukrainian society has changed – similar to what the return of the formerly autocratic KMT rule in Taiwan under President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) has seen in Taiwan society that had already had a taste in freedom from oppression. The people's aspiration for freedom and autonomy has already strengthened, and the media has already shaken off its former yoke of subservience and government censorship. Like the CCP regime, the increasingly repressive Putin regime that has been subverting Russia's hard-won post-Soviet democratic structure is experiencing an "impending Colour Revolution" anxiety – "Colour Revolution" that both the Putin regime and CCP dictatorship have loudly accused, actually not too off the mark, the liberal democratic West of instigating. Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, of Crimea in 2014, and of the whole Ukraine in 2022 are the natural manifestations of such an anxiety.

The Ukrainian people hope to embrace the type of liberal democracy, the hallmark of Western Europe post-WWII, that has already accepted by the East European ex-satellite states of the defunct Soviet Union, to join the EU for economic advancement and the NATO for military protection, to move further away from the corrupt and repressive legacy of the Soviet Union – not least fuelled by the painful memory of the Holodomor – the Soviet-Communist-State-induced Terror-Famine in 1932-33 that took the lives of 7 to 10 million Ukrainians which bordered on genocide, as well as the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown.

However, to the Putin regime, allowing the Ukrainian people to move further away from the Great Russian fraternity towards a liberal democratic Western Europe identity is disastrous for it shows the

Russian electorates that a non-strong-man liberal democratic political order is possible for the Slavonic people. If the human-rights-respecting liberal democratic system could thrive among the "Little Russians" (Ukrainians, and Belarussians), it could also work for the Great Russians. If the aftermath of the Orange Revolution is allowed to stabilise into paving the way to liberal democratic prosperity and a stronger pan-European Ukrainian identity away from the traditional Great Russian-Little Russian fraternity, it will irrevocably pose a mortal threat to the Putin regime's reversion to corrupt autocratic rule in the post-Soviet Russia, and that will also discourage other East European countries from following the Putin road. The success of the Orange Revolution in propelling Ukraine towards a stable liberal democratic order would become a much needed boost to further proliferation of "colour revolutions" in those post-Communist states suffering from authoritarian reversion, and as the Chinese Communist Party dictatorship has repeatedly been warning Putin, the liberal democratic West will continue to utilise "colour revolution" to topple both authoritarian-reverted post-Soviet regimes and the CCP dictatorship and the authoritarian regimes of its client states and others propped up by the CCP regime in Southeast Asia and beyond. Such a "colour revolution" is scaring the CCP to death, and the vibrantly liberal democratic Taiwan nation across the Taiwan Strait facing its Fujian Province is now more and more like China's own Ukraine both as the liberal democratic West's unsinkable aircraft carrier just at its doorstep and a beacon of guidance to dissident forces on the mainland in their aspiration for a colour revolution to liberate the Chinese people from yoke of the Communist Party dictatorship. In this context, surrendering democratic Ukraine to an invasion from a repressive authoritarian Russian regime is a sacrilege – an acquiescent that a people choosing their own destiny to freedom and democracy have no rights to do so, that they have no rights

for self-determination, that they have no rights for arranging a democratic arrangement between ethnoregional areas in the country without being forced to give up those areas by an external invasion force.

However, the post-Soviet Russia now fuelled by the Putin regime's irredentist ultra-nationalist revisionist propaganda has never been able to accept that Ukraine, a captive nation of the former Soviet Union empire, determines to move towards liberal democracy and allied itself with the liberal democratic West signified by EU and NATO. Once becoming truly liberal democratic, coming hand in hand with it will be spirit of independence and self-determination, and the with more independence and self-determination, it will be more completely different from Russia's autocratic regression under Putin. The same applies to Taiwan. And Hong Kong too. The free world has lost Hong Kong. The liberal democratic world has betrayed Hong Kong. The liberal democratic world has largely turned a blind eye, with empty words and no action, to continuing atrocious human rights abuses in China, to crime against humanity in the Uyghur region. In a sense, Ukraine has become the sacrificial lamb that has opened the eyes of the world to the danger of an appeasement approach towards abusive authoritarian regimes. The Russian invasion has caused policy shift and mentality change globally among liberal democratic nations, especially in post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltic and Caucasus, and East and Southeast Asia.

It is interesting to note that Putin actually expressed interest in joining NATO when talking to George Robertson when the latter was secretary general of NATO in early 2000s but was unwilling to queue in an application process together with other countries which he considered inferior to Russia,[15] and had told David Frost in a BBC interview shortly before he was first inaugurated as Russian president more than two

decades ago that he would not rule out joining NATO which was hard for him to visualise as an enemy, as he considered Russia part of the European culture and hence could not imagine Russia "in isolation from Europe and what we often call the civilised world."[16] Thus it has been with the deepening of authoritarianism increasingly characterizing the rule of a leader who was constantly worried about being swept away from power and privilege if the democratic process were to be respected to run its proper course in Russia. This is same worry that has plagued the mindset of China's CCP regime ever since the Beijing Massacre of 1989 when the Communist Party army ("People's Liberation Army") killed thousands of unarmed protesters and other civilians supporting and protecting them).

Despite all of Communist China's whataboutism rhetoric, all the regular attacks on the liberal democratic West from the New Left, the shortcomings in democratic credentials and all the social malaise in individual countries, the historical guilt of sins committed on the negative side of colonialism by the now disintegrated Western maritime colonialism (while Russian and Chinese land-based colonisation continues as "domestic affairs"), the human rights-respecting liberal democratic values that come with the global expansion of the system of North Atlantic liberal democracy cannot be denied, or simply dismissed as just episodes of great power rivalry. Losing Taiwan will be a great disaster, not just in terms of international *Realpolitik* wherein losing the defence of the first island chain will result in endangering the military supremacy of the American-led West in the Pacific, but most importantly in terms of a boost in the global influence of authoritarianism that has been on the alarming rise in recent years, with the notoriously repressive Chinese Communist Party dictatorship subjugating and annexing a vibrantly free and open society of human-rights-respecting liberal democratic Taiwan. If that happens, it will be an

unprecedented high-impact invasion by autocratic Beijing since the 1959 military invasion and colonisation of Tibet by the CCP regime, or further back in time, the ethnic genocidal 1756-58 invasion and obliteration of both state and people of Dzungaria by the China's Manchu imperial central State (after the successful military invasion of Outer Mongolia in 1723-24) with massacre of the majority of the Dzungar population and the enslavement or banishment of the remainder, which began the complete colonisation of largely what has today become the Xinjiang region of China. The same fate awaits the Taiwanese – as the boorish Chinese ambassador to France Lu Shaye (卢沙野) has pronounced: "The Taiwanese people will be re-educated after reunification",[17] thus bringing in the chilling undertone of an impending fate as those million Uyghur people have suffered, being dragged into the Xinjiang concentration camps in recently years under CCP general secretary and state chairman Xi Jinping's rule.

The ideological clash is similarly manifest in Eastern Europe. While Ukraine is moving further to more fully embrace liberal democracy, the more authoritarian Russia has become under Putin, who has imposed an increasingly ruthless, repressive and even murderous (assassination of exiled dissidents, a common practice during Soviet Communist rule, has seen a revival, like the coming back of psychiatric hospital detention of dissidents and re-education gulags that characterised today's atrociously repressive CCP regime in China). Such repressive rule is to ensure that the liberal democratic atmosphere outside Russia, especially in its next-door states including Ukraine will not spread into Russia. Sabotaging the liberal democratic transition in Russia's ex-Soviet "near abroad" on the European and Caucasus side – in particular Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – by meddling in their internal political process, has become imperative for the survival of the increasingly repressive and autocratic Putin regime, and if that action fails, under the logic of "offence is the

best defence" the so-called "special military operation" became necessary, taking advantage of the intricate ethnoregional fabric of the Russophone regions of these post-Soviet nations. Heavily resorted to has been the active covert support for the pro-Russian faction in Ukrainian, Moldovan and Georgian political landscapes to sow seeds of social division and fan internal strife, aided by a deluge of anti-liberal-democratic-West disinformation (tactics long utilized by the former Soviet Union's Communist Party regime, and today by the CCP dictatorship to disparage the liberal democratic West and promote the autocratic "China model"), and if all these fail, outright invasion becomes a final resort, before Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia become more fully liberal democratic and join the EU and NATO and come under the protective umbrella of the latter. If the Putin regime were to succeed in this invasion of Ukraine, his gameplan will become a perfect model playbook for the CCP regime towards Taiwan, as what has been laid out in the above exposition finds indeed an almost perfect East Asian parallel in Communist Party dictatorship-ruled China's view of the "Taiwan threat" it is facing.

* * *

> *While the separation of Hong Kong and Taiwan from Mainland China during the decline of the Ch'ing Empire represented a product of the era of colonisation filled with humiliation by foreigners, within the overall progress of world civilisation, it also led to these two regions attaining freedom and prosperity [away from the repressive empire on the Mainland] bestowed by modern civilisation. In sharp contrast […] the [Mainland] Chinese after being freed from the torment by colonial powers, instead of attaining liberation and freedom, have since been subjected to even more comprehensive and more brutal totalitarian*

> *subjugation [...] While the Chinese Communist Party's dictatorial government has undergone an unequivocal great leap in its hi-tech operation, its political system and mode of governance still remain in the medieval era, hitherto having not given up the medieval myth of a greater empire-building. Internally, towards minority nationalities, it denies them freedom of autonomy. Externally, towards Taiwan, it rejects making a promise of not using military force for unification; towards Hong Kong, it resorts to dictatorial coercive means of intervention in Hong Kong's "One Country, Two System" autonomous governance, resulting in insurmountable barriers to Hong Kong's political democratisation. One of the important principles underlying the post-WWII modern civilisation is the self-determination of a region's inhabitants. Under this principle, the achievement of any unification to resolve conflict is not determined by military coercion by a powerful party, but by the voluntary choice of the minority groups [...] If unification could imply coercion and subjugation, there might as well be no unification.*[18]
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> – Liu Xiaobo (28th December 1955 – 13th July 2017)[19], 2010 Nobel Peace Prize laureate and China's prisoner of conscience, repeatedly jailed dissident and democracy advocate, granted medical parole on 26th June 2017 and sent into closely guarded hospitalisation only seventeen days before his death

According to the routine reports by Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense on incursions of its Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) by mainland Chinese military forces (the so-called "People's Liberation" Army, PLA), PLA aircraft, including nuclear-capable bombers, entered on nearly 250 days in the twelve months between September 2020 and September 2021, with a record number of 148 aircraft entering Taiwan's

ADIZ over the course of four days during mainland China's 2021 National Day celebrations,[20] prompting Taiwan's Ministry of Defense warning in a biennial report released in November 2021 that mainland China had obtained the capacity to surround and blockade the island nation's harbours, airports and outbound flight routes[21]. Then in 2022, in response to U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, China launched a series of military exercises that encircled Taiwan, initially lasting from 4th to 7th August 2022 and involving live-fire drills, air sorties, naval deployments, and ballistic missile launches, unprecedented in recent history and taking place in six zones that surrounded the island nation's busiest international waterways and aviation routes, followed by more military exercise around the island from 8th to 10th August 2022.

In the following year, in response to Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen's meeting with U.S. Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy and other prominent U.S. lawmakers at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library on 5th April 2023, and just hours after the California meeting, a arrival of a congressional delegation consisting of Representative Michael McCaul, chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, in Taipei to show the Americans "strong support of Taiwan" during which McCaul compared the CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping with Adolf Hitler, on 8th April 2023 the PLA announced the start of three days of "combat readiness patrols" encircling Taiwan, dispatching several warships and dozens of aircraft including fighter jets and bombers towards Taiwan, with approximately 71 Chinese military aircraft crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait, According to Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense. China's Shandong aircraft carrier was also deployed to participate in the military exercises, likely the source of four Chinese J-15 fighter jets that Taiwan tracked threatening the island nation. Escalating the threat, on 9th April 2023 Chinese fighter jets and

warships simulated strikes on Taiwan and an encirclement of the island nation. Taiwan responded to the encroachment by deploying her own warships, leading to a standoff between the two states' navies, and prompting the United States Navy to send a warship to the South China Sea on 10th April 2023, the day on which China announced the end of these initial drills, thus bringing the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis to a close, but stated China would continue combat training encircling Taiwan.

To understand these increasingly frequent and numerous mainland China warplane flybys crossing the median line in the Taiwan Strait and the Chinese Communist Party dictatorship's continued bullying military harassment in the skies and waters off Taiwan's coast, threatening live-fire military exercises encircling the vibrantly liberal democratic Taiwan with Chinese missiles flying over the free island nation during the military drills, and the background of long-running the political and military standoff and stalemate between the Chinese Communist Party dictatorship-ruled mainland China (officially "People's Republic of China") and vibrantly liberal democratic Taiwan (officially "Republic of China"), one needs to go back to the year 1949 at the end of the two-decade long Chinese Civil War that ravaged the vast mainland of the ancient land of China, when the defeated Kuomintang forces fled to the serene island of Taiwan, or *Ilha Formosa* ("beautiful island") as named by Portuguese explorers back in the 16th Century.

In 1949, Kuomintang[22] leader Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek retreated with a significant amount of gold and approximately 2 million Nationalist refugees to the small island of Taiwan (臺灣) where he established a hard-line authoritarian regime, shortly following the 228 Massacre of 1947 (二二八大屠殺). The White Terror (白色恐怖) to which Taiwan was consigned after the massacre was one of the longest martial law periods in world history, as tens of thousands of Taiwanese

were imprisoned and executed under the grim eye of the Taiwan Garrison Command secret police body (Yeoh and Yeoh, 2013). Who in that era could have predicted the day would come when four decades later President Chiang Ching-kuo (son of Chiang Kai-shek) and Taiwan's subsequent leaders would successfully facilitate a bloodless and relatively peaceful democratic transition by imposition for their nation and turn the de facto independent island state into one of the most vibrant democracies in the world and a best-case paragon of civil liberties and political rights-respecting free society?

With the democracy of Taiwan, officially the Republic of China (ROC, 中華民國), continues to stand in intriguing, defiant contrast to the ruthlessly maintained political monopoly of the Chinese Communist Party in the "People's Republic" of China (PRC, 中华人民共和国) on the mainland, Taiwan tends to present itself as a perfect textbook validation of the modernization theory, for she has proven to be one of the most successful later industrializers in the history of the twentieth century as well as a "best-case" democracy (Rigger, 2004). When Chiang Ching-kuo came into power in the 1970s, he was taking command of a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing Taiwan whose increasingly educated and politically conscious people had begun to chafe under the repressive yoke of the hard-line authoritarian policies since Chiang Kai-shek's era. It is at this point that the predictions of the modernization theory begin to appear validated, as can be seen from the events which followed. Local elections were held in an effort to increase the political participation of the native Taiwanese. Four new members, all of whom were highly educated and had no significant connections to the military or the Chiang family, were elected to the KMT's top decision-making body, i.e. the Central Standing Committee in 1986 (Copper, 1987). Most importantly, the KMT convened with intellectuals and opposition leaders in discussions which eventually led to the end of

martial law and the formation of a major national opposition party, i.e. the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) whose establishment on 28th September 1986 in defiance of restrictions imposed by the authoritarian KMT regime truly represented a watershed in Taiwan's gradually moving from an authoritarian political structure towards today's full-fledged multiparty electoral democracy. In short, over those critical early years, many governmental reforms were launched which enabled the system to transition gradually away from hard-line authoritarianism to partial democratization[23], and these liberalizing measures not only involved the political realm, but fed back into the economic one as well. Taiwan's economic freedom has steadily increased since 1975, i.e. the year Chiang Ching-kuo fully came to power. This has paid off well, and thus in 1986 Taiwan was credited as a top nation by global standards in terms of economic performance (*ibid.*), and when Chiang Ching-kuo's successor, the native Taiwanese Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) came onto the scene in 1988, modernized Taiwan was ready for his efforts to facilitate her evolution into a full-fledged constitutional democracy. More than twenty years on, today Taiwan has matured into the most democratic free society in East Asia and indeed also one of the most vibrant democracies in the whole of Asia and even the world.

No country exists in a vacuum; the consequences of the smallest decisions or actions generated through global interactions can affect a country's trajectory dramatically. It is hence impossible to analyse the political trajectory of Taiwan without touching upon the critical role that the international environment has played not only today but also in impacting her history, especially in the wake of the Chinese Civil War. The defeat of the Nationalist army by the Communists in 1950 had been keenly felt as a blow to the anti-Communist portion of the international community. Critics howled that then U.S. President Harry Truman had failed to provide sufficient support to their Free China allies and as a

result, the United States was presumed responsible for "losing" China to "the Reds" (Yeoh and Yeoh, 2013). Such a proportioning of blame had the indirect effect of heightening international sympathy for the KMT regime. Thus, when the KMT fled to Taiwan in 1949-50, it did so with the consoling knowledge that it still possessed powerful allies which recognized the ROC as the true government of all China and opposed the dominance of the CCP over the mainland.

Many pessimistic predictions were made forecasting Taiwan's eventual fall to the control of mainland China. Recognizing the high costs of directly engaging the CCP army in combat, the international community was reluctant to furnish Taiwan with offensive support or directly assist the KMT's quest to recover the mainland (*ibid.*). Even so, "there were few spokesmen, even in neutralist countries, who […] advocated turning Taiwan over to the Communists" and thus the international community willingly provided defensive support instead (Walker, 1959). The United States proved to be a particularly valuable ally in that it provided both military aid in the form of stationing the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait and economic aid in the form of "Development Loans" to finance new economic projects which must be approved by the U.S. government, "Development Grants" to provide technical assistance against obstacles to economic development, and farm surplus commodities under "Public Law 480" (Chang, 1965). Simultaneously, the U.S. built up a bitter enmity with China, whose switch to Communism and involvement in the 1950 Korean War were regarded as personal affronts, while Washington "took a hard line by toughening the U.S. economic embargo against the PRC, […] firming up support for the Nationalist government in Taiwan [and] blocking the PRC's membership in the UN, and further isolating the PRC politically" (Xia, 2008). All this, alongside the problems of the deteriorating Sino-Soviet alliance as well as internal instability in China, served to weaken

China's strategic position against that of Taiwan's within the global arena for a time. In short, it would not be amiss to conclude that the KMT's survival in Taiwan subsequent to the Civil War was more an indicator of the tremendous sway Western and U.S. opinion and actions had over international politics than a testament to the KMT's own strength (Yeoh and Yeoh, 2013).

As the years passed, however, the international community inevitably realized the unlikelihood of the ROC ever returning to the mainland and re-assuming the status of a world power. Slowly but surely, pragmatism won over idealism, and the balance of power gradually tipped in favour of the PRC. A key character expediting the erosion of Taiwan's international standing was, in an ironic twist of fate, none other than then President of the U.S., Richard Nixon (*ibid.*). Prior to 1970, Nixon had been appreciated as one of Taipei's favourite American allies, given his past reputation as a formidable "red-baiter". This, however, changed when the Nixon administration enacted a grand plan to restructure the international order via initiating a strategy of triangular diplomacy to create a state of détente between China, the Soviet Union and the U.S. This strategy achieved its intended sub-goal of normalizing U.S. relations with the PRC, but simultaneously, it effectively sidelined the ROC government and served as a harbinger of the derecognition to come (*ibid.*). On 25th October 1971, the United Nations made the momentous decision to "expel forthwith the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek from the place which they unlawfully occupy at the United Nation" and accepted the PRC as the legitimate government of China (Appleton, 1972).

The significance of this decision cannot be understated. Not only did China gain all the international legitimacy which Taiwan lost, she also secured much more leverage and a better bargaining position than Taiwan could ever have hoped to hold. Owing to the disparities of size

and geography between China and Taiwan, the former has always played a more critical role in the annals of world history as compared to Taiwan and, regardless of the international environment, shown that she is a player not to be trifled with. International support for Taiwan involved less potential risk but also less potential reward than international support for China, as may be derived from current conditions – even if the global community had continued to support the former rather than the latter, it is difficult to imagine Taiwan becoming the economic powerhouse and regional leader that China is today (Yeoh and Yeoh, 2013).

Thus, with the fateful 1971 verdict, Taiwan was demoted to becoming a political entity in possession of virtually all the trappings of a country, save for the vital last ingredient – formal recognition from other countries. She could only be seen as an object of trade and tourism in the global mind, as "the People's Republic of China (PRC) [...] made it clear that it [did] not object to European business activity in Taiwan if political overtones are excluded" (Drifte, 1985). This was a precariously vulnerable position for any country to have, and it was to Taiwan's credit that her reaction "was not only controlled, but somewhat more receptive than usual to suggestions for internal reform", as Sheldon L. Appleton noted, "Observers on Taiwan when the Nixon trip to Peking and the U.N. China vote were announced reported concern, but no depression, panic or major demonstrations" (Appleton, 1972). Something, however, clearly needed to be done if Taiwan intended to retain her governmental autonomy. Thus set the stage for the next four decades of diplomatic tussle, often turbulent, between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait – technically still at war to date – with the third player, the U.S., as a deeply involved interest party.

In this context, as observed earlier, Taiwan's particular international circumstances (vis-à-vis China's) were significant to her democratic

development. The successful democratization of Taiwan has been significantly attributed to the Republic of China's loss of her seat in the United Nations in 1971 – being replaced by the People's Republic of China – followed by her marginalization in the Senkaku/Tiaoyutai (尖閣諸島／釣魚台列嶼)[24] dispute, and adding insult to injury, the 1979 US derecognition (Yeoh and Yeoh, 2013). This sequence of humiliating events had served to trigger an unprecedented, major national crisis[25], though Chu (1992) also brought in the decline in military tension with China in the late 1970s as a factor given that the said decline has greatly reduced the "siege mentality" of the Taiwanese people and in turn the legitimacy of a continuing authoritarian polity. All these had irreparably weakened the KMT's moral stance in maintaining an authoritarian grip upon the island state. Similar circumstance has occurred in Argentina as result of losing the war with Great Britain over the Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas). As a point in contrast, China has never been under such pressures to democratize. Although China has frequently come under severe Western criticism for her consistently violent stance against any form of political dissent within the country, the international repercussions which followed have not been as punishing to the Chinese government as they could have been[26], and certainly resulted in nothing as damaging as the precariously isolated position observed above that Taiwan had found herself in.

From the tumultuous period of cross-Strait relations under the Democratic Progressive Party's Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) presidency to the present two-term DPP presidency of Tsai Ing-wen who rose to power after the electorates' sentiment swung back to the DPP following the student activists' storming of the Legislature during the Sunflower Student Movement (太陽花學運, the name in allusion to the Wild Lily Student Movement (野百合學運) of 1990 which set a milestone in the democratization of Taiwan) protesting the passing of the Cross-Strait

Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA) at the legislature without a clause-by-clause review – which the protesting students and civil groups perceived that would hurt Taiwan's economy and leave it vulnerable to political pressure from Beijing – by the then ruling Kuomintang under the Ma Ying-jeou presidency – the shadow of war has never left this one of the most dangerous flashpoints of East Asia, once seen as one of the world's three hottest potential war zones.

In addition to Kenneth N. Waltz's arguments in his book *Man, the state and war: A theoretical analysis* (2001) regarding the roles of human behavioural factor, internal national instability and lack of legal constraints in precipitating war that can throw light on the critical role of rising nationalism on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, mainland China's problem of maintaining domestic stability (e.g. that resulted in Deng Xiaoping (邓小平)'s launching of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese war) and the conflict between mainland China's "core interest" and America's major interest concerning Taiwan in the rising cross-Strait tension, attention needs to be paid to the possibility of accidental triggering of crisis – two vivid historical precedents being the assassination of Austrian crown prince Franz Ferdinand in 1914 as pointed out by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. in his book *Understanding international conflicts: An introduction to theory and history* (1997) and the earlier-than-expected breaking-out of the Hsin-hai Revolution (辛亥革命) (Day, 2012: 15-18).

Regarding the interesting issue of the formation of a "Taiwanese identity", there is a school that traces the germination of "Taiwanese nationalism" back to the ceding of Taiwan to Japan in 1895 and its proper formation triggered by the 228 Massacre of 1947 and brutal repression by the Kuomintang – in other words, a Taiwanese identity was born directly as a counteraction to two "foreign" political administrations, namely the Japanese colonial rule and the Kuamintang

repression which shared similarity in combining political repression and cultural assimilation – while there is another school that traces the formation of this identity only back to the 1895 cession but not to the 228 Massacre (*ibid.*: 27-30). Such divergence is in fact rather political, as it all boils down to one's perspective on whether a so-called "Taiwanese identity" is part and parcel of a wider Chinese identity for in this context recognizing the 228 Massacre as a milestone is tantamount to saying that the Taiwanese had finally turned their back on the Han Chinese after the turning point of the 228 Massacre (*ibid.*). Across the Taiwan Strait, the rediscovery by the Chinese Communist Party of the usefulness of nationalism in strengthening citizens' loyalty to the ruling Party and the country in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War and the demise of communist party rule in most other parts of the world, leading to its embrace both by the intellectuals who have produced countless books and essays in rousing ovation for such nationalism and the wider masses who made books with titles like "China Can Say No"[27] instant best sellers in the country, accompanied by the inexplicable reemergence of Mao-latry (*ibid.*: 36-37) – the veneration, the hero worship of the one person in recent Chinese history who caused such unparalleled level of human misery through murderous purges, crime against humanity via mindless grassroots political persecution, man-made famine through whimsical economic policies that led even to widespread cannibalism.

In contrast to the rising Chinese nationalism in the early 20th Century whose main contents – like those reemerged in the Tiananmen student movement in 1989 – circled around the resentment against government corruption and the aspiration for a clean and able government, today's new government-promoted nationalism in mainland China is in support of and serving to strengthen the governing legitimacy of the present unelected ruling party and the authority of the present

political institution that outlaws any attempt in electoral challenge to the CCP, while abiding by CCP's rhetoric in emphasizing the importance of political stability rather than political change. In other words, with State and society in a way exist in separation, democracy followed the development of nationalism, leading to the establishment of Asia's first republic from the ruins of the Manchu monarchy in the early 20th Century. On the contrary, denying a separate existence of society from the political State run in monopoly by today's catch-all Communist Party, the present wave of State-promoted, mass-inciting nationalism has not only been contributing nothing to democratic reform, but instead has been intensifying bitter xenophobic behaviour in the realm of foreign affairs, especially in the form of hate-filled anti-Japanese and anti-American nationalistic sentiments (*ibid.*: 37). A textbook example is the aftermath of the (allegedly accidental) bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by American bombers: the Japanese China expert Miyazaki Masahiro (宮崎正弘) commenting on the extreme anti-American actions by demonstrators in China that amidst such an atmosphere of incited fanatic nationalistic outburst that anyone who are trying to constrain or neutralize the situation would themselves become victims of attack by those around them (*ibid.*: 38). As Deng Xiaoping told visiting former US president Richard Nixon just after the June Fourth 1989 Beijing massacre while calls for sanction was brewing, "Please tell President Bush … even if it takes a hundred years, the Chinese people will never beg to have the sanctions lifted. If China would not respect itself, China can't stand firm and there won't be national dignity. It's a very big issue, and any Chinese leader who commits error on this issue would definitely fall from power. The Chinese people will not forgive him. I'm telling the truth."[28] Here goes the war cry of the new nationalists: "Don't think that Chinese youths will thank America for imposing sanction on China. You can't separate the individual from the

nation. When you hurt the Chinese government, you hurt the Chinese people."[29] In the befuddled realm of the CCP State = China = Chinese people cognition, questioning the CCP State's policy actions is logically equated to insulting the Chinese people and hurting Chinese nationalistic feeling. Nationalism in such context represents a "single-edged venomous sword", in the opinion of the presently incarcerated Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo.

Especially in the post-colonial, post-Cold War era, the roar of nationalism tends to become the last refuge for authoritarian regimes against the global march of human rights-, political choice-respecting liberal democracy, a rediscovered ideological instrument to crush any challenge to the ruling party's political monopoly (Liu, 2006). Increasingly adept in handling such nationalistic sentiments, the CCP State is able to summon them up whenever they should be useful for dealing with foreign relations while avoiding them from turning into a threat to the regime itself – as illustrated by the following examples, among others, of the incidents following respectively the mid-air collision between a United States Navy EP-3E ARIES II signals intelligence aircraft and a People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) J-8II interceptor fighter jet near the Chinese island province of Hainan in 2001, and the Chinese actress Zhao Wei (趙薇)'s photo shoot, also in 2001, for a fashion magazine wearing a dress featuring the Japanese "rising sun" military flag (Day, 2012: 39-41). It is within such context that there is increasing concern for a potential clash between mainland Chinese nationalism and the newer Taiwanese nationalism. While Taipei has been reformatting the unfinished Chinese Civil War into an international conflict in order to force Beijing's hand to reach a certain form of compromise that would pave the way to Taiwan's political independence and nation-state recognition, similarly the CCP regime will never tolerate Taiwan's gaining her nation-state status not just

because of the righteous question of national sovereignty but more importantly for the regime's own political survival. While the masses on the mainland might not really care as much about the issue of Taiwan independence as about their own economic wellbeing, nationalism, probably just next to improving people's standard of living, is always the trump card in the CCP's quest to perpetuate its rule (*ibid.*: 47-48). Citing Susan Shirk (2007), Day (2012) points out that in the reasoning that CCP is presently the great torchbearer of Chinese nationalism, having proving itself to be the best hope of China to finally be a strong and unified nation, to eventually cleanse itself completely from the shame of the "Hundred Years of National Humiliation", the Taiwan issue is no longer simply an issue of territory, but of national pride and dignity. Juxtaposing such outlook among the mainlanders, who increasingly look ever ready to rally around the red flag of the CCP in the event of the outbreak of a cross-Strait war, with the empirical evidence from opinion polls that today's younger generation in the de facto independent island state is fast diminishing in their identification with China and probably there would be none so identifying themselves in the next generation, the shadow of a coming war is indeed grimly looming as a most probable outcome of the clash of two nationalisms (*ibid.*: 48-49).

On the premise of such eventual clash of two nationalisms, Day (2012)[30] discusses lessons learned from the wars of unification and wars of separation in Chinese history from those launched by the Ch'in state to take over the other six states during 236-221 B.C. to the failed attack launched by the then new "People's Republic of China" on Kinmen in 1949 that left a cross-Strait confrontation till the present,[31] and from these lists of wars of unification and separation in Chinese history, Day (2012: 68-71) arrives at several deductions. First, both unification and separation require undergoing the trial of war. The way that PRC's

Anti-Secession Law (反分裂国家法)[32] was written shows that, Day observes, it is difficult for the mainland to achieve unification with Taiwan without resorting to war. On the part of Taiwan, despite the continuous effort of part of the society to pull Taiwan out of China's historical framework, its possibility of success is never something that Taiwan can alone determine; instead, mainland China's stance on that is unfortunately of paramount importance and even decisive, unless Taiwan is really prepared to go to war with the mainland. Lastly, there is the human factor as a recurring element in the history of war of unification and separation – strong leaders who could hold dear to a principle to the end vs. those who would go for compromise and trade political sovereignty for economic gains. With this, the arguments have apparently crossed into the domain of Taiwan's long-running partisan political fault line. After all, with two thirds of China's past eras experiencing territorial political unity and one third in division, the pressure of nationalistic "historical responsibility" could be forcing the CCP dictatorship's hand to eventually launch an inevitable war of unification, for regime survival, to claim Taiwan.

Besides the clash of conventional mainland Chinese and emerging Taiwanese nationalism, the cross-Strait conflict can be placed in the wider context of the Sino-U.S. clash of interest – a favourite topic for writers of international relations and strategic studies on which innumerable papers have long been churned out year after year in recent decades. Of particular interest here is that amidst all the rhetoric of mainland political leaders and scholars emphasizing China's "peaceful rise" or "peaceful development", the alarming, disproportionate growth in Chinese military expenditure, her self-justified aggressive assertion of sovereignty over almost all of South China Sea, her untiring reiteration of past national humiliation, her exploitation of the society's age-old hatred for Japan and her arrogant refusal to abrogate the possibility of

the use of force towards Taiwan to the extent of writing the non-peaceful solution into her Anti-Secession Law definitely do not help to placate her neighbours and the U.S. and dispel their worries of a "China threat". The centrality of Taiwan in the Sino-U.S. rivalry for Asia-Pacific hegemony, given the undisputed geopolitical strategic importance of the island state for America, has made increasing Taiwanese economic dependence on China a real worry for America, according to Day (2012: 86), citing a Rand Corporation project for the U.S. Defense Department, "Chinese Economic Coercion against Taiwan: A Tricky Weapon to Use" (Tanner, 2007). The research pointed to the possibility that as the Taiwanese economy is getting increasingly dependent on China, there could be pressure on Taiwan at some point in time to make a reckless move to declare independence to avoid Chinese economic oppression getting out of control as time might not be on Taiwan's side. Alternatively, being unable to effectively achieve her political objectives via economic means for too long, China might yet resort to military means to force unification with Taiwan, amidst a feeling of defeat from the failure of playing her economic trump card and the concomitant increasing anxiety over Taiwan's eventually declaring independence – witness the sudden "Sunflower Movement" that was sweeping Taipei through March-April 2014, led by hundreds of thousands of student protesters enraged by then President Ma Ying-jeou's "Politburo-esque maneuver"[33] to enact a trade pact with China to open up the island state's service industries without fulfilling the promise to allow a clause-by-clause review before implementation. The ultimate source of the protest movement is the increasing wariness felt by Taiwan's younger generation of, besides and more than the economic impacts of effective merging the two economies though the trade pact, the foreboding sense of China's incremental political control over Taiwan and the Hongkongisation of Taiwan's hard-won democracy.

On the other hand, there is a prevalent argument by mainland scholars that eventual unification is of paramount importance for China for the fact that territorial unity represents the road to prosperity while disunity tends to lead to disaster and agony. Such thinking is evidently the result of Chinese traditional mainstream thought of grand unity and sovereignty: while the worries for a possible domino effect affecting China's frontier regions may not be unfounded, the real disaster and agony stem not from separation – as in the "velvet divorce" of the Czech Republic and Slovakia – but from the unwillingness of the stronger side to let go of the weaker leading to the use of devastating military campaign to halt the latter's move towards independence, as in the case of Russia and Chechnya, or formerly Indonesia and Timor-Leste and Serbia and Kosovo, when the maintenance of social stability and welfare and protection of human rights as the fundamental value of national existence give way to vehement sovereign sentiment and ultra-nationalistic ideology (*ibid.*: 87-88). Anyway, it all boils down to a matter of policy priority. China's leaders, from Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin (江泽民), Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping have been vehemently against adopting Western liberal democracy for China, both for the fear that the Communist Party will lose its political dominance or China might disintegrate like the former Soviet Union.

The possibility of China's disintegration is indeed not just a figment of the nightmare of CCP's leaders, but a favourite prognostication among Western and Japanese scholars too. For instance, Ian Cook and Geoffrey Murray gave a scenario in which "the erosion of sovereignty via such combined pressures as globalization, new regionalism (based partly on newly emerging elite groups) and ethnic dissent, would lead to China fragmenting"[34], in a scenario wherein "[r]ich regions like Guangdong and Fujian might attempt to break away from the centre to form a South China state with Hong Kong and Taiwan in order to

maintain their economic prosperity, while poor regions would become poorer with the possibility of social unrest and even civil war."[35]

Cook and Murray added to this scenario the possible secession of Tibet and Xinjiang (Eastern Turkestan), resulting in the China proper shrinking to a rump centred on the Huang He (黃河, Yellow River) and Yangtze (揚子江／長江) deltas (Cook and Murray, 2001: 93).

Farfetched it might seem to be, such "China deconstructs" nightmare scenario does underline the long-term worries of China's rulers over the impacts of decentralization since Dengist reforms began. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991 serves further as a premonition of the bad days to come. After all, China is the world's only former empire that has not disintegrated as have, all in the 20th century, the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, the Western maritime empires, and the Russia empire (later, the Soviet Union). The only ethnic region that managed to break away from China is Outer Mongolia that formed the independent Mongolian People's Republic in 1924, with Russian support, though not recognized by China until 1946.[36]

Unity has been the greatest concern of the generation that holds dear to the conviction that China's shameful defeat at the hands of Western and Japanese colonizers would never be allowed to be repeated, and that, though not often explicitly stated, high degree of regional autonomy especially in the non-Han regions like Tibet and Xinjiang could be the prelude to separatism and pave the way to China's disintegration, as the cases of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia have amply attested to. When the former Taiwanese (Republic of China) president Lee Teng-hui came up with his theory of "China in seven blocks" (中國七塊論), he was widely vilified not only in mainland China, but also among the Chinese community leaders overseas.

Lee's idea was proposed in a book《台灣的主張》("Taiwan's viewpoint")[37] he published in May 1999 towards the end of his

presidency. Lee wrote that the ideal situation is when China is finally able to throw off the yoke of Great Sinism (大中華主義) and allow comprehensive autonomy for regions with diverse cultures and differing degrees of development. Lee believed that competition among these seven regions for progress and prosperity would auger well for a more stable Asia. The proposed regions include Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang (Eastern Turkestan), Mongolia (Inner Mongolia), the Northeast – as stated in Lee's book – and two more regions understood to be Chiang-pei (江北, north of the Yangtze River) and Chiang-nan (江南, south of the Yangtze River).

Lee's proposal instantly caused uproars both in China and among the overseas Chinese communities. His detractors wasted no time to show their disgust at his audacity to so explicitly propose the splitting up of China. He was crowned with the unenviable title of a stooge of the Western and Japanese anti-China forces. The fact that Lee said before twenty-two years old he had considered himself a Japanese and the media published his photograph wearing a kimono did not help, given the painful memory both in China and in the overseas Chinese communities of the unspeakable inhumanity the Japanese military committed against the Chinese populace during its 1937-1945 invasion and occupation of China and Southeast Asia. On the other hand, those who came to Lee's defense stressed that Lee, as the first popularly elected president of the first human rights-respecting liberal democracy in the five millennia of Chinese history and the first native Taiwanese Chinese to become Taiwan's head of state – "who successfully guided the Taiwanese people into full democracy through an election-led, gradual and peaceful process that some international observers have praised as a 'quiet revolution'"[38] – was not proposing China's disintegration, but administrative decentralization through conferring regional autonomy for economic development.

Lee's proposal might have had its origin in an earlier book《和平七雄論》("A Theory of the Peaceful Seven Powers") by Wang Wen-shan[39]. Wang advocated breaking up China into seven parts – not seven regions, but seven independent countries. Wang's rationale is that a China with 1.3 billion people could never become a democratic country. The best way to avoid the resurrection of the ancient Chinese empire was to let China disintegrate into several smaller Chinas peacefully, voluntarily and rationally, stated Wang. It has been said that Lee was deeply impressed by Wang's book and recommended it to many people including his officials in charge of cross-Strait relations. He also showed the book to the Japanese writer Fukada Yusuke (深田佑介) during the latter's visit to Taiwan and suggested a Japanese translation. Fukada brought it back to Japan and got a Japanese version out in 1997 called, more provocatively, "Seven Chinas", published by the《文藝春秋》(*Bungeishunjū*). This was not the first time the breaking up of China was suggested in Japan in recent years. Taking France as having the optimal country size, Japan's China expert Nakashima Mineo (中 (島) 嶺雄) had earlier suggested dismantling China into twelve blocks, viz. Tibet, Mongolia, Xinjiang, Manchuria, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, eastern China, southern China, western China, northern China and central China. Another Japanese China expert Miyazaki Masahiro as noted earlier with regard to Chinese citizens' anti-American nationalistic outburst, also asserted in 1995 that the post-Deng China would split into 16 small states forming a federal system.

The nightmarish scenario of China's disintegration and the most likely prospect of losing Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, probably also Qinghai and Ningxia, and of course Taiwan, and having China shrunk by half alone is enough for the Communist Party leaders to convince many, not least among the overseas Chinese community leaders, to shun the idea of democratization and regional political autonomy. The death

of the Soviet Union hangs like the sword of Damocles to remind people that "[… when] Mikhail Gorbachev launched his radical political reform and initiated the process of political democratization in the former Soviet Union, scholars in the West argued that Gorbachev must be 'right' and China's Deng Xiaoping must be 'wrong.' […] However, when Gorbachev's reforms eventually led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Deng Xiaoping was proven 'right.'" (Zheng and Lye, 2004) The prevalence of such views that have fed into the collective fear somehow serves well in justifying the stance of China's current regime despite the value-loaded nature of judging right and wrong in this case. Soviet Union's disintegration is definitely wrong in the context of the preference for stability and territorial unity, but this is highly judgmental. Firstly, as pointed out earlier, that a "nation" divided is destined to herald misery for the people might not be borne out by modern empirical evidence – the outstanding record of economic prosperity, political stability and human welfare of the many successor states of the former Austro-Hungarian empire, the Kalmar Union (the Danish empire) and, of course, the success of Taiwan. To be fair, to generalize such successes could be as empirically unsound as to be consumed by the combination of ethno-national pride and the morbid fear of losing territorial domination, but sometimes, as the proverb goes, the best things might just come in small parcels. E.F. Schumacher in his now classic *Small is beautiful* (1973) proposed the idea of "smallness within bigness" – a form of decentralization whereby for a large organization to work it must behave like a related group of small organizations: "Man is small, and, therefore, small is beautiful" (Schumacher, 1973/1975: 169). Schumacher might just have a point. Secondly, the aspiration for a unified nation under the Han Chinese domination from the point of view of the Han Chinese should be indisputable, but whether this is true from the perspective of other non-

Han Chinese people – "Chinese" as defined as "China's citizens" – especially those who are ethnoterritorial should, to be fair, be properly seen from these ethnic minorities' point of view, taking seriously into consideration their civil liberties and political rights as well as the right of ethnic self-determination.

Since during the recent decades of open-door policy and reform which brought mainland China astonishing economic achievements Taiwan was in fact not a part of the People's Republic of China and her absence in the PRC did not affect in any way the rise of mainland China, as Day (2012) argues, there is absolutely no reason to believe that Taiwan's continued absence in the PRC would constitute a hindrance in any way to the continuing rise of mainland China into a world power: so why is this inexorability of making Taiwan a part of the PRC? – a *sine qua non* for achieving a world superpower status? If Taiwan is simply a military-strategic pawn in Sino-U.S. rivalry, would the Finlandization of Taiwan, as suggested by Bruce Gilley (2010), following increasing cross-Strait economic and trade relations truly help, Day asks, to reduce Sino-U.S. tension? What would U.S.'s other allies in the Asia-Pacific think if U.S. were to so easily surrender Taiwan to the PRC?

However, the severe inadequacy of political trust causes difficulties in any meaningful progress in truly ending mutual enmity and building in turn military mutual trust, making the rather pragmatic calls of former CCP general secretary and state chairman Hu Jintao's 31st December 2008 "告台湾同胞书" ("Letter to Our Compatriots in Taiwan") hollow and futile. With no progress in sight in ending cross-Strait enmity and the state of war since 1949, with PRC's eventual true or erroneous understanding that Taiwan is forever only willing to go for economic but never political integration with the mainland and with China's ultimate objective of persuading Taiwan for unification forever remains in vain, one of the three alternative conditions for resorting to non-peaceful

means in the Anti-Secession Law, "a complete disappearance of the possibility of peaceful unification", would assert itself (Day, 2012: 129-130). In such a situation, war is not just an alarmist talk whether from the perspective of international power rivalry, the mainland regime's domestic pressures or the mainland leaders' power contests and consolidation, even if the Taiwanese government were to hold dear to its present "three no's" policy: "no unification; no independence; no use of force"[40]. All in all, the fact is that: the first two on the part of Taiwan do not guarantee the third by the mainland regime, if the PRC eventually makes good on a jilted lover's "marry me or I'll kill you" pledge.

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Notes

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19. As a leading intellectual dissident activist from the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations and hunger strikes to *Charter 08* – for which he was sentenced to 11 years of imprisonment – Liu Xiaobo (劉曉波) was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on 8th October 2010 but was unable to receive it as he was serving his 11-year sentence. He received his Ph.D. from the Beijing Normal University in 1988 with his thesis "審美與人的自由" [aesthetics and human freedom].
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22. Or officially the "Kuomintang (commonly translated as "Nationalist Party") of China" (KMT, 中國國民黨).
23. It must be noted that only partial, not full democratization had been attained and so overcoming the lingering limits to KMT tolerance of opposition was still a work-in-progress. The DPP, for example, was founded in 1986 and allowed to compete in elections, but remained technically illegal until the enactment of the Law on Civic Organizations in January 1989 (Copper, 1987).
24. The Pinnacle Islands – a group of uninhabited islands currently controlled by Japan who calls them the Senkaku Islands (尖閣諸島), a part of Okinawa prefecture (沖縄県), but claimed by both the governments of the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China as the Tiaoyüt'ai/Diaoyutai Islands (釣魚台列嶼 / 钓鱼台群岛), part of the Taiwan province. The largest island of the group is the Uotsuri Jima (魚釣島) / Tiaoyü Tao / Diaoyu Dao (釣魚島).
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a paltry two years, and by the mid-1990s, most of these Western countries had warmed up to China once more.

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28. Cited in Song (2010), p. 264, from《邓小平文选》[selected works of Deng Xiaoping], Volume 3, Beijing: 人民出版社, 1993, pp. 331-332.
29. Cited in Song (2010), p. 264, from Song Qiang (宋强) *et al.*,《中国还是能说不》[China can still say "No"], Beijing: 中国文联出版公司, 1996, p. 405.
30. Day (2012: 52, 61), Table 3-1, Table 3-2.
31. Recalling the wars of unification in Chinese history including that launched by the Ch'in (秦) state to take over the other six states during 236-221 B.C. which unified the Three Kingdoms under Chin (晉) during A.D. 263-280, the North and South Dynasties under Sui (隋) during 581-589, the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms under Sung (宋) during 962-979, by the Mongolian Yüan (元) Dynasty to take over Southern Sung (南宋) during 1235-1279, and that by the Manchurian Ch'ing (清) Dynasty to take over Southern Ming (南明) and Taiwan during 1645-1683, Day asks: Is there reason to predict a war, say around 2020, launched by China to conquer Taiwan? Similarly, recalling the wars of separation in Chinese history including the Battle of Ch'ih-pi (赤壁) in A.D. 207 that established the tripartite existence of the Three Kingdoms which lasted for 73 years, the failed Northern Expedition in 354 during the Eastern Chin (東晉) dynasty that ended up in the second Three Kingdom period that lasted 16 years, the Battle of Feishui (淝水) in 383 that resulted in the Eastern Chin and the Former Ch'in (前秦) standing in mutual north-south confrontation for 20 years, the unconcluded war of Former Sung (劉宋) against the Northern Wei (北魏) in 430 that resulted in a stalemate that lasted 49 years, the unconcluded Battle of Kao-p'ing (高平) between Later Chou (後周) and Northern Han (北漢) and war waged by

Northern Chou (北周) against Southern T'ang (南唐) during 954-957 that resulted in a division that lasted 22 years, the failure of the Manchurian Ch'ing's attack on Taiwan in 1664 that resulted in mutual confrontation between Koxinga (國姓爺 , i.e. 鄭成功 (Cheng Ch'eng-kung))'s Ming remnant government on Taiwan and the Ch'ing court on the mainland for 19 years, and the failure of the attack launched by the new "People's Republic of China" on Kinmen (金門) in 1949 that left a cross-Strait confrontation till the present, Day asks: Is there reason to predict a failed war effort in the near future by the Communist Party-ruled mainland China against Taiwan resulting in a new round of cross-Strait confrontation?

32. Passed by the third conference of the 10th National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China and ratified on 14th March 2005.
33. "Ma seems to have forgotten he's running a democracy, not a Communist Party precinct", commented William Pesek in his *Bloomberg* column (Is China losing Taiwan?), 1st April 2014 (Opinion) <*https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2014-03-31/is-china-losing-taiwan*>.
34. Cook and Murray (2001) (quote from page 90).
35. Cook and Li (1996) (quote from page 213).
36. The Uyghurs in fact established, with Russian help, a short-lived East Turkestan Republic in 1944, but it collapsed after the 1949 Communist victory in China's civil war, and the region was reincorporated into China as the Xinjiang (新疆) Uygur Zizhiqu (自治区 , "autonomous" region) in 1955. Like the *de facto* independent Taiwan since 1949, with the collapse of the Ch'ing (清) Dynasty that led to the repatriation of the imperial troops from the region, Tibet (today China's Xizang (西藏) Zizhiqu) was in every respect virtually on her own from 1911 to 1950.
37. Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) (1999).《台灣的主張》. Taipei: Yuan-Liou (遠流). Though usually translated as "Taiwan's Viewpoint", the title of the book literally means "Taiwan's Proposition".

38. Mashiro Wakabayashi, "Taiwan de zhuzhang (Taiwan's Viewpoint), by Lee Teng-hui" (book review), *China Perspectives*, n°25, September-October 1999, pp. 91-92 (quote from page 91). <*https://www.cefc.com.hk/article/taiwan-de-zhuzhang-taiwans-viewpoint-by-lee-teng-hui/*> <*http://www.cefc.com.hk/uk/pc/articles/art_ligne.php?num_art_ligne=2509*>
39. "Wang Wen-shan" (王文山) was the pen-name of Wang Shih-jung (王世榕), a former associate professor at Taiwan's Chinese Culture University (中國文化大學). The Chinese version of his book《和平七雄論》was published in December 1996.
40. President Ma Ying-jeou proclaimed the "three no's'" policy – no negotiations for unification; no pursuit of de jure independence; no use of force by either side of the Taiwan Strait – in outlining his planned approach to cross-Strait relations prior to the 22nd March 2008's Taiwan presidential election, seemingly as antitheses to the PRC's long-standing "three no's" – no Taiwan independence; no "two Chinas" or "one China, one Taiwan"; and no Taiwan membership in organizations where statehood is required.

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