

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

CHINESE EXPANSION: A CONSIDERABLE DILEMMA

Luis Lobo-Fernandes

The study of variance is one of the milestones of the scientific process. In the field of knowledge of International Relations, it means the identification of possible discontinuities in the international system. Weighting the rise of China, which is marked by inexorable expansionist ambitions, both at geoeconomic and commercial and at strategic and military levels – already defined as “Sino-globalization” – takes on, in this context, an urgency that requires careful reflection. Now, in the effort to problematize the factors of international change and of the growing sense of uncertainty, as in the case at hand, it is crucial to operationalize accurate conceptual frameworks always keeping in mind the theoretical and methodological pluralism of the scientific area of International Relations. Thus, embarking on an ambitious enterprise, the current R:I issue encompasses six relevant contributions that explore different aspects and dimensions of the current international conjuncture, marked by the hegemonic claims of a China manifestly intent on becoming the dominant power, but which questions the premise and the stability of an open world marked by the advent of democracy, by freedom of navigation and the free movement of goods over the last seventy-six years. Such is the considerable dilemma that is being outlined at the international level.

Luís Lobo-Fernandes, who also coordinated this issue of R:I, explores the construction of a rational problematic on China’s growing expansion by revisiting the related issues of long cycles, hegemonic transitions and the so-called “Thucydides trap”, among other dimensions of analysis, based on some of the most important theoretical formulations by Thucydides, Kautilya, Organski, Modelski, Gilpin and G. Allison. In the construction of a problematic concerning the rise of China, which serves in some way as the background of this exercise, the author outlines four interconnected vectors of understanding which he designates as the *criterion of the method*: 1) nexus, continuities and transformation; 2) the fundamental nature of the international arena; 3) some effects on the *status quo* ensuing from China’s expansionist ambitions; and, 4) a conclusion that points to the advent of a new era of strategic containment. Among other hypotheses he builds, the author considers that the international subsystem of the Indo-Pacific largely reissues the European balance of power of the 19th and early 20th-centuries in

which the security dilemma is a central factor. In this subsystem, as was the case in that period, which would lead to World War I, ideology plays a totally marginal role in determining the state of relations between the main powers. The probability of open conflicts in that space is not at all an impossibility, fueled by outbreaks of tension and macro-regional factors of great instability. As Metternich always pointed out, in a system of powers, the maintenance of the regional balance of power is the only real guarantee of international peace and security. This element is, moreover, a particularly important quality of the model, which has prevented, inter alia, the imperialization of the international environment. In exploring the dynamics of change, perceptible in the current scenario, Lobo-Fernandes awards special relevance to the question of how this system of hegemonic stability of a liberal nature will evolve, mainly led by the United States and its allies and which has, for all purposes, ensured the freedom of trade and navigation in the oceans since the end of World War II. Based on the comparative analysis of several historical scenarios of hegemonic transition, in which the important study of Graham Allison and the central dilemma of the so-called “Thucydides trap” stand out, the author argues that if China continues to act as a revisionist power with the intention of projecting and expanding its economic and military power in an excessive and threatening manner, already apparent in the attempt to create spheres of influence and in the establishment of military bases and ports scattered around the globe – a course of action that he considers reckless on the part of China – the possibility of a containment war may therefore be on the horizon. The deliberate formulation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) strategy, articulated exclusively around a single center – Beijing – conveys an expansionist logic that the author configures in the framework of his tendentially realist reflection, in terms of neo-imperialism, with typological correspondence in Morgenthau’s well-known taxonomy of the politics of imperialism, as opposed to the politics of the *status quo* or even of prestige. In the case of Portugal, which exhibits one of the highest rates of Chinese penetration in the European Union as a whole (EU), with a special focus on the key sector of energy infrastructure, Lobo-Fernandes considers that this situation seriously affects the strategic autonomy of the country, increasing its potential vulnerability, and that such processes constitute, moreover, a strategic error unparalleled in the past.

The theme proposed by Vasco Rato addresses the first year of Biden’s foreign policy, identifying an ample continuity with the main guidelines of the orientation of the Donald Trump Administration regarding Beijing. Indeed, it was up to the Trump Administration to undo the so-called “China consensus” and break up with the benign expectations underlying the *engagement*. However, the defense of democracy and human rights now emerges as a structuring pillar of the United States’ foreign policy, to the extent that these dimensions are now understood as part of the broader strife between pluralist regimes and authoritarianism, that is, Sino-American rivalry takes on universal contours. Like his predecessor, Biden identifies China, North Korea, Iran and Russia

itself as geostrategic adversaries. And given that the Indo-Pacific has become increasingly the center of global geopolitics, and also today the most dangerous region on the planet, it is in the American interest that the region is free and open, anchored in the respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law. On this specific issue, Taiwan's political integrity and freedom of navigation in the South China Seas are of central importance. However, according to Rato, China now faces the dilemma of not being able to alleviate pressure in the Taiwan Strait under penalty of compromising its credibility; this is a dynamic fraught with dangers, as any miscalculations increase the chances of a serious conflict. Now, Rato argues, China's emergence requires henceforth a global strategic response that involves the reconfiguration of alliances and the securitization of trade and scientific relations. Biden emphasizes, in particular, the reestablishment of partnerships with European allies, who welcome the return of multilateralism without, however, seeming to find so far a coherent strategy that, in any case, excludes confrontation with China and the logic of a new Cold War. Thus, the United States have already moved forward with allies more inclined to consider a containment strategy, which is patent in initiatives such as the Quad or the Aukus. Assuming that the direction of the relationship will not be determined exclusively by the American side, the expectation is that over time Biden's Chinese policy could become, according to Rato, less confrontational or, alternatively, more unilateral.

Maria Raquel Freire reading of the relationship between Russia and China questions whether this bond constitutes a strategic partnership or rather an instance of convenience or even consequence. The evolution of Russia's relations with China has deepened in the present context of somewhat difficult relations in the West; however, the expansion of China's great economic dynamism to other areas also requires caution on the part of Moscow. The narrative of Russian foreign policy is based on the idea of a multipolar world in which the hegemony of the United States is deemed limited, being accompanied by actions aimed at an alternative order while, at the same time, aspiring to an increased recognition in this international cycle. As pointed out by Freire, whose perspective articulates a material and ideational framework in which decisions and actions are pondered, Moscow's orientation has been very consistent in its goal of affirming Russia as a great power, noting that Russian foreign policy has exhibited a pattern at once markedly revisionist and militarized. China has always been on Moscow's agenda and the issue of managing an enlarged space in which the former has taken on an increasing presence, discernible in Central Asia, becomes even more relevant. In China, on the other hand, relations with Russia are defined as adhering to the three no's policy: non-aligned, non-confrontational, not directed against third parties. This reading is relevant to the debate on the issue of a possible Sino-Russian alliance. However, if in many respects these two actors share a convergent international vision, in as many others the differentials are blatant, pointing to existing ambivalences (for example, the Indo-Pacific macro-region is understood differently by Russia and China, which

highlights the distinct geopolitical reading they make of this space). On another level, although China is Russia's largest trading partner, this issue is apparently secondary in Beijing's view to the maturity of the partnership, while in Moscow the issue of the major imbalances between the two countries is also avoided, especially the security dimension of the relationship. However, Freire stresses, Russia's scant level of economic performance is clearly hampering its capabilities, representing, in Beijing's eyes, a possible source of instability insofar as Moscow emphasizes the military and security dimension in the framework of its policy. The so-called 'Asia pivot' project, launched by Moscow, was part of a concern with rebalancing sought by Russia in its affirmation of identity and power, counterbalancing its European dimension. However, the accelerated development of military technological capabilities in China has reduced the possible advantages that Russia might obtain in this scope. Moscow is aware of the imbalance entailed by a bilateral relationship and does not intend to become a minor partner. Lastly, Freire considers that, despite the immediate gains that closer proximity to China could bring, associated costs are also very much a possibility, which remains a considerable dilemma for Russia. The logic of double strategic containment, both in relation to the United States and the West, and with regard to China, is illustrative of Moscow's current concerns and caution, Freire points out.

The contribution of Pedro Farrajota Ramos is a comparative case study covering Chinese investment in Portugal and in Italy and its repercussions on the EU. The author raises the question of the extent to which dependence on Chinese capital and the control of strategic assets affects the whole and the ability to achieve consistent answers from the EU. Indeed, discussions around Chinese investments include the perception of their negative effects on the EU's strategic autonomy, which would eventually lead to initiatives to protect the interests of the Member States. Justifiably, China not being a EU ally, its investments on European soil raise doubts about its real intentions, i.e. whether they are spurred by economic or geopolitical reasons; even private companies themselves have strong links to the government and the Chinese Communist Party, enabling them to obtain financial benefits denied to many Western companies in their home countries. The entry of large amounts of Chinese investment into the EU had a higher impact in the post-economic crisis period of 2011, peaking in 2016. It is note-worthy to mention that Portugal and Italy are the two countries in Southern Europe that have received the largest share of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from China over the last decade. Some publications go so far as to label these two countries as ingenuous friends of China. Farrajota Ramos' study focuses, on the one hand, on the observation of the foreign policy responses of Portugal and Italy and the communication strategies adopted by both countries with respect to the attraction of Chinese investment, and, on the other hand, on the EU'S responses to the dynamics imposed by Chinese investment. It should be noted that Portugal was the first eurozone country to issue public debt in renminbi, in addition to 16 other bilateral agreements signed during Xi Jinping's visit in 2018.

Despite this, Lisbon has tried to lead a more moderate communication strategy when compared to Italy's, stating that China is not an ally of Portugal and stressing that its foreign policy objectives are aligned with the EU and NATO, which shows concern about the potential negative effects of the already sizable scale of Chinese investments in Portuguese territory. Italy has shown greater ambivalence, notably when the EU's mechanism named European Union Foreign Investment Screening Regulation (EUFISR) was created in 2020. The study indicates that Italy's communication strategy has affected, at least to some extent, EU's capacity, weakening its negotiating position with China. Portugal, on the other hand, has preserved a more restrained rhetoric that will not have affected the overall community interest in the same way, apparently managing to balance the investment from China and its own image within the EU.

In turn, Xintong Tian and Carmen Amado Mendes reassess the nature of Chinese foreign aid and the historical tax system from a relational, constructivist perspective, which has been somehow neglected in literature, building an innovative hypothesis founded in the idea that both are, in essence, a special type of public goods. Specifically, they consider that studies on China's foreign aid have not paid due attention to the several centuries over which diplomatic relations in East Asia were regulated by the tax system, adding that this is ascribable, in their view, to substantialist approaches according to which the concepts of foreign aid and tax system are recurrently based. The line of analysis they explore withholds, on the other hand, that these notions rely on voluntary participation and on reciprocity, the result of a relational way of thinking intrinsic to traditional Chinese culture. An approach to this topic from a relational perspective would make it possible – the authors claim – to ascertain the extent to which external aid is based more on reciprocity and on a concern with the strengthening of ties, that is, on a valorization of what they call the relational experiences of nations during transactions, which would hold a higher value than the potential economic benefits. Therefore, the authors propose a shifting of the focus of research from mere fact recording to the analysis of behavioral patterns of donation, as well as of the ideas underlying them. They stress that, in the current international context, in which the United States and China are fiercely competing for strategic power, foreign aid is an indispensable tool that each uses to make allies and secure support, while raising the question – perhaps more intricate – of whether Beijing will use its aid programs to hasten the transition from a *Pax American* to a *Pax Sinica*. At this level, they show how China has increased aid amounts exponentially over the past two decades, becoming one of the major global actors, a trend that has attracted growing attention. The authors point out that, as an emerging donor, Beijing's foreign aid is not as normalized and institutionalized as OECD's so-called Official Development Assistance (ODA), highlighting, moreover, that the Chinese Government has never committed to an official outline of its foreign aid, although some Chinese authors argue that Beijing's foreign aid is largely carried out in a logic of South-South cooperation. Tian and Mendes recognize that their essay may

somewhat betray a measure of skepticism regarding the definition of external aid, which can be explained through the difficulties involved in testing notions such as reciprocity and moral debt; in this regard, they claim that their proposed reading of Chinese foreign aid is not a ‘new measuring ruler’, but rather a lens that may help to differentiate several aspects of this important dimension of international relations without, however, failing to wrap up with the overall strategic importance of foreign aid policies. They conclude by stating that the relational nature of Chinese aid is not a guarantee of immediate benefits for Beijing to the extent that, as they put it – using an image withdrawn from game theory – the establishment of solid relationships is only possible after many rounds.

Lastly, Luís Tomé’s article, which contains a set of six relevant contributions to the Chinese problem, explores central questions about Beijing’s grand strategy which he considers crucial for an understanding of its stance and course of action, namely: what are China’s goals and ambitions, what means, policies and strategies does it employ in order to fulfil its purposes? The author states that none of the theories of International Relations is able, by itself, to encompass the entire international reality, articulating what he calls an eclectic approach in the context of the so-called theories of complexity. In this sense, the line of thought he proposes values the assumption of nonlinearity, that is, that the result of behaviors and interactions is essentially unpredictable, also emphasizing the notions of co-adaptation and co-evolution of the actors and the system. His premises explore several aspects: firstly, the goals of the People’s Republic of China, which are tied up with those of the Chinese Communist Party and which have once more gained huge prominence with the leadership of Xi Jinping; secondly, he surveys China’s comprehensive national power and Beijing’s growing self-confidence; the third aspect of the article addresses Xi’s foreign policy, showing that what he calls “xiplomacy” is actively committed to reshaping the international order, investing in the construction of a Sino-centric world based on *soft power*, relying mainly on a wide range of bilateral, trilateral and multilateral trade mechanisms; in the fourth part, he argues that Xi-led China adopted a blatantly confrontational wolf warrior strategy which spans from economic and diplomatic coercion to threat and use of military force. One of the lines of understanding proposed by Tomé stresses the concentration of power in Xi himself and an ideological orthodoxy unparalleled since Mao, showing impatience with the current *status quo*, while the same time displaying a high and unexpected tolerance to risk, wagering the cult of personality and a notorious urgency in China’s international affirmation. Indeed, as the author maintains, Xi’s China has abandoned the low-profile *stance* inherent in the “24-character strategy” of its predecessors since Deng Xiaoping, to venture into a much more assertive, challenging line that neither shies away from nor conceals an idea of open confrontation, in an attempt to hasten the pursuit of its goals, sanctioning his detractors and trying to conquer spheres of influence. Tomé points out that while Xi’s strategy seems unrelentless,

it faces enormous challenges both internally and externally. The new superpower status can attract a few friends, but it also carries costs and exponentially increases the attention and concern of rivals. Now, his assertiveness and haste are eliciting adverse reactions on a scale that Beijing had not fully anticipated. On this question, despite the deep interdependencies and the many issues involving mutual articulation and compromise, the United States seem ultimately committed to China's policy of neo-containment. Tomé concludes that Xi's grand strategy for China appears to show some rashness if not indeed recklessness, and questions if he may have gone too far – and also too quickly – wondering, finally, whether time and momentum will remain on Beijing's side.

Regardless of the diversity of perspectives and corresponding propositions explored by the authors and researchers in the scientific area of International Relations coming from several Portuguese universities, the core conclusion seems to point to the idea that the current international system has already entered, in one way or another, a new era of strategic containment. Here it is, therefore, available to the specialized public, but also to wider audiences, given the timeliness and relevance of the theme, the current issue of *R:I*, which represents an important contribution by IPRI to the analysis and clarification of what will be, with great probability, as we had the opportunity to point out, one of the main international dilemmas in the course of this century. *R:I*

Luís Lobo-Fernandes Professor (retired) of Political Science and International Relations at the Universidade do Minho, holder of the Jean Monnet International Chair of European Political Integration since 2004. PhD from the University of Cincinnati (1995). Former Fulbright scholar at The Henry M. Jackson School of International

Studies – University of Washington (Seattle), and Calouste Gulbenkian fellow at the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) – Johns Hopkins University.

> Universidade do Minho, Campus de Gualtar, 4710-057 Braga, Portugal | luislobo@eeg.uminho.pt

■ ■ ■ ENDNOTES

¹ A Portuguese version of this paper was first published in *Relações Internacionais*, No. 71, September 2021.