

Converging Interests, Emerging Partnerships:

China's diplomacy in full spring in 2021

In 2013, China assumed the role it formerly disassociated with and adopted the “major power diplomacy” (大国外交, dàguó wàijiāo). In a bold attempt, meant to leave behind Deng's „keep a low profile” (韬光养晦, tāoguāngyǎnghuì) strategy (a concept too complex and nuanced to be properly dealt with here), China took a seat at the Great Powers' table.

2021 might remain as the year when China first acted more than vivid comparing with former more or less positions and stands as a player at the Great Powers' table. During the US-China meeting in Anchorage, Alaska, last month, China decried certain attempts „to obstruct normal trade exchanges, and incite some countries to attack China,, complaining mistreatment and lack of diplomatic protocol. According to the Chinese high-officials present at the meeting, as a „great power”, China deserves another kind of treatment. The move, deemed by the US officials as “exaggerated diplomatic presentations often are aimed at a domestic audience”, reaffirmed the 2013 „major power diplomacy” stance.

Of course, there are no set – or commonly agreed, to say so – characteristics of a „Great Power”. However, Kenneth Waltz, founder of the neorealist school of thought in International Relations, identified a set of five features that could render a „Great Power”: population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, political stability and competence, and status. While the spatial dimensions, as well as the political and economic capabilities of China are an important topic to discuss in a future article, it is – in fact – **the status dimension that makes the difference between a regional power (status frequently and undeniably attributed to China, having in mind her relations and partnerships with most of the Asian countries as well as her presence in the Political, Strategic and Economic Architecture in Asia, the latest is the REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP - RCEP) and a global one.** For George Modelski, a realist often quoted in the academic circles of Beijing, status evolved „from the role played by the great military states in earlier periods... But the Great power system institutionalizes the position of the powerful state in a web of rights and obligations.”

It is exactly an institutionalisation of the position of power that China appears to have energetically accelerated in the aftermath of the Alaska meeting with the US. In other words, former partnerships, relations or gentlemen's agreements have been (or are about to be) institutionalised under the auspices of International Law (or the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, to be precise).

On *March 27*, **China signed a 25-year cooperation agreement with Iran**, purportedly covering cooperation in trade, economy and transportation. While the Atlantic media envisaged the creation of a joint Chinese-Iranian bank following the agreement (*to increase the international usage of the renminbi at the expense of the US dollar*), the content of the agreement has not been made public – which renders a proper assessment a matter of speculation only. The head of Chinese diplomacy commented that *"Our relations with Iran will not be affected by the current situation, but will be permanent and strategic"*. According to the local media, a high official in Tehran appreciated that *„A country's strength is in its ability to join coalitions, not to remain isolated."* The Moscovite media reported the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister having met the Iranian Ambassador to Russia on the same day for a *„thorough exchange of views"*.

In fact, **China's Treaty of Good-neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation with Russia** will soon be updated as well, in order to take *„into account **new realities**, [which] will help achieve new agreements and give a new impetus to the development of bilateral relations"*, according to the Chinese Foreign Minister's declaration following a meeting in Guilin with his Russian counterpart on *March 22*. According to the Chinese high-official, the two parties *„have agreed on the automatic extension of this agreement, and we must constantly give this agreement new content"*. The expected treaty comes as a **renewal of the 2001 China-Russia Treaty on Good-neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation**. After the decades-long Sino-Soviet split, the two countries normalized their bilateral relations in 1991 with the *Sino-Soviet Border Agreement*, which reaffirmed the Russian sovereignty over formerly Chinese Kuril islands and Haishenwai (*now Vladivostok*). Naturally, the *„new realities"* mentioned by the Chinese top-diplomat may refer to China's alternative, shorter – and significantly cheaper – route to Europe, the so-called *„Arctic Route"* of the *Belt and Road Initiative*. For Russia, *„new realities"* may also be considered in reference to the capitalization of their strong Arctic presence, including the ice-breakers as well as defense facilities in the area.

Figuring high on the recent international agenda, **North Korea remains a traditional friend of China**. After signing the **1961 Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty**, in which **China pledged immediate military assistance by all means to its neighbor in the event of outside attack, the two countries decided to renew their respective commitments in 1981 and 2001**. According to the treaty's provisions, the **term for prolongation is set in 2021**. It is perhaps in this key that one shall assess the oral message conveyed by the Chinese head of state to his North Korean counterpart on *March 23*: *"we are willing (...) to maintain, consolidate and develop China-DPRK relations, promote the continuous achievement of new results in the socialist cause of the two countries, and better benefit the two peoples."* The Chinese president noted *„the international and regional situations have undergone profound changes,* perhaps thus signalling the increasingly assertive stance of China as *„great power"*.

In the just started year of 2021 the *„high speed diplomacy"* of China is bringing substantial concrete results in the dialogue with other international actors as well. Reference is made to the meeting between **China's head of diplomacy and his Turkish counterpart**. Following their meeting in Ankara, on *March 25*, the two parties agreed to *„give full play to the role of various cooperation mechanisms between the two countries, strengthen policy*

communication and coordination, and solidly promote cooperation in areas such as the export of high-quality local products to China, **exchange of local currencies, and large-scale projects**, expand cultural exchanges between the two countries, and achieve a higher level of mutual benefit.” Of course, it would not be impossible that „the exchange of local currencies” could be in reference to a prospective joint financial institution, while the „large-scale projects” could signal a prospective Chinese participation in the megalithic – and much disputed – project of the „Canal Istanbul”. The Turkish Foreign Minister declared „committed to further enhancing the strategic partnership between Turkey and China”, signalling that his country „will not take part in any anti-China actions and will not allow violent and terrorist acts against China in Turkey”. In fact, during President Erdogan’s meeting with the Chinese Foreign Minister (on the same day), the two parties made explicit references to the mutual support for the advancement of the „Belt and Road Initiative” (promoted by China) as well as the „Intermediate Corridor” (an adjacent project proposed by Beijing that would link the trans-caspian geographies with Central and Eastern Europe through Turkey). Naturally, a treaty reaffirming – and perhaps consolidating – the relation between the two states on the anniversary of their **50 years of diplomatic relations** shall not to be completely excluded.

Saudi Arabia might similarly be appeased by the Chinese support for its „Vision 2030”, which seeks to consolidate the Kingdom’s regional leadership in the Middle East and its role in the Gulf Cooperation Council, as well as **the Chinese discourse on non-interference in national affairs of sovereign countries** (illustrated by the Chinese Foreign Ministers’ five-point initiative to achieve security and stability in the Middle East). It is not excluded that, at a certain point, Riyadh might want to prevail of all the options on the table in order to leverage a stronger negotiating stance.

Europe, the abutment of the Chinese „Belt and Road Initiative” bridge, certainly generates a real – and pragmatic interest – in Beijing. In this regard, the institutionalisation of power „in a web of rights and obligations” that would encompass European countries should be neither denied nor neglected. The tour of the Chinese State Councilor/ Minister of Defense to **Hungary, Serbia, Greece and North Macedonia** could be interpreted as a confirmation of Beijing’s intentions. In Budapest, the Chinese Minister used his visit to praise Hungary’s vocal opposition to EU sanctions on China (despite Hungary’s affirmative vote in the Council of the European Union). In Belgrade, the Chinese General and Minister paid homage „at the site of the bombed Chinese Embassy in former Yugoslavia” after meeting the Serbian President. The two high dignitaries discussed matters pertaining to deepening bilateral relations, including „military exchanges with the European nations”. After the meeting, the Serbian President remembered how NATO countries “attacked a sovereign country, without an approval of the United Nations,” an event which he condemned as a “horrific act of crime, and an act of aggression.” Suggestively, the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s Spokeswoman found herself compelled to state that „When foreign ministers meeting of NATO members called China a ‘challenge’ a few days ago, we have to remind NATO that it owes a debt of blood to the Chinese people”. The local Chinese media commented that the high official’s tour in Europe „came amid some NATO members moving to deploy or announced plans to deploy warships to the South China Sea with the excuse of the so-called Freedom of Navigation operations.” Of course, such a visit might be expected to pave the way for a future higher-level bilateral meeting – or diplomatic tour – during which significant bilateral agreements might be signed,

thus further institutionalising the bilateral relations between European states and China.

In the meanwhile, the progress of the **EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investments („CAI“)** has come to a halt, in the light of the tit-for-tat sanctions between EU and China. On *March 23*, the **EU Parliament cancelled its review of CAI**, making clear that its ratification will not be possible until the lifting of the Chinese tit-for-tat sanctions. According to MEP Inmaculada Rodríguez-Piñero, responsible for the China Agreement on Investment in the EU Parliament, *“Europe needs to trade with China, but our values and standards go first. China must show signs of a change in the human rights situation and commit to a road map of changes.”* The halt of the CAI talks came immediately after the EU sanctions on four Chinese high-dignitaries, the first such sanctions applied in the past three decades, preceded only by the EU sanctions on China following the Tiananmen events. While EU might have signalled a move closer to the hardline US position, China maintained the irrevocable status of its sanctions, urging EU to *„end the hypocritical practice of double standards and stop going further down the wrong path“*, while leaving open the possibility to *„resolutely make further reactions“*.

In the light of a particularly busy March for the Chinese diplomacy, one may wonder **what generated such a process**. Though difficult to identify a trigger for China's active institutionalization of its *„major power“* status, a look at the Chinese Foreign Minister's statements on *„the quadrilateral mechanism involving the United States, Japan, India and Australia“* may provide a convincing perspective: *“What it pursues is (...) to stir up confrontation among different groups and blocs and to stoke geopolitical competition. What it maintains is the dominance and hegemonic system of the United States. (...) In this sense, this strategy is itself a big underlying security risk. If it is forced forward, it will wind back the clock of history“*.

One could agree that meeting in Anchorage, Alaska was the moment when both China and the USA spoke freely about how they stand or which is the background of further approaching in their bilateral relations. For certain, both global powers will find a way to improve the current situation (no one is expecting a world without differences of opinion or political regimes), which, with the whole honesty, is counterproductive for peace and international stability. It affects as well the international unity, as the world seems to be divided at least in two major sides – with China and with the USA. For sure, the economic factor will be determined both for China- the USA relationship and the choice of the other countries of the world to one or the other side. The best way is to be with both of them. At the end of the day, business means either to win or to lose! The national interest will never disappear from the strategic, political, military or economic strategies!

Dialogue, mutual respect and understanding are key features of International Relations. **Realism, just as the rhetoric behind „great powers“, remains a reference model among the International Relations paradigms.**

C.N.

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy, position or view of IRSEA.