

CHINA-TAIWAN ISSUES IN THE SECURITY CLIMATE OF EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Motto: “When the wind of change blows, some build walls, others build windmills”

ABSTRACT

The security architecture of East and Southeast Asia is in a process of extensive change, driven by the rising Chinese state, but also by the US, which, with its military and institutional power here, is a pillar of stability that seeks to preserve American supremacy and the liberal international system. Current developments show that some of China’s neighbors are no longer inclined simply to fall in line with Beijing’s policy, but rather are determined to challenge its inclination towards regional hegemony, and are arming themselves to do so, diversifying its security relations and forging strong ties with the US, denouncing China’s attempts to create a sino-centric system based on building an ‘Asian’ security and economic architecture, translated into institutional arrangements based on cooperation mechanisms centered on (and for the benefit of) the Chinese state.

KEYWORDS: security architecture, China, security imaginary, grand strategy, Taiwan

1. Introduction

A region can be an object of analysis in itself, as it translates to “*places where consequences and sources of explanations can be identified*” (Buzan, Waever & Wilde, 2010, 24). Even if the regional level is often omitted in security analyses, it must be said that, before any trend manifested at the global level, an intermediate process takes place at the regional level, in the form of institutional concretizations (political or economic), which “*regionalize states and organize the security regime at the zonal level*” (Sava, 2005, 132). Thus, based on the premise that all the states in the system are

interconnected in a “web of security interdependence”, and on the fact that most threats “move” faster over short distances, we can state that the security dilemma is often “associated with proximity” (Buzan, Waever, & Wilde, 2010, 27).

Thus, this study starts from the fact that the regional level of the analysis of security issues is relevant in terms of understanding the trends and developments on the scene of international relations, in the sense that we can say that, in the current international climate, “*security is global, but manifests itself locally, regionally*” (Sava, 2005, 29). I also consider that the

security environment influenced by the current international climate generate tendencies according to which political leaders think globally but act locally (Barbu, 2007, 30), in which sense, the present research aims to outline a clear security picture that, starting from the regional valences that shape the regional security climate, sheds light on the main guidelines that determine the channeling of efforts and decisions of actors in terms of international policy.

2. A Brief Overview of the Security Architecture specific to the East and Southeast Asia Region

Geographically, a region is a large territorial unit marked by homogeneous characteristics. In terms of security studies, the region takes a more complex approach, with Karl Deutsch (1969) and Barry Buzan's studies being representative. According to the political scientist Karl Deutsch, the region is interpreted as the main framework circumscribing a "*set of multiple borders, i.e. borders that affect most contacts*". But, says Deutsch, contacts create a region only if the participation of actors within them creates co-prosperity (Sava, 2005, 144). Barry Buzan takes a slightly different approach. In his work, the region denotes a "*distinct and significant subsystem of security relations,*" formed by a group of states that "*were fated to be in geographic proximity to each other*" (Buzan, 2017, 232).

No less important is the contribution of the American political scientist Joseph Nye, who speaks of international regions as areas delimited by a series of states, characterized by a certain level of interdependence, which determine the formation of alliances and groups, starting from a certain relevant geographical aspect, such as a continent, an ocean, a gulf (Dungaciu, 2017, 292).

Does the East and Southeast Asia region represent a region in terms of

security studies? Can we categorize the region as an international region or a security complex? These are legitimate questions that need to be answered in order to understand the security architecture that shapes this geographical area.

To be most effective, the answer to these questions is *yes*. East and South-East Asia is both an international region and – in Barry Buzan's terms – a security complex, given the interdependence of rivalries and shared interests. Categorizing the region in this way also follows from the simple fact of the widespread recognition of the existence of a security architecture in this area. A security architecture is the "*institutional skeleton that states use to maintain regional order*" (Ford, 2020, 2). Thus, like the security complex, security architecture suggests the existence of a greater or lesser level of threat/fear felt mutually by a group of states, which points to the need for institutional policing practices.

In order to better understand the China-Taiwan issue in the security climate of East and Southeast Asia, it is first necessary to understand the security architecture present in this area. Therefore, this sub-chapter aims to provide an overview of how the security architecture of the two geographic spaces is constructed, as well as its key features and interactions.

2.1. Southeast Asia's Security Architecture

The specific security architecture of Southeast Asia is manifest in the demographic ring of the globe: here in Southeast Asia, with its 600 million inhabitants, China with 1.4 billion joins the Indian subcontinent, whose population mass exceeds 1.5 billion. The geographical meeting point of all these countries is the South China Sea, a veritable web of economic connections where most of the global maritime routes meet. Often referred to as the 'heart of Eurasia's navigable coastline' (marked by some extremely important geostrategic points: the Straits of

Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar), the region accounts for more than half the tonnage of the global merchant fleet and a third of the entire world's maritime traffic. Last but not least, in addition to its geostrategic location, the area has oil reserves of around seven billion barrels and estimated natural gas reserves of over 25 billion cubic meters (Kaplan, 2020/b, 34-35).

New strategic dynamics, triggered by the rapid rise of China and the apparent passing of the US "unipolar moment", have marked structural changes in the regional security architecture and prompted countries in the region (both in Southeast Asia and East Asia) to diversify their security options by strengthening bi-/multilateral relations with various extra-regional poles. China's rise, including its military buildup and increasing assertiveness over its maritime territorial claims, has imposed suspicion on littoral states as well as major powers interested in freedom of transit through the area and international waters (Pejsova, 2014, 1).

Within the confines of this space, *regionalism* manages to manifest itself as a power, united in the form of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) grouping. ASEAN has been recognized from the outset as one of the most successful regional organizations in the world. Established in 1967 in a region described as the 'Balkans of the East', ASEAN has been seen as a positive force for peaceful change, not least through its leading role in building a network of multilateral institutions bringing together a range of states in the wider Asia-Pacific region. These institutions include the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), the East Asia Summit (EAS), as well as the ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meetings (ADMM) and ADMM Plus to address regional economic and security challenges (Caballero-Anthony, 2022, 1-2). ASEAN's centrality in the discussion of Southeast

Asia's security architecture stems, on the one hand, from its being at the "*center of regional political deliberations and security arrangements*" and, on the other, in terms of building multilateral institutions and promoting a vision of "*open*" and *inclusive regionalism*. Thus, according to the literature, ASEAN's centrality in the regional security architecture can take 5 main forms: (1) *regional leadership* – ASEAN has assumed the role of leading regional inter-state relations towards greater institutionalization and diplomatic cohesion; (2) *regional convener/facilitator* – in the sense that ASEAN brings small, medium and large states to the table, opening dialogue on various issues of concern; (3) *regional hub* – ASEAN is the main node in the regional architecture of Asia; (4) *regional engine of progress* – in the sense that ASEAN provides an impetus for the implementation of stated goals and commitments; and (5) *regional convener* – ASEAN providing the most accessible and acceptable platform for institutionalizing multilateral cooperation in Asia (Caballero-Anthony, 2022, 8). The ASEAN path involves building trust, promoting peace, and institutionalizing regional cooperation by internalizing norms such as peaceful settlement of disputes, respect for non-interference in internal affairs, and sovereignty. ASEAN's contribution to the regional order in Southeast Asia and beyond includes internalization of norms, international socialization, and identity building (Caballero-Anthony, 2022, 7).

The South China Sea reflects a '*natural state*' in the sense that legal claims are in contradiction with each other and there are enough points of tension to affect the cooperation process. Power calculations, particularly related to warship movements, provide a general but representative picture of how many of the states in this region interact. This does not mean that the region is doomed to a future war. The US and ASEAN will not be the

only impediments to China's military assertiveness, or to conflict between small and medium-sized states but will be joined by "*a whole web of emerging bilateral relations between Asian countries with each other along Asia's navigable coastline from the Western Pacific to the Indian Ocean*" (Kaplan, 2020/b, 305-317). In the South China Sea, the Chinese claim about 90% of its waters, with associated islands, according to the so-called "*Nine-dash line*" – the demarcation line used by the PRC to argue its claims to the South China Sea. In other words, the Chinese leaders – in their quest to gain access to the bulk of fish, energy, and mineral resources, as well as multiple strategic outposts – disregard the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas and Oceans (UNCLOS) but rely on historical traditions and maps from antiquity and the Middle Ages. Moreover, even as the disagreements are ongoing, China is building small islands (which it is also militarizing), cementing natural atolls, then claiming the continental shelf and territorial sea associated with the 'new islands'. This means of action, besides destroying the ocean's ecological environment, restricts and threatens freedom of navigation on the international sea. The main differences arise over: (1) the Pratas Islands (China vs. Taiwan); (2) the Paracel Islands (China vs. Taiwan vs. Vietnam); (3) the Zhongshan Islands with Macclesfield Bank and Scarborough Bank (China vs. Philippines vs. Taiwan) and (4) the Spratly Islands (China vs. Taiwan. Vs. Malaysia vs. Philippines vs. Vietnam) (Cioculescu, 2018, 30-31).

In this context, the current security environment has been strongly influenced by new security architectures, in particular *AUKUS* and *QUAD*, which express new dynamics and at the same time herald future emerging actors that will play an increasing role in shaping and establishing security in the region.

AUKUS, a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the UK, and

the US, aims to provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines, with the undeclared objective of countering Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific region. It is, most analysts say, a means of showing China that the three countries are willing to "*draw a line in the sand to initiate and counter the PRC's aggressive moves in the Indo-Pacific*" (Explainers, 2023).

The Quadrilateral/Quad, officially the *Quadrilateral Security Dialogue*, is a grouping of four countries: the US, Australia, India and Japan, whose cooperation began in 2004 after the Indian Ocean tsunami. Since 2021, leaders from the four countries have become increasingly cohesive in their shared concerns about the Chinese factor – namely China's increasingly assertive behavior in the region (Smith, 2021). The quadrilateral focuses on security cooperation, with an emphasis on coordinating the four countries' military operations and strategic policies. Recently, the Quad has expanded its remit, setting up work programs on the environment, public health, and high technology. The Quad's stated aim is to be a propagator of a liberal, open, rules-based order, rooted in international law and unintimidated by coercion, "*to strengthen security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and beyond*" (Bisley, 2022, 4-5).

Last but not least, another actor increasingly involved in shaping the security architecture of East and Southeast Asia is *India*. Against the backdrop of the 2020 military confrontation between India and China in the Himalayas, the first deadly one in 45 years, the New Delhi authorities' perspective on how to manage and respond to China's rapid rise has changed. New Delhi fears most Beijing's so-called '*string of pearls*' – a reference to the strategic ring China has created through cooperation with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Burma – consisting of naval bases in the Indian Ocean (Gwadar, near the Strait of Hormuz; Hambantota, the southern tip of Sri Lanka; Djibouti, at the

junction of the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea) (Cioculescu, 2018, 231). Against the backdrop of these developments and taking advantage of the strong traditions of non-alignment of East and Southeast Asian countries – which cause many countries to continue to pursue a strategy of diversified security linkages – India has become an increasingly engaged and accepted member of leadership mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS). As India's economic and strategic weight continues to grow, we expect its willingness and potential ability to contribute to the design of East and Southeast Asia's security architecture to increase (Huiskens, 2009, 13-15).

2.2. East Asia's Security Architecture

Since the mid-20th century, US alliances with Japan and South Korea have served as the main pillars of East Asia's security architecture, and North Korean instability has been the main focal point of regional threat perceptions. However, recent developments, notably the rise of China, are changing the regional security environment, prompting discussions between the US, Japan, and South Korea on how the new and changing security architecture should be managed. China's three main security interests in East Asia are: (1) ensuring stability on the Korean Peninsula; (2) securing Chinese maritime claims in the East China Sea; and (3) resolving the Taiwan issue (USCC, 2014, 417-418).

In terms of ensuring stability on the Korean Peninsula, the issue is of great interest to the Chinese state because, as Robert Kaplan says, the peninsula is a kind of "appendage" of Manchuria, which, by its position, "shields the north-eastern trade routes". Moreover, if an adversary had troops all over Korea it would be on the Chinese border, with no geostrategic buffer of any kind to provide a defensive advantage or delay possible military aggression (Cioculescu, 2018, 258-259).

China's second major interest is, as mentioned earlier, to secure maritime claims in the East China Sea. Relevant here is the fact that China's approach, given its disagreements with Japan and South Korea, is *preferential*. So, while China fiercely disputes ownership of the Senkaku Islands with Japan, it tends to play down the dispute with South Korea over Socotra / Suyan Jiao/Ieodo Rock. The dispute over the Senkaku Islands intensified with their "ransom" in 2012 from a private holder in the name of Japan's national interest and was reflected in the increased air and sea presence of both China and Japan. This frozen conflict has at least two motivations: (1) the small group of islands has an important geostrategic position within an important maritime route (commercial and military) linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans through the Strait of Malacca to the Asia-Pacific area, and (2) there are allegedly large mineral resources in the area, including oil deposits (Neguț, 2015, 429). On the other hand, Socotra Rock, on which South Korea built an ocean research station in 2003, is only a minor point of contention between China and South Korea, as it lies within the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) claimed by both countries. So, because the states only enjoy economic rights, not full sovereignty, Socotra is not technically a territorial dispute issue (USCC, 2014, 418-419).

As for the third objective, namely resolving the Taiwan issue, it has grown in strategic importance for China, the US and Japan, and not just because of the democracy present here or because of its geostrategic relevance internationally. Taiwan's increased relevance is also underpinned by the tense relations between the two hegemonies in the area, the US and China, with the island *de facto* at the forefront of strategic developments in East Asia. If Taiwan were to be abandoned, the entire US strategic and political framework in Asia would become defunct and its relations would have to be

redefined, bringing into play other unintended, unpredictable, and non-linear consequences. Such a loss would accelerate regional instability and animosity and create a much greater likelihood of a truly adversarial relationship between China and the US (Rahman, 2001, 86-97).

Unlike the security architecture of Southeast Asia, which is strongly shaped by the geographically, culturally, and politically diverse nature of the region, the security architecture of East Asia is relatively simple, dictated mainly by the balance between the different sets of perceptions and security priorities of Tokyo, Seoul, and Beijing. The divisions in the region concern issues of historical interpretation, which have aggravated both China-Japan and South Korea-Japan relations. In this sense, East Asian security is strongly shaped by the persistence of fractures at the political level (stemming mainly from Chinese and South Korean perceptions of Japan's lack of remorse over its imperialist past), which will create serious impediments for the US factor in its attempt to bring together two of its most important allies in terms of the East Asian security climate (USCC, 2014, 418). Building on this, China has decided in recent decades that it is time to take advantage of these peculiarities of the region – far inferior in terms of institutional connections to Southeast Asia – and issue increasing demands on elements that Beijing sees as relevant to its goals. Of course, China's continued claims have not gone unnoticed by Tokyo and Seoul, which have begun to reinterpret their security calculations, obviously choosing separate paths, or at least not ones that are thought out on the premise of mutual benefit to both countries.

The case of Japan, whose recent evolution in security calculations runs (to a greater or lesser extent) counter to the last eight decades of history, points to the tendency of the authorities in Tokyo to assert and protect their national interests more vigorously and to participate more in

international security affairs as part of a policy of “proactive contribution to peace”. To this end, Tokyo is pursuing the following measures: (1) reforming the legal and policy framework to facilitate US-Japan cooperative initiatives in the areas of security, defense and more flexible use of national armed forces; (2) building a “stronger alliance and greater responsibility” with the United States; (3) developing an architecture based on networks of regional partners in various fields, in particular with Southeast Asian states, but also with extra-regional actors such as India; and (4) strengthening the capabilities of the Self-Defense Forces/SDF, against the background of recent proposals and legislative changes aimed at modifying restrictive legislative aspects of this issue (USCC, 2014, 421-422).

South Korea's concerns about the security agenda differ quite a bit from Japan's. Despite being located in the same geographic space, and the regional security architecture being one with the same particularities, issues, and developments, at the heart of the South Korean security agenda is the North Korean issue, not the rise and increasingly irredentist attitude of China. It is precisely these differing perspectives and interests – coupled with deteriorating political relations between East Asian powers – that are the main impediment to a common approach to the cohesive management of security issues in the region, and also limit the US interest in building a genuine network of partners in this part of Asia. In the case of South Korea, while its relations with Japan are fluctuating, Seoul is strengthening its alliance with the US, while also strengthening its relationship with China. Thus, South Korea is pursuing a hedging strategy between the US and China, with its main interests being (1) to maintain its alliance with the US while retaining a degree of strategic autonomy; (2) to take advantage of its strong and mutually beneficial economic ties with China while protecting itself against China's growing military influence in the region; and (3) to keep its distance from Japan

which, according to some analysts, assures China that Seoul is not participating in a balancing/counterbalancing effort against China (USCC, 2014, 424-425).

3. Geography of Chinese Power

By “*geography of Chinese power*” I intend to: (1) capture, as a whole, the picture of Chinese forces exerted on the East and Southeast Asian stage; (2) identify the deeper goals animating the actions of this hegemon (*grand strategy*) and, last but not least, (3) identify the philosophies/ideologies, or explicit or implicit perceptions to which individual actors (in our case Xi Jinping) subscribe in the use of geostrategies designed in accordance with the deeper goals animating China’s actions regionally and globally (Chițu, 2021, 31-32). Therefore, the present section aims to identify the main variables influencing China’s increasingly aggressive behavior regionally and globally. In this sense, we try to X-ray the “grand Chinese strategy” until 2049 (the year in which the PRC will celebrate its centenary), identifying its main constituent elements. Last but not least – given the extremely high influence that Xi Jinping, the CCP president, has at home – we aim to identify the main elements subsumed in the *security imaginary* of the Chinese elite, as well as the *strategic narratives* present in the Chinese official’s speeches. The latter (the security imaginary and the strategic narratives subsumed to the concept of *statecraft*), are of high relevance in terms of understanding Chinese foreign policy, given the impact that their enunciation in different moments has led to the adaptation and readaptation of Chinese grand strategy.

3.1. China’s Grand Strategy

According to Peter Layton, grand strategy can be understood as “*the art of developing and applying various forms of power in an effective and efficient manner to attempt to intentionally change the*

existing relationship between two or more intelligent and adaptive entities” (Tomé, 2021, 106). From a more general perspective, grand strategy can be seen as the “*main means of a state’s response to its own security dilemma, in the sense that it represents a symbolic resource whose main purpose is to increase the acceptability and internal cohesion of the state*”. The component elements of a grand strategy involve: (1) *premises* – extremely important because they not only require an understanding of the context in which the grand strategy is applied, but also indicate the long-term effects produced by the grand strategy; (2) *political objectives* – these are those set by the political level, i.e. the governmental elite who set the main guidelines; (3) *military instruments* – i.e. the tactical means that can be used to achieve the political objectives; and (4) *strategic modalities* – the patterns of action through which the political objectives can be achieved (Dungaciu, 2019, 409-412).

As for the premises of China’s grand strategy, they must be understood from two central ideas: (1) that of “*comprehensive national power*”, which guides the development of the CCP’s infrastructural power in all areas in an articulated manner and also allows for the assessment of China’s evolution and comparison with other systemic powers; (2) that of “*strategic configuration of power*”, which underpins China’s vision of “*propensity of things*” according to which the Beijing leadership sees the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century as a *real period of opportunity*. In this sense, China does not need to impose its emergence by force, but only to take advantage of the “propensity of things” and the opportunities arising from it, in order to naturally and gradually increase its extensive national power (Tomé, 2021, 108).

Moving on to the policy goals, we see that they represent a fairly extensive list of achievements that Beijing is aiming for in

the short and medium term. On the one hand, the foreign geopolitical agenda involves “*expanding Beijing’s influence in the region and the world, boosting China’s regulatory role as a producer of alternative norms and principles, cultivating a model of modernization for developing countries, dividing the West and, not least, discouraging the foundation of an anti-China coalition*” (Tomé, 2021, 125). On the other hand, as far as the domestic agenda is concerned, the ultimate goal of Beijing’s grand strategy is to achieve “*national rejuvenation and thus achieve the China Dream*”. To achieve this dream, Xi Jinping outlined – in his speech at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017 – a two-stage development plan: (1) *now – 2035*, when the Chinese state will become a global leader in innovation, exponentially strengthening its “soft” power and establishing the “rule of law” domestically; (2) *2035-2050*, when China will become “*prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful*” (Rand, 2020, 18-19).

With regard to the tactical means by which China can achieve the above objectives, it should be recalled that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is the world’s largest army, with over two million troops, is directly led by top CCP representatives through the Central Military Commission, and has a dual role: (1) to defend the population from attack from outside, and (2) to prevent and maintain a stable internal climate, to suppress any opposition, rebellion, insurrection that might lead to the overthrow of the communist regime. We will not dwell here on all the objectives or technical capabilities at the PLA’s disposal, but one aspect needs to be mentioned. Namely that *in China there is an “obsession with national humility”*, reflected in museums, books, songs, parks and even in the existence of an “Atlas of the Century of National Humility in Modern China”

(Cioculescu, 2018, 58/65). Why is this relevant? Because it represents one of the strategic narratives often invoked by Xi Jinping, who has repeatedly stated that “*Beijing will no longer allow anyone to behave towards China and the Chinese people comparable to that period*”. Such narratives have a powerful impact domestically, coalescing the Chinese nation’s full array of power elements, both military and non-military, to satisfy the nation’s deepest interests in the short, medium, or long term.

Turning further to the driving patterns through which policy objectives can be achieved, these should be understood in two ways: (1) driving patterns used to achieve *maritime objectives* and (2) driving patterns used to achieve *land-based objectives*. Both are subsumed under the attainment of the policy objectives mentioned above.

As far as Chinese action models are concerned, related to the maritime space, they are conducted according to three geostrategic perimeters: (1) blue water; (2) green water and (3) brown water (Panu, 2018, 73). According to these perimeters, the strategic modalities chosen by China are classified into *four stages*. The first stage began in the early 1980s, with Admiral Liu Huaqing as the main architect. This stage was crucial for the Chinese Navy, which gradually shifted from exclusively coastal defense to offshore defense. The follow-up to Admiral Liu Huaqing’s strategic vision was to develop a strategy stretching to the year 2050, when China will become “*a great maritime power that can project its power across the entire Planetary Ocean, and in the Pacific and Indian Ocean, replace the US*”. The second phase began in the 2000s and called for the extension of Chinese maritime power into the brown-water zone, or, according to Chinese thinking, as far as the “*first chain of islands*”. The third phase has been underway since 2020 and has a time horizon of 2040, with the main aim of

expanding the operational area of the Chinese Navy to 600 nautical miles. Importantly, control of strategic points such as the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea will extend the operational area to 1800 nautical miles. Essentially, the aim is to achieve the “*second island chain*” and match US military strength in the area. The final phase, characteristic of the 2040-2050 timeframe, will involve strengthening the presence of Chinese naval forces across the entire expanse of the planetary ocean, and expanding maritime power projection capabilities through long-range ballistic and cruise missile submarines (Simileanu, 2010, 325-327).

As for the strategic models used by the Chinese to achieve their land policy objectives, they are multiple and subsumed under an overall goal – the formation of a “*Sinocentric*” system. The formation of this Sinocentric system implies the creation of a true Chinese structural power. Thus, through a series of IGOs (BRICS, New Development Bank, China-Africa Summit, China-Africa Cooperation Summit, China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States Forum, China +17, etc.), China is ensuring its role as a node in the various global networks. The most emblematic of these mechanisms is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) / One Belt One Road (OBOR) – a project conceived by Xi Jinping in 2013. It is a “*pragmatic model of ‘xiplomacy’, along the lines of ‘go out - bring in’ and ‘go global’, representing a powerful tool for strengthening Beijing’s cooperation with countries and regional groups*” - from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), to the European Union, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) or the African Union (AU) – multiplying, moreover, platforms such as the Digital/Green/Green/Polar/Health Silk Road (Tomé, 2021, 117).

3.2. Chinese Statecraft

In the previous section, we have presented, in essence, the structure and implementation of China’s grand strategy. However, there remains one essential aspect for understanding the geography of Chinese power, namely *the impetus/spring behind the Chinese grand strategy*, because *the grand strategy does not emerge in a vacuum of identity*. Therefore, this section attempts to capture, in brief, the statecraft of the Beijing administration.

When we talk about statecraft, we mean people, i.e., dignitaries, public institutions, and infrastructural capacity, plus the public culture and symbolic strength of a power center. Statecraft is not about institutions, “*but about people and the vision they disseminate and internalize within public institutions, thus providing the impetus behind grand strategy*” – by conferring some form of exceptionalism translated into institutional dominance in various forms, such as ideological, economic, or political (Dungaciu, 2019, 562-564). Subsumed to the process of statecraft are the two concepts – *security imaginary* and *strategic narratives* – that interweave the picture of the belief system of the political and strategic elite of a state. While *the security imaginary* refers to the external dimension of national identity (essentially arguing that national interests are nothing more than social constructs, permissible representations, and products of a state’s security imaginary) (Dungaciu, 2017, 500-503), *strategic narratives* are the main means by which, a security policy becomes legitimate both domestically and internationally. They (strategic narratives) have an “*identity propulsion, which activates specific discursive sedimentations or residues in a security culture*” by accessing certain “*stocks of collective emotion and information*,” which provides consensus and legitimizes a particular security policy. In other words, strategic narratives are normative political acts that

define who our enemies are, how they threaten us, how we should behave in order to defend ourselves against them and how we should interact with them (Dumitrescu, 2020, 9/16).

From a certain point of view, we can say that Xi Jinping was the right man at the right time, in the sense that his figure is opportune to rethink China's approach to foreign realities, in correlation with the state's new capabilities. However, few people talk about his development which has strongly influenced the way he thinks and implements policies. Xi grew up enjoying the privileges of a "prince of the Communist Party," thanks to his father, who was one of the pioneers of the communist revolution. However, he, like his father, suffered the hardships imposed by the Cultural Revolution – exile from Beijing, a long break from school, work in the countryside. He emerged – on the basis of his privileges and sufferings – with a firm belief in the need for a strong Chinese Communist Party to govern China; an aversion to chaos and instability; a commitment to China's economic growth in correlation with the importance attached to the role of markets; and, last but not least, a demand for respect for China internationally (Barder, 2016, 8). China's dominant concepts in the period 1949-1978 and 1978-2012, respectively, were not pure intellectual creations of disinterested scholars, but reflected both the ideology and the main strategic interests of the Chinese leadership, which was not only revolutionary but also comparatively weaker internationally. Thus, the China that Xi Jinping inherited was totally different from the China of his predecessors, which allowed the dignitary to implement a series of massive changes to China's place on the international stage, as well as to issue demands that the international system should be made to accommodate this rising China (Barder, 2016, 5).

In terms of the security imaginary of Beijing's political elite – regarding the developments that need to take place in the security architecture of East and Southeast Asia – it presents several notable insights: (1) *there is a need for a more "Asian" architecture, i.e. a China-centric alliance system* – one of the ways Beijing is doing this is by creating alternative, "Asian" institutions in which the US plays as small a role as possible, such as: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), as well as certain dialogue mechanisms within ASEAN – ASEAN +3 (ASEAN, China, Japan, South Korea) and ASEAN – China (10+1); (2) *the need for a "non-alliance" architecture* – closely linked to Beijing's desire to limit US influence and based on what Xi Jinping has called a new "Asian security partnership agenda", through which China has revived its strategy of diplomacy on the periphery, working to build a network of partnerships especially in the Southeast and Central Asian region; (3) *the need for a more integrated economic and security architecture* – in particular linking Asian security to the BRI; (4) *a less liberal architecture that is more accommodating to CCP ideology*, discrediting what Beijing sees as an attempt by the West to inculcate liberal values into the regional security architecture by establishing channels of dialogue and partnerships between different states. This perspective is based on the strategic narrative that there is a need for greater "*democracy in international relations*", i.e., a system that accommodates alternative political systems and their policies. Beijing uses this narrative to legitimize its suite of international forums set up for this purpose, which provide Beijing with an uncontested operational platform to "*advance its positions to a friendly international audience*" (Ford, 2020, 4-12).

When we talk about President Xi Jinping's strategic narratives, we are referring to a series of identity-driven concepts, the purpose of which is to access certain emotional and perceptual sedimentations necessary to legitimize a security policy, both at the level of civil society and the international community. There are five main strategic narratives (identified) promoted by President Xi Jinping – which present the Beijing leadership's vision of China's relations with other actors in the system.

The first narrative is the promotion of the concept of the “*Chinese dream*” – which, according to some analysts, “*reflects both the ambition of regional hegemony and the cult of national values, a mixture of ancient (Confucian – Taoist) and current communist nationalism*”. Thus, the Chinese dream can be understood as a promise of greater prosperity for the benefit of the citizen, as well as a strategy for consolidating the structural power of the state in all relevant areas and even recovering lost territories or punishing former adversaries (Cioculescu, 2018, 342/356). Therefore, starting from the Chinese dream, the main objective of the CCP, in Xi Jinping's words, is “*building a socialism superior to capitalism and laying the foundations for a future in which we will gain the initiative and have the dominant position*” (Tomé, 2021, 109-110).

The second strategic narrative strongly promoted by Beijing is the *entry of Chinese socialism into a “new era”*. In his speech at the 19th CCP Congress in 2017, Xi Jinping said that amid China's leadership in various key areas, Chinese socialism has entered a new era, which, according to the dignitary, denotes the vitality of the Chinese system in the 21st century. So, the significance of Xi's “new era” is that China is on the verge of achieving the “Chinese dream”. Subsuming the “new era” narrative, Xi's China has developed a strategy in two symbolically

representative milestones to celebrate the centenary: (1) building a moderately prosperous society in all respects by 2021 and (2) building a “*modern, prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious*” socialist country by 2049 (Tomé, 2021, 109-110).

As part of the narrative of the new era and the Chinese dream, Beijing is promoting the third strategic narrative identified, namely that of *establishing a relational identity with other actors in the system as part of a “community of common destiny” (CDC)*. The CDC was first introduced during President Xi's speech to the Indonesian Parliament in October 2013, since when the CDC has become part of Beijing's neighborhood diplomacy, characterized by increasing activism towards neighboring countries. At a conference the following year, Xi said he aimed to “*transform China's neighborhood into a community of common destiny*”. So, with this narrative, Xi is legitimizing his policy of building a Sino-centric regional system in which China can coordinate the behavior of its neighbors. Also, an interesting point here is that the CDC narrative is used by China in particular to speak on behalf of developing countries in Asia or Africa, promoting the image of the Western-led liberal international order as “*unequal, unfair and unreasonable*” for these countries (Jaknanihan, 2022). Essentially, China's proposal to found a community with a common destiny aims to “*solve the practical problems facing the world today and achieve the peaceful and sustainable development of humanity*”. The proposal also pursues the goal of universal harmony and the strongly invoked principles of cooperation and win-win strategies, opposing power politics and hegemonism (Tomé, 2021, 113-114).

In order to achieve the objectives of the concept of “*community with a common destiny*”, Xi Jinping has promoted “*a new model of major-power relations*”, i.e. the

management of diplomatic and political relations with states such as the US and Russia, which must be guided by the adoption of new relational principles between two superpowers. The phrase is first mentioned by Xi Jinping in his 15 February 2012 speech in Washington D.C. (he was then vice-president). Expressing his view, Xi said that such relations should be characterized by “*mutual understanding and strategic trust*”, “*respect for each other’s fundamental interests*” and “*strengthening cooperation and coordination in international affairs and global issues*” (Lampton, 2013).

The last strategic narrative identified refers to Xi’s strategy of *reconstructing a Sino-centric Asian order* – the geostrategic region of utmost importance for Chinese foreign policy – towards which Xi Jinping declares (in the view of some analysts) a kind of “Monroe doctrine with Chinese characteristics” and also a kind of co-prosperity sphere with Chinese characteristics. This is the line taken by various slogans promoted by Chinese diplomacy in recent years, such as: the new concept of Asian security; Asia for Asians; the Asian dream or the Asian community of common destiny. Emblematic of this narrative is President Xi Jinping’s speech at the Shanghai Expo Center on 21 May 2014, where he stated that:

“*Ultimately, let the people of Asia manage Asia’s affairs, solve Asia’s problems and support Asia’s security [...] Outside countries, in turn, should respect the diversity of our region and do their part to facilitate its development and stability*” (Tomé, 2021, 114).

Thus, President Xi Jinping’s presentation of national interests and the way the Chinese state interacts with other actors in the system is used by the dignitary to demonstrate that the Chinese state continues to affirm a foreign policy based on the traditional Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (respect for the

territorial integrity and sovereignty of states; non-aggression; non-interference in internal affairs; equality and cooperation to achieve win-win situations; and peaceful coexistence), which is invariably reiterated in major official documents and speeches (Tomé, 2021, 113).

4. Taiwan’s Importance in the Security Architecture of East and Southeast Asia and its Relationship with the Chinese State

Taiwan’s importance within the security architecture of East and Southeast Asia stems from three considerations: (1) the island’s geostrategic position; (2) its geo-economic relevance regionally and especially internationally; and (3) its symbolic significance for both the American and Chinese factors.

Geostrategically, Taiwan lies at the geographic center of the *first island chain*, between two US allies, Japan, and the Philippines (Barranco, 2022, 40). With such a position, US General Douglas MacArthur once stated that Taiwan is “*an unsinkable aircraft carrier that dominates the very center of China’s convex maritime zone, from which a power like the US can radiate force along the entire Chinese coastline*” (Kaplan, 2020/a, 389). If, hypothetically speaking, Taiwan was to return to the motherland – by any means – this would open up China’s main route to the Pacific. In addition to the opportunities of opening new trade routes, control of Taiwan would offer China a host of strategic advantages. China could place long-range missiles in Taiwan, giving it the opportunity to strike Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands. Last but not least, owning Taiwan would give the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) the ability to threaten Hawaii and even operate behind US lines, providing a defensive or offensive position within the second island chain.

Another of the island’s strengths is its geo-economic importance regionally and, in

some respects, internationally. Despite an extremely small population compared to its neighbors of around 24 million, Taiwan ranked 21st in the world's top economies in 2022 and is also the sixth largest economy in Asia (after China, Japan, India, South Korea, and Indonesia) and the fourth richest country in Asia after Singapore, Japan, and South Korea. One area in which Taiwan excels is microelectronics, holding a key position in the production and global supply chains of semiconductors – the basic material and technological engine of the digital age. In 2020: Taiwanese companies accounted for 20% of global sales in chip design; 77.3% in chip manufacturing and 57.7% in chip packaging and testing. These figures are achieved by a handful of Taiwanese companies that are among the world's market leaders: MediaTek in chip design, TSMC and United Microelectronics Corporation (UMC) in chip manufacturing, Globalwafers in wafer manufacturing and Advanced Semiconductor Engineering (ASE) in chip packaging and testing. In 2020, TSMC alone had 55% of the global chip manufacturing market, making it the 11th largest company in the world by market capitalization. The indispensability of next-generation semiconductors for various purposes, such as AI, high-speed computing power, cloud servers, 5G communication systems, autonomous driving or building military drones, gives TSMC's corporate policy a "geopolitical dimension". Given its geo-economic relevance, translated through the quasi-monopoly of some of Taiwan's high-end semiconductor manufacturing facilities, it is not only of strategic importance for global industrial value chains, but also for foreign and security policy, as *Taiwan's trade policy has an important political component* beyond economic reasons. Every trade policy agreement with various third countries and every Taiwanese membership in multilateral organizations "symbolizes the sovereignty of the state and

therefore has a foreign policy value in itself" (Hanns Günther Hilpert, 2022, 17-23).

Finally, Taiwan is also relevant because of what it symbolizes. First, Taiwan has special symbolism for China for two main reasons: (1) as a free, prosperous democracy that "is Chinese", Taiwan is seen by the CCP as directly confronting the legitimacy of PRC authoritarianism, threatening one of the strategic narratives that "*China can only prosper under totalitarianism*" (Barranco, 2022, 40-41); (2) The CCP claims, as a central element of its claim to legitimacy, that it is righting the wrongs of the past – specifically those related to the "Century of Humility". This narrative resumes with the rise of the CCP, its victory in the Chinese civil war and the halting of China's decline. Thus, in a speech commemorating the founding of the CCP, Xi Jinping recalled the "Century of Humility" before declaring that "*the Chinese party and the Chinese people have shown the world that the Chinese people have risen up and that the time when the Chinese nation could be bullied and abused by others is gone forever*" (Cheng, 2022, 3-4). One important element remains here. For the strategic imaginary of the Beijing elite, *Taiwan is seen as the last unresolved element of the Chinese Civil War*, hence the statements of some senior officials that resolving the Taiwan issue is a historical mission of the CCP. Thus, for the CCP, the symbolism of Taiwan is a powerful symbol of the Party's legitimacy. For the CCP, *a China that does not include Taiwan is a China that is not whole*. Secondly, Taiwan has symbolic relevance for the US as well. Like the Chinese, if the US were to allow a democratic nation of 24 million people to be crushed, or, were to lose it in a military confrontation in which it became actively involved, Washington would lose credibility in the eyes of the nations with which it should normally ally itself to

counter or at least limit China and its hegemonic tendencies. If Taiwan is lost, the U.S. would lose in the eyes of the world its moral authority to lead the liberal world order, and Washington's entire political and strategic framework in Asia would become defunct, influencing the security environment in unknown ways and with unintended consequences (Barranco, 2022, 41). Thus, we can outline the hypothesis that a delegitimization of the US would give China the historic opportunity to gain hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region – the most populous and, in the near future, the most powerful economic region of the globe – which will give the country leading the region the possibility to decide on the future configuration of the international system.

On the basis of the aforementioned aspects, we consider, without claiming to be exhaustive, that there are *three particular developments that have made stability in the Taiwan Strait, i.e., relations between China and Taiwan, much more fluctuating than in previous years*. First, under Xi Jinping's leadership, the PRC has grown strongly in terms of economy, technology, and military capabilities. Against the backdrop of these changes, China has become increasingly aggressive internationally, significantly altering the stability of the security architecture. Against this backdrop, both in word and deed, the Beijing government is pursuing a policy of increasing intimidation against Taiwan's intention to declare independence.

For example, at the declarative level, in a speech by President Xi Jinping in 2019, he declared unification with Taiwan to be a core interest, the realization of which *"should not be passed down from one generation to the next"* (Hanns Günther Hilpert, 2022, 7). The statement has been interpreted as Xi's confession of his willingness to realize unification with Taiwan under his leadership as a political legacy, as his successor will probably belong to a younger generation, which

might chart a different security imaginary among the Beijing elite. However, more recent speeches have not reiterated the need to avoid passing on the Taiwan problem to future generations. For example, in a speech delivered on the occasion of the CCP's centennial celebration in July 2021, Xi stated that:

"Resolving the Taiwan question and realizing the complete unification of China is a historic mission and unwavering commitment of the Communist Party of China ... We must take resolute measures to completely defeat any Taiwan independence attempt ... No one should underestimate the determination, will and ability of the Chinese people to defend their national sovereignty and territorial integrity" (David Santoro, 2023, 4).

Last but not least, at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2022, Chinese Minister of National Defense General Wei Feng-he emphasized that *"Taiwan is first and foremost China's Taiwan"* and promised that Beijing would do everything in its power to *"resolutely crush efforts to achieve independence through the use of force"*. *"We will fight at any cost, and we will fight to the end"*, the dignitary added (USCC, 2022, pg. 592-593).

Tensions have also been heightened by the visit of a five-member US delegation led by Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House of Representatives (the third-ranking US House of Representatives), from August 2-3, 2022. The day after the delegates left Taiwan, the PLA began a series of live-fire exercises, which some analysts described as unprecedented in scale and proximity to the island. Dozens of Chinese military aircraft and ships also crossed the "median line" – long considered an informal buffer between the Chinese and Taiwanese militaries (USCC, 2022, p. 591). Although tensions have since decreased, they remain at a fairly high level due to a variety of disruptive factors: the Chinese spy balloon incident in February 2023, their divergent positions on

the war in Ukraine, and an increasingly strong Beijing-Moscow partnership, plus the 10-day international trip (March 29-April 7, 2023) of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen (Wang, 2023).

The latest development that further complicates the security climate is the presidential election on January 13, 2024, won by Lai Ching-te, who began his term on May 20, 2024. Viewed from Beijing, Lai Ching-te is seen as a politician with separatist views, who pursues Taiwan's independence at all costs, issues that represent "*a red line for the CCP*" (Li, 2024).

Second, Taiwan's population increasingly emphasizes its own identity as distinct from mainland China. In a survey conducted in 2022 by National Chengchi University, 61% of respondents described themselves as Taiwanese, compared to 33% who considered themselves both Chinese and Taiwanese. In the same survey, only about 3% considered themselves only Chinese, a view that has become less popular since 1994, when 26% identified themselves in this way (Maizland, 2023). Moreover, one of the fundamental features of Tsai Ing-wen's foreign policy was characterized by the fact that Taiwan consciously and voluntarily adhered to the agreed standards of public international law, abiding by international treaties, even though it had no prospect of formally signing these treaties. In this way, Taiwan acted as if it were a member of major international organizations, seeking to contribute to their realization and implementation (Hanns Günther Hilpert, 2022, 15). Doing so, Taiwan, in addition to declaring itself increasingly vocally as a country with a distinct identity, also presents itself as a responsible actor in the international community as well as an exemplary democracy. It remains to be seen what policy the new Taiwanese President, Lai Ching-te, will adopt and how he will handle the new security developments.

Third, the relationship between the US and China can increasingly be characterized as a great-power conflict in which both sides are driven by mutual distrust, competing for status and power (Hanns Günther Hilpert, 2022, 7). As previously stated, within this issue Taiwan plays an extremely important role in this geopolitical struggle for supremacy. Strategically, it is positioned within the first island chain, offering offensive-defensive possibilities for whoever holds supremacy over it; geoeconomically, Taiwan is the world leader in semiconductor production, which is a crucial factor in the technological rivalry; last but not least, Taiwan is an important piece of the systemic conflict between democracy and authoritarianism, being a thorn in Beijing's side and offering a counter-example to the Chinese communist model.

5. Conclusion

The security architecture of East and South-East Asia is undergoing a process of change, driven by a rising China, but also by the US, which, with its military and institutional strength here, is a pillar of stability that seeks to preserve American supremacy and the liberal international system. Current developments show that some of China's neighbors are no longer inclined simply to fall in line with Beijing's policy, but rather are determined to challenge its right to: (1) control various relevant geostrategic points; (2) turn atolls into artificial islands; (3) simply declare exclusive air zones in the South or East China Sea; or (4) dominate the market by overcrowding it with cheap products, outright monopolizing certain sectors or reducing competitiveness. These neighbors – notably Vietnam and Japan, but also countries such as the Philippines, Malaysia and Australia – are arming themselves, diversifying their security relationships (both among themselves and in arrangements involving out-of-area states) and establishing strong ties with the US,

denouncing China's attempts to create a Sino-centric system based on building an 'Asian' security and economic architecture, translated into institutional arrangements based on cooperation mechanisms centered on (and for the benefit of) the Chinese state(s).

Seen from this perspective, Xi's grand strategy seems "*to have gone too far, too fast*". In record time, China's "benign panda" image has been replaced by that of a "menacing dragon". In this respect, many parts of the globe – from Europe to the South Pacific, Africa, South Asia, South and East America and Latin America – are divided into two camps: strengthening ties with Beijing or maintaining a reluctant attitude and limiting and countering those ties.

Throughout this article we have taken an x-ray of the security architecture of East and Southeast Asia, presenting the main actors, links and interdependencies that make this area a true security complex.

The article also stressed the importance of considering the regional level of analysis, because despite the countless extra-regional international organizations and all the initiatives to create an international community sharing common values and interests, one thing remains certain, the world of the 21st century is largely based on "*what China wants, does and achieves*" (Tomé, 2021, 125).

Confident, Xi Jinping and his Beijing clique continue to believe that time and the momentum of history are on China's side in its historic quest to recast the international system as a whole. **But are they really?**

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