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STORIA PRESENTE

NEW AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE «CHINA THREAT» ISSUE PETER NAVARRO AND THE «THUCYDIDES'S TRAP»

Introduction

Eight years ago, in June 2011, at the Munk Debates in Toronto, four of the greatest personalities of our time met to discuss the role that China would play in the 21st century: will China become the dominant power in the 21st century (1)? If the 20th century was the “American century”, will the 21st century be the “Chinese century”? And if so, what changes would this bring to the international context? The four experts who convened in Canada gave antithetical answers to these questions and then divided into two opposing sides: on the one hand Henry Kissinger and Fareed Zakaria replied that China will not play the dominant role because it is still dealing with internal issues and solving problems with neighboring countries (2). On the other hand, the British historian Niall

(1) The Munk Debates were established in 2008 as an initiative of the Peter and Melanie Munk Charitable Foundation. The Debates take place twice a year in Toronto in front of an audience of 3,000 people. From American Democracy to Climate Change, to Europe and the Global Refugee Crisis, the Munk Debates tackle the most important political and economic questions of our time. In June 2011 Henry Kissinger - Secretary of State during the Nixon presidency, who played a key role in the establishment of diplomatic relations with China - and Fareed Zakaria – host of a famous CNN international affairs program and editor at the age of 28 of the prestigious «Foreign Affairs» magazine – met with the historian Niall Ferguson and the economist David Daokui Li to discuss China's rise.

(2) *Does the 21st Century Belong to China?*, ed. by R. Griffiths – P. Luciani, Toronto, Anansi, 2001. The American economist Peter Navarro – currently Assistant to the President and Director of the Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy - dedicates chapter 15 of his book *Death by China* to Fareed Zakaria, which is significantly titled *Death by China Apologist: Fareed Zakaria Floats Away*, inserting him in the «China Apologists Coalition», P. NAVARRO – G. AUTRY, *Death by China. Confronting the Dragon – A Global Call to Action*, Upper Saddle River - NJ, Pearson, 2011, pp. 215 ff. Kissinger, on the other hand, is mentioned by Navarro only in *Crouching Tiger* because of his role in the normalization of Sino-US relations, see P. NAVARRO, *Crouching Tiger. What China's Militarism Means for the World*, New York, Prometheus Books, 2015, pp. 119, 217.

Ferguson, who teaches at Harvard University, and David Daokui Li, an economist and professor at various Universities both in the US and in China, agreed that China already had all the prerequisites to assume a central role in the new international context.

The debate was extremely interesting, as Kissinger's important volume *On China* had just come out (3): the former National Security Advisor gave a negative answer to these questions, highlighting some of China's most pressing problems: the gap between the greater development of coastal regions - which reach the standards of advanced economies - and the underdevelopment of the internal regions; inequality in the level of development between cities and countryside; demographic problems associated with the rapid aging of China's population that will be a crucial issue in the coming decades (4), and so on.

Despite the different positions of the two sides on China's dominant role in the 21st century, all four agreed, however, on China's undisputed growth. David Daokui Li stressed in particular the fact that in China there is a negative perception of the Western attitude towards China's political and economic rise. And, on the other hand, despite different shades of opinion, the three Western actors agreed to highlight the nationalism and aggressiveness of Chinese foreign policy, for example in the South China Sea, over which China claims sovereignty.

At the end of the debate the audience in the hall (2,700 people) voted to express its opinion. 38% answered affirmatively to the question whether the 21st century belongs to China, while 62% answered negatively, thus rallying behind Kissinger and Fareed Zakaria's positions. A result that, however, is in contrast with the opinion that has been expressed, since the early 2000s, by the clear majority of international observers who tend to identify the 21st century as the "Chinese

(3) H. KISSINGER, *On China*, New York, Penguin Press, 2011.

(4) With regard to the demographic issue, particular emphasis has been placed on the consequences of the "one-child policy" (*yitaizhi zhengce* 一胎制政策). Accompanied with the improvement of living conditions and the increase in population longevity, the "one-child policy" has led China to reach the peak of its active population in 2015. From this moment onwards, a decreasing active population (between the ages of 15 and 64) will have to support an ever-increasing elderly population. The birth rate has fallen in the last decades because of the distortions caused by the application of the "one-child policy", thus endangering the country's economic growth due to the progressive diminishing of the labor force basin. To help rebalance the demographic issue, the "one-child policy" has in fact been modified in 2013 allowing couples to have two children if at least one of the parents was an only child, and then ended in 2016 allowing all Chinese couples to have two kids. And, recently, the Chinese Communist Youth League is promoting, within the "Medium and Long-term Youth Development Plan (2016-2025)", some disputed initiatives aimed at solving the problem of the current 200 million single people that do not contribute to the increase in the birth rate; see A. HAYUTIN, *China's Demographic Shifts. The Shape of Things to Come*, Stanford, Stanford Center on Longevity, 24 October 2008, pp. 3-7.

century” (5), just as the 20th century was the “American century” and the 19th was the “British” one (6). A report from the National Intelligence Council found that today’s China has the same requirements that in the last century allowed the United States to overcome Britain (7). This is actually one of the points that also the historian Niall Ferguson underlined during the debate: before the First World War, at the peak of the *Belle Époque*, it would have been difficult for European observers to foresee the British decline during the 20th century and the rise instead of the United States, first in economic but then also in geopolitical terms (8).

Goldman Sachs’ estimates are also well known, predicting that, in thirty years’ time, the Chinese economy will surpass the American one very significantly. In fact, China has managed to defend itself better and in a more consistent and stable manner than other countries from the recession caused by the 2008 global economic crisis (9). For these reasons, the 2008 crisis was interpreted by some international analysts as a turning point that marked the beginning of the American decline and the start of the new Chinese era (10).

Undoubtedly, the People’s Republic of China is already an indispensable actor in the international arena not only from the economic-financial point of view, but also from the political-diplomatic and the energy-environmental point

(5) On the future hegemony of the People’s Republic of China see *The Rise of China*, ed. by M. Brown, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2000; S.W. MOSHER, *Hegemon. China’s Plan to Dominate Asia and the World*, San Francisco, Encounter Books, 2000; T.C. FISHMAN, *China Inc. How the Rise of the Next Superpower Challenges America and the World*, New York, Scribner, 2005; A. GOLDSTEIN, *Rising to the Challenge. China’s Grand Strategy and International Security*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005; A.I. JOHNSTON, *How new and assertive is China’s new assertiveness?*, in «International Security», 37, 2013, 4, pp. 7–48; M. PETTIS, *The Great Rebalancing: Trade, Conflict, and the Perilous Road Ahead for the World Economy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013.

(6) B. ONNIS, *La Cina nelle relazioni internazionali*, Roma, Carocci, 2011, p. 81.

(7) F. RAMPINI, *Il secolo cinese: storie di uomini, città e denaro dalla fabbrica del mondo*, Milano, Mondadori, 2005, pp. 3-5.

(8) *Does the 21st Century Belong to China?*, ed. by R. Griffiths – P. Luciani, quoted.

(9) *La Cina, Verso la modernità*, ed. by G. Samarani – M. Scarpari, vol. III, Einaudi, Torino, 2009, p. 4 ff.; F. CONGIU, *Il processo di modernizzazione cinese tra “multipolarismo e polarizzazione”*, in *L’Asia di Obama e della crisi economica globale*, ed. by M. Torri – N. Mocci, «Asia Maior», Milano, Guerini, 2010, p. 223.

(10) See M. JACQUES, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*, London, Allen Lane, 2009; S. HALPER, *The Beijing Consensus: How China’s Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty-First Century*, New York, Basic Books, 2010; A. SUBRAMANIAN, *Eclipse: Living in the Shadow of China’s Economic Dominance*, Washington DC, Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2011. As B. ONNIS already noted, the lowest common denominator between these three studies can be identified in the thesis that the Chinese model is not limited to the economic sphere but is easily extendable to the political and cultural spheres, *Has China Plans for World Domination?*, in «Comparative Civilizations Review», 68, 2013, 68, p. 56.

of views. In other words, China is already a key player in important contexts: if, for example, the PRC, which alone was responsible for 29% of greenhouse gas emissions, had not first signed and then ratified the Paris climate agreements, no progress in this direction would be possible. Moreover, Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris agreements seemed to confirm China as an even more "responsible" power, to the point that the former US ambassador to Beijing David Rank has distanced himself from Trump's decision and has resigned, not wanting to make the official announcement to the Chinese authorities (11).

Also in other fields China has achieved important successes, from the 2008 Beijing Olympics (12) to the 2010 Shanghai Expo (13). These and other factors therefore suggest to the majority of international observers that the PRC has thus achieved the status of great emerging power, putting a definite end to the so-called «century of shame and humiliation».

Today, eight years after the Toronto Munk Debates of 2011, the international context is different, the leaders of the two countries have changed and the US approach to the Asia-Pacific has been modified, but the Toronto debate on China's leading role in the international context remains topical and ongoing. International analysts continue to question whether or not China will become the new superpower capable of supplanting the US. We do not want to reconstruct this debate or the one on the "China threat" theory (*Zhongguo weixielun* 中国威胁论) which, as we know, has been elaborated since the second half of the nineties by some American scholars according to which China's economic and military rise poses a threat to global security (14). Indeed, the "China threat" debate has been widely reconstructed both in the United States and in China

(11) M. SAMPATHKUMAR, *Acting US Ambassador to China quits over Donald Trump's withdrawal from Paris Accord*, in «The Independent», 6 June 2017. Mr. Rank - who during his career has constantly worked to consolidate the relations between the two countries - should have left the Chinese capital at the arrival of the new ambassador appointed by Trump, the Republican Terry E. Brandstad, who was governor of Iowa until May 2017.

(12) On the importance for Beijing of hosting the Olympic Games and the benefits in terms of soft power see S.L. SHIRK, *China Fragile Superpower*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. IX: «As a rising power determined to reassure other countries that it isn't a threat, China has become more self-conscious about its international reputation than any other country in the world. And the Olympic Games are the best chance the nation will have in a long time to shape its image».

(13) On the ongoing development of Shanghai, «spearhead of the country's modernization», see L. DE GIORGI, *Shanghai*, Firenze, Giunti, 2009, pp. 114 ff.

(14) See D. ROY, *The "China Threat" Issue: Major Arguments*, in «Asian Survey», 36, 1996, 8, pp. 758-751; *The China Threat: Perceptions, Myths and Reality*, ed. by H. Yee - I. Storey, London - New York, RoutledgeCurzon, 2002.

and also in Italy by international historians who deal with Asia (15) or by some historians of international relations, such as Andrea Francioni who in 2011-12 published a detailed review in two parts entitled *Guerra di parole. "Minaccia cinese" e "Sviluppo pacifico" nel dibattito sull'ascesa di Pechino* tracing the entire debate from 1992 to 2005 (16). The aim of this paper is rather to take a look at the new American perspectives on the "China threat" issue in recent years, also in consideration of some geopolitical and economic initiatives undertaken by the Chinese leadership. These Chinese initiatives will be analyzed in the first three paragraphs of this article trying to understand if, beyond their purely geopolitical or economic purposes, they can also be considered instruments of economic and cultural soft power.

1. *Is a new «Globalization with Chinese Characteristics» likely to happen?*

In the aftermath of British Prime Minister Theresa May's statements on a "hard Brexit" and on the eve of Donald Trump's inauguration in the White House, the Chinese president Xi Jinping delivered a speech in January 2017 at the 47th World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos focused on the positive sides of globalization and on the importance of the agreements signed in Paris on climate change. A speech that, according to some observers, could have been written by Obama's ghostwriters, as the former American president was very sensitive to these issues (17). Xi Jinping stressed that many of today's problems (such as that of migrants) do not depend on globalization. In his words, globalization has some

(15) See G. SAMARANI, *La Cina contemporanea. Dalla fine dell'Impero a oggi*, Torino, Einaudi, 2017, pp. 358 ff.; ID., *Cina, Ventunesimo secolo*, Torino, Einaudi, 2010; V. FERRETTI, *La questione della sicurezza nell'evoluzione della politica estera della Repubblica popolare cinese*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2006; B. ONNIS, *La Cina nelle relazioni internazionali*, quoted, pp. 75 ff. See also the volumes ed. by M. Torri – N. Mocci within the important series of «Asia Maior», in particular *The end of the Obama era in Asia*, Roma, Viella, 2017; *Chinese-American race for hegemony in Asia*, Roma, Viella, 2015; *Engaging China/containing China: Asia in 2014*, Bologna, I libri di Emil, 2014; *Il drago cinese e l'aquila americana sullo scacchiere asiatico*, Bologna, I libri di Emil, 2014.

(16) A. FRANCONI, *Guerra di parole. "Minaccia cinese" e "Sviluppo pacifico" nel dibattito sull'ascesa di Pechino (1992-2005)* – part one, in «Storia e Futuro. Rivista di storia e storiografia», 27, 2011, pp. 1-55 and ID., *Guerra di parole. "Minaccia cinese" e "Sviluppo pacifico" nel dibattito sull'ascesa di Pechino (1992-2005)* – part two, in «Storia e Futuro. Rivista di storia e storiografia», 28, 2012, pp. 1-30.

(17) XI JINPING, *Shoulder the Responsibilities of Our Time and Promote Global Growth Together*, Keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the World Economic Forum 2017 in Davos, Switzerland, 17 January 2017, in ID., *The Governance of China*, vol. II, Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 2017, pp. 519-532.

negative aspects and it is necessary to make changes but any return to protectionism would not solve many of the problems with which we are confronted. Moreover, many scholars have underlined how much China has benefited from the economic effects of the globalization process, taking full advantage of the relocation carried out by many Western and Japanese multinationals and of the transfer of business activities to Asian countries where labor costs are lower. The PRC therefore experienced that phase of uninterrupted growth that we all know, with a GDP that has grown from 147 billion dollars in 1978 to 10,380 billion in 2016, with a saving capacity still equal to 37% and a low public debt (43.20% in 2015) (18).

The well-known American economist Nouriel Roubini, who teaches at New York University and who has held various positions at the Treasury Department, has underlined that while China is promoting important initiatives such as the Bank of BRICS (The New Development Bank - NDB), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, *yi dai yi lu* 一帶一路), the United States officially withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The NDB was founded by China and the other BRIC countries in 2013 to finance sustainable development and infrastructure projects in different national contexts (19). The AIIB was founded in Beijing in October 2014 and is an international financial institution that has been proposed by the People's Republic of China. They are both opposed to the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, because these institutions are accused of being oriented by capital and by the strategic choices of developed countries and primarily by the United States (20). The AIIB founding countries were 57 and the main objective of the Bank is to provide and develop infrastructure projects in the Asia-Pacific region, thus promoting the economic-social development of the region. From the beginning, projects have been financed in various Asian countries and the 2017 program extended loans to countries not strictly belonging to the Asian area to contribute to global growth.

(18) A. VARSORI, *Storia internazionale. Dal 1919 a oggi*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2015, pp. 385-386 and ID., *Le relazioni internazionali dopo la guerra fredda, 1989-2017*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2018, pp. 91 ff.

(19) On the BRIC countries – now BRICS since South Africa joined the association in 2010 - see A. GOLDSTEIN, *Brasile, Russia, India, Cina alla guida dell'economia globale*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2011.

(20) See KEJIN ZHAO, *China's Rise and its Discursive Power Strategy*, in «Chinese Political Science Review», 1, 2016, 3, p. 540: «China takes seriously the reform of the IMF, WTO, World Bank, etc., strongly challenging the so-called unfair international system dominated by Western powers».

Equally, the BRI is a huge infrastructures project that the Chinese government launched in September 2013 to connect China to Europe through Asia, nowadays involving about 65 countries and a third of the world's energy resources for a total GDP of about 23,000 billion dollars (about 29% of global GDP), with the aim of creating wealth in these countries and adequate outlets for the Chinese production overcapacity in some crucial industrial segments, such as cement, steel, coal. The BRI has in fact been conceived also and above all to respond to the slowdown of the Chinese economy which has not been growing in double figures as in the past. The OBOR project is in fact capable of opening huge markets to goods but also to Chinese capital, with important consequences also from the financial point of view for the diffusion and internationalization of the Chinese currency, the yuan (21).

The TPP, on the other hand, was signed on February 4, 2016 by twelve countries on both sides of the Pacific (Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, Singapore, United States, Taiwan, Vietnam) with the aim of reducing the trade rates between the Member States and in order to harmonize their national legislations in a wide range of sectors, including finance, labor, environment, etc. If ratified, it would have been «the world's largest free trade agreement, covering an area that is worth over 40% of world GDP» (22). The exclusion of China from the agreement would have allowed the United States to increase its trade with the Pacific countries involved, stimulating US exports to the region and achieving significant diplomatic success. For these reasons, the

(21) The Chinese initiative was enucleated in several stages: about a month after his first speech in Kazakhstan's capital Astana, on October 3, 2013, Xi Jinping announced to the Indonesian Parliament the desire to build the "New Silk Road" and then connected the two projects the following month when, in November 2013, at the third plenum of the CCP he officially presented the two initiatives - the terrestrial and the maritime - as related. The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Economic Belt encompasses Southeast Asia, and the South China Sea (together with the Mediterranean at the opposite end) takes on a central role in this context, which explains China's assertiveness in this area and the disputes in progress with its neighbors on the Spratly, Paracel and Senkaku/Diaoyu archipelagos. The 8 chapters document that officially institutionalized the BRI as a foreign policy initiative was then presented by the Chinese government to the Boao Forum in March 2015 (*Vision and Actions on the Jointly Building and the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*), see F. CONGIU, *China 2015: Implementing the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk*, in *The Chinese-American Race for Hegemony in Asia*, ed. by M. Torri – N. Mocci, quoted, pp. 19-52; M. BERRETTINI, "Go West!": *Pechino, la nuova via della seta e il 'Cina-terraneo'*, in «Tetide, Rivista di Studi Mediterranei», II, 2016, 3; G.B. ANDORNINO, *The Belt and Road Initiative in China's Emerging Grand Strategy of Connective Leadership*, in «China & World Economy», 25, 2017, 5, pp. 4-22.

(22) F. FARINA, *L'Asia: il rebalancing e il 'dilemma della sicurezza' con la Cina*, in *La dottrina Obama. La politica estera americana dalla crisi economica alla presidenza Trump*, ed. by P. Wulzer, L'Aquila, Textus Edizioni, 2017, pp. 199 ff.

TPP has aroused from the beginning a lot of concern in China which in recent years has also promoted a greater economic integration between the countries of the Pacific area, for example through the ASEAN + 3 (the forum formed from the 10 Asean countries + China, South Korea and Japan). So the repudiation of TPP – promoted by former President Obama – goes hand in hand with the revival by Beijing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a proposed free trade agreement between China, the 10 ASEAN countries and another five neighboring states with which ASEAN already has free trade agreements (Australia, India, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand). The United States is excluded from the RCEP but some Latin American countries - like Peru - have instead become interested in entering (23). In November 2016, at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Lima, Xi Jinping delivered a keynote speech which already emphasized China's commitment to globalization, trade and investment (24).

So paradoxically China, despite its internal constraints and limits, could stand up for the defense of free markets and globalization when other international actors, traditionally in favor of free trade and economic cooperation, seem to withdraw, or plan to opt for protectionism and to favor bilateral agreements instead of multilateral diplomacy. Xi Jinping thus becomes an «anti-Trump», «the new Davos Man», a champion of liberalism and a defender of globalization that allows China to thrive. Consequently the question arises as to whether there will be a «Globalization with Chinese Characteristics», an economic globalization which can become an alternative model to Western-led globalization, especially for those non-democratic regimes that from South East Asia to the Middle East will benefit from the Belt and Road Initiative. Many scholars agree that the reason for the survival and success of the Chinese communist model, compared to other communist realities, lies in the ability of the Chinese communist leadership to promote economic development in order to lift an ever larger proportion of the Chinese population out of backwardness and poverty (25).

(23) A possible alternative to the RCEP could be a strengthening of the so-called Asian mini-lateralism, that is a form of greater security cooperation between the Asian allies of the United States who feel penalized by Trump's decision to abandon the previous multilateral strategies, see TONGFI KIM, *Asia's Minilateral Moment. With fear of U.S. abandonment on the rise, Asian states are looking to increase cooperation with each other*, in «The Diplomat», 13 June 2017.

(24) Keynote speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the APEC CEO Summit, 20 November 2016, available at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1019023.shtml>.

(25) See F. CONGIU - B. ONNIS, *The Chinese Model*, in *Alternatives to Democracy. Non-Democratic Regimes and the Limits to Democracy Diffusion in Eurasia*, ed. by E. Baracani – R. Di Quirico, Florence, European Press Academic Publishing, 2013, par. 3.3. For a Chinese perspective on China's determination to promote «the new globalization» in order to shape «the

However, some Western observers respond negatively to this question, arguing that only a democratic China would be more attractive in terms of soft power and would then acquire the legitimacy to apply for world leadership (26). China's economic growth is, in fact, still associated with the pollution problem, with relatively low wages, with the pockets of unemployment and poverty still present in large areas of the internal regions and with a lack of transparency (for example regarding the Chinese sovereign fund), not to mention the lack of democratic evolution of its political system and its poor human rights record (27). In the West all these elements matter and do not play in favor of Chinese soft power and they seem to contradict the goal of achieving the «harmonious society» (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) repeatedly proposed by the Chinese leadership (28).

2. The Chinese economic model and its political and cultural implications

Since 2004, following an article by Joshua Cooper Ramo who first spoke of the «Beijing Consensus», there has been much discussion, first in the West and then in China, on the possibility of providing an alternative model to the «Washington Consensus» for developing countries (29). After China's responsible management of the 2008 financial crisis, some scholars have gone so far as to

new international order» see *The Belt and Road towards Win-Win Cooperation*, ed. by Wang Lei – Wang Liqiang, Beijing, Social Sciences Academic Press, 2017, pp. 12-19. On the debate on the Chinese model in the PRC see G. SAMARANI, *La Cina contemporanea. Dalla fine dell'Impero a oggi*, quoted, pp. 412 ff.

(26) Among others, A. PANEBIANCO, *Il summit dei Grandi. Gli insegnamenti agli Usa che l'Europa non può dare*, in «Corriere della Sera», 28 May 2017; E.C. ECONOMY, *The Problem With Xi's China Model. Why Its Successes Are Becoming Liabilities*, in «Foreign Affairs», 6 March 2019.

(27) See A. J. NATHAN, *China's Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience*, in «Journal of Democracy», 14, 2003, 1, pp. 6-17; M. MIRANDA, *La democrazia in Cina. Le diverse formulazioni dagli anni '80 ad oggi*, Editrice Orientalia, 2013, pp. 21 ff.

(28) *He* (和) means “gentle, mild, kind” or “harmonious” and can be found in the noun *heping* (和平) “peace”. *Xie* (谐) means “to harmonize, to agree”. The concept of harmony applied to Chinese society has very ancient origins and is based on the Confucian principle of supporting a stable and balanced society. Since Hu Jintao's concept of an «harmonious society», the adjective *hexie* (和谐) has taken on a new connotation, much more politicized. Since the early 2000s the adjective *hexie* has actually begun to circulate also with the nuance of “eliminating what can harm the harmony of society”, “censoring”, and in a wider sense “repressing”. Therefore the average Chinese does not necessarily attribute to this adjective the positive connotation that the Chinese elites want to transmit and that Western observers perceive. On the rebirth of Confucianism and on literary quotations in contemporary political discourse see M. SCARPARI, *Ritorno a Confucio. La Cina di oggi fra tradizione e mercato*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2015, pp. 129 ff.

(29) J. COOPER RAMO, *The Beijing Consensus: Notes on the New Physics of Chinese Power*, London, The Foreign Policy Center, 2004.

extend «the Chinese model» from the economic sphere to the political and cultural sphere. According to Stefan Halper, for example, the Chinese “authoritarian” model guarantees not only rapid progress from an economic point of view but also socio-political stability, where on many occasions the processes of democratization have been accompanied by significant political and social unrest. For many non-Western countries involved in the Belt and Road Initiative the Chinese authoritarian model is therefore attractive both for the intrinsic promise of greater and quick well-being and because it is not intended to be forcibly exported, as the United States or even the European Union have tried to do with their own democratic model in some Middle Eastern and African countries (30).

Furthermore, China is increasingly using “cultural diplomacy” as an important tool to make its image more attractive, working hard to spread the Chinese language, culture and civilization not only on the Asian continent but all over the world (31). In the last ten years, the PRC has invested a great deal overseas to promote the study of Chinese language and culture, opening numerous Confucian Institutes, one of the last ones even in Rovaniemi at the University of Lapland (32). The institute will play a significant role in enhancing cultural

(30) S. HALPER, *The Beijing Consensus: How China's Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty-First Century*, quoted. For a Chinese perspective on China's model of development see ZHANG WEIWEI, *Zhongguo chudong quanqiu* 中国触动全球 [*The China Ripple*], Beijing, Xinhua Chubanshe, 2008; ID., *Zhongguo zhenhan: yige wenmingxing guojia de jueqi* 中国震撼: 一个文明型国家的崛起, Shanghai, Shiji Chuban Jituan, 2011 (English translation: *The China Wave. Rise of a Civilizational State*, New Jersey – Shanghai – Singapore, World Century, 2012) and ID., *Zhongguo chaoyue: yige wenmingxing guojia de guangrong yu mengxiang* 中国超越: 一个文明型国家的光荣与梦想, Shanghai, Shiji Chuban Jituan, 2014 (English translation: *The China Horizon: Glory and Dream of a Civilizational State*, New Jersey – Shanghai – Singapore, World Century, 2016). On this last important volume of Zhang's “China Trilogy” see A. LAVAGNINO, *Zhang Weiwei e il Sorpasso della Cina: da paese “modello” a “Stato modello di civiltà”*, in *Politica, società e cultura di una Cina in ascesa. L'amministrazione Xi Jinping al suo primo mandato*, “Cina Report”, ed. by M. Miranda, Roma, Carocci, 2016, pp. 121-131.

(31) If the goal is to make Chinese a *lingua franca* for business, according to Kissinger, however, the structure of the Chinese language, obviously less immediate and more difficult to communicate in than English, represents a serious obstacle for China in order to overcome the US in terms of soft power and cultural influence. Nevertheless, in recent years there has been a surprising increase, worldwide, of registrations for HSK (*Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* 汉语水平考试), China's national standardized test designed for non-native speakers of Chinese (the equivalent of the American TOEFL - Test of English as a Foreign Language), see B. ONNIS, *La Cina nelle relazioni internazionali*, quoted, p. 90.

(32) LUO LIUWEI, *China to set up Confucius Institute at Lapland University*, in «Daily Finland», 9 October 2017. On the ambiguous role of the Confucius Institutes, on the loans they receive from the Hanban (the Chinese National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign language) which is affiliated to the Ministry of Education, and on the implications of these relations for the countries that have decided to host the CI, see M. SCARPARI, *Ritorno a Confucio. La Cina di oggi fra tradizione e mercato*, quoted, pp. 89-93. On Chinese «pragmatic and strategically smart

exchanges between Lapland and China but also demonstrates China's strong interest in the Arctic route. According to a United States Geological Survey reported by «The New York Times», the Arctic might hold about 13% of the world's oil that has not yet been discovered, and 30% of the undiscovered natural gas (33). Moreover, with the melting of the ice and the gradual opening of the Arctic routes, it is likely that in the future the sea trade links between Asia and Europe will be much faster, yielding considerable savings for maritime transport. So it is no coincidence that the State Council Information Office published its first white paper on "China's Arctic Policy" in January 2018, in order to underline that «China is an important stakeholder in Arctic affairs», both geographically as a «Near-Arctic State» and economically as «the natural conditions of the Arctic and their changes have a direct impact on China's climate system and ecological environment, and, in turn, on its economic interests in agriculture, forestry, fishery, marine industry and other sectors» (34). An accredited observer to the Arctic Council since 2013, China has long been interested in the region and its interests can now materialize by building a "Polar Silk Road" from Shanghai to Rotterdam. Vice-Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou immediately tried to address the international concern about China's intentions: «Some people doubt China's participation in Arctic affairs and worry we will plunder resources and damage the environment. I think that concern is completely unnecessary» (35).

Confirming China's commitment to "cultural diplomacy", Xi Jinping has recently declared he is willing to welcome 100,000 cooperators in China and to offer 18,000 scholarships, thus continuing that «Charm Offensive» that Joshua Kurlantzick had already predicted in his notable book of 2007 (36). Moreover, the charm exercised by the United States will be less powerful as a result of some actions and policies pursued by President Trump, such the construction of the wall with Mexico, the controversial presidential policy against migrants coming from Islamic countries, the announcement to exit the Paris agreements on climate

approach toward public diplomacy» see also F. HARTING, *Chinese Public Diplomacy: The Rise of the Confucius Institute*, London - New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 187 ff. On the important role of Universities in spreading Chinese soft power worldwide see JIAN LI, *Conceptualizing Soft Power of Higher Education. Globalization and Universities in China and the World*, Singapore, Springer, 2018.

(33) JAD MOUAWAD, *Arctic may hold as much as a fifth of undiscovered oil and gas reserves*, in «The New York Times», 24 July 2008.

(34) *China's Arctic Policy*, ed. by the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, January 2018, available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/26/c_136926498.htm

(35) HOU LIQIANG, *China vows to promote sustainable development of Arctic*, in «China Daily», 26 January 2018.

(36) J. KURLANTZICK, *Charm Offensive. How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2007.

change, and the tariffs imposed on trading partners deemed “unfair” (37). As Hal Brands argued in his recent book «the president’s entire first year has represented a veritable assault on American soft power» (38).

Regarding the climate change issue in particular, the strong condemnation of some European leaders was echoed by the statements made in Berlin by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. He actually said that fighting climate change is a «global consensus» and an «international responsibility» (39). Also Xi Jinping has repeatedly confirmed his commitment to the Paris agreements, helping to strengthen the image of China as a «responsible great power» (*fuzherende daguo* 负责人的大国) (40). If «public diplomacy is perception», the Chinese leadership is undoubtedly doing a very good job in painting China as a responsible power to the point that «it currently seems to be winning the global battle for hearts and minds» (41). But over and above the official statements, the question arises as to what role China intends to play on the Asia-Pacific scene and on the global geopolitical chessboard.

Xi Jinping’s statements are not empty political declarations and his missions abroad almost always have economic and political repercussions. On the occasion of the aforementioned Davos summit of January 2017, as soon as he arrived in Switzerland, the Chinese president further increased the Free Trade Agreement that had been signed between the two countries three years before. The Chinese tendency towards globalization is therefore bringing a number of financial and political benefits, and it is affirmed as an irreversible phenomenon. For instance,

(37) On the benefits in terms of soft power acquired by China after Trump’s decision to exit the Paris agreements, see K. BROWN, *CEO, China. The Rise of Xi Jinping*, London – New York, I.B. Tauris, 2017, p. XIII: «China has become the global champion of climate change, giving it a new, softer international image». G. RACHMAN also emphasizes the opportunities given to China by the Trump administration: «Now it is the United States that can be presented as a dangerous player, over issues such as North Korea, trade and climate – while China plays the role of the supporter of international norms and agreements», *Easternisation. War and Peace in the Asian Century*, London, Vintage, 2017, p. XVII. See also *Xi Jinping has more clout than Donald Trump. The world should be wary. Do not expect Mr Xi to change China, or the world, for the better*, in «The Economist», Print Edition, «Leaders», 14 October 2017: «On his numerous foreign tours, Mr Xi presents himself as an apostle of peace and friendship, a voice of reason in a confused and troubled world. Mr Trump’s failings have made this much easier».

(38) H. BRANDS, *American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump*, Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2018 and ID., *Not Even Trump Can Obliterate America’s Soft Power. But the Damage May Take Years to Undo*, in «Bloomberg», 18 January 2018.

(39) See M. SAMPATHKUMAR - A. WILTS, *Donald Trump confirms withdrawal from Paris Agreement on climate change in huge blow for global deal*, in «The Independent», 2 June 2017.

(40) B. ONNIS, *Has China Plans for World Domination?*, quoted, p. 70.

(41) I. STONE FISH, *Is China Becoming the World’s Most Likeable Superpower?*, in «The Atlantic», 2 June 2017.

the Chinese reaffirmed their intention to continue investing in Europe and the US, despite Trump's hostile approach. At the Asian Financial Forum in Hong Kong, also held in January 2017, a few days before the new president took office at the White House, the Chinese representatives reiterated they will continue to invest in the US, despite Trump's threats to introduce protectionist measures. Despite the fact that trade between the two countries was already falling, the Chinese were proposing to invest in those sectors - such as the large infrastructures - that Trump intends to promote in order to encourage the growth of American jobs and workers in the United States.

Investments in the infrastructure sector are one of the tools through which the Chinese are able to settle abroad. Quite emblematic is the African context, where the beginning of Chinese penetration in different States dates back to the 1960s (42). Even if during the Maoist era Chinese investments in Africa have not always proved advantageous, since China began its reform and opening up in 1978, Africa has supplied the People's Republic with raw materials and energy resources. At the same time, unlike the Western powers, China presented itself as a rising power that did not want to impose democratic reforms nor speed up progress with regard to human rights in the African States where it was investing. By granting loans to these countries at very low rates and abolishing customs tariffs on African products, the PRC has financed major infrastructure works, condoning foreign debt and guaranteeing these countries non-interference in their internal affairs (43). In January 2017, the new Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway was officially inaugurated, entirely financed and built by the Chinese between 2011 and 2016. The new railway replaces the old line, reducing travel time from 3

(42) In those years, the PRC engaged in relations with many African States and invested heavily in some of them, such as in Tanzania, where thanks to important Chinese aid the Tanzania-Zambia railway was built, see B. ONNIS, *La Cina nelle relazioni internazionali*, quoted, p. 49.

(43) The policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states (*bu ganshe neizheng* 不干涉内政) is, however, likely to change in the future, as the number of Chinese immigrants in Africa has rapidly increased in the last two decades. According to the Annual Report on Overseas Chinese Study, Chinese immigrants in the African continent were more than 1,1 million in 2012. Like the other major Powers, the People's Republic intends to protect both its economic interests and its workers abroad who in the past ten years have been targeted in several countries, see B. ONNIS, *The New "Selective Diplomacy" of the People's Republic of China: towards a "partial" interference in global affairs?*, in *The Quandaries of China's Domestic and Foreign Development*, ed. by D. Mierzejewski, Łódź, Łódź University Press, 2014, pp. 43-57. This is therefore one of the reasons for the opening of the Djibouti base and for China's greater contribution to UN peacekeeping operations. Chinese blue helmets in Africa are about 3,000 and not surprisingly most of them have been located in South Sudan where China controls oil production and oil pipelines; SU ZHOU, *Number of Chinese immigrants in Africa rapidly increasing*, in «China Daily», 14 January 2017.

days – as at Rimbaud's time – to 10 hours, and giving Ethiopia (which does not have an outlet to the sea) access to the Gulf of Aden more quickly.

Through the infrastructural projects the Chinese then settle down in the territory, as happened in Djibouti where they bought 25% of the port's shares (the Doraleh Container Terminal) and they opened the first Chinese military base abroad, able to house up to 10,000 military and civilian personnel, not far from the American naval base of Camp Lemonnier, where 4,000 American soldiers are stationed and from which US drones take off to Yemen and Somalia. It is therefore evident that the Chinese presence in the Horn of Africa assumes an important strategic value. More generally, China has had major financial interests for decades throughout the whole African continent: Beijing is the first commercial partner of Africa where there are about 3,000 Chinese companies and where China has built more than 5,000 km of roads and 6,200 km of railways⁽⁴⁴⁾. China's economic presence in Africa is constantly expanding: the new Nairobi-Mombasa railway line is now able to connect the Kenyan port of Mombasa to the capital Nairobi, in the heart of Eastern Africa, also in this case significantly reducing travel time (from 15 to 4 hours). And even in this case the position is strategic: the goal is to connect the Indian Ocean to the heart of Africa, making Eastern Africa one of the privileged outlets for Chinese companies. Mombasa is in fact one of the most active African hubs where dozens of Chinese cargo ships dock every day, unloading tons of goods. And it is from Mombasa that other ships leave carrying the African raw materials destined for Asian markets. Thanks to these forms of economic penetration, China's rising role has more and more emerged at a political and cultural level, i.e. funding Mandarin language programs in Kenyan and other African schools⁽⁴⁵⁾. Promoting a new «international relations democratization» (*guoji guanxi minzhuhua* 国际关系民主化) in the African contest, China is willing to present itself as a leading country in the framework of the “South-South cooperation” and is actually calling for «a fairer international political and economic order»⁽⁴⁶⁾.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ Data available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/28/c_136857657.htm

⁽⁴⁵⁾ On China's soft power in Africa see HE WENPING, *The Balancing Act of China's Africa Policy*, in «China Security», 3, 3, 2007, pp. 23-40; K. KING, *China's Aid and Soft Power in Africa. The Case of Education and Training*, Woodbridge, James Currey, 2013; *China's Media and Soft Power in Africa: Promotion and Perceptions*, ed. by Xiaoling Zhang – H. Wassermann – W. Mano, New York, Palgrave, 2016.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ YANZHUO XU, *China, Africa and Responsible International Engagement*, New York, Routledge, 2018. On China's current multilateral cooperation policy see L. TOSONE, *China and the development discourse at the United Nations. Multilateralism «with Chinese Characteristics»?», in *Foreign Aid in Asia: Traditional and «New» Donors in a Changing Development Landscape*, ed. by L. Tosone – A. Villani – N. Mocci, «Asia Maior», Roma, Viella, 2018, pp. 69-105.*

3. Xi Jinping's soft power strategy: “Culture is a country and nation's soul”

Soft power is opposed to hard power (military and economic power), and lies in the ability to attract and persuade others through intangible tools such as culture, political values and foreign policy⁽⁴⁷⁾. According to Nye's definition – which, as is well known, was first coined in 1990 –, soft power consists in the ability of States to spread their value system, their cultural influence and their lifestyle abroad, so as to achieve an important role on the international stage and to meet their political and economic interests more fully and easily. In the wake of Nye's studies, the concept of soft power has experienced a growing success, as well as a progressive expansion, partly due to the fluidity of the concept itself, along with a different evolution depending on the various countries where it has been implemented and applied. In recent years, the PRC has also implemented a series of strategies (mainly economic, financial and communication strategies) that aim to strengthen soft power and improve its image in the eyes of international public opinion. Soft power has therefore been the subject of increasing attention by the Chinese leadership since the early 2000s.

The Chinese internal debate on the concept of soft power (*ruan shili* 软实力) is wide-ranging, complex and still in progress. Starting from the literal translation of Nye's expression, then a series of further translations spread in order to specify the concept adapting it to various internal Chinese contexts, such as cultural, military or urban contexts. The expression has therefore been enriched in China with specific meanings, partly differentiating from the original meaning commonly accepted by Western scholars who almost exclusively use it referring to the international context⁽⁴⁸⁾.

Since 2003 enormous progress in Chinese external publicity has been made and, under the leadership of the Foreign Publicity Leading Group and the China Central Publicity Department, mainstream media such as China Radio International, China Central Television (CCTV), Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily, China Daily, Global Times, etc., make sure that the “Voice of China” is distinctly heard: «what China wants is not only to be acknowledged as a great economic and military power, but also to be recognized as a super power in values, norms

(47) J. NYE, *Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York, Public Affairs, 2004, p. 9. See also ID., *The misleading metaphor of decline*, in «The Atlantic Monthly», March 1990, pp. 86-94; ID., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York, Basic Books, 1990; ID., *Soft Power*, in «Foreign Policy», 80, 1990, pp. 153-172.

(48) See T. ZAPPONE, “Soft Power” in cinese. *Ideologia del potere e adattamento culturale*, in *Atti del XIII Convegno dell'Associazione Italiana Studi Cinesi*, ed. by C. Bulfoni – S. Pozzi, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2014, pp. 414-425.

and other soft resources» (49). In 2004 the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a Public Diplomacy Division under the Information Department, thus intensifying the public diplomacy discourse, whereas the Chinese leadership had previously underestimated the potential of this tool (50).

In his report to the 17th Congress of the CCP in 2007, former President Hu Jintao stressed the need to «enhance culture as part of the soft power [of China] to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests, enrich the cultural life in Chinese society and inspire the enthusiasm of the people for progress» (51). In 2007, in an article published in the «People's Daily», Premier Wen Jiabao also reiterated the importance of «conduct[ing] public diplomacy in a more effective way» (52). The idea was to convey a more positive image of China through soft power tools such as cultural and academic exchanges, the promotion of Chinese language learning, the dissemination of Chinese artistic, literary and cinematographic works, and so on (53). Also in this case, the goal is to fill the gap with the US whose formidable soft power reserves - «from Hollywood to Harvard» - are in addition to the traditional hard power tools, constituting an advantage in the international context (54).

Therefore, China intends to improve its image, which in the world is strongly contested because it is perceived as dangerous in many areas and in particular in the economic-productive one, due to its extremely competitive prices. In fact,

(49) KEJIN ZHAO, *China's Rise and its Discursive Power Strategy*, quoted, p. 558.

(50) In 2009 the Public Diplomacy Division was then upgraded to a Public Diplomacy Office. On the ongoing debate on China's public diplomacy (*gonggong waijiao* 公共外交) see T. ZAPPONE, *China's public diplomacy. Between old propaganda and civil participation*, in «Floriantalia», I, 2014, pp. 117-145 and ID., *La comunicazione politica cinese rivolta all'estero: dibattito interno, istituzioni e pratica discorsiva*, Milano, Ledizioni, 2017. On the effectiveness of Chinese public discourse see also A. CAFFARENA, *La trappola di Tucidide e altre immagini. Perché la politica internazionale sembra non cambiare mai*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2018, pp. 112-113.

(51) HU JINTAO, *Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in all Respects*, Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 15 October 2007, available at https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-10/24/content_6204564.htm

(52) WEN JIABAO, *Our Historical Tasks at the Primary Stage of Socialism and Several Issues Concerning China's Foreign Policy*, «People's Daily», 27 February 2017, available at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-03/03/content_818952.htm

(53) See J. KURLANTZICK, *Charm Offensive. How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World*, quoted, and SHENG DING, *The Dragon's Hidden Wings. How China Rises with Its Soft Power*, Lanham [et al.], Lexington Books, 2008. On China's soft power in East and South Asia see B.M. JAIN, *China's Soft Power Diplomacy in South Asia. Myth or Reality?*, Lanham [et al.], Lexington Books, 2017; C.S. LEE, *Soft Power Made in China. The Dilemmas of Online and Offline Media and Transnational Audiences*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

(54) J. NYE, *Power in the Global Information Age: From Realism to Globalization*, London, Routledge, 2004, p. 7.

since the second half of the Nineties some scholars elaborated the theory of the "China threat", according to which the Chinese economic and military rise constitutes a danger to global security (55). According to the US neoconservatives, the "Blue Team" neocons (56), very influential during the two Bush administrations, from 2000 to 2008, the new Chinese superpower could have decided to launch warlike and aggressive initiatives in the Asian context to extend its influence to the detriment of the American supremacy. Christopher Cox accused the Chinese of stealing American military secrets, whereas Robert Kagan and William Kristol were alarmed by some Chinese initiatives - such as selling war technology to Iraq, economic financing of Milošević's regime, and searching for an anti-American alliance with Russia (57). Both Kagan and Kristol were hoping that the Bush Republican administration could be more incisive than the previous Clinton

(55) See *The China Threat: Perceptions, Myths and Reality*, ed. by H. Yee – I. Storey, quoted. Also S. Huntington foreshadows China's rise and the decline of the West, and foresees a return to the rich imperial culture, canceling out the effects of the Maoist era in which the traditional values had been criticized and dismissed, see S. HUNTINGTON, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon&Schuster, 1996. Huntington's theories are obviously rejected by the Chinese political and academic world, in particular as regards Chinese foreign policy and the accusations of hegemonic purposes.

(56) The expression derives from the terminology used by the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) to indicate the competition between the Red Team and the Blue Team, see A. FRANCONI, *Guerra di parole. "Minaccia cinese" e "Sviluppo pacifico" nel dibattito sull'ascesa di Pechino (1992-2005)* – part two, quoted, p. 2.

(57) This last issue is of particular relevance given that China is still identified by the Western powers as the potential antagonist, despite its ever greater integration into the world economy and despite the apparent friendliness and cordiality of its leaders. Therefore, some analysts wished for a Russian-American *rapprochement* against China, resuming the model that Kissinger and Nixon experimented in the '70s with the triangular diplomacy and the normalization of Sino-American relations. A Russian-American *rapprochement* would avoid further convergence between China and Russia, which in recent years has ensured a mutual "benevolent disinterest" on important international issues: Russia has not intervened in the South China Sea dispute while China showed economic solidarity with Russia after the Western sanctions during the Ukrainian crisis, see E. DI RIENZO, *Il conflitto russo-ucraino: geopolitica del nuovo (dis)ordine mondiale*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2015; A. BRADANINI, *Oltre la Grande Muraglia. Uno sguardo sulla Cina che non ti aspetti*, Milano, Università Bocconi Editori, 2018, p. 107. This convergence was carefully followed by international observers and the neologism *Chussia* has been created to indicate the axis constituted by the Russian and Chinese poles, which - with over 1,5 billion citizens - represents about 1/5 of the total population and contributes to global GDP with over 12,000 billion dollars, see M. BERRETTINI, *Guerra Fredda o transizione egemonica? La diplomazia «atlantica», l'asse Mosca-Pechino e l'alterazione dell'equilibrio strategico*, in «Nuova Rivista Storica», CI, 2017, 1, p. 26 and ID., *Verso un nuovo equilibrio globale. Le relazioni internazionali in prospettiva storica*, Roma, Carocci, 2017, pp. 104-110. Indeed, also Peter Navarro notes with concern the emerging geopolitical axis between Putin's Russia and Xi's China, see P. NAVARRO, *Chussia: Revenge of the Revanchists*, in «The National Interest», 23 March, 2016.

administrations against the Chinese government, regarded as dictatorial (58). In their opinion, the Democrats were actually too soft on Beijing, while it would have been better to prevent the People's Republic of China from resolving its internal contradictions and favor a possible regime change (59). Although the Bush administration has identified China as a «strategic competitor», a definition that inevitably implies the need for a containment by the US, it is interesting to note that actually Bush's approach is seen by Navarro as too soft on China, to the point of including the former President in the list of the "Appeasers" as well: «With President George Bush, the problem was largely ideological – as a free trader, he just couldn't fathom the damage being done to the American manufacturing base by a mercantilist and protectionist China» (60).

On the contrary, those who do not share the theory of the "China threat" point out that China has no interest in being a "revisionist" power within the international context because it is within that context that China intends to operate, maximizing its profits through international cooperation, adhering to multilateralism and international organizations, especially those of an economic nature, such as the World Trade Organization (61). The pages that Mario Del Pero dedicates to China in his recent book on the Obama era tell us that the initial approach of the former American president was aimed at overcoming the concerns regarding the Chinese rise. The idea was to work with China to strengthen the rules of the international order, through a partnership that, according to Obama,

(58) See *I nuovi rivoluzionari. Il pensiero dei neoconservatori americani*, ed. by J. Lobe – A. Oliveri, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2003, pp. 44 ff. and A. FRANCONI, *Guerra di parole. "Minaccia cinese" e "Sviluppo pacifico" nel dibattito sull'ascesa di Pechino (1992-2005)* – part two, quoted, pp. 4-7.

(59) It is interesting to underline, as rightly pointed out by A. Francioni, that even Clinton's election campaign in 1992 was characterized by hostile tones towards China. Although a Democratic candidate, Clinton repeatedly stigmatized «the butchers of Beijing», whereas his opponent George H.W. Bush was instead referred to as "pro-Chinese" because he favored a resumption of dialogue with China after the events in Tiananmen Square. The early years of the Clinton presidency were in fact characterized by concern for Chinese rearmament, by tension on the Taiwan Strait and by a firmer attitude on the issue of human rights. Only in 1997-98, did Clinton's attitude become more positive and he agreed with Jiang Zemin for a «constructive strategic partnership», Ivi, part one, pp. 3-4.

(60) P. NAVARRO, *Death by China*, quoted, p. 224.

(61) See *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*, ed. by Th.W. Robinson – D. Shambaugh, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1994; G. SEGAL, *East Asia and the "Constraint" of China*, in «International Security», 20, 1996, 4, pp. 107-135; D. SHAMBAUGH, *Containment or Engagement of China? Calculating Beijing's Responses*, in «International Security», 21, 1996, 2, pp. 180-209; *Tangled Titans. The United States and China*, ed. by D. Shambaugh, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012; H. WHITE, *The China Choice. Why We Should Share Power*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 133 ff.; TH.J. CHRISTENSEN, *The China Challenge. Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2015; A. BRADANINI, *Oltre la Grande Muraglia. Uno sguardo sulla Cina che non ti aspetti*, quoted, pp. 104 ff.

was not only necessary but also full of opportunities on both sides (62).

For its part, since 2003, the Chinese leadership, in continuity with Deng Xiaoping's theory (63), had insisted a lot on the concept of “peaceful rise” (*heping jueqi* 和平崛起), underlining how Chinese growth did not pose a threat to international peace and stability. On the contrary, from that growth other nations could have obtained significant benefits and opportunities. The theory of “peaceful rise” had therefore the dual objective of officially defining the Chinese position in the international scenario and reassuring the neighboring countries of Southeast Asia and the United States on China's long-term goals. As Barbara Onnis pointed out, «the common perception in the West, and especially in the USA, is that China is both a voracious economic competitor and a threatening political and military challenger, an emergent superpower with growing indefinite intention that acts exclusively in its own interests, even to the detriment of the international order» (64). And it is for these reasons that the Chinese leaders insist on reaffirming the “peaceful” intentions of their country, underlining how a peaceful context is important for the continuity of Chinese development and how in a highly integrated global economy Chinese stability is fundamental for the maintenance of general prosperity (65).

As is well known, the expression of “peaceful rise” has been replaced by that of “peaceful development” (*heping fazhan* 和平发展) to also mitigate the concept of “rise” that can be perceived as “elevating above” and therefore imply “overcoming”

(62) M. DEL PERO, *Era Obama. Dalla speranza del cambiamento all'elezione di Trump*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2017, pp. 71-72. Del Pero then follows the evolution of US policy towards Asia, the so-called Pivot to Asia, identifying its successes, as in the case of the Paris climate agreement, but also the gap between initial expectations and actual results. On the reorientation of American foreign policy toward the Asia-Pacific Region see H. CLINTON, *America's Pacific Century: The Future of Geopolitics Will Be Decided in Asia, Not in Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States Should Be Right at the Center of the Action*, in «Foreign Policy», 189, 2011, pp. 56-63; K.M. CAMPBELL, *The Pivot. The Future of American Statecraft in Asia*, New York – Boston, Twelve, 2016.

(63) As we know, in the '80s Deng Xiaoping distanced himself from Maoist ideology, indicating development and internal growth as a priority for China, with particular attention to its image at international level. In 1991, at the end of his leadership, he advised the Party to keep a low profile and never take the lead: «Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership». Useful directions that the Chinese leaders seem to have taken in account by “operating in the shadows”, A.L. FRIEDBERG, “*Going Out*”: *China's Pursuit of Natural Resources and Implications for the PRC's Grand Strategy*, in «NBR Analysis», 17, 2006, 3, p. 12.

(64) B. ONNIS, *Has China Plans for World Domination?*, quoted, p. 69.

(65) Among other Chinese scholars, Kejin Zhao - Associate Professor at the Institute of International Studies and Deputy Director of the Center for Sino-US Relations at Tsinghua University - points out how «casting as illegitimate the “China Threat Theory” is regarded as a long-term strategic task by China's senior governmental officials», KEJIN ZHAO, *China's Rise and its Discursive Power Strategy*, quoted, p. 546.

another power (66). The Chinese leadership instead wants to insist on the concept of “development” that does not imply potential contrasts and therefore wants to reassure those international observers who are worried about Chinese growth (67). We must not forget the importance of the American market for Chinese exports nor that China is still America’s biggest creditor (68). Both nations have therefore reciprocal economic leverage and Xi himself in the mentioned speech in Davos underlined that there is nothing to be gained by a commercial war: «No one will emerge as a winner in a trade war» (69). Xi’s speech therefore tended to present China as a champion of globalization and even as a new leader in International Climate Change Politics, aware that these aspects can significantly improve the Chinese leadership’s image at the global level (70). To this end, Xi Jinping has also modified, compared to his predecessors, the traditional relationship with

(66) In literary Chinese *jueqi* (崛起) indicates “the rise of a mountain” and can have the connotation of “rise abruptly”. In the early 2000s, a broad and in-depth debate took place in China on the concept of “peaceful rise” that could jeopardize the stability of the regime. This debate was summarized by Zhu Yibing and Yang Dazhi in a review of Chinese studies that collects the contributions on the theme written between 2002 and 2004. This review was then translated into Italian by «Mondo Cinese» in 2005, see ZHU YIBING – YANG DAZHI, *Compendio degli studi cinesi e stranieri sull’“ascesa” e l’“ascesa pacifica” della Cina*, in «Mondo Cinese», 125, 2005, pp. 43-49; B.S. GLASER, E.S. MEDEIROS, *The Change Ecology of Foreign Policy-making in China: the Ascension and Demise of the Theory of “Peaceful Rise”*, in «The China Quarterly», 190, 2007, pp. 291-310; A. FRANCONI, *Guerra di parole. “Minaccia cinese” e “Sviluppo pacifico” nel dibattito sull’ascesa di Pechino (1992-2005)* – part two, quoted, p. 16.

(67) See ZHENG BIJIAN, *China’s Peaceful Rise. Speeches of Zheng Bijian: 1997-2005*, Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2005 and ID., *China’s “Peaceful Rise” to Great-Power Status*, in «Foreign Affairs», 84, 2005, 5, pp. 18-24. Jang Zemin also believed that the term “rise” was too aggressive towards other nations, so it was decided that in the Government’s and the Party’s official documents it would be replaced with “development”, while it could continue to be used in academic discussions, *China’s Peaceful Development Road*, ed. by Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, Beijing, New Star Publishers, 2005. On Zheng Bijian and the theory of “peaceful rise”, which he exposed for the first time at the Boao Forum in 2003, see G. SAMARANI, *Cina, Ventunesimo secolo*, quoted, pp. 15 ff.

(68) B. ONNIS, *La Cina nelle relazioni internazionali*, quoted, p. 80.

(69) XI JINPING, *Shoulder the Responsibilities of Our Time and Promote Global Growth Together*, in ID., *The Governance of China*, vol. II, quoted, p. 525. On the strong interdependence between the two economies see, among others, M. DEL PERO, *I dilemmi dell’interdipendenza USA-Cina*, in «Atlante», Treccani, 14 March 2019, available at http://www.treccani.it/magazine/atlanter/geopolitica/I_dilemmi_dell_interdipendenza_USA_Cina.html

(70) The close connection between international stability and Chinese stability has been repeatedly stressed in the previous speeches of Xi Jinping: «China will thrive only when the world prospers. China provides positive energy for world prosperity and development by holding to the path of peaceful development», XI JINPING, *The Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation Is a Dream Shared by All Chinese*, 6 June 2014, in ID., *The Governance of China*, vol. I, Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 2014, p. 70. See also Xi’s speech at the third group study session of the Political Bureau of the 18th CPC Central Committee, *Strengthen the Foundation for Pursuing Peaceful Development*, 28 January 2013, in Ivi, pp. 271-273.

North Korea, with greater attention to the question of the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula rather than to the survival of the Kim regime. The ongoing provocations of Pyongyang can actually damage China's international status in the event Beijing is still considered the "protector" of North Korea (71).

Even more than his predecessors Xi is actually very attentive to the projection of a positive image of China and something is changing within the Chinese leadership, paying ever-greater attention to its discursive power strategy. During the 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party "Xi Jinping's Thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era" (*Xi Jinping Sixiang* 习近平思想) was included in the Party Statute, an honor that so far had been reserved only to Mao, since in the case of Deng Xiaoping himself his "theories" (rather than his "thought") were included in the Party Statute only after his death (72). So international observers immediately wondered what was Xi's ideological contribution, which is structured around 14 main points that address the centrality of the CCP leadership, the continuation of reformist policies but also the promotion of a «Community of Shared Destiny» (*mingyun gongtongti* 命运共同体) which is clearly connected to the One Belt One Road project. The BRI itself has also been included in the Party Statute, thus recognizing how extraordinary this foreign policy initiative is and how valuable it is as a tool of soft power in Xi's diplomatic strategy. Nevertheless, the «community of shared destiny» that Xi Jinping intends to build implies not only a vast economic cooperation supported by huge Chinese infrastructure investments but also implies closer ties between the

(71) See A. FIORI, *L'evoluzione dei rapporti tra Cina e Corea del Nord nell'era di Xi Jinping*, in *La Cina quarant'anni dopo Mao. Scelte, sviluppi e orientamenti della politica di Xi Jinping*, "Cina Report", ed. by M. Miranda, Roma, Carocci, 2017, pp. 91-108.

(72) Although Xi Jinping very much emphasizes the aspects of continuity with the generations of immediately preceding leaders, his role has come out much strengthened from the 19th Congress, during which, among other things, Xi was also called *lingxiu* (領袖), a term that in Chinese means "the highest leader" and has the meaning of a "spiritual" guide of the country. Compared to the conventional *lingdao* (领导) that corresponds to the word "leader", *lingxiu* is an obsolete term that was used in the Maoist era: the great *lingxiu* was Mao and the same term *lingxiu* was then attributed only to the immediate successor of Mao, Hua Guofen, just to legitimize his succession to the great *lingxiu* (ie Mao himself). The reappearance of the term and the attribution to Xi Jinping of the title of *lingxiu*, of a "higher leader" compared to the *lingdao* who preceded him, is an indication that the Denghist precepts of "keep a low profile" and "never take the lead" have been put aside. See XUETONG YAN, *From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement*, in «Chinese Journal of International Politics», 7, 2014, 2, pp. 153–184. On the rapid consolidation of power by Xi, who managed to hold the three most relevant state and party offices in a very short time compared to his predecessors see M. MIRANDA, *Il veloce consolidamento della posizione politica di Xi Jinping all'inizio del proprio mandato*, in *Politica, società e cultura di una Cina in ascesa. L'amministrazione Xi Jinping al suo primo mandato*, "Cina Report", ed. by M. Miranda, quoted, pp. 27-48.

member countries and the mutual defense of their respective national interests. A «win-win diplomacy» which, through infrastructures and connecting lines, brings development to those who need it, but in exchange for recognition and respect for Chinese «core interests», such as the question of Taiwan or the claims on the South China Sea. For these reasons both the BRI and the AIIB (which is closely associated with the BRI (73)), together with Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea (which is obviously one of the fundamental hubs of the Maritime Silk Road) have aroused apprehension and mistrust in Washington (74).

Xi Jinping announced the One Belt One Road project for the first time in a speech on September 7, 2013 at the Nazarbayev University in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan (75). From a geostrategic point of view, the location chosen for the announcement of the BRI is not accidental: Kazakhstan is one of the 8 member countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded in June 2001 by the heads of state of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, in the wake of the Shanghai Five (or Shanghai Group), of which the first 5 countries have already been members since 1996 and to which Uzbekistan was added in 2001 and India and Pakistan in June 2017. With the SCO Declaration, the first 6 signatory countries claimed to be willing to significantly increase previous cooperation mechanisms in various fields, from political-economic to scientific-cultural, energy-environmental and security-related issues. Moreover, it has already been noted that the Asian republics of the former Soviet Union were the first recipients of «the new soft strategy of Chinese diplomacy», aimed at curbing the negative effects of the “China threat” theory, in the first place towards neighboring countries, emphasizing on the other hand the benefits that peaceful Chinese development will be able to bring to its developing neighbors (76).

(73) ZHANG JIAN – DONG YIFAN, *AIIB e vie della seta, due facce della stessa medaglia*, in «Limes», *Cina-USA. La sfida*, 1, 2017, pp. 67-73.

(74) T. MILLER, *China's Asian Dream*, London, Zed, 2017, p. 25; M. BEESON – FUJIAN LI, *China's Place in Regional and Global Governance: A New World Comes Into View*, in «Global Policy», 7, 2016, 4, pp. 491-499.

(75) XI JINPING, *Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt*, in ID., *The Governance of China*, vol. I, quoted, pp. 315-319.

(76) B. ONNIS, *La Cina nelle relazioni internazionali*, quoted, p. 83. In this sense, therefore, the BRI is in line with the SCO and is also connected to the other multilateral cooperation mechanisms in which China is present, namely: ASEAN + 1 (the 10 ASEAN countries + China), APEC, Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), China-Gulf Cooperation Council Strategic Dialogue (GCC), Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), etc. By linking these multilateral cooperation organizations together, China expands its prospects exponentially: in fact, about 65 countries will be affected by the huge OBOR project and will benefit from it. So, initially regional, it will be expanded to become Eurasian and potentially global.

In Xi's Astana speech the reference to the ancient Silk Road is immediate: he mentions the journeys of Zhang Qian, emissary of the Han dynasty and in charge of a peace and friendship mission in Central Asia, journeys that inaugurated a series of contacts between the Chinese Empire and the countries of Central Asia and opened the Silk Road that extended from East to West, connecting Asia to Europe. From Japan and the Korean peninsula, through China, the Indian subcontinent, Persia, the horn of Africa and the Arabian peninsula to the Mediterranean and Europe, the land and sea links of the ancient Silk Road opened economic links between all these ancient civilizations. In addition to silk – obviously the main commodity exported from China – also spices, ceramics, paper and numerous other goods have passed along that old commercial network. Economic connections have also paved the way for political ones and as a result of trade not only goods and technologies but also philosophical and religious systems have traveled through the regions involved.

Xi underlined therefore from the beginning the importance of the contribution of that constant flow of diplomats, merchants, scholars and craftsmen who have conducted exchanges within the countries along the Silk Road, favoring the dialogue between Eastern and Western civilizations and promoting cooperation between different nations and cultures. So Xi fully utilizes the evocative appeal of the ancient Silk Road, along which, for more than two thousand years, countries of different ethnicities, beliefs and cultures have been able to benefit from peaceful exchanges and of a common development. By emphasizing the precious heritage that the ancient Silk Road has left us, he thus makes a vast economic initiative such as the OBOR extremely attractive also from the cultural point of view: now as then, countries of different ethnic groups, beliefs and cultures, if they persevere in inclusiveness, will benefit from all the advantages deriving from a profitable economic but also cultural cooperation.

In the report he delivered at the 19th National Congress, Xi Jinping has placed much emphasis on the importance of «pursuing opening up on all fronts», and the BRI is therefore identified as a priority, giving «equal emphasis to “bringing in” and “going global”» (77). He also underlined that «China's cultural soft power has grown much stronger» and that «Chinese culture has greater appeal» but that much more needs to be done in order to promote the development of cultural programs and industries: «We will strengthen people-to-people and

(77) XI JINPING, *Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era*, Report delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 18 October 2017, available at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm

cultural exchanges with other countries, giving prominence to Chinese culture while also drawing on other cultures. We will improve our capacity for engaging in international communication so as to tell China's stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country's cultural soft power» (78). It is interesting to note how the word "culture" recurs 48 times in the document, reflecting the strong emphasis that Xi attributes to this concept. He also takes up Mao's expression of «letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend», a very attractive image that had been disregarded during the Maoist era and which, equally, has no greater chance of success in today's China. It is difficult not to think about the tragic end of former Nobel Prize Liu Xiaobo and to the instances of repression or imprisonment of other human rights activists and defenders in Hong Kong as in Mainland China (79). The term "human rights" actually appears in the report only three times. In China's case, «perception is not reality», someone already noted (80).

4. Peter Navarro and the "Thucydides's Trap"

For all these reasons, the Chinese leadership did not look favourably on the appointment of Peter Navarro as head of the National Trade Council, the new White House office responsible for overseeing trade policies (81). Navarro, MA and PhD in Economics at Harvard University and then Professor at the University of California-Irvine, published several books with emblematic titles: *The Coming China Wars: Where They Will Be Fought and How They Can Be Won* (2008) (82);

(78) Ivi. On the limitations on China's mainstream discourse on cultural soft power (*wenhua ruan shili*, 文化软实力) and for a more pluralistic approach to understand it, see *Screening China's Soft Power*, ed. by P. Voci – Luo Hui, London - New York, Routledge, 2018.

(79) See M. MIRANDA, *La democrazia in Cina. Le diverse formulazioni dagli anni '80 ad oggi*, quoted, pp. 114 ff. On the striking contrast between Liu Xiaobo's miserable fate and China's model, see the paper submitted by the Chinese dissident writer YU JIE, [*Il caso*] *Liu Xiaobo ha colpito i punti deboli del 'modello Cina'*, in *Il Modello Cina*, ed. by M. Miranda – A. Spalletta, Roma, L'Asino d'oro, 2011, pp. 169-175.

(80) I. STONE FISH, *Is China Becoming the World's Most Likeable Superpower?*, quoted.

(81) See F. SISCI, *Perché cinesi e americani non si capiscono*, in «Limes», *Cina-USA. La sfida*, quoted, p. 115.

(82) Already in its title, *The Coming China Wars* (Upper Saddle River - NJ, Pearson, 2008) recalls one of the most emblematic texts of the "China threat" school, R. BERSTEIN - R.H. MUNRO, *The Coming Conflict with China*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997. As is well known, the two authors strongly denounced the global consequences of the Chinese rise and the existence in the United States of a "New China Lobby" that intentionally took steps to substantially open up to China by means of cooperation. According to the two authors, this collaboration is not sustainable in the medium to long term because of the mutual and conflicting interests of the two countries.

Death by China: Confronting the Dragon - A Global Call to Action (2011); *Crouching Tiger: What China's Militarism Means for the World* (2015). Some well-known documentaries from these last two books - *Death by China* and *Crouching Tiger* - can also be viewed on YouTube.

The entire volume *Crouching Tiger* is developed as a «detective story», asking the reader questions aimed at alerting the public about China's aggressive behavior in the Asia-Pacific region. The first paragraph of the first chapter is titled *The Thucydides Trap Meets the "Security Dilemma"*, using the expression coined by Prof. Graham Allison of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University who, in August 2012, published an article in the «Financial Times» titled *Thucydides's Trap Has Been Sprung in the Pacific* (83). The question that is asked in this first paragraph is: «Based on the historical record, how likely is war between a rising power like China and an established superpower like the United States? 1. Very likely or 2. Very unlikely?» (84). Navarro takes up the concept expressed by Thucydides in his *Peloponnesian War*, according to which what made the conflict between Spartans and Athenians inevitable was the growth of Athens's power and the fear that it caused in Sparta, which was recognized, at the time, as the hegemonic power. Citing other examples closer to us, such as that of the challenge posed on the seas by Wilhelminian Germany to Great Britain, the hegemonic power before the Great War, Navarro notes that, starting from 1500, in 11 cases out of 15 in which a hegemonic power was facing a rising power,

(83) G. ALLISON, *Thucydides's Trap Has Been Sprung in the Pacific*, in «Financial Times», 21 August 2012 and ID., *The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?*, in «The Atlantic», 24 September 2015. Chinese president Xi, however, was perfectly aware of the ongoing debate in the United States and in November 2013 at a meeting in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing he reassured the Western delegation: «We all need to work together to avoid the Thucydides trap – destructive tensions between an emerging power and established powers», G. RACHMAN, *Easternisation. War and Peace in the Asian Century*, quoted, p. 2. Of G. ALLISON, now director of Harvard University's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, see also the recent book *Destined for War. Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Melbourne – London, Scribe, 2017. Allison emphasizes how both Xi and Trump represent the national aspirations of their respective countries and how the goal of both presidents is to «make their nations great again», each of them considering the other nation's interests as an obstacle to achieving his own goal, p. IX. In particular, referring also to the «clash of civilizations» foreshadowed by Huntington, Allison states that the concept of the «Chinese dream», which is a *leitmotiv* of Xi's political discourse, makes it difficult for China to become a «responsible stakeholder», Ivi, p. XVIII-XIX. On the debate arising from the publication of the two articles by Graham Allison see M. BUFFET, *Is the Thucydides Trap for the U.S. and China? A Response to Graham Allison*, in «Huffington Post», 20 September 2015; A. CHANCE, *Is Thucydides Helpful in Explaining Sino-US Relations?*, in «The Diplomat», 20 May 2015; E. GIN, *The Thucydides Trap*, in *Future Wars. Storia della distopia militare*, Quaderno 2016 della Società italiana di storia militare (Sism), ed. by V. Ilari, Milano, Acies, 2016, pp. 681-686.

(84) P. NAVARRO, *Crouching Tiger. What China's Militarism Means for the World*, quoted, p. 21.

war became inevitable. In 70% of cases in which a hegemonic power (as the United States is today) has faced a rising power (like today's China), the conflict was inevitable (85).

The fear of not being able to militarily face the rising power pushes the hegemonic power to increase its military capabilities, giving rise to the "security dilemma" and to a dangerous arms race. Resuming Mearsheimer's realist theories of the anarchy of the international system and the uncertainty of others' intentions, Navarro shares his conclusions about the need for the United States to prevent the possibility that China becomes the hegemonic power in Asia at the expense of America (86). Predictably, as regards the initial question - «how likely is war between a rising power like China and an established superpower like the United States?» -, Navarro answers «very likely». The structure of the entire volume then proceeds with similar questions to raise a doubt in the readers – and as we go on reading the awareness – regarding China's real aggressive intentions towards the established order.

Such aggressive intentions on the part of China, according to Navarro, will not necessarily materialize in an open conflict, although they could easily occur, in his view, due to specific tensions such as those in the East or South China Sea, in Taiwan or in the Korean peninsula (87). But what China is already doing, according to the American economist, is trying to achieve its hegemonic goals through a strategy that, by putting into practice some precepts contained in the famous *Art of War* by Sun Tzu, allows China to win "without fighting", gradually achieving partial strategic successes and presenting the United States and its allies with a *fait accompli*. Successes that China has managed to achieve despite the priority status given to the Asia-Pacific region by the Obama administrations. Thus proving, in Navarro's view, the failure of the Pivot to Asia because of the creation by Beijing of about 3,000 acres of artificial islands in the South China Sea, the unilateral declaration of an "air defense identification zone" in the East China Sea, as well as other illegitimate claims of territories from India to Indo-

(85) Ivi, p. 22.

(86) See J. J. MEARSHEIMER, *The tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2001; ID., *The Rise of China Will Not Be Peaceful at All*, in «The Australian», 18 November 2005.

(87) Even Graham Allison, by analyzing previous occasions where a hegemonic power and a rising power have warded off the possibility of war in the past, concludes that a Sino-American conflict, although much more probable than generally not recognized, is avoidable only if many efforts are made by both parties, especially in view of the fact that «hot war between nuclear superpowers is no longer a justifiable option», G. ALLISON, *Destined for War. Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, quoted, p. 208.

nesia and the Philippines (88). Since the Pivot has failed, despite the grand initial statements, the new Trump presidency will be able to firmly pursue a strategy of «peace through strength», a more assertive strategy where the high-sounding declarations are followed up by some action. This includes increasing the military budget and relying on those partners which - like Japan, South Korea, India, or even Myanmar and Vietnam - are interested in a closer relationship with Washington because they see «Beijing as a bully and potential aggressor that must be balanced against» (89).

Navarro's approach and volumes with very aggressive titles and contents recall in China the so-called “nationalist literature”, known as *shuo bu shu* (说不书, literally the “say no” literature), mentioned by Kissinger in his *On China* and then cited also by other Italian scholars (90). This nationalist trend began to spread in China in the '90s with the publication of the bestseller *The China that Can Say No: Political and Emotional Choices in the post Cold-War Era*, whose authors (Zhang Zangzang, Zhang Xiaobo, Song Qiang, Tang Zhengyu, Qiao Bian and Gu Qingsheng) were very critical of American values and foreign policy (91).

(88) On political tensions and maritime disputes in East Asia see S. DOSSI, *La Cina e le controversie marittime in Asia orientale: vecchie questioni e nuove sfide*, in *Politica, società e cultura di una Cina in ascesa. L'amministrazione Xi Jinping al suo primo mandato*, “Cina Report”, ed. by M. Miranda, quoted, pp. 71-86.

(89) A. GRAY - P. NAVARRO, *Donald Trump's Peace Through Strength Vision for the Asia-Pacific. How the Republican nominee will rewrite America's relationship with Asia*, in «Foreign Policy», 7 November 2016. In early March 2017, the Chinese President also announced that military spending would have grown by only 7% in China, while in 2016 the increase in military spending was 7.6%. He was then showing a more conciliating attitude in this field as well, whereas Trump proposed a 10% increase in US military spending, amounting to \$ 54 billion, cutting into other important sectors such as environment or foreign aid. Certainly «not a soft-power budget», as Mick Mulvaney, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, pointed out; see R. BERMAN, *President Trump's 'Hard Power' Budget*, in «The Atlantic», 16 March 2017; A. BRADANINI, *Oltre la Grande Muraglia. Uno sguardo sulla Cina che non ti aspetti*, quoted, pp. 109-111. As G. PASTORI noted, these declarations, together with those relating to the opportunity to strengthen the American nuclear potential, have indeed reduced the fears of a policy of «appeasement» towards Washington's main competitors on the international scene, namely Russia and China, *Dividere il fardello: Stati Uniti ed Europa da Barack Obama a Donald Trump*, in *Effetto Trump? Gli Stati Uniti nel sistema internazionale fra continuità e mutamento*, ed. by M. De Leonardis, Milano, EDUCatt, 2017, p. 54.

(90) H. KISSINGER, *On China*, quoted, pp. 503 ff.; B. ONNIS, *Has China Plans for World Domination?*, quoted, pp. 65-66; M. MIRANDA, *La questione dell'identità nazionale in Cina e il nuovo nazionalismo contemporaneo*, in *L'identità nazionale nel XXI secolo in Cina, Giappone, Corea, Tibet e Taiwan*, ed. by M. Miranda, Roma, Orientalia, 2012, pp. 50-53.

(91) *Zhongguo keyi shuo bu: Lengzhanhou shidai de zhengzhi yu qinggan jueze* 中国可以说: 冷战后时代的政治与情感抉择 [*The China that Can Say No: Political and Emotional Choices in the post Cold-War Era*], ed. by Zhang Zangzang – Zhang Xiaobo – Song Qiang – Tang Zhengyu – Qiao Bian – Gu Qingsheng, Beijing, Zhongguo Wenlian chubanshe, 1996. After

Starting from 2000-2001, the Chinese authorities have tried to keep Chinese nationalism under control, partly rekindled also by the Sino-Japanese dispute on the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, insisting instead on the issues of “peace and development”. The theory formulated since the early 2000s by Zheng Bijian was definitely a turning point in this direction. A PCC intellectual and former director of the Central Committee’s Propaganda Department, Zheng Bijian was trying to build the image of a country willing to put its political and economic influence at the service of a «harmonious world» (*hexie shijie* 和谐世界) (92). So Zheng lent support to the engagement advocates and to Clinton’s strategy as well.

In more recent years, some of these authors then published, in 2009, the essay anthology *China is Unhappy: the Great Era; the Grand Goal, and our National Anxieties and External Challenges*, explicitly inviting young people and the masses to seize the opportunities offered by China’s current position of strength because the West - says Song Xiaojun - is not willing to lay down its arms to trade with China peacefully (93). *China is Unhappy* had a huge public success,

the crisis in the Taiwan Strait in 1995-96, several polls showed widespread popular support for the reunification of the “rebel province” to China. At the same time books and pamphlets were inviting to resist “Western civilization” and American foreign policy, finding many followers in the Chinese nationalist public. “The China that can say no” immediately became a source of concern for international observers, even more so after the publication in 1996 of the volume *Yaomohua Zhongguo de beihou* 妖魔化中国的背后, ed. by Li Xiguang – Liu Kang (Beijing, Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 1996), later translated into English, *Behind the Scene of Demonizing China*, in «Contemporary Chinese Thought», 30, 1998, pp. 3-102. Both the authors lived and worked in the United States – Li as a journalist at the «Washington Post» and Liu as a Professor at Pennsylvania State University -, which helped to strengthen the image of an intentional «demonization» of China by Western countries, and the United States in particular, to prevent its rise. A strong Chinese nationalism developed therefore from the period of the crisis on the Taiwan Strait until the end of the decade, culminating in the famous anti-Western demonstrations that spontaneously erupted across China after the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the NATO operations against Serbia, see A. FRANCONI, *Guerra di parole. “Minaccia cinese” e “Sviluppo pacifico” nel dibattito sull’ascesa di Pechino (1992-2005)* – part one, quoted, pp. 8-10. In 1999 also Fang Ning, Wang Xiaodong (who both had organized the opinion polls in 1994-1995) and Song Qiang (one of the authors of *The China that Can Say No*) published the book *Quanqiu hua yinying xia de Zhongguo zhi lu* 全球化阴影下的中国之路 [*China’s Path in the Shadow of Globalisation*] (Beijing, Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1999), strongly critical of the United States. On the ambiguities and ambivalences of Chinese nationalism see J.-P. CABESTAN, *The Many Facets of Chinese Nationalism*, in «China Perspectives», 59, 2005.

(92) See ZHENG BIJIAN, *China’s Peaceful Rise. Speeches of Zheng Bijian: 1997-2005*, Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2005, pp. 86 ff.; ID., *China’s “Peaceful Rise” to Great-Power Status*, in «Foreign Affairs», 84, 2005, 5, pp. 18-24; A. FRANCONI, *Guerra di parole. “Minaccia cinese” e “Sviluppo pacifico” nel dibattito sull’ascesa di Pechino (1992-2005)* – part one, quoted, p. 11.

(93) *Zhongguo bu gaoxing: da shidai, da mubiao ji women de neiyou waihuan* 中国不高兴: 大时代,大目标及我们的内忧外患 [*China is Unhappy: the Great Era; the Grand Goal, and our National Anxieties and External Challenges*], Nanjing, Jiangsu Renmin chubanshe, 2009. On the

selling about 100,000 copies only in the month following its publication, and was followed one year later, in 2010, by another bestseller titled *China Dream: Great Power Thinking and Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era*, published by Liu Mingfu, a senior officer of the People’s Liberation Army who teaches at the National Defense University. According to Liu Mingfu, the «China Dream», China’s goal is to become the dominant power, «the number one in the world» to revive the past national glories, ousting the United States (94).

Both volumes are very nationalist, they contest the theory of “peaceful rise” and also contain criticism of the ruling *élite* that is considered too passive in the face of the “abuses” of the American administrations. The release of these books coincided with a period of particular tension in the South China Sea, but despite having had great public success, they were criticized both by the press and online, as well as in the academic world (95). But the fact that they became a national case undoubtedly suggests that they describe impulses that are present in Chinese society. So Kissinger rightly questions why, in a country where censorship is extremely pervasive, the authors were able to publish texts that contain explicit criticisms of the ruling *élite*:

Was this one ministry [of Defence]’s way of influencing policy? [...] Did the leadership allow the debate to drift as a kind of psychological gambit, so that the world would understand China’s internal pressures and begin to take account of them? Or is this just an example of China becoming more pluralistic, allowing a greater multiplicity of voices, and of reviewers happening to be generally more tolerant of nationalist voices? (96).

In any case, the Chinese government has felt compelled to respond by distancing itself from these positions, reaffirming the theory of “peaceful development”. In December 2010, just a few months after the publication of Liu’s book, State Councilor Dai Bingguo published the article titled *Adhere To The Path of Peaceful Development* (97). Dai Bingguo actually reiterates that “peaceful development” is

“different nuances” of unhappy China see, F. CONGIU, *Il processo di modernizzazione cinese tra “multipolarismo e polarizzazione”*, in *L’Asia di Obama e della crisi economica globale*, ed. by M. Torri - N. Mocchi, quoted, pp. 237 ff.

(94) LIU MINGFU, *Zhongguo meng: hou Meiguo shidai de daguo siwei yu zhanlue dingwei* 中国梦: 后美国时代的大国思维与战略定位 [*China Dream: Great Power Thinking and Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era*], Beijing, Zhongguo Youyi chubanshe, 2010, then translated in English with a foreword by Liu Yazhou (New York, CN Times Book, 2015).

(95) B. ONNIS, *Has China Plans for World Domination?*, quoted, p. 66.

(96) H. KISSINGER, *On China*, quoted, p. 507.

(97) DAI BINGGUO, *Adhere To The Path Of Peaceful Development* [*Zhongguo guowu weiyuan Dai Bingguo: jianchi zou heping fazhan zhi lu*], 6 December, 2010, available at <http://china.usc.edu/dai-bingguo-“adhere-path-peaceful-development”-dec-6-2010>.

neither an expedient with which China «hides its brightness and bides its time» nor a choice that can damage the country by losing strategic advantages. “Peaceful development”, on the other hand, is a far-sighted policy that allows China to best accomplish its national interests by entering the international context in a profitable way, with a view to peaceful cooperation. He therefore emphasizes the common objectives that in a globalized world make countries increasingly interdependent. In this situation, cooperation becomes essential and China, writes Dai, is «a member of the big international family» (98). So the Chinese leadership reaffirmed its adherence to the theory of “peaceful development”, responding in this way both to international observers, worried by the publication of the cited bestsellers, and to that part of the Chinese population that considers the Party leadership’s approach too moderate.

Starting from 2012, the concept of «Chinese Dream» (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦) has been used in many speeches by Xi himself, placing it in the perspective of the «rejuvenation of the Chinese nation» (*zhenxing Zhonghua* 振兴中华). It is no coincidence that he connected the two concepts in the speech of November 29, 2012, pronounced during his visit to the exhibition “The Road to Rejuvenation” (*fuxing zhi lu* 复兴之路), significantly held in the new National Museum (which illustrates how China redeemed itself from the humiliations inflicted by the Westerners in the previous two centuries). President Xi said:

We are now all talking about the Chinese Dream. In my opinion, achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the advent of modern times. This dream embodies the long-cherished hope of several generations of the Chinese people, gives expression to the overall interests of the Chinese nation and the Chinese people, and represents the shared aspiration of all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation (99).

The concept of «rejuvenation of the Chinese nation» - which also has a long tradition in Chinese political discourse from Sun Yat-sen to Hu Jintao and which refers to the glorious past of the Chinese nation - is therefore linked to the «Chinese Dream». The specificity of the Chinese dream was then immediately underlined by Zheng Bijian who specified that China does not intend to realize the «American dream», the «European dream» or the «Soviet dream», aiming at

(98) Ivi; H. KISSINGER, *On China*, quoted, pp. 508-513; B. ONNIS, *Has China Plans for World Domination?*, quoted, pp. 66-67.

(99) XI JINPING, *Achieving Rejuvenation Is the Dream of the Chinese People*, in ID., *The Governance of China*, vol. I, quoted p. 38.

achieving national development and socialist modernization through peaceful means⁽¹⁰⁰⁾. The dream of the entire Chinese nation continues, in Xi's speeches, to promote economic development, aims at innovation and excellence but, unlike in Liu's volume, the Chinese dream is presented in a perspective of cooperation inside the international community, as «China cannot develop without the rest of the world; nor can the world as a whole prosper without China»⁽¹⁰¹⁾.

At the APEC summit of November 2014, Xi explained the concept of an «Asia-Pacific Dream» and announced to the 20 leaders (including Obama, Putin and Shinzo Abe) who came to Beijing the plans to significantly increase Chinese investments abroad and to allocate a special fund of \$ 40 billion for the new Silk Road, the Silk Road Fund. It was an important step because in fact Xi's predecessors had never talked about an «Asia-Pacific Dream», implying a Chinese leadership for it. So far, the Chinese leaders had operated in continuity with Deng Xiaoping's precepts aimed at maintaining a low profile without claiming the leadership, so as to ensure the stability necessary for ever greater internal development. These statements by Xi Jinping were therefore read, by some international observers, and Americans in particular, as «a fundamental break with the past», launching a more assertive foreign policy, of which the BRI is the main tool: Tom Miller - senior analyst at Gavekal Research and editor of the «China Economic Quarterly» - expressly speaks of «Empire Building Along

(100) Zheng Bijian jiedu "Zhongguo meng": bu zuo "Meiguo meng Ouzhou meng Sulian meng" 郑必坚解读“中国梦”：不做“美国梦欧洲梦苏联梦” [Zheng Bijian interprets the Chinese dream: we do not realize the American, European or Soviet dream], in «Yifeng wang», 3 December 2012; ZHENG BIJIAN, *China's Path of Peaceful Development in the Second Decade of the 21st Century*, in *China under Xi Jinping. Its Economic Challenges and Foreign Policy Initiatives*, ed. by Shao Binhong, Leiden - Boston, Brill, 2015, pp. 11-21; M. MIRANDA, *La re-ideologizzazione del Partito e degli ambienti intellettuali da parte di Xi Jinping*, in *Politica, società e cultura di una Cina in ascesa. L'amministrazione Xi Jinping al suo primo mandato*, "Cina Report", ed. by M. Miranda, quoted, pp. 49-68.

(101) XI JINPING, *Right Time to Innovate and Make Dreams Come True*, 21 October 2013, in ID., *The Governance of China*, vol. I, quoted, p. 65. See also Xi's speech at the General Debate of the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly at the UN headquarters in New York, on September 28, 2015: «More than 1.3 billion Chinese people are endeavoring to realize the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation. The dream of the Chinese people is closely related to the dreams of other peoples of the world. We cannot realize the Chinese Dream without a peaceful international environment, a stable international order, or the understanding, support, and help of the rest of the world. The realization of the Chinese Dream will bring greater opportunities to other countries and contribute to global peace and development», in ID., *The Governance of China*, vol. II, quoted, p. 574. On Xi's efforts to address misunderstandings about the meaning of the Chinese dream see ZHOU XINMIN, *Xi Jinping's Governance and the Future of China*, New York, Shyhorse Publishing, 2017, pp. 43-45. On the ongoing debate on the Chinese dream, see G. SAMARANI, *La Cina contemporanea. Dalla fine dell'Impero a oggi*, quoted, pp. 419 ff.

the New Silk Road» (102). Also Franco Mazzei, an eminent Italian orientalist, in a speech at the Chamber of Deputies in Rome on November 2017, spoke about «China 3.0» to distinguish this third phase, led by Xi Jinping, a strong decision-maker inside the country and an assertive leader outside, compared to the two previous phases, Mao's China (1.0) and Deng's one (2.0) (103).

But the Chinese establishment's official position - which distances itself and publicly disavows both the American and Chinese nationalist literature - is therefore partly different from the current US administration's position. Navarro's contributions come from academia - as well as the works of other American realists - and Navarro's influence on Trump has been evident since the beginning of the presidential campaign. As is known, on several occasions during the election campaign, Trump has defined China as a «currency manipulator»: chapter 5 of the volume *Death by China* is entitled *Death by Currency Manipulation* and is entirely dedicated to the currency issue (104). Moreover, Navarro has bitterly criticized both Henry Paulson, Bush's Secretary of the Treasury, and Timothy Geithner, Obama's Secretary of the Treasury, for not labelling China as a «currency manipulator» (105). Likewise, the roots of Trump's «Buy American, Hire American» are easily identifiable in Navarro's exhortation to buy «China-free products», ie avoiding not only the Made in China products but also all those products whose components are manufactured or assembled in China (106). In fact, Navarro's goal is to disarm what he calls «China's Weapons of Job Destruction», ie protectionist tax policies that keep the yuan artificially low, illegal tariffs on fundamental raw materials,

(102) T. MILLER, *China's Asian Dream*, quoted, pp. 23 ff.

(103) F. MAZZEI, *Il sogno di Xi Jinping nella Cina 3.0*, in *La Cina all'indomani del congresso*, Presentation of the CSCC (Centro Studi sulla Cina Contemporanea) Policy Paper «Il XIX congresso del Partito comunista cinese», Camera dei Deputati di Roma, 8 November 2017.

(104) P. NAVARRO, *Death by China*, quoted, pp. 67-76. See also ID., *The Coming China Wars*, quoted, pp. 7 ff.

(105) ID., *Death by China*, p. 225.

(106) Ivi, pp. 234 ff. However, as noted by Allison, «supply chains connecting the indispensable producer to the irreplaceable consumer have become so integrated that virtually everything sold in the US, from iPhones to Boeing aircraft, is made with components from China». So, we must to try to avoid a conflict between the two economic powers because they are so interdependent that, in the event of military escalation, the mutual economic impact would make the benefits of war lower than the damage received by each of them: «they create an analogue of MAD [Mutual Assured Destruction] that has been labelled MAED: Mutual Assured Economic Destruction», G. ALLISON, *Destined for War. Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, quoted, pp. 210-211. See also I. BREMMER, *China vs America: Fight of the Century. The world's two great powers are growing dangerously hostile to one another. Could this be worse than the Cold War?*, in «Prospect», April 2010, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/china-vs-america-fight-of-the-century>

«predatory prices», low safety standards in the production of many consumer goods, «dumping practices», little attention to environmental damage, etc. (107). Navarro strongly denounces «the Cheating China Price», thanks to which, as is well known, the Asian giant has conquered the manufacturing industry at a global level by using commercial practices considered «unfair» and deplorable working conditions («slave-labor conditions») (108). Concern about the trade deficit with China and other Asian countries has been a constant theme in Trump's election campaign and, despite the President having initially lowered the tone of the debate once elected, much emphasis has subsequently been placed by his administration on trade deficits. This emphasis on trade deficits has marked a discontinuity in Washington's policy toward Asia (109).

Navarro's approach is therefore more assertive than that of the neocons of the Bush administrations, from whose political humus - that of the "Blue Team" - he also comes. A long list of «China Apologists» is in fact identified by Navarro as responsible for the current trade situation with China. What Navarro calls a «China Apologist Coalition» includes prominent personalities such as, among others, Fareed Zakaria or Tom Friedman (110), important publications - from the «Wall Street Journal» to the «Financial Times» and the «Economist» -, and financial giants like Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley. And also all those prestigious think tanks that, albeit with different nuances, favor engagement with China, such as the Council on Foreign Relations, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Carnegie Endowment, the Brookings Institute, etc. Above all, the ruling *élites* in Washington, regardless of their political color - from the Clinton administrations to the Bush administrations up to Obama - were, in his view, responsible for an appeasement policy instead of confronting China. All these experts and think tanks fail, according to Navarro, in underestimating

(107) P. NAVARRO, *Death by China*, quoted, pp. 49 ff.

(108) ID., *The Coming China Wars*, quoted, pp. 1 ff.

(109) See B. LEE, *Trump's First 100 Days in Asia*, in «The Diplomat», 28 April 2017. Other discontinuities from Obama's Asian policy are rightly identified in the US withdrawal from the TPP and from the commitments made in Paris on Climate Change. The continuities are instead identified in the attention paid to the Asia-Pacific region also by the Trump administration, confirming to support America's traditional Asian allies - Japan and South Korea - and to continue high-level dialogues with China. Despite Trump's approach during the election campaign and despite the initial concern about the phone call with the Taiwanese Premier Tsai Ing-wen, Trump predictably confirmed the «one China policy», Ivi.

(110) Author of the well-known best seller *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (London, Allen Lane, 2005), Thomas Friedman is branded by Navarro as one of the «Globalization Gurus» who mistakenly believe that China's entry into the WTO has produced greater competitiveness and therefore beneficial effects on the globalization process, P. NAVARRO, *Death by China*, quoted, pp. 215 ff.

the «Butterfly effect» because of which «what happens in China, doesn't stay in China» and, if China flaps its powerful economic wings, stormy consequences are very likely to happen worldwide in every field, from politics to the military and the environment (111).

Conclusion

It is therefore not surprising that Navarro's appointment was perceived with concern by both some American observers and the Chinese leadership. In the United States, in fact, Jacob Heilbrunn, editor of the «National Interest», defines Navarro as «The Most Dangerous Man in Trump World» and warns that if Navarro's line prevails and Trump imposes drastic tariffs on China, this would lead to a global depression (112). The Chinese leadership, for its part, in December 2016, following Trump's election and in the midst of the polemics unleashed by the phone call between Tsai Ing-wen and Trump (113), had invited Kissinger, at the time ninety-three, to China. Received by President Xi Jinping for clarification of Trump's real intentions on foreign trade, Kissinger had expressed the hope that once at the White House, the new president would not confirm some of the statements he made during the election campaign. One of the meanings of Kissinger's visit to China - the 80th since 1972 - can be identified in the Chinese hope that the former Secretary of State may still play a key role in influencing Trump's foreign policy, since the visit had been agreed and Trump had repeatedly expressed himself in favorable terms about Kissinger (114). In mid-April 2017 Trump refused to label China as a «currency manipulator» and in mid-May important trade agreements were signed on meat but also on liquid natural gas and credit services, following the two leaders' first meeting at Mar-a-Lago in Florida.

Basically, common sense prevailed and the agreement was reached despite the positions of Wilbur Ross, Trump's Secretary of Commerce, are very similar to those of Navarro and those of Robert Lighthizer. The latter was nominated U.S. Trade Representative by President Trump on January 2017. An American

(111) ID., *The Coming China Wars*, quoted, p. XV.

(112) J. HEILBRUNN, *The Most Dangerous Man in Trump World? How Peter Navarro could lead us into a global depression—or worse*, in «Politico», 12 February 2017.

(113) See M. BERRETTINI, *American (next) Pacific Century? Gli Stati Uniti di Donald Trump alla fine della «Great Divergence»*, in *Effetto Trump? Gli Stati Uniti nel sistema internazionale fra continuità e mutamento*, ed. by M. De Leonadis, quoted, pp. 131 ff.

(114) On Kissinger's role see G. SAMARANI, *La Cina contemporanea. Dalla fine dell'Impero a oggi*, quoted, pp. 443 ff.

attorney from Ohio, Lighthizer was already Deputy U.S. Trade Representative for President Ronald Reagan from 1983-1985 and even then very critical on China's rise (115). Once nominated, he immediately called for the US to bring «more cases against China for failing to comply with WTO obligations» (116). So, the Mar-a-Lago agreement was reached despite the critical opinions regarding China on the part of Trump's trade advisors. This at the time was considered a setback for the three of them, but it was only a temporary one because a new bipartisan consensus has emerged on China policies in the current US political debate, a «trend [that] developed progressively and over time - not overnight» (117).

So these anti-Chinese positions are only partially balanced, within the American establishment, by other personalities whose background and approach is more open and friendly towards China, like Terry E. Brandstad (118) as US Ambassador to the PRC or Stephen Swarzman as Director of the Strategic and Policy Forum. Terry E. Brandstad, former Republican governor of Iowa, has for years already been in close contact with the Chinese president, promoting and encouraging for decades the trade links between Iowa and China. Stephen Swarzman made available in April 2013 a personal fund of 100 million dollars to launch a scholarship program through which every year more than 100 American graduates, the Schwarzman Scholars, have the opportunity to study in China at Tsinghua University (119). The project has been conceived to provide a greater knowledge of the Asian country by the United States but also and above all with the concrete aim of establishing links with the *élite* leaders who traditionally, starting from the third generation of leaders up to the current fifth, are formed in the prestigious Tsinghua University, from which both Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping graduated, just to mention the most famous names. Brandstad and Swarzman are more discreet, their initiatives have attracted less attention from the media than Navarro's documentaries, which have obtained greater visibility, having involved numerous University Professors and national and international experts with a strong media

(115) J. JACOBS, *Trump Taps China Critic Lighthizer for U.S. Trade Representative*, in «Bloomberg L.P.», 3 January 2017.

(116) E. TRAN, *Steel Industry Cheers Nomination of Lighthizer as U.S. Trade Representative*, in «Bloomberg L.P.», 3 January 2017.

(117) D. SHAMBAUGH, *The New American Bipartisan Consensus on China Policy*, in «China-US Focus», 21 September 2018. See also R. SUTTER, *PacNet #62 - The 115th Congress Aligns with the Trump Administration in Targeting China*, in «Pacific Forum», 30 August 2018; M. DEL PERO, *I dilemmi dell'interdipendenza USA-Cina*, quoted.

(118) See V. v.B., *An "old friend" of Xi Jinping will be America's next ambassador to China*, in «The Economist», 8 December 2016.

(119) See A. STANLEY, *Swarzman Scholars Announces Inaugural Class to Study in China*, in «The New York Times», 10 January 2016.

impact. Nevertheless their initiatives are concrete and their projects could lead to constructive collaborations in the long term. The same dismissal, in August 2017, of Steve Bannon, former Chief Strategist at the White House, was initially interpreted as a conciliatory signal to China because according to Bannon, as according to Navarro, there is a direct correlation between the increase of wealth in Asia and the US decline (120).

President Trump made his first official visit to the Asia-Pacific in November 2017. Top priorities on his agenda were U.S. trade with the region and the North Korean issue; on both issues, he needed to find a solution with Xi, so the meetings between the two presidents were crucial. Trump was able to get 250 billion dollars in Chinese contracts in order to purchase U.S. goods, a Chinese agreement to allow U.S. financial companies to do business with Chinese people (rather than the Chinese government), and confirmation that Beijing will continue to pursue the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

Despite this, the situation remains uncertain mainly due to the duties repeatedly imposed or threatened by the Trump administration. In January 2018 Trump decided to impose tariffs on washing machines and solar panels and Wilbur Ross declared at the 48th WEF in Davos that «a trade war has been in place for quite a while. The difference is that the U.S. troops are now coming to the ramparts» (121). Imposing duties on solar panels, however, means hitting one of the sectors in which China has invested heavily in order to facilitate the fulfillment of the Paris agreements. So also in this case we can foresee a negative return for the US in terms of soft power. China is currently twenty-seventh in “The 2018 Soft Power 30” – the global ranking of soft power -, losing two positions compared to 2017 (when the PRC was 25th) but still gaining one position compared to 2016. Even if the gap is very wide, the US fell to third in 2017 and to fourth in 2018, leaving the top spot to Macron’s France whose soft power was on the rise in 2017 and to Britain in 2018 (122). Moreover, tariffs on washing machines and solar panels have been seen as «the first move that will be,

(120) Chief executive officer in Trump’s election campaign, Bannon had openly considered, in very derogatory terms, the possibility of a conflict between the US and China: «We’re going to war in the South China Sea in five to 10 years. There’s no doubt about that. They’re taking their sandbars and making basically stationary aircraft carriers and putting missiles on those. They come here to the United States in front of our face – and you understand how important face is – and say it’s an ancient territorial sea», B. HAAS, *Steve Bannon: ‘We’re going to war in the South China Sea ... no doubt’*, in «The Guardian», 2 February 2017.

(121) R. AITKEN, *Is U.S. President Trump Ready To Embark On A Trade War Sparking Retaliation?*, in «Forbes», 26 January 2018.

(122) *The Soft Power 30. A Global Ranking of Soft Power*, Portland, USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2017 and 2018, available at <https://softpower30.com>

possibly, followed by the introduction of trade barriers to other industries such as steel and aluminium», stated Dr. Fragkiskos Filippaios, currently Reader in International Business at Kent Business School, University of Kent (123). But, if so, China is ready to retaliate and Wang Hejun, a senior official at China’s Commerce Ministry, said that they will «certainly take necessary measures to protect [their] legitimate rights» (124).

Their fears have come true as in March 2018 President Trump imposed a 25% tariff on steel imports and a 10% tariff on aluminium imports. Both Trump and Navarro underlined that steel is vital for a country and that without it «you don’t have a country» anymore (125). This decision has been criticized both domestically and internationally. More than 100 Republican House members signed a letter expressing «deep concern» about it and White House chief economic adviser Gary Cohn resigned arguing that «the impact on trade and on companies using cheap steel imports would outweigh any benefits of the tariffs» (126). Chinese Foreign minister Wang Yi’s first reaction was smart. Once again, he underlined that the concern that «China will replace the US is fundamentally wrong» and that China’s path towards modernization «has no need or intention to displace America» (127). China reiterated that a trade war can’t be the right solution in a globalized world, thus enforcing its perception as a «responsible power» and its commitment to international agreements, even if it never fully complied to the WTO rules (128). The White House has actually strongly denounced «years of unfair trade practices» by Beijing, including «dumping, discriminatory non-tariff barriers, forced technology transfer, overcapacity, and industrial subsidies», which contribute to increase the US trade deficit against China, currently amounting to \$375 billion (129). In May 2018, in order to protect American technology and intellectual property, Trump announced implementing «specific investment restrictions and enhanced export controls for Chinese persons and entities related

(123) R. AITKEN, *Is U.S. President Trump Ready To Embark On A Trade War Sparking Retaliation?*, quoted.

(124) T. HANCOCK – S. DONNAN, *China threatens to retaliate against US metals tariffs*, in «Financial Times», 18 February 2018.

(125) *Donald Trump signs order for metals tariff plan, prompting fears of trade war*, in «The Guardian», 8 March 2018.

(126) Ivi.

(127) HE WEI, *China-US should work as partners, not rivals, says Foreign Minister*, in «China Daily», 8 March 2018.

(128) MARK WU, *The ‘China, Inc.’ Challenge to Global Trade Governance*, in «Harvard International Law Journal», 57, 2016, pp. 1001-1063.

(129) A. FENSOM, *US-China Trade War Escalates*, in «The Diplomat», 29 May 2018.

to the acquisition of industrially significant technology» (130). Likewise, he also stated the US government will continue to pursue litigation at the WTO for China's violations of the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights. Last but not least, the US will impose «a 25% tariff on \$50 billion of goods imported from China containing industrially significant technology», including those related to the “Made in China 2025” program (131).

In the aftermath of the G7, Navarro stigmatized the concern of Canadian, European and Japanese finance ministers over current US trade policies and their lack of acknowledgment of «the trade practices that contribute to America's more than \$500 billion annual global trade deficit in goods and services», concluding that «it's time for our major trading partners — from strategic competitors like China to key members of the Group of 7 — to realize that the era of American complacency in the international marketplace is over» (132). In the wake of Navarro's and Lighthizer's approach, in June 2018 Donald Trump stated that the United States will implement the duties on a long list of Made in China products containing «industrially significant technologies» (133). In response to the corresponding Chinese countermeasures, Trump threatened restrictions on Beijing's investments in strategic US sectors as well as duties on another \$200 billion of Chinese products – which were then imposed in July and in September (134).

At the same time, the International Monetary Fund, in the annual analysis conducted by the Washington Institute on the US economy, feared a possible recession. The combined effect of the tax cut and the increase in public spending «will cause the federal government deficit to exceed 4.5 percent of GDP by 2019. This is nearly double what the deficit was just 3 years ago». According to

(130) The White House, *Statement on Steps to Protect Domestic Technology and Intellectual Property from China's Discriminatory and Burdensome Trade Practices*, 29 May 2018, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-steps-protect-domestic-technology-intellectual-property-chinas-discriminatory-burdensome-trade-practices/>.

(131) Ivi.

(132) P. NAVARRO, *The Era of American Complacency on Trade Is Over*, in «The New York Times», 8 June 2018. It is worth mentioning that the SCO leaders met in Qingdao for their 18th annual meeting at the same time as the G7 in Quebec. It was the first SCO summit since India and Pakistan joined the organization in June 2017, symbolically showing the world the potential strength of an Asian alternative to the G7. Comparing pictures and outcomes, the Chinese media put a lot of emphasis on the success of the «Shanghai Spirit» while the G7 ended «in disarray», see *SCO explores global governance for new era*, in «The Global Times», 10 June 2018.

(133) The White House, *Statement by the President Regarding Trade with China*, 15 June 2018, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-regarding-trade-china/>.

(134) B. DAVIS – P. NICHOLAS, *Donald Trump Approves Tariffs on About \$50 Billion of Chinese Goods*, in «The Wall Street Journal», 14 June 2018; A. SWANSON - K. BRADSHAW – K. ROGERS, *Trump Threatens Tariffs on \$200 Billion in China Goods, Escalating Fight*, in «The New York Times», 18 June 2018.

IMF experts, «such a strongly procyclical fiscal policy is quite rare in the U.S. context and has not been seen since the Johnson administration in the 1960s» with the Vietnam War and the Great Society spending. The current fiscal path «will elevate the risks to the U.S. and global economy» (135).

The situation therefore remains uncertain and very tense, while Chinese experts and media, minimizing the US trade deficit, denounce the US «unilateral trade protectionism measures» and the subsequent violation of the consensus reached in previous China-US trade talks (136). On December 1, 2018 a 90-day commercial truce was signed in Argentina but negotiations are currently underway to reach an agreement and Trump decided to extend the tariff deadline when it was expiring at the end of February 2019 (137). On the eve of the trade talks in Beijing in January 2019, Xi Jinping said that cooperation is the only option, once again apparently showing a more conciliatory attitude than Lighthizer and Navarro who want to achieve significant changes in China's IP laws and regulations, in addition to greater purchases of American products. Nevertheless, it is a fact that foreign companies operating in China have so far been obliged to share their know-how with Chinese companies in joint ventures (138). So, their demands finally seem to be met as Beijing's parliament approved in mid-March a new foreign investment law that aims to eliminate forced IP transfer and limit government interference in foreign-owned enterprises, in order to de-escalate the trade war.

According to an old saying, we must never make any predictions about the future (139), but in relation to the present, we can conclude that Kissinger's approach to China is confirmed as the only desirable solution to the crisis in the Pacific area. In a context of very strong interdependence between the two

(135) United States of America: Staff Concluding Statement of the 2018 Article IV Mission, 14 June 2018, available at <http://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2018/06/13/ms061418-2018-United-States-article-iv-consultation-concluding-statement>.

(136) ZHONG NAN - REN XIAOJIN, *Experts: US 'fight and talk' trade to continue in long run*, in «China Daily», 17 June 2018.

(137) Total US tariffs applied to China currently amount to \$250 billion whereas total Chinese tariffs applied to the United States currently amount to \$110 billion. For detailed and updated information about the US-China trade dispute see DORCAS WONG – A. CHIPMAN KOTY, *The US-China Trade War: A Timeline*, in «China Briefing», 25 February 2019.

(138) Also Susan Shirk - former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State during the Clinton administration and currently Chair of the 21st Century China Center at the University of California, San Diego - remarked that the US, while continuing to successfully integrate China into the global community, should nevertheless stand up more often, «by pushing back when Beijing violates international rules and harms U.S. interests», S. SHIRK, *Trump and China. Getting Yes With Beijing*, in «Foreign Affairs», 96, 2, March/April 2017.

(139) The traditional Chinese idiomatic expression states *shi shi nan liao* 世事难料, meaning “it's difficult to predict what will happen”.

economies, both nations have reciprocal economic leverage, and the same Xi in the aforementioned Davos discourse emphasized that a commercial war does not suit anyone. Kissinger does not believe in the Thucydides's trap, he believes that the historical parallels may prove to be inaccurate and that «even the most precise analogy does not oblige the present generation to repeat the mistakes of its predecessors» (140). Global issues of priority importance such as nuclear proliferation, energy security, and climate change imply a serious and constant effort of joint US-China cooperation for the building of a «Pacific Community» in whose development both Washington and Beijing should cooperate, no matter how such cooperation seems difficult to imagine in this delicate moment.

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*Since the “China threat” theory was elaborated in the second half of the nineties by some American scholars - according to which China’s economic and military rise poses a threat to global security – the debate on China’s leading role in the international context has remained topical and ongoing. International analysts continue to question whether or not China will become the new superpower capable of supplanting the US. Graham Allison’s recent volume, *Destined for War. Can America and China Escape “Thucydides’ Trap”?* (Scribe, 2017), takes up the concept he already expounded in an article published in the «Financial Times» in 2012 and brings these issues again to the attention of international public opinion. So, the aim of this paper is to take a look at the new American perspectives on the “China threat” issue in recent years given that the appointment of some members of the “China threat” school, such as that of Perter Navarro, within the Trump administration, implies a possible change of attitude in the White House’s policies towards relations with China, as the tariffs the President has imposed since March 2018 currently seem to confirm.*

KEYWORDS

US-China Relations
Xi Jinping
China Threat Theory

(140) H. KISSINGER, *On China*, quoted, p. 522.