



The Rise/Decline of Asia in a (post-)pandemic world

Interdisciplinary analyses of consequences of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic with regard to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Hong Kong, the Bay of Bengal, and the South China Sea



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Colophon

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Foreword

“Never let a good crisis go to waste” has certainly been the adage of the makers of this report. The product in front of you illustrates what smart students in groups can achieve – even amidst a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic – in an online environment, when they collaborate towards a common objective. This report furthermore highlights the value of interdisciplinary education: students worked in a legal unit ((wo)manned by legal majors, of course), a civil-military unit (manned by strategists and riot-gear fetishists), a mapping unit (mapping geeks), a timeline unit (history reps), a pandemic unit (run by medical and a politics students), and even PR & Fundraising and Graphic Design Departments. I consider their work to be a testament to the potential and future of the Liberal Arts & Sciences in a (post-)pandemic world.

If war once resembled a “game of cards”, contemporary “players” better learn to deal with many simultaneous games, cards in Chinese, and encrypted rulesets that change by the hour. This requires a reconsideration of accepted paradigms as well as practical and digital skills attuned to a (post-) pandemic world. We move towards increasing unconventionality where people are needed who can think on their feet, handle complexity without being overwhelmed, who can communicate effectively and professionally, and engage in strategic planning through team and information management, coalition building, and diplomacy. Over the past three months, these students have done exactly that. In the coming years and decades, I hope that they continue doing so.

Tim Goudriaan
Co-founder UICCS

Executive Summary

This report discusses geopolitical, regional and national consequences of (governments' responses to) the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic in relation to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Asia. Specifically, the various contributions to this report analyse and forecast the interplay of international and regional actors and events in East and South Asia, focusing on Hong Kong, the Bay of Bengal, and South China Sea in a (post-)pandemic world. We have found that existing power dynamics between China and the rest of the world have only been amplified with the pandemic. This has ramifications for China's public image, its relationship with other nations, its economic development, and its power over Hong Kong. Importantly, the pandemic overall had a negative influence on the production of infrastructure to support the BRI. However, the weakening of countries in the South China Sea has enabled China to seize back control in various areas. As such, the main research question that this report aims to answer is: *What are the consequences of (governments' responses to) the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic with regard to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Asia?* The answer to this question consists of output from 'classical' research in the form of country profiles and op-eds, and by creating, playing, and analysing games and simulations pertaining to the scenarios under discussion.

Hong Kong: Three key actors to watch in the (post-) pandemic world are China, Hong Kong, and the U.S. The research report discusses China's role in the pandemic, and the possible ways in which China will come out on the other side. Having been the birthplace of the pandemic, whilst also being an important political actor, it is argued that this pandemic can become the beginning of the rise of China. Hong Kong in turn has become a pivotal actor in the region. Tensions have remained over the looming threat of Chinese force and the expansion of Chinese power. It also holds an important place in the overall plans of China's expanding BRI network. The Covid-19 crisis has impacted these key actors in differing ways. Covid has caused a depression in the economy and halted much of the BRI's industry and development projects. This ambitious project – starting in 2013 and being described as a 21st century Silk Road - had already been impeded by slowing economic growth in China, which is currently at its lowest rate in three decades. As the pandemic continues, the economic downfalls are likely to continue. While

adjustments have had to be made to the Belt and Road projects, other actors have also had to adjust their tactics.

Particularly, the Hong Kong protestors who have been forced to adjust their efforts with the restrictions in place due to the current crisis. As the world grapples with the Covid-19 crisis, the protestors of Hong Kong continue to adapt to face the opposing governmental force. Because of this, the Chinese government may see this period as a chance to regain control over the city and suppress the anti-government protestors further. We have seen these events starting to unfold at the end of May, 2020. New security legislation by the Chinese Communist Party has been answered with renewed protests, which are currently being put down forcefully by (riot) police. The Covid-crisis has highlighted the opportunity for a Neo-Colonial thesis that will be discussed in this report, the relationship between mainland China and Hong Kong continues to evolve, the crisis is set to further shape these relations as we move into the future.

With regard to the BRI, for China itself, the corona crisis creates both opportunities and challenges. Although young Hong Kongers vehemently oppose cooperating with the BRI, economic uncertainty makes the government more likely to do so. It also gives them better justification for taking China-Hong Kong relations in this direction. On the other hand, Sinophobia has been on the rise, partially due to economic and social uncertainty brought about by the pandemic. This is only exacerbated by the sometimes-tendentious ways in which data are shown in a visual matter, such as through maps or graphs. The way in which we pick and choose to show certain aspects of data or leave other points out can create a skewed view of the situation. As is common in the face of invisible danger, there has been widespread scapegoating of Chinese people. Apart from the pandemic, it has also become clear that economic dependence on China often comes hand in hand with collaborating on the BRI and this has created some resentment. These suspicions are therefore due to a combination of economic uncertainty, the COVID-19 pandemic, and also a response to the economic dependency that countries have towards China.

The Bay of Bengal

The first key region of this report is the Bay of Bengal, located in the northeastern part of the Indian Ocean. It concerns a number of key actors, especially with regards to the Belt Road Initiative with its maritime road passing right through the Bay. Whilst the coronavirus is also making its way to this area, power dynamics in the region may face some subsequent change. China is already facing some difficulties implementing infrastructural change in the region due to the tricky relationship it has with another big power, namely India. China has been leaning a helping hand towards India (aid and equipment) in times of this crisis whilst taking advantage of the slightly tense pre-pandemic relations between India and Bangladesh. However, India sees the growing relationship between Bangladesh and China as a threat and is in turn doing all it can to prevent these ties strengthening even more by providing Bangladesh with aid. Bangladesh, however, is struggling with the pandemic and cannot keep up with the growing number of Rohingya refugees which it cannot accommodate safely due to its preoccupation with its own population. Meanwhile, Myanmar is getting ever closer to China with strong trade deals and increasing BRI related deals being made. Nevertheless, the coronavirus has impacted Myanmar's trade with China significantly due to closed borders and its economic reliance is thus ever growing.

As a result of the war, Sri Lanka has a towering debt and the government is trying to get the economy going again. In return for the Chinese bailout which the nation needed as a result of this, China has carried out significant works in Sri Lanka under the Belt and Road Initiative. Sri Lanka has been dubbed the closest strategic partner of China in their MSR initiative as a result. Sri Lanka's government's response to COVID-19 was strict, keeping their infection and death rates relatively low. Yet, the outbreak of this virus will leave Sri Lanka with both an economic recession, a debt larger than 6 billion USD to China, and multiple ports under China's control. Since the early stages of the South China Sea dispute, Indonesia has repeatedly asserted its position as a non-claimant state, even though parts of China's 'Nine-dash line' overlap with Indonesia's exclusive economic zone, leaving the relationship with China as a tricky one. Over the past year, Chinese investments in Indonesia, mainly focused on infrastructure and manufacturing, have doubled. Furthermore, Indonesia was hit hard by the COVID-19 crisis, in

general showing that the country's healthcare system was not ready for the crisis. Indonesia's relationship with the US is strong, since they both want to increase stability in the region.

The South China Sea

The second key region for analysis is the South China sea. This extremely complex region carries with it a number of geopolitical tensions and disputed territories. The relations among the South China Sea territories have only become more complex with the recent outbreak of COVID-19. While negatively affecting the development of (maritime) infrastructure, the simultaneous weakening of countries in the South China Sea enables China to expand its foothold in these waters. The successful handling of the COVID-19 crisis by Taiwan has brought its tensions with China into even larger relief, especially through its continued ban from WHO. Relations between the Philippines and China have worsened recently, especially after the Reed Bank incident in 2019, where a Filipino fishing vessel was sunk and abandoned by a Chinese vessel.

Other countries to watch are Malaysia and Vietnam. Malaysia has a better relationship with China, formed mainly due to its reliance on China for trade. More recently, Malaysia has gained significant aid from China to combat the Pandemic. Some cite the multiple investment projects, and Belt and Road initiatives in Malaysia as the reason why Malaysia has taken a historically reserved stance in exerting their sovereignty against China in the South China sea. It remains to be seen if the pandemic, and the resulting delay in these projects will change the geopolitical balance of the region. Vietnam has had rocky relations in the region during the Cold War. After the Cold war, however, its relations with its neighbours improved greatly. Malaysia and Vietnam enjoy good relations and the Philippines is a strong economically. In addition, Vietnam is now chairman of ASEAN, which gives it the power to set the agenda of regional efforts. Unlike with other countries in the region, conflict in the South China Sea has caused hostile relations between China and Vietnam.

Table of Contents

Colophon	1
Foreword	1
Executive Summary	2
Table of Contents	6
Introduction	8
An Introduction to China’s role in the Pandemic	10
The Belt and Road Initiative	12
Key Actors	12
China	12
Hong Kong	17
Hong Kong Protests: The Military Civilian Strategies Underlying the Fight for Democracy	17
The COVID-19 Virus as an Impulse to (Neo-)Colonial Forces	26
Sovereignty in Murky Waters: Rule of law in a pandemic world	29
Bay of Bengal	34
India	36
Myanmar	40
Bangladesh	45
Sri Lanka	48
South China Sea	51
Indonesia	51
Philippines	55
Taiwan	58
Malaysia	61
Vietnam	66
The South China Sea’s Geopolitics in a Post-Pandemic World: A Simulation of the South China Sea During the Covid-19 Crisis	70
Serving China on a Silver Platter: How the Pandemic Has Presented China with the Opportunity to Further Develop Its Belt and Road Initiative	81
How the politics and narratives of crises might influence China’s BRI plans	86

The Importance of Mapping in Understanding Covid-19	90
Conclusion	93
Recommendations	94
Appendix	96
References	104

Introduction

When we consider Asia in a post-pandemic world we need to take into consideration the key actors that will be playing a role in this outcome. So far, during 2019 Hong Kong has been on the forefront of Asian news. Their fight for democracy against Chinese rule became global news, and it seemed as though the whole world had an opinion. Of course, the two biggest, and arguably most important, responses came from our two other key actors; China and the United States of America. The question is, how will the pandemic influence this current hegemonic world order of ours? How China comes out on the other end of this pandemic will be incredibly telling of Asia's future. However, functioning within a Liberal Democratic global order, where the United States appears to remain the unipolar world power, we cannot disregard them in this research paper. This may be a research paper regarding Asia in a post-pandemic world, but the truth is, how the U.S. acts has everything to do with how the world will turn out. Hence, when we look at the key actors in this research paper about Asia in a post-pandemic world, we must consider the two countries whose actions and choices may have the biggest consequences, be it literal or merely politically. The main research question that this report aims to answer is: *What are the consequences of (governments' responses to) the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic with regard to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Asia?* The answer to this question consists of output from 'classical' research in the form of country profiles and op-eds, and by creating, playing, and analysing games and simulations pertaining to the scenarios under discussion.

We will first provide you with a detailed analysis of China, Hong Kong and the USA. Here we look at their histories, their internal political structure, as well as their goals and capabilities in light of the current events surrounding the BRI and pandemic. Then, the research report mentions China's role in the pandemic, and the possible ways in which China will come out on the other side. The research paper, then, goes into the Belt and Road Initiative, starting with the key actors within this conflict. After a brief introduction to China's immense history, the paper delves into the development of the BRI. It then continues to build on the earlier op-ed by explaining the effect the COVID-19 pandemic is having on this initiative. They continue by explaining China's internal affairs as well as their international relations and how these have been affected by both the BRI and the pandemic. The first key *region* of this report is the Bay of

Bengal, located in the northeastern part of the Indian Ocean. It concerns a number of key actors, especially with regards to the Belt Road Initiative with its maritime road passing right through the Bay. The second key region for analysis is the South China sea. This extremely complex region carries with it a number of geopolitical tensions and disputed territories. The relations among the South China Sea territories have only become more complex with the recent outbreak of COVID-19.

An Introduction to China's role in the Pandemic

An opinion editorial by: Sabine Loth and Anandi Sweere

“Today, this liberal international order is in crisis” (Ikenberry, G. J., 2018)

In his 2018 article “The End of the Liberal International Order?”, John Ikenberry disputes the fact that the Liberal International order is in fact completely doomed. The liberal international order here being the global system of power put in place by the liberal powers after the Second World War. In this system, the ‘first citizen’ was its hegemonic power; the United States of America. Ikenberry argues that surprisingly it was not the rise of the East that has put our precious liberal system in trouble in a post-war world. Instead, he believes that it is the development of the nationalist West itself that had led to these unstable times. Our liberal democracy may be threatened by our own polarization, and we may be moving to a bi-polar world order. A realist world order, with not one, but two powers on top; the U.S. and China. However, this was in a post-war world. Now we have entered a new realm of time measurement. Now we must consider: a post-pandemic world. This new world order may have more pressure from the East than we have faced before, and only time will tell how it will turn out (Ikenberry, G. J., 2018).

China's role in this global pandemic has been undeniably massive. Besides the obvious conflict of China starting the pandemic by not only failing to pick up on it before-hand, but by also failing to take proper (if any) measures when the virus first became apparent they have also helped the world with controlling this highly contagious virus. The People's Republic of China has sent medical supplies and medical staff to various governments around the world, including Italy, who after China faced the largest national impact of the virus. China has also been praised by their massive scale testing, including large groups of Muslims and ethnic minorities; groups they have previously been known to exclude from their countries narrative. One article by the ‘Bangkok Post’ even goes as far as to say “Finally, we can understand from China that regardless of race or religion, we can all be friends.” (Zubeir, Samih., 1 May 2020) This clearly shows how China's public appearance is already being changed and twisted far from what we believed about their intentions in pre-pandemic times.

In addition to this, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) during the pandemic cannot be ignored. This initiative would be globalizing China's investments to massive extents. Is the

pandemic hurting it or supporting it? Though the supply-chain and manufacturing have been negatively affected by the pandemic, the digitizing of the BRI has proven incredibly successful in these trying times, making the Chinese tech industry as well as its health care industry highly attractive for investors (Boo, Bee Chun, et al, 4 May 2020).

So, maybe our liberal international order is in more trouble than we first thought. Not only are we now facing polarization in the West, we are also experiencing massive economic and political growth, as well as near neo-imperialism, in the East. A realist world order with bi-polar powers seems to be an inevitable outcome from this pandemic. As the U.S. crumbles under the weight of the virus, China has risen from its carnage. We will no longer live in a post-war world, but in a post-pandemic one.

The Belt and Road Initiative

Key Actors

China

Historical Background

The full history of China dates back to long Before the Common Era, with ancient China lasting to approximately 221 BCE. During this time there were various dynasties and clans across the lands we now consider China. Around 221 BCE the imperial era of China began, consisting of over 12 different dynasties. This era can be divided into three categories; Early, Middle, and Late. Early imperial China started off with the Qin Dynasty, and ended with the Qing Dynasty in 1911, where modern Chinese history began. Throughout the imperial era there was a lot of changing of geographical borders and unifications of tribes and clans before eventually ending up with what we now understand as the lands of China. Though this era was incredibly relevant to the history of China and its cultural and social origins, we will mainly be focusing on the modern history of China. In 1912, China officially became the Republic of China, and power was quickly turned over to Yuan Shi-kai. He abolished all provincial assemblies and local forms of governing, to unite China under his rule as emperor. Yuan's rule did not last long, and he left his position 1916 right before passing away. Frustrated with the fall of the republic, the people of China became unsettled, and a civil war between the nationalists and Communists arose. In the 1920s a revolutionary base was established by Sun Yat-Sen, and he welcomed the support of the Soviet Union, and formed an alliance with the growing Communist Party of China. The second Sino-Japanese war occurred from 1937-1945, becoming part of the Second World War. After the defeat of Japan in 1945, the civil war within China continued and by 1949 the Communist Party of China had gained control over the country. However, the United States did not recognize the People's Republic of China as an official governing entity until the early 1970s, when they finally got a seat at the United Nations. This was as a result of the PRC's affiliations with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Under the rule of Mao Zedong, from 1949 to 1976, PRC became a strict communist regime. After this Deng Xiaoping became the ruler of China, leading the country to great economic reform, and by

1997 and 1999 Hong Kong and Macau had also become geographical regions of China. The People's Republic of China remains in power under the rule of Xi Jinping. Further key events in modern Chinese history were the SARS outbreak of 2003, a prelude to the COVID-19 outbreak of 2019 ("China Profile - Timeline.", 2019).

Recent Events

In 2013 Beijing announced its most ambitious project to date: a massive infrastructure and transport project originally called One Belt, One Road (OBOR) and now known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It comprises investments in 70 countries and international organizations in Asia, Europe, and Africa and seeks to connect countries along the southwestern Silk Road land route and the maritime route in the northern part of the Bay of Bengal. In a 2013 speech announcing the project, Chinese president Xi Jinping has said working more closely together, will allow China and its neighbours to "expand regional cooperation with a more open mind and broader vision and achieve new glories together" (Brakman et al, 2019). It is estimated that total Chinese spending on BRI-related projects could total \$1.3 trillion (€1.16 trillion), which is seven times more than the American investments in European economies after World War II under the Marshall Plan (Pandey, 2020). By early January 2020, 2951 projects were planned across the world, with a total value of 3.87 trillion dollars ("How will the international Covid-19 outbreak impact the Belt and Road Initiative?", 2020).

The ambitious project - described as a 21st century Silk Road - has been impeded by slowing economic growth in China, which is currently at its lowest rate in three decades (Prasso, 2020). In addition, inflation is rising and China is suffering from the effects of a trade war with the United States. In countries such as Malaysia, Pakistan and Kenya, projects have been "canceled, downsized or scrutinized", according to Bloomberg (2020). Scrutinization and criticism from recipient countries includes the high project costs and the "predatory loan practices" (Pandey, 2020). Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port is often cited as an example of this. Beijing took control of the strategically important port in 2017 after Sri Lanka was unable to repay a Chinese loan. The future of BRI started to look even darker as the coronavirus swept the globe.

Response to- and Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

SARS-COV-19, the virus which has caused a pandemic and sickened almost 3 million people globally (John Hopkins University, 2020), started in China in December 2019. Chinese authorities announced the outbreak of a mysterious pneumonia on December 31st 2019. They emphasized that the virus jumped from an animal to a human at a market in Wuhan, and that there was “no clear evidence” of human-to-human transmission. China was initially praised - for example by the World Health Organization (WHO) - for a quick response and extreme lockdowns which brought the crisis in Wuhan under control. However, China is now facing criticism for its handling of the crisis. Reports from scientific literature and local and international show that the outbreak started weeks or months earlier than Chinese authorities claimed, and the virus was already spreading among people. Beijing allegedly pressured allies to maintain travel ties with China as the virus was raging (Gehrke, 2020). Authorities also censored information and silenced whistleblowers who tried to sound the alarm, such as Dr. Li Wenliang. This physician tried to warn his colleagues about the severity of the outbreak in early December, but was silenced by police and forced on January 3 to sign a letter saying he spread “untrue speech”. The virus eventually took his life (Belluz, 2020).

Recently, on April 24th, the state of Missouri filed a suit against the Chinese government alleging negligence on China’s part (Tan, 2020). French President Macron has said it would be "naive" to suggest China had dealt better with the crisis (“Macron questions China's handling of outbreak”, 2020). And on the 25th of April, it was reported that China had successfully lobbied European Union officials to soften the language in an EU report that criticised Beijing for spreading disinformation about coronavirus (Aleem, 2020). COVID-19 also has consequences for the BRI. In the short term, China has used the COVID-19 epidemic to position itself as “a global leader in healthcare” by using the BRI corridors, ports and hubs to provide medical support to partner countries (Shepard, 2020). However, pandemic-related restrictions on the flow of workers and supplies has impeded progress in many BRI projects. It also expected that domestic economic troubles caused by the pandemic, will limit the ability of China to invest in overseas projects as they will focus on domestic health and economic recovery (Pandey, 2020).

In the long term, Frans-Paul van der Putten of the Clingendael Institute outlines three potential impacts of COVID-19 on the BRI: First, a greater role for state-supported Chinese companies in global transport as market-vulnerable competitors may go bankrupt. Second, an increased pressure

on China's relations with developing countries. Third, an increased leadership role by China in multilateral platforms, such as the G20 or the IMF (Shepard, 2020).

International Relations

China's international relations took a turn after the introduction of an 'Open Door Policy' by Deng Xiaoping in 1978. This decision set motion for China's future role in international relations and their modern economic development as it allowed foreign businesses to invest in the country (BBC News, 2010). China's BRI is a modern example of their vast global economic expansion. This initiative is estimated to enhance China's economic, political and military power thus, challenging the USA's dominance as a unipolar power. The BRI presents the shift of economic power from industrialized to emerging economies, creating new relationships between countries and initiating a dramatic change in international relations as we know it (Joshua, 2019). For instance, in the Bengal Bay region, India has taken a stance against the BRI which can be seen by their absence in the Belt and Road Forum that China hosted in May 2017. While India is also an emerging economic power, they fear that the aspects of the BRI that run through India's South Asian area will disrupt existing power dynamics in the region. This includes concerns over existing relationships with India's neighboring countries -- Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, and Afghanistan -- which may fall under the political and economic power of China. It is clear that by creating bilateral trade relations with these nations, China is replacing India as the leading regional power. This use of soft power gives China greater geo-political influence and dissolves the legitimacy India has in diplomatic relations and shaping policymaking in the Bengal Bay region (Baruah, 2018).

With regards to the South China Sea, the area has been characterized by historical tensions between China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia over land claims of the resource rich region. Despite objections under international maritime law, China recently has been using hard power methods such as increasing their military activity in order to reclaim their sovereignty. This includes physically increasing the size of islands and creating new islands all together on which China builds ports, military installments and landing strips, such as the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Not only does this expand China's military power, but it also allows them to enlarge their exclusive economic zone (EEZ) allowing claims over resources. In response to China's aggression,

Japan has sold military equipment to the Philippines and Vietnam in order to protect their collective security and economic interests (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020).

Furthermore, China holds a permanent membership on the United Nations Security Council. This is important as China is given veto power over any substantive resolution and in general, they are in a position to more easily exercise political and economic power. With regards to the BRI, the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expressed support for the initiative, stating that “with the scale of planned investments, it offers a meaningful opportunity to contribute to the creation of a more equitable, prosperous world for all, and to reversing the negative impact of climate change” (UN, 2019). Thus, the UN can be used as a tool for facilitating international economic activity, such as the BRI.

Another important political body which China holds significant influence is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional intergovernmental organization made up of 10 countries. China’s membership is substantial as this organization promotes economic, political, security, military, and educational integration among its members and other Asian nations. While the BRI presents opportunities for some member states of the ASEAN, it has also created tension among others as discussed above. Therefore, if the BRI is not a catalyst for regional growth, it may result in the destabilization of the ASEAN and hinder the economic connectivity that China wishes to create (Yan, 2018).

Hong Kong

With the Coronavirus sweeping across the face of the earth, leaving no country unaffected, tensions in Hong Kong are still very much present. However, a new challenge has presented itself, namely the great economic depression that the novel Corona brings. The Hong Kong government is facing a difficult choice: Reach out to China and consolidate its BRI efforts in an attempt to save the Hong Kong economy, even though Hong Kongers might not concur, or don't engage with China and keep domestic turmoil as low as possible. For China, Hong Kong's geographical position is a key factor in achieving the BRI successfully. Achieving the initiative would mean that China's interests of gaining more control over Hong Kong will be satisfied. After months of unrest in the streets and a complete destabilization of public life, the last thing the Hong Kong government wants right now is to stir an even bigger revolt of the Hong Kongers.

Hong Kong Protests: The Military Civilian Strategies Underlying the Fight for Democracy

An opinionated editorial by: Zach Frazer and Leonard van Lembergen

Introduction

The Hong Kong protests were triggered by an extradition bill that would allow criminal suspects to be transferred back to Mainland China (Ives, 2019). Most believed that this would undermine the region's autonomy and people's civil liberties, as well as infringe on the rights to privacy and freedom of speech laws (Pomfret, 2019). As the protest progressed, the protestors laid out five key demands, being the withdrawal of the bill, an investigation into police brutality and misconduct, the released of all jailed protestors, a retraction of the government's characterisation of the protests as "riots", and the resignation of Chief Executive Carrie Lam (Solomon, 2019). With the Hong Kong government not backing down, thousands took to the streets, resulting in an intense standoff between police and protestors, in which the former used tear gas and rubber bullets (Gunia, 2019). With the death of two students in November 2019, the protests intensified further. However, COVID-19 forced many indoors, but as the rules become more relaxed again, protests are poised to reoccur with an increased layer of intensity.

1. **HK Protests: a leaderless uprising paralyzing Hong Kong**

Over the course of the protests, those fighting for democracy and civil liberty have learned to adapt to their situation, and have come up with several tactics to outsmart police officers. In the next paragraphs, these tactics will be explained. With the spread of COVID-19, new tactics have appeared, and these will be discussed as well.

In general, the protests have decentralized leadership. Unlike a similar protest in 2014, the democracy protests take place in a decentralized manner, with the Los Angeles Times referring to them as “impeccably organized” (Su, 2019). So far, no one has claimed leadership over the movement, yet this does not mean that several social groups support it. The most prominent ones are the Civil Human Rights Front (CHFR), a group with a long track record of organizing civil movement and instigator of the protests on the 9th and 16th of June, and Demosisto, a group led by Joshua Wong, who was jailed at the start of the protests. Several other pro-democracy legislators were spotted during the movements, yet most of them only came to support (Su, 2019). With no one taking up the leading role, mediating talks between Hong Kong representatives and protestors have become more difficult (Griffiths, 2019). Whilst most protestors believe the decentralized character to be a good thing, some have expressed that said leadership allows for escalation to happen without proper planning, as was evident in the storming of the LegCo building (Griffiths, 2019). Francis Lee, a professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, has titled the decentralized, leaderless movement as the “open-source” protest model. Through an online participatory process on democratic platforms, activists are allowed to collaborate by voting on tactics and brainstorm on what the next moves should be in a manner in which everyone has an equal say (Banjo, 2019). The online voting mechanisms have allowed for flexible coordination, which in return made sure that a central leadership was not needed.

For the most part, all sorts of protestors agree to decentralized leadership. In general, there are two groups to be found amongst the protestors, namely the “peaceful, rational and non-violent” protestors and the “fighters” group (Kuo, 2019). Whilst they differ in tactics used, both groups have held back from denouncing and condemning the other. Both abide by the “Do Not Split” theory, aimed at promoting respect for differing views within the same protest movement (Yiu-man, 2019). Whilst both groups have been the target of criticism from Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, and her administration, they are able to maintain public support, with

roughly 60% of respondents supporting the move from peaceful protests to more intense actions (Lee, 2019).

The moderate group participates in different capacities. They have held mass rallies, hunger strikes, the forming of human chains, launching petitions, class boycotts, and the disruption of traffic. Additionally, the moderates composed a protest anthem titled “Glory to Hong Kong”, which was sung by flash mobs in shopping centers (Dixon, 2019). Their tactics also include singing hymns at religious gatherings and volunteering as first aiders, while others provide logistical support and supplies to the “fighter” protests. With the support of the moderate group, Lennon Walls were set up in multiple Hong Kong neighborhoods to spread the message of support to the “fighter” protestors. Pop-up stores were set up to provide cheap protesting gear and gadgets, as well as undercover clinics (Ng, 2019). A mobile app was developed to allow crowdsourcing of the location of the police (Deng, 2019).

To keep support for the movement high, the moderate protestors have engaged in making protest art and derivative works, mainly targeted towards the police and government (Creery, 2019). A crowdfunding platform was set up to attract foreign newspapers, and national flags of other countries, such as the United States’ or United Kingdom’s, were waved to call for their support. Online social platforms such as Reddit and Twitter were used to deliver messages to a broad audience all over the world and raise awareness (Shao, 2019). Efforts were also made to transform the protests into a longer-lasting movement. For example, an open-source app was made where people could write what political movement a shop owner has, allowing Hong Kongers to patronize only in businesses that are sympathetic to the movement while boycotting businesses supporting or owned by mainland Chinese interests (Szeto, 2020).

Escalation of Violence: a more radical approach to Hong Kong reform

The “fighter” group is often more radical in their approach. They are the ones that are on the frontlines actively protesting. Their most common strategy is the “be water” strategy, inspired by Bruce Lee’s philosophy. This means that they move in a fluid and agile fashion in order to confuse police officers. When the police arrive, they retreat only to re-emerge elsewhere. These tactics started when the police began to ban requests for demonstrations (Hale, 2019). Recently, the metaphor has expanded to include “be strong like ice” when confronting the police force, “gather like dew” when protestors spontaneously come together, and “scatter like mist” to ensure

that protestors can escape when the police show up. Another tactic that they use is geographical dispersal, meaning that demonstrations and clashes diversified over twenty different neighborhoods in Hong Kong. They show up in their own neighborhoods and “blossom everywhere” to avoid arrest (Anderlini, 2019). Additionally, protestors have adopted black bloc tactics to protect their identity. In the online sphere, this means that they started using pseudonyms, locking their social media accounts, and using codes to describe their actions. On the streets, those on the frontlines use “full gear” that consists of umbrellas, face masks, helmets and respirators to shield themselves from teargas and projectiles. Furthermore, they are equipped with laser pointers meant to damage surveillance cameras to protect their identity. On sites of protests, protestors use hand gestures for nonverbal communication, allowing for supplies to be delivered via human chains (Anderlini, 2019).

Their main target is the police, and the protestors use certain weapons to do so. These contain the digging up of paving bricks and throwing them at the police and the use of petrol bombs and corrosive liquid (n.a., 2019). Furthermore, vandalism against Chinese corporations such as Xiaomi is widespread. They also disrupt traffic by setting up roadblocks, damaging traffic lights, and throwing objects onto railway tracks (Yau, 2019).

COVID-19: the Pandemic Incapacitating Ongoing Protests

The rise of COVID-19 put a brief stop at the protests. However, with the apparent control of COVID-19 in China, protestors are gathering again. At the start of May, protestors appeared in a mall, singing the protest anthem “Glory to Hong Kong”. In the words of Mich Chan, who works in the legal industry, “The protests had calmed down previously because of the coronavirus, but now we must step up and let the world know that we have not given up. We’re still fighting for what we fought for last year.” All throughout May and June, protests have been planned in accordance with the social distancing rule (Soo, 2020). Large groups of people turn up, who are then divided into groups of four, which permits protestors to gather without breaking any rules. The renewed marches are a build-up towards the one expected on July 1, the day when Britain returned Hong Kong to China. It is unclear how many people will show up to this protest, but many are expected (Soo, 2020). What is clear, however, is that protestors are using similar tactics as before the virus spread and forced them to stay inside.

This raises the question of how domestic law enforcement has been able to respond to the plurality of tactics employed by the pro-democracy camp in Hong Kong. This report will, therefore, provide insight into the ongoing claims of police brutality surrounding police response to Hong Kong protestors, will contrast this domestic response with the military strategy adopted by China in the Hong Kong protests, and will evaluate the role of the Coronavirus pandemic in shaping ongoing conflict dynamics through the scope of the Hong Kong government and law enforcement.

2. HK Government: the strategic deficit creating chaos in Hong Kong

As city-wide protests broke out in Hong Kong, state police forces attempted to create some semblance of strategic direction against the chaos of the protestors. A number of sophisticated tactics were developed in response to the increasingly volatile nature of the protests. The Hong Kong government deployed police in ‘para-military formation’ (Jones, 2019), with riot police forming multiple lines as protestors frequently barricaded themselves on the street. These formations would consist of a long shield wall as a front line, the second line of officers ‘carrying batons, shotguns, and tear gas launchers’ (SCMP, 2019), and a rearguard of flag bearers carrying visible warnings to protestors to disperse (Jones, 2019). Clear protocols were provided to police regarding the use of force, detailing what ‘options are available to officers faced with different levels of resistance from protestors’ (Mahtani et al., 2019). However, while the Hong Kong government presented a facade of tactical control over the ongoing protests, state law enforcement has received widespread criticism for an alarming pattern of indiscriminate and reckless tactics being employed against demonstrators.

Law enforcement has deviated from the strategy outlined by the Hong Kong government in three key ways.

Firstly, while the initial strategy outlined the necessity for coordinated suppression of disorderly riots, unorganized police units have instead been ‘chaotically deployed’ (Hale, 2019), with police officers independently taking their own decisions, including those in relation to force. This has resulted in the ‘assaulting and beating of peaceful protestors and bystanders, the misuse of chemical irritants such as pepper spray and tear gas, and in extreme cases, the torture of protestors in detention’ (Amnesty, 2020). This frequent and unnecessary use of force has not only

broken numerous international human rights standards but has also ‘fuelled tensions even further’, and sparked further conflict within Hong Kong (Mahtani, 2019).

Secondly, while the police should only engage in the dispersal of assemblies when it becomes justified, officers have adopted a ‘zero-tolerance policy to policing protests’ (Amnesty, 2020). The unwillingness of law enforcement to not even facilitate small-scale, peaceful protests, has been emblematic of the hard-line stance adopted by the Hong Kong government throughout the protests. This common theme of inflexibility throughout the pro-Beijing camp has only ostracized Hong Kong protestors further away from the state and encouraged the use of force as a response to law enforcement by protestors.

Finally, Hong Kong police have been criticized for their use of ‘indiscriminate force’ (Hale, 2019). Law enforcement has employed the use of tear gas grenades, as well as water cannons to shoot liquid mixed with a dye that marks individuals for late identification. A primary concern with both of these measures is the challenge of accuracy, as both tools affect all protesters and bystanders ‘regardless of whether they were involved in violent protests or completely peaceful’ (Amnesty, 2020), haphazardly incriminating innocent Hong Kong citizens. This indiscriminate behavior has also been extended to reporters, with journalists on the front line now being ‘viewed as the enemy as a tactic of police intimidation’ (Chung et al., 2019). Such cases of police brutality have only substantiated protestor claims of police brutality and misconduct, as well as reinforcing pro-democratic sentiment amongst the Hong Kong public.

Hong Kong police have not only been highly ineffective at preventing the escalation of violence but have further galvanized the Hong Kong public into action against the pro-Beijing cause. The impetus gained by protestors resulting from allegations against police has drawn attention towards a possible reaction by China to the protests as Hong Kong forces continue to lose their ability to keep control.

Hong Kong Government: A Comparison with China.

When China doubled its police presence in Hong Kong to ‘up to 12,000 troops’ (Torode et al., 2019), speculation arose over the possibility of a Chinese intervention into the escalating situation in Hong Kong. However, while China has been shoring up its military presence in Hong Kong, the non-combative stance adopted by China has contrasted the increasingly aggressive stance adopted by Hong Kong law enforcement. The reasoning behind this hesitation is two-fold.

Firstly, by using outside military forces to subdue conflict, this would inflame China's 'already tempestuous relationship with the United States, potentially triggering economic sanctions' (Barrett, 2019). While the U.S. and China are already engaged in a trade war, the U.S. is yet to impose tariffs on imports from Hong Kong. The interdependent nature of the Chinese and Hong Kong economies means that US sanctions would have significant economic ramifications for Beijing. The economic risks of intervention in Hong Kong have contributed to the cautious nature of Chinese policy. Secondly, if Chinese intervention resulted in civilian casualties, this would likely spark further unrest within Hong Kong, reinforcing the narrative of Beijing suppressing the autonomy of Hong Kong.

Hence, China has been forced to adopt less combative measures to deescalating Hong Kong protests. Beijing has used state-owned media as a tool to warp the narrative against the protests. Labeling the protestors as a 'political virus', China has claimed that Hong Kong will be unable to return to a state of 'prosperity and stability' until the 'poisonous and violent black-clad demonstrators are eliminated (Davidson, 2020). This anti-protest rhetoric has been juxtaposed by the Chinese military forces' strategy within Hong Kong, whose only intervention within the ongoing conflict was 'clean up the streets of Hong Kong after demonstrations (Hollingsworth et al, 2019). These operations have allowed China to maintain a presence within Hong Kong, while helping to undermine the cause of the protestors, by highlighting the damage they have created. However, while such tactics have been effective in promoting the pro-Beijing narrative, it has meant that China has been incapacitated when trying to respond to the emerging threat posed by Hong Kong protestors. With both Hong Kong and Chinese military tactics unable to quell protests, the emergence of COVID-19 has played an important role in the Hong Kong crisis.

COVID-19: An Opportunity to Regain Control

The Coronavirus has provided some respite from the ongoing protests. Government regulations require social distancing, which has limited the capacity of protestors to instigate mass gatherings. The Coronavirus has subsequently granted the Hong Kong government a brief window of time to adjust their military strategy towards protestors before domestic regulations against COVID-19 are loosened.

Two key recommendations have been made to ensure that Hong Kong military tactics are efficacious in preventing the further escalation of the protests.

First, Hong Kong law enforcement needs to orientate their stance away from combatting protests, to controlling them. Law enforcement is critical to preventing the uncontrolled escalation of protests, the abuse of force by police only exacerbates the nature of the protests. A database review analyzing use-of-force incidents in Hong Kong indicated that force only justified in approximately 8% of the reviewed cases with Hong Kong police going against regulations in 70% of all incidents' (Mahtani et al, 2019). This provides insight into how little regard law enforcement has taken for guidelines issuing 'minimum force necessary policy'. To provide more control of conflict dynamics within Hong Kong, a greater focus must be put on ensuring Hong Kong police are compliant with these regulations, as the use of extreme violence only fuels further protests

Second, Hong Kong must ensure the 'full and transparent accountability of law enforcement agencies', so that the 'arbitrary or abusive use of force' by police officers is punished (Amnesty, 2020). Impunity forms a primary motivator for the unlawful use of force by law enforcement in Hong Kong, as police officers are more likely to break rules and regulations when they believe there are little ramifications to doing so. The current legislative system in place is ill-equipped to handle the magnitude of human rights violations committed by law enforcement in Hong Kong and is not without 'links to law enforcement individuals under investigation' (Amnesty, 2020). By addressing these concerns and establishing a system of accountability within Hong Kong Law enforcement, it is less probable that officers will deviate from the controlled military strategy initially underlined by the Hong Kong government.

These strategies would not only allow the Hong Kong government to maintain more rigid control over the tactics adopted by riot police but would also help to address the griefs of the pro-democracy camp, who see confronting ongoing police brutality as a primary source of inspiration for the protests.

While COVID-19 presents an opportunity for the Hong Kong government to take steps to prevent the ongoing protests, conflict dynamics have changed very little since the start of the protests. As Hong Kong starts to relax stringent COVID-19 pandemic measures, protests have begun to reemerge; mainly 'small groups of people gathering in shopping malls to sing' (Davidson, 2020), However, applications for large-scale, peaceful marches have been rejected by the government, epitomizing the unwillingness of Hong Kong to provide a platform for the voice of its people. Trust with the governments remains at a 'record low of 19.1%', with 'approval ratings

of the police plummeting from 62.5% to 35.3%. Hong Kong has an obligation to repair the harm caused to Hong Kong society, both China and Hong Kong have been increasingly inflexible with dealing with the concerns of its people. Therefore, while the protest movement may eventually die down, the oppressive strategies adopted by both the Hong Kong and Chinese military symbolize the ‘dead fault lines within Hong Kong society’ (Chung et al., 2019). Only through addressing the excessive, uncoordinated abusive military strategies adopted by Hong Kong law enforcement, can a peaceful resolution to the Hong Kong protests be found.

3. Reflections on the Future for Military-Civilian Strategy in Hong Kong

By assessing the military strategies adopted by the two main opponents in the ongoing Hong Kong protests, this paper provides insights into why conflict dynamics have evolved to the extremes they have within Hong Kong. The pro-democracy camp has been highly adaptive when combatting law enforcement and efficacious at garnering international support to their cause, and the effectiveness of their strategy has been reflected in the traction gained by the protestors within Hong Kong. This has been juxtaposed by an systemic lack of strategic direction from Hong Kong, whose arbitrary, indiscriminate military tactics have not only been ineffective in combating the protestors, but has instead fueled further violence within Hong Kong. The COVID-19 pandemic arrived at a time of volatility for both the Hong Kong protests and government forces, providing space for both parties to reflect on future strategy within Hong Kong. However, as restrictions continue to loosen, protestors look to withstand the Coronavirus, and return to protests of the same magnitude as what was witnessed pre-pandemic. As the sophisticated military tactics of the pro-democracy continue to cripple Hong Kong, the Hong Kong government looks more and more likely to turn to support from China. Therefore, analysing the future for Hong Kong conflict dynamics is paramount, as the escalation of protests increasingly visible.

The COVID-19 Virus as an Impulse to (Neo-)Colonial Forces

An opinion editorial by: Sam Reilly, Nirmiti Somani, Jarne van der Poel and Tia Yang

The World Health Organisation (WHO) was first alerted to a new, unrecognised strain of reported pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019. (WHO, 2020) COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic on the 30th of January and is currently a top priority for the international community. As of May 5th 2020, there were 3,598,324 cases of the virus across 212 countries and territories around the world. (John Hopkins University, 2020) As a result of the worldwide spread of the virus, there has been a shift in the world order. Commonly the Western world are the ‘savers’ of global modern day issues, however the US, Italy, Spain and the UK are the four countries with the most confirmed cases. (John Hopkins University, 2020) Thus, China is establishing itself as a new global power to help solve the issue of COVID-19. China is providing medical supplies and indirect investments, which increases dependency on China from countries that are not in financially and politically stable positions. This echoes a neo-colonial power relation which can be observed in both case studies that we discuss. Firstly, the situation in Hong Kong is severely impacted by COVID-19 as it has stopped the protests which erupted in 2019. The pandemic helps China increase its political control and Hong Kong’s dependency by providing supplies. Secondly, the other case study where a comparison can be made, similarly with this neo-colonial power relation, is between Israel and Palestine. The Israeli-Palestine conflict has continued for decades and during this crisis, Palestine is reliant on Israel as they have the power over the lives of the Palestinians.

Neo-colonialism

Our thesis is that the outbreak of COVID-19 has given an impulse to neo-colonial forces in both the China-Hong Kong conflict and the Israel-Palestine conflict. Neo-colonialism does not entail physical occupation of territory. Instead, it is the control over countries, oftentimes former colonies, by other ‘powerful’ countries, through the exertion of cultural, economic, and political influence (Elam, 2019). The exercise of this influence and reliance on the ‘colonizer’ have a mutually dependent relationship. The more influence is exercised, the more dependency is created and vice-versa. This essay posits that this global pandemic has increased inter-state dependency economically, in terms of medical supplies, and with regards to information and

expertise. As a result of this dependency, some countries will gain political, economic, and cultural influence in other countries, therefore leading to neo-colonial power relations. Thus, while the sovereign might look like they are in control of their territory, in practice they are not (fully) (Elam, 2019).

China and Hong Kong

The Hong Kong protests started in March 2019 and evolved into mass protests in June 2019 through to the start of this year. However, as a result of COVID-19 the protests have dwindled and China has managed to clamp down on protestors who are demonstrating against Chinese influence in the state. China has attempted to plant their influence and increase Hong Kong's dependency on China, for example, China owns large parts of the city centre. (Einhorn and Zhao, 2019) Thus, China has a stake in the Hong Kong economy. China was previously in the limelight due to the protests. However, the pandemic gives Beijing an opportunity to increase their political control over Hong Kong and put an end to the pro-democracy movements, while the rest of the world is distracted with domestic affairs. Wong and Liu write that "China has moved to curb the territory's treasured special autonomy and is suspected to be behind a reshuffle of the city's government." (Wong and Liu, 2020) This shows how China is infiltrating and pushing their agenda on Hong Kong in a time where Hong Kong is weak and seeks help to deal with COVID-19. Furthermore, as a result of COVID-19 sweeping through Hong Kong, China has taken this opportunity to clamp down on the protests. On April 19th, 15 pro-democracy activists were arrested on the charge of "organising and participating in anti-government protests last year." (Reuters, 2020) This unlawful arrest led to the US and UK officially condemning the arrests. The pro-democracy activists have a right to protest against China's influence in the area. However, because of the pandemic taking headlines, China found an opportunity to suppress the movement by arresting key activists such as the Democratic Party founder and barrister Martin Lee who is 81 years old. Thus it is clear to see how China is pushing its agenda and as a result of the pandemic, China is increasing its control on Hong Kong.

China already has a large amount of influence on Hong Kong, given that the very water supply that Hong Kong relies on has been imported from mainland China since 1965 (Kang-chung & Kao, 2017). According to the "lump-sum" agreement, Hong Kong pays yearly for a guaranteed 820 cubic meters of water, regardless of actual consumption, a policy that many have

called inflexible and unfair (Siu, 2017). As of 2017, Hong Kong was under a HK\$13.5 billion deal with China wherein the former buys water supplied from the East River (Dongjiang) in Guangdong (Kang-chung & Kao, 2017), and the price of this deal was only predicted to climb. In fact, this particular river supposedly provides an estimated 70-80% of Hong Kong's water supply (Kang-chung & Kao, 2017). What's worse, Hong Kong has, according to reports, "always lacked major lakes, rivers or aquifers", so alternatives for a reliable and safe freshwater supply are scarce (Cummins, 2020, para. 1). And it would hardly be beneath China to use this to their advantage as leverage over Hong Kong; in an attempt to quash the protests in Hong Kong, pro-Beijing leaders called for the Beijing central government to cut off water supply to Hong Kong, and several government officials, including Chief Executive Carrie Lam, hinted towards the possibility of such actions being taken (Pao, 2020).

As if this wasn't enough, the COVID-19 pandemic has further made Hong Kong reliant on China for medical (and other) supplies, to the extent that this reliance was used as an argument against closing borders to China, with the excuse that this would hinder supplies from entering Hong Kong (Sataline, 2020). In the meantime, Hong Kong is steadily running out of supplies, with Chief Executive Carrie Lam writing to Beijing's State Council requesting surgical masks, and Chief Secretary Matthew Cheung Kin-chung quoting the number at 8 million masks for the public, and another 24 million for city retailers (Lok-kei & Low, 2020; Lok-kei, 2020). That is not to say that the trouble is over, as medical experts estimate a monthly consumption of 300 million masks in Hong Kong during the pandemic (Lok-kei, 2020).

Conclusion

As can be seen in the case studies above, the spread of COVID-19 has allowed China to increase their influence in Hong Kong even further, now by providing medical supplies. Previously, Hong Kong had been reliant on Chinese mainland for only one basic necessity; water. Now, like many other countries, they look towards China in the battle against COVID-19, giving China more leverage to increase their political power.

Sovereignty in Murky Waters: Rule of law in a pandemic world

An opinionated article by: Annabelle Willeme, Fenna Selman and Yamuna Kali

Through the years the concept of the rule of law has obtained many different, and in some situations conflicting, definitions and connotations. For the purpose of this comparison we have chosen to adhere to the definition as it is set out by the Oxford English Dictionary: "The authority and influence of law in society, especially when viewed as a constraint on individual and institutional behavior; (hence) the principle whereby all members of a society (including those in government) are considered equally subject to publicly disclosed legal codes and processes." (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018). The principle is designed to protect against arbitrary exercise of power by authorities by making them abide by the law as well as by requiring a legal basis giving the institution in case the capacity to perform such actions. Hence, the rule of law is a norm that ensures equality before the law for all as well as prevents the parties in power from violating the population's rights enshrined in the constitution and other legal sources (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020).

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many are concerned about the threat this crisis poses to the rule of law. Naturally, some rights will have to be restrained in order to contain the virus and some procedural rules might have to be disregarded in order to prevent bureaucratic red tape from interfering with effective and timely decision making. However, fear exists that in situations where the rule of law was previously already under pressure, this pandemic will be exploited in order to bring permanent damage to the rule of law protections in place. Specifically, in this section we will be exploring the crisis' impact on the rule of law in Hong Kong.

Rule of Law in Hong Kong

Law in Hong Kong holds a special place, as it is this (the Basic Law specifically), that enshrines the 'one country, two systems' principle (Pang, 2020). As the change of sovereignty (2047) draws closer, the rule of law and the capitalist system are increasingly hailed as the secret to the economic success of Hong Kong (Man and Wai, 2015).

Along with this, the Basic Law protects freedoms such as freedom of assembly and freedom of speech, neither of which are protected under Chinese law (Pang, 2020). Due in part because of this, it is increasingly argued that legal traditions of mainland China are not compatible with

Hong Kong. Man and Wai, for example, argue that the application of the ‘reasonable person’ as the standard of all criminal law, is culturally biased, and that something ‘reasonable’ in the eyes of Beijing is different than in Hong Kong (Man and Wai, 2015).

Many people in Hong Kong feel as if Beijing is taking too many liberties with the application of the Basic Law and is therefore encroaching on the democracy of Hong Kong (Pang, 2020).

From the very start, protestors say they’re battling to protect the rule of law, keeping Hong Kong separate under the ‘one country, two systems’ agreement, and want to curb the systematic erosion of the city’s freedoms to Beijing (Jones, 2020). Protests have also started over alleged police brutality. Since the start of the protests the authorities have arrested over 8,000 demonstrators, while failing to prosecute any police (“Hong Kong: Crackdown Amid Covid-19”, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought the protests in Hong Kong to a halt, and some assert that Beijing, and the Hong Kong government are using the pandemic as a further means to encroach on the rule of law in Hong Kong (Su, 2020).

A part of the efficacy of the protests in Hong Kong was the international reactions and support by countries such as the United Kingdom. Now, with the virus however, most countries are too busy with their internal affairs. For example, the arrest of 15 pro-democracy politicians, that would normally cause an international outcry, went unnoticed (Hong Kong politicians arrest further erodes the rule of law”, 2020). Human Rights Watch on this issue stated that, “Beijing seems to be banking on the Covid-19 crisis to keep other governments silent” (“Hong Kong: Crackdown Amid Covid-19”, 2020).

Two of Beijing’s representative offices in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Liaison Office and the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs office announced in April that article 22- which stops the interference of mainland China- doesn’t apply to them (Su, 2020). They proposed implementing security legislation in Hong Kong, which has been stopped by huge demonstrations in the past. This caused an uproar and lawyer Chan stated that this was ‘a declaration on the part of Beijing that Basic Law doesn’t constrain their power at all’ (Su, 2020). Jimmy Lai, who founded the city’s pro-democracy newspaper further said that ‘this is the beginning of the end for Hong Kong, if they destroy the rule of law, which they intend to do with Article 22, everything will be gone’ (‘Beijing clamps down on Hong Kong...’, 2020)

There have also been concerns that Hong Kong police will use regulations concerning social distancing rules, and other public health measures to disproportionately target businesses that are supportive of the protest movement- the so-called yellow economy (Hui, 2020). This, along with the increased Chinese representatives, and the arrests made, are all seen by Hong Kong as infringements on their freedom of expression, and ultimately threatening their differentiated rule of law.

To counter this widespread anger, Financial secretary Chan announced that 58 million would be going towards “strengthening our communities’ understanding of the concept of the Rule of Law and its implementation” (Marlow, 2020). The awareness campaign will be entitled: ‘Vision 2030 for Rule of Law’. He further mentioned that “respect for the rule of law and independence of the judiciary are among the cornerstones underpinning Hong Kong’s success (Marlow, 2020). Although these efforts have highlighted the importance of rule of law in Hong Kong, it is unsure whose values will ultimately be protected within the rule of law, and what the effect of further months of Pandemic lockdown of the world will be on this.

Key Actors

USA

International Relations

The relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China has been complicated with increasingly intertwined economies on the one side, but several open conflicts on the other fronts. Next to the shared economic interests, the proliferation of nuclear weapons has also been an important mutual goal. However, most conflicts in the past have related to human rights violations and democracy, or the lack thereof, in China ('U.S. Relations with China', 2020). Moreover, the two nations have been in dispute over the territorial control over the South China Sea, in which China has been trying to assert dominance, whereas the U.S. is trying to ensure these waters remain international waters and therefore freely accessible to anyone (Fisher, 2016). The relation between the two nations has deteriorated ever since U.S. president Trump has launched a trade war against China. Yet this conflict seems to have turned into something more serious after the trade talks broke down in May 2019. Namely, the countries started formulating the relationship in nationalist and emotional terms (Lee, 2019). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, tensions continued to rise as it seems China started exploiting the situation to improve their position in the South China Sea conflict (Lendon, 2020). Furthermore, both countries have accused each other of concocting the pandemic (Austin & Smith, 2020; Firozi, 2020)

The U.S. currently has a predominantly good relationship with India ('U.S. Relations with India', 2019). They are partners in both military and economic relations. There has been security cooperation to protect the Indo-Pacific region through joint military exercises and exchanges of technologies. In addition, the U.S. is invested in trade with India, as India is one of the new rising powers that is experiencing exponential economic growth ('U.S. Relations with India', 2019).

Since the end of the Vietnam war, relationships between the U.S. and Vietnam have grown strong in several fields: economically and security wise cooperation for example. The increasing power of China, and more specifically their behaviour with regards to the South China Sea, has led Vietnam to strengthen their ties with not only the U.S., but also with other Asian powers (Albert, 2020). Recently, a Chinese ship sank a Vietnamese fishing boat in disputed territory of the South China Sea. Analysts have suggested that China conducted this operation in order to show

that it will freely operate in the area while the U.S. is dealing with the impact of COVID-19 on their navy (Lendon, 2020).

A relevant organization for the U.S. within this region is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This is the biggest organization of countries within the Indo-Pacific region. The U.S. historically has had a strong connection with them and every year US-ASEAN summits were organized. The last two years this bond has deteriorated, but Trump is trying to make amends for his own negligence. Strategically as well as economically, ASEAN is an important partner for the U.S (Davies, 2020) Another important organization for the U.S. within this region is the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). It's member states are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The U.S. is trying to forge alliances with many of these members, both militarily and economically, in order to consolidate their influence in the region. Moreover, the U.S. supports the efforts of more regional cooperation outside of China's influence, and one element amongst these efforts is the support they receive from SAARC. It uniquely has been an observing member at some of its summits (Biswal, 2014).

Of course, within Asia there are various disputes that need to be considered when making a judgement of the region as a whole. This research paper will be looking at two areas of such conflicts in light of a post-pandemic Asia. We will take a closer look at the Bay of Bengal and the South China, and analyse the actors partaking in this conflict. Once again we will take a look at the actors' histories, internal political structures, as well as their political motivations and capabilities.

Bay of Bengal

Introduction

Finding itself in the North-east area of the Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal is an interesting area to many large actors. As mentioned before, both China and the U.S. both lay large claims to these waters, using them as a politically strategic gateway to the East. However, no country is as involved in the Bay of Bengal as India. Oil shipping routes and the planned routes for the Belt and Road Initiative have created extra tensions within these waters, and we will focus on the actors involved. Besides the key players India, China, and U.S., Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Indonesia play key roles in how this conflict plays out. Below we will offer an analysis of each of these actors as we have done before, to show their intentions within this region.

USA and the Bay of Bengal

In 1971 there was an internal crisis in Pakistan, which resulted in a third war between India and Pakistan and the split of East Pakistan, making the independent state of Bangladesh. This altered the relationship between the U.S and the region (Amin, H., & Amin, H., 2020). The United States had several dilemmas in how to respond to the crisis. Pakistan was a diplomatic partner and has helped the US get a rapprochement with the People's Republic of China in the 70s. After Nixon visited in 1969, the U.S government continued selling military equipment to Pakistan (Milestones: 1976 Office of the Historian). Washington did not want another war between India and China but also were scared that Pakistan would be weakened if its eastern province seceded and so supported Pakistan initially. But the acts against the mass protests in Pakistan were publicized and condemned internationally which limited the extent to which the U.S government was willing to help the Pakistan government prevent the division of the country. In the end, the U.S acted in a sorta ambiguous manner (Amin, H., & Amin, H., 2020). The U.S.S enterprise carrier group from Vietnam went towards the Bay of Bengal, stopping in Singapore and eventually got to Sri Lanka. This resulted in signaling to Soviet Union and China that it was possible that the U.S would be supporting Pakistan. However, by not ordering direct intervention the U.S commitment to intervention in South Asia had limits (Milestones: 1976 Office of the Historian).

China and the Bay of Bengal

For instance, in the Bengal Bay region, India has taken a stance against the BRI which can be seen by their absence in the Belt and Road Forum that China hosted in May 2017. While India is also an emerging economic power, they fear that the aspects of the BRI that run through India's South Asian area will disrupt existing power dynamics in the region. This includes concerns over existing relationships with India's neighboring countries -- Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, and Afghanistan -- which may fall under the political and economic power of China. It is clear that by creating bilateral trade relations with these nations, China is replacing India as the leading regional power. This use of soft power gives China greater geo-political influence and dissolves the legitimacy India has in diplomatic relations and shaping policymaking in the Bengal Bay region (Baruah, 2018).

India

Historical Background

The largest ever wargame in the Bay of Bengal (BoB), hosted by the Indian Navy, and code-named Malabar CY 07-2, involved naval warships from US¹, Bangladesh, Thailand, Singapore, Japan and Australia (Mujtaba, 2007). This exercise displeased China, where it was seen as a NATO-like, US-inspired security grouping in the making (Miglani, 2015).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, China helped the Myanmar Navy strengthen its bases and facilities in the BoB, including Myanmar Coco Islands north of Andaman Islands of India (Lintner, 2020). This provoked strategic concern in India, especially when security analysts stated that Coco Islands had been leased to the Chinese to build a base (Lintner, 2020). Those reports were inaccurate, but this was enough for India to establish its Far Eastern Naval Command based on the Andaman Islands in 2001, and to enhance naval collaboration with allies such as the US, Japan and Australia (Lintner, 2020).

The BoB is located in the centre of two enormous economic blocks, SAARC (of which India is a member), and ASEAN. SAARC² was founded in 1985 to foster economic and regional cooperation (Rao, 2019). Similarly, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)³ was founded in 1997 to facilitate cooperation amongst nations that depend on the BoB for trade (Rao, 2019).

Recent Events:

16th June 2017, Doklam⁴: Chinese troops began extending an existing road to the south (Myers, Barry, & Fisher, 2017).

18th June 2017: 270 armed Indian troops crossed the Sikkim frontier into Doklam as part of Operation Juniper to prevent Chinese troops from building the route (Myers et al., 2017). On August 28, both India and China declared withdrawal of all their troops from the face-off site in Doklam (Gettleman & Hernández, 2017).

¹ The US's involvement was viewed with suspicion, due to concerns that experience they gain from the game may be passed on to Pakistan, or help them make India a naval base for US operations in SE Asia (Mujtaba, 2007).

² Includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (Rao, 2019).

³ Includes Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan (Rao, 2019).

⁴ A region claimed by both China and India's ally Bhutan (Myers et al., 2017).

In 2019, India rejected China’s official invitation to attend its BRI summit for the second time, the first time being in 2017 (Business Today, 2019). One reason cited was concern over the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project⁵ (Business Today, 2019). The Indian government firmly maintained that Beijing's BRI initiative violates India's sovereignty due to CPEC running through the disputed Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) territory, and disregards India's strategic interests (Business Today, 2019).

With India-China relations historically and recently being what they are, BRI negotiations between the two parties will likely be tricky to say the least. It does not help that many Indian analysts suspect China of having not just economic, but also strategic and political ambitions (details unclear) to be realised through the BRI, possibly reflecting strategies of Mackinder (securing Eurasia), Mahan (naval power) and Sun Tzu (strategy and knowing your enemy) (Singh, 2018).

Response to- and consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic:

Cons (Krishnan, 2020)	Pros (as of 21 st April) (Malviya, 2020)
\$22 billion aid package, announced only amid growing public outrage and amounts to below 1% of GDP (versus stimulus plans in Britain, Spain and Germany amounting up to 20% of their GDP). No help for migrant or day-workers.	Reports claim recovery rate is about 16%, and death ratio per million is less than 0.3 (versus global average of 17.3).
No grace period provided to stock-up on supplies for the lockdown – speech made at 8pm, lockdown enforced for three weeks just	Screening was started earlier than other nations. Before the first patient was even recognized, testing laboratories were ready.

⁵ These concerns were backed by the US, saying that they “share India’s concerns over projects that do not have any economic basis and that leads to a country ceding sovereignty” (New Indian Express, 2019, para. 2).

after midnight the same day – after telling people for weeks not to panic-buy.	Almost 1.5 lakh individuals were screened with merely 3 active cases.
Not enough testing; people without travel history and healthcare workers only recently started being tested.	WHO-recommended preventative gear such as N95 masks made available to frontline healthcare workers.

International, Political Implications (Economic Times, 2020):

- China attempts to change narrative on Covid-19 by providing aid (test kits, medical equipment, building hospitals)
- As a counter, Indian PM Modi coordinates with SAARC nations (except Pakistan) to create SAARC COVID fund, with India contributing \$10 million
- Director of India Initiative, Hudson Institute claims “Pakistan and Sri Lanka are heavily dependent on Chinese largesse, especially under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and have been the most open to and reciprocated Beijing's charms” (para. 7); implies division of alliance between India and China.

International Relations

Bangladesh and India used to have good diplomatic relations, with the Indian Army aiding the Bangladeshi fight for freedom from Pakistan (Mushtaq, 2018). Recently, there has been resentment in Bangladesh about India’s interference. Bangladesh has since been using India and China’s tense relations to its advantage. Uncomfortable with China getting closer to Bangladesh, India loaned Bangladesh 5 billion dollars in 2017. Bangladesh and India share the fifth-longest land border in the world. The two countries have a dispute in the Bay of Bengal (Anwar, 2019).

India and China have strong trade relations. Until 2018, this has been unilateral in the sense that China was not dependent on Indian trade. Chinese investments in India range from the

automobile industry to energy to infrastructure (Krishnan, 2020). The border between India and China can be tense, with disputes erupting every so often. Between 2017 and 2019, relations between the two countries remained stable, neither improving nor deteriorating, as the balancing of economic, geopolitical, and strategic factors led to an impasse. China's increasing rivalry with the United States has driven it to seek better relations with India (Lidarev, 2020).

Like with Bangladesh, China's influence is important in India's relations with Myanmar. Myanmar is also important because it could be India's gateway into Southeast Asia (Atmakuri & Izzuddin). As well as infrastructure projects, India has also supplied Myanmar with weapons, such as torpedoes (Panda, 2019).

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is an important international organisation because it is an attempt to create a regional community that could inform strategic decisions ("SAARC Secretariat", 2020). The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is also an important organisation that allows economic activity to occur in the Bay of Bengal in a peaceful manner. It also serves to connect South and Southeast Asian countries ("About BIMSTEC", 2020).

Myanmar

Historical Background

During the years 1824-1948 Burma was under British rule (Baten, 2016), which was resented by the Burmese people making riots commonplace during the colonial era (Collis, 1945). In January 1948 the Burma Independence Act granted independence from British rule, and the country became known as the Union of Burma. In this post-colonial period, non-Burmese ethnic groups began to push for autonomy. Due to the civil unrest and the weak civilian leadership in the newly independent country, in 1962 the military staged a successful “coup d’état” (Kipgen, 2017). The country was under military rule from 1962-2011, which was considered one of the world’s most repressive regimes (Howse, 2010). In 2008 the Burmese Constitutional Referendum was enacted to create a democracy and officially changed the name of the country to the ‘Republic of the Union of Myanmar.’ The military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party declared victory in the first elections under the new constitution, despite worldwide allegations of fraud (TNI, 2010). In the country exists a Hindu majority and a Rohingya Muslim minority, this minority have consistently faced human rights abuses (Head, 2009) and the state is currently undergoing criminal prosecution for the genocide of the Rohingya people (ICC, 2019).

Recent Events

Some important recent events occurring in Myanmar include the ongoing court case for human rights abuses against the Rohingya and new deals signed on the BRI initiative.

In 2018 a UN report accused Myanmar’s military leaders of carrying out genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity against the Rohingya people (Aung & McPherson, 2020). Along with this report there have been ICJ and ICC cases started, and international calls for sanctions, creating enormous economic and political consequences for Myanmar (Lynn, 2020).

These sanctions increased Myanmar’s dependency on China, who has been Myanmar’s main advocate on the international stage (Lynn, 2020). As can be seen in figure 1, China is Myanmar’s main trading partner (“China and Myanmar sign off on Belt and Road projects”, 2020).

This is set to increase through new BRI initiatives signed on January 13th ("China and Myanmar sign off on Belt and Road projects", 2020). These 33 bilateral agreements include development



of a deep-sea port in Kyaukpyu on the Bay of Bengal, a railway project that will connect Yunnan in China to Myanmar's coast, a waterway through the Irrawaddy river and a Mega-hydropower dam (Lintner, 2020). As seen in figure 2, together these initiatives form part of a bigger plan to create an economic corridor giving China access to the Indian Ocean (Lintner, 2020).



Response to- and consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

As of April 21st, Myanmar has 119 confirmed cases of COVID-19, and 5 deaths ("COVID-19...", 2020). The World Health Organization has ranked Myanmar's healthcare system as one of the worst in the world, and unprepared for the COVID-19 pandemic (Lynn, 2020). The WHO estimated that Myanmar has 6.1 doctors per 10,000 people, and as little as 1 per 83,000 people in rural areas. The measures Myanmar has taken so far can be seen summarized in figure 3 ("COVID-19...", 2020) and include the following: the issuance of all visas is suspended, prohibited gathering of more than 20 people, all social events postponed or canceled until the end of April, all schools, universities and entertainment centers closed, restaurants can only remain open for delivery services (Lwin, 2020). Overcrowding, internet shutdown, blocks of humanitarian aid and movement restrictions have all made populations displaced by violence in the states of Rakhine, Kachin, Shan and Karen extremely vulnerable to a virus outbreak ("Myanmar: Displacement...", 2020).

Beyond the health risks, the development and industrial sectors of the country will suffer consequences of the virus. Myanmar's economic dependence on China, and other neighboring countries means that border closures have sparked a sharp downturn in trade (Henson, 2020). According to the Ministry of Commerce, Myanmar's usual profit of 10 million dollars a day from border trade with China has now dropped to less than 1 million (Lintner, 2020). Myanmar's main export of clothes, bringing in 4.6 billion dollars in the 2018-19 fiscal year, is also hard hit. Up to 90% of the raw materials processed in Myanmar's clothing factories comes from China, with the rest from Indonesia, South Korea and Vietnam (Lintner, 2020). Many factories had to shut due to a shortage of raw material, and an estimated tens of thousands of people will lose their jobs. Other sectors that are impacted include tourism, and electricity, with the outbreak causing massive delays in power production construction, including the mega-hydropower dam that is part of the BRI initiative (Henson, 2020).

Preparedness and Response to COVID-19 in Myanmar



International Relations

India: In an attempt to counteract the growing influence of China in the region, India has forged close ties with Myanmar (Bhaumik, 2007). Their influence in the country has helped lessen the international isolation felt by Myanmar and also ease their reliance on China (AT, 2016). In 2015 India provided Myanmar with a loan amounting to \$500 million (US) for development purposes. India and Myanmar have also agreed to cooperate militarily in order to help modernize Myanmar's military.

China: The relationship between Myanmar and China has traditionally been friendly, in the 50s they signed a treaty of friendship and a non-aggression pact (Geng, 2006). However, recently tensions have risen between the two due to alleged Chinese 'debt-traps' (Lwin, 2018) and Chinese backed militants in the North (Reuters, 2018). China and Myanmar cooperate extensively militarily and strategically, with China being the biggest supplier to Myanmar of military aid. In 2007 China vetoed a UN security council resolution designed to punish Myanmar, showing it's support for the country (Bristow, 2007). However, in recent years China has been less willing to back the government, even condemning the government after violence erupted in the Northern regions of the country. Despite this, in 2018 international organisations found a rise in Chinese projects in Myanmar, with the country pursuing even more in 2019.

Bangladesh: The relationship between Myanmar and Bangladesh is cordial, with Bangladeshis historically supporting movements in Myanmar for democracy. Bangladesh has sought to establish greater rail and road networks between the two countries to encourage and boost their economic relations (US, 2010). However, the spillover of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh has caused friction between the two countries.

Bangladesh

Historical Background

To understand the historical background of Bangladesh we need to understand that Bangladesh was built by the “Bengalis”. They are considered as an ethnicity within Pakistan. While being the majority they feared domination by the minority group of West Pakistan. Facing oppression, the Bengalis decided to create their own Muslim state and fled to India, the current territory of Bangladesh. While escaping Pakistan the Bengalis were still considered to be part of Pakistan, they were treated as East-Pakistan. It was during the Indo-Pakistan war in 1965 that East-Pakistan started to slowly detach itself from the political ties of West Pakistan (Choudhury, 1972). It is only in March 1971 that the Bangladesh liberation war occurred between East and West Pakistan. At the same time a war between Pakistan and India erupted which caused more instability in the Bay of Bengal, after the previous separation of Pakistan and India in 1947 (Saikia, 2007). India interfered in the conflict between West-East Pakistan and assisted East Pakistan (Haider, 2009). Due to India’s support Bangladesh emerged in December 1971 (Wolf, 2013). Even though India supported Bangladesh during the liberation war there are still tensions between India and Bangladesh today. The border dispute that occurred back in 2001 between the two countries is a result of the constant tensions between these countries, because of religious and territorial divergence.



Recent Events

Some recent events have led to clearer bilateral relations between Bangladesh and important players in the Belt and Road Initiative passing through the Bay of Bengal. The first being the strengthened relationship between Bangladesh and India which was reinforced when an agreement about the long-lasting border dispute was signed in 2015 (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2017). With this agreement India and Bangladesh found common interest and this subsequently led to many roads and opportunities for trade between the two nations. We must, however, acknowledge that the Sino-Bangladeshi relations are also of importance as China has now become Bangladesh's most prominent investor and the two countries have become strategic partners as of 2016 (Ramachandran, 2019). According to the CEIC China's investment in Bangladesh hit 37.8 billion US dollars in 2019 (2019). Its infrastructure is thus developing greatly since the wake of the BRI however, none of the infrastructure has proven to be "strategically controversial" just yet (Brewster, 2019). Lastly, Bangladesh has been struggling with the incoming refugees more significantly than ever due to the pandemic. The country rescued many Rohingya from the sea on April 16th 2020, however on April 25th the government refuses to take in more Rohingya refugees as they claim it is not their responsibility (Aljazeera, 2020).

Response to- and Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Bangladesh was encircled by countries previously affected by the virus, it eventually attained the Bangladeshi territory beginning of March. It is only on the 17th of March that the government responded at regional level by closing down schools and other public institutions. For now, the government got criticised from all angles since it refrained from prohibiting large religious gatherings. As other countries in the region Bangladesh was criticised for not acting directly when the virus spread in the neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, the government has installed an \$8 billion stimulus package to support the local economy, since the garment industry, which is the main income of the country, had to be shut down (Diplomat Risk Intelligence, 2020). Another internal challenge caused by the coronavirus is to assure the protection of the Rohingya refugees that currently reside in the densely populated camps of

Cox's Bazaar. Through media and announcements, the government tries to educate the people about the prevention measures to take against the virus (Alam, 2020). It is feared that the virus will spread even more in refugee camps, which is the reason why the authorities completely locked down these regions (Fliegau & Ayres, 2020). According to the World Bank, Bangladesh was granted a \$100 million fast track. This contribution is to fight the spreading of the virus by supporting the national health institutions and providing sanitary equipment (2020). This is how Bangladesh is currently supported at international level.

International Relations

To understand Bangladesh's international relations, one must observe its localisation, it is densely encircled by India and shares a border with Myanmar. At the same time, it is central on the Bay of Bengal. Because of this optimal position China sees the opportunity to become associated with Bangladesh to implement the BRI . Because of China's and India's constant rivalry, it is harder for Bangladesh to separately negotiate with China, without India trying to interfere or preventing the strengthening of economic and political ties with China. Nevertheless, Bangladesh does benefit from this competition on an economic level, since it obtains military funding from China and is the second largest recipient of Chinese loan in regard to the BRI (Ramachandran, 2019). The relation between Myanmar and Bangladesh is delicate, with several disputes because of the Rohingya refugees' crisis and a territorial conflict about the sea border because both countries aspired to own the largest maritime part of the Bay of Bengal (Churchill, 2012). Bangladesh is also part of the Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM), which offers Bangladesh the opportunity to export worldwide and boosts its economy. Another benefit of Bangladesh is its strategic position on the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), which is the sea-based extension of the BRI (Baruah, 2018). Due to this position, it has a central role of connecting the different countries on the BRI. Bangladesh is also part of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which is an intergovernmental organization in South Asia. Its members are Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Lastly, Bangladesh is also a main actor in the Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which will eventually benefit its economic development. This cooperation aims to create a Bay of Bengal Community, which would facilitate collective action between the littoral states (Karim, 2020).

Sri Lanka

Historical Background

After a civil war in 1971, another one from 1987 until 1989, Sri Lanka was hit hardest by the civil war from 1983 to 2009. The conflict can be traced back to the British colonial rule of Sri Lanka, when the friction between the majority group of the Sinhalese and the minority Tamils started. After about four decades of institutionalised discrimination against the Tamils, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) started their insurgency against the incumbent government. The war is estimated to have costs about 200 billion USD (AsiaEcon, 2015), not taking into account indirect costs such as the cost of mental trauma or the violations of human rights (Pradhan, 2007). As a result of the war, Sri Lanka had a towering debt and came close to bankruptcy multiple times. Since then, the Sri Lankan government has strenuously been attempting to get the economy going again. This has been somewhat successful, with the GDP per capita being approximately five times higher in 2018 than in 2002 (The World Bank). However, because of the domestic investments, the Sri Lankan debt skyrocketed.

Recent Events

As a result of the reparations of the civil war, the country has needed bailouts on multiple occasions. Two examples are the 162.2 million USD loan from the IMF in 2016, and the 1.25 billion USD bailout from China in 2018 (EconomyNext, 2018). In addition to this direct investment, the Chinese have carried out significant works under their Belt and Road Initiative in Sri Lanka too. The Hambantota Harbour in Sri Lanka was built with the help of a 1.263 billion USD loan from China, with China Harbor as the ports builder company. Currently 85% of the port is owned by China Merchants Port, the other 15% belonging to the Sri Lankan government (EconomyNext, 2018). More recently (2019), China has invested 1.4 billion USD in the largest and most important port of Sri Lanka, the port of Colombo (Rossi, 2019). Here, Sri Lanka has no sovereignty whatsoever, exemplified by the Chinese submarines docked when the Prime Minister of Japan was visiting this harbour (Abi-Habib, 2018). As a result of the influx of FDI from China, Sri Lanka has now been dubbed the closest strategic partner of China in their 'Maritime Silk Route' (MSR) initiative (Brewster, 2014). Officially, the MSRI would connect

the ports in the Bay of Bengal and create special economic zones in the whole of Southeast Asia. However, as a byproduct of the implementation, the countries in the Bay of Bengal would become reliant on the Chinese economy (Brewster, 2014).

Response to- and Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The first confirmed case of the COVID-19 virus happened on January 27th, when a Chinese woman in Sri Lanka tested positive. Following this, the government imposed a lockdown on the 20th of March, when the tally was up to 70 confirmed cases which lasted until the 24th of March, however, in some regions the curfew was lifted a day earlier. On the 25th of April, the curfew was re-imposed because of a surge in the number of cases (ABC News, 2020). At the time of writing, there are 435 confirmed cases in Sri Lanka with a total of 7 deaths. These numbers are relatively low and are most probably the result of the stringent measures taken by the government.

According to the Overseas Development Institute, Sri Lanka's is 'one of the most vulnerable middle-income countries' (Hewage, 2020) with regards to the impact of COVID-19 on their economy. It is heavily reliant on export revenue and Chinese import of raw materials, which have decreased significantly because of China's economic slowdown (Jansz, 2020). Despite this slowdown, China has granted a concessionary loan of 500 million USD upon Sri Lanka's request on the 19th of March, after which the 1.3 million USD from the US and the 24 million USD from the EU pale in comparison. While previously there was a case to be made that Sri Lanka is not in a Chinese 'debt trap' -as convincingly done by the Chatham house among others (Chatham House, 2020)-, the outbreak of this virus will leave Sri Lanka with both an economic recession, a debt larger than 6 billion USD to China, and multiple ports under China's control. This all culminates in the term 'Health Silk Road', which entails Beijing increasing their influence by investing and providing supplies in healthcare in other countries (Ranaraja & Majueran, 2020).

International Relations

Historically, India-Sri Lanka relations have been very well maintained. This is partly due to their close geographical location and shared maritime border, strengthening cultural ties . Only

during the Sri Lanka civil war were they tested, when India attempted to intervene and got into direct conflict with the LTTE . Since India's withdrawal in 1992 however, political and economic relations have strongly improved , India being the main important partner in 2017, and the third largest export partner after the U.K. and the U.S.

Sri Lanka and China have always been on good terms and the BRI has deepened these relations significantly. India now perceives China as a rival in terms of exercising influence in Sri Lanka. This exercise of influence can not only be seen in the flows of FDI coming from China, but also when analyzing military ties between the two countries. China has given Sri Lanka 1 billion USD, modern weapons, and six F7 fighter jets to end the civil war . When the West and India ¹⁹ withdrew their (physical) support, China filled the vacant role of saviour and indebted the Sri Lankan government to themselves.

BIMSTEC, or The Bay Of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, is an international organization of several nations of South and South East Asia. The member states are Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and since 2004 Nepal and Bhutan. The area houses about 1.5 billion people and has a combined GDP of \$3.5 trillion. The sub-regional grouping was first formed in 1997 with five countries and quickly grew to 7 in 2004. The objective of BIMSTEC is to further technological and economic cooperation in 14 key sectors.

From 2018 until 2022, Sri Lanka will be chair of the BIMSTEC, meaning that China will be able to at least somewhat influence policy making in these meetings, despite them not being part of the Initiative. Due to the fact that the Bay of Bengal is an important access point to the Indian Ocean for Beijing, Xi Jinping will not allow Sri Lanka to forget their debt to him.

South China Sea

Indonesia

Historical Background

The Netherlands ruled over Indonesia from the early 19th century until the end of World War II. On 17th August 1945, the Indonesian independence was proclaimed. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the country went from democracy to authoritarianism, went through a failed coup d'état in 1965, a subsequent anti-communist purge, and three decades of substantial economic growth stimulated by foreign direct investment and supported by the United States. Since the start of the 21st century, despite instability, corruption and terrorism, both Indonesia's democracy and economy were strengthened.

Since the early stages of the South China Sea dispute, Indonesia has repeatedly asserted its position as a non-claimant state. However, parts of China's 'Nine-dash line', a demarcation line defined and used by China for their claims of the major part of the South China Sea, overlap with Indonesia's exclusive economic zone near the Natuna Islands - about 1400km away from the Chinese mainland. These waters are important for fishery but are also home to large natural gas reserves. Indonesia has repeatedly asked China to clarify the nature of the line. In July 2010, Indonesia declared to the UN Secretary General that the line 'clearly lacks international legal basis', and that it risks upending the United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea. Generally, however, Indonesia has adopted the view that the line's existence is best ignored (Connelly, 2016).

Recent Events

Over the past year, Chinese investments in Indonesia, mainly focused on infrastructure and manufacturing, have doubled, going from \$2.4 billion to \$4.7 billion. In doing so, China has replaced Japan as the second largest investor in the country. According to the chairman of the Indonesian investment agency, "the government does not give priority to Chinese investment. It's just that China is known to be very aggressive" (Asmara, 2020).

The foreign direct investments (FDI's) have also caused unrest in the past week. Indonesia forced several Chinese workers to return home due to the ongoing pandemic. This shows an underlying trend of Indonesians increasingly becoming more hostile towards China due to FDIs

slowly taking over the economy. Indonesian authorities say that on a local level, the FDI's create resentment because of the lack of added value to the local economy, as well as the fear that Chinese workers will take away work from locals (Sangadji, Septiari, 2020). On a governmental level, however, both countries are cooperating more due to COVID-19. So far, China has sent thousands of medical supplies to Indonesia to help them fight the disease (Pinandita, 2020).

Whilst cooperation seems to increase, tensions between China and Indonesia have grown in the South China Sea. In the first weeks of 2020, Indonesia sent ten naval ships and four F-16 fighters on patrol. Prior to that, Chinese coast guard vessels and Indonesian naval ships were locked in a standoff. The increase in tensions is due to China claiming large parts of East Natuna (Chang, 2020).

Response to- and Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

As of April 25th, 2020, Indonesia had more than 8600 officially reported Coronavirus cases (the second highest in Southeast Asia), more than 720 deaths (one of the highest fatality rates in the world), and more than 1040 recoveries (Worldometers, 2020). The country's rate of testing for COVID-19 is one of the lowest in the world - only a few thousand tests have been done for an entire population of 267.7 million people. That means that the COVID-19 virus has likely been spreading unchecked for months, especially since the Indonesian government initially downplayed the virus and only declared its first case on March 2nd, and that the real number of cases is likely to be much higher (Barker and Souisa, 2020). It is expected that, once the testing rate increases, the high fatality rate will decrease.

Foreign travel has been banned, but there is no national lockdown in Indonesia. There have been disagreements over physical distancing measures between Indonesia's central and local governments, with some regional leaders pushing to close provincial borders to slow the spread of the virus (Ratcliffe, 2020). More recently, the government prohibited holiday travel over Ramadan, to avoid further spread of the virus (Sidhu and Regan, 2020).

Indonesia has been an important voice in calling for a greater regional and international response to COVID-19, including within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In general, it is clear that the country's healthcare system was not ready for this crisis, especially not in remote areas. The deaths of medical workers have exposed its underequipped nature and shortages of personal protective equipment (Diplomat Risk Intelligence, 2020).

International Relations

Indonesia's relationship with the United States is strong. Both countries want to maintain peace and stability in the region. In 2010, they initiated a partnership to foster consistent high-level engagement on democracy and civil society, security, maritime, energy, and trade issues, among others. In 2015, they upgraded this partnership to the U.S.-Indonesia Strategic Partnership, extending cooperation to issues of regional and global significance. (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2020).

Indonesia's relationship with China is tricky. China claims most of the South Chinese Sea, its Nine-dash line intercepting Indonesian EEZ claims around the Natuna Islands. Widodo, however, affirms there will be no compromise on Indonesian sovereignty in the region - preserving it being part of his foreign policy. While Chinese coast guard vessels keep venturing into the Indonesian Exclusive Economic Zone, Indonesia states that China's claims in its EEZ have no legal basis, and are a violation of Indonesian sovereignty. Jakarta is also expanding its military presence around the Natunas, and relations are likely to become increasingly strained as China continues to aggressively assert its fishing rights in the region. (Lo, 2020).

Indonesia and the Philippines are each other's closest ally. They both co-founded ASEAN and APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) and reject any Chinese claim in the region. Bilateral trade between the two keeps growing, the balance of trade significantly favouring Indonesia. In 2017, they forged accords to establish a new shipping route to boost trade as well as intensify cooperation on agriculture development, and to step up bilateral cooperation on maritime security, counterterrorism and anti-drug efforts (Kabling, 2017). Indonesia's relations with Malaysia are complex. Both co-founders of ASEAN and APEC, the two countries are similar in terms of history, culture, religion, ethnicity and language. Yet, there are territorial disputes between the two, most notably over the oil rich islands of Ambalat. Both have detained officials and fishers of each other, accused of territorial breaching violations and illegal fishing (Hunt, 2010). Indonesia entered a trilateral cooperation agreement with Malaysia and the Philippines, allowing coordinated patrols in the pirate-infested Sulu Sea (Parameswaran, 2019).

South China Sea

The South China Sea carries with it a lot of geopolitical tensions, and can be seen as one of the most highly disputed areas of water. With various countries laying claim to the water, as

well as the clusters of islands within these waters, the South China Sea has raised plentiful conflict. China's actions in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative have done anything but lighten these conflicts. Continuous allegations are being made of China crossing disputed waters and laying claim to geographical areas that are not theirs. Specifically the before mentioned Malaysia, as well as Vietnam, Taiwan, and the Philippines reap great issues from this conflict. The South China Sea (SCS) has been and continues to be a complex and contentious area, with the powers of the region (and the world) grappling with the complexities of overlapping and contested sovereignty. While tensions in the area between nations with stakes in the region and dynamics between states continue to change, the Covid-19 pandemic has shifted regional dynamics. While it has created roadblocks to the development of projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it has also given China an opportunity as its rivals have been weakened.

Recently, a report by the International Crisis Group database CrisisWatch published an update from the South China Sea for April 2020. They classified the situation in the SCS as deteriorating (CrisisWatch, 2020). Particularly, tensions have been rising between China and Vietnam, the Philippines, and the United States. These tensions mounted due to maritime disputes within contested waters (CrisisWatch, 2020). While opposing states have accused China of using the pandemic as an opportunity to further its territorial claims within the SCS, China has condemned the US as a 'troublemaker' (Wong, 2020). As states continue to make movements within the region, the situation is ever evolving.

To investigate this strategic evolution, we created a matrix game to simulate the situation within the region as it stands. We ran two identical games over the period of two rounds, each lasting an hour and forty five minutes each. Students were paired into groups of two to represent China, the USA, the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam and Malaysia. After preparing for the simulation in these pairs, each individual went on to represent their nation in either simulation 1 or 2. We used these games to simulate the events of Covid-19 and its impacts on the power dynamics and the overall situation within the region. Before presenting the results of these simulations, the following is the product of research done into the actors that we simulated in our recreation of the geopolitics of the South China Sea.

Philippines

Historical Background

In 1946 the Philippines, previously having been a colony from Spain and then sold to the US, became an independent nation. In 1965, Ferdinand Marcos started his second term as a president. With him in charge, Martial law was implemented after an attempted assassination of the then Defense-minister. This caused a totalitarian regime until 1986, with new elections, Corazón Aquino became the new president and ended the Martial law. A new Constitution was drafted. In 2012, there was a clash with China over the Scarborough Shoal in the SCS. The Scarborough Shoal was thought to have ample resources of oil and gas. China disputed whether it pertained to the Philippines or not (BBC, 2018). In 2016, under Rodrigo Duterte's regime, the Build Build Build projects started, with a main goal, to improve the infrastructure of the country. Spending on infrastructure has almost doubled. The goal is to reach 7% of their GDP by 2022 (The Economist, 2016). In 2016, the Philippines went to the International Court because they thought that China had no legal basis to claim Ayungin Shoal, another island in the SCS.

Recent Events

12th of July International Jury posits arbitral proceedings against the People's Republic of China regarding actions performed by China that the Philippines deemed violated the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Ayungin Shoal (Second Thomas), located in the South China sea and claimed by the Philippines, had restricted access by surrounding it with a myriad of ships. This disabled Philippines access to provide supplies and food with their own ships (Philippines vs China, 2016). This relates to the Maritime Silk Road part of the BRI, where China tries to control the South China Sea more.

China is expected to finance infrastructure projects beneath the Administration of current president Duterte. The biggest infrastructure project being 'Build Build Build' (Mourdoukas, 2019). Approximately a trillion dollars will be invested by China to help the Philippines. There is uncertainty of how stable this deal is and how much the Philippines will actually receive. These investments are part of China's bigger plan to construct the Road part of the BRI since the Philippines controls a significant part of the SCS.

Response to- and Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Philippines has just over 6,000 current cases of COVID-19 and is increasing daily. They had their first confirmed case, early on, at the end of January and then had a slow rise up until mid-March when their cases started to rapidly climb. (COVID-19 Map, 2020) Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in the country, President Duterte imposed a ban on travellers from Wuhan City and the Hubei Province in China, and this later extended to the rest of China. (Tomacruz, 2020) The Philippines has tried to decrease the spread of COVID-19 by imposing further travel restrictions on who can enter the country. Cathay Pacific, one of the most frequently used airlines in the Philippines, does not permit any passengers traveling from China or who have visited China, Hong Kong, or Macao in the past 14 days, as according to government advice. (Cathay Pacific, 2020) On the 16th of March, the Philippines declared a state of calamity, which also declared that law enforcement agencies can require assistance from armed forces to take any necessary actions to enforce lockdown and peace. (Republic of The Philippines, 2020) This is a very dramatic decision undertaken by the Government, as they have allowed law enforcement agencies to shoot any citizens not abiding by the rules that are set.

International Relations

China: Relations between the Philippines and China have worsened over recent times due to the South China Sea dispute. The relations hit a new low following the Reed Bank incident in June 2019 when a Filipino fishing vessel was sunk, and the crew abandoned by a Chinese vessel. Left stranded, a crew of Vietnamese fishermen came to their rescue. (Pieto, 2019) Both governments did come to a peaceful conclusion however it shows that small incidents can easily worsen relations. Scarborough Shoal, an island in the South China Sea, is heavily disputed. China has attempted to claim the island by warning off Filipino vessels away from the island, however this deteriorates relations and exacerbates the dispute in the area. (Panda, 2019)

USA: Relations between the Philippines and the US have historically been quite strong; previously named a “special relationship”. (Sen, 2005) However, since Rodrigo Duterte has come to power in 2016, he has pondered his country’s relationship with the US. Relations were inevitably questioned between the two were questioned in February 2020, when the President of the Philippines, announced that they would be terminating the Visiting Forces Agreement Pact,

which has been in force for over two decades. This agreement allowed the US to participate in exercises with Filipino forces. (The Economist, 2020) This could be interpreted in many ways: the Philippines trying to increase their own security and dependency, or making a strategic move to please China, although very unlikely.

Vietnam: Relations between the Philippines and Vietnam have been relatively positive recently. As mentioned earlier; Vietnamese fishermen came to the rescue of the Filipino men who were stranded after their fishing vessel was sunk. This warmed relations between the two and they share a goal within the South China Sea against the Chinese who are trying to occupy much of the region. (Pioto, 2019)

Taiwan

Historical Background

Taiwan's history is intimately bound with that of Chinese interference, with the first formal annexation dating back to the Qing Dynasty in 1683, and after briefly ceding the territory to Japan (1895), regained control in 1945. In 1979, The USA switched its diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to Beijing. The Kuomintang - who ruled brutally from 1949-2000, signed the “1992 Consensus” with mainland China, which states that, “there is only one China”, although both states differ on how to interpret this (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020) . By 2003, a result of Chinese intimidation tactics, Taiwanese parliament agreed that, should China attack, a referendum declaring independence shall be held (BBC News, 2019). In 2005, China introduced an “Anti-Secession Law”, which Taiwan turned down. In 2007, the UN rejected Taiwan's request to gain membership as an independent nation-state. The following year, the Kuomintang won the elections and regained power. Consequently, relations between China and Taiwan became warmer, evidenced through the 2013 Cross-Strait services trade agreement, as well as the 2015 Chinese-Taiwanese presidential talks (the first since 1949). In 2016, the pro-independence Democratic Progressive party won the presidential elections, and relations have once again soured.

Recent Events:

- (1) The Solomon Islands' decision to recognise the Chinese government leaves Taiwan acknowledged by a mere 15 states. This was premised on the multi-million-dollar stadium China has promised to build, as well as a revival of the Gold Ride – at one point the Islands' most profitable goldmine. This leaves Taiwan further isolated, and grants China a firmer foothold in the South Pacific (The Guardian, 2019).

- (2) The once-touted viable option for political rule in Taiwan – one country, two systems – has been dismissed following the Hong Kong protests of 2019, which assisted in the election of Tsai Ing-Wen, whose party campaigned under the slogan of, “Resist China, Defend Taiwan”. This occurred regardless of Chinese attempts at disinformation campaigns, the goal of which was to mar the name of the incumbent president, and bolster support for the pro-China Kuomintang party (The Guardian, 2019). Regardless of

China being Taiwan's biggest trade partner – accounting for 30% of its trade and trade deals reaching \$150.5 billion in 2018 – this tension risks Taiwan jeopardising one of China's main goals in the South China Sea: maintaining regional peace and stability (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020).

- (3) Although heavily reliant upon the guarantees offered by the USA under the Taiwan Relations Act, Taiwan has a definite need for a military presence, which has been increasing in recent years. In 2019, Taiwan's defense budget was \$11.3 billion, accounting for 2.6% of its GDP. By 2025, Taiwan aims to increase this by 20% (\$2.1 billion). With reference to the aforementioned dilemma (#2), this leaves food for thought with regard to China meddling in Taiwan's sovereignty at a time when they are pressing for peace in the region (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020).

Response to- and Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Although only 130km from mainland China, Taiwan's mitigation of the coronavirus has arguably been one of the best in the world, in part due to their experience from the 2003 SARS outbreak. The success of which can be attributed to the use of technology (phone tracking), a central command centre, a single-payer healthcare system, and rapid decision making. Border controls were put in place quickly, and the export of surgical masks was banned early on. Although not a part of the WHO – due to strong objections on the part of China – experts have been allowed to engage in an online WHO forum regarding the current epidemic. Life generally carries on as normal: offices and schools remain open, as do “bustling” restaurants, gyms and cafes, although as a precaution, customers must spray hand sanitiser and have their temperatures taken. However, Taiwan's response was, by and large, a dismissal of noncitizens, evidenced through the vulnerable undocumented migrant workers who could not be liable to Taiwan's treatment and prevention measures (The Diplomat, 2020). Additionally, with a population of 24 million, Taiwan is only conducting 800 screenings per day, and not everyone in quarantine is tested. Regardless, as of 26/04/2020, there have been 429 cases of coronavirus, of which 281 have recovered and only 6 have died (Google, 2020) (The Guardian, 2020).

International Relations

- (1) United States of America: Although the biggest weapons provider to Taiwan, the USA does not officially recognise Taiwan as an independent state. Military support for the unrecognised-state can be taken as part of the USA's commitment to the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait differences, and for peace in the region more generally. Recognition aside, U.S developmental assistance to Taiwan during the 1950s-60s helped bolster Taiwan's economy, and is the US' 9th largest trading partner. As such, Taiwan enjoys a normal trade relations status as well as ready access to US markets (U.S Department of State, 2018). The Taipei-Act between the US-Taiwan was passed in on March 26th, 2020 and aims to strengthen ties between the two nations. (Central News Agency, 2020).

- (2) People's Republic of China: The PRC considers Taiwan to be an inalienable part of it and argues the 1992 Consensus to an implicit agreement of Taiwan to not seek independence. The island is bound intimately with mainland China, with economic links that could become too costly to sever. A result of President Tsai's rejection of the 1992 Consensus saw a suspension of a cross-strait communication mechanism, restricted tourism and an exclusion from international entities such as civil aviation. China has missiles deployed along the Taiwan Strait, and systematically conducts drills near the island, with bombers, fighter jets and other aircraft that fly around the island as a show of force. In 2019, Xi Jinping reiterated that Beijing would "employ non-peaceful means" to safeguard its national sovereignty (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020).

- (3) World Health Organisation: Due to Taiwan not being a member of the United Nations - a result of its complex relationship with China - it is banned from gaining WHO membership. This means that Taiwan is excluded from emergency meetings on the current pandemic. The fact that Taiwan prides itself as having one of the best health systems in the world makes this ban markedly more offensive. This tension has come to the forefront in the last month in response to the assistant director-general of the WHO - Bruce Aylward - who, when asked to comment on Taiwan's response to the virus, responded that they had already discussed China.

Malaysia

Historical Background

Due to its favourable geography, Malaya was a major trading center for spices in Southeast Asia, especially amongst East Asia and the Middle East back in the 1400s. Since then, Islam also became the main religion. After which, for over 400 years, Malaya was colonised by multiple parties – the Portuguese, then the Dutch, followed by the British – and was also occupied by the Japanese in World War II. (Department of Information, 2016). When the Japanese left Malaya in 1945, the Communist Party of Malaya started gaining control, which was when the British returned. Malaya was under the British Administration until 1946, where the Malayan Union was formed. The Union referred to the political party in power, formed from a coalition of three parties representing the main ethnic groups of Malaya – the Malays, Chinese and Indians. This large (20%) ethnically Chinese population has led to widespread support for domestic Chinese presence and investment within the country. Malaysia also played an active role in the foundation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations; and has maintained diplomatic, political and economic relations with neighbouring ASEAN countries since its formation.

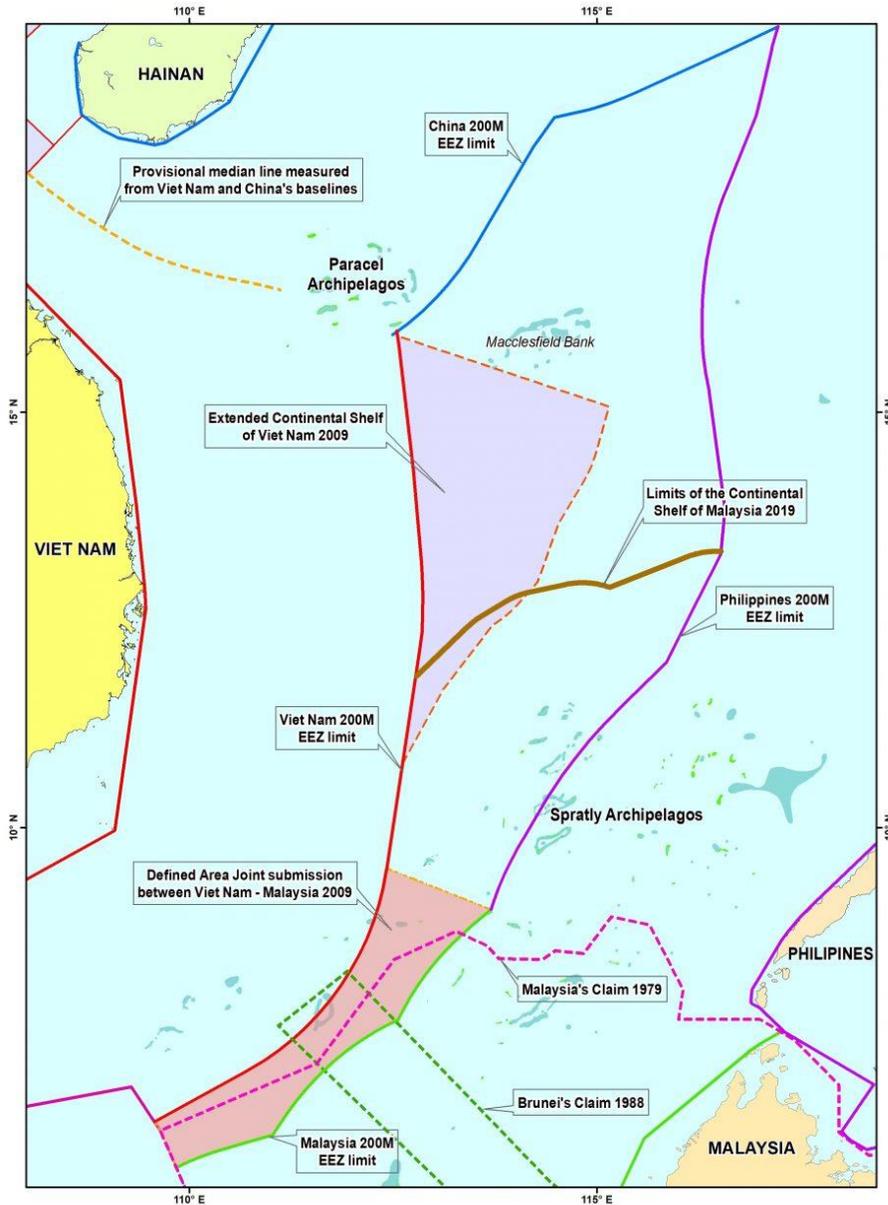
Recent Events

In recent years, Malaysia has become a focal point for the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative whilst taking low-interest loans of 800 million USD from EXIM Bank of China for infrastructural development investment projects.(OECD, 2018). These investment projects, combined with a number of other trade and defence deals (France-Presse, 2016) have resulted in Malaysia taking a historically reserved stance to exerting their sovereignty against China in the South China Sea (SCS).

Two recent initiatives have contrasted this characteristically reserved approach. In 2009 Malaysia made a joint submission directly to the United Nations in conjunction with Vietnam for maritime territorial expansion into the lower continental shelf (Thao, 2019); the body of sea situated between Vietnam and Malaysia (highlighted in the map below). These joint claims expanded into the territory contended within China's nine-dash line, implicitly rejecting the validity of China's aforementioned claims. This initial claim was extended upon in 2019, when Malaysia tendered a second submission to the UN (United Nations, 2019), further expanding

Malaysia's claims to the upper continental shelf region. This was met with hostility from Beijing, who are currently conducting island building missions and oil drilling operations (Smith, Ryal, 2020) in the Spratly Islands; situated within the region Malaysia has laid claim to. Tensions have only arisen further with Chinese militia and law enforcement ships approaching dangerously close to Malaysian oil and gas operations (Jaipragas, 2020). Both the US and Australia have responded by condemning China's strong-arming behavior and by sending warships into Malaysia's exclusive economic zone to provide domestic Malaysian security (Latiff, 2020).

Figure 1: 2019 Malaysian Submission into the Upper Continental Shelf



Response to, and Consequences of, the COVID-19 Pandemic

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 was reported on the 25th January 2020, in Selangor. The number of cases remained low until the cluster linked to the Tablighi Jamaat religious gathering held in late February was identified (The Independent, 2020). From fewer than 30 at the start of the month, the figure rose to over two thousand cases by the end of March.

Malaysia's Prime Minister, Muhyiddin then announced and implemented the Movement Control Order (MCO), scheduled to last from 18 to 31 March (The Star, 2020). The MCO was designed to enforce social distancing, to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, and included the closure of all businesses other than essential services and the suspension of religious activities. Only one member per household was allowed to leave to buy groceries or attend medical facilities.

The MCO has been extended thrice so far, to 14 April, then 28 April, and now 12 May. On the night of 23 April, when Muhyiddin announced the extension, he specified the possibility of further extensions. (Bernama, 2020). Travelling in and out of the country has also been restricted, causing widespread panic to workers in Johor Bahru, especially those who travel daily between Malaysia and Singapore. Many workers chose to stay in Singapore, until Singapore commenced its lockdown measures on April 7th, prompting more Malaysian to return home (Straits Times, 2020).

Before March, Malaysia gathered and donated 9 million pairs of medical gloves and 2 million MYR from Sabah (The Star, 2020; Borneo Post, 2020). After which, when Malaysia started dealing with COVID-19 cases, China then publicly announced that they are committed to supplying healthcare supplies such as masks, testing kits, and ventilators. Medical aid has been sent to Sabah repeatedly, and Chinese medical experts have also shared their experience with Malaysian frontline healthcare workers (The Star, 2020).

International Relations

China, Vietnam, and the United States form the three most consequential actors affecting Malaysia within the SCS dispute. While the ongoing dispute between China and Malaysia has caused friction in their relations, China remains Malaysia's biggest trading partner, with a number of bilateral trade deals, agreed between the states in 2016 (France-Presse, 2016). Malaysia has also received significant medical support from China to combat the ongoing Coronavirus crisis, which has only increased Chinese leverage (Al Jazeera, 2020). Malaysia looks for a favorable resolution to the SCS dispute that does not impact domestic Chinese investment and trade relations which both remain critical to economic growth in Malaysia. Vietnam has also played a pivotal role in Malaysia's SCS dispute. Vietnam and Malaysia filed for a joint submission for the extension of their respective maritime borders into the Continental

Shelf (South China Sea), as well as having overlapping claims in the Spratly Islands (United Nations, 2009). While this has caused tension between the aforementioned countries, they both have strong economic and political ties, which provides a medium for future collaboration against Chinese sea expansion. The United States also remains a crucial ally of Malaysia and has provided naval support against growing Chinese aggression and strong-arming in the SCS (Reuters, 2020). The US remains Malaysia's strongest security partner, enjoying extensive bilateral defense cooperation, and therefore maintaining strong diplomatic ties with the US is pivotal to Malaysia's ongoing claims in the SCS region.

On an institutional level, two intergovernmental bodies; namely ASEAN and the UN will play important roles within the ongoing dispute. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) promotes intergovernmental cooperation and integration between Southeast Asian states and helps to counterbalance the economic and military power of China. ASEAN provides a forum for Malaysia, as well as other Southeast Asian states to cooperate in combating Chinese territorial expansion, and will be integral to preventing Chinese coercion through a divide and conquer approach. The United Nations (UN) will also play a central role in the ongoing dispute, as it provides a channel for countries such as Malaysia to engage in the SCS where they would otherwise be unable to. The UN also provides the legislative basis through which Malaysia can substantiate its claims to territory in the SCS, as the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) deals directly with delineating maritime borders within the SCS and provides a forum for resolving maritime disputes (United Nations, 2019).

Vietnam

Historical Background

Although Vietnam's involvement in the South China Sea (SCS) goes back to the 2nd and throughout the 19th century, it is not until 1954 that Vietnam starts playing an active, critical role in this dispute. In the latter half of the 19th century, Vietnam was conquered by the French, who controlled it as a protectorate (1883–1939) and then as a possession (1939–45). From 1946 to 1954, the French opposed independence, and Vietnamese guerrilla warfare ended with a provision for a temporary division of the country. This, of course, impacted the SCS: the Geneva Accords, which ended the First Indochina War, gave South Vietnam control of the Vietnamese territories, namely, islands in the Paracels and Spratlys. In 1974, when a North Vietnamese victory in the Vietnam War seemed probable, the PRC used military force in the Paracel Islands and took back the “historically Chinese” territories. These nations formalised bilateral ties in 1991, and by 2004 had successfully resolved certain maritime disputes in the area, ending in both countries ratifying agreements. After officially introducing the nine-dash-line map in 2009, conflicts in the region have continued to grow, with the Chinese detention of 21 Vietnamese fishermen in the Paracel Islands in 2012, and the eruption of anti-Chinese protests in Vietnam following oil conflicts. Tensions between the interested parties seemed to consistently be increasing.

Recent Events

Longstanding tensions seem to continue to simmer between China and Vietnam as recent developments are demonstrating more and more hostility in the South China Sea - even amidst a global pandemic. Earlier this year, Vietnam pulled the animated film “Abominable” from cinemas because of the depiction of the SCS's nine dash line (Victor, 2019). More recently, on April 2, a Vietnamese fishing vessel, found near Paracel Islands, was rammed and sunk by a Chinese maritime surveillance vessel (Vu, 2020). This incident was the latest, unsurprising reminder of the fact that Beijing remains determined to advance its claims in the South China Sea even as other claimant states continue to deal with COVID-19. While China claimed that Vietnam illegally entered the zone, and Vietnam asserted that the Chinese vessel committed an act that violated Vietnam's sovereignty over the Hoang Sa archipelago, the U.S. State Department, five days later, condemned China. Washington accused Beijing of capitalising on the global COVID-19 crisis to aggressively assert maritime claims in the South China Sea. On April 15th, the NY Times reported

that a Chinese ship embroiled in a standoff with Vietnamese vessels last year had returned to waters near Vietnam (Reuters, 2020).

Response to- and Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The novel coronavirus was confirmed to have spread to Vietnam on 23 January 2020 (Coleman, 2020). As of 22 April, there were 268 confirmed cases, 223 recoveries, and no deaths; with Hanoi, its capital, being the most affected area. Despite sharing a border with China, a weak healthcare system, and a low budget for combating the coronavirus, Vietnam has been effectively dealing with the spread of COVID-19. A combination of early decisive action, extensive testing, vigorous quarantining and social unity, Vietnam's response to the crisis has earned praise from the World Health Organisation. Kidong Park, the WHO's representative to Vietnam, believes the country's early response to the crisis was critical (Pham, 2020). Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc recently described Vietnam's efforts to contain the virus as the "spring general offensive of 2020" — a deliberate reference to the 1968 Tet Offensive carried out by the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War, a hint towards Vietnam's pride. Citizens are noticing levels of compliance, discipline and solidarity they hadn't experienced since the war. Others are attributing Vietnam's success in dealing with this pandemic to the country's brush with SARS in 2003. Their experience in developing disease treatment regimens has come in handy. The country's response to the outbreak has received acclaim for its immediacy, effectiveness and transparency, in contrast to the cover-up in its neighbouring country, China; as well as the poor preparation in the United States and European countries (Nguyen, 2020). Even in comparison to other commended examples like South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan, Vietnam has experienced a much lower number of cases and no deaths (Atkinson, 2020).

International Relations

United States: US - Vietnam relations have come a long way since the Cold War and particularly the infamous Vietnam War, also known as the American War in Vietnam. Starting in the early 2000s, relations have gradually neutralised and reached their peak under the Obama administration when the US arm embargo was lifted (Parameswaran 2019). Since then there have been talks about elevating the relationship to a potential new high - a declaration of strategic

partnership. These recent developments reflect the tendencies of strategic convergence between Washington and Hanoi, however the latter is weary of any further collaboration such as alliance declarations or military cooperation. This reflects Vietnam's foreign policy of "Three No's" - no military alliances, no foreign bases and no working with another state against a third one (Nguyen 2020).

China: Even though both Vietnam and China share a common socialist backbone ideology, they also share a complicated history. The current source of strain is their territorial dispute in the South China Sea, where the infamous nine-dash line proclaimed by Beijing as their historical sphere of influence covers much of the Exclusive Economic Zone delineated by Vietnam in accordance with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). China has been increasingly asserting their presence in disputed territories such as Paracel and Spratly islands. Recently, there was a controversial incident, in which a ship off the Chinese Coast Guard sunk a Vietnamese fishing boat in disputed waters. Both sides openly blamed the other. Despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and calls for solidarity, the maritime conflict does seem to be coming to a halt (Parameswaran 2019).

Nonetheless, it must be noted that such incidents are specks of tension in a broader evolution of the economic partnership, as China is Vietnam's biggest trading partner. Vietnam is also a stern supporter of the Belt and Road Initiative and maintains a definite pro-China stance on the One China Policy (Kurlantzick 2020). These ambivalent stances reflect Vietnam's "cooperation and struggle" strategy, which is their preferred way of doing international relations in an attempt to secure what's best for the national interests (Grossman 2019).

Malaysia & Philippines: Both countries have warmed up to Vietnam after the end of the Cold War and are currently economic allies, jointly participating in ASEAN and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). They are all closely and anxiously monitoring China's activities in the South China Sea.

Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN)

Vietnam became a member of the organisation in 1995 after years of hostility between Hanoi and its neighbours. Since then it has emerged as one of the rising powers in the region. In

2020, Vietnam takes on the role of chairman of ASEAN, which opens possibilities for agenda setting, resolution of disputes in the South China Sea and securing relationships with its neighbours. Particularly salient issue is coming to an agreement on the Code of Conduct for behaviour of states in the South China Sea. Vietnam also advocates for greater unity and solidarity in the region, greater regional economic integration and a heightened sense of collective identity (Kliem, 2020).

The South China Sea's Geopolitics in a Post-Pandemic World: A Simulation of the South China Sea During the Covid-19 Crisis

An opinionated article by Sasha Thorburn and Alexander Hoppenbrouwers

Earlier in this paper, we presented the core aspects of the simulations conducted by our research group. Whereas the simulations represented the geopolitical contexts of both the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea (SCS), this article will focus more specifically on the SCS and what the simulations can teach us about the future. To this end, we have combined an analysis of the outcomes of all four simulations with both academic research and recent developments in the SCS region. This article seeks to establish likely dynamics in international relations following the pandemic and how they will affect the behaviour of states with a stake in the SCS to see how their overarching motivations will change, while at the same time investigating SCS-specific moves as displayed in both real-life dynamics and likely courses of action derived from our simulations to establish developments particular to the SCS region. Before analysis of the simulations, we will provide a deeper insight into the nature of the games so that our conclusions can be evaluated in the context of their creation.

The Limits of Our Simulation's Predictions

It is important to note the effects of the nature of our simulations on the specific predictions that can be based on them. First, the simulations were played by undergraduate students, who researched their country and its role in the SCS conflict but lacked the political expertise of the leaders they represented. Moreover, they lacked medical and economic expertise to which leaders do have access, which means that their decisions are not as well-informed as those of real leaders. This generally made it more likely that countries would take riskier decisions and be more easily swayed by grand conceptions like protecting the independence of one's country relative to less 'glamorous' concerns like securing funding for the expansion of a port, whereas in the real situation politicians would be somewhat more cautious and would be under domestic pressure to boost their respective economies. In our games, this may have been a factor in the general tendency to eschew cooperation with major outside powers and instead work together more with smaller local powers in the context of ASEAN.

Second, the simulation was not designed to simulate gradual economic or pandemic-related changes. This means that the increasing toll that the Covid-19 crisis took was represented only in the initial scenario and in developments announced as ‘breaking news’ in between the two sessions wherein the games were played. Students were also supplied with a map of the SCS, but this displayed mostly the maritime border claims. While the players made a great deal of economic and medical aid-related deals, these facts likely caused an increased emphasis on the military and strategic aspects of the SCS region rather than on the virus and its economic effects.

Covid-19 and Changing Motivations in International Relations

The Covid-19 crisis has stirred hope in some that fundamental motivations in international relations will change. A combination of increased cooperation against this outside threat and a lessened availability of resources that can be invested in conflict may mean that international cooperation grows at the cost of competition. The role of multinational institutions like the WHO and regional unions to fight the crisis and its consequences may even lead to an increased respect for international law. One of our simulations already hinted at this, as attempts were made to bring China to the ICJ.

However, the virus has brought counterbalancing effects as well. Xenophobia and nationalism have increased as foreigners are seen as sources of disease, with special suspicion being reserved for the Chinese and Americans, who form the origin of the crisis and its worst-hit victim (Mishra, 2020). Borders are closed and foreign citizens pushed back to their native countries, sparking conflicts as countries try to eradicate every possible source of contagion. While the virus keeps other nations occupied, it is also frequently used for moves that would normally result in foreign backlash: an example is Viktor Orbán’s quick expansion of his power (Walker, 2020).

These two seemingly opposite effects are likely to produce interesting effects for the SCS region. The increasing cooperation and salience of international institutions is in clear view as ASEAN forms a platform for the joint tackling of the crisis. At the same time, the opportunity provided by the weakening of the United States and international distraction hastened the Chinese establishment of administrative districts over maritime areas in the South China Sea (Mollman, 2020). The following sections will analyse how these effects on international relations will shape the geopolitics of the SCS in the post-pandemic world.

Changing Strategic Position of Great Powers

China

The current situation in the SCS concerning China is centered around tensions rising between China and external actors over contested waters and territories. Recently, these tensions have been centered around confrontations between China and Vietnam, over the sinking of a Vietnamese fishing boat and most recently, tensions have risen between China and the US. China, US tensions escalated after the US. accused China of using the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to further its maritime claims within the SCS region. Following this, the US Navy sent a guided-missile cruiser, the USS Bunker Hill, to the Spratly Islands in order to conduct freedom of navigation operations. China moved to condemn this, with spokesman Wu Qian stating China is on high alert, closely following the actions of the US Navy (Wong, 2020). Chinese operations in the region generally can be characterized by an enhanced military presence, combined with an increased claim over the ‘international territory’(Huang, 2020).

Within our simulation, a focus was made by the other players towards reprimanding China. Because of this, China held a limited scope for opportunities of cooperation or negotiation. However, China attempted to use the Covid-19 crisis as a strategic tool, particularly through the provision of medical supplies with the goal of improving relations and spreading influence. Others went so far as to extend support to the US in the provision of medical supplies in order to better their international image.

In simulation 1, provisions of medical aid allowed China to solidify relations with Malaysia and they remained a strong ally. However, in the parallel game, Malaysia moved to reduce its dependence on China, favoring American support in its place. Within the simulation, nations were quick to cluster together in order to stand against China. This allowed for dramatic shifts of power within the region. In the ‘real-world’ the possibility for this will depend on the reliance nations (members of the ASEAN in particular) have on the Belt and Road initiative (BRI).

The Belt and Road initiative has proved to be a powerful tool in China’s arsenal for spreading and solidifying influence within the SCS region. It has also brought in an interesting dynamic into the territorial disputes within the SCS. The Philippines and Vietnam in particular have pre-existing territorial disputes with China in the SCS region. However, they have both received investments in partnerships with BRI project’s. The initiative as a whole has also

become a wedge within the ASEAN cooperation. Nations reliant on China for support from the BRI within ASEAN have been hesitant to condemn Chinese actions in the past. However, the Covid-19 crisis has proved a challenge to the continuation of the BRI, the project is vast, ambitious and expansive in and of itself, and during these times, it is certainly not business as usual.

There remains continued discussion over what the impact of the Covid-19 crisis will be on the BRI network, and what Chinese action must be in order to facilitate its continuity. While domestically, China's economy is gradually recovering, damages along the supply chain of the BRI have created a significant barrier toward the continuity of its development (Pearl, 2020). Workers are unable to travel in order to work on projects, materials are unable to be delivered, and in many nations within the region building and construction has been halted due to enforcement of lockdown measures. This comes in combination with an increase in negative feelings towards China due to the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic at its inception. In an attempt to overcome this, China has used the provision of medical supplies along BRI infrastructure. We saw this move within our simulation, with China using the BRI network to send medical provisions to the Philippines. While it is possible for China to use these soft power relations in order to improve and maintain diplomacy along the BRI network, as the global economy suffers as a result of the current pandemic, the production capacity along the supply chain will undoubtedly take a severe hit.

In the recent report published by BakerMckenzie titled Understanding How Covid-19 Alters BRI, the authors discuss the opportunities and barriers China has in the development of the BRI following this crisis. One particular opportunity that arises from this crisis is expedited development of the digital BRI network (Boo, 2020). As the world has moved online during this lockdown period, demand for online platforms is on the up, the crisis has provided a unique situation in which necessary technologies are being developed and tested at rapid pace. Furthermore, the authors suggest that Covid-19 in combination with the ongoing US-China trade war will necessitate Chinese cooperation along the BRI network, possibly expanding relations to avoid overdependence on a single country within the network (Boo, 2020). This may in the long run come to benefit Southeast Asian nations that have yet to have received China's full attention. The crisis may nudge China to solidify and expand its collaboration with nations closer to its regional vicinity.

It is unlikely that China will be able to resolve tensions within the SCS in the near future. However, in the times of the Covid-19 crisis, it appears that China has used many outcomes to its advantage. As players within the region are weakened in the fight against the pandemic, China has been able to make some expansionary moves in the waters of the SCS. This has caused backlash from parties including the U.S, the Philippines and Vietnam. As the tensions in the region remain high, China has sought out methods to solidify relations. China seems to be attempting a balancing act between conducting soft power relations through the BRI and the provisions of medical supplies, while increasing its military presence in the waters of the SCS. As and when we move into a post-pandemic world, the relations China holds following this will depend on states willingness (and ability) to stand against the spread of Chinese power. Much of Chinese strategy is dependent on its regional dominance and influence. In our simulations, the other actors were able to effectively shift the power dynamic's away from China through an increase in cooperation. The likelihood of this power shift is dependent on Chinese ability to continue to assert itself and maintain weaker states dependence, particularly through making use of the BRI initiative.

The United States

The United States has traditionally been the pre-eminent actor counterbalancing Chinese military power in the South China Sea. Simulations of military engagements in the region would often feature only American ships contacting Chinese ones, even if their conflicts were sparked by ASEAN members (Mizokami, 2019). Our simulations, however, predicted a decline of American power.

The first reason for this decline is a decreased American ability to project power due to Covid-19. The crisis has forced the United States to turn inward to deal with domestic problems, as its status as the hardest-hit country by the pandemic has left it vastly weakened. Even relative to other states, its spike in unemployment and struggling businesses is considerable (McNeil, 2020) and combined with public spending on crisis alleviation the United States will see a decline in both private investment in, and aid to, the states abutting the SCS. This will leave its soft power greatly diminished.

The Americans are therefore also missing the opportunities that Covid-19 presents to great powers: rather than boosting its image through medical aid, it has angered foreign powers

by stocking up on protective gear needed by everyone (Toosi, 2020). It has been able to offer some medical expertise and funding, but the comparatively generous donations of medical equipment like masks and testing equipment by China is causing a decline in American popularity (Schwarz, 2020). American inability to capitalize on the crisis was perfectly captured by one of our simulations, which featured American citizens being transferred to Taiwanese hospitals for treatment rather than the other way around.

At the same time, American hard power is temporarily decreased as 26 US Navy vessels have seen Covid-19 virus cases and are thus not able to operate as effectively as before (Starr, 2020). On the longer term, the weakened US economy may mean decreased military spending as well. Contemporaneously, the relative power of regional actors is increasing as ASEAN seems to ramp up its cooperation and assertiveness. This growing role for ASEAN will be discussed later, but the consequences for the United States are hard to miss. In one of our simulations, a coalition of traditional American allies in the Bay of Bengal felt that it was able to provide for maritime security on its own and openly questioned the need for the US Navy's presence in its waters, demanding that the Americans depart. It is likely that the United States, stepping back onto the world stage after struggling with Covid-19 domestically, will find an empowered ASEAN seeking to renegotiate the American status in their region.

In short, Covid-19 will likely cause the American strategic position in the SCS to decline. Its domestic problems will dent its soft power while preventing it from playing a large role in helping others overcome the crisis and so boost its popularity. Its hard power shrinks, and increasing cooperation amongst the states around the SCS will bring about a more powerful ASEAN that is likely to push back against American involvement.

The Changing Geopolitical Situation of Local Powers

Taiwan

Within our simulations, Taiwan often came out as a winning player. In group 1, an increase in nationalism led to a call for an independence referendum and the Taiwanese applying for UN membership. While this may have seemed unbelievable in 2019, Taiwanese handling of the Covid-19 crisis has received international recognition. This comes following a solidification of the movement against Beijing, which was confirmed with the re-election of Tsai Ing-wen in

2020 (Taiwan election, 2020), who has been outspoken in objecting to Chinese claims on Taiwan.

The Covid-19 pandemic has given Taiwan a chance to solidify its legitimacy as a nation-state on the global scale. Although the US Navy has maintained a presence and protection of Taiwan within the Taiwanese straits, as of yet, the government has been hesitant to speak against the “One-China ” policy. The US has maintained respect towards the “One China” policy since the 1970s under the Nixon administration (Kan, 2009). However, the United States has recently come out in support of Taiwan joining the World Health Organization (WHO) (Jaipragas, 2020). As states aim to maintain Chinese economic support, particularly as the BRI movement expands, it is unlikely that states will back Taiwan in joining WHO as they must protect their own Chinese relations. However, the US’s move to back Taiwan is a departure from the upholding the “One-China” policy.

Within our simulations, Taiwan focused on making verbal accusations, endorsements and announcements. The players focused strongly on collaborating with the US even going so far as to offer to take in American Covid-19 patients and treat them in Taiwanese hospitals. While this action in itself seems highly unlikely, it is reflective of strengthening relations between the US and Taiwan. Another interesting situation that arose during the simulation was a movement for Taiwanese and Malaysian cooperation. While this was fairly successful, as Taiwan and Malaysia came to an agreement regarding free passage of ships, this agreement was never formalized due to Malaysia wishing to maintain strong alliances with China, especially considering the investments made possible through the Belt and Road initiative.

The Covid-19 crisis could become a pivotal movement in helping Taiwan gain momentum in its overall fight for sovereignty and legitimacy of independence. The effectiveness of this will depend on whether states will move to support Taiwan, or whether nations will choose to maintain Chinese support. With the hopes for expansion of the BRI initiative, many states within the region and beyond rely on Chinese support for overall development. Furthermore, states within ASEAN may be hesitant to support Taiwan, as relations between China and ASEAN are already contentious in regard to the broader territorial disputes of the SCS, but these tensions may also drive ASEAN member states to back Taiwan to spite China.

ASEAN

The most important regional organisation in the SCS region is ASEAN. While it has steadily expanded both its membership, from 5 to 10 states since its inception, and its mandate, from mostly economic cooperation to security, cultural and political issues, it remains a relatively thin structure (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). It often fails to implement its decisions, such as the agreement on transboundary haze pollution which barely affected Indonesian haze emissions (Ghani, 2017).

However, both our own and other simulations predict an increase in ASEAN's power and mandate. In our first game, ASEAN formed two combined fleets to do battle and to survey China's actions. In our second game, ASEAN member states jointly sailed warships into Chinese territorial waters, claiming the right of innocent passage while threatening to take China to the ICJ over their sinking of Vietnamese fishing boats. A simulation conducted by Li Ding in 2017 showed that while a period without major crises would allow China to use its economic power to gain the support of several ASEAN states in the SCS dispute, in a period of crisis and security tension all ASEAN members states save Laos and Cambodia would band together against the PRC even if the Chinese relinquished some claims under the Nine-Dash Line. The Covid-19 virus pushing ASEAN together combined with recent incidents like the sinking of Vietnamese vessels makes it rather likely that ASEAN will increasingly find the interests of its member states converging and cooperation against China increasing.

ASEAN will expand its powers in various ways. First, Covid-19 has already facilitated cooperation in new areas – primarily public health – as its member states pledged in a major conference to strengthen cooperation through exchanging information, research, and coordinating policies to deal with the economic and social impacts of the virus. Using ASEAN-wide funds for economic relief was also discussed (Permana, 2020). Path dependency and the case of the European Union suggests that this cooperation will likely only increase after the crisis. Areas related to Covid-19, such as the need to control the movement of people, could offer ASEAN a springboard into heavy involvement with issues like immigration. Crucially, ASEAN may have to take over functions of retreating outside powers. The reduced American ability to patrol SCS waters is likely to push ASEAN's natives into a more active role, which as mentioned before they will be reluctant to give up afterward. The reduced investment from American firms and the Belt and Road Initiative will necessitate regional economic cooperation, and the

previously shown desire amongst ASEAN leaders to further integrate the region's economies makes it likely that this opportunity will be gladly taken (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016).

The main obstacle to such cooperation will be internal cleavages. Laos and Cambodia have long been supportive of China and according to simulations could swing towards either China or ASEAN when the latter becomes more assertive. In one of our simulations, Malaysia made a deal with China regarding their bilateral SCS dispute in exchange for financial aid and therefore did not join the incursion into Chinese waters, while in another Vietnam initially tried to enter into negotiations with the PRC in defiance of the harsh anti-China stance amongst the rest of ASEAN. However, Malaysia did not try to stop its ASEAN partners from taking on China and Vietnam eventually turned on China as well. It therefore seems likely that cooperation will increase in 'uncontroversial' areas likely public health while security and political cooperation will depend on the extent to which ASEAN can agree internally on its stance – but the most powerful ASEAN states are almost certain to come to an informal agreement to counter many of China's ambitions.

ASEAN will thus likely see its power and internal cohesion increased in a post-pandemic world. Our games saw increasing security cooperation in ASEAN due to the Covid-19 crisis pushing its member states together and due to tensions that facilitated a common ASEAN policy. The association's power will then increase by expanding its mandate in various areas, generally related to public health concerns, and by taking over functions of retreating foreign powers. The main obstacle to strategic cooperation specifically will be preventing single member states from striking a deal with China, but this is unlikely at least in the case of ASEAN's major powers. However, despite its growing power, it must be noted that ASEAN will not form as strong a bond as, for example, the EU since its powers are still far more curtailed and its internal conflicts more prominent (ASEAN Secretariat 2016).

Conclusion

Our op-ed has formed predictions for the geopolitical situation in the SCS in a post-pandemic world. In general, we believe that the Covid-19 crisis will lead to an increased relevance of regional organisations - in our case ASEAN - but will also mean that the bilateral relations of many countries will deteriorate.

In the great power competition for influence over the SCS, America will come out as the

main loser while China's position will both benefit from and be harmed by the crisis. America's vulnerability to the virus has left its hard and soft power greatly reduced, and upon recovery from the crisis it is likely that its strategic involvement in the region will be heavily scrutinized. China, meanwhile, has used the crisis to make unpopular moves and deepen its claims to the SCS's islands, has tried to boost public opinion by sending great deals of aid, and benefits from the increased allure of BRI when countries try to resuscitate their economies in a post-pandemic world. At the same time, immediate effects have thrown a wrench in many BRI plans, delaying them greatly. China's main problem is the risk of antagonizing an empowered ASEAN, which could try to block its advance and already looks suspiciously at Chinese claims in the SCS.

Our simulations seem to show local powers as the geopolitical winners of the Covid-19 crisis. Taiwan's increasingly assertive and nationalist stance has been legitimized by its handling of the crisis, which cast Taiwan as a success story and has left it less harmed than most. This increases its popularity and opens the door to inclusion in multilateral institutions. At the same time, ASEAN has been greatly empowered by expanded cooperation amongst its members and by the decline in influence of outside powers. This has allowed it to expand its influence over member states and present a more unified front.

Future predictors of the SCS conflict can improve on our simulations in two main ways. First, any prediction would benefit from an expansion of the pool of actors. Laos and Cambodia could give a more accurate view of ASEAN's internal rifts, as they are the most pro-China member states of the association. Japan and South Korea are important investors in the region, and their close ties to the US means that they could decrease the losses that our simulation predicted for the Americans. Last of all, development assistance from the World Bank and the EU is often seen as the Western counters to the BRI, for which reason they would be important aspects to economic competition in the region.

Second, simulations would benefit from inclusion of more facets of the SCS dispute. Countries should have a clearer view of their economies, seeing their actions directly affect unemployment, trade and GDP figures. This would help more accurately simulate the motivations of actors. Covid-19's effects should also be displayed more prominently, with figures such as amounts of cases and deaths ticking up or down with each passing day. This can then also be affected with specific policies such as lockdowns, which would help illustrate the interplay of economics and the pandemic. Last, the power disparity would benefit from clear

strategic overviews that included naval deployments, which is essential to have players properly understand the role of, and benefits from working with, great powers.

Serving China on a Silver Platter: How the Pandemic Has Presented China with the Opportunity to Further Develop Its Belt and Road Initiative

An opinionated article by Rachel Chan, Mathilde Panis-Jones, Arnoud Roelfsema, and Louis Stapleton English

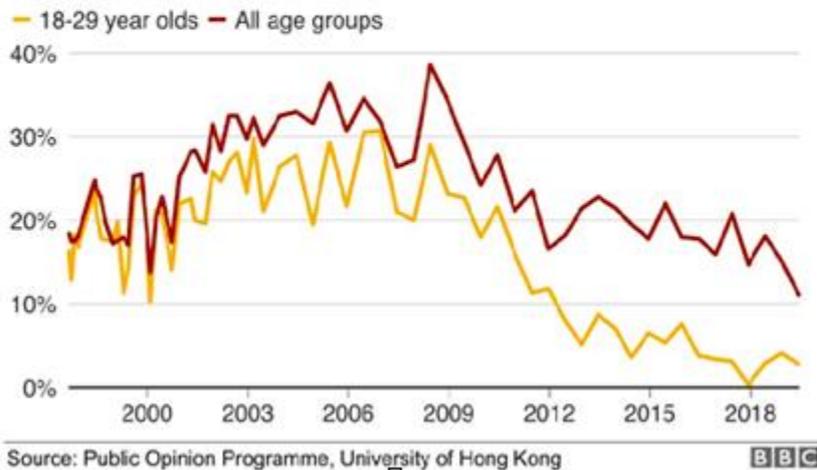
Following the disruptive protests of 2019, the governing body of Hong Kong is eager to see a return to social and economic stability, with a senior official of China's Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) saying that both a stop to the violence as well as a restoration of order were crucial in the recovery of the financial hub's economy (Belt and Road News, January 2020). It merits no extensive consideration, then, as to why the BRI is an enticing prospect for Hong Kong. One only has to look at predictions made by the Asian Development Bank; infrastructure projects amounting to \$1.73 trillion in this year alone (Al Jazeera, September 2019). On top of the generally-felt social disenfranchisement with Hong Kong's governing body, the city faces its first GDP decline in over 10 years - a problem exacerbated by the novel coronavirus. It was with this in mind that the Chief Secretary for Administration - Matthew Cheung - warned when making reference to the potential rapid rise in unemployment that Hong Kong would see, should protests continue (Belt and Road News, January 2020). (BBC News, 2019)

Whilst evident that the Hong Kong government considers the BRI (and thus the backing of China) as fundamental to a restoration of Hong Kong's former economic glory, the same cannot be said for many Hong Kongers. Evidenced through the graph above, the number of youth in Hong Kong who identify as 'Chinese' has drastically decreased over the last several years.

With this in mind as well as the fact that, following protests spurred over the proposal of an extradition bill granting mainland China increased judicial authority, many would be further discombobulated by China being the 'guarantor of economic stability'. The arrests of protestors and activists in the new year - a ploy criticised for using the media-consuming pandemic as a means of avoiding (excessive) attention - has seen an increased lack of trust in government, with protests ongoing, albeit whilst adhering to social distance rules (The Guardian, May 2020).

Young Hong Kongers are increasingly unlikely to identify as 'Chinese'

% of respondents asked about ethnic identity (1997-2019)



Although Hong Kong may be considered a ‘gateway’ for mainland China, the points raised above indicate that, contrarily to the desires of the government, many Hong Kongers might not concur. Whilst it may be true that, economically, the initiative may be beneficial to Hong Kong, the dissatisfaction that many have with the current system of governance is not to be trifled with. Economic ‘rescue’ might not be enough to quell the already riled-up protestors, particularly from China, who have maintained their calls for justice for almost a year. With decreased prison sentences for pro-Beijing citizens (and vice versa), increased hostility towards mainland China can be expected to grow (The Guardian, May 2020). Therefore, whilst it may be true that, economically, it might be in the best interest for posterity that Hong Kong become, in the words of Hong Kong’s Financial Secretary Paul Chan Mo-po, the “financial capital of China” (Al Jazeera, September 2019), and assist it in its attempt to become increasingly economically independent from the US, the social repercussions of this are another matter entirely.

II. International Diplomatic Cooperation between Hong Kong and Key Strategic Regions in the Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a far-sighted, ambitious vision for international cooperation in the Twenty-First Century, and Hong Kong is a key link for the Initiative. Legally speaking, given the difficulties in navigating different regulatory and legal systems such as common law, continental law, and Islamic law, and general principles of international law, it is inevitable that certain disputes and conflicts will arise in the BRI (KPMG, 2018). A solid legal foundation for the project is crucial. In the context of “one country-two systems”, Hong Kong has close ties with the Chinese Mainland in terms of talents, logistics, capital and information. Not only that, but its experience in international business and trade gives it a clear and unique advantage in its very close economic links with China — this translates to the rest of the world. As explained by Hong Kong Financial Secretary Paul Chan Mo-po during the 2019 Belt and Road Summit, “Hong Kong is in the position to promote multilateral economic cooperation”. (Al Jazeera, September 2019) But what does the international economic and diplomatic cooperation between Hong Kong and the rest of the world look like in the Belt and Road Initiative?

China

While the BRI supports a diverse array of initiatives that enhance connectivity throughout the world, it is primarily driven by China’s pressing need to transform its national economy through further integration with the world. (Cacioli, 2019) The initiative clearly serves to strengthen China’s economic and political interests - interests which might translate into control over Hong Kong. As a massive asset to mainland China, Hong Kong’s unique role is highlighted through the BRI, as both the bridge for foreign companies to access the market in China and the launching pad for institutions in China to gain exposure to international markets (OECD, 2018). In the face of an increasingly austere political and economic situation, partially brought by the COVID-19 global pandemic, encouraging communication and investment co-operation between Hong Kong and mainland China on BRI projects seems to be the only way to move forward effectively.

III. China's Strategy Surrounding the Creation of an Infrastructural Basis for the Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative has been hailed as the “project of the century” (Xi, 2017), and Hong Kong’s Chief Executive Carrie Lam has expressed her intentions to play an active role in this venture. As the BRI involves building infrastructure in countries and regions involved, one might imagine that huge investments would be needed. Hong Kong, as a strong financial center, may serve to support China and describes itself as a “key link and prime platform for the B&R” (HKSARG's Work on the Belt and Road, n.d.).

On trade, Hong Kong has signed free trade agreements with 20 economies, Investment Promotion and Protection agreements with 30 economies, undergoing negotiations with other economies still (HKSARG's Work on the Belt and Road, n.d.). In addition, Hong Kong is a member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and is the world’s largest offshore Renminbi (RMB) business centre. For economies involved in BRI, Hong Kong can serve as a great stop to settle trade imports and exports.

With the infrastructural development and improving relations of BRI, SMEs can indeed reach out to further businesses and customers, and Hong Kong enterprises are going as far as Kenya and Djibouti to do so too (China Daily, 2019). These enterprises range from banking, real estate development to engineering services, looking to invest through joint ventures and local partnerships. The director of research at Hong Kong Trade Development Council, Nicholas Kwan, singled out Djibouti for developing transport logistics, as it would be a potential regional hub for the other landlocked countries in Africa. By May 2019, exports from Hong Kong to Kenya grew by 120 percent to \$103 million, while bilateral trade increased by 68 percent (China Daily, 2019).

However, Hong Kong's economy is still rather vulnerable to external actors and matters not within their control. In 2019, due to regional instability and China-US relations, Hong Kong saw exports fall for nine consecutive months (Global Times, 2019). According to the Hong Kong Financial Secretary Paul Chan Mo-po, exports dropped by 9 percent and 5.7 percent in the months of June and July, and the unemployment rate rose from 1.9 percent to 2.4 percent between June and August. This is a huge blow on Hong Kong’s economy, as the external trade sector made up 21.5 percent of their GDP in 2017.

According to Chan, Hong Kong has been working actively with Zhuhai customs, a part of Guangdong province, to collaborate on operational matters. Hong Kong, with its experience in big data and artificial intelligence technologies, can improve Zhuhai's clearance efficiency as well as analyse logistical information, hoping to help small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to develop (Global Times, 2019).

Moving forward, according to Carrie Lam (China Daily, 2019), Hong Kong's willingness to share knowledge and experience on development and management will be Hong Kong's major contribution to capacity building of other BRI economies. This would serve as a link between the infrastructure that Hong Kong is supporting financially, as well as the sustainable growth between the BRI countries.

IV. Concluding remarks

Although it might seem that the Coronavirus mostly has downsides for China, it turns out this dark cloud has a silver lining. This mostly has to do with the economic recession that has come to Hong Kong as a result of the pandemic. China would like to further instigate collaborations between the Chinese and Hong Kong government, by giving financial support, and reviving the Hong Kong economy. This means that in return, China can exercise more power over Hong Kong, which is a key geographical spot in its Belt and Road Initiative, namely the 'gateway' for China to the rest of the world. The Hong Kong government has come to a crossroads: It could revive its economy by accepting financial support, however, this would also mean giving up a great part of their sovereignty. Especially domestic protests are something the government is and should be worried about. The upheaval and turmoil that emerged as a result of Hong Kong's relations to the Chinese government have caused destabilization of the domestic economy, social relations and public life.

How the politics and narratives of crises might influence China's BRI plans

An opinionated article by Dany Kirilov and George Chokoy

It is safe to say that in the midst of a global pandemic, humanity finds itself at a turning point in terms of communication and cooperation. Coping with COVID-19 is undeniably affecting the development of contemporary economics and international relations. The pandemic has caused a fair share of new controversies and disputes or has rekindled them, adding new fuel to the fire of already existing conflicts. Among them is the rise of negative attitudes towards Chinese people across the world and particularly in places where these attitudes were already present for various reasons, such as in Southeast and Central Asia (Chaudhury, 2018).

The (New) Rise of Sinophobia

Recently, an attempt at building a joint 280 million-dollar Kyrgyz-Chinese logistic endeavor, part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has been buried due to friction between locals and Chinese companies. Tension began to rise as early as August 2019, when local workers halted the mining process at a local gold mine owned and operated by a Chinese state-owned company. Since then, tensions have been running high and Kyrgyz workers have been heavily protesting against the Chinese workers for performing labor on their land, as a result leaving many Kyrgyz workers unemployed. Recent protests have also adopted the fear that Chinese workers might have brought the infamous coronavirus to their land (Belt and Road News, 2020).

Kyrgyzstan is not the only country which has experienced a drastic rise in sinophobia. In Vietnam and Indonesia, there are multiple reports of shops not allowing Chinese tourists to enter their institutions (Widianto, 2020). The West is also no exception: in Italy and the US, Chinese tourists reported numerous acts of violence and discrimination carried out against them, and certain Chinese owned enterprises have been boycotted in the light of the outbreak (Belt and Road News, 2020; Widianto, 2020).

The current negative sentiments towards Chinese people, however, do not stem solely from the social and economic uncertainty caused by the outbreak. It is a byproduct of the looming economic dependency on China that many states have experienced as part of financing BRI projects (Myers, 2020). Many economic experts predict these projects to be catastrophic to

debtor states (Chaudhury, 2018). A troubling example is Sri Lanka, where the government leased a port built as part of the BRI to China for 99 years due to inability to pay China back (Schultz, 2017). It substantiated the fear of many people in similar debtor state situations that China will come to have increasing influence and eventual dominance in their respective region (Chaudhury, 2018). This fear aligned with a certain narrative of malevolent Chinese intentions and a dark future of global Chinese domination (Kyzy, 2017) and has only been exacerbated by the global spread of what some deem the “Chinese virus”, mostly notably the American president (Viala-Gaudefroy, 2020). But what lies at the root of this phenomenon?

An Anthropological Perspective

Works of anthropology can offer here great insight into this growing trend of sinophobia. Historically, people who are perceived of different origin have oftentimes been accused of carrying disease. In Medieval Europe, the culprit for the plague were Jewish communities; in the 80’s the blame for AIDS was put on Haitians; and more recently, the Ebola outbreak was blamed on people of African descent (Heinrich, 2020; Aguilera, 2020). Chinese people themselves have been scapegoated before for outbreaks of smallpox in the 19th century, with China being unfairly described in the West as the ‘cradle of smallpox’(Heinrich, 2020). Despite the advancement of scientific knowledge that disproves such claims, some communities continue to face stigma during health crises, as exemplified by the current way of sinophobia.

One of the ingredients for this intolerance is the pervasive political distrust in authorities in many countries that generally creates high levels of suspicion and anxiety among the masses and higher susceptibility to misinformation. In times of public emergency those are ever heightened. However, on a deeper level, it reveals a certain orientalist bias. In particular, it is the supposed origin of the virus in a wet market in China coupled with orientalist assumptions towards Chinese customs, cuisine and way of life, that creates the ground for the victimization of Chinese people. In most Western media, ‘wet markets’ have become the symbol not only for the cause of the global pandemic, but also for Chinese otherness. They have come to represent a backwards way of life, a lawless and disease-ridden trading space for exotic animals, where locals indulge in exotic delicacies. This orientalist depiction of wet markets incites anxieties for symbolic pollution or what anthropologists call “matter out of space,” a culturally rooted understanding surrounding purity and danger. The premise is simple - what things, or in our case

food, we understand as dirty or polluted depends on the context they are in, physically and metaphorically. The idea of chicken as a meal doesn't trouble the Western imagination, but the idea of a bat does, as it hangs on Western standards of what can be considered food and what not. The depiction of wet markets is also, unsurprisingly, faulty. 'Wet markets' is an umbrella term for all kinds of markets that offer fresh meat and are the byproduct of the modern rather than traditional economic reality of small-scale meat production of China, where farmers are pushed into certain meat niches in order to survive as big companies take over the poultry, cattle and pork industry. This renders wet markets a great target for the projection of the Western orientalist imagination, which fuels pollution anxieties not only in the West but all over the world (Lynteris & Fearnley, 2020).

Orientalist assumptions are taken and blown out of proportions by the most potent source of sinophobia: misinformation (Sibarani et al, 2020). Faulty information on Chinese reality coupled with decontextualized photographic and video content has been critical in this process. The ubiquity of social media further facilitates the spread of stigma and racial stereotyping (Aguilera, 2020).

Most importantly, a virus is an invisible threat. It is therefore impossible to 'see' it and completely protect yourself, no matter how many times you wash your hands. Because of this, a need to imagine a physical manifestation of this invisible danger arises. Conflating Chinese people with the virus then represents a solution to the problem, as it gives the threat 'visibility' (Heinrich, 2020). One can now physically avoid all Chinese people, reject their presence and hence contain the danger.

Implications for the BRI

The fervent rise of sinophobia across countries and regions is bad news for the Chinese government. That has even been brought to their attention already in a recent report by the Chinese Institute of International Relations, describing how anti-Chinese sentiments have reached their highest point since the Tiananmen square incident and that China should be prepared for a "worst-case" confrontation scenario (Hirschberg, 2020).

China's strategy until now was to exert leverage on other countries to support and recognize the contribution of China in coping with the virus as a condition to the continuous flow of Chinese investment and benevolence (Myers, 2020). Yet attending only to top-level politics

might come to bite them. China-friendly governments might lose support in their electorate, which is increasingly anti-China. Such situations hold potential for political crises and thus threaten China's strategic investments abroad (Hirschberg, 2020). Nevertheless, the CPC has expressed its conviction to continue their BRI plans with as little adjustments as possible, securing deals for millions with Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos amidst the pandemic (Writer, 2020).

Yet it is famously difficult to turn the tide of public perceptions. Anti-Chinese sentiments will probably continue to grow and will reach governing bodies. A look at the US shows that such processes have already reached the top, with some states such as Missouri taking the initiative to sue China over its handling of the virus (Al Jazeera, 2020).

Chinese political and economic influence, just as the Chinese population abroad, seems to have itself become 'matter out of place' - a symbolic pollutant in the eyes of local populations. Moreover, BRI infrastructure projects, as the physical manifestations of those influences, stand to represent the visible dimension to an invisible force, and hence end up being an easy target for boycott or other threats. This should be interpreted as a wake-up call for China, as it might soon find itself in an irreversibly hostile environment. An appropriate reaction to this unfavourable development thus represents an important test to the ambitions of Xi Jinping and his party.

The Importance of Mapping in Understanding Covid-19

An opinionated article by Sabine Hillen, Isabela Cassola, and Ellinor Strowel

One of the things that we heavily rely on when talking or writing about COVID-19 pandemic is statistics and maps. However, to what extent are these statistics and maps actually informative? When we talk about deaths or infections per 100,00 people, how useful is that when comparing different countries or different maps? In this OP-ED we will be looking at how information can be sometimes misleading, especially when it comes to the geopolitics of each country and how trying to be informed can sometimes backfire.

To do so, we are going to look at persuasive cartography - the use of illustrated maps for conveying a message and influencing opinions. Indeed, maps can give biased views on seemingly neutral data, they can support statistical misconceptions when some data is left out or, on the contrary, highlighted. This can potentially change the information we obtain and thus our opinions. In addition, we will use different maps that show data and contrast them, to see if they portray a different story and how this can be hurtful when we seek unbiased information on the pandemic, particularly in the context of the Belt Road Initiative.

The Limits of the Maps

Maps are used regularly, whether it is to see on which continent India is positioned or to verify which countries are situated around the Bay of Bengal. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been bombarded with maps on a daily basis that show different statistics about the spread of the virus, the number of people who are sick and treated in hospitals, and the virus-related death rates. We notice that the term “map” can be used for a variety of representations of the countries and international relations, both regionally and globally.. According to Harley (1989), maps can be understood by how they represent the interrelations of different countries. In other words, he argues that the way maps are set up says a lot about the political power that reigns on a global level. Monmonier (2005) points out the power of maps, which is their capability to distort facts. It is through scaling that they can alter dynamics and the information they deliver. Regarding scaling, we have an example below that illustrates the complexity of maps and how it transmits a certain truth depending on the scale used.

The map on the right represents China on the 24th of February and illustrates how many coronavirus cases were recorded in each of its provinces. This is represented through a choropleth map, which is a thematic map that is patterned depending on the statistical variable that it demonstrates. We can observe that every province in China is patterned in different shades of blue, depending on how many cases of corona were recorded. On the map a province in the North-East of China, Hubei, is coloured in dark blue, which implies it is the region with most cases, about 111 cases per 100.000 inhabitants. We can analyse that all the provinces around Hubei are tinted in blue-gray which signifies that the number of cases is lower. In the provinces encircling Hubei there are between 2 or 3 cases per 100.000 habitants, which is considerably less than in Hubei. It is interesting to observe how the scale measure of the map suddenly raises exponentially. The first scale is 0.5 case per 100.000, which is represented in grey. Then the second scale continues with 1, which is illustrated by a very light blue. This then continues gradually till 3. Thus, the fourth scale measure, in a marine blue, rises abruptly to 111 cases per 100.000. This is a discontinuation with the progressive rising of the scale measure until now. While looking at the choropleth map one might not imagine such a drastic difference between the shades of blue, but while looking at the legend one can see that there is certainly a big difference in the number of cases per province. To analyse to what extent the choropleth map is reliable we will be comparing it to another map which illustrates the provinces of China, but using a different scale measure.

The map on the right is a proportional symbol map, which also depicts China and how the different provinces are affected by the Coronavirus. This is represented through a dot which shows the different cases per province. The largest dot can be found in the province of Hubei, which represents 100.000 cases. This is similar to the choropleth map. The other Chinese provinces are marked by a small dot that determines there are approximately 1000 cases within them. This small dot is the same size in each province. It is not stated how many habitants live in each province, which makes the number of cases seem very vague. In comparison to the other map, we can conclude that on the proportional symbol map there is no representation of the different case numbers affected in China's different provinces. We can therefore deduce that the second map does not illustrate precisely how other provinces in China are also affected by the Coronavirus. It demonstrates how the scaling can misguide and transmit imprecise information and thus has the power to mislead. As Monmonier (2005) states, the scales that are used on a

specific map have tremendous effects on the way the information is interpreted afterwards. This exposes the limits of the usage of maps and shows how they have the power to give only a certain truth that is intended to be shared by the researcher (Crampton, 2008).

The Limits of the Validity of Statistics of the COVID-19 Along the BRI

In regards to the Coronavirus cases in China, we can observe how China tried multiple times to cover up the damages of the Coronavirus. Officially China reported to have 75.000 cases on the 20th of February, however, a study by researchers in Hong Kong stated that the number of cases would approximately be around 232.000 (Campbell & Gunia, 2020). According to Qiao Long (2020), the official numbers given by the Chinese government concerning the death rates in Wuhan are too low compared to the death rates that the population attendant witnessed. China certainly has a lack of transparency concerning the numbers they publicly declare. The statistics can therefore not be seen as a reliable source (BBC, 2020). Other countries in the BRI also have an issue with offering a set of statistics that is reliable. This is simply due to lack of testing and the little knowledge we possess on the virus (Ioannidis, 2020). According to Ian Goldin (2020), countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan and India are expected to endure a huge economical and humanitarian crisis that it will be hard to predict in numbers, since the damage will be immense. It is to be observed that the statistics concerning the coronavirus are not entirely trustworthy, depending on multiple reasons. It can be a political reason and the numbers are not being given out, like China for example. Other countries are simply incapable of providing the right numbers because of their incapacity to predict the damages of the coronavirus, such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and India.

How Does the BRI Challenge Future Cartography?

In this section we will discuss how the Belt road Initiative has consequences on the cartography, since the BRI undermines national borders. Through the BRI there is a “newly emerging core periphery relationship (Mayer & Zhang, 2020)”. The quote above implies that because of the Belt and Road Initiative the borders between different countries are becoming less important. Another aspect it points out is that there is a new sense of interconnectivity between the different countries through the different trading deals. China aims to implement different corridors, meaning that there will be on land trading routes between several countries. Through

this implementation of the different land and maritime trading routes, the terms like “national” and “international” will lose relevance (Branch, 2011). Throughout history China has always been a massive geobody, with unsettled borders that were not clearly demarcated (Agnew, 2012). There have been shifts in territorial expansion. That is a reason why the BRI would also challenge the future cartographies, since it might lead to less border focussed map. This is what China has been doing for centuries (Callahan, 2009).

As discussed above, maps are powerful means to transform information and to propagate a certain vision. Especially now during this pandemic, we rely heavily on them. However we should stay critical and question what they present to us and also the way the information is presented. Not only should we challenge the maps we see, but also the statistics they embody. In particular now, the statistics of the coronavirus should not be completely trusted, since they change on a day to day basis. Especially certain countries that are part of the BRI and underdeveloped are therefore unable to offer reliable statistics. Because they do not have the tools to measure properly and to simply treat the coronavirus. It is therefore also disadvantageous to compare the statistics of different countries based on the coronavirus cases, every country deals with it differently. Especially within the BRI there are several countries such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh that deal with such specific internal obstacles that these cannot be compared to each other, since the situation in itself is peculiar. The BRI is consistently demonstrated in maps, thus showing time and again the interconnectivity of all the different countries. In the long term we should ask ourselves what the maps will look like with regards to the evolution of the BRI.

Conclusion

It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic will have widespread impacts everywhere in the world. In China, where the virus originated, its effects are perhaps the most pervasive. Through this report it can be seen that the pandemic influenced China’s public image and role on the world stage, its economic development, its trade relations through things such as the BRI and it’s relationship with, and power over Hong Kong.

China was initially praised for early large-scale testing, and quick response to the virus. In some instances, it has also positioned itself as a global leader in healthcare, by using the BRI

corridors, ports and hubs to provide medical support to other countries. By creating bilateral trade agreements, and giving medical aid, China is establishing itself as the leading regional (and perhaps global) power. On the other hand, some are concerned that China will use this increased power in a neo-colonial way, especially concerning Hong Kong. In some cases, the outbreak of COVID-19 has allowed infringements of the rule of law in Hong Kong. It has also been posited that China initially covered up the extent of the outbreak, which calls into question both the idea of official statistics, and China's intentions. Also putting China at a disadvantage is the growing trend of Sinophobia that has been observed worldwide, based both on the fact that the COVID-19 outbreak began in the country and because of nations' growing economic dependence on China.

Even though its Belt and Road Initiative development has taken a bit of a halt, especially in the South China Sea, China has been using the weakened status of its rivals to their advantage. Tensions that have been building up over the past few years seem to have continued unchecked, even during this pandemic. Tensions spiked when China sunk a Vietnamese fishing boat. China has also been expanding its influence, for example, by supporting the Solomon Islands economically so that they recognised the Chinese government in Taiwan. The United States on the other hand has failed to capitalize on the crisis and will most likely continue to lose power in the South China Sea conflict. In the meantime the role of ASEAN seems to be expanding showing more cooperation and assertiveness, a role which they will most likely use to push back against American development.

Recommendations

Throughout this report we have tried to analyse some of the impacts that the COVID-19 crisis has had for China, and other countries in southern and eastern Asia. Trade relations within this region, as well as with this region and the US are complex, and it is difficult to predict the full impact that the virus will have. Therefore in this uncertain time, it is important to consider the countries, territories and people that are most vulnerable. Rather than turning inward and focusing purely on domestic issues, countries must increase international solidarity to ensure that this pandemic does not result in infringements of rule of law, neo-colonialism, or exploitative trade relations.

Appendix

Hong Kong Comprehensive Gear Guide

Compiled by: George Ciocci

1) The Protestors¹

The protestors are a group of citizens that stay in opposition to the government and often express violent behavior during their protests. Considering the fact that civilians do not have extensive and easy access to personal protection and assault tools, they make heavy use of construction equipment which is the second-best option if juxtaposed to police/paramilitary equipment owned by

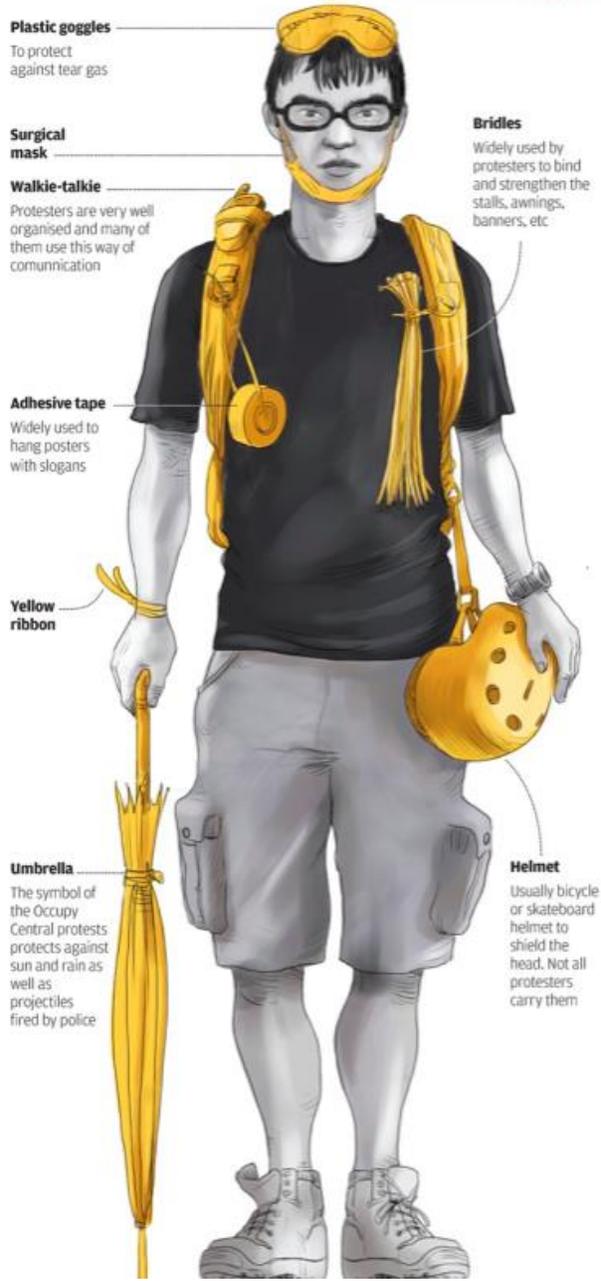


Effects on body
Can become dangerous by impeding free passage if a large crowd stampedes. Protestors are also able to reverse the situation and use as barricade against police and traffic

Used
Worldwide, all kind of crowds



Effects on body



2) The STS²

The Police Tactical Unit is a unit within the Hong Kong Police Force which has been created in 1958 and designated to handle emergency situations within the state.

It has several sub- divisions which have their own tasks and competences. One such division is the Special Tactical Squad, which has been created in 2014 as a response to the internal turmoil caused by the protests, its main duties involve crowd and riot control. The STS makes use of Imported riot control equipment provided by manufacturers abroad, mainly the US.



Water

Stink bombs or liquids are sometimes mixed with water causing foul odour



High velocity streams of water prevent demonstrators' progress forcing crowds to disperse

Effects on body

While not overly dangerous, impact may cause bruising and slippery surfaces can be hazardous

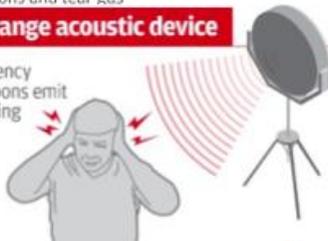


Used

Riot in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 25,000 protesters fired upon by police using water cannons and tear gas

Long-range acoustic device

Low-frequency sonic weapons emit pain-inducing tones



Effects on body

Induces headaches, panic, and potential hearing loss



Used

264 words

Non- Lethal Crowd Control Variants:

Large-sized pepper spray

Volume 400ml, contains capsaicin, which irritates skin and respiratory tract and cause burning pain when touched.

- ▶ **Name:**
Curd's Police Riot
400ml
- ▶ **Manufacturer:**
IDC System AG
(Switzerland)
- ▶ **Range:**
about 5m

Source: Internet

FactWire 傳真社



Gren Hand Burst Irrt A-Riot N225

23 tear gas pellets when exploding in the air; release smoke will last for 10-15 seconds.

- ▶ **Manufacturer:**
PW Defence Ltd (UK)



Tear gas canisters and pellets

264 words

FactWire 傳真社



Tippmann 98 Custom Platinum Basic (PepperBall Carbine SX)

Shooting pepperball with compressed gas. Pepperball will explode and release PAVA capsaicin. Skin and respiratory tract will feel pain when touched. Avoid shooting an opponent within 1.8m.

- ▶ **Manufacturer:** Tippmann Sports LLC (US)
- ▶ **Range:** Over 45m

Bullet: Pepperball LIVE-X
The "LIVE-X" pepper ball contains 10 times more PAVA capsaicin than the other red and white "LIVE" pepper balls produced by the company.

- ▶ **Manufacturer:** PepperBall (US)



Photo: The Reporter / Alan Louie
Source: user manual and specification sheet



VKS Pepper Ball Launcher

The dual feed system of the VKS pepper ball launcher allows users to quickly switch between a hopper or magazine mode during an operation for optimum versatility. The magazine capacity is 10 to 15 pepper balls. Used by the Hong Kong Special Tactical Squad, the buttstock or the magazine of the launcher will be in orange or yellow to be identified as less-lethal weapons.

- ▶ **Manufacturer:** PepperBall, United Tactical Systems, LLC (US)
- ▶ **Bullet:** LIVE-X VXR LIVE-X projectiles




- ▶ **Muzzle velocity:** max. 129.5m/s
- ▶ **Effective Range:** 45.7m

FactWire 傳真社
Source: specification sheet

264 words



Remington 870 Shotgun

HKPF use two kinds of gun handles to distinguish types of bullets; orange grip with label "LESS LETHAL" on the stock, mainly for firing rubber bullets.

- ▶ **Manufacturer:** Remington Arms Company, LLC. (US)

Rubber bullet used: ALS1202 Rubber Fin Rocket

Looks like a rocket as its name suggests - 4 stabilising wing at rear. Unlike MP-4-R3 for indirect shooting, ALS1202 is designed to be directly fired at human body.

- ▶ **Manufacturer:** AMTEC Less-Lethal Systems, Inc. (US)
- ▶ **Muzzle velocity:** 152m/s
- ▶ **Range:** 40m



Bullet

Shell Case



Remington 870 Shotgun

HKPF use two kinds of gun handles to distinguish types of bullets; shotgun with wood grip and stock can fire bean bag rounds and real ammunition.

- ▶ **Manufacturer:** Remington Arms Company, LLC. (US)

Bean bag rounds used: Model 2581 12GA Super-Sock Bean Bag

Bullet-proof synthetic bag containing 40g small steel marbles. Serious injuries or death when shoot at head, neck, throat, heart or spine

- ▶ **Manufacturer:** Combined Tactical Systems (US)
- ▶ **Muzzle velocity:** 82.3-88.3m/s
- ▶ **Range:** 25m



2581 SUPER

FactWire 傳真社 264 words

Federal 37MM Riot Gun

Most commonly used by riot police for firing tear gas canisters and rubber bullets.

- ▶ **Manufacturer:**
Federal Laboratories, Inc. (US)

Rubber bullets used:
MP-4-R3 - Hard Rubber Baton Projectile (3)

3 hard rubber batons. Firing at human at close distance can cause serious injuries or death.

- ▶ **Manufacturer:**
NonLethal Technologies, Inc. (US)
- ▶ **Muzzle velocity:** 75m/s
- ▶ **Range:** maximum 90m;
skip-fired 45m



FactWire 傳真社



Federal 37MM Riot Gun

Most commonly used by riot police for firing tear gas canisters and rubber bullets.

- ▶ **Manufacturer:** Federal Laboratories, Inc. (US)

Tear gas canister used:
MP-6M5-CS - Multi-Smoke 5 Projectile (CS)

Each carries 5 CS smoke submunitions; release smoke will last about 20 seconds. Should only be used outdoors. Cannot be fired directly at human or serious injuries or death may be resulted.

- ▶ **Manufacturer:**
NonLethal Technologies, Inc. (US)
- ▶ **Range:**
Max.80m



Source: specification sheet

264 words

Lethal Crowd Control Variants (Last Resort)

MP5 Submachine Gun

The MP5 is an automatic submachine gun fitting for short-distance combat, frequently used by the Counter Terrorism Response Unit and other Hong Kong police task forces. Heckler & Koch has stopped selling the MP5 in 2017, citing the city's political environment.



- ▶ **Manufacturer:** Heckler & Koch (Germany)
- ▶ **Calibre:** 9x19mm Luger ammunition
- ▶ **Muzzle velocity:** 400m/s
- ▶ **Effective Range:** 200m



Source: specification sheet

Photo credit: Apple Daily

FactWire 傳真社

SIG516 Assault Rifle

The SIG516 is a tactical rifle that features a four position rail system for mounting optics and accessories. Officials from the Hong Kong Counter Terrorism Response Unit were seen to be equipped with the olive green SIG516 CQB with a shorter barrel for near-distance combat. The Airport Security Unit officials were seen to be equipped with the SIG516 Tactical of longer barrel with an optical aiming system for projectile weapons.



- ▶ **Manufacturer:** SIG Sauer (Switzerland)
- ▶ **Calibre:** 5.56x45mm NATO ammunition
- ▶ **Muzzle velocity:**

264 words /s



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