

The Inherent Cost of Narratives: Realpolitical Obligations and Maneuvering

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In the previous chapters, several strategic narratives currently utilized by the PR China were presented and examined. Consequently, one general question may arise for the readership: What about the implications of these narratives in political reality? To this end, this chapter takes up the thematic thread of the previous chapters and examines implications in present-day real politics.

Since strategic narratives play a critical role in the PRC's diplomatic performance and the official perception of political events, state leadership is always bound to react in line with the narrative. Otherwise, the project would be doomed to fail and increase the chances of success for counternarratives.

When a state aims to consistently follow its official strategic narratives from the unavoidable context of real-politics, it is confronted with both obligations and constraints on the one hand, as well as windows of opportunities on the other hand. The dissemination and enhancement of narratives is limited to a clearly defined maneuvering room. Security analysis discourse points at engagement within certain limiting frames as “maneuver in the narrative space.”¹

The moral narratives

Johannes Berchtold states in his contribution that moral narratives are playing an increasingly important role in media reality and that the practice of moralizing as an instrument in political discourse is showcasing an upward trend. This makes ethics and morality a growing power factor in the arena of international politics.

¹ Charles L. Moore et al (2016), “Maneuver and Engagement in the Narrative Space,” *Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) Periodic Publication*, http://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Maneuver-in-the-Narrative-Space_Final_Jan2016.pdf.

Which moral narratives with substantial geopolitical implications – currently disseminated by the People’s Republic – is ranking first? There is no consensus concerning this question within academic communities. Thus, in accordance with previous chapters, the author takes the liberty to start with the meta-narrative of China’s quest for “justice” in the sense of promoting global fairness at various fronts. The referral to “justice” in the PRC’s official documents and statements addressing the international community has shown a significant increase during recent years. At present, Beijing’s quest for justice in global affairs as a “responsible major power” has become a standard position in international affairs. In the White Paper on International Development Cooperation published in January 2021, a historic retrospective underlines Beijing’s quest for justice since the founding of the People’s Republic:

The Chinese people always preserve a sense of justice and a feeling of sympathy. In 1950, just one year after the founding of the People’s Republic, China did its utmost to support other countries in their campaigns for national independence in spite of its own difficulties.

Over the past seven decades, the Chinese nation has forged ahead, moving from poverty and backwardness towards strength and prosperity. The Chinese people hope that other peoples will also lead a good life while theirs is improving and are willing to contribute as much as they can to other developing countries’ efforts to satisfy their people’s aspiration for a better life.²

Several sub-narratives fall in line with this strongly morally oriented meta-narrative, for example “win-win cooperation,” the “right to development” as well as the “Health Silk Road.” Not to forget China’s extensively advocated vision of a “global community of a shared future.”

Beijing’s quest for “global justice” addresses the Global South. The PR China presents herself as the largest developing country in the world and considers herself a legitimate advocate of other developing countries.³ It is precisely

² State Council Information Office of the PRC, *China’s International Development Cooperation in the New Era*, January 2021, 5f.

³ “China is the largest developing country in the world,” see preface of the White Paper (January 2021), *China’s International Development Cooperation in the New Era*, State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China.

this self-imposed advocacy role that entails considerable obligations and requires maneuvering in real politics. This background invites to take a closer look, following the thematic focus of this chapter.

As mentioned above, it is a non-disputable obligation for the PRC to take sides with the global South vis-a-vis the developed, industrialised countries. This self-imposed duty definitely carries a high degree of geopolitical implication, as regards Beijing's declared quest for global justice. One basic aspect of moral legitimization vis-a-vis the developing world lies in the "just" objectives of a so-called "responsible major power." China as a responsible major power is obliged to support the developing world to catch up with the global North. This aspect is particularly reflected in the pro-active performance of Chinese UN-representatives in the framework of various UN agendas. In terms of monetary contributions to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the People's Republic has been dedicating considerable funds since 2016.⁴

Apart from the issue of financing the UN 2030 Development Goals, effective South-South cooperation includes granting zero-tariff treatment for export items from least developed countries and cancelling unconditional government loans for heavily indebted poor countries. In regard to the G20 debt agenda of late 2020, Beijing claims to have taken the lead in calling for supporting the extension of the Debt Service Suspension Initiative for the poorest countries according to DSSI.⁵ In light of such policy initiatives, it can be said that the PR China, unavoidably, has to bear substantial costs in order to gain international credibility in the sense of a "just" global re-balancing.

On April 26, 2021, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, at an opening ceremony, took the opportunity to underline the four principles of China's development cooperation. According to the cross-reference of the anti-

⁴ In 2016, two Chinese funds – totalling 5.1 Billion USD – were established at UN level for climate change and South-South cooperation, i.e. the South-South Climate Fund and a fund for the implementation of the SDG, see <https://www.southcentre.int/question/chinas-boost-to-south-south-cooperation/>.

⁵ PR China Ministry of Finance, Written interview with Finance Minister Liu Kun on G20 Debt Agenda, November 2020, http://www.mof.gov.cn/en/news/spe/202011/t20201120_3626593.htm.

hegemonism narrative, it should come as no surprise that the first principle carries a strong flavour of critique addressing the developed western world in between the lines:

China never uses assistance and development cooperation as a leverage to interfere in others' internal affairs, never attaches any political strings, and never lectures others.⁶

At the same time, the first principle underlines a characteristic of Chinese South-South cooperation, which is met by the Western industrialized world with suspicion:

China always pursues mutual respect, mutual trust and mutual benefit, and always seeks to consult with others, build together, and share the benefits with other countries.⁷

As regards the openly declared orientation towards “mutual benefit” or “shared benefit,” the beginning of maneuvering in the international arena is clearly visible at this point. Utilizing a Maoist methodological approach, certain contradictions can be identified. One contradiction lies in the assumption that South-South cooperation is balanced in an exchange of experiences between countries with similar levels of development and that the relationship between donor and recipient tends to be horizontal. Under this assumption, the principle of “mutual benefit” appears legitimate. On the other hand, the development gap between China as an emerging influential donor country and a larger number of recipient countries, is enormous. Against this backdrop, so-called horizontal structures seem illusory.

Some analysts see an additional contradiction in the fact that, while Chinese representatives include themselves in the “South” when they speak to aid beneficiaries, they also want to be considered as equals in the communication with “Northern” countries.⁸

⁶ CIDCA, April 27, 2021, “Wang Yi sheds light on China’s four principles in foreign aid,” international development cooperation, http://en.cidca.gov.cn/2021-04/27/c_614587.htm.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See J. Vadell/G. Brutto/A. Leite (2020), “The Chinese South-South development cooperation: an assessment of its structural transformation,” *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 63(2), 1-22, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329202000201>.

The Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) highlights the fact that the “mutual benefit” orientation of Chinese South-South cooperation does not correspond with Western specifications and drops a clarifying comment on its website:

China’s foreign aid differs in several aspects from official development assistance provided by members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee, as China openly affirms that its development assistance is for mutual benefit, including China’s own commercial benefit.⁹

Since the European Union is represented in the OECD Development Assistance Committee and most EU member states are OECD donor countries, the growing Chinese influence in South-South cooperation has led to a new space of encounter between Europe and the People’s Republic in the sphere of development aid. In the third part of this publication, the challenges and perspectives of this encounter at various geographical locations will be examined in more detail.

Viewing the opportunity of “mutual commercial benefit” in other developing countries, Chinese companies have been displaying a remarkable readiness to invest abroad during recent years. The question arises to what extent the – partly state-owned – corporate sector is following the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) guidelines when investing in South-South partner countries. An international study examined the reporting practice of larger, stock exchange listed Chinese companies and came to the conclusion that the implementation of the SDGs does not appear to be embedded in their business strategies and goals:

Based on our research, we can safely conclude that in the case of China, the SDGs have gained significance as far as reporting mechanism is concerned, but there is still a long way to go when it comes to incorporating these into the strategic objectives of Chinese companies, and there is a lack of tangible evidence related to their adoption implementation as part of companies’ overall objectives.¹⁰

⁹ OECD, Development Cooperation Profiles 2020, China (People’s Republic of), <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/18b00a44-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/18b00a44-en#section-d1e45840>.

¹⁰ Siming Yu/Muhammad S. Sial/Dang Khoa Tran/Alina Badulescu/Phung Anh Thu (August 4, 2020), “Adoption and Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in China – Agenda 2030,” *mdpi*, <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/15/6288/pdf>; the research sample consisted of 100 companies, listed in the Shanghai Stock Exchange from 2016 to 2018.

The anti-hegemonic narrative

What are the inherent costs of the anti-hegemonic narrative? Which implications arise for Beijing from this narrative under the obligation to avoid hegemonic performance as a “responsible” major power? Are there recent showcases on the international stage that indicate maneuvering? These are the questions to be discussed as follows.

As already mentioned, the official PRC narrative of anti-hegemonism dates back to the Bandung Conference of 1955. Hence, the leadership of the People’s Republic can draw on the diplomatic continuity and experience of more than half a decade to uphold and foster its role as anti-hegemonic power. The supporting main pillar of the anti-hegemonic stance, i.e., non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, ranks fourth among the Ten Principles of Bandung.

Interference in the internal affairs of other states presupposes the status of power. Until the post-Deng Xiaoping era, the PR China was hardly in a position to exert leverage through interference on the global stage, with the exception of neighbouring countries.

As for neighbouring countries, at the very beginning of the Deng Xiaoping era, Beijing set a blunt example of regional hegemonism by a massive punitive military offensive against Vietnam launched on February 17, 1979.¹¹ Later on, the offensive was officially labelled a “self-defence counterattack against Vietnam” (对越自卫反击战, Dui Yue ziwei fanji zhan), based on the justification of prior skirmishes along the Sino-Vietnamese borderline.

As a matter of fact, this punitive campaign of the late 70ies constituted a clear violation of the normative framework of anti-hegemonism, since the

¹¹ On February 17, 1979, more than 300,000 Chinese ground troops crossed into northern Vietnam and captured several cities. On March 6, 1979, China declared that the punitive mission of the PLA forces had been achieved and withdrew from Vietnam. At Southeast Asian regional level, China was aiming to punish Vietnam for its invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 to oust the Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge. By January 7, 1979, Vietnamese forces had entered Phnom Penh with Soviet support and the Khmer Rouge leadership had fled to western Cambodia. Beijing’s strategic goal to drive out Vietnamese insurgents from Cambodia did not materialize.

actual objective was not to gain territory but to enforce a radical change in Vietnamese foreign policy decision-making. It was bone-hard power interference, intended to stop the welcome culture of the Hanoi regime for Soviet support and to contain the perceived “encirclement” strategy by Moscow.

A study on the legal justification of the Chinese military offensive against Vietnam comes to the conclusion that “the Chinese incursion of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was a systematic abuse of Chinese hegemonic power, used symbolically to denote superiority and influence.”¹²

Even though the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has gained enormously in terms of capacity and technological level since the turn of the millennium, no similar large-scale hard power undertaking against neighbouring states has been launched during the last 42 years.

Yet, in the run of the last decade the nine-dash-line in the South China Sea, introduced by the Kuomintang government in 1947,¹³ has increasingly given rise to accusations of hegemonistic hardpower performance at sea. It is a well-known fact that Beijing vehemently opposes this blame, arguing that the offshore waters and islands within the nine-dash-line fall under China’s “indisputable sovereignty.” The governments of the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia and Indonesia regularly brand Beijing’s insistence as regional hegemonism because the Chinese claims are at numerous locations restricting the outreach of their Exclusive Economic Zones.

¹² Matt McDonald (2016), “The Law and Politics of a Norm Violation: Punitivity and the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979,” *Amsterdam Law Forum* (Vol.8/2), 39, <https://amsterdamlawforum.org/articles/abstract/10.37974/ALF.284/>.

¹³ The nine-dash line was originally an 11-dash line developed by the Chinese geographer Yang Huai ren (1917-2009) employed by the Nationalist Kuomintang government. In 1949, when the Kuomintang relocated to Taiwan, Yang stayed on the mainland and was persecuted during the Proletarian Cultural Revolution as an “anti-revolutionary academic authority.” In 1952, Zhou Enlai gave up China’s claim over the Gulf of Tonkin and handed maritime sovereignty of the bay over to Vietnam, thereby removing two of the 11 South China Sea dashes.

After the UNCLOS arbitral court decision of July 2016 against Chinese claims based on the nine-dash-line¹⁴ the European Union and major European countries have been showing reluctance to get involved in a regional issue of dispute in the Asian Pacific. But since August 2019, the EU has been addressing China on several occasions to adhere to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and several major EU member states are increasingly engaging in naval operations in South China Sea waters.¹⁵

At this point, the South China Sea dispute was only touched in brief to identify a current maneuvering in the international arena at odds with Beijing's anti hegemonism narrative. The third part of this volume will elaborate in more detail on the inclusion of East Asia and Southeast Asia in the eurostrategic orbiter.

Returning to the initial question, which antagonisms in real politics are connected to China's anti-hegemonism narrative, the increasingly heated human rights debate should not be omitted.

In democratic countries, the human rights debate in relation to the PR China is referred to almost exclusively in the context of systemic rivalry. Whereas Beijing is projecting its concept of universal human rights in various international fora as a strategic field of action in the theoretical framework of anti-hegemonism.

According to the Chinese point of view, the normative hegemonism of Western industrialized countries is reflected in the inappropriate, hence unjust, ranking of socio-economic human rights. Beijing's argumentation reads that for humans living in the global South the category of civil and

¹⁴ See: United Nations (2017), 'The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China)', 12, July 2016, *Law of the Sea*, No.91, 28, https://www.un.org/depts/los/doalos_publications/LOSBulletins/bulletinpdf/LOS_91_WEB.pdf.

¹⁵ On August 29, 2019, Germany, France and the UK expressed in a joint statement their countries' concern about the situation in the South China Sea and their support for the application of UNCLOS. The South China Sea security situation was also addressed during the EU-China Summit of September 2019; for further details see also Nicola Casarini (2020), "Rising to the Challenge: Europe's Security Policy in East Asia amid US-China Rivalry," *The International Spectator*, 55/1, 78-92, <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/casarini.pdf>.

political rights is secondary in comparison to human rights concerning livelihood. However, in order not to fundamentally call the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into question, the Chinese view is usually toned down in official documents to the effect that socio-cultural and cultural rights are to be equal to political rights.

The joint declaration adopted by the South-South Human Rights Forum held in Beijing in 2017 includes a change in the ranking of basic human rights. According to Article III “the right to subsistence and the right to development are the primary basic human rights.”¹⁶ Article IV defines the relationship between political – democratically oriented – rights and livelihood rights: “The acquisition of civil and political rights is inseparable from the simultaneous acquisition of economic, social and cultural rights, which are equally important and interrelated.”¹⁷

Not only at United Nations level this approach on human rights has caused a major divide between the developed North and developing countries in the global South. It is exactly in this context that Beijing considers its mission as an anti-hegemonic actor against the normative supremacy of the North partly fulfilled. In this vein, the cleavage between the European human rights convention and the People’s Republic’s human rights concept has to be considered a multidimensional issue. The aspect of systemic rivalry covers just one dimension.

China’s days as the largest developing country are most probably counted, and likewise might the anti-hegemonism narrative come to an end during upcoming years. Recent diplomatic and economic sanctions at bilateral level convey the image of a “New China:” A rising major power, inclined to pick up a hegemonic orientation, instead of continuing a strict anti-hegemonic stance. By having declared a “New Era” at national policy level, Beijing might have prepared a smart maneuvering move for the international community as well.

¹⁶ China Daily, December 8, 2017, Full Text of Beijing Declaration adopted by the First South-South Human Rights Forum, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201712/08/WS5a2aaa68a310eefe3e99ef85.html>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The Health Silk Road narrative

Barbara Farkas has outlined that China's ambitions in the global health sector are closely connected to the objective of enhancing the reputation as a responsible major power and to gain support for its international positioning. It was further stated that Beijing has been striving to expand its discourse power in the global health sector for several years and that since 2017, the narrative of the "Health Silk Road" has constituted a strategic core component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In Farkas' contribution it was rolled out in detail that the global spread of Covid-19 has significantly upgraded the current importance of the Health Silk Road narrative.

What are the geopolitical implications of this narrative and its inherent costs? What about the high expectations of most BRI-partner countries? Can Beijing meet these expectations without maneuvering?

Since the end of 2020, China's pandemic crisis management assistance, delivered to the outside world and initially labelled "mask diplomacy," has given way to a new label: "vaccine diplomacy." PR China state authorities and state media hardly miss an opportunity to protest against this labelling:

Beijing, on its part, has promised to make Chinese-made vaccines a global public good and ensure developing and least-developed countries can afford to pay for them. But some Western politicians and media have distorted facts and misinterpreted China's intentions to claim it is indulging in "vaccine diplomacy" to extend its regional and global influence.¹⁸

Up until June 2021, China has provided vaccine donations to more than 80 countries and exported vaccines to another 40 states.¹⁹ This ratio immediately raises the question: Which criteria are used to decide about the volume of free-of-charge shipments for specific countries and how about the pricing in the frame of regular export shipments of Chinese vaccines?

¹⁸ Yinglian Hu, "China's vaccines are global public good," *China Daily*, April 28, 2021, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202104/28/WS60889a0ba31024ad0babad4d.html>.

¹⁹ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on June 2, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1880861.shtml.

Beijing argues that in the first place socio-economic indicators are decisive, when it comes to the vaccine distribution modus for BRI partner countries. However, a closer look reveals that realpolitik considerations obviously take precedence over socio-economic factors. The cases of Bangladesh and Pakistan support this observation.

Bangladesh signed a deal with India in December 2020 to purchase 30 million doses of the Astra Zeneca vaccine priced at 5 USD per dose. Further, Bangladesh received 2 million doses of the vaccine as a donation from India. Yet, in late April 2021, the Indian government stopped exporting the vaccine due to an unprecedented surge in Covid-19 cases and the subsequent rise in domestic demand for the vaccine. At that time, Bangladesh had received only 7 million doses of Astra Zeneca, less than 25% of the agreed purchase with India.

As an emergency solution, the Bangladesh government approved in a government-to-government deal of late May 2021 the purchase of 15 million Sinopharm doses from China, priced at 10 USD per dose. Hence, the Sinopharm vaccine cost Bangladesh double the AstraZeneca vaccine from the producer Serum India in India.²⁰

Apart from the purchase agreement, the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced the provision of 600,000 more vaccine doses to Bangladesh as a second batch of gift, in addition to 500,000 Sinopharm doses already delivered as gift on May 12, 2021, adding up the Chinese free-of-charge donation for Dhaka to 1.1 million doses, which is still far below the Indian vaccine donation of 2 million doses.²¹ On the other hand, the erroneously published purchase price at 10 USD per dose was far below the prize the vaccine was sold to some ASEAN countries and Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's

²⁰ Business Standard, May 29, 2021, "Chinese vaccine to cost Bangladesh double of India's Oxford AstraZeneca," https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/chinese-vaccine-to-cost-bangladesh-double-of-india-s-oxford-astrazeneca-121052900820_1.html.

²¹ Dhaka Tribune, May 25, 2021, "Momen: Bangladesh will buy 15 mio doses of Covid vaccine from China," <https://www.dhakatribune.com/health/coronavirus/2021/05/25/covid-19-bangladesh-to-buy-15-million-doses-of-vaccine-from-china>.

immediate protest caused diplomatic upset and put Beijing in a difficult position.²²

The case of Bangladesh makes it clear that China has reserved a certain amount of political leeway in setting the sales price of vaccines and knows how to use this leeway in pragmatic terms, irrespective of socio-economic factors.

That under the flagship of the Health Silk Road geopolitical considerations factor very heavily into vaccine distribution is only further illustrated by Pakistan. According to a World Bank categorization, Pakistan is on track to be moved out of the UN Least Developed Countries list by 2026, with Bangladesh included in the same category. Following the logic of strengthening the health systems of the global South, both countries should be equally supported. However, Bangladesh plays a minor role as a Belt & Road Initiative country, whereas Pakistan has been a strategic BRI partner since 2013 within the ambitious flagship project of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Hence, economic and geostrategic interests play a certain role in the allocation of Chinese vaccine aid in the framework of bilateral partnerships. In the case of Pakistan, Beijing makes no secret of the priority status of its - de facto - close political ally. The state-run Xinhua agency elaborates in April 2021:

Pakistan is not only the first country in the world that the Chinese government provided Covid-19 vaccine aid to, but also the country that has received the largest number of China-donated Covid-19 vaccines so far, which is a vivid manifestation of the ironclad friendship between the two countries.²³

²² The Daily Star, June 5, 2021, “China annoyed that prize of Sinopharm was publicized by Bangladesh: Foreign Minister,” <https://www.thedailystar.net/coronavirus-deadly-new-threat/news/china-annoyed-price-sinopharm-was-publicised-bangladesh-foreign-minister-2105065>; The Times of India, June 1, 2021, “Expensive Chinese vaccines stir hornet’s nest in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka,” <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/expensive-chinese-vaccines-stir-hornets-nest-in-bangladesh-sri-lanka/articleshow/83138927.cms>.

²³ Xinhua, April 27, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/27/c_139908100.htm.

In March 2021, Pakistan signed an agreement with Cansino Bio in late March to import a concentrate of the vaccine to process and package the vaccine locally. In April 2021, technology for vaccine production was transferred from Beijing to Islamabad. In early June 2021, Pakistan started producing the CanSino Covid-19 vaccine with the help of China under the product name PakVac.²⁴

It is worth noting that it had taken Beijing no more than three months to get local vaccine production up and running in a BRI partner country with a deficient health system. At the opening ceremony of the production site in Islamabad, the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan explained, “Our cooperation not only effectively contributes to Pakistan’s efforts in fighting against the Covid-19 [...], it reduces its dependence of the vaccine import.”²⁵

The conclusion in the case of Pakistan may be that those countries that can invoke “ironclad friendship” with the People’s Republic are preferentially helped to free themselves from dependence on vaccine imports from abroad. Besides the start-up of local vaccine production Pakistan received 3.5 million doses of free-of-charge vaccine in four batches from China within the first half of 2021.²⁶

The examples of Bangladesh and Pakistan were used to illustrate China’s maneuvering freedoms in the sphere of bilateral arrangements. At the multilateral level, the picture is somewhat different. In multilateral institutions like the World Health Organization and multilateral mechanisms like COVAX, the People’s Republic has to carry the inherent cost of its “Health Silk Road” narrative without exception. Here, China’s leverage and maneuvering space appears rather limited. All participating economies have equal access to a public portfolio of vaccines, are required to commit to legally binding agreements and have to make upfront payments to the COVAX facility.

²⁴ See Reuters, June 4, 2021, “Pakistan produces Chinese Can Sino Bio COVID vaccine, brands it PakVac,” <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-produces-chinese-cansinobio-covid-vaccine-brands-it-pakvac-2021-06-04/>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The Hindu, June 23, 2021, “Pakistan receives another 2 million doses of China-made Covid vaccine,” <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/pakistan-receives-another-2-million-doses-of-china-made-covid-vaccine/article34923552.ece>.

The COVAX facility was launched by the World Health Organization (WHO) in tandem with the European Commission and France in April 2020. Due to this setup, the multilateral vaccine distribution mechanism COVAX offers a diplomatic convergence zone for EU member states and China. The “EU Strategy for Covid-19 vaccines” of June 2020, showcases similar intentions of a strong commitment to be a responsible major power, as do the “Health Silk Road” documents:

The spread of the virus has shown that no region is safe until the virus is under control everywhere. In addition to it being in their clear self-interest to do so, high-income countries have a responsibility to accelerate the development and production of a safe and effective vaccine and make it accessible for all the regions of the world. The EU recognises this task as its responsibility.²⁷

Yet, the converging interests of major vaccine donors in the service of humanism will show little effect if UN structures and other relevant global institutions are dominated by a bipolar divide at the geopolitical level.²⁸

Given this assumption, a strong geostrategic positioning of the European Union as an autonomous counterweight to purely bipolar alignments seems crucial.

The European Union is not alone in facing this strategic challenge. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with its ten member states²⁹ is struggling in another context to escape the growing bipolar power logic in the Asia-Pacific region. At the ASEAN Leaders’ Meeting of April 24, 2021, the chairman’s statement summarizes under point 5 the current efforts of consolidation:

²⁷ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament the European Council, the Council and the European Investment Bank, June 17, 2020, “EU Strategy for COVID-19 vaccines,” <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0245&from=EN>.

²⁸ The WHO gave emergency approval to Covid-19 vaccines developed by Pfizer-BioNTech, AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson and Moderna before the approval of the Chinese SinoPharm vaccine on May 9, 2021. For the first time the WHO has given emergency use approval to a Chinese vaccine for any infectious disease. The Chinese vaccine is now included in COVAX, which has hit serious supply problems with Western vaccines.

²⁹ ASEAN member states: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam.

We underscored the importance of further strengthening ASEAN centrality and unity in our engagement with ASEAN's external partners through ASEAN-led mechanisms in order to build mutual trust and confidence as well as to reinforce an open, transparent, inclusive, and rules-based regional architecture with ASEAN at the centre. In this regard, we instructed the ASEAN Foreign Ministers to hold their meetings with the People's Republic of China and the United States as soon as possible, prior to the 54th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting.³⁰

The expression "strengthening ASEAN centrality and unity" carries, among other things, the restrained but clear message that ASEAN states do not want to see themselves as pawns in either anti-Chinese alliances or anti-US initiatives. As regards public health policy and the purchase of Covid-19 vaccines in particular, the Southeast Asian countries have been practising on full purpose a diversification policy line since 2020.

According to an annual survey by the ASEAN Studies Centre at Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute,³¹ a majority (53.8%) of the 1,023 respondents, when asked how ASEAN should best respond to Beijing and Washington's power competing ambitions in the region, prefer to have ASEAN enhance its own resilience and unity to fend off pressure. The fear that ASEAN is becoming an arena of competition among major powers and its members may become their proxies rank as a main concern for 69.1% of the respondents.

It is certainly not an exaggeration to say that the geopolitical interests of the European Union and ASEAN coincide in relevant aspects, although the majority of ASEAN member states are still developing countries. At present, Southeast Asia does not occupy the position of one of the EU's geostrategic key regions. But taking into account the recent dynamics of Europe's China strategy, this situation may change rapidly.

³⁰ Chairman's Statement on the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting, April 24, 2021, ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta, <https://asean.org/storage/Chairmans-Statement-on-ALM-Five-Point-Consensus-24-April-2021-FINAL-a-1.pdf>.

³¹ Sharon Seah/Thi Hoang/Melinda Martinus/Thi Pham (2021), "The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report," *ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute*, 2, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>.