

Pubblicazione quadrimestrale  
numero 1 / 2022

# afriche e orienti

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rivista di studi ai confini tra africa mediterraneo e medio oriente

anno XXV numero 1 / 2022

## The Belt and Road Initiative: Perspectives from Asia and Africa

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AIEP EDITORE



Simona A. Grano, David Wei Feng Huang (eds.),  
*China-US Competition: Impact  
on Small and Middle Powers' Strategic Choices*,  
Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2023, 365 pp.,  
ISBN 978-3-031-15391-4

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The illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 accelerated the definition of the political perspectives of small and medium-sized countries vis-à-vis the two global powers, the United States and the People's Republic of China. The medium-sized and small countries have approached the war with different strategies and positions that somehow trace the shadow of their own projection on the arena of international politics, their own ambitions, forecasts, and fears. The political and military failure of the Russian objectives once again restores the centrality of the Sino-American confrontation in the international scenario of the 21st century. The medium-sized and small countries that should now position themselves with greater clarity within this political confrontation, for several years had moved with their own paths conditioned by the economic, historical, and geographical dimension instead.

These paths are often analyzed in the action-reaction dichotomy that Washington and Beijing implement. The book *China-US Competition: Impact on Small and Middle Powers' Strategic Choices* edited by Simona A. Grano and David Wei Feng Huang is a careful and precise study, emphasizing a perspective that has not yet been sufficiently addressed in terms of its contents and in a comparative approach. The work highlights the precautions, strategies and balances that a certain number of small and me-

dium-sized countries implement in their political, economic and cultural relationship with the United States and with the People's Republic of China. Substantial differences emerge from the chapters, but also parallels within the framework of a wider geopolitical view and international relations. According to the authors, countries of different sizes and with unequal responsibilities seek a balance within the greatest competition between the two superpowers.

The competition between Washington and Beijing unfolds on several fronts, descending from the global level to more defined and marked spaces, as clearly highlighted in the first part of the text. The second part and the third part of the book enter into the specifics of the strategies adopted and the results of the Sino-American competition on some European and Asian countries: Switzerland, Sweden, Italy, Germany, UK in the second part and Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore in the third part. The political dimensions and responsibilities weigh differently on the balance of foreign policy, but the authors support the idea of a general orientation of the various countries to position themselves historically in the so-called "hedging zone", with the exception of Taiwan. Anyway, the Russian invasion war in Ukraine is now bringing out the dangers and weaknesses for security, particularly but not only in East Asia and in Taiwan but also for the other countries closest to and exposed to a possible attack by the Chinese. In recent years, therefore, a general tendency has emerged in various countries to better redefine their relationship with China and the United States. We are witnessing a cautious and slow, but also evident, distancing of governments and public opinion from the risks of excessive collaboration with Beijing.

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Specifically, the first chapter by Simona A. Grano "set[s] the stage by broadly sketching the contours of the intense strategic competition between the two superpowers, with its potential to reshape Asia-Pacific and the world order" (pp. 3-4). The second chapter written by Shelley Rigger and Jamie Rose Montagne explains the historical and contemporary cautions and difficulties of the Sino-US relations. The authors therefore focus on the adverse consequences of the Global Financial Crisis before and after the COVID-19 pandemic on the relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China. The third chapter written by Brian G. Carlson instead wants to highlight the relationship between the domestic policy and the foreign policy of the two countries within the broader competition, also focusing on the theoretical level.

The second part of the book begins with the fourth chapter. As mentioned, this part shifts the analysis to the decisions and actions of individual European countries. This chapter is written again by Simona A. Grano, together with Ralph Weber explaining Switzerland's internal and external difficulties. The Confederation must redefine its historic role as a neutral country within this competition that goes beyond purely strategic and economic issues. In fact, the competition undoubtedly takes place also on a level that involves those liberal and democratic values to which the Alpine country adheres. The fifth chapter written by Johan Lagerkvist is dedicated to Sweden which

has been moving in recent years towards a greater distance from the People's Republic of China leading up to the request for membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The sixth chapter written by Giovanni B. Andornino focuses on the causes and consequences of the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Italian government with the Chinese government in 2019 and which placed Italy within the Belt and Road Initiative. According to the author, however, the repression in Hong Kong, the COVID-19 pandemic, the persecution of the Uyghurs and finally the Chinese ambiguity towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine led in the following years to a rethinking of the generous openings towards Beijing. The seventh chapter, written by Jens Damm, analyzes the position of the new German government and the wider German political, cultural and media world towards China as well as the relationship of political parties with Taiwan. The need to rethink the relationship with China also emerges in Germany. The author highlights the Atlanticist role of Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock in redefining German foreign policy. The eighth chapter, written by Roderic F. Wye, analyzes the role of the United Kingdom. In this case, the country appears seeking to guarantee the old relationship with China, but at the same time the most recent evolutions in international politics lead to a more marked distance between Beijing and London, in particular following the persecutions of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the crackdown on demands for democracy in Hong Kong, which, it should be remembered, remains a clear violation of the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984. The agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS) clearly falls within this new path.

Starting from chapter 9, the third part of the book is dedicated to three East Asian countries and one Southeast Asian country. The ninth chapter, written by David Chia-vacci, analyzes Japan, with particular attention to the period of government of Shinz Abe. This one was characterized by an overcoming of the economic and commercial pragmatism of previous years for the construction of a foreign policy oriented towards the security of a country which could be one of the first targets, after a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan. In the tenth chapter, Linda Maduz addresses the political choices of South Korea. Maduz also highlights a possible greater estrangement between Seoul and Beijing in the coming years. The eleventh chapter, written by David Wei Feng Huang and Wen-Chin Wu, is the one dedicated to Taiwan. This small country is certainly the most exposed to a possible Chinese invasion and therefore it is the one that can be placed more clearly in the field against the People's Republic and in support of the United States of America. The last chapter of the book is written by Ja Ian Chong and dedicated to Singapore. The Southeast Asian island has to deal with the growing Sino-American competition from which until now it had managed to keep itself autonomous. Such a competition clearly threatens the political and economic space of the region.

The text can be a good guide for scholars and students of international relations and international economics. It can also be a valid reading for those who are interested

in the internal and foreign policy of only one of countries selected as case studies. As seen, the book is limited to only a few geographical areas and in particular to a few countries, while other regions that are central to the Sino-American competition are excluded from the analysis. This can be a stimulus for further analysis while maintaining a comparative approach.

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ISBN 13: 978-8860862358



9 788860 862358

ISSN 1592-6753

€ 18,00

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