

## Conference

# US-China competition, COVID-19, and democratic backsliding in Asia: Implications for Europe

**28 September 2021**

Sala del Consiglio - Villa Salviati, Via Bolognese 156 - Florence

Scientific Organisers:

**Giulio Pugliese** | European University Institute and Oxford University

**Michelguglielmo Torri** | University of Turin

## Introduction

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic emergency has had a major impact in Asia – from South Asia, through Southeast Asia all the way to North Korea. It has allowed states to further centralise control over economic and social affairs – arguably also for good reasons – and has lent legitimacy to a recrudescence of nationalist and protectionist instincts, effectively empowering many of the region’s strongmen. The ripple effects of a post-pandemic depression are hard to discern.

As popular discontent mounts, populist strongmen and democratic leaders alike may exhaust the charisma acquired through COVID-19 crisis-responses, ushering the way to two broad scenarios. A pessimistic outlook suggests further political decay and deepening geopolitical tensions as national interests more easily clash, and leadership seeks to divert attention from socio-economic grievances. Alternatively, contemporary history has demonstrated that genuine political evolution, new social compacts, redistributive political economies and multilateral systems of governance may acquire a new shine following a major crisis. Still, COVID-19 is among the factors that have widened the rift between the United States and China, bringing bilateral relations to their lowest level since Nixon and Kissinger’s overtures in 1971. In fact, US-China zero-sum interactions across the geopolitical, economic, technological and political domains spiralled towards a race to the bottom in 2020.

The fight against COVID-19 and its aftermath, democratic backsliding, China’s assertiveness and the US pushback are making the Asian seas stormier. How are regional powers navigating them? This conference brings together Italy’s best contemporary Asia experts to take stock of latest developments and address these questions.



## Draft Programme

### 28 September

9.00 - 9.15 Arrival and welcome

9.15 - 10.00 Welcome remarks

**Giulio Pugliese** | European University Institute and Oxford University

Keynote speeches:

*Assessing China, sine ira et studio (without either bitterness or partiality)*

**Michelguglielmo Torri** | University of Turin

*A China policy is not an Asia policy, but no Asia policy without a China policy!*

**Michael Reiterer** | Former Ambassador of the European Union to the Republic of Korea and Vrije Universiteit Brussel

#### **PANEL 1 - South Asia**

10.00 - 11.45 Chair:

**Pietro Masina** | University of Naples "L'Orientale"

*The US-China rivalry and its implications for Pakistan*

**Filippo Boni** | Open University

*Democratic backsliding amid the COVID-19 pandemic in India*

**Diego Maiorano** | National University of Singapore

*India's alignment with the US, its challenge to China and its loss of strategic autonomy*

**Michelguglielmo Torri** | University of Turin

Discussant:

**Marzia Casolari** | University of Turin

11.45 - 12.00 Coffee break

#### **PANEL 2 - Southeast Asia**

12.00 - 13.45 Chair:

**Barbara Onnis** | University of Cagliari

*Coup in a pandemic: The case of Myanmar*

**Matteo Fumagalli** | University of St. Andrews

*Vietnam facing the new US-China competition: COVID-19 and the reshaping of production networks*

**Pietro Masina** | University of Naples "L'Orientale"

*Understanding Malaysia's politics of 'hedging' amidst mounting US-China competition*

**Emanuela Mangiarotti** | University of Pavia

Discussant:

**Giuseppe Gabusi** | University of Turin

13.45 - 14.30 Lunch

### PANEL 3 -Northeast Asia

14.30 - 16.00 Chair:  
**Francesca Congiu** | University of Cagliari

*The role of South Korea amidst US-China competition*

**Marco Milani** | University of Bologna

*The US-Japan Security Alliance – Prepared to ‘Deal’ with China?*

**Axel Berkofsky** | University of Pavia

*Taiwan: the key to regional stability and the role of Europe*

**Antoine Bondaz** | The Foundation for Strategic Research

Discussant:

**Michael Reiterer** | Former Ambassador of the European Union to the Republic of Korea and Vrije Universiteit Brussel

16.00 - 16.15 Coffee break

### Panel 4 - China

16.15 - 17.45 Chair:  
**Michelguglielmo Torri** | University of Turin

*COVID-19 and China’s global image*

**Barbara Onnis** | University of Cagliari

*China, COVID-19 and the Long-Standing Question of Human Rights*

**Francesca Congiu** | University of Cagliari

*China’s official narratives on Xinjiang: From ethnic separatism to religious terrorism*

**Beatrice Gallelli** | University of Bologna and Istituto Affari Internazionali

Discussant:

**Silvia Menegazzi** | LUISS University

17.45 - 18.00 Closing remarks

## Speakers

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<b>Axel Berkofsky</b>	University of Pavia
<b>Antoine Bondaz</b>	The Foundation for Strategic Research
<b>Filippo Boni</b>	Open University
<b>Marzia Casolari</b>	University of Turin
<b>Francesca Congiu</b>	University of Cagliari
<b>Matteo Fumagalli</b>	University of St. Andrews
<b>Giuseppe Gabusi</b>	University of Turin
<b>Beatrice Gallelli</b>	University of Bologna and Istituto Affari Internazionali
<b>Diego Maiorano</b>	National University of Singapore
<b>Emanuela Mangiarotti</b>	University of Pavia
<b>Pietro Masina</b>	University of Naples "L'Orientale"
<b>Silvia Menegazzi</b>	LUISS University
<b>Marco Milani</b>	University of Bologna
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