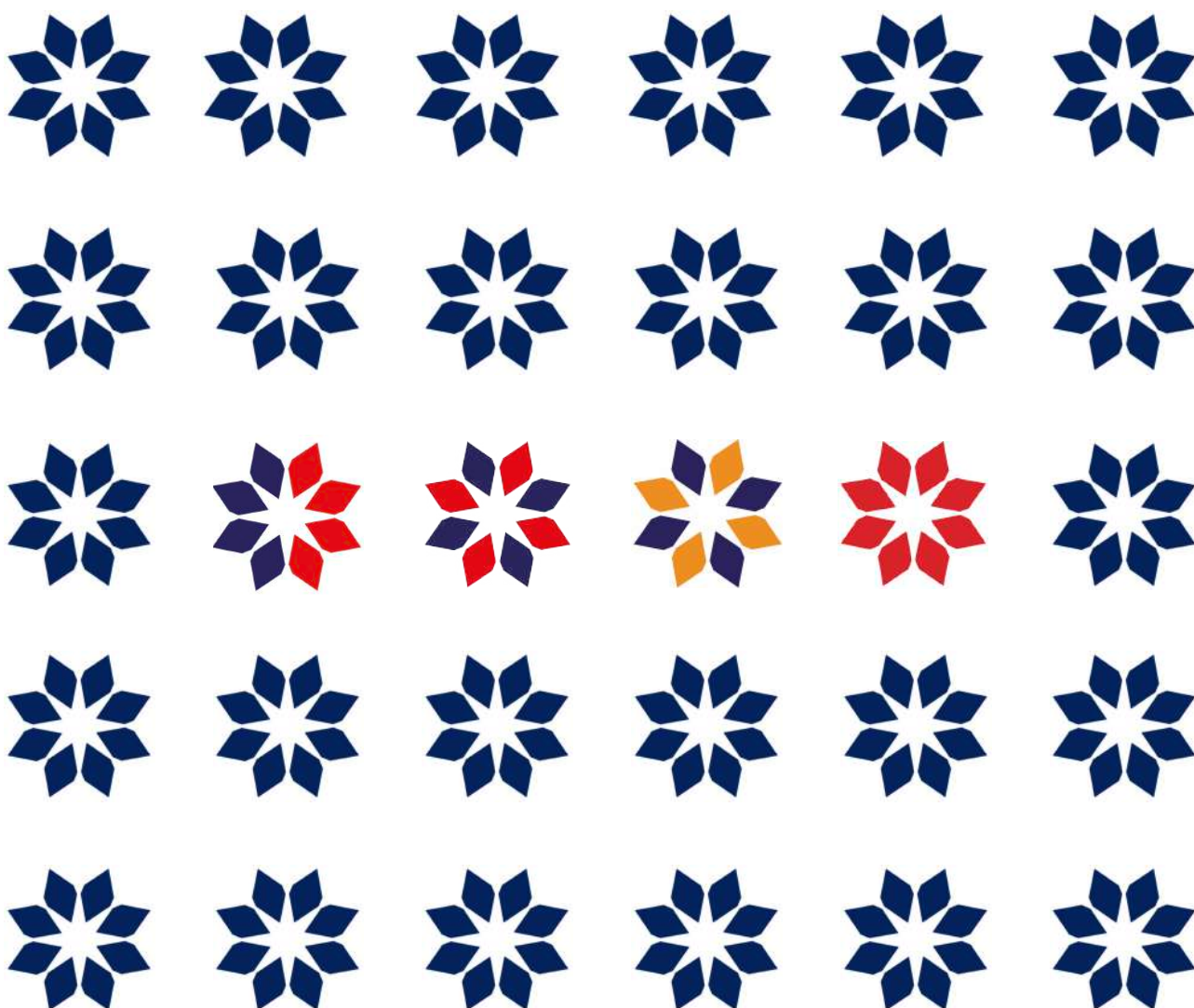




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A new perspective on Asia and the diversity of its issues and cultures,
combining the views of experts and high-level player.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

p.3 Editorial.

by Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet,
Editorial Director and former diplomat.

p.6 Asian news.

by Pierre Haski,
Journalist for France Inter.

p.7 Cooperation, security, and innovation: a new dynamic for Franco-Taiwanese relations.

with HAO Pei-Chih,
Representative of the Taipei Representative Office in France.

p.11 From Surabaya to Nusantara: urbanization and capitals in transition in Indonesia.

with Manuelle Franck,
Professor of Geography at the National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO).

p.19 India's geopolitical pragmatism between Beijing, Moscow, and Washington.

with Karine de Vergeron,
Associate Director of the Global Policy Institute and Member of the Scientific Committee of the Robert Schuman Foundation.

p.24 China, the Tianjin summit, and the military parade, should we be afraid?

by Yves Carmona,
Former diplomat.

p.27 The festival of lights in Myanmar.

by San San HNIN TUN,
Professor of Burmese at INALCO.

AGENDA

October 9-12

France-India Young Leaders Seminar
2025 in New Delhi and Mumbai

October 9

France India AI Initiative Roundtable
in New Delhi

« Social adoption of AI: challenges and changes
towards inclusion »

October, 14

France India AI Initiative & Brunswick
Roundtable in Paris

« From competition to cooperation: can France,
India, and the U.S. build a shared
vision for a trustworthy AI? »

November, 27

Conference with Xavier Huillard,
President of Vinci

December, 3

France India AI Initiative &
Paris Brain Institute Roundtable

December, 9

France-China Track 2 Forum in Paris

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Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet
Editorial Director and former diplomat

EDITORIAL

Each Asian country commemorated its 80th anniversary in its own way, thereby displaying its singularity within a geographic space that is far from homogeneous, whether from a cultural, historical, or ideological perspective.

The most remarkable celebration was that of the People's Republic of China, through the majesty of its display of power, and even more so through the presence of its guests of honor: autocrats Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un flanking on either side their host, Xi Jinping—following the saying “birds of a feather flock together”!

This September 3 marked “the 80th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and of the World Anti-Fascist War,” as the Chinese head of state recalled from atop the Gate of Heavenly Peace at the Forbidden City [1], the same place where, on October 1, 1949, his illustrious predecessor had proclaimed “the establishment of the People’s Republic of China and its government” [2].

The display of the most modern weaponry deceived no one as to the goal pursued by this martial gathering. It was clearly a show of strength with both a combative and deterrent value, aimed at the Western world, and particularly at the United States, its main adversary.

The message was twofold, with the presence in the reviewing stand for this military parade of the Russian and North Korean heads of state alongside the Chinese leader—all three allies in a common struggle against the democratic values of the West, and beyond that, in Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and Moscow’s challenge to its borders.

In Taiwan, meanwhile, it was only the Kuomintang (KMT) nationalists who marked in small committee a victory over their then-enemy Japan—a victory that belonged far more to them than to their great continental rival, reduced for the most part to rearguard skirmishes and guerrilla actions, not to mention the decisive role—left unacknowledged by Beijing—played by the United States in Japan’s defeat in August 1945 after the dropping of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and then Nagasaki.

Nothing had in fact been planned by the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and its democratically elected president, (William) Lai Ching-te, who took the opportunity to send Beijing a message intended to be both sensible and preventive: “Taiwan does not commemorate peace with guns.” He further added that this 80th anniversary should serve as a warning to democracies: “Just as Europe was faced with fascist aggression, Taiwan is now confronted with authoritarian coercion.”

For Hanoi, September 2 provided the occasion—again in martial form, with a display of weaponry just as modern but less sophisticated than that of its powerful neighbour—to commemorate not Japan’s defeat but the anniversary of the fleeting independence from



colonial France proclaimed by Ho Chi Minh, forgetting the five years of Japanese occupation that had preceded it (1940–1945), and a France determined, a year later (1946), to reassert control over its former colonies without having truly learned from its own occupation by German troops at home. April 30 was also marked as the 50th anniversary of “Reunification Day,” the fall of Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) and the victorious entry of the Viet Minh, bringing to an end a murderous 20-year conflict (1955–1975).

The focus of attention as a former aggressor nation, Japan—through the voice of its Prime Minister, Ishiba Shigeru—used the occasion of the memorial ceremony for the war dead to stress the obligation to “deeply keep within us our remorse and the lessons learned from that war.” This “remorse,” commentators noted, had not been expressed by a Japanese prime minister for 13 years.

Under fire after inflicting two back-to-back major national electoral defeats on his party, the head of government (before finally resigning on September 8, ushering in another period of political uncertainty) felt compelled to appease conservative members of the LDP and his support base by refraining from offering public apologies while also avoiding more serious diplomatic friction with Asian neighbours by abstaining from personally visiting the Shinto shrine of Yasukuni-jinja (though he still had a ritual offering delivered there) to honour the soldiers who had “given their lives in the name of the Emperor of Japan”—including the 14 Class A war criminals convicted by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East after the conflict.

In an unusual move—since tradition usually grants precedence to Washington—South Korean President Lee Jae-myung, criticised by his political opponents for being anti-Japanese, surprised many by traveling to Tokyo at the end of August to publicly announce with his Japanese counterpart a “historic” joint communiqué (the last dating back to 1998), in which Japan acknowledged “the terrible suffering and damage” caused to the Korean Peninsula during its 35 years of colonisation (1910–1945).

Yet, eighty years after the end of the Pacific War, the still-burning issues of forced labor and “comfort women” remained unresolved, as the South Korean president underlined in characteristically Asian fashion: “At the same time our proximity means that there are also aspects where we have conflicts.” On that

occasion, the two leaders pledged to work for the complete denuclearisation of the peninsula and to respond, through appropriate multilateral mechanisms, to North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic threats. They also emphasised the importance of trilateral cooperation with their American ally, as a way for Lee Jae-myung to reassure Washington about Seoul’s perceived willingness to show greater leniency toward Beijing.

Observers saw in the call by the two leaders for a resolution of the nuclear issue “through dialogue and diplomacy” (an unlikely outcome when a country is already nuclear-armed and feels threatened) a gesture of support for the resumption of U.S.–North Korea talks apparently being considered by Trump, in his pursuit of a Nobel Peace Prize—difficult to attain in the context of the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, given the pro-Putin and pro-Netanyahu stances the White House host has taken so far.

At the joint press conference in Tokyo, the Japanese prime minister declared on behalf of both countries their opposition to any unilateral attempt to change the status quo by force or external pressure—a way of warning Beijing on the Taiwan question.

This was another novelty, as Japan–South Korea discussions had until now been confined to the North Korean issue. The visit nevertheless demonstrated the desire of both neighbours to turn the dark page of their shared history and focus on economic and security cooperation, while each sought to manage as best as possible their delicate relations with the Trump administration.

If Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to China (the first in seven years) to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Tianjin could be read as a counter-move toward Washington after being slapped with a 50% customs tariff hike, it should not be forgotten that it was preceded by his August 30 meeting in Japan with his counterpart Ishiba.

That meeting gave both sides the chance to reaffirm their shared vision of a “free and open Indo-Pacific”—a formulation that ruffles Beijing—while Delhi prepares to host later this year the next Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) summit with the highest leaders of the U.S., Australia, India, and Japan, in support of a



“peaceful, stable and prosperous, inclusive and resilient Indo-Pacific.”

If Modi’s visit to China can be seen as the culmination of steps toward a gradual normalisation of relations begun in October 2024 (agreement on arrangements for patrols along the contested Line of Actual Control; resumption of trade at three border posts, among others), Delhi nevertheless refrained from endorsing Beijing’s demand for recognition of Taiwan as part of China (a consistent Indian position since 2008), just as Beijing did not abandon its territorial claims over Indian states in the Himalayan regions of Jammu and Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh. Modi’s visit to Beijing therefore did not dispel the mutual suspicion that continues to taint relations between the two regional giants.

Meanwhile, the “Super Garuda Shield” (August 25–September 3), an annual military exercise attended by the deputy commander of the Indonesian National Armed Forces, General Tandyo Budi Revita, and the commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Samuel J. Paparo—with participation from the armed forces of 13 countries (including France), plus observers—sought to enhance interoperability and deterrence in the region.

A similar but smaller-scale Russo-Chinese exercise, in which Indonesia also took part, showed that Jakarta—like the other nine ASEAN countries apart from the Philippines—continues to keep its distance from U.S.-led efforts to

contain China’s drive to reassert regional hegemony. France and Japan, for their part, through the third edition (September 1–11) of the “Brunet-Takamori” exercise conducted in New Caledonia, signalled their intention to strengthen defence cooperation “in the face of a hardening regional environment,” as explained by General Gabriel Soubrier, commander of the Armed Forces in New Caledonia (FANC), and in response to Japan’s precarious security situation, as noted by Lieutenant General Yasunori Matsunaga, commander of the 9th Division in Aomori [3].

Clearly, the days are long gone when, in June 2013, Xi Jinping and then-U.S. President Barack Obama agreed to establish a new model of relations between major powers, emphasising pragmatic cooperation and constructive management of differences. Today, conflict seems far more plausible, and countries in the region are already sharpening their weapons in anticipation of a clash that could prove far more destructive than those the world is currently witnessing—without being able to offer solutions beyond mere declarations.

[1] See « Le discours de Xi Jinping à l’occasion du 80^{ème} anniversaire de la victoire de la Chine dans la WWII », <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Y8KdZtT2eI>

[2] See « Mao Zedong Full Speech Restored (1949) [English Subtitles] Proclamation of the PRC » https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaRV_AiWxao

[3] See Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes, « Pourquoi 120 soldats japonais se sont entraînés en Nouvelle-Calédonie », September, 12 2025.

Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

A career diplomat who studied Chinese studies in France and then worked in development aid as an international expert for UNESCO in Laos (1988–1991), Jean-Raphaël PEYTREGNET has held positions including Consul General of France in Guangzhou (2007–2011) and Beijing (2015–2018), as well as in Mumbai/Bombay from 2011 to 2015. He was responsible for Asia at the Center for Analysis, Forecasting, and Strategy (CAPS) attached to the office of the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs (2018–2021) and finally Special Advisor to the Director for Asia-Oceania (2021–2023).



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Fossils of knowledge installation in Antikythera, 2022.
Courtesy of the artist, Athir and Mamour gallery



Pierre Haski
Journalist

Asian news

Géopolitique, a podcast offering a perspective on international affairs.

By Pierre Haski on France Inter

September 1 - China shows that the world does not revolve solely around Donald Trump.

With the regional summit in Tianjin and the impressive military parade planned in Beijing approaching, Xi Jinping's China is demonstrating its ambition to position itself as the leader of a "front of refusal" against Trump's America.

▶ [Listen to the podcast](#)

September 2 - Xi, Putin, and Modi: what the smiling photo from Tianjin tells us.

On the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit, the Russian, Indian, and Chinese leaders smiled for the cameras, thinking of the "absent" Donald Trump.

▶ [Listen to the podcast](#)

September 3 - The historical paradox behind the military parade in Beijing.

Beijing is using the anniversary of the end of World War II to project its new power against the United States. Donald Trump criticises Xi Jinping for downplaying the American role in the victory.

▶ [Listen to the podcast](#)

September 18 - In the Sino-American standoff, Beijing strikes a major blow.

China has banned imports of semiconductors from the American company Nvidia, a new episode in the technological war between China and the United States.

▶ [Listen to the podcast](#)

Pierre Haski

French journalist, former correspondent in South Africa, the Middle East, and China for Agence France Presse (AFP) and then for the newspaper Libération, co-founder of the news website Rue89, Pierre HASKI has been president of Reporters Without Borders since 2017. Since 2018, he has been providing insight into international politics through his morning show "Géopolitique" broadcast on France Inter.



HAO Pei-Chih Representative of the Taipei Representative Office in France

Interview Nouveaux Regards

Cooperation, security, and innovation: a new dynamic for Franco-Taiwanese relations.

Interviewed by Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet : You have succeeded François Wu in your new role as Representative of the Taipei Representative Office in France. Is this your first professional or residential experience in France? What was your first impression upon taking up your post?

I indeed succeeded Mr. (François) Wu Zhizhong on September 1, 2024, as Representative of the Taipei Representative Office in France. In fact, I have a long personal history with France. From 1996 to 2003, I pursued my university studies there and obtained a PhD in political science from Paris I University. I believe the French perception of Taiwan has changed considerably compared to the time when I was a student. It was the first time I had returned to France after such a long absence.

When I took up my new post, I immediately noticed a very significant change in the image Taiwan projects in France. Today, Taiwan enjoys great visibility in French society and a very positive image. I believe that a large part of the French public is now aware of the special relationship that exists between Taiwan and China.

The level of exchanges between Taiwan and France is very high today, with many new interactions having developed in various areas—whether in politics, scientific and technological exchanges, the economy, culture, and more.

I believe there are two main reasons for this. The first is Taiwan's overall strength. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I think the entire world was able to recognize Taiwan's unique medical and technological capabilities in this field.

The second, of course more obvious in recent years, has to do with the geostrategic relations between Taiwan and China. There is also the fact that Taiwan, as a country with particularly strong technological power in the semiconductor industry and in high-tech industries, has established itself as a global technological power.

After such important changes, I think Taiwan has been better perceived by the French authorities.



Of course, our team at the Taipei Representative Office in France—particularly my predecessor, Wu Zhizhong—played an important role in the very positive evolution of our relations.

The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs considers Taiwan an important partner for Europe and for France, especially in the economic, cultural, and technological fields. How does Taiwan view its relations with France? In your opinion, in which areas could France-Taiwan relations be further strengthened?

First of all, I would like to warmly thank the French authorities for regarding Taiwan as such an important partner. I believe that this partnership is not limited to economic and cultural fields, but is global in scope. As for how Taiwan views its current relations with France, I would say, to put it very simply, that Taiwan's image of France is that your country, as a major power, is at present the one that supports Taiwan the most among all European nations.

This is the image we currently have of France in Taiwan, and I think it can be summed up most clearly by the visit to France in October 2024 of our former president, Ms. Tsai Ing-wen. There is in particular one photo that profoundly moved Taiwanese society: that of our president standing in front of the Louvre.

This photo had a huge impact on Taiwanese society. Why? Because it was the first time one of our highest leaders, our former president, had set foot on French soil. The Louvre is one of the most emblematic monuments of France. What does this photo show? It shows that France offers Taiwan a warm welcome, that France and Taiwan are very good friends.

I want to speak about this photo because it particularly highlights the state of relations between Taiwan and France in recent years, and it illustrates what I have just said: that Taiwan occupies a very important place for France. I am grateful for this and wish to thank France, because I believe that among all the major European powers, it is the country that supports Taiwan the most. There are, of course, other very important aspects.

Among them is the military programming law for the years 2024 to 2030 adopted by your country, which defends the right to maritime navigation in the Indo-Pacific, especially in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, in order to preserve peace and stability in the region.

Several of your naval vessels patrol this important area to safeguard France's vital

interests there. Other European countries have also introduced bills favorable to Taiwan, and the French head of state as well as the British prime minister have each, in their own way, expressed support for peace in the Taiwan Strait.

What are your expectations for France-Taiwan relations in the coming years?

We hope to strengthen our cooperation in the future in the fields of security, economic policy, and industrial development. In these areas, I believe Taiwan and France can build a more diversified and more resilient relationship. Thus, starting from these three pillars, we hope to develop our cooperation in aerospace, defense, semiconductors, artificial intelligence, communications, and green industries.

I think we can strengthen our cooperation in these sectors, including in satellites and space. We also hope that France will fully play its role as a major power within multilateral international organizations, which have concrete significance for us, Taiwan. This is also an area we hope to strengthen in the future.

French society now clearly distinguishes between Taiwan and China in terms of the image projected by each entity. We are no longer in the situation of the past, when everyone had a rather vague view. On the cultural level, we still need to make efforts so that French society perceives Taiwan's unique image as a whole.

Yes, we do indeed need to redouble our efforts, to find new narratives and new methods of presentation. And also to find ways of showcasing the cultural elements that make Taiwan unique and distinguish it from China.

We have a major investment project in France. It is the first large-scale project of this kind in Europe—indeed, perhaps even in the world. It involves the production of solid-state batteries by the company ProLogium, which has invested in this project in Dunkirk.

This is a Taiwanese company, and France was chosen as the location for its first overseas factory. Traditional liquid batteries pose many safety problems and have too short a lifespan. Moreover, they cannot be transported by airplane, as they can easily be exposed to extreme temperatures, with all the risks that entails. This new type of solid-state battery does



not present that problem. They can be exposed to extreme climatic conditions without any issue. In addition, they have a long lifespan and a compact size, as thin as a postcard.

The second cooperation project falls within the framework of the most recent “Choose France” summit launched by President Macron, at which the Taiwanese group Foxconn, together with its French partners Thales and Radiall, announced a joint project: the creation of an industrial capacity for semiconductor assembly and testing in France. Foxconn also signed a second agreement on satellite constellations, combining its advanced manufacturing capabilities with the space technologies of Thales Alenia Space.

The aim for the two Franco-Taiwanese manufacturers is to jointly develop mass production of high-quality, high value-added satellites, in order to supply cutting-edge technological content for their major projects of low-orbit telecommunications satellite constellations.

In a speech delivered in Singapore at the “Shangri-La Dialogue,” President Macron emphasized the interdependence of the European and Asian security environments, drawing a parallel between the war in Ukraine and the actions China might undertake against Taiwan or the Philippines. President Macron also firmly reiterated France’s position: to reject any attempt to unilaterally alter the status quo by force. What impact did this statement have in Taiwan?

I believe it first sparked great interest in Taiwan, and we are extremely grateful to him for making it. I think President Macron’s speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore contained three important points.

First, it was the first time a French president had spoken so clearly about security in the Asia-Pacific region. He sent a very clear and strong message on this subject.

Second, Mr. Macron explicitly drew a parallel between Taiwan and Ukraine, and that parallel means that both Taiwan and Ukraine are sovereign territorial entities.

Democratic countries should not be invaded or threatened by other states in an abusive way, and this is very important for Taiwan. Third, it was also the first time that the French president unambiguously stated the importance of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly concerning the Taiwan Strait. He also rejected the use of force or other coercive means to change the status quo.

This therefore represents once again firm support from the French government for peace and for Taiwan.

These three elements had a huge impact in Taiwan, because they showed and reaffirmed that France is the European country that supports Taiwan the most. It was the first time that President Macron, in his current role, had expressed his support for peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region—especially in the Taiwan Strait—in such a clear and positive way. We are very grateful to him.

What message would you like to convey to our readers?

I think we must continue on the same path as before. We have seen that France has launched the “France 2030” investment plan to develop its industrial competitiveness and future technologies. We believe that in these areas there is strong potential for cooperation between Taiwan and France, which would strengthen the resilience of our democracies, our key industries, and our economies.

We very much hope to establish with France a reliable partnership in regional security, including in the areas of analysis and information sharing.

Just like Taiwan, Europe is facing many new challenges, especially in the field of security. I think Taiwan can also play an important role as a cooperation partner, particularly regarding new cyberattacks, interference by foreign powers, or disinformation.

France wishes to improve its economic security and industrial autonomy through a more diversified, autonomous, and resilient supply chain. From an economic perspective, Taiwan can indeed play a very important role in this cooperation, as I mentioned earlier. Taiwan presents itself to France as a reliable partner for cooperation, since Taiwan is a democratic country at the cutting edge of technology.

As I also mentioned earlier, this includes certain very important strategic industrial sectors. We can enhance our cooperation in strategic industries, including those I just mentioned—such as defense, aerospace, communications, semiconductors, quantum technology, artificial intelligence, and green industries. I believe we can strengthen our cooperation in all these fields in the future.



The peace and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region are closely tied to the peace and prosperity of Europe. In this context, Taiwan wishes to cooperate more closely with European countries, and particularly with France.

We have high expectations and are ready to establish a more comprehensive cooperative relationship with your country.

HAO Pei-Chih

Ms. Hao Pei-Chih assumed her duties as Representative of the Taipei Representative Office in France on 1 September 2024. She holds a Doctorate in Political Science from Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University. Prior to her appointment, Ms. Hao served in several senior positions within the public administration of Taiwan and held a professorship at a Taiwanese university (see : roc-taiwan.org).



Manuelle Franck

Professor of Geography at the National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO)

Interview Nouveaux Regards

From Surabaya to Nusantara: urbanization and capitals in transition in Indonesia.

Interviewed by Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet: You teach urban and regional geography of Southeast Asia at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO). Early in your career, you focused in particular on Indonesia, completing in 1989 a doctoral dissertation on the processes of urbanization in Java. What led you, as a geographer, to take an interest in this country in particular?

Manuelle Franck : First of all, it was the size and diversity of the country that most attracted me. Indonesia is one of Asia's very large countries. It ranges from the wettest equatorial regions to the driest areas of the southeast. There is great diversity in societies and environments, and as a result, all kinds of landscapes and uses of the environment. It is also one of the world's great maritime and island nations, with an entire set of questions arising from this very maritimicity—regarding maritime networks, but also the use of marine resources, coastal installations, and so on. The vast geographic scale of this country, its diversity, and its maritime character raise many questions—for example, in political geography, with the relations between social groups, populations, and nation-building, as well as in

economic or regional geography, with issues surrounding development methods and the inequalities that accompany them.

In urban geography, which is a subject of great interest to me, what is particularly important are the modalities of urbanization and their specific features.

More specifically, your work focuses on urban configurations, spatial organization, and the dynamics of regional integration. Among the many works you have devoted to this subject is one dealing with the impact of globalization on cities at the margins of metropolitanization in Indonesia, based on two examples: the port city of Surabaya on the island of Java, and Denpasar, the provincial capital of Bali. Why these two cities in particular? How have they been affected by globalization, and what is the situation today?

In the case of these two cities, Surabaya and Denpasar—which were the subject of a collective research project in which I was involved (cf. infra, “for further reading”)—we observed a phenomenon of metropolization, even if it was less advanced than in the large



capitals, the so-called first-tier metropolises. We defined this process of metropolization as a transformation of the city essentially through the internationalization of the urban economy within the context of globalization.

In Surabaya, the main drivers of metropolization are industry and the port function (trade and shipbuilding). In the case of Denpasar, the principal factor is tourism.

For these two cities, I focused on socio-spatial configurations, on the forms and actors of urban expansion. In both cases, we observe the emergence of polycentric configurations, with differentiated functions according to the urban poles, and increasingly marked distinctions between the city center and the peri-urban space. What we see here is the formation of large urbanized areas, not necessarily in the form of continuous built-up zones, but where multi-centered configurations are emerging.

During the colonial period, Surabaya was for a long time Indonesia's principal city, until it was overtaken by the capital, Jakarta. It was the leading city thanks to its economic activity, in particular the rise of its industry, in addition to the activity of its commercial port. Today, Surabaya is Indonesia's second-largest city by population, but until the mid-19th century it could be said to have been the first city in terms of economic activity and even population in the Dutch East Indies.

Industrial production there is highly diversified, ranging from agribusiness and textiles to petrochemicals, mechanics, and processing industries. What is particularly interesting in Surabaya is the entire fabric of local enterprises—SMEs as well as larger firms—with local actors who have been established for a long time and have formed entrepreneurial families. There are, in fact, kinds of business dynasties that are also active in the real estate development sector.

Surabaya is also a major export port and, considered the gateway to eastern Indonesia, a transit point for domestic maritime trade flows toward the port of Jakarta. It is a large city of 3 million inhabitants if one considers only its administrative unit. If one includes the greater metropolitan area around Surabaya (the Gerbangkertosusila), the population reaches 10 million. Beyond this agglomeration, a conurbation—an urban-rural mixed zone—links Surabaya to the city of Malang, 90 kilometers to

the south, punctuated by poles forming a polycentric configuration.

In Denpasar, the configurations are quite different, even if the form is also polycentric. The urbanization process, which began in southern Bali, is linked to the expansion of tourist facilities but also to the development of communication infrastructures connecting new tourist hubs. At first, an urbanization in the form of a star radiating from Denpasar took shape, which then spread more independently along the coasts, primarily in the island's southwest and gradually northward, then from Denpasar inland toward Ubud, and later toward the eastern and northern coasts.

A wide variety of actors contributed to this: major Indonesian or international hotel groups, as well as small independent investors or smaller hotel groups. In terms of economic activity, there are countless small-scale initiatives in handicrafts, hospitality, and catering, run both by Indonesians and by foreigners who are settling there in significant numbers. The state intervenes to build major infrastructure such as communication networks or water treatment systems.

Here, too, we find polycentric urbanization: with Denpasar at the center, now primarily an administrative but also a cultural hub, and around it, poles linked to tourism that have tended to develop over time and are becoming more and more numerous across the island. Initially concentrated along the coasts, they later spread further inland. Thus, the actors and modalities at play are completely different from those in Surabaya. This dynamic continues today.

Listening to you, I found myself wondering about the geographical choice of a capital city for a country when such a decision arises. What precedes one choice over another? This is particularly interesting in the case of Indonesia, a geographically very fragmented country made up of some 20,000 islands.

Officially, the figure stands at 17,500.

So this raises a delicate question: where should a capital be located when one is dealing with such a disparate collection of territories?

As soon as the idea of relocation is raised, the issue already arises at the level of available land, which rules out the very small islands, most of which are mountainous. The choice that was made, and the reasoning behind it, rested on a location that was somewhat symbolic, situated



at the geographic center of Indonesia, with the idea of bringing together eastern and western Indonesia.

There is indeed a very large disparity between western Indonesia—which is more developed, closer to the Strait of Malacca, that major international strait through which much of world trade passes, and connected to the entire economic dynamism of the Asia-Pacific—and eastern Indonesia (from the island of Sulawesi and the island of Lombok onward).

The East is a much less developed area, made up of smaller, more scattered islands. Distance there becomes a real handicap, especially in terms of logistical costs for transporting production to the economic center of gravity of Indonesia, which is on Java, and for exporting it via maritime routes. Symbolically, and in an effort to address this disparity, the idea was to locate the capital at the geographic center, in the hope of creating a new economic hub that might in turn generate momentum throughout eastern Indonesia.

So, in August 2019, Indonesian President Joko Widodo announced his project to move the national capital from Jakarta—on Java and some 1,200 km away—to the island of Borneo in Kalimantan. According to its planners, this new capital, named Ibu Kota Nusantara (and still not fully built, as you will confirm), is intended to be ecological—a forest city—smart, and inclusive.

It seems, however, that the real reasons for its construction lie more in the disastrous environmental situation of the current capital, Jakarta, which has around 30 million inhabitants including its urban region, and which suffers from severe pollution and congestion. Moreover, Jakarta is one of the so-called “sinking cities,” those that are literally subsiding due to global warming. Could you tell us more about this?

As for the reasons behind the move, we discussed them just before. Beyond Jakarta's environmental problems, territorial rebalancing was also a factor, since economic and political power as well as population are concentrated on the island of Java.

The idea was, in a sense, to “de-Javanize” Indonesia.

As for Jakarta, it is one of the major metropolises of the Global South, facing numerous management challenges. Within its administrative boundaries, the city has 10 million inhabitants, but if the surrounding urban region is included, the figure reaches 30 million.

Like many of the very large cities of the Global South, Jakarta suffers from pollution problems, notably linked to the coal-fired power plants that supply the city with electricity, to industry, and also to road traffic. The latter is heavily congested. Added to this are a shortage of housing, insufficient infrastructure, and many other issues, even if some improvements have been made.

What especially captures attention—and the main argument that has been used to justify relocating the capital—is the issue of the city's subsidence, which seems inescapable, with some districts (mainly in the north) sinking by as much as 25 cm per year. Flooding caused by the monsoon is worsened by this phenomenon of subsidence.

Jakarta's location is the reason: it lies in a very low coastal plain drained by about ten rivers. This plain forms a kind of natural trough into which these rivers, flowing from the mountains toward the sea, pour in, causing recurrent floods during the monsoon season when these small rivers overflow—exacerbated by soil sealing that prevents water from seeping deep into the ground. These monsoon-related floods are aggravated by the city's subsidence. The latter is linked to the marshy nature of the soil, where natural subsidence occurs, but it is worsened by urbanization. Urbanization, often called “stacking”—everything built on these unstable soils—adds weight and contributes to sinking the ground. Another particularly critical issue in Jakarta is groundwater pumping. There is not enough infrastructure to provide water supply, so water is pumped, increasingly deeper, to find fresh (non-saline) water. For the most luxurious real estate or industrial projects, pumping can reach depths of up to 300 meters.

This, of course, contributes to land subsidence. Today it is estimated that almost one-third of the city lies below sea level. Moreover, the rise in sea levels caused by climate change further intensifies the flooding. At present, there is indeed a serious subsidence problem throughout the northern part of the city. The Indonesian authorities considered it inevitable—that one day the city would be submerged—and decided that rather than embarking on costly coastal protection infrastructure and building very high seawalls, it would be better to relocate the capital. That said, the current president, Prabowo Subianto, has revived the “Giant Sea Wall” project, to be built along the entire northern coast of Java, where this subsidence problem and the worsening of flooding linked to rising sea levels are most acute.



So there do not really seem to be solutions for these cities that are sinking, subsiding for the reasons you have mentioned?

One might think that if the water supply network were improved, pumping from aquifers would stop. Perhaps it would also be necessary to avoid excessively tall constructions to prevent the weight of the buildings from being too heavy, and to restore wetlands to absorb water. There are technical solutions with protective seawalls, dikes, and pumping stations. But this will not necessarily prevent the sea one day from rising above the great protective walls. As with all environmental issues, there are more and more technical solutions, but they are extremely costly and do not always hold up over time.

When is Jakarta expected to disappear?

By 2050, it is thought that the sea will have submerged one-third of the city. This does not, however, prevent the development of new projects on the northern coast, notably land reclamation projects.

From what I have read on this subject, this would be the first time in the world that climate change has been explicitly invoked to justify the relocation of a capital.

Worldwide, I cannot say, but with regard to Indonesia, it is indeed the first time, because, as you recalled, there have already been previous plans to move the capital that did not come to fruition. But this is the first time that, for a capital city, the project has been accompanied by an entire discourse on sustainability and adaptation to climate change. That said, Indonesia already has policies in place to promote urban sustainability.

These are more sectoral projects, concerning transport or waste management. At the same time, it is true that the new capital, Nusantara, presents itself as the counter-example to Jakarta in this respect. Since it is a city being built from scratch, ex nihilo, there is the possibility of making it an environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable city.

And why was it located as far away as 1,200 kilometers?

This stems from the idea of territorial rebalancing, with a central location that is somewhat symbolic. There have also been cultural interpretations of the symbolism of the center in Indonesian kingdoms, where the

center concentrated power and authority. Traditionally, kingdoms and cities were defined by their centers more than by their outer boundaries.

But land ownership issues were also likely decisive in the choice of Borneo. If you look at the geographic center of Indonesia, you fall on the Makassar Strait, which separates the island of Borneo from Sulawesi. The choice was ultimately made for Borneo, on its eastern coast, and upon closer examination one realizes that the state already controlled about half of the land needed—either because it was exploited by state-owned forestry or mining companies, or because it was under concessions granted for a limited duration to companies, concessions that could either not be renewed or perhaps bought out before expiration. Moreover, NGOs have raised the point that members of Indonesia's politico-economic elite, including the family of the current president, held significant land there, either directly or under concession, and that this may have been a factor.

It is nevertheless worth questioning the decision to build a city from scratch in a forested area when it would have been possible to build a new district in one of the existing cities, such as Balikpapan or Samarinda. That would have been far less costly, since all the access infrastructure already existed there. Former President Joko Widodo, however, was determined to make it a symbol of contemporary Indonesia and to leave a legacy. The decision to build a new capital 1,200 kilometers from the current one also had to do with the fact that this region is far less seismic than Java or many other Indonesian islands, which are regularly struck by earthquakes.

The city is located somewhat inland, and therefore faces less risk of marine submersion. There was also the idea that this is a region of immigration—internal migration—because although it is still sparsely populated, its economy is very dynamic and based on the extraction of natural resources: timber, but also minerals, especially coal. It is also a plantation region. This has attracted a large labor force from other Indonesian islands. Many Javanese live there, as well as populations from the nearby island of Sulawesi.

To this was added an organized migration program of Javanese to other less-populated islands, implemented by Indonesian governments, called transmigration. Thus, the population is already very mixed, the environment is already culturally diverse, and



the thousands of civil servants coming from the capital could more easily integrate there.

The new city of Putrajaya in Malaysia seems to address the same concerns as Nusantara—namely, a garden city, a smart city designed to be ultra-connected, with green spaces occupying one-third of its surface. Yet this project, dating back to 2002, does not appear to have achieved the success Malaysian authorities had hoped for, judging by the small number of residents who have moved there. Isn't that also, in a way, the issue with Nusantara?

That is indeed the issue with Nusantara, but the city is not yet finished, and civil servants have not yet moved in. There is, however, an administration already in place—the administrative authority responsible for building and managing the city. But it is true that the city is still under construction. In addition, there are uncertainties about whether the city will be fully realized. Will the current president make it a priority or not? For now, at least in budgetary terms, funding has been reduced compared to previous periods. The current president has said that he will install the new government there, that he will sign the decree to relocate the capital in 2028—that is, at the end of his term.

As a result, construction has been spread out over a longer period. But for the moment, the decree relocating the capital has not been signed. In other words, Jakarta has been stripped of its capital status, but Nusantara has not yet been formally designated as the new capital.

So we are in a sort of in-between situation. This uncertainty over whether it will truly become the national capital actually reduces the interest of private investors, who need to be mobilized to build the city, since the state cannot do it alone. The plan is for the state to finance only 20% of the city's construction, with the remainder coming from either public-private partnerships or the private sector taking charge of the city's development. It is therefore essential that the private sector take an interest. But the private sector operates according to a logic of profitability.

The Putrajaya project follows the same logic as that of Nusantara, while being very different, since it is located only 30 km from Kuala Lumpur.

Here, the project is part of the development of a large metropolitan area, with the construction of

a new city dedicated to administration. It is not at all the idea of building a city ex nihilo in the middle of the forest and far from the former capital. Rather, the project follows a logic of metropolitan planning.

The surface area of Putrajaya is also much smaller—around 50 km², whereas the Nusantara project covers 2,600 km². The objective of Putrajaya was to address Kuala Lumpur's problems—even though it is smaller than Jakarta, it still faced traffic congestion, a shortage of housing, and limited land available for state projects and new administrative buildings. The idea was also to counterbalance the city's expansion, which was concentrated to the west along the Klang Valley leading to Kuala Lumpur's port, Kelang.

The project envisioned creating a major North-South axis linking central Kuala Lumpur to a new international airport, the endpoint of what Malaysian authorities called the "Multimedia Super Corridor." The idea was to build southward an entire urban and infrastructural ecosystem capable of attracting high-tech companies, essentially creating a new Silicon Valley in Malaysia. This project formed part of President Mahathir's "Vision 2020" for Malaysia's development. Putrajaya was to be the city of this corridor, with governmental functions, embodying both Malaysian ambitions and Malaysian identity.

It is true that Putrajaya, like Nusantara, was presented as an ecological city. But the project dates back to 1990, when environmental concerns were less critical—or at least less well known—with less urgency around climate change than today. Putrajaya's references were those of the "Garden City" and the "City Beautiful," both Western concepts, whereas the forest city model adopted for Nusantara has been more widely tested in Asia, particularly in Singapore and China.

The Garden City idea was not originally about environmental concerns, but rather about correcting dysfunctions in overly dense and polluted British industrial cities. The goal was to de-densify by creating small urban centers that were economically self-sufficient, combining urban activities with a rural environment.

The idea was, in a sense, to improve living conditions. This resulted in a city integrating many green spaces, a green belt with surrounding farmland to control urban sprawl. In this respect, it resembles the Nusantara project, but its original aim was more about improving



living conditions and economic activities than about environmental priorities.

The second model, the “City Beautiful,” was a 19th-century architectural model, like the Garden City in Britain. Here the goal was to beautify cities by creating highly regular geographic plans with broad boulevards and grand axes. Putrajaya’s plan is something of a blend of these concepts, visible in its four-kilometer-long axis stretching from the Convention Center to the Prime Minister’s Office, lined with water features and green spaces.

Today, there is a new discourse around this city, one that takes ecological and smart-city dimensions more fully into account. The first Putrajaya master plan, dating from 2015, has been updated to integrate these aspects, particularly the smart-city dimension, using digital solutions to make the city more environmentally virtuous—for example, by improving water supply management or smoothing traffic flow.

Another distinctive element of Putrajaya is its emblematic architecture, which is Middle Eastern in style and inspired by Islam. In Nusantara, by contrast, the idea is to embody an Indonesian and plural identity, reflecting the country’s diversity. Putrajaya, on the other hand, has been criticized for projecting—through its capital’s buildings—an exclusively Muslim Malaysian identity, despite the presence of significant minorities, particularly Chinese and non-Muslim communities.

So why is it still something of an empty city? Because, indeed, Putrajaya has never really been embraced by the population. It is also because Putrajaya is too close to Kuala Lumpur, and civil servants have continued to reside there. This is all the more so since, within the framework of this Multimedia Super Corridor project, expressways, highways, and trains were built, linking Kuala Lumpur to Putrajaya very quickly. Thus, if you live in the southern suburbs of Kuala Lumpur, you are not very far from your workplace in terms of commuting time. Like Nusantara, Putrajaya has so far remained a city with little actual investment from its population.

It’s a bit like Washington D.C. in the United States.

Yes, but Washington eventually became an economic city, which is not at all the case with Putrajaya—firstly because opposite Putrajaya lies Cyberjaya, the city dedicated to new technology activities within the Multimedia Corridor, and secondly because industrial facilities have continued to expand elsewhere in

the region, but not specifically in Putrajaya, whose primary function remains governmental.

There seems to be a trend among these countries to create new capitals. I’m thinking, for example, of Myanmar or China.

Yes, indeed, there are many such projects, but they are not always successfully carried out. In Naypyidaw, Myanmar, the relocation of the capital was the result of a very particular process, and the reasons for the move were never officially explained. In an authoritarian context, it was a unilateral decision by the Burmese junta, and the city was built almost in secret. Then, overnight, civil servants were forced to move. Most likely, security and political concerns drove the decision to relocate the capital.

In 1988, large demonstrations took place in Rangoon, brutally suppressed in blood, and this may have pushed the military junta to withdraw further inland, and especially away from the coast—historically the entry point for foreign influences but also invasions, the most recent being the British conquest. The idea was also for the junta to shield itself, away from Rangoon’s social movements. The chosen site is surrounded by mountains, offering natural defenses, complemented by fortifications, bunkers, and underground tunnels.

This does not mean it is an isolated city: today it is well served by highways leading to the airport, situated on a North–South axis, the Sittang Valley, which serves as an alternative to the other North–South river corridor, the Irrawaddy, the country’s main river. It is easily accessible and closer to the city of Mandalay, another major economic hub.

But the initial motivation was nonetheless security. The city is also highly fragmented, made up of small functional units separated from one another and connected by wide roads—up to ten lanes on each side. This structure allows for rapid lockdown of the city in case of threat, with access controlled by barriers at the entry points of these urban highways, on which tanks could also be deployed. Burmese identity is embodied in the architecture of the administrative and religious complexes, which feature neo-regional designs inspired by Buddhism. Naypyidaw is meant to embody a Buddhist Burmese nation, even though many religious minorities also exist. In this way, Burmese authorities promote a Buddhist national identity, just as Malaysian governments



promoted—through Putrajaya—a Muslim Malaysian identity in a multiethnic country.

On the projects we have mentioned—perhaps not in Myanmar given the regime—are populations or NGOs consulted before such a decision to move a capital is made?

In the case of Nusantara, this is precisely what was criticized of the central government—that it pursued the project almost unilaterally, in an authoritarian, top-down manner. Then-President Joko Widodo announced the relocation and rapidly pushed through laws in a legislative marathon, which allowed the principle and modalities of the move (location, cost, governance) to be approved.

The choice of the master plan for the new capital—envisioning a “tropical forest city”—was also made in a highly centralized fashion. The process was criticized for having involved very little consultation, particularly with Indonesian experts, relying instead on foreign firms. Local government was not consulted, nor was the population, and NGOs defending local and indigenous communities strongly protested—especially environmental NGOs.

Nusantara carries the ambition of being an ecological city, with green spaces meant to occupy 75% of its area. It is true that green building standards are being applied to construction, and that green spaces and water circulation systems are being implemented in line with the plan. But for now, what one sees is mostly construction dust, rapid deforestation—even if the site was mainly eucalyptus plantations. To the environmental damage must be added social problems concerning land rights for local populations, whose claims are often based on usage rights granted historically by local or customary authorities rather than on formal private property titles. This has led to tensions around expropriations and the level of compensation. Land issues are a particularly conflictual subject in the region.

Then there is the issue of population displacement and its economic impact.

The site was not very densely populated, but there were still local villages. Some villagers have already been relocated, and the process is not yet complete. Land clearance remains a major problem. As long as land is not clearly and legally freed for projects, private investors remain unwilling to get involved.

Does this mean Jakarta will not be totally abandoned?

No. Jakarta will remain the economic capital in any case. It is even possible that it will remain the political capital as well, if President Prabowo does not sign the decree officially designating Nusantara as the capital. That decree has not yet been signed. But Jakarta will always, at least for a long time, remain the economic capital, because it has the best infrastructure, the largest and most skilled labor force, and the biggest market too—since the island of Java is home to 150 million inhabitants.

In East Borneo, where Nusantara is being built, there are far fewer people, some five million inhabitants.

There may also be a political issue, because Javanese power has historically prevailed over all others.

Yes, precisely. In the official discourse, the idea was to “de-Javanize” the country, to give a region outside Java the capacity for political—if not economic—leadership. As far as the economy is concerned, the city’s planning does indeed include specialized industrial zones. But the economy is not something that can be commanded: one may build infrastructure to attract private companies and offer them fiscal or financial incentives, but in the end, it remains their choice whether to settle there.

Moreover, the aim is not to turn Nusantara into a new economic hub competing with Jakarta. The idea is rather to create a new economic pole outside Java, capable of generating spillover effects first in East Borneo and perhaps later across all of eastern Indonesia.

So we’re not there yet.

No. For the moment, what is being built continues to be the administrative and governmental core. A few buildings are already completed: the presidential and government palace, the headquarters of the city’s Administrative Authority, several ministerial buildings, a bank, a hotel; the mosque is well advanced. For the officials of the Administrative Authority, several residential towers have also been completed. What has not yet been built are the legislative and judicial complexes. Work is scheduled with a budget running until 2028. The city is indeed under construction, but at a slower pace than initially planned. Will it go all the way? That is not yet known. Another question arises regarding its ecological dimension, its smart-city ambition. Will this truly extend beyond the hyper-central administrative core—

entirely planned and funded by the state? Or will environmental standards be neglected once the private sector begins building the rest of the city?

In February 2023, UN Secretary-General António Guterres raised the alarm about the risks of rising seas in several Asian capitals—political or economic. He specifically mentioned Bangkok, Dhaka, Jakarta, Mumbai/Bombay, Shanghai, and Guangzhou/Canton. Is the risk real? Is it possible to stop it?

The risk is entirely real. I know the case of Bangkok much better than the others. Bangkok lies in the large Chao Phraya Delta, affected by both natural and human-induced subsidence. Technical solutions have already been put in place: central Bangkok is protected by dikes and pumping systems. These protective measures have existed for a long time, since the 1980s. Today, the same approach continues: projects are underway to build additional protection and pumping systems around the periphery of central Bangkok, elsewhere in the delta, to limit both natural and artificial subsidence. Bangkok, after all, is a very large agglomeration, with extensive construction and infrastructure.

Efforts are also being made to reopen canal spaces that were blocked or covered up during the city's expansion, even though traditionally Bangkok was organized around canals—both within the city itself and throughout the delta. Jakarta, by contrast, has developed such technical solutions far more recently.

That is also the problem in Dhaka?

Yes, of course.

And what about the construction of dams? I see that the Chinese are building dams all over,

affecting the Mekong's flow and therefore neighboring countries. Could this be a solution?

The construction of dams is not designed to solve downstream urban problems. The Chinese build dams along rivers and upstream to regulate flooding in China, to control water flows, but also to generate hydroelectricity. They also serve as reservoirs for irrigation. But downstream, they cause damage: fewer sediments reach the estuary because they are trapped upstream, and less water flows as well, making the delta more vulnerable to saltwater intrusion. Moreover, lower water levels downstream create serious problems of water supply and irrigation. All the riparian populations along the Mekong, who depend on the river's resources, face multiple difficulties as a result of these dams.

Thank you very much!

The research on Nusantara and on new Southeast Asian capitals discussed in this interview was conducted in collaboration with Nathalie Lancet, Director of Research at the CNRS, in partnership with Trisakti University in Jakarta.

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Manuelle Franck

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Karine de Vergeron
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Interview Nouveaux Regards

India's geopolitical pragmatism between Beijing, Moscow, and Washington.

Interviewed by Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet: Do you share the view expressed on September 6 in an op-ed in *Le Monde* by political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot, a specialist on the Indian subcontinent, and CERI director Stéphanie Balme, that Narendra Modi's participation in the SCO summit held in Tianjin, China, from August 31 to September 1, 2025, was, I quote, "to be interpreted as an act of revenge (e.g. against the United States and the Western order it represents) on the part of the Global South" and, beyond that, as its "birth certificate"?

It seems to me that such a statement is somewhat premature when one considers the composition of this heterogeneous group of underdeveloped countries—or even biased, insofar as it takes into account only India's participation in a summit which was, after all, quite natural, given that India, like Pakistan, has been a full member since 2017.

Karine de Vergeron: India's participation in the SCO summit at the end of August—an event New Delhi had not attended for seven years—should, I believe, be understood as a direct response to the tariffs imposed by President Trump on India, and also within the broader context of the war in Ukraine. In 2022, India's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine was

primarily determined by domestic economic considerations, particularly in the defence sector, since India remains heavily dependent on Russian equipment (imports of defence materiel from Russia accounted for 45% of India's total imports in this sector between 2018 and 2022).

A number of experts estimated believed then that it would take India more than twenty years or so of it wished to fully replace its Russian-made defence equipment with that of new suppliers.

India's continued imports of Russian crude oil since 2022 are also explained, in this context, by the availability of inexpensive and lucrative energy supplies, given that India hosts the world's largest oil refinery—Jamnagar, located in Gujarat—the vast majority of whose inputs come from Russia, and which has grown into an international hub for processing petroleum-based products, exporting beyond India's borders. But maintaining these imports also



stems from larger strategic priorities for New Delhi, namely its relationship with China.

Indeed, since 2022 India has sought to carefully keep its ties with Russia, in the hope of having Moscow remain in a potentially neutral position in the event of any future conflict between New Delhi and Beijing.

In this broader context, the US President Joe Biden did not, then, exert real pressure on the Indian government to influence its position on Ukraine, choosing instead to consider India's role in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and its Indo-Pacific strategy as more important to American interests vis-à-vis China. However, the unpredictable nature of President Trump's decisions since his election last November has revived in India an older tendency to work towards a possible rapprochement with China.

Back in 2005, in an essay published by the Royal Institute of International Affairs and the Robert Schuman Foundation, I referred to former minister Jairam Ramesh's book *Making Sense of Chindia*, which already highlighted the sense of long-term complementarity—or an irreversible economic momentum—aiming towards a rapprochement between China and India despite their multiple rivalries, particularly on the highly sensitive issue of the Himalayan borders. This idea of a China-India rapprochement is, therefore here not new.

I am not also, entirely convinced that we can truly speak of this SCO summit as a “birth certificate” of the Global South. It is indeed a turning point but, in my view, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is also seeking to provide a commercial response on the one hand, to India's nearly \$100 billion trade deficit with China last year, and on the other hand, to the tariffs newly imposed by the U.S. president. India reaffirms, in this way, its political strategy of pragmatism and case-by-case decision-making, a method it has long applied in its relationship notably with the European Union.

A number of Indian experts now believe that keeping durable alliances in the current geopolitical context of a redefined multipolar world order is illusion, and that Donald Trump's presidency has opened the door to a form of client-based realpolitik, giving priority rather to commercial aims at the expense, if necessary, of longer-term strategic geopolitical interests.

Observers, particularly in France, have commented extensively on the alleged deterioration of Indo-American relations—a consequence, according to them, of the Trump administration's decision to impose steep 50% tariff duties on India. This move was explained both by Delhi's chronic trade surplus with Washington and, above all, by India's refusal to abandon its imports of Russian crude oil in the context of the war in Ukraine (and perhaps also its dependence on Moscow for arms supplies?).

Are relations between these two major Indo-Pacific powers truly so strained, when in fact they share a common objective—namely, to counter China's push for hegemony in the region, notably through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which India is set to host by the end of the year?

Yes, indeed, as I mentioned earlier, Delhi's military dependence on Moscow is an essential component to understand India's reaction. I would add that of the 50% tariff duties enacted by President Trump, half (25%) is openly a U.S. sanction for New Delhi's continuing to import oil and military products from Russia.

President Trump's focus on his electoral base, and a certain disregard for international strategic considerations, led him—through the tariff increase introduced on August 27—to attempt to force New Delhi into making trade concessions. India's response, by playing the geopolitical card of rapprochement with China, should therefore be understood as a way of trying to regain the upper hand and force the U.S. administration back to the negotiating table in a position, which would be more favourable to India.

It is thus not surprising that, in mid-September, a team led by U.S. trade negotiator Brendan Lynch held talks with officials from the Indian Ministry of Commerce to explore how a deal might ultimately be reached. This came as the U.S. president had also called, at the beginning of September, on the European Union to impose tariffs of up to 100% on China and India in order to pressure Russian President Vladimir Putin to end the war in Ukraine.

These remarks were made just as India had announced it was close to finalizing a large part of its bilateral free trade agreement with the EU. Here, we can clearly see the central importance of the trade issue underlying the Indo-American relationship and the Sino-Indian rapprochement.

In this context, the decision taken on September 19 by the U.S. president to further impose fees of \$100,000 for H-1-B visas for foreign workers—nearly 70% of which are held by Indian nationals



—is a serious additional blow to India that will further complicate India's room for manoeuvre.

One should add, however that the relationship between President Trump and Prime Minister Modi had in fact already been strained after the U.S. president received the Pakistani Prime Minister at the White House last July. That episode was perceived as challenge by the Indian Prime Minister.

The fact that the United States had sought to potentially play a mediating role between India and Pakistan had already given India the impression that it could not always rely on Washington's support and, therefore, that it needed to focus on its own short- and medium-term strategic interests.

The deployment of sixty-five Indian military personnel—including the Kumaon Regiment, one of the oldest units in the Indian Army—during the mid-September Zapad military exercises in Russia and Belarus, is, in this context, a more problematic and worrying signal, at a time when NATO has begun reinforcing its air defence on its eastern flank.

The Belarusian exercise, which stretched across vast areas east of Moscow and in the Arctic, up to the Baltic Sea and Belarus's western border near Poland and Lithuania, notably included ballistic missile launches as well as simulated airstrikes.

This Indian participation demonstrates New Delhi's continued prioritization of its relations with Moscow (and with Beijing), on which Modi increasingly relies in a context of mistrust toward the United States. It should be noted, however, that the Indian Prime Minister did not attend the Chinese military parade in Beijing on September 3.

And despite the current disputes between India and the United States on trade and strategic issues, the Quad, which India will host before the end of the year, remains a cornerstone of Indo-American relations, as their interests continue to converge in their assessments of the risks in the Indo-Pacific with regards to China. Once again, India, thus, seems to favour a case-by-case policy.

There is, however, in this context a genuine opportunity for Europe to strengthen its strategic relationship with India, both

commercially and geopolitically in the Indo-Pacific and in security matters.

By the end of the year, Brussels and New Delhi hope to finally conclude a free trade agreement, negotiations which began over fifteen years ago, whilst the EU remains India's second-largest trading partner.

The EU is also proposing a series of sectoral agreements with India in new technologies, air transport, and sustainable finance, at a time when U.S. trade pressure on the European Union has increased since the heavily unbalanced trade deal of last July, which imposed 15% U.S. tariffs on European goods. There is thus a renewed convergence of interests for both India and the EU to work towards a swift agreement.

Narendra Modi's seemingly radiant appearance in Tianjin at the side of China's top leader could be interpreted as confirmation of the Sino-Indian rapprochement initiated in recent years through the diplomacy of the two countries—both eager to turn the page on the clashes that had pitted them against one another in 2017 and, more seriously, in 2020 at Doklam and in Ladakh, territories claimed by Beijing alongside the Indian Himalayan state of Arunachal Pradesh.

At the same time, just before landing in China, the Indian Prime Minister met with his Japanese counterpart to reaffirm with Tokyo their "steadfast commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific"—a concept that has the particular effect of ruffling Beijing's feathers.

How do you analyze this situation? Should this meeting between the two leaders be seen as heralding a breakthrough, or an acceptable modus vivendi for India, as some have suggested?

Or is it rather a matter of India's realistic positioning in the moment, mindful of China's closeness with Pakistan—its sworn enemy—which was again underscored during the crisis between Delhi and Islamabad following the April 25, 2025 terrorist attack in Pahalgam against Indian tourists in the Indian-administered state of Jammu and Kashmir?

India's geostrategic outlook on the Indo-Pacific has not changed and remains, regardless of the possible rapprochement with China, a vital concern for New Delhi. Indo-Japanese relations must also, in my view, be understood within the broader historical context of the rise of Hindu nationalism and the ties that some Indian independence leaders had maintained with Japan against the British during the Second World War.



In this context, Japan is regarded by Narendra Modi as a friendly country and as a counterweight to China. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs further emphasizes that Indo-Japanese friendship has a long history, rooted in spiritual affinity as well as strong cultural and civilizational ties.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Tokyo on August 29 therefore came, as you pointed out, at a pivotal moment, with India-Japan relations currently under strain due to divergent strategies on Russia and Donald Trump's punitive trade policies, which are changing the traditional alliance structures in Asia.

Despite these challenges, the two leaders unveiled an ambitious investment target of ten trillion yen over ten years and strengthened their security cooperation, signalling their determination to forge a new strategic partnership.

It also appears that the "neighbourhood first" strategy promoted by Narendra Modi and his Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar—with countries such as Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka—has recently faced numerous setbacks.

This was evident again on August 28, 2025, with the first visit in 13 years of a Pakistani Foreign Minister, Ishaq Dar, to the former East Pakistan, seemingly indicating that Dhaka and Islamabad are now seeking to strengthen their relations, particularly after the fall of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who has since taken refuge in India.

India's relations with its immediate neighbours thus appear complex, marked both by close cultural and linguistic ties but also by tensions, particularly those fuelled by geopolitical rivalries with an increasingly assertive China in this region and beyond. How would you assess these recent developments? Are they likely to call into question India's foreign policy, which is by definition multidimensional?

Are there alternatives available to India, other than maintaining an equal distance between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing, without ever fully choosing sides?

In the past twenty years or so, India's foreign policy seemed to encompass three distinct themes. The first was India as one of the two great Asian powers driving the renewal of the East vis-à-vis the West, associated with the notion of "Chindia," as I mentioned earlier.

This approach was also one of the core elements of India's external strategy known as

the "Look East Policy", which notably resulted in closer ties with ASEAN countries and with Japan.

Second, there was the theme of India increasingly becoming part of an "expanded West," as the world's largest democracy.

The most significant expression of this was the U.S. recognition of India's status as a nuclear power—through the 2006 Indo-U.S. strategic agreement, later partly confirmed by the special status granted by the Nuclear Suppliers Group in 2008. For some, India was then becoming the United States' new special Asian partner.

And a third way was the notion of "Indian particularism": a modernized version of India's post-independence commitment—sustained throughout the Cold War era—to non-alignment.

Today, although India continues to believe that its natural sphere of influence lies in South Asia, its position in recent years has been increasingly challenged by China, making its eastward neighbourhood policy more complex and risky.

Moreover, India's global ambitions appear to have developed at the expense of its relationships with its regional neighbours, who have grown increasingly hostile to New Delhi's quest for regional hegemony, even as economic instability and political fragility threaten South Asia. Despite official statements in favour of regional solidarity since 2014, India's foreign policy has, in essence, remained outward-looking—toward the United States, the Quad, and the Indo-Pacific—rather than focused on South Asia.

India may also wish over the longer term, to strengthen its partners westward, towards the Middle East, and northward, particularly towards Central Asia, both for energy supply and in an effort to counter China's growing influence in South Asia. India's strategic and geopolitical pragmatism may also further intensify at a time when the United States appear to be moving towards a more isolationist policy.

It is striking to note that the early drafts of the new U.S. National Defence Strategy, released early September, put the protection of the U.S. homeland and its Western Hemisphere before confronting adversaries such as Beijing or Moscow.



If confirmed, this new priority would represent a major shift from recent US Democrat and Republican administrations, including President Donald Trump's first term, which had made the

deterrence of China a core component of U.S. efforts. Such a reversal would, without doubt, have a profound impact on India's geostrategic posture towards China.

Karine de Vergeron

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Yves Carmona
Former diplomat

Opinion

China, the Tianjin summit, and the military parade, **should we be afraid?**

By Yves Carmona

No, rest assured, we will not devote ourselves exclusively to China, though it does take some effort to resist the flood of commentary sparked by the few photographs released by Xi Jinping's team of official photographers—images of heads of state and government rarely seen gathered in such numbers at multilateral summits such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded in 2001.

It is true that successive enlargements have brought in Southeast Asian countries, India, Pakistan, and even Iran since 2023.

Many were also surprised to see UN Secretary-General António Guterres in attendance, particularly in the context of President Trump's hostility toward multilateralism. Yet for the United Nations, this meant recognizing a regional organization—by far the most populous (said to encompass 60% of the world)—as participating in a world order already deeply shaken.

Let us not forget that in this country, a master of the political use of photography, images of the "Gang of Four" alongside Mao during the victorious days of 1949 were later doctored to

erase them after their betrayal, their proximity to the Great Helmsman no longer permissible...

Since then, from a poor country, China has become one of the world's two "superpowers," though its techniques of social control have grown ever more sophisticated. The Tianjin Forum, by staging the Chinese president with his guests—whether it be the war criminal Putin, the troublemaker Kim Jong-un, the irascible Modi of "the world's largest democracy" (itself under pressure from Trump), along with others less visible in the photographs but present nonetheless, such as the Laotian president and Nepalese prime minister—feeds into this narrative.

As with any plurilateral forum, it was also an opportunity for numerous meetings: the Vietnamese prime minister met with his Cambodian counterpart Hun Manet, Malaysian prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan, as well as UN Secretary-General António Guterres and ASEAN Secretary-General Kao Kim Hourn.

At a time when the very existence of the UN is being questioned—even by some of its top



officials, who have recently voiced their concern to the secretary-general over the organization's inability to resolve any conflicts, from high-profile ones such as Ukraine or Israel and its neighbors, to those still covered by major media like Rwanda vs. the DRC through proxy militias, and to the millions oppressed in Darfur, Tibet, or Xinjiang—and with President Trump bent on dismantling the international order established by his Democratic predecessors at Bretton Woods in 1944, is Xi Jinping not seeking to demonstrate that he can build a different order, distinct from the one shaped by the West?

This is no doubt why he also invited former Japanese prime minister Yukio Hatoyama, a political opponent of the ruling LDP. After some hesitation (his son tried to dissuade him), Hatoyama attended.

The Tianjin military parade served the same purpose: to show that China, by virtue of its military might, has the means—after emerging victorious in Asia's Second World War in September 1945 thanks to decisive U.S. intervention.

Much has been said about the “Global South,” though many have long known it does not exist. How can India and China march in step? India and Pakistan, who fought wars not long ago? Egypt and Brazil, whose demographic weight justifies their presence but whose interests hardly align with those of the PRC?

The author of these lines recalls a colleague following the evolution of the G20 in the early 21st century: not an organization, but a grouping without a secretariat, capable of agreeing only on rejecting the Western order. Has that really changed?

As China expert François Godement observes: “Faced with the U.S. trade offensive and international tensions, China's economy has shown unexpected resilience. It has preserved its industrial competitiveness thanks, among other things, to remarkable logistical flexibility, ongoing deflation, and a favorable exchange rate. Even more strikingly, it has rapidly diversified its export markets, significantly strengthening its ties with ASEAN, Europe, and Africa. At the same time, the Chinese economy is moving up the value chain, now dominating key sectors such as electric batteries, renewable energy, and autonomous vehicles. This hybrid industrial strategy, balancing public and private,

supported by constant innovation and intensive automation, thus keeps China at the heart of global supply chains. However, its reliance on exports remains, in the short and medium term, a structural weakness.”

Indeed, hyper-powerful China also has its weaknesses. Its approach to pollution is paradoxical.

After decades of CO₂ smog created by urban automobile traffic, it is now striving to drastically reduce emissions: nuclear, solar, and wind power; curbs on interurban car use; and an ever-expanding high-speed rail network (extended, at more modest speeds, to neighbors such as Laos and Thailand).

At the same time, by purchasing large quantities of hydrocarbons, it helps finance Russia's war in Ukraine—as do several European countries, following President Trump's climate-skeptic slogan proclaimed at his inauguration: “Drill, baby, drill! And drill now!”

Yet today, China dominates clean energy: accounting for one-third of global spending, 80% of solar panels, and 60% of wind turbines.

In the 12 months to June 2025, wind and solar energy produced more electricity than other sources of clean energy—double their share just four years ago. China filed 75% of patents in this sector, and clean energy already represents one-tenth of its GDP, while fossil fuels, still dominant, have plateaued.

Moreover, its clean energy technologies are inexpensive enough to equip emerging countries, including in Latin America—two centuries ago an American preserve under the Monroe Doctrine. Thus, Beijing imposes a “smiling” economic domination (Xi Jinping's “Chinese Dream” since 2012), but a domination nonetheless.

The heads of state and government gathered in Tianjin may well be, as one otherwise usually insightful magazine wrote, “12 desperados.” But Xi Jinping's delight was palpable—he even mused about living to 150... Yet his economy is far from thriving. Official growth in the second quarter was only 5.2%, down despite consumption subsidies.

Uncertainty over U.S. tariffs, postponed until November, and above all a deep and persistent property crisis, feed middle-class anxiety.



As for its military power, whose recent growth is impressive—through cutting-edge technologies, newly demonstrated capabilities to deploy weapons on land, at sea, in the air, and even in outer space; hypersonic missiles; and drone warfare—it provokes hostile reactions from neighbors, underscoring China's isolation.

Thus, as Mainichi Shimbun reported on September 14: "The Ministry of Defense (NB: Japan's 1946 Constitution in principle forbids it from having an army) has announced its intention to sequentially deploy long-range missiles within the Ground, Maritime, and Air Self-Defense Forces in various regions by fiscal year 2027. This will provide 'counterstrike capabilities' (against enemy bases) if necessary. The first frontline unit is the Ground Self-Defense Force garrison at Kengun (Kumamoto City), where deployment began at the end of fiscal year 2025. Expanding the missile range from the current 100 kilometers to about 11,000 kilometers will cover nearly the entire eastern coast of China and North Korea, strengthening deterrence in anticipation of China's repeated military intimidation."

Some in Tokyo imagine that China's repeated incursions near Taiwan might tempt it to launch a limited operation—far less costly in men and equipment than a conquest of the "rebel" island—yet sufficient to deter Japan from providing aid.

Certainly, the United States is supposed to defend both Taiwan and Japan. But who still trusts President Trump?

Southeast Asian neighbours are likewise uneasy, particularly as China's manoeuvres to turn reefs into inhabited islands were ruled in 2016 by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague to be unlawful, since the reefs fell within the exclusive economic zones of coastal states, here the Philippines—a ruling rejected by Beijing.

Even more threatening for Beijing is the gradual implementation of an "Indo-Pacific strategy" launched by the late Japanese prime minister Shinzō Abe (1954–2022), which, as early as 2007, responded to American hesitation by gradually bringing in India, Australia, the United States, and ASEAN.

In this great geopolitical game, improved relations between Japan and South Korea—encouraged by the recent replacement of its ousted conservative president with the more conciliatory Lee Jae-myung—could, between these two industrialized and democratic East Asian countries allied with the United States (which maintains numerous military bases in the region), constitute a far more formidable threat at China's doorstep.

Conclusion: Will the Tianjin summit—best remembered for its massive military parade marking the end of the Second World War in Asia—give birth to a "new order" led by China? Or will Beijing settle for imposing Xi Jinping's soothing "Chinese Dream" through its economic power?

To be continued.

Yves Carmona

A former student of the École Nationale d'Administration (ENA) and a career diplomat, Yves CARMONA spent most of his career in Asia: twice posted as Counsellor for Foreign Affairs in Japan, then as Deputy Chief of Mission in Singapore, and later as Ambassador to Laos and Nepal (2012–2018). In these positions, as well as in those he held in Paris, he focused—drawing also on his background as a student of Japanese—on the rapid transformations of Asian countries and their relations with France and Europe. Now retired, he is committed to sharing his experience with those who may benefit from it.



San San HNIN TUN Professor of Burmese at INALCO

Analysis Nouveaux Regards

The festival of lights in Myanmar.

By San San HNIN TUN

In Myanmar, the traditional calendar is lunar and has twelve months, like the Gregorian calendar. The day of the full moon of each month is a public holiday, marked by a festival.

Thus, there are two festivals of lights:

- The first, in the month of Thadingyut, marks the end of Buddhist Lent for Theravāda Buddhism, or the beginning of the dry season. It usually falls in October.
- The second, in the month of Tazaungmone, marks the end of the rainy season and usually falls in November.

“Thadingyut”, also known as the Festival of Lights (in Burmese: သီတင်းကျွတ် မီးထွန်းပွဲတော်), is held on the full moon day of the month of Thadingyut (in Burmese: သီတင်းကျွတ်). In 2025, this day falls between October 5 and 7, with October 6 as the full moon day of Thadingyut. Accordingly, public holidays for Myanmar embassies worldwide, and for embassies and consulates, are October 6 and 7, 2025.

This festival of Thadingyut is followed by the festival of Tazaungdine. In 2025, it will be held on November 4, according to the Gregorian calendar. For this reason, some prefer to call Thadingyut the “first festival of lights” and Tazaungdine the “second festival of lights”, since

both are celebrated with illuminations across the country.

For the Burmese, however, beyond the fact that Thadingyut is known as the second most popular festival after Thingyan (the New Year in Theravāda Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia), there is a practical difference between the two.

History and origin of the festival of lights

In Myanmar, it is said that these festivals of lights symbolize the return of the Buddha (from heaven) to Earth (to the world of human beings).

During the night, the Buddha ascended to the heaven where his mother Maya resided, reincarnated among the good spirits in heaven (generally equivalent to “Paradise” in Christianity), known as Trayastimsa/Tavitimsa (in Burmese: တာဝတိံသာ နတ်ပြည်), to preach to her texts from the Abhidhamma (အဘိဓမ္မ) during the three months of Buddhist Lent (known as vassa in Pali or waso in Burmese - ဝါဆို).



During the three months of Lent, people, including Buddhist monks in Myanmar, do not move house or travel. Thus, in Myanmar during this period, there are no relocations or weddings, since both involve changing residence. Buddhist Lent also coincides with the monsoon, or rainy season, in Myanmar, so it is natural that people do not travel during this time.

When the Buddha returned to Earth, people welcomed him with lights along his path. To this day, houses, streets, and pagodas across the country are illuminated to commemorate this event.

The Festival of Lights in Tazaungmone, or the second festival of lights, commemorates the fact that the Buddha's mother wove a monk's robe for her son before his departure (as she knew that her son, the future Buddha, would soon renounce his life as a prince in the royal palace to become the Buddha).

This festival also marks the end of the rainy season and the beginning of the kathina period, which means "the time for making offerings."

During this period, monks receive new cloth to make new robes. In Myanmar, it is said that this festival has its origins in Kattika in Pali, or kahtein in Burmese (ကထိန်), and commemorates the guardian planets in Hindu astrology. The Festival of Lights of Tazaungdine is said to predate the introduction of Theravāda Buddhism in Myanmar.

Practices in Myanmar

The Thadingyut Festival of Lights is usually celebrated over three days. On the eve of the full moon day of Thadingyut, people pay respect to elders—parents, grandparents, teachers, uncles, aunts, and, more broadly, all those older than oneself.

In schools, including universities, ceremonies are organized to honor teachers, known as Saya kadaw bwe (ဆရာတန်ဆော့ပွဲ). As this homage involves prostration, non-Buddhists are allowed not to participate.

Homage is a way of asking forgiveness for any offenses committed during the year. Thus, the festival symbolizes gratitude and a request for forgiveness. Respect to elders is shown through offerings of food such as cakes, fruits, and other

gifts. In return, elders give pocket money to the younger generation. Many young Burmese Buddhists see it as an opportunity to earn some pocket money, and households are filled with festive or special foods.

For the Tazaungdine Festival of Lights, by contrast, beyond colorful illuminations, there are all sorts of night performances across Myanmar, known as pwe (ပွဲ), including zat pwe (ဇာတ်ပွဲ), the Burmese equivalent of theatrical performances.

While the Thadingyut festival is celebrated relatively uniformly across the country, celebrations of Tazaungdine vary from region to region. For example, in the town of Taunggyi in Shan State, hot-air balloon or lantern competitions are held, with balloons made of paper that float into the sky using the hot air from a suspended candle. This festival, known as the "Taunggyi Balloon Festival," usually lasts five days and is often accompanied by fireworks displays.

Another notable difference: during the Tazaungdine festival, throughout the country—but especially at major pagodas such as the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon—competitions are held to weave monk robes, called matho thingan yet pyaing pwe (မသိုးသင်္ကန်းရက်ပြိုင်ပွဲ).

The festival begins on the eve of the full moon of Tazaungdine, and teams of weavers, working over two nights by the light of the full moon, weave the yellow cloth to be offered to the monks. At the end of this contest, the robe is offered to the monastic community (Sangha) rather than to an individual monk.

These festivals are often accompanied by music and performances. The yellow robes woven for Buddhist monks are also known as kahtein thin gan (ကထိန် သင်္ကန်း).

The Tazaungdine festival is normally associated with acts of offering. For example, there are Studitha feasts (စတုဒီသာကျွေးပွဲ), during which food is offered to anyone who wishes, without any discrimination. Offerings also include padetha bin (ပဒေသာပင်), representations of a "tree of abundance" decorated with banknotes or useful items offered to monks.

In some neighborhoods, young people—usually men—celebrate the kyi ma no pwe (ကျီးမနိုးပွဲ), which means "the festival before the crows wake up", by playing pranks on their neighbors



or stealing an object (at night, as the name of the festival suggests). For example, youths might take signs from a public place and place them at the entrance of private homes. However, it is never serious or malicious, as everyone laughs about it the next day.

With these descriptions of the festivals of lights, I hope I have inspired you to visit Myanmar during the months of October and November, which correspond to the dry season in Myanmar—that is, “winter” in Southeast Asia, when it never really gets cold.

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San San HNIN TUN

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